

Exiting Law and Entering Revolution

Basel al-Araj

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Foreword by The Bad Side

The assassination of Basel al-Araj in 2017—caught on camera and shared, proudly, by the official Twitter account of the IDF—silenced one of the most fearless, inventive voices on the Palestinian radical left. He was thirty-one. A writer, teacher, and militant opponent of the Zionist state, he'd been in hiding for six months when Israeli soldiers stormed the house where he'd taken shelter in al-Bireh, on the outskirts of Ramallah. Al-Araj and five comrades had already served half a year in Palestinian Authority detention, during which they'd gone on hunger strike in protest of their torture. After public demonstrations, the men were released; but they knew their "freedom" wouldn't last for long.

Among the handful of al-Araj's possessions found in his hideout—weapons, a keffiyeh, books by Antonio Gramsci and the Lebanese Marxist Mahdi Amel, and a stack of his own unpublished writings—was a letter, to be publicized in the event of his killing. It placed his sacrifice squarely within the history of Palestinian resistance. "I have read for many years the wills of martyrs and have always been puzzled by them: quick, brief, short on eloquence and without satisfying our search for answers to our questions about martyrdom," he wrote. "I am now on the path to my fate satisfied and convinced that I have found my answers."

I Have Found My Answers: Thus Spoke the Martyr Basel al-Araj, a collection of al-Araj's writings, was published in Arabic in 2018. The volume collects previously published pieces, tributes to al-Araj, social media posts, as well as a selection of the writing found after his death. (There is currently an effort to translate these texts into English; the complete works will be published by Maqam Books later this year.) The texts testify to the dynamism of al-Araj's intellectual mission, and together execute a brisk, impressive synthesis of manifesto, conjunctural analysis, and political education. The style is frank, fierce; it isn't surprising that this author gave radical walking tours and taught at the activist-run Popular University in the West Bank. Subjects range from episodes in Palestinian history to speculative, even psychological investigations into the meaning of resistance. There's also a work of historical fiction, written from the perspective of a member of the al-Araj family born before the Nakba. The pieces share an absolute commitment to Palestinian freedom—and suggest a supple, even ecumenical ideological approach. Despite his vigorous defense of armed struggle, al-Araj never joined any faction and aimed, in his life and writing, to provide a shrewdly capacious sense of what Palestinian resistance is and can achieve.

We are publishing the below translation of "Exiting Law and Entering Revolution" for three reasons. The first is to express, in our capacity as a group, our longstanding, deeply held solidarity with the struggle for Palestinian freedom and root-and-branch opposition to the Zionist project, one whose latest episode has amounted to the genocidal offensive on Gaza by the state of Israel. As we write, the mainstream media reports that over 33,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed; the real number is likely much higher, amounting to more than 41,000 when those missing under the rubble are accounted for. Our second reason follows from the first: we find it crucial, in the current profusion of reporting, diplomacy, debate, and lies, to translate and publish insurgent Palestinian writing. The decades-long assault on Palestine—by the various, interlocking means of genocide, ecocide, and politicide—has always included an element of "scholasticide." This is an intellectual culture under fire; that every university in Gaza has been blasted to pieces in the last seven months is only the latest hateful proof of the colonial drive to murder knowledge.

Our third reason corresponds to the essay itself. As the title suggests, "Exiting Law and Entering Revolution" inquires into the link between the figure of the outlaw or bandit, and the subjec-

tivity of the revolutionary. We won't summarize the piece here; al-Araj's own exposition is lucid, and anyway proceeds by the suggestive juxtaposition of particular fragments and figures instead of cleaving to an explicit thesis. Among the allusions to the Palestinian revolutionary Sheikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, the Syrian writer Hanna Mina, and the Algerian rebel Ali La Pointe (whose death, reproduced at the end of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, bears a striking resemblance to al-Araj's own) there are also references to Malcolm X and Eric Hobsbawm—militant intellectuals of the Global North. Which is to say that as the Gaza catastrophe sends shock waves shooting across the world, compelling us to renew our essential commitment to liberation, we are not simply looking at Palestine; Palestine looks back at us.

