Moving Through the Interregnum
Yassin al-Haj Saleh in the Syrian Revolution

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Abstract

This article analyzes the iconic Syrian writer and activist Yassin al-Haj Saleh. It analyzes the film *Baladna al-rahib* [Our Terrible Country] by Syrian filmmakers Muhammad Ali Atassi and Ziad Homsy as a way to explore current debates about revolution, exile and representation in Syria and the Middle East. Homsy and Atassi embrace and use Saleh’s stature as an iconic figure whose embodied meaning functions as an ‘aperture’ to a truth beyond his own person; the truth, in this case, about the Syrian revolution. By using theories of iconicity and revolution, the article interrogates current debates about revolution. What can a revolutionary icon do or say in a situation of apparent defeat? What images of revolution can filmmakers create in a state of what Gramsci called the interregnum, when the old is dying and the new is struggling to be born? It suggests that icons do not only reflect struggle, but also make and remake ideological positions. For the revolutionary project, the key issue becomes what kind of ideological re-making emerges from crisis, and what kind of change to the repertoire of action critique animates.

Keywords

revolution – Syria – Arab left – political culture – intellectual history – icons
The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

ANTONIO GRAMSCI

One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

ALBERT CAMUS

In one of the opening scenes of the 2014 film Biladna al-rahib [Our Terrible Country] by Syrian filmmakers Ziad Homsy and Muhammed Ali Atassi we see the main character of the film, the Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh, walking through the rubble of Douma, one of the so-called liberated areas north of Damascus where rebels still hold out against the Assad regime. In the film, it is spring 2013. ‘There is nothing that more eloquently expresses the transformation afflicting Syria than this image’, Saleh says, and points to a torn sticker of President Bashar al-Assad, ‘where minhibak (‘we love you’) is written on a site held by the regime, this regime of blind loyalists, which itself caused this overwhelming destruction’. Minhibak was a campaign launched in 2011 by the regime to counter the revolution’s central claim that the majority of the country was rising up against the Assad regime. In the campaign the regime was embodied by the president, ostensibly united with his people through an unbreakable bond of ‘love’. The campaign was a continuation of the strategy of domination through the symbolic realm which, largely successfully, established what Lisa Wedeen (1999) famously called a politics of ‘as if’, in which, for decades Syrians, out of fear, self-policed their disdain for the president and the system. State violence in Syria before 2011 was a spectacle ‘ever present in its absence’ (Haugbolle 2010: 224). Now the image is torn, the bond is broken, and the politics of ‘as if’ has been iconoclastically undermined, but ironically, as Saleh notes, ‘the area is totally empty of its inhabitants’. The absence of the people—the very agent of change—and the scenery of destruction undercut the regime’s claim that the people as a whole ‘love’ the president, but also make the revolution an absent presence. The bond may be severed, and the false claims of love and
submission to the authority of the Assads exposed as a lie in the revolutionary iconoclasm, but the country has been broken in the process. Violence and destruction derailed the transition from what Charles Taylor (2002: 102) called ‘hierarchical complementarity’—a situation where images of absolute submission to an authoritarian leader slowly give way to imageries of mutual benefit and exchange without actually changing the political order—to a radical new social imaginary. That is the heart-wrenching status quo of the Syrian revolution turned civil war in 2013, two years after the first protests, and this is the state of affairs even more so in 2014 with the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (renamed Islamic State, IS, in June 2014) as a major power in both Syria and Iraq. The film as a whole can be seen as an attempt to reflect on this status quo by following the dramatic journey of Saleh and the young cameraman and revolutionary Ziad Homsy from Douma to Raqqa in central Syria and eventually to Turkey. What is revolution today and what can a revolutionary icon do or say in a situation of apparent defeat? What images of revolution can filmmakers create in a state of what Gramsci called the interregnum, when the old is dying and the new is struggling to be born?

The opening scene cleverly juxtaposes two icons of the Syrian tragedy: President Assad and shaykh al-thawra (the shaykh/leader of the revolution) as some people call Yassin al-Haj Saleh (Hashemi 2014). The nickname is one of many given to Saleh for his role as a thinker and organizer of the youth who rose up against the Assad regime in peaceful protests in March 2011. He has also been called the conscience of Syria, the heart of the revolution, and, not least, the hakim (wise man/thinker/doctor) of the revolution. The praise is far from universal. As with all icons and saints, his iconicity is produced in a space of contention, not just between supporters and critics of the secular revolution, but also in liberal, secular leftist intellectual Arab circuits. His work—in articles and books published since 1996 when he was freed from sixteen years of prison—is dedicated to understanding and dissecting the mechanism of power that has allowed the Assads to control Syria for half a century (Saleh 2011, 2011a, 2012, 2012a, 2014, 2014a). A prisoner of conscience for sixteen years, Saleh’s starting point is based on his personal experience of the machinery of power. Since 2011 he has become one of the chroniclers of the revolution, but with a keen eye to the particular obstacles that have presented themselves from the regime, from the international community and from the internal dynamics in the uprising. The fault lines have been many and shifting in people’s readings of the dramatic events of 2011–2014, and some have disagreed with Saleh’s stance and rejected his iconicity. But many young as well as older supporters of the revolution have constructed Saleh as an iconic figure for their own struggle to construct a new political culture in Syria and in the wider Arab world.
Here, I base my observations of his status on six focused interviews with young Syrian revolutionaries in Beirut, Copenhagen and Malmo, and on further conversations and observations garnered from four months of fieldwork in Beirut between 2012 and 2014. The interviewees were selected because of their interest in or personal relationships with Saleh, and are therefore not representative of Syrian society at large, but of a particular circle of young intellectuals.

