

Internationalism: How the Syrian Revolution has transformed me - "I owe an apology to a people who are blamed for a carnage committed against them"

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The world revolves around Palestine, or so I thought until 2011.

The Palestinian cause, I argued, was the litmus test for anyone's commitment to freedom and justice. Palestine was the one and only compass that must guide any Arab revolution. Whether a regime is good or bad should be judged, first and foremost, based on its stance from the Palestinian cause. Every event should somehow be viewed through a Palestinian lens. The Arab people have failed us, and we inspired the entire world with our resistance.

Yes, I called myself internationalist. I claimed to stand for universal and humanist ideals. I blathered on and on about breaking borders and waging a socialist revolution.

But then came Syria, and my hypocrisy and the fragility of those ideals became exposed.

When I first heard the Syrian people in Daraa demand a regime reform on 18 March 2011, all I could think about, subconsciously, was: "If the Egyptian scenario happens in Syria, it would be a disaster for Palestine."

I did not think about those who were killed by the regime on that day. I did not think of those arrested or tortured.

I did not think about the inevitable crackdown by the regime.

I did not greet the incredibly courageous protests in Daraa with the same elation and zeal I felt during the Tunisian, Egyptian, Bahraini, Yemeni, and Libyan uprisings.

All I could muster was a sigh of suspicion and fear.

"Assad is a tyrant and his regime is rotten," I thought to myself, "but the subsequent results of its fall might be catastrophic for Palestine and the resistance." That sacred axis of resistance meant to me back then much more than the Syrian lives being cut short by its defenders.

I was one of those whose hearts would pound when Hassan Nasrallah appeared on TV. I bookmarked loads of YouTube videos of his speeches and teared up while listening to songs glorifying the resistance and its victories.

And while I supported the demands of the Syrian protesters in principle, I did so with reluctance and it was a conditional support. It was not even solidarity because it was so selfish and always centered around Palestine.

I retweeted a blog post by an Egyptian activist calling on Syrians to carry Palestinian flags, in order to “debunk” regime propaganda. The Syrian people took to the streets defending the same universal ideals that I claimed to stand for, yet I was incapable of viewing their struggle outside my narrow Palestinian prism. I claimed to be internationalist while prioritizing Palestinian concerns over Syrian victims. I shamelessly took part in the Suffering Olympics and was annoyed that Syrian pain occupied more newspaper pages than Palestinian pain. I was too gullible to notice that the ordeals of both Syrians and Palestinians are just footnotes and that the breaking news would become too routine, too dull and unworthy of consumption in the space of few months.

I claimed to reject all forms of oppression while simultaneously waiting for the head of a sectarian militia to say something about Syria and to talk passionately about Palestine.

The Syrian revolution put me on trial for betraying my principles. But instead of condemning me, it taught me the lesson of my life: it was a lesson given with grace and dignity.

It was delivered with love, by the women and men dancing and singing in the streets, challenging the iron fist with creativity, refusing to give up while being chased by security forces, turning funeral processions into exuberant marches for freedom, rethinking ways to subvert regime censorship; introducing mass politics amidst unspeakable terror; and chanting for unity despite sectarian incitement; and chanting the name of Palestine in numerous protests and carrying the Palestinian flag without needing a superstar Egyptian blogger to ask them to do so.

It was a gradual learning process in which I had to grapple with my own prejudices of how a revolution should “look like,” and how we should react to a movement against a purportedly pro-Palestinian regime. I desperately tried to overlook the ugly face beneath the mask of resistance worn by Hezbollah, but the revolution tore that mask apart. And that was not the only mask torn apart, many more followed. And now the real faces of self-styled freedom fighters and salon leftists were exposed; the long-crushed Syrian voices emerged.

How can one not be inspired by a people rediscovering their voices, transforming folk songs and football chants into revolutionary chants? How can one not be taken aback by protests choreographed in front of tanks?

The Syrian geography was much more diverse and rich than that promoted by the regime and the official narrative collapsed as Syrians from the margins reconstructed their own narratives. The Syrian rainbow had many more colors than those permitted by the regime. And Syrians could raise their voices in places other than football stadiums, using their famous victory chant in public squares and streets to curse Hafez al-Assad, the “eternal leader.”

If Hafez al-Assad’s name could only be whispered with trembles before 2011, people at last could vociferously curse him and his son, shaking both the physical as well as the symbolic hegemony of this dynasty to its foundations.

I could not remain neutral as Syrians redefined the feasible and stretched the boundaries of people power, albeit briefly, during those early months of fatal hope.

Wouldn’t remaining impartial have been an act of treason to anything I claimed to stand for? How could I possibly read out Howard Zinn’s quote “You cannot be neutral on a moving train” to those sitting on the fence on Palestine, while I was doing the same on Syria? The Syrian revolution crumbled the fence from under me. I rediscovered my voice thanks to the mass mobilization I witnessed in Syria. I would listen to clips from Syrian protests, memorize their chants, and repeat them in Palestinian protests. Thinking of the fearlessness of Syrians would immediately make my

voice louder and help make me overcome any slight semblance of fear.