Exiting Law and Entering Revolution

People ran at the sound of bullets. They partook in the fray, not asking why or how. The countrymen against the French. All is clear and it takes place even if the dispute is over a triviality or if the fight is between drunkards. The French colonizer is then an enemy, and resisting the enemy is a duty. In those days, as I moved from one house to the next, I understood the meaning of Ibrahim Al-Shankal's words about resistance against the colonizer, about national spirit, enthusiasm, initiative, solidarity, about hatred in the eyes, mouths, and hands, the hatred for everything that is French and anyone who cooperates with the French, be they landowners or Aghas, commoners or those who are weak in spirit and conscience. As for those who fought in battle and escaped arrest, they were honored by the city and I was among them. I, the one who had been in one world and suddenly found himself in another. I, the one who became a patriot without understanding the meaning of patriotism as the others whom God had blessed with consciousness and courage had understood it.

— The End of a Brave Man, Hanna Mina

In the literatures examining peoples' revolutionary history, there recur some exceptional and divisive individuals who fuse revolution with heroism, crime and violations of law with tradition and custom. The accounts of their lives are often similar in terms of origin, circumstance, trajectory, and ending. Most crucially, they are similar in how they are received: in all of these cases, the public is divided over how to deal with these accounts. Some consider these individuals to be petty criminals and outlaws, while others see them as heroes.

The Arabs were familiar with this phenomenon since well before Islam, as it was represented by the groups of vagabonds known as Sa'alik, the most famous of whom was Urwa bin al-Ward, nicknamed Prince of the Sa'alik. These groups of men who broke with custom and tradition, confronting the economic, social, and political systems of their tribes, were either shunned by the tribe, or themselves fled the tribe. When hard times fell on the tribespeople, they would gather around the Sa'alik, who tended to their needs. When normality was restored, the tribespeople would again repudiate the Sa'alik and forsake them.

The similarity between the revolutionary and the outlaw consists in their decision to deviate from accepted "systems" and "laws." The outlaw's transition to national or political action—organized or spontaneous—is a smooth one. It is not marred by the same complexities of the transitions of members of the bourgeoisie, for example, which require a rejection of their social

class and of the rituals, customs, and material comfort it provides. The outlaw, by way of his experience in the fields of theft and fraud, masters ways of operating outside of that law, acquires skills to deal with arrest and investigation, and carries out operations that require high degrees of prior planning. These experiences are similar in their practical logic to resistance action, even if the end goals differ.

Frantz Fanon was alert to this overlap and wrote the following about these outlaw figures in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

In the same way the people make use of certain episodes in the life of the community in order to hold themselves ready and to keep alive their revolutionary zeal. For example, the gangster who holds up the police set on to track him down for days on end, or who dies in single combat after having killed four or five policemen, or who commits suicide in order not to give away his accomplices—these types light the way for the people, form the blueprints for action and become heroes. Obviously, it's a waste of breath to say that such-and-such a hero is a thief, a scoundrel, or a reprobate. If the act for which he is prosecuted by the colonial authorities is an act exclusively directed against a colonialist person or colonialist property, the demarcation line is definite and manifest.

As a crucial sign of his attachment and love for community, his sense of justice, and his acquisition of analytical tools which furnished him with a lucid and serious vision, the martyr Sheikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam said of the outlaws: "Let them do their work because there is a manhood in that work which we will one day transform into holy struggle, and as long as the colonizer wants to kill our souls, these people are closer to God and to the love of holy struggle than are those who submit."

The Marxist historian Eric J. Hobsbawm understood the significance of the outlaw or "social bandit," whose particularities contradict the logic of law in modern liberal states, which is based primarily on the "social contract" and the "natural rights" of man to property, freedom, and life—as outlined by John Locke. According to this understanding, banditry is an assault on private property; it is a "criminal" act in the terminology of the state and the classes affected by said "criminal" act.

One of Hobsbawm's books is based on a long and mythologized history of what he refers to as "social banditry," traceable in the popular imagination of various societies, and centered around the heroics of thieves and bandits such as Robin Hood, Rob Roy MacGregor, and Jesse James. Hobsbawm addresses the phenomenon through its social context, wherein the outlaw or thief's social role is one of revenge, especially if he defrauds or steals from a member of the dominant and tyrannical classes in society. Hobsbawm labels this thief the "noble robber." In other cases, such as the Mafia in southern Italy, the outlaw provides an alternative to the dominant social order and relations imposed by the ruling class through the police and other forces of oppression and containment. Hobsbawm finds a similarity between social bandits and revolutionary heroes, such as Che Guevara, or Võ Nguyên Giáp and Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, or in the Arab and Islamic context, those such as Abdul Karim al-Khattabi, Omar al-Mukhtar, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, Wadhi Haddad, and others.