Saleh may not be the most obvious choice of icon to examine in Syria. There are the horrible images of the boy Hamza al-Khatib, the 14-year-old protester whose mangled body was returned by the security services in May 2011, an event that triggered mass protests and the militarization of the revolution. He has become a symbol of deliberate victimization and targeting of children by the Assad regime. Activists even created a Facebook page called ‘We are all the martyr Hamza al Khateeb’ in his memory. Liked by more than 750,000 people, the page features posts about Hamza himself, but more often documents the abuse of children across Syria by the Assad regime (Layla Saleh 2013). There are military icons, thousands of dead fighters whose pictures circulate on the internet and are used in YouTube propaganda videos for various brigades and militias, secular and Islamist alike. And there are the first wave of peaceful demonstrators, like the filmmaker Bassel Shehade, whose innocent youthful face represents the innocent victims of the early protest movement. There is Razan Zeitouneh, the human rights lawyer and co-founder of the Local Coordination Committees, whose disappearance in December 2013 triggered saintly pictures used in online campaigns and posters (fig. 1). Each represents a different category of the revolutionary icon: the activist, the martyred victim, the fighter, the artist. Add to that a steady stream of shuhadaʾ al-thawra, martyrs of the revolution, civilians and fighters dead in the war, who may be remembered in smaller circles such as families, in particular militias, in neighborhoods, or other restricted publics. By July 2014, with more than 150,000 dead Syrians, the country is awash in a culture of mourning and remembering. All the icons mentioned are dead or missing and so join the ranks of others, albeit with greater ability to symbolize common traits in the revolution. Their images, words and deeds are used to frame the continuing uprising.

In this article I focus on Saleh because I am interested in interrogating the role of intellectual icons and political thought in transformative revolutionary periods. Political thought is critical for revolutions. In the French revolution, ideas of fraternity and liberty were iconized by female figures erected as statues around the country (Hunt 1984: 32). As radical projects seeking to remold the social, revolutions inscribe themselves in empty historical time, rushing forward with no other compass than the foundation ideas. Saleh, more than anyone, has become an icon for the intellectual sumud, the steadfastness of
insisting on understanding the predicament of Syrian society and presenting a vision for the future. Critics have blamed revolutionaries for lacking a vision. Revolutionaries are aware of this critique and struggle with the internal contradictions in the uprising: the factionalism, fanaticism and sectarianism that have emerged and that seem incompatible with the original vision of a democratic system based on respect for human rights, good governance, and above all, an end to corruption and the nepotism and injustice of a ruthless security apparatus under the control of the Assad family (Kodmani 2014). Saleh’s writings do not devise a political program, but they offer a penetrating analysis of the problems that have faced the revolution, and insist on the need to resolve them. Perhaps this explains his status as an icon particularly among secular revolutionaries.

In this article I use Saleh’s own reflections on revolution, in Our Terrible Country and in his books, articles and interviews, to reflect on the role of bio-icons in an age of revolutions and counter-revolutions. My basic hypothesis is that icons are not a peripheral cultural phenomenon, but located much closer to the heart of the constitution of the social. They express personal trajectories, ethical qualities and embodied practices that inscribe guiding visions for moral order in the social imaginary (Taylor 2002). By articulating emotional bonds between individuals and sub-national, national and transnational collectives,
they express and reproduce the Durkheimian forces that allow societies to maintain their coherence and integrity. These are also the very forces that generate political power. But not all icons are national, and not all icons articulate the power of established institutions like churches, parties and states. Unlike other recent studies of political leadership and aura in the Middle East (Matar 2008; Wedeen 1999; Navaro-Yashin 2002), I do not focus on charismatic power in the strict Weberian sense of performative acts generating legitimate authority. Saleh obviously does not wield such power. Rather he provides intellectual leadership and an iconicity that derives from his words and his life story. As an example to follow, he inspires collective action and reflection that is meant to transform the social imaginary and prepare the social conditions conducive for revolution. This article therefore uses theories of revolutions, icons and intellectual formations to analyze the iconic figure of Yassin al-Haj Saleh, who is an interesting Arab thinker in his own right; I also analyze, more broadly, the role of bio-icons in today’s (post) revolutionary political culture.

Moving Through the Interregnum

The opening sequence in Our Terrible Country introduces the themes of destruction, revolution, lives in flux and personal destinies upended by the conflict, and then it asks how people are to make sense of the unbelievable tragedy of Syria as it unfolds. The film performs a double interrogation of this question, because it does so through a documentary témoignage of the life-altering exit of someone who, independent of the film, offers some of the most persuasive analysis of the question raised by Lynn Hunt (1984) and other social historians and ethnographers of revolution: what is the structure of revolutionary experience, and how does it change political thought? Hunt located the political culture of the French revolution in language, symbols, icons, rituals and other performative acts. These constituted the social imaginary at the time of transition from ‘ontological hierarchy’ to ‘mutual benefit’ (Taylor 2002: 102), what Raymond Williams (1981) called a structure of feeling of the revolutionary experience—the way it was felt, perceived and negotiated by contemporaries. As Saleh says at a later point in the film when he is starting his journey out of Douma and out of Syria, the dominant structure of feeling in the Syrian revolution is movement: ‘Each has his own end point, his own Odyssey’. Movement is narrated in different narrative structures informed by different stages of the revolution. The first stage is characterized by comedy and satire (Della Ratta 2012), the vast cultural production that dramatically altered what could be said against the regime in 2011 and 2012, performed in carnivalesque spectacles euphor-
cally upending social norms. The second stage is romance, in which the heroes were ‘the brothers of the revolutionary fraternity, who faced a life-and-death struggle with the demonic forces of counterrevolution’ (Hunt 1984: 35). As the expected leap into the future meets an increasing number of obstacles, as ‘the enormous gap between what we are and what we could be’ fails to narrow, the narrative of movement turns to tragedy. As Hunt describes the latter stages of the French revolution, ‘The tragedy is that the goal was so right, yet the quest for it inevitably failed. The heroes who nevertheless made the attempt were making a noble sacrifice of themselves for the sake of the community’ (Hunt 1984: 37).

