

Sebastian Ordoñez: Welcome to the encounter “Our Wounds Are Bridges.” You are all so welcome here. Thank you for being here.

My name is Sebastian Ordoñez, and I am from Colombia, talking to you from London, UK, and I'm with an organization called War on Want.

It's an honor to have you all here. Before we begin, we want to acknowledge that this is a sensitive conversation held in a moment of intense distress. Above anything, this will be a space of care and justice. We encourage everyone to respect each other in the chat and to be radically curious. There will be no tolerance for behavior that excludes, threatens, or disrespects others on the basis of gender identity, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and other identities. We will be listening to the voices of people behind critical struggles, so please be open to being challenged and transformed.

Now a little bit of context about the team behind this event. Post-Extractive Futures is an experiment: we create spaces of kinship and encounter for social movements to kindle the fires of possibility that emerge when collective power meets complexity. Our collective, and the initiative behind this event, is diverse, but we are guided and challenged by one question: what is it that we can do together that we can't do alone? There are so many answers to this question, but one answer feels very relevant today. Only together can we realize that we are not alone. Only together can we listen to our stories, make space for our wounds, and make sense of our collective power to change the present.

I'd like to hand over to my colleague and friend Tatiana Garavito, who is going to welcome us from Colombia.

Tatiana Garavito: Thank you so much, Seb and everyone. It's really nice to be here. I know some of you have been introducing yourselves in the chat, but if you haven't done it, this is an open invitation for you to let us know where you're connecting from. I can see that people are coming from a lot of different places. It's a real honor to be here with you today.

Today we open this conversation from Colombia, from the territory of the Muisca and Pijao people—I am by the central ranges of the Andes. After over seven decades of ongoing armed conflict here in Colombia and in this region, with hundreds of thousands of people killed, millions of people displaced and exiled, we are still struggling and working to make these territories spaces of joy and liberation. So we are particularly honored to be part of this conversation today from these territories. We offer our love across the ocean, and affirm that we are here to listen, to learn, and to do this work of associating together.

Our conversation is going to be joined by really amazing academics and activists and people who are at the front lines of struggles, and the conversation today is going to be guided by Joey Ayoub, who is a Lebanese writer, researcher, podcaster and editor. Previously a MENA editor at *Global Voices* and *IFEX*, he is doing his Ph.D. on postwar Lebanon at the University of Zurich. He is also the host of *The Fire These Times*, a podcast dedicated to the task of tackling the twenty-first century from the periphery. His work covers everything from cultural studies to human rights, futurism, and the climate emergency.

We are so honored to have you here and have you guide the conversation today, so over to you, Joey, thank you for being here.

Joey Ayoub: Thank you Tatiana. I am going to start by introducing the four guests that we have here—we have two Syrians and two Ukrainians, just the perfect ratio for this conversation. I would also ask speakers to speak as slowly as they can to give time for our interpreters. The team has done an

amazing job getting five different languages at the same time. I have no idea how they managed to do this, but they did. If those listening want to hear this conversation in any of the other languages, check out the language button at the bottom right for the other languages: English, Ukrainian, Russian, Spanish, and Arabic.

Yassin al Haj Saleh, who will be speaking in English, is a Syrian writer and former political prisoner. He is author of several books on Syria, prison, contemporary Islam, intellectual responsibility, and experiences of the atrocious. He is the husband of Samira Khalil, who was abducted by an armed Islamist group in Douma in December 2013. He now lives in Berlin. Links to essays by Yassin can be found in the chat at some point during this conversation.

Wafa Mustafa, who will also be speaking in English, is a Syrian activist, a journalist, a survivor of detention. Mustafa comes from Masyaf, a city in the Hama governorate in western Syria. She left the country on 9 July 2013, exactly a week after her father was forcibly disappeared by the regime in Damascus. In her advocacy, Mustafa covers the impact of detention on young girls, women, and families. A profile of Wafa can be found in the chat box as well.

Yuliya Yurchenko, who will also be speaking in English, is a senior lecturer in political economy at the department of economics and international business and a researcher at the political economy governance finance and accountability institute at the University of Greenwich, UK. She is the author of *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital*, which was published by Pluto Press in 2017. She researches state, capital, and society relations as well as public services as a commons with a regional focus on Europe and Ukraine.

Taras Bilous, who will be speaking in Ukrainian, is a Ukrainian historian and an activist of the Social Movement Organization. As an editor for *Commons*, a journal of social critique, he covers the topics of war and nationalism. He has recently written quite a lot of articles, including “A Letter to the Western Left from Kiev” as well as “The Left in the West Must Rethink.”

To get us started, I will ask Yassin first, if that's okay, and then Wafa—we'll start with Syrians and then go to Ukrainians—if you can talk to us about what is happening in Syria, and what's been happening in Syria. And obviously feel free to start where you want to start, I know this is a big question. After that we can go on with Wafa to focus on more recent events as well.

Yassin al Haj Saleh: Thank you Joey, thank you everybody for organizing this amazing event. It is really vital now that we can meet and talk about issues, to reflect and find connections between our struggles in different parts of the world. I feel a bit prehistoric here, because I see most of the people here are younger—thirties or younger, so I feel quite a grandpa. But maybe I have the merit of having been involved in struggles in Syria for democracy, for social justice, and for human dignity for quite a long time.

When I was very young, I was a political prisoner for quite a good time—all my twenties and more than half of my thirties. It was the first wave of struggle for democracy and for change. Our struggle for owning our country, for retrieving our country did not start today or eleven years ago. It started at least since the second half of the 1970s, after Hafez al Assad came to power. As maybe you know, we have now a dynasty. He ruled the country thirty years, and then his son ruled the country for twenty years.

So the second wave—an even bigger wave started in 2011. It started as a peaceful demonstration of people in many parts of the country for democracy, and for justice and for dignity. The idea of dignity loomed very large in the Syrian struggle. It was faced by war from the very first moment, from the side

of the regime. People were arrested, tortured, and killed at demonstrations. Just a few days after the beginning, dozens of demonstrators—there was a sit-in in a certain place in Dera'a and people were killed not by police but by the military formations led by Maher al Assad, the brother of Bashar al Assad. So then it turned to armed military struggle. For almost two years, it was a Syrian versus Syrian struggle. It was our struggle against a cliquish regime, oligarchic and extremely brutal. Then the national siting of struggle collapsed and it became a regional thing, with many regional powers involved and many international powers.

