

# **Help Syria now. Tomorrow it may be too late - “The current situation is the direct result of the unwillingness of great powers to support the Syrian revolutionaries”**

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**An open letter to friends and leaders of public opinion in the west: current policy is short-sighted and inhumane.**

Three months ago, I left the city of Damascus, where life had become too oppressive, to go to the “liberated” area of East Ghouta. An area that had 2 million inhabitants before the uprising, East Ghouta is now populated by only around one million. It was a base from which the rebels headed towards the capital, but is now completely besieged by the regime’s forces due to renewed support from Russia and Iran, and the arrival of Iran-sponsored Iraqi and Lebanese militias. During the past three months, I have personally witnessed the staggering lack of arms, ammunition, and even food for the fighters. Many of them would get two meals a day at most, and their situation would have been immeasurably worse had they not been local residents, protecting their own towns and families, and living off their own kin.

The cities and towns that I have seen or lived in during these months are subjected to daily and random air strikes and mortar and rocket shelling. Victims, mostly civilians, fall every day. In a centre for civil defence where I lived for a month I used to see all the bodies brought in. Some were indistinguishable remains, others belonged to children, and among the victims was a six-month fetus lost by a terrified mother. Not a single day passed during that month without victims; two or three usually, but nine on one day, 28 on another, and 11 on a third.

Besides civilians, several fighters are killed every day by the arms of a superior power, with superior support.

The entire area has not had power for eight months. Therefore, people depend on numerous easily broken generators that consume a lot of gasoline at a time when this is becoming increasingly scarce, which in turn forces people to stop using their fridges despite the soaring heat. Land and mobile telephone networks are all cut. In the last week, wheat has become scarce as well. I have only been eating twice a day. It is OK so far. The new diet has helped me lose 10 kilograms.

Worst of all, however, is the increasing number of people who are being buried in a hurry and without dignity. People are scared to linger near the cemeteries and be targeted by new missiles. We - myself and a number of friends - are still alive. In Damascus, we faced the constant possibility of arrest and insufferable torture. Here we are safe from that, but not from a missile that could land on our heads at any minute.

One of the most remarkable things I noticed during my first few days here was that Friday prayers

were called for at 9am in one mosque, half an hour later in another mosque, and then in others with half an hour between each. The purpose was to avoid gathering a large number of people in one place so as not to allow the regime to kill the most people possible. The regime tried before, and in one city, there are five destroyed mosques.

More painful is that more than two-thirds of the children are not enrolled in schools, either because their parents are too terrified to let them out of their sight, or because there are very few schools available. Those that are still open are all underground to avoid shelling, and several hospitals are there too.

People fight here with absolute defiance because they realise that a big massacre awaits them if the regime succeeds in regaining control over the area. Those who are not killed immediately will be arrested and tortured savagely. The options of the people are to either die resisting the aggression of a fascist regime or to be killed by this same regime in the worst way possible. People shudder with fear, and I myself shudder, at the thought that this regime might rule us again.

The current situation is the direct result of the unwillingness of great powers to support the Syrian revolutionaries, while the allies of the regime have not only continued to support it with money, men, and weapons, but increased this support in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Finally, after the world established that the regime used chemical weapons, (something I documented myself and verified with friends who have the necessary personal expertise), and after the regime had secured the world's approval of its use of air force and long-distance rockets against cities and residential neighbourhoods, after all that western powers have decided to support the revolutionaries with arms for the purpose of re-establishing 'balance' whose disruption in favour of the regime they themselves had facilitated.

This policy is not only short-sighted, nor is it just going to prolong the conflict, it is deeply inhumane. There are no two equal evils in Syria - as most of the western media claims, contrary to the reports of the United Nations and international organisations. There is a fascist regime that has already killed more than 100,000 of its own people, on one hand, and a diverse umbrella of revolutionaries, of which some had been radicalised due to the longevity of the conflict and the weakening resistance of Syrian society towards radicalism. The longer the Syrians are left alone to die the more likely it is that the radical groups will gain strength and the voice of reason and moderation will grow weak. From my personal experience, this is exactly what is happening. Whenever new victims fell, especially children, people at the civil defence centre would look at me with probing eyes. They wonder what value the "reasonable" language I use has anymore.

There is only one right thing today, from a Syrian and a human standpoint: to help the Syrians rid themselves of the Assad dynasty that acts as if Syria is their fief and Syrians their serfs. Everything will be difficult in post-Assad Syria, but removing Assad will set a new more moderate dynamic in Syrian society, and will allow Syrians to stand against those more radical among them. Much worse than this would be to allow this conflict to fester and for its human and material cost to rise; worse is to watch Syrians getting killed by Russian arms, and in the hands of local, Lebanese and Iranian murderers, worse too would be to impose a settlement that does not punish the criminals and does not resolve Syrian problems.

US and western politicians often insist that there can't be a military solution to the Syrian conflict. But where is the political solution? When did Bashar Assad say during the past 28 months and after more than 100,000 deaths that he is willing to enter into serious negotiations with the opposition in order to share power? The truth is that there won't be a political solution without forcing Assad to step down, now, and with him all the masters of killing in his regime.

Our dear friends, I address you today because the Syrian tragedy has become one of the world's biggest and most dangerous problems today. It has displaced more than a third of the population, internally and externally; there are hundreds of thousands of people injured or disabled, and what amounts to a quarter of million detainees who are being subjected to horrific torture.

We implore you as leaders of public opinion in your countries to pressure your governments to assume a clear stance against Assad and in favour of an end to his regime. This is the only human and progressive thing to do; and there is nothing more fascist and reactionary in today's world than a regime that kills its people, imports killers and mercenaries from abroad, and stirs up a sectarian war that might not stop before it takes the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

We look to your support today. Tomorrow might be too late.

**Yassin al-Haj Saleh**

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**P.S.**

\* The Guardian. Wednesday 10 July 2013 09.00 BST:

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/10/help-syria-now-tomorrow-too-late>