Following Hunt’s three stages of revolutionary narrative, *Our Terrible Country* is located between the romantic and the tragic, at the time of interregnum (Baumann 2013: 119–122). The interregnum was originally used to denote the time period between the death of a ruler and the emergence of a new one. Gramsci—and later Agamben—extended the meaning from routine to extraordinary conditions of interregnum, when the extant legal frame of social order loses its grip, and a new frame is still at the design stage. This liminal stage is always violent and confused (Armbrust 2013: 834–836). In a time of extreme crisis, people must travel from their fixed location towards an unknown destination, both physically and mentally. In the film, this individual journey becomes a metaphor for the collective journey of a country trying to move, to walk, or to fight, together towards the utopian revolutionary victory where a new system becomes possible. The journey involves struggle, a struggle that at times seems entirely meaningful because a space of opportunity has opened for radical change, and that space in itself is producing the shape of the new social order. At other times the struggle is truly Sisyphean. Many give up and either resign themselves to a life in exile outside of the realm of revolution, or to a continuation of life under the current regime. Saleh fights against impossible odds, like the hero of Albert Camus’ (1942) *Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he likens the absurdity of man’s life with the situation of Sisyphus, a figure of Greek mythology who was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll down again. As Saleh says en route to Raqqa, ‘the journey no longer made any sense, but I no longer had any option but to continue’. The answer for Camus is not surrender, but revolt and struggle, a struggle which in ‘itself … is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy,’ as the final words of his essay state.

Throughout the film, Saleh wears a smile that is remarkable given the circumstances. Saleh is a man whose words are respected but he is not an icon in the sense of a mass reproduced face or profile. In that sense, the film creates a bodily iconicity for Saleh, adorns him with a smiling face that recalls
Camus’ dictum. We must imagine Sisyphus happy. As humans we must bear the hardship and carry on. Carrying, supporting a burden (Arabic: *hamila*) is indeed a central term in the film. In Douma, Saleh carries the burden of life in the liberated areas where basic supplies are limited by an almost total siege by the regime. We see him sweeping the streets with other activists, playing badminton with fighters during breaks, and helping at the medical facility. This participation is a necessity for him. ‘For two and a half years I did my utmost to stay in the country,’ he says. ‘It is important for a writer to live in the country he writes about. It is important for an intellectual to live with the people he is part of, and try to understand the situation.’

Staying means carrying the burdens of ordinary people, but it also means transforming that experience into intellectual production. And the personal tragedies that he experiences—his brother kidnapped by Islamists, his wife and close colleagues abducted by militants—must not get in the way. At one point, Atassi, who often acts as the critical interrogator in the film, asks him why he shows so little emotion about these losses. ‘So that I can bear it,’ Saleh replies. ‘It’ here potentially refers to bearing the situation on a personal level, but also bearing the revolution, carrying the movement on his shoulders, optimistically. Imagining himself happy. When asked about his appeal, several of the young Syrian revolutionaries interviewed for this study indeed stressed his optimism. Despite the defeats and tragedies of the revolution, they needed someone who presents a forward-looking vision for their project.

Unlike Camus’ Sisyphus, Saleh is not a solitary hero facing the absurdity of life writ large, but an outstanding intellectual traveling with comrades on a journey. He bears the hardship, but not alone. Solidarity carries him through. In the film, Saleh struggles heroically through the Syrian desert in the burning 50-degree heat of mid-summer, hiding from Assad’s airplanes under a canvas with other revolutionaries, and he eventually arrives in Raqqa, the first destination of his journey—only to find it controlled by hardline Islamists. He spends weeks in hiding from the Islamists before finally escaping to Turkey. In Douma, he leaves behind his wife, Samira al-Khalil, who is later kidnapped by a local militia. The film is animated by the movement of the protagonist, on the physical level of the journey, and on the metaphorical level of the state of the Syrian revolution, about which the film becomes a statement. In that sense the filmmakers Homsy and Atassi embrace and use Saleh’s stature as an iconic figure whose embodied meaning functions as ‘an aperture to a truth beyond’ (Ghosh 2011: 69) his own person; the truth, in this case, about the Syrian revolution.
One of many of the iconic images of the ‘Douma Four’, Razan Zeitouneh, Samira al-Khalil, Nazem Hammadi and Wael Hammadi, circulating on Facebook and other activist media in 2013 and 2014 as part of a campaign to secure their release. Taken from the NGO Syria Nonviolence’s Facebook page. https://www.facebook.com/SyrainNonviolence
The Thinker and the People