If we want to give a clear idea, I'm afraid many listeners here will feel lost. I'll try just to give some outlines. After the collapse of the Syrian-versus-Syrian struggle, there were many regional and international powers, and there were many massacres with WMD, especially chemical weapons. There was a big chemical massacre in one of the suburbs around Damascus on August 21, 2013—more than 1,400 people were killed. At the same time there was the rise of nihilistic Islamic groups—I call them nihilistic because they negate, truly, the Syrian society itself. Most of their struggle was against Syrians—some of them fought the regime, but they (especially Da'esh) fought against Syrians who were fighting the regime.

The Americans intervened in Syria in 2014. The Russians intervened a year later, in 2015. The Turks a year later, 2016. Iranians were intervening from the very beginning, through their satellites from Lebanon and Iraq and Afghanistan, and sectarianizing the struggle: manipulating the cultural-religious divisions within Syrian society. Israel was intervening all the time, and occupies Syrian territory since 1967, the Golan Heights.

I don't think we have many examples that are similar to Syria, where you have five regional and international powers at the same time in one country, and many substate actors—I mentioned Lebanese Hezbollah, many Shi'a groups from Iraq and Afghanistan, and Pakistan. And the infiltration of Sunni jihadism after the collapse of the national siting of struggle. So it is a global thing. At the same time, almost 7 million Syrians have been displaced outside the country, which is thirty percent of the population. So we have the world in Syria, so to speak, and we have Syrians scattered in 127 countries: mostly in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Germany. Then Iraq and Egypt. But according to Human Rights Watch, Syrian refugees are scattered in 127 countries.

Now we have four Syrias—or five actually. One dominated by the regime: it is the Assadi protectorate, protected by Russia and Iran. Then we have an enclave in Idlib, dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is sort of an offshoot of Al Qaeda. Then a strip along the northern borders of Syria occupied by Turkey, though through Syrian proxies. Then there is a region in the east dominated by the Americans and the boots on land are mostly Kurdish, from Syria and from neighboring countries, from Turkey specifically. Then of course the Golan Heights.

So we have almost five Syrias and we have Syrians everywhere in the world. I don't think we know many examples like this. The human toll was huge. According to the UN two months ago, a speaker said 350,000 people killed, and she emphasized that the real number is most likely far bigger. My personal estimation is between half a million and 600,000, which is more than one among every forty Syrians. Syrians were 22-24 millions. We have more than 100,000 people forcibly disappeared. We don't know their fates. It happens that Wafa's father is one of them; my wife, my brother, and many of my friends are among them.

So it is a big tragedy on a human level—reducing a whole country to a situation that we don't know how to understand and analyze it well. One of the features of our struggle is that many people say it is

complicated over there in Syria. And this is true. It is complicated. But it is analyzable. And the one main thing in analyzing it is to talk about the complicators. When there is a big chemical massacre and instead of punishing the criminal, you pretend to take away the tool of the crime—they didn't take it: it was a farcical application of international law—then things will become really complex. And they became complex. I think I will stop here.

JA: Thank you Yassin. Wafa, you want to take it from there?

Wafa Mustafa: Yes. Good evening, everyone, from Berlin.

Yassin covered a part of what I was preparing to say, but I'll still give some more numbers and facts. As Yassin mentioned, first and foremost, most importantly when it comes to Syria and when it comes to numbers, there have been many estimates from different entities regarding the numbers of deaths and detainees and those forcibly disappeared. This is the most difficult aspect of the situation in Syria. Obviously we have heard many numbers, reaching a million victims killed in Syria. This is part of the tragedy: that nobody actually knows and nobody actually can tell. After eleven years, it is still very difficult for any party or organization or political entity to come up with the real numbers.

But at least we know, as Yassin said, that more than half of Syria's population has fled their homes. The number I guess now is approaching 7 million people who are internally displaced. 2 million of them are staying in camps with limited access to basic services. The biggest numbers of refugees outside Syria are staying in neighboring countries—Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq—but as of February this year it was said that 14 million Syrians inside Syria were in need of some humanitarian assistance (this is according to the UN) and about 5 million are classified as in extreme and catastrophic need. More than 12 million are struggling to find enough food each day.

I usually do not really speak numbers, but I know today that we have a very diverse audience. I also know that we all don't really like numbers. But to give an overview, these numbers are huge. Obviously, each of us still have family still in Syria. When I say more than 12 million people are struggling to find enough food, I know that because my family is one of these families. I know that because my friends and people who I grew up with call me sometimes to say, "We are very embarrassed, but can you please support because we spent the last week with no food." It is unfortunately the reality.

And talking about education unfortunately became a kind of luxury in Syria, not only because a huge number of schools were targeted (not only randomly) and destroyed by the regime and Russian airstrikes, but also because many families did not send their children to school for years, for the sake of their safety. When we talk about destruction, whole cities are destroyed in Syria. Aleppo is a very clear and unfortunately very similar example to what we are seeing in Ukraine. And it's heartbreaking talking about hospitals. According to Physicians for Human Rights, they said that we have reached a point where only half of Syria's healthcare facilities are functioning.

Unfortunately I have to come to the point where we talk about negotiations. After eleven years, everything failed. Countless rounds of negotiations, organized and "supported" by everyone we can imagine, they all failed. Last one, we had an invitation to write a constitution, which many Syrians did not support—it started a couple years ago, and recently, last year, Geir Pedersen said that it's a huge disappointment.

This is the overview, but when it comes to daily life, even for those of us who live in exile—I've been living in Germany for now six years, but my daily reality is Syria, and is about Syria. This is something that many people in exile say: that I am physically here but I am mentally and emotionally still in Syria.

Not only because this is the country, as Yassin explained beautifully, that I belong to and this is the country that I fought for, and mostly also because my father is still there, somewhere. My father was forcibly disappeared by the Assad regime today now for 3,208 days. That makes 8 years, 9 months, and 12 days. That means we don't even know if he is alive or not. This is what enforced disappearance means in Syria: no phonecalls, no letters, no communication. Families like mine are actually tortured by the regime by spending the rest of their lives just wondering if their loved ones are still alive or not, and if they are not, why they were killed? And where are they buried? This is one of the things that I am mostly concerned with.

The footage from Ukraine, everything we've been seeing is just heartbreaking. To be honest I'm mostly disappointed, because I did not wish that to happen for anyone else. I wish that the world didn't let us down, but they did. So I'm here today and I'm very honored, but for some reason I feel ashamed—I should not be, because I am not the international community, I did not fail anyone. And I am fighting with all my power. But I still feel ashamed. Just before this conversation I was looking at images and footage and videos from Ukraine and I just feel helpless. I hope this conversation today will inform all of us but will also bring us closer.

JA: Thank you Wafa. I know I speak for everyone when I say you are not the one who should be ashamed in such a context. Both Yassin and Wafa, thanks a lot for—it's impossible to summarize and explain in a few minutes the past fifty years, so I think your interventions were fantastic.