In many cases, the outlaws become figures of agitation in societies that persist in a state of submission, as they are the most capable of existing outside of the system that imposes humiliating

conditions on the living. They also possess sufficient knowledge to live and sustain themselves outside of the dominion of unjust law. They set for themselves strict rules that organize their world with just traditions, granting the human being their dignity and the right to live a decent life in return for fulfilling one's duties. For example, if one of the outlaws confesses to the authorities or informs on one of his companions, this is sufficient to end his trajectory with the group.

Because outlaws are at the bottom of the social pyramid, their world is explicit. They are not fooled by authority's tricks and lies, nor are they subject to its discourses, tools of mediation, and manufacturing of public opinion. The world in which they find themselves is one that is pristine in its reality, with all its hardships, miseries, poverty, and injustice. One thus finds that they hold justice in the highest regard and that they are the most contemptuous of its absence.

It is important here to mention the enormous connection between any covert movement or revolution and the underground world which exists outside of the law. The law is a tool for normalization and hegemony at the hands of power, which reserves the right to interpret or revise said law. Therefore, revolutionary, covert movements exist on par with the outlaw "underworld." Revolutionary movements have always relied on this underworld to acquire know-how, logistics, and arms, as well as tactics of maneuvering and methods of obtaining financing, in order to confront the enemy.

Arab, Palestinian, and International Figures

The figures that we will discuss all hail from the poorest and most oppressed classes in society, which are subjected to the greatest degree of persecution. Most of their stories also share similar sets of circumstances that lead to the creation of a new humanity and to moments of birth and transformation.

We are talking about individuals whose consciousness is formed by material experience and whose life begins with rejection by society. Yet they come to be heroes: women sing of them at weddings and men hail their names and virtues, as they become models of heroism and rebellion. We are speaking here of individuals who are nothing but revolutionaries from the first moment. In their qualities, virtues, and psychological composition, they are marked by courage, rebellion, boldness, and intelligence. They are not deceived by embellishments nor are they ever domesticated.

Have you heard of Ibrahim, the boy who was killed in 1913, the one who loved Fatima, daughter of the feudal lord, and who was chased and persecuted as a result? He realized the extent of the injustice and oppression imposed by the state and feudal lords on the peasants and the poor, so he formed a gang that robbed the rich and gave the poor their rights. That boy was Hekimoğlu Ibrahim, one of the most famous dissenters in the Ottoman Empire, who became one of the most renowned icons of popular epics, whom people sing of and whose story grandmothers retell to children in order to instill in them the highest values—deepening their concepts of struggle, freedom, justice, equality, and love.

Hekimoğlu bears some resemblance to the English folk hero Robin Hood or to the Prince of the Sa'alik, Urwa ibn al-Ward, but he most closely resembles the Scottish revolutionary William Wallace, depicted in the movie *Braveheart*, in whose case love was also the engine of revolution. And just as Hekimoğlu's life inspired people, so did his death. The picture of him as a dead man

cradling his Martini–Henry rifle made all the youths in the Ottoman Empire covet that same rifle. To this day, our popular songs and chants in Palestine recall Hekimoğlu through that Martini rifle.

These outlaw figures are distinguished from revolutionaries only by consciousness and political mission. The latter, whose social base and political projects are created by material conditions, become a nation's hope and model. In his book *Guerrilla Warfare*, Guevara noted this great similarity when he said:

The guerrilla fighter counts on the full support of the local people. This is an indispensable condition. And this is clearly seen by considering the case of bandit gangs that operate in a region; they have many characteristics of a guerrilla army, homogeneity, respect for the leader, bravery, knowledge of the terrain ...

According to Guevara, if the people rally around these gangs, they will be transformed into revolutionaries.

This can be demonstrated by the story of the martyred Iraqi militant Suwaiheb, the peasant who was killed by gangs hired by feudal lords in al-Ahwar, near the al-Kahla River, in Iraq in 1959. He was the first martyr after the revolution of July 14, 1958, commemorated by Muthaffar al-Nawab, in the poem *Suwaiheb*, sung by Sami Kamal.