In order to understand what kind of work Saleh’s iconicity performs, this section of the article situates him in the intellectual milieu of the Syrian and Arab left and in the context of the Syrian opposition movement that has struggled, since the late 1970s, for political freedoms and human rights. I have likened Saleh (and other former political prisoners and activists in Syria) to Sisyphus before (Haugbolle 2010). In 2008 I carried out two months of fieldwork in Damascus and Beirut on the role imprisonment has played in shaping new ideological directions for Syria’s embattled opposition. I met and interviewed, among others, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, his wife Samira al-Khalil, and the human rights lawyer Razan Zeitouneh, all of whom appear in Our Terrible Country and all of whom have now become icons of the peaceful movement in the Syrian revolution (fig. 2). The conclusion then was not too upbeat. Despite a large corpus of prison memoirs and brave human rights projects that devised what I called a new liberalism focused on the individual body as opposed to regime narratives of collectivity, and despite a short window of opportunity for change during the so-called Damascus Spring in 2000–2001, in which Saleh also participated, ‘today [in 2010], that project has been reduced to individual efforts; brave people left with the Sisyphean task of piercing the silence in the hope that truth-telling may eventually contribute to the demise of authoritarianism in Syria’ (Haugbolle 2010: 238).

Fast forward to August 2011, when the revolution still promised a swift victory through popular mass mobilization and Saleh (2011) wrote in an essay in the literary magazine al-Adab that ‘The uprising can be defined as a monumental effort on the part of a large number of Syrians to own their life and take charge of politics, which means independent organising and independent and free speech and initiative’. Ultimately, it was not heroic intellectuals who rocked al-Assad’s boat, but the collective effort of mainly young Syrians to coordinate new political life through the protest movement. In that sense, Saleh’s colleague and friend Razan Zeitouneh is a much more politically charged icon for the revolution, as her work represents the tansiqiyyat, the acts of popular coordination committees. The demonstrations changed what Taylor (2002: 110) calls the ‘established repertoire of actions’ in the social imaginary—the things society perceives as natural tools to maintain or change the moral order. The arrival on the scene—seemingly out of nowhere—of popular mass mobilization was the revelation of the revolution but also raised critical questions for intellectuals. Can a revolutionary movement really do without charismatic leadership? And if yes, how does a revolution without leaders see the relationship between intellectuals and masses, and between the state and society? What is the role...
of political thought vis-à-vis the revolutionary movement and how should it be mediated?

These questions are accentuated when a revolution suddenly becomes a real possibility. But they are in fact recurrent themes in debates on the Arab left. In articles published in *al-Hayat* (2012: 7–71), Saleh wrote about the crisis between the state and society in Syria that necessitated a new social contract and new leadership emerging from the people. Similar questions preoccupied other opposition intellectuals and former prisoners of conscience, such as the previous head of the Syrian Communist Party–Political Bureau that Saleh belonged to, Riyad al-Turk, as well as Muhammad Ali Atassi, whose previous films about the Egyptian critic Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid and about Riyad al-Turk focus on intellectual leadership. In two films, one shot just after the Damascus Spring in 2002 and the second on the eve of the revolution in 2012, Atassi interrogates the role of al-Turk, who was also imprisoned for decades. Whereas the first film, *Ibn al-ʿam*, focuses on the typical *sumud* (steadfastness) of the survivor and his slow work to deal with the memory of his imprisonment once released from prison, the 2012 follow-up *Ibn al-ʿam Online*, offers more drama. In it, the revolution has broken out, and al-Turk has gone into hiding in Damascus, from where he talks with Atassi in Beirut via Skype. He recounts his pleasure and surprise at seeing a young generation engaging in mass protests and breathing new life into the project that al-Turk and his generation of opposition leaders failed to achieve. He also stresses the need for an older generation to be humble:

New people, new men have entered the fray. Everyone should know their abilities, their place, their limitations ... They have grasped the burning core of the struggle, the core that we couldn't grasp. They have burnt themselves for its sake. For that reason we must respect them, even if they are not perfect.

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The tone in *Ibn al-ʿam Online* is hopeful, even romantic, just as it is in Saleh's essay in *al-Adab* and many other revolutionary cultural and intellectual works from 2011. Even though the tone has edged towards tragic, *Our Terrible Country* elaborates on the same theme, the relationship between the old intellectual opposition cohort and the more numerous young revolutionaries. As Saleh says to a revolutionary in her twenties at an Istanbul café towards the end of *Our Terrible Country*: ‘Don’t listen to what anyone over 50 years old has to say about the revolution!’ ‘Except for me,’ he adds and laughs. He has sided with the young generation and invested all his hopes in their abilities. Together they have
invented, and partly succeeded in naturalizing new repertoires of action. He has nurtured several of the new Syrian intellectuals and provided experience and advice. This connection is indeed a bond of love, and a necessity for the raison d’être of a radical project. For years, many from Saleh’s generation of leftist Arab writers and thinkers born in the decades after independence in 1943 felt positioned outside society and had no real belief that their revolutionary work would sway the masses and transform the social imaginary. Riyad al-Turk was Secretary General of the Syrian Communist Party–Political Bureau from its founding in 1973 until 2005. He did not command a large group of people, and his every move was closely monitored and circumvented by the regime. He and Saleh belong to a group of Syrian leftists who, in Saleh’s words

was influenced by thinkers like the two late Syrians Yassin al Hafez and Elias Murqus, and the Moroccan historian and political theorist Abdallah Laroui. To those of us seeking a better understanding of our social and historical situation, they offered a non-dogmatic Marxism with an orientation to our society and cultural problems. Under their influence, I decided I wanted to be a writer. We found ourselves enthusiastic about the Euro-communism of the 1970s and critical towards the Soviet Union. But our political identity was mainly built on our experiences of struggle against the tyrannical rule of Assad, the father. It combined a traditional leftist affiliation with a deep commitment to the people and an aspiration for freedom. 