We can move on to Yuliya if that's okay, to focus on recent and ongoing events. But if you can also give us some context for those in the audience who don't know, what is happening in Ukraine? Then we'll go to Taras of course.

Yuliya Yurchenko: Thank you very much. Normally at events that I go to in my line of work as an academic and an occasional activist, I like to follow after others have spoken because you can layer on what others have said. In a sense that is also true here, but at the same time it is more difficult, because you hear these heartbreaking stories—of course you know it from the news and you hear personal accounts, but there is something quite different happening to you, even in a virtual space, with people who have endured it personally. In that sense, you prepare certain things to say, and you don't know if it's even relevant anymore. My heart goes out to you and your families in your country. It's horrific. Years of suffering, absolutely horrific.

What is happening in Ukraine—I am glad we are having this event of support and solidarity with our friends and comrades from Syria, because we see so many horrifying similarities in what is going on. You see the betrayal of those who you hope to find among your comrades in these difficult times, as Taras has recently put it. We talk about it a lot: horrendous suffering of people, destruction of cities, kidnappings, torture, murder. On top of dealing with all of that, when you're trying to find some support for humanitarian and military needs of the country that are so dire, you also have to fight those who are doubting what is going on in your country. I'm not just talking about people from Kremlin propaganda, I'm talking about the people who call themselves the hardcore Western left or whatever they are. That I find to be one of the most difficult things, because it makes you feel very lonely and very sad.

If you do not support the liberation struggle of those who are being aggressively destroyed, then what's happening? We hear a lot that it's an inter-imperialistic struggle—you've heard that I'm sure—that this is all about this great power struggle and your land and your people are just a pawn. Yes, that's blatantly obvious. But there is so much more to this story. Where are the individuals? Where is

their agency, their subjectivity? Where are their stories? Where are their desires, where are their dreams? Where are their lives?

What has to die inside of you to look at images of burned and destroyed and mutilated bodies and say that it has all been staged, this is some sort of cinema production to justify some sort of fascist regime in Ukraine? That, I find, on a personal level, the most difficult thing to deal with. I do not wish that on anybody, and I know that you've gone through that yourself and you still go through that so much. The disbelief of eyewitness stories—what kind of self interest does a person whose house has been bombed have in framing somebody else? I cannot believe that this is what we're dealing with. On a broader level, I want to speak to two things that I find are quite pertinent in this narrative framing of what is going on in Ukraine. There is a lot of litter that we need to get out of the international discourse altogether.

We have been hearing a lot about the inter-imperialist context. If we are to have a left analysis of what is going on, we need to be looking at people, we need to be looking at social groups, and we need to be looking at classes. We need to be asking ourselves: Where is the labor? Where are the capitalist interests? How are certain narratives being manipulated, and who is benefiting from it? It's not about looking for conspiracies or anything of the kind, but to understand what is going on and who we need to be supporting. When we start asking those questions, then we also have to go back to the roots of what left solidarity is supposed to be. We need to study the material, see who is on the ground and who is fighting for their self preservation and who is fighting to exceed their financial or territorial interests or something of that kind.

I've written about that in my book as well. Of course there are competing imperialist powers, but we live now in a world that is taken by the empire of capital, where there are different powers—not so much powers, but classes by proxy of different states and armies—fighting for spheres of interest, as Russians like to call them. What we end up with is there are fewer and fewer options for an alternative world order or alternative politics that are left for any groups that are trying to challenge that, and any time you try to break away from that you get labeled as some sort of opportunistic group. That is quite toxic, I find.

Of course there are certain class interests of various fractions of capitalist classes who will try to manipulate certain groups and voting behaviors and the rest of it, but it doesn't negate the individual interest and agency of people who end up being exploited in the process. Centering that is very important for everybody.

We've heard a lot of legitimizing narratives in Russia, coming from Russia, that they have some sort of security concerns as a pretext for their invasion—and it's not the first invasion of course, but the latest invasion, on 24 February. Of course it's a pure fabrication. But it has been in the making for some time. It didn't come from nowhere. There is no evidence that Ukraine was going to invade Russia; it's a complete fabrication. Nor is it or was it logical for Ukraine to do so, it would have never won. This doesn't make any sense. Instead, Russia kept amassing troops on the Ukraine's border for years. Especially since Zelenskyy became president, because Putin saw him as weak and saw that Zelenskyy naively thought negotiations might get somewhere. You don't negotiate with somebody who has imperialist ambitions around you. We tried negotiations for eight years and it simply doesn't work.

Putin only recognizes hard power. For those who have that power, he may negotiate, but that also is not guaranteed, as we can see now with these antagonizing gestures toward NATO, France, the United States, and the rest of it. Russia invaded Ukraine eight years ago, we are in year nine now. But it has

been in infiltrating the local population and sending sleeper agents in preparation for Russkiy Mir and the Novorossiia project, for years before that. Russian TV propaganda channels and political technologists have been fabricating this narrative that negates Ukraine's national, linguistic, and cultural identity as separate from Russia, for decades.

Russia may have some concerns, as they do say, but those are about losing control over and access to Ukraine's economy and the Black Sea deep water ports at Simferopol and Sevastopol, as they said in 2014. But those are imperialistic concerns, not security concerns. Having negotiations around that is completely ridiculous. What we see now is the mask of pretend concerns and diplomacy and brotherhood has slipped altogether. We see that there's been an evolution of this narrative of freeing Russian-speakers from supposed Nazis who staged a coup in Ukraine in 2014 and eventually built some sort of anti-Russian Banderite regime, which is again a complete fabrication. Yes of course there are some rightwing elements in the country, there are some battalions that have been more Nazi, that's undeniable. But to say that Ukraine is overrun by far-right parties—well, let's look at the French election a few days ago. Imagine if an equivalent of Le Pen's party gathered as many votes as it did, in Ukraine. What kind of narrative would that have been? Rightwing parties have never had nearly that level of success. Electorally speaking, they have lost support of the population after the first invasion.

These are complex and also contradictory narratives. There is also no such thing as pure protest, pure revolutions, everybody agrees, everybody carries the red banner and we're building communism, and that's the only revolution we can support. It's never happened, and I doubt it ever will. That kind of ridiculous, *non sequitur* naivety of some on the left internationally really baffles me. When we hear narratives about denying Ukrainians weapons to defend their country from Russian aggression on the basis that there is Azov battalion in Mariupol—what do people in Bucha do, or in Sumy, or in Kharkiv? Do they deserve to be annihilated because there are some nasty people in the country? It simply doesn't make any sense to me.

