



# EVERYWHERE BUT NOWHERE:

## YASSIN AL-HAJ SALEH'S UNDERSTANDING OF EXILES

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