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An interview with Leïla al-Shami

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Leïla al-Shami and Robin Yassin-Kassab are the authors of *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, an important book in which they recounted the early years of the revolution and the profusion of experiments in popular self-organisation. We interviewed them in 2016 and 2019. The following interview is not an interview in its own right, but rather a sort of addendum to the previous ones.

When we interviewed you in 2019, you said that the Syrian people were facing several forms of fascism, that of the regime of course, but also that of certain Islamist rebel groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTC). Do you think that HTC has changed since then, at least strategically?

HTC has changed quite dramatically over the years. It has moved away from its roots in al-Qaeda, which was a transnational jihadist organisation, and transformed itself into a Syrian nationalist Islamist project. Joulani seems to be a pragmatist. He

has a lot of experience in building institutions of governance, as he has ruled Idlib since 2017 through the Syrian Salvation Government. The Idlib government was made up of civilian technocrats appointed by the shura council, rather than democratically elected, and included no women in leadership positions. They were responsible for providing services, distributing humanitarian aid in coordination with international organisations and ensuring security. They did this under very difficult conditions, and Idlib and its economy were more stable than elsewhere in Syria, so they enjoyed some popular support. But they remained an autocratic and authoritarian force. While people had more freedoms in Idlib than in the regime-controlled areas, over the years we have seen continuous protests in Idlib against the HTS regime, due to the silencing of opponents, the imprisonment of critics and reports of abuses in prisons.

Since the overthrow of Assad, Jolani has clearly been trying to build popular and international legitimacy. He has reached out to minority communities (both religious minorities and Kurds) to reassure them of their future in the country. He has issued decrees banning any interference with women's dress. Many Syrians feel reassured by these measures, but many are also cautious. We must not forget that this is a transitional government. The question now is to what extent other players, including progressive and democratic forces, will be involved in Syria's future. And to what extent will another popular movement emerge from below to hold the leaders to account and continue to make progress towards the original objectives of the revolution?

How do you explain the sudden fall of the Assad regime? Some see it as the victory of an armed and organised militia supported by Turkey and having taken advantage of the weakening of Hezbollah. Others see it as the continuation and reactivation of the revolutionary process and stress the importance of local and popular uprisings in this victory. Are we witnessing a change of regime or a decisive stage in a longer revolutionary process?

I see it as both. The fall of the regime was a decisive event. It marks the end of a horrible era of brutality in Syria's history. It also offers a tremendous opportunity to re-launch civil activism and may lead to the continuation of the revolutionary process. Today, Syrians are flocking from all over the world to return to Syria. Many of these revolutionaries have never given up on their dreams and have also learned a great deal from their experience of organising in exile and their contact with different political cultures. Already, many initiatives are taking shape, and there are now opportunities and hope, which Syrians have not had for many years, despite the many challenges we still have to overcome.

A few years ago, you wrote an important text, L'anti-impérialisme des imbéciles (The anti-imperialism of fools), in which you denounced the failure of a certain Left that stubbornly refused to understand anything about the Syrian revolution by trying to translate it into its own dusty, out-of-touch categories. Nevertheless, the geopolitical maelstrom in which Syria finds itself today raises the question of how this is likely to affect the political situation now and in the future.

My main fear for Syria's future is the interference of foreign states, in particular Israel and Turkey. These states represent an enormous threat to the country's future. But Syrians will continue to fight imperialism as they have fought Russian and Iranian imperialism in recent years. Perhaps now that the imperialisms they are fighting are not popular with part of the 'anti-imperialist' left, they will get more support for their struggle. But in fighting imperialism, we must not erase the Syrians on the ground. We should listen to them and learn from them. Geopolitics is only part of the story. At the end of the day, the future of Syria will be decided by the Syrians and nobody else. The last two weeks have taught us that. That's why people need to stand in solidarity with the progressive and democratic forces on the ground, to make sure they have more strength and can counterbalance the many counter-revolutionary forces we face.

In the 13 years between now and the start of the Syrian revolution, many political experiments have succeeded one another, have been fought over and have overlapped. First there were the local councils and their coordination committees, which organised themselves horizontally in the face of the need to survive the regime's repression and its abandonment or flight from whole swathes of the country. There is Rojava, which is trying to organise the communalism advocated by the PKK but also controlled by it. And of course there is the Islamic State, a fascist theocracy. Each of these experiments, whether they have been wiped out or are struggling to survive, contains an imaginary world, a system of desire and an interpretation of the world that have necessarily outlived them. In the same way that the Paris Commune, 150 years later, still inspires our imaginations. What do you think remains of this today in Syria? Do any of them seem renewable or desirable to you, or are we witnessing a completely new situation?

We are still in the early days of the regime's collapse, but Syrians are already organising themselves. The revolutionary experience may have been crushed, but it is never dead. It lives on in the Syrians who lived it, and it has changed us forever. The experience of local coordination committees and local councils across Syria is rich in lessons. The same is true of the experience of the Kurdish-controlled regions in northern Syria, which has continued to this day, even though it is now under threat. I believe that over the coming months we will see the Syrians revive and continue this legacy, the question being whether the world will support them.