We need to be thinking in terms of building an international solidarity, we need to be doing this very difficult work of tackling these nonsensical narratives that deny, under the blanket of their anti-Americanism and anti-NATO sentiments (which a lot of are very fair, let's be honest). But there's more to the story than that. You cannot use your anti-American and anti-NATO sentiments to justify denying weapons to Ukrainians to defend themselves, or Syrians for that matter. It absolutely doesn't make sense. There were a couple of cases of trade unionists in Greece and Italy refusing to load weapons that were directed to Ukraine, and it was paraded as some sort of heroic deed because they were risking their jobs. You know what? Keep your jobs. We don't need solidarity like that.

Last Saturday, there was a demo organized by Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, which I am a part of, and I am also a part of Sotsialny Rukh together with Taras. There was a demo in London with the support of the biggest unions in the country, and that demo was supported by Sotsialny Rukh from Ukraine, and was supported by the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine, all the texts and the slogans were agreed. And the attacks that we saw from so-called leftists on social media and in their own publications has been absolutely outrageous. These workers don't have the ideas you would like them to have so you will not defend them? It really is quite something else.

In terms of healing and going forward—I realize I've been speaking for a while—we need to be building solidarities not least through listening to each other and allowing those who are fighting tell their story, not projecting some hundred-year-old templates of what we expect certain things are supposed to look like—do what historical materialists are supposed to do: study the material and then develop your bloody theory. Do not go with your theory book where you don't even speak the

language and you've never stepped your foot before.

Amplifying the voices of those who are in the middle of the fight, those who have suffered; asking people what life they want to live and then helping them to build it: this is what we need to be doing together. I agree with the general sentiments of this event: be careful with each other. Be mindful of each other's trauma and suffering. Listen. Sometimes we will overstep certain boundaries, apologize, and ask how to take it further ahead. This is the kind of left, the kind of solidarity that we need to be building. Only then will we have a fighting chance at tackling this hydra of capitalist interests that are ripping apart our world in their greed, destroying our planet and our societies and our families and our gardens and our homes, just so that a few more bucks can be made. Let's build those, and I'm really happy that we're making these connections today. Thank you so much for inviting me and for listening.

JA: Thank you so much Yuliya. Finally, Taras, go for it.

Taras Bilous: Good evening. I'd like to thank the organizers for having invited me here and having organized this event. And I would like to thank the interpreters, now they will have to do the double interpretation into English and into other languages. It's hard for me to wrap my head around how it works. I would like to express gratitude to all Syrians who have expressed their support over this one and a half months of war. Many people supported Ukraine globally. There were huge rallies. But the fact that people who are in such a dire situation are also expressing their solidarity with us probably is what matters the most. I was preparing to say one thing, but now I'm not sure anymore.

As Yassin and Wafa spoke more about the historical context, I would like to also add that yes, our stories are similar to a certain extent. It all, in our case, started with the Maidan revolution in 2014, which was also a part of this wave of mass protests across the world: the Arab Spring, the Syrian revolution—but we probably were luckier, because Maidan won in our case. And unlike in the Syrian revolution, the Yanukovich regime was overthrown. But right after this, after we had managed to overthrow the Yanukovich regime, we were faced with Russian aggression. In fact, then, for the first time—it was eight years ago—I remember we were afraid that probably Russian tanks will approach Kyiv. Thank god, back then Russia only annexed Crimea and invaded Donbas. So it invaded the most pro-Russian regions of Ukraine.

This is a topic for a separate conversation. Probably Ukraine is not as diverse as Syria, but since the day it gained its independence it was polarized. There were pro-Russian citizens and and pro-Western citizens and forces in the country. On the one hand, Ukrainians—how do I put it—very often we are not happy how it is being presented in Western media, that there is a conflict between Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers or something like that. We know that in reality it is way more complex. It was never an ethnic conflict. It's difficult to describe this conflict and this original division in the country. But yes, we had this reality. Then, eight years ago, Russia annexed Crimea, the only region in Ukraine where Russians formed the majority, but also, back in the day, the Russian empire of the eighteenth century invaded it. And the Crimean Tatars, who had been indigenous people there, were pushed out of that region for centuries, and Russia tried to bring more Russians to Crimea. And then the war in Donbas started. This is also a separate topic for discussion. There was Russia's invasion and Russia's role in adding fuel to the fire of that war, and some internal factors.

The final thing I'd like to add is, there is a saying that all commanders are preparing for the past wars. When this war started, I realized that this also has to do with me, even though I am just an activist and an editor. But yes, eight years ago we were afraid that Russian tanks would come to Kyiv, but it didn't

happen back then. Back then they only went to Crimea and Donbas. After that, I never would have thought that Russia, so easily, without *causus belli*, would invade Ukraine. Eight years ago it was happening in the context of a political crisis—let's call it that way—in Ukraine, when the society was polarized, and Russia used this. After that, I was forecasting that, well, Russia may advance in Donbas. Throughout all these years we saw this horror in Syria. There were periods when I was afraid it would also happen to us. But I also thought that a large scale war is only possible if there is some serious political crisis in Ukraine; if there is the third Maidan revolution, many people were talking about that, then Russia would again use that. But it appeared to be that I was very wrong. When Western media started talking about large-scale invasion, I thought this was a nonsensical idea. Because a large-scale invasion will be a disaster! Putin is not that stupid to do that! It appeared that it was the other way around. We didn't understand Putin's regime well enough, and what he is ready to do. Thank you.

JA: Thanks, Taras. This is a good segue, actually, because the followup question was going to be about the the links between Syrians and Ukrainians. The occupation and annexation of Crimea happened one year before the Russian intervention and invasion in Syria, and since then we've seen similar tactics being deployed in both Ukraine and Syria: the bombing of hospitals, the using of humanitarian corridors as places to bomb, the online disinformation using in some cases the exact same template that was used in Syria. I can name, for example, on Sputnik they were saying the Ukrainians are going to use the known “White Helmets template,” *i.e.* there's going to be a false flag attack. They were using the same discourses, and to this day they are still using them.

For the Syrians here, what were your thoughts in the first few days of the second Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February? And to the Ukrainians, maybe since then or even before then, how did you view the situation in Syria?

YHS: First of all, we have the same enemy, Russia, as an occupation power in Syria since late September 2015. 23,000 Syrian civilians have been killed by Russian bombardment. Russia used cluster bombs, thermobaric munitions, and phosphorous bombs against Aleppo and against many areas in Syria. Everything that we see now in Ukraine has been seen before in Syria. Markets and hospitals were targeted systematically, after their getting location information from the UN. And then there is this courageous, this valiant ability to lie. What amazes me more than anything is that they are very powerful at lying, and trying to convince the whole world of their lies: that chemical weapons were never used in Syria, and there were no civilian victims, and of course everyone is a terrorist in Syria—the way everyone is a Nazi in Ukraine. So Ukrainians are killing their people in Bucha and Mariupol, as we were doing this in Syria all the time.