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The commitment to the people was impossible to translate into a political project in the 1980s and 1990s when most of them were in prison or heavily monitored. As a result, like many other Arab intellectuals of this generation, the ideals of their earlier commitment to party politics and Marxism were gradually redefined as a cultural project, and the problems facing Arab societies were reframed from a historical materialist reading to a culturalist one, where Islam in particular took center stage. This enculturation of vanguard intellectuals brought criticism from another iconic figure on the Arab intellectual left, the Lebanese Marxist thinker Mahdi ‘Amil. ‘Amil branded culturalism ‘obscurantist thought’ (Frangie 2012). For ‘Amil, enculturized leftists, partly as a result of their disappointing experiences in the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian resistance movement, had become overly pessimistic about the ability of Arab people to organize resistance. This was just one of the reactions to a general crisis on the Lebanese and Arab left in the 1980s, a crisis that reflected a growing skepticism about previously accepted truths about the relation between
the working class, the party and the intellectual. This cultural pessimist mode, in which the role of the intellectual is to lead the people, but the people—unfortunately—are caught in the impossible trappings of false consciousness, can be described as permanent crisis that became the structure of feeling of leftist Arab intellectuals born in the first decades after independence.

When popular uprisings broke out in 2011, this generation of Arab intellectuals sensed a chance to break free from the trappings of permanent crisis. The Lebanese writer Abbas Beydoun wrote in the left-leaning daily al-Safir two days after the fall of Mubarak that it was as if ‘the people found itself’ (Kassab 2014: 14). Arab thinkers, he wrote in a later article, had too long insisted that the lack of freedom in Arab countries was due to decline or backwardness (takhalluf). Now a new breed of intellectuals, not from the intellectual elite, nor from the common people, was being born from the revolution. These were what Beydoun called ‘common intellectuals’, ‘youth and university students, connected to new media and the people and close to reality’. Many established intellectuals found these new intellectuals inexperienced and unorganized, and often refused to engage with them, though they celebrated the uprisings. But some intellectuals embraced the chance to finally be ‘among the people and with the people: the “public” that walks with them is not their “own public” [of intellectuals] but the wider rebelling people’ (Beydoun, quoted in Kassab 2014: 16).

If we accept Beydoun’s rather schematic dichotomy of new and old intellectuals, Saleh is clearly one of the old intellectuals who has grasped the need to not just think about the revolution but think with the revolution—think about societal change with the words and deeds of the revolutionary political culture that surrounded him in Damascus from 2011 to 2013. Thinking with the revolution involves being on the ground, in close proximity to Syrians in the liberated areas as they began to organize. Movement, at this stage, essentially meant coordination (Arabic: tansiq). This redefined role of the intellectual, for Saleh, is not just a result of the revolution but also of the gradual realizations he experienced during his imprisonment from 1980 to 1996. In his prison memoirs, Saleh (2012) relates that the long fight for freedom changed his view of himself as a public intellectual and as an ethical agent in the struggle for change. His sixteen years of confinement were grueling but also an emancipatory experience. He recounts that through suffering, learning and struggle, he broke out of some of his ‘internal prisons’: of narrow political affiliation, of rigid ideology, and that of the intellectual’s ego (Saleh 2012: 85–119). By rigid ideology, he also means the attachment to a leftist party agenda that, for many Arab leftists, kept them transfixed in ‘a discourse that equates the left with a hollow nationalist rhetoric that in recent years has acquired, in its national dimension, an obscure appellation: Rejectionism (mumanaʿa)’ (Saleh 2011). The idea of a rejectionist
front led by the Baathist regime in Damascus against Israeli and US intentions in the region underpins the regime’s justification for authoritarian rule, and by continuing to buy into the need for rejection (mumanaʾa), parts of the left (the Syrian Communist Party and many independent writers, artists and media institutions) implicitly or explicitly support the regime. This rejectionism, writes Saleh, ‘is no more than a flashy label for a local tendency, injected with a dose of anti-imperialism, which cloaks sociopolitical conditions perpetuated by violence and privilege. As for its social dimension, it has become an impoverished ideology mixed with a state-centered political thought’ (Saleh 2011).