You do not choose the nationality into which you were born but you don't have to be bound by its shackles.

My Syrian identity, my sense of belonging to the Syrian revolution, was not forced onto me. I chose to adopt it. I never stepped foot in Syria. It was not until 2013 that I first met a Syrian not from the Occupied Golan Heights in the flesh, face to face. My main way of connecting with Syrians was and remains through social media and Skype. Yet, I couldn't help but feel Syrian and completely identify with the struggle.

Until 2011, my talk about breaking borders and internationalist solidarity was but a soundbite, mere rhetorics. Thanks to the Syrian uprising, I finally understood what solidarity is really about.

I always expected people to support the Palestinian cause without imposing conditions, without preaching or lecturing, without dictating. When the Syrian uprising erupted, I acted exactly like those armchair preaches demanding a jasmine revolution from Palestinians, constantly asking us about the New Gandhi and MLK. But as the revolution went on, I could finally comprehend the true meaning of solidarity from below, a solidarity that is unconditional yet also critical. I saw how people like martyr Omar Aziz applied horizontal self-governance in some of the more conservative and traditional neighborhoods, and I learned from his model.

I learned the meaning of communal solidarity and Palestinian-Syrian togetherness from the Palestinian residents of Daraa refugee camp: they risked their lives to smuggle bread and medicine and break the siege on the rising city of Daraa. It was not just a humanitarian act; it was a political statement and the beginning of the formation of an identity, that of the Palestinian-Syrian revolutionary.

Khaled Bakrawi, a Palestinian refugee from Yarmouk, and Zaradasht Wanly, a Syrian youngster from Damascus, were both injured by Israeli occupation forces during "return marches" to the Golan Heights in 2011. Both Khaled and Zaradasht were murdered by the Syrian regime: the former was killed under torture, the latter was shot dead during a peaceful protest.

Syrians marched in solidarity with Gaza amid the rubble of their houses destroyed by Syrian regime air strikes. The Syrian Revolutionary Youth put out posters against the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the Naqab when most of the group's members were in hiding, jails, exile, or graves.

Such is the solidarity of the oppressed which Syrians turned from rhetorics to practice. How can one not admire it?

If the Second Intifada in October 2000 shaped the political consciousness and national identity of an 11-year-old girl who had just left her tiny village to move to the city; the first wave of the Syrian revolution in March 2011 rebirthed a woman making her more confident steps in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, my city, the one I chose to call home, could not by any means be liberated by the oppressors of my people, of Syrians. Jerusalem's spirit cannot be hijacked by those bombing a hospital carrying its name.

Far from struggling to reconcile my Palestinian and Syrian identity layers, The Syrian uprising made me even more committed to the struggle for Palestinian liberation: the liberation of the land from the occupier and the liberation of the cause from dictators and bandwagoners.

And while I parted company with people I once regarded comrades because of their support for the Syrian regime, I also gained new, lifelong friendships that have imbued my world with warmth and

strength.

I owe so much to the Syrian revolution, which re-created me. I have no status or self-importance or willingness to speak on behalf of anyone, let alone on behalf of the Palestinian people, but I personally owe an apology to the Syrian people. I should have never hesitated in supporting their just cause. I should have never privileged geopolitical concerns over Syrian lives; and I should have never been so naively deceived by the propaganda of the resistance axis.

I owe an apology to a people who, for decades, were trodden upon, silenced, and humiliated in the name of my own cause; to a people whose only encounter with "Palestine" was in a prison dungeon carrying this name; the people who were blamed and mocked for being so docile yet when they did rise up, they were abandoned.

I owe an apology to a people who are blamed for a carnage committed against them, just as we have been, and who have been betrayed by an opposition pretending to represent them, just as we have been, too. I owe an apology to a people cynically called upon to bring an alternative to the Assad regime and Islamists while bombs and missiles fall on their heads. Those same people asking "Where is the alternative?" ignore that Syrians who were ready to offer a progressive vision have either been jailed, killed or displaced by the regime.

One would think that Palestinians know the cynicism behind the question of alternatives that they wouldn't pose it to another oppressed people fighting to build everything from scratch.

Yet despite contradictions, Palestinians and Syrians do share the same yearning for freedom, the same burning desire to live in dignity and the dream to walk in the streets of the Old City of Damascus and the Old City of Jerusalem.

The road we shall cross to get there, though, is not the one that the regime and Hezbollah saturated with Syrian corpses, but one paved with the hands of Palestinian and Syrian freedom fighters: by people who know that their freedom is always incomplete without the freedom of their sisters and brothers.

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P.S.

* How the Syrian Revolution has transformed me". BudourHassan in Articles, May 19, 2016:
<https://budourhassan.wordpress.com/author/budourhassan/>

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