Apart from the fact of the same enemy and the same tactics—there is a sense that the cause is one. In Syria it was a popular uprising for political change: for democracy, for justice—and we were not unaware. We were not delusional about the difficulties that we would face if we were able to overthrow the regime. We were not able. But we were not delusional that things would be easy for us after more than forty years of Assad family rule, almost half a century of Ba'athist rule of our country. In Ukraine, they have an elected government. So it is that in Syria, the Russians are protecting a regime that is similar to the regime they have in Russia. In Ukraine, they are preventing—they are angry about the democratically elected government in Ukraine, and the Ukrainians are representing themselves. So it is crushing democracy in Ukraine, and it is preventing democracy in Syria.

Of course we have a monstrous and traitorous regime that made this possible in Syria. Assad started killing his people and then invited foreign powers to this murder feast. This is not a very optimistic observation: this whole thing is no longer about democracy. We lost our first independence—

independence from colonialism was lost because we failed to implement our second independence, which is independence from tyranny, which is democracy. We see it clearly. Now Syria is divided and occupied. It is again in Syria a question of liberation and self-determination.

Many people misunderstand this, and many leftists, as Yuliya talked about so bitterly. I understand your bitterness, Yuliya, I am quite bitter. But I don't think we have to spend much energy or much time on this—I have done, actually. From time to time I have dedicated time on these issues. But what they don't understand is that this state, under the name of War on Terror, became a continuation of colonialism by other means. It is a colonial state. Which means, again, that it is a question of national liberation. It is again self-determination. So it is not only democracy. First of all we need to retrieve our countries from imperialist powers, and Russia is one—it is a shame that we have to talk about this.

The main difference, however, between Syria and Ukraine is that in Ukraine, the US is on the opposite side of Russia. They are not fighting the Russians, they are against a no fly zone, they will not give Ukraine warplanes, but they are against Putin and in a way they are helping. In Syria, the US has always been another Russia. The Russian intervention in Syria has never been condemned by the US or any European power for that matter. This is another source of complexity in Syria. Democratic powers have never been democratic in the least, in Syria or in the Middle East in general.

This is a long story, a long and ugly and nasty and disrespectful and unspeakable one and I will not elaborate on it. But it is a point that people should keep in their minds. In Syria we have two Russias. One of them is called the United States of America. As if one Russia isn't too much for us. There are other powers and they are not helping the Syrian people. Of course the Iranians are another occupation power. The Israelis, and the Turks—though they are using Syrian proxies.

YY: Following up on Yassin's point, I'd like to make a couple of observations. I mentioned in my earlier comments about people with books going to countries they don't speak the languages of and trying to 'educate the infidels' with their theory gospel. Well, we have theories like that, but we also have politicians and even regimes like that. I agree that with the War on Terror there is this neocolonial thing going on, the spread of democracy through air bombing by the United States. And there's been so many violations of international law by Israel, by the United States, by France, the UK, that when Putin started breaking the facade of this international illiberal "liberal" order, they couldn't really say anything could they? He could sit at the security council of the UN with a smirk on his face and say we're not doing anything you haven't done. And he was right.

It's not to justify what Russia was doing. But this order has been dysfunctional for a very long time, and it has been reproducing certain hierarchies in the international order since its establishment—and it does so by design. What I was thinking watching Syria in horror and when the Putin regime started doing what it's doing in Ukraine, to me it was looking like the facade of this liberal international world order and geopolitics—the weaknesses, the facade of international law functioning, the facade of neoliberalism, the facade of some sort of rule-based order, there are a lot of contradictions in the way international politics have been conducted. This self-appointed spreader of democracy, the United States, has been the biggest bully on the block who have been abusing the system for a very long time. It was only a matter of time until someone came up and started mimicking these things, and start exploiting certain tropes in this so-called order, like "sanctity of elections," however despotic the person is, unless you want to displace them with a coup (which again the United States are quite good at).

In the nation-state system, the monopoly on the use of violence by the state, which of course gets

misused and abused all the time—that also has been systematically instrumentalized to legitimize the existence of despotic regimes who have usurped power, and when there are popular uprisings against them, then those protesters are breaking the law, and they're terrorists, and they're labeled with all sorts of unsavory names. I have a lot of beef with international relations theory. I took about six weeks of my master's degree and thought, “This is a load of rubbish, what's going on?” And then political economy week came by and everything fell into place. But this whole idea that somehow only certain groups have the right to determine what and how things should be decided in their countries, and it has to be done through elections, and there is a sanctity to that, and no matter what kind of treacherous group of people get into power, or how they change their politics from what they said they were going to do, or however fraudulent the elections were, nobody is supposed to challenge that.

There are a hell of a lot of flaws in that system. Because that kind of so-called order is being held as sanctimonious, then by design there is very little space for any salvation of any people who have been systematically held out of positions of power—on the level of race, on the level of sex and gender, on the level of religion, ethnicity, you name it. The colonial and imperialistic legacy of the world has not really gone anywhere. It's become a little more dressed up with a few more frills.

I keep forgetting whose quote it is. Weeks of bad sleep and my brain is betraying me. But there was an African liberation leader speaking of the United States who said that there is only one party in the United States but with American exuberance they have two of them. There is the facade of democracy and the freedom of political determination—it is exactly there in the heart of self-appointed spreaders of democracy everywhere who are going around like the Christian missionaries educating infidels on how they're supposed to be living their lives, without any interest in what those people want their lives to be like.

I don't know if what I'm saying is very consistent. But to me, the explosion of all these contradictions, baring them in the international system—those who are under these facades of democracy and elections and freedom...that facade is slipping and it becomes more and more impossible every day to pretend the system is functioning. This is the hope—in the myriad international conflicts, there is a hope that with every next one it becomes more difficult to pretend that the system can actually serve its purpose. Hopefully some sort of challenge to it can materialize into something qualitatively different. That hope is still there. I cannot tell you how strong or weak it is, because I don't want to spoil anybody's mood. But there is a bit of a hope.

TB: First of all I wanted to say, I have to admit I don't know that much about Syria, but from what I've seen from the way the Western media have been reporting on the Ukrainian situation over the last eight years, and the war in the Donbas specifically—it has taught me to be very, very careful when speaking about conflicts in other countries if you are not an expert on them. I cannot rely—the things I've seen written by Western journalists who are not aware of the Ukrainian context were very difficult for me to read and comprehend, so I take with a pinch of salt with anything I'm seeing and reading about Syria as well.