Although the people embraced these individuals as icons and heroes illuminating the way, the state and its law were unable to account for the logic at work. Even when the authorities used these icons as myths in their own state projects, they continued to consider them outlaws. Here we may refer to the popular epic of the Egyptian folk hero, the martyr Adham al-Sharqawi, whose memory the Egyptians still commemorate in their popular songs to this day, about whose life two TV series were made. His story was deployed during the Nasser era, as the tide of socialist pan-Arabism swept over, and a film about his life was made, starring Abdullah Ghaith and directed by Hossam El Din Mustafa, with Abdel Halim Hafez singing the film's *mawil* and folk songs. And yet, the clothes of Adham al-Sharqawi, who was killed in 1921 at 23, are still displayed in the "Notable Criminals" section at the National Police Museum.

The revolutionary martyr and theorist Malcolm X is one of the most famous examples of the revolutionary outlaw. He was born to a small and impoverished Black family, growing up under a racist system that no sound person could accept. In 1931, when he was six years old, his father was killed by a white supremacist group. Four of his uncles were then also killed at the hands of whites, without trial. His mother was placed in a psychiatric hospital.

Malcolm's presence at a school for whites was sufficient to compel him to comprehend the extent of injustice experienced by Black people, even at the tender age of six. The seeds of rebellion and revolution were planted in him at a young age. He learned to shout in anger, as did the character of Mufid al-Wahsh in Hanna Mina's novel *The End of a Brave Man*. Malcolm X has said of this phase of his life: "So early in my life, I had learned that if you want something, you had better make some noise."

As he reached puberty, these protestations took on a more violent and rebellious form. He undertook burglary and theft, and was imprisoned for it, continuing his high school studies in prison. Afterwards, he left prison for Boston and New York, where he dove into a world of violence, crime, and drugs, before returning to prison.

His moment of rebirth took place in prison and he emerged a new human. His consciousness about the injustice which Black people are subjected to across the United States had expanded.

The cruelty of life in prison gave him the knowledge and art of interpreting society's deviant behaviors as Fanon and Ali Shariati did, and not as the half-educated people who considered them pathologies or genetic mutations do.

Malcolm X forged his path towards becoming one of the most influential Black leaders, partaking as well in the struggles of other nations, such as the Algerian Revolution. His was a critical mind that could not accept lies, deception, and quackery. He maintained that thought and theory must be subjected to social conditions. Then, the hunt for his life began, and multiple assassination attempts were made on him until one was successful on February 21, 1965.

As for the Algerian martyr Ali La Pointe: born in 1930, he knew injustice, poverty, and exploitation on the colonial farms in his town of Miliana in Algeria. Then he moved to Algiers, the capital, to practice boxing, soon stepping outside of the colonial law and being thrown in prison. There, he was reborn. How many national heroes were born in prison? Abu Jilda, Al-Armit, Farid Al-'As'as, and Abu Kabari were also prison births, later becoming national symbols.

La Pointe: that name which attached itself to our hero, the hero of the Battle of the Casbah, the arena over which he, Ali La Pointe, exerted his control before his rebirth, he who led several operations against the French occupation in Algiers, aiding the revolution in its move from the mountains to the cities. On October 9, 1957, the French blew up his hideout. He was martyred along with three other heroes: the young woman Hassiba Ben Bouali, Talib Abdel Rahman, and the child Omar, who also became one of the many symbols of the revolution.

And here we mention the martyr hero Hussein Al-Ali, from the Arab Saqrs of the Beisan valley. He is one of the most important Palestinian examples. Al-Ali killed a cousin who had done him an injustice. (Most of the Palestinian examples similar to Hussein Al-Ali begin their stories in a clash with authority starting from the bottom of the pyramid, such as the mukhtar, then the feudal lord, and then the bourgeoisie which takes on the face of the colonizer and its comprador.) He was chased after by the British authorities and went underground until the Great Revolt of 1936, then becoming one of its leaders and most important symbols. Hussein was later martyred in a crushing battle with the forces of the British enemy. He was immortalized by the poet Tawfiq Ziyad in his epic *Sarhan and the Pipeline*, sung by the 'Ashiqin band.

The beginning of every revolution is an exit, an exit from the social order that power has enshrined in the name of law, stability, public interest, and the greater good. Every social and economic authority necessarily intersects with and is an extension of political authority. This is how these heroic figures can be understood and appreciated by the general public, who are overpowered, as though by instinct. From there, we understand the hostility of social, economic, and political authority towards these figures, and its use of the law as a tool to tarnish their image and criminalize them. We therefore also understand the smooth transition from the outlaw into the revolutionary—the one who resists.

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