This internal struggle on the Arab left has pitted Saleh against many intellectuals. One of the most vivid spats was with California-based academic As’ad Abu Khalil (2013) who claimed, in an article in the Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar, that Saleh represents ‘the team of liberals allied with the Muslim Brotherhood’, a sell-out to the Saudi power center (because he writes for the Saudi Arabian-owned newspapers al-Hayat). Being a ‘liberal’ in this context meant writing for al-Hayat and accepting the political economy underpinning this intellectual position. A second line of argumentation against Saleh from leftists is his support of the Free Syrian Army that is partly funded by the Qatars, and his defense of dialogue with the Islamist elements in the uprising. The call for a levelheaded critique of political Islam is a long-standing theme in Saleh’s work (Saleh 2011a), and one that attracted criticism from some secularists even before 2011. His iconicity is thus confined to a particular political reading, a particular mawqif (stance), produced through regular interventions in online media, status updates (Saleh has a massive following on Facebook), and not least in his articles in the newspapers al-Hayat, al-Quds al-Arabi, and occasionally even the New York Times (for which he was declared a traitor of the Arab resistance). His admirers may not ‘like’ his mawqif on all occasions, but they support his basic line, what Michael Freeden (1994) calls the core of an ideology’s morphology. The core of his ideological stance, following our reading so far, is support for the popular revolution, and resistance against the privileges of the Assad regime and the political economy that underpins it. In short: movement (away from the Assad state) and coordination (of popular struggle). Adjacent morphologies, in Saleh’s case, would be social justice and secularism. These ideological focal points are shared with people like As’ad Abu Khalil. But they differ over whether popular struggle should come before anti-imperialism, phrased as rejectionism. This, for him, is what the revolution is about: the central pre-occupation of activists and leftists today.

Arguably, this is exactly the ideological shift that the Arab uprisings in general and the Syrian revolution in particular have brought about. Several
interviewees stressed Saleh’s critical role in defending the detractors of the revolution, including ‘reactionary’ leftists. In the words of Sausan (born 1979), ‘We need a bulwark against our internal enemies too’. Saleh was seen as their protector and a focal point for their own confused thoughts in the midst of upheaval. Salim (born 1976) adds:

I remember following his articles on daily basis, his smooth language and clear thoughts were enjoyable to read especially in the first month of the revolution when young intellectuals and activists were striving for a theoretical foundation of what they are living in the streets of Syria. Yassin served that purpose as an intellectual, writer and demonstrator with us.

As a new social group in the midst of formation, Saleh became a father figure for many. These young people rushed to his defense and identified deeply with him. In a video released on the Beirut-based documentary collective Abou Naddara in 2014, Saleh comments on his relation with this group (Abou Naddara 2014). He understands their need for an iconic figure, he says, and he remembers having intellectual heroes in his own youth. He does not want to be a leader, but he can see why the young act like they do, obsessing over his every move. Indeed, some of them act as his shabiha (thugs), he says and smiles. Shabiha is the name given to the bands of pro-Assad thugs who have carried out some of the worst violence in the war. One of Saleh’s (2014a) most circulated essays analyzes the emergence of the shabiha in the 1970s, its central role in maintaining regime power, and its connection to the roots of violence in the Syrian war.

The video can be seen as a pun on the lack of violence in the intellectual cohort of the revolution: that their shabiha merely fight with words. However, one of my interviewees took issue with the term, and with the video, which he saw as indicative of a sense of ‘superiority’ in Saleh’s approach to the young. Despite the fact that Saleh rejects the leadership role, Salim stressed, this is exactly how he acts when he calls his supporters shabiha. The Bidayyat video and Salim’s contentious comment reveal an internal disagreement in the movement over whether or not to strive for leadership, and if so, whether that leadership should emerge from the youth. To date, it has remained a leaderless revolution, and many people in the uprising see this as a necessary reaction against the personality cult of Assad, as well as, increasingly, is, led by the self-appointed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A recent poster from the small northern town of Kafranbel, famous for the biting satirical billboards posted widely on the internet, maintains that leadership is idiotic (fig. 3). Half the population is under the boot of the shabiha, wearing an Assad minhibak
T-shirt, the other half are brainwashed Islamists with a prophet Muhammad *minhibak* T-shirt. These are two sides of the same enemy the poster seems to say. There is, and will be, no Yassin al-Haj Saleh T-shirt to match, because their project is precisely to counter the politics inherent in unreflective adoration and following: to remove the boot and the lock weighing like a nightmare on the minds of the living.
Crisis and Critique

Saleh’s critique forms part of an exploding intellectual field of Syrian and Arab debates over legitimacy, revolution, statehood, secularism, gender and other social issues that have been transformed by events since 2011. This moment represents new openings for critique and transformation but also a deepening sense of crisis. The affective power of icons feeds on crisis. Indeed, liminal moments are intrinsically linked to crisis (Boland 2013). An emergent anthropology of crisis stresses that crisis is not just a symptom of ills but that it diffuses, proliferates and extends liminal events such as revolutions, and adds affective potential to processes of iconization. In this vein, icons can be seen as by-products of crisis. They can either be restorative in relation to the existing social order or revolutionary, seeking to undo it (Ghosh 2011: 18–27). Following Ghosh and other critical scholars of bio-icons, this article has shown that icons do not only reflect struggle, but also produce ideological making and re-making of positions. For the revolutionary project, the key issue becomes what kind of ideological re-making emerges from crisis, and what kind of action is animated by the critique (Boland 2013; Thomassen 2012). Without belief that movement towards change is possible, even at the bleakest of times, the role of critique becomes obsolete, even nihilistic, and icons of revolution lose appeal (Boland 2013: 227).