It's difficult for me to draw comparisons because I am not that much aware of all the details, but if I make an attempt at the comparison, as I mentioned, the Maidan in Ukraine and the Syrian revolution were part of the same wave of popular uprisings around the world. For us here, the task here was in many ways simpler than that faced by Syrians. In Syria, the authoritarian regime had existed for decades by then. The Assad family had privatized the country and turned it into their own dominion. In Ukraine, the authoritarian regime was only making an attempt to establish itself, and Yanukovich

failed. We managed to topple the authoritarian regime as it was only forming, as it was just finding its feet, so to say.

In a way, the lesson of Syria for us is that we get a glimpse of what might have happened had we not been successful—had Yanukovich not been toppled, had Yanukovych not fled, had Russia overtly supported him as they have with Assad, had they attempted to restore him to power. So I guess it's a lesson to us.

Many people in Ukraine after the Maidan in 2014 were disappointed with its achievements. Some of the aspirations that people had as they went out into the streets, as they fought against the Yanukovych regime—many of those aspirations, they felt, had been betrayed and never came to fruition. But I think the comparisons should be drawn not to what we had before the revolution but also with the potential scenarios of what could have been. And we don't need to even turn to Syria. We have the example of Belarus next door. A totalitarian regime with Russian support has just suppressed a popular uprising there. Thankfully we have not faced a similar outcome, and we have enjoyed more.

Yassin has mentioned that Russia in its propaganda, both in Syria and in Ukraine, was using similar templates and similar approaches, drawing all Syrians as terrorists and all Ukrainians as Nazis. But on the other hand, in both cases in these popular uprisings, forces that we perhaps aren't happy about have also participated. Ukraine does have its far-right, and Syria does have its jihadists. But the thing we need to be aware of is how Russia always pounces on the opportunity to magnify, to put them under a magnifying glass and say that everyone is suddenly a far-right group. As soon as you have one unsavory participant, they are going to be used as a poster boy or poster girl, and everyone will be drawn as them.

I also wanted to react to Yassin's comments about Russia and the US. Yes, you are absolutely right, the situation is different. For many decades, Ukraine has been in no-man's land between Russian and American colonialism and imperialism. I want to turn to a specific incident about a week after the full scale invasion broke out. I was in Kyiv and I was contacted by a western left journalist and he suggested that we catch up for an interview, and I was very interested in meeting him. I thought if a person arrives to Kyiv amid the current situation—back then, the situation was very tense in Kyiv as well. Now it's much calmer. People are coming back, cars are driving in the streets, whereas back then we had very few people out and very few cars. I was actually very eager to meet the person, I was very interested. But the journalist turned out a complete idiot. He arrived in Kyiv and started telling me that the US was the biggest threat to us whereas Russia—they're moderate imperialists, they're manageable.

Yuliya mentioned that there are so many flaws in the current liberal international system. But excuse me, we get to see what is happening in Russia right now. For many years they have had an authoritarian regime, and after the onset of the war and after the antiwar movement has been entirely suppressed, they are approaching living under fascism, effectively. Putin is referring to the examples of Iraq and so on in order to justify his invasion in Ukraine. But I honestly don't remember American journalists during the war in Iraq writing articles about how the Iraqis need to be de-Iraqified (I'm not even sure of the word here) in trying to justify a complete genocide of the Iraqi people. Russian journalists, I am afraid, are writing these things.

So as I was writing the letter to the Western left—this is on the second day of the war—I hadn't processed everything through the prism of what's happening. But now, looking back at it, if I were

viewing everything—back then I thought there was one clear imperialist enemy: Russia. But now, I want to stress: don't get me wrong, the US invasion of Iraq is a crime, and there should have been tribunals, people should have faced justice. But I guess we then need to continue the conversation all the way to French and British colonialism after the Second World War. We should not have supported British and French colonialism in order to support the war of the Allies against Nazi Germany. Similarly again, the left does not have to support American imperialism in order to be in a position to support arms delivery to Ukraine or to demand the strengthening of sanctions. These are things that go in parallel, and I am convinced that the progressive community should be supporting these things.

I do understand, similarly: the international tribunal that we would like to have Putin facing and that we would like to have Russian war criminals facing—but probably the US, Britain, and France will be reluctant to support the establishment of such a tribunal because it could be used as a precedent, as a template to also prosecute them for things they have done. We have also seen Russia wielding its veto power in the UN security council, and I'm quite sure the US will be reluctant to change this whole system because the US also uses its veto power and it wants to hang on to its privileged position.

So yes, we are now in a position where the international rule-based order, law-based order, whatever you want to call it, is facing its largest crisis in decades. But I also feel that now—how do I put it? For the first time in many decades, we at the same time have a proper chance to reform the UN, for example, to actually do something about the veto powers in the security council. For this we need international pressure. A bright example is that for the first time in forty years, since Russia's invasion in Ukraine, the UN resolution “Unity for Peace” was actually enforced and the issue of Ukraine was moved from the security council to the general assembly. If my understanding is correct the Syrian opposition has been struggling for this to happen for many years, and it has been unsuccessful. So Ukraine in many ways has been privileged and lucky.

So this is a great opportunity, this is a great moment when we need to exert pressure on Western governments for them to do what is needed and do what is right. I guess I will draw a line at that. Thank you for your attention.

WM: The three of them said mainly everything I wanted to say, but I wanted to share something more. I didn't know very much about Ukraine before I left Syria. Two years ago during the pandemic I watched *Winter on Fire*, the documentary by Netflix that documented the revolution in the Maidan in 2014. Especially after the revolution, especially after I fled, I am interested in films and I watched many things about similar fights for freedom and liberation movements and I think I can honestly say that was one of the most intense, relevant, powerful and touching things I've ever seen. Aside from all that, from the fact that it is beautifully shot—it is very honest and powerful—I think the main point was that it's very similar to what I know. They are speaking a different language, they are in a different geography, but it feels so similar. The boy who said “I never went to school but now the Maidan is my school.” The activist who was one of the first activists to be shot in the Maidan, and the collective sadness, the collective grief of this activist, the way people organized themselves in the Maidan—this is not something I take for granted, this is not something I see and watch as a film and then I just forget about. It stayed with me.

But today more than ever, to be honest, because I watched this film, and I learned a little bit more about Ukraine, and I saw their fight, their longing for freedom, their power, their strength, their sacrifices—that's one reason that made it more difficult for me now when the invasion started. Because it's not only a war that just started. To me it felt like a place that I know. It immediately came to my mind all the places I've seen, all the faces I've seen in that film, and because at one point when I

watched that, as Taras said, I was very happy that it's not like Syria. To be honest, I was very, very happy. I was even more—it gave me hope. I was even more hopeful that yes, one day we might go back to Syria, we might take over squares and Maidans again, and we might also achieve what Ukraine achieved. That also made it more difficult for me now when the invasion started. But to be honest, one main point was that it made me feel that I'm losing hope on Syria.

I felt that we were pushing Syria's case forward. I thought that with the support of other people we would just move it a step forward. But now, everything—in the past few years, as activists we've been talking about the danger of normalizing the Assad regime, the danger of letting Assad get away with his crimes, the danger of not stopping Russia. It's not only—it's very sad that now I am saying this, but we said that it's not only about Syrians. You don't care, you thought Syria is very far, you thought Syrians are very uncivilized, you don't care about them? Well, first they are here now, they live in Europe, they live in your country. And they are here and they are loud. And they don't stop, and they are not keeping silent.

But unfortunately—it's crazy that politicians and governments did not know that not stopping Russia in 2015 and not stopping the Assad regime sent a clear message to Putin and all dictatorships all over the planet: please do whatever you want, bomb your own citizens, use chemical weapons against them, kill them, detain them, besiege them, it's fine. You will just be called a president, you will be welcomed. Sometimes we will just release a statement saying that we don't accept that and this is not fine and you are violating human rights, and we will take actual steps. Eleven years after that, we're still just seeing raised eyebrows and empty statements. Empty words and nothing has changed.

This makes me even more angry, unfortunately. But again, I'll conclude by saying that as Taras said, this is why I am more determined now. Not only because—I believe in general that our fights are connected, all over the planet. People tell me this is a very romantic idea of fighting for freedom. Unfortunately, Ukraine proved it is not romantic, it is practical and it is realistic. We would maybe not have seen what is happening in Ukraine today if Russia was stopped a few years ago. Today we need to stop Russia in Ukraine, we need to prosecute Putin and Russia for their crimes, because that will definitely move Syria's case a step forward, and that will definitely prevent Putin and other dictators and other tyrants all over the planet from thinking they can still commit crimes and get away with it.

JA: Thank you Wafa. And I think this is especially prescient since we've seen the exact same commanders who have committed crimes in Syria now being sent onto the battlefield in Ukraine.

As we wind down, what are the possibilities for association and collaboration in the future? We've talked about problems and maybe the missed opportunities between Ukrainians and Syrians, and the rest of the world. But now what can we do? What are practical, hopeful suggestions?

YY: I wanted to speak to some of the things that were raised before, some of the things I thought about saying but didn't because I got carried away otherwise. I agree with what Wafa just said: every time there is a war, every time there are atrocities, every time there are these violations of rights and the only thing that follows is a warning and a stern condemnation, there is further enabling of further violence, and there is not just that: there is an emboldening of the perpetrators of that violence. We've seen that with Putin, with Assad, with the United States, with the Israeli government; we've seen that with all sorts of different regimes. The list goes on.

I agree that the current stage of war of Russia against Ukraine—again, we're in the ninth year now—that could have been prevented. The strength of reaction that we're seeing now we should have seen in 2014. Why was it acceptable to choke off parts of Donbas and Crimea? How much—we've had the

resurfacing of that kind of discussion from before the actual next wave invasion that started 24 February, where we've seen comments coming out from the United States saying that if there is only a minor incursion into Ukraine then there will be these consequences, if it is major, there will be those—well, first of all there has already been an incursion, that's eight years old. It was called war. We thought there was this international order where borders are sanctimonious. We are not violating borders, that's a no-no. But now all of a sudden it looks like there is some kind of gradation scale, that a certain amount of land is somehow okay to take, and certain types of weapons are okay to use. Can we at least have a chart of how many women it is okay to rape, and how many civilians it is okay to kill, and how many houses it is okay to bomb, so we can at least get some clarity? I'm obviously being sarcastic. It boils my blood listening to this. The current atrocities could have been prevented, had there actually been proper action.

It will be eighteen years in September since I've been living in the UK—I'm in Ukraine right now but I'm normally in the UK. In the UK, I've seen audiences with the Queen that have been held for heads of state who persecute and execute people publicly and who perpetrate war crimes, and selling weapons to them. So selling weapons to murderous regimes is okay but giving weapons to people trying to protect themselves from those regimes—that is somehow morally reprehensible? It really doesn't make any sense to me.

One other thing I wanted to say because I think it's very important. I was having a conversation with an activist friend about this. There are all these frames of understanding these conflicts. Taras, you spoke to that a bit as well. We try to think in old conflicts, you expect the next one will be similar. There is a tendency to look for the familiar, because that's how we're wired. We try to make sense of something that doesn't make sense in front of us.

We need to look into intersectionality and interdisciplinary work properly. When we look at this politics of entitlement that colonial and imperial powers have, we need to go to frameworks of domestic violence and psychology and psychiatry. There is psychological warfare. There is belittling, there is demoralizing, there is victim blaming: there is violence against people and countries and social groups and ethnicities and sexes and genders and then the victim is being blamed for the violence that is being caused to them. We saw it with Syria (and I'm obviously less familiar with the situation), and we see a lot of it in Ukraine, like somehow Ukrainians forced Russia to come and bomb its cities. In an abusive relations framework it makes sense.

The sense of entitlement, the inability and unwillingness to accept you do not have a right over the other person or country or city—that is something that we also need to be thinking about. And we saw that in the international discussions of “what to do with Ukraine,” that we need to appease Putin and give him a bit more of Ukrainian territory. What does that even mean? You do not appease a bully. When did it become acceptable? But I've read it from some leftists, and I heard it from the Stop the War Coalition, and from some Ukrainian so-called leftists that maybe some territory is okay to give away to Russia as long as it preserves civilian life. Wait a minute, no! First of all, that's already happened. And we know what happened in those territories. We know the persecution, we know the torture, we know the kidnappings, we know the destruction of industry and environment. But I'm sorry, how are we going to decide which Ukrainian cities and which Ukrainians it is okay to give away to Russia? How are we even having this conversation? It is not okay, and it pains me to see the destruction that is happening in my country today.

I also understand that it is an existential fight. If we do not push Putin's army out, there will be more wars and more fighting and more suffering. I agree, Wafa, you hit the nail on the head: if Putin's army

had been stopped in 2014 we wouldn't be discussing this war now because it wouldn't have happened. And the international so-called community of leaders has failed in this instance. It's not the only one, and I'm aware of that, very painfully. But in this specific case there was a systematic failure. And the way it's systematic makes it emblematic of myriad failures.

Look at Taras, in uniform. He shouldn't be in the military. He should be doing his amazing scholarly work. Sorry Taras, I didn't want to put you on the spot. It's getting late and I'm getting emotional here.

TB: Thank you. Well, I agree with Wafa that the best way Ukrainians can help Syrians now is winning this war. Probably this will change the international situation, and probably this will give an opportunity to also change something in Syria.