The year 2014 is indeed the bleakest of times, not just because of the stagnation of the revolutionary projects in Syria, Egypt, and Bahrain, and the related rise of Islamist militias such as the Islamic State, but also because the very idea of what the Arab revolution(s) was about is going through a crisis. That crisis is read differently in different national publics and intellectual fields. For Arab leftists, the crisis today is symptomatic of a deep ideological rift over what leftism should be about in the twenty-first century, a crisis that arguably goes back to the Arab defeat in 1967 (Kassab 2009). As suggested in my reading of Abbas Beydoun’s reactions in 2011, those who embraced the moment of revolution saw it not just as a chance to confront reactionary forces in political and intellectual circles, but more fundamentally as a revival of critique from a platform of vernacular thinking. I have shown how the gradual change of mood from initial elation (comedy) through hardened struggle (romance) to deep crisis (tragedy) from 2011 to 2014 has brought revolutionaries full circle back to the same questions of stagnation, the role of critique, and the issues of relations between intellectuals and the people—the same issues that preoccupied them before the revolution began. Now that revolutionary change has been tried and largely failed, the crisis is deeper than before. As Ziad Homsy says to Yassin al-Haj Saleh when they are reunited in Istanbul: ‘ya hakim, there
is something that cuts the deepest, which is that they [ś] are one of the consequences of the revolution'. ‘Exactly’, Saleh responds. ‘They are the product of our work, the cancerous growth of the revolution, if you like’. Both men have ended up outside Syria, looking back at what appears to be a double enemy: the regime and resurgent Islamism: the two minhibaks. Exile and defeat produce self-critique. In retrospect, Homsy believes that they ‘should have known that. We should have worked hard so that they [ś] didn’t appear’. Now, the revolution is stranded. Today, he wouldn’t ‘take up arms again for a political project … or a political party [like the Free Syrian Army]. The revolution is bigger than that. I take up arms for an idea … it’s precisely this idea that is lost at the moment’.

Ziad Homsy here equates the revolution with an idea. As the hakim of the revolution, the role of Saleh is to clarify the essence of that idea, and therefore he is vital to the continuation of the project. He is not the embodiment of power or the face of a political leader, but the essence of revolution. In the final scene of the film, Homsy and Saleh reflect on the revolution over drinks. Homsy says it clearly: ‘He is the revolution for me’. Therefore he should be protected: ‘I can handle it (ahmilha) if someone beats me. If he was imprisoned, he would be tortured, he would break down. We would break down too’. At this point, Saleh tries to stop Homsy’s emotional monologue, but he continues: ‘Because I know what he is like inside. I don’t want to sing his praises in front of him … how beautiful he is, how pure, how much of a revolutionary …’ Saleh puts his arm around Homsy and tries to explain to the camera that Homsy’s adoration perhaps has something to do with the fact that his father was kidnapped during their journey to Raqqa, and that he therefore identifies with Saleh as a father figure. But Homsy insists, through tears, on making his final point:

My father was imprisoned, for 13 years, and my mother endured it. I don’t want to cry. She endured it. I was arrested twice and she endured it. My brother was arrested four times and she endured it. I wanted to bring my family to safety. I wanted to show how to get my mother out. But my mother knew—she organized it so that I could get out [of Syria]. But I want my father back, and I want to go back. There is something called a will to live. I want to live, hakim, and I want you to live. I want my mother to live, and I’m going to get her out. Because they can’t live inside. People who want to live should get out. They shouldn’t stay inside, because inside is death.

Saleh cries too, perhaps because he also left his loved ones inside Syria. The crisis in the country is so profound that being there is no longer an option.
Critique must be performed from outside. That is the depressing conclusion, and at the end of the film, bearing it stoically is no longer possible, even for the hakim. But despite the predicament of exile and revolutionary collapse, Saleh maintains that critique is the only straw there is to grasp:

I’m aware how impossible our situation is. However, each time I thought I had understood something or shed light on something, I felt a small victory against a dumb, many-headed monster that wants to keep us in darkness, so as not to have the words, so as to want only what it wants.

The moment of realization that Our Terrible Country articulates forces new questions: what heuristic device in intellectual formation, what practical innovation in revolutionary organization, must be adopted now? Where did we go wrong in the last three years, and is it too late to return to the moment of 2011? Or must a new moment be carved out by alternative means? Was the failure of the Syrian and Egyptian revolutions inevitable because social and cultural structures were not ripe for a ‘total revolution’ (Yack 1992) in the tradition of the French revolution, where the role of critique is not a corrective one, but where ‘revolution,’ in the words of a French revolutionary writing in 1793 ‘means outside of all forms and all rules’? (Hunt 1984: 38). The longing for what Hazem Saghie (2014) has called a ‘second revolution’ that goes beyond the level of political change to alter the underlying social structures and values of Syrian society now seems like the chimera that led the revolutionaries astray. They did not have the social base necessary for a total revolution. The second revolution was, and still is happening for them, and inside of them, but perhaps they misread the predicament of ‘the people’. If that is the case, the role of critique must be redefined.

Saleh’s own doubts about the people and the social base of the revolution surfaces at several points in the film. If he is living among the people in Douma, sharing their daily struggle and sweeping the streets with them, there is also an omen just before he leaves for Raqqa. Ziad Homsy asks a bearded man on the street what he thinks about ‘them,’ that is, Yassin, Razan and Samira. They are good people, he says, but ‘any woman in Douma is forbidden from going outside unveiled. With permission from the almighty God’. But, Homsy interrupts, ‘They feel they are in their own country, and they’re helping us?’ Yes, the man replies, ‘but, we want them to cover up so they look like they are from here’. Obviously, not everyone accepts the symbiosis of the revolutionary leaders and the people. The distance between him and the people, him and the country, becomes more pronounced as the journey proceeds. Moving towards Raqqa, Saleh’s city of birth, he asserts that ‘the destination we are trying to reach is
moving further away, it is no longer the same. This is no longer our country. I mean Raqqa of course. But does he actually mean more than Raqqa? He—and the revolution—are struggling through a desert. The revolution sought to redefine the country in its image. But now it is, as he says about himself, ‘not in control of its own destiny. Truly a feather blowing in the wind’. On a stop in the nineteen-day journey from Douma to Raqqa, Saleh looks over the desert landscape and reflects on people’s ‘bad habits’ without which ‘the revolution would manage to skip a stage’. These habits, ‘some of our usual practices’ which we could also call the existing political culture in Syria, include ‘wasting time’ and ‘the extremely modest place for culture in the lives of the people. There is no culture. There are no books’.

Later, in Turkey, Saleh has an argument with a Syrian shop owner who appears to charge too much for their meal. He has lost his son in the war and keeps the iconic picture of his martyred son framed on the wall. He gets extremely upset over Saleh’s complaint about the bill: ‘We’re breaking our backs to serve you. The important thing is to get our country back soon. We’re here to serve you, all of you, this is not an investment, not for business, nor for profit. Do you see that boy behind you?’ he says to Saleh and points to the image of his dead son. ‘He’s worth all the treasure in the world’. Saleh apologizes and they kiss and make up. ‘Hopefully we can return soon’, the old man says as they leave, ‘and we will rebuild it with love’. But, he adds, reflecting Saleh’s own doubts about the revolution, ‘Assad is merely an illusion (khayal). The disaster is inside us! What is Assad? A person like you and me, don’t you see?’

Three types of icons of the war—the martyred fighter, the revolutionary leader, and the president—are clustered together in this scene. The martyred fighter serves as a reminder of human sacrifice and the necessity of returning. The iconic leader is taught a lesson of humility towards the people that he seeks to understand. And the president, in the vernacular philosophy of the shopkeeper, is reduced from icon to symptom of a cultural malaise. Assad symbolizes the people, but not as a faultless leader supported by a bond of love, as the regime narrative would suggest, but as one of many Syrians fighting with themselves against their internal tendencies to authoritarianism. The crisis of the man’s exiled status produces a radical critique, not in a developed reflexive way, but as a stark statement about the country. The developed critique is the role of the intellectuals—Saleh, Atassi, Homsy and others—who seek to understand their predicament and work out a way forward.

There is no question that the crisis that Saleh’s thinking and Atassi and Homsy’s film revolves around is systemic. It is not merely the crisis of a national uprising, but a crisis of Arab thought and Arab society. It is a crisis of the social. Such social crises have a dialectical relation with critique, not least in Marx-
ist social theory that goes back to the nineteenth century (Boland 2013). From
Marx to the 1970s there was a certain agreement over what the political, eco-
nomic and social crises of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant on a
systemic level. In this tradition, which we could simply call the Left, the role of
critique was to show that underneath the veneer of a system seemingly repro-
ducing itself and improving society and the human condition in the process,
the basic structure of capitalism was in fact generating recurrent crises, be they
economic, social or political: crashes, class wars and actual military wars. The
role of radical critique was also to suggest that a crisis-free utopia was possible.
The aim of critique was to make crisis a springboard for social change. Crisis
was painful but also presented an opening that was thought to produce two
things: First, a structural rift, or opening, in the machinery of social reproduc-
tion from which a space of opportunity could emerge for social change; and
second, a political subject engaged in altering rather than upholding social
structures. The point of critique was to put the analytical finger on this rift, this
space from which change could emerge through the agency of the revolution-
ary subject (Hage 2009). It would alter the social imaginary like a thunderbolt.

The internal critique of ‘actually existing socialism’, from the British new left
and Solzhenitsyn to repentant French maoists, and of course the end of world
communism, has gradually undermined the privileged position of the Marx-
ist critique. As discussed earlier, the conditions for the crisis of the Arab left
have particular dynamics but also share elements of the global retreat of Marx-
ist critique. Intellectuals were often engaged directly in communist parties,
lke Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Fawwaz Traboulsi, Ahmad Beydoun, Hazem Saghieh
and Riyad al-Turk. Crises—such as the Lebanese civil war—were painful but
also meant an opening for radical change. Slowly, as a result of the transfor-
mations in the regional Arab intellectual field and the global field of the left,
a sense among intellectuals took hold that rather than being an occasion for
social transformation, permanent crisis did not offer any of the two hoped-for
openings: neither the rupture in capitalist logic of reproducing the social, nor
the necessary conditions for the birth of a revolutionary subject. In this way,
as Ghassan Hage (2009) has put it, radical critique of crisis gave way to a crisis
of critique. Critique continued to exist, but often in a kind of against-the-odds
vogue, the Sisyphean frame.

The left’s self-interrogation was necessary for the return to an absolute com-
mitment to individual freedom as the basic condition for social change. But the
concurrent sidelining of critique, and the severed connection with the public
that resulted from it, has meant a redefinition of crisis. Without the possibil-
ity of forging a revolutionary subject, critique is stagnant. The revolutionary
project, and the left, became stuck, and this ‘stuckedness’ became the central
structure of feeling in a time characterized by permanent crisis (Hage 2009). The Arab revolutions represented the possibility of a return to the time, pre-1980s, when the left really believed that crisis and critique could foster a revolutionary subject. Intellectuals from Saleh’s generation remember this belief. Most abandoned it, and some returned to it, briefly in 2011, only to abandon it again. With or without icons, a new revolutionary project in the twenty-first century must find a way to accommodate these historical experiences with the outlook, experience, creativity and hope of a young generation of revolutionaries.

References