At the same time, our obligation now, when so much attention is paid to Ukraine at the international level, is to strengthen and amplify your voice and remind about Syria as much as possible. We don't have that many opportunities to do that. Nevertheless, I think that in the first place you should tell us how we can help and assist you. How can we amplify your voice? Which of your demands can be supported by us?

One final thing, I'd like to react to what Yassin said, that you don't have to try and convince western anti-imperialists who keep writing silly texts. I disagree. To a certain extent, yes, we're not able to change somebody's opinion. But in Ukraine, the leftwing is quite a bit more generalized. One of the reasons I wrote that letter to the western left was because I believe that we have to fight capitalism, and global socialist movements should be the ones who do that. There is a huge responsibility on the Western left. We have to do something with these idiots so that they understand something. We are weak here, but they are the biggest audience that our words matter to.

On the one hand we have to try and convince them, and on the other hand, I think—Yassin's and Leila al Shami's texts have been very useful to me, because they helped me to better understand the problem. On the other hand, we have to shape a new internationalism with those who are in a similar situation, with those who are faced with similar prejudice. I'm not only talking about Ukrainians and Syrians. Let's take Hong Kong: those who protested in Hong Kong also were faced with this, softly put, wrong attitude towards them from the Western left. And in other countries where people are fighting with anti-Western authoritarian regimes. We have to build a dialogue with them. Because now, unfortunately, due to the hierarchy of the global system—let's take Yassin and other thinkers: where can Ukrainians find out about them? Only Western media in many cases.

WM: I wanted to say something: yesterday I was also contacted by a journalist, and he asked me why it's important for Ukrainians and Syrians to get connected, and how would they do that? I said that it's not just important, but there's no other option for us but to get connected and work together and support each other. There is no way out of this—not only the current situation today in Ukraine—there is not way out of this absurdity and this brutality that we've been witnessing for the past couple of decades unless we come together, get to know each other, and support each other.

First and foremost—as Taras said and as I said, we didn't know much about each other before a couple of years ago. As Yassin said, yes the situation in Syria is complex, obviously. But this should not be your way to say, “I am out of politics and I cannot do that because it's too complicated.” Everything is complicated. But there are Syrian activists and Ukrainian activists who dedicate their lives to make things easier for you. Listen to activists. Listen to Syrians and listen to Ukrainians. Listen to us.

I am based in Berlin and this is my way to invite everyone who is in Berlin to come to the demo we have on Saturday. This is again one of the crazy narratives: we have on Saturday a protest invitation

from the Berlin Easter March where they actually invite people to come together and demand “peace with Russia.” Yes, it is that absurd. We are going on another protest on the same day, as Syrian activists and Ukrainians and people and activists from Belarus, to say that it's not that shallow, it's not that stupid: there is no way for sustainable peace without first stopping the ongoing crimes and prosecuting all war criminals. There is no way that any peace can be achieved if it does not center the victims of these wars.

For example let me say that in Berlin (and I know this is the case in many places) Syrians and Ukrainians are coming together, they are getting to know each other, they are supporting each other, they are organizing protests and events, they are trying to help each other in every possible way. This is the first step.

I hope this doesn't sound pessimistic, but if I've learned one thing in eleven years it's that it is a very, very long fight. I came to the point that I am satisfied and convinced that I might not see Syria as a free, democratic country, any time. Maybe not even the next generation will. This is fine because I know that what we are fighting against is that brutal, and that criminal. I know that the world we live in is that absurd. We fight today together, and Ukraine is fighting today, every day, and we are still fighting in our own way, each of us from their own position, because we know that there is no way that this brutality and these tyrannies and dictatorships will last. There is no way they will rule us forever. There is no way that we will keep being slaves for capitalism, for imperialism, and for dictatorships. There is no way that this is going to be the reality of the next generations.

To me at least, this is a fair enough hope that keeps me fighting on a daily basis. Now in my own way, I'm trying to—most importantly not only are we fighting against the same enemy, but the enemy is Russia. When it comes to Russia, propaganda is not just one aspect of their war against us. On a daily basis in my personal life, I fight to convince people that my dad is not a terrorist, my dad is not ISIS, and my dad does not deserve to be somewhere between life and death, and my family deserves to know where he is being held and why he is being disappeared for all these years.

What we are doing today, being here today is one step to inform each other and also to fight against these narratives. In Syria today, maybe the war on the ground is over, but the battle over narratives is ongoing. The least we can do is fight against it and present a counternarrative to that of Russia and other dictatorships.

YHS: As Taras said, please win the war. This will be good for us. First of all it will be good for you. It will be good for us—not as good as it would be for you, because we have two Russias. But things will be less bad for us if Putin is defeated. And it will be—not least important—it will also be good for Russia. There are many courageous people, many decent and honorable people who are against Putinism and against this machine of war and lies and propaganda. The defeat of Putinism would be good for them.

Second, the more networking, the more common spaces that we share, like the one on Saturday in Berlin—these are the activities that should go on. Maybe we will create spaces. We don't have a Ukrainian-Syrian space. We need a space. We organize meetings outside from time to time where we are here in Berlin. But in other places, in France, in UK, US, wherever we can—and hopefully some day in Kyiv and Damascus. I read today actually about some Syrians who went to Ukraine in a bus: they took some stuff, food and medicines, I'm not quite sure, and they brought back refugees. This is amazing. This is a very good thing. Symbolic—but these are the activities that we need, and just to keep meeting and talking and listening to each other.

Sebastian Ordoñez: Hi everyone, I just want to close the space by thanking Joey, Yassin, Wafa, Taras,

and Yuliya for holding the space with such dignity: a space of care, a space of listening, a space where people joined us from all over the world. Because we know, as Wafa just reminded us: we fight, but we fight together. I want to thank you for the openings and the spaciousness to have conversations that are rooted in pain but that still give us hope: hope of winning, as you all highlighted; hope of building power from below against imperialism in all its expressions. And I also want to thank you for helping us to make sense of the current realities that you face and that we all face by sitting with the complexity and inviting us to learn from each other.

I think seeing the rich discussions that have happened in the chat, I also want to name that this conversation has opened up the possibility of talking about other conflicts and other sites of struggle. Ethiopia, Yemen, Haiti, to name a few. But with those opportunities for conversation will also be opportunities for association and for peace, to continue to build bridges in pain.

I want to thank our interpreters: thank you for your commitment to linguistic justice and your brilliance. And finally I want to thank all of you, audience, for being here today. As Joey already mentioned there were over 200 people who joined us. Thank you for your time and your energy for bringing that presence, which highlights the importance of dialogue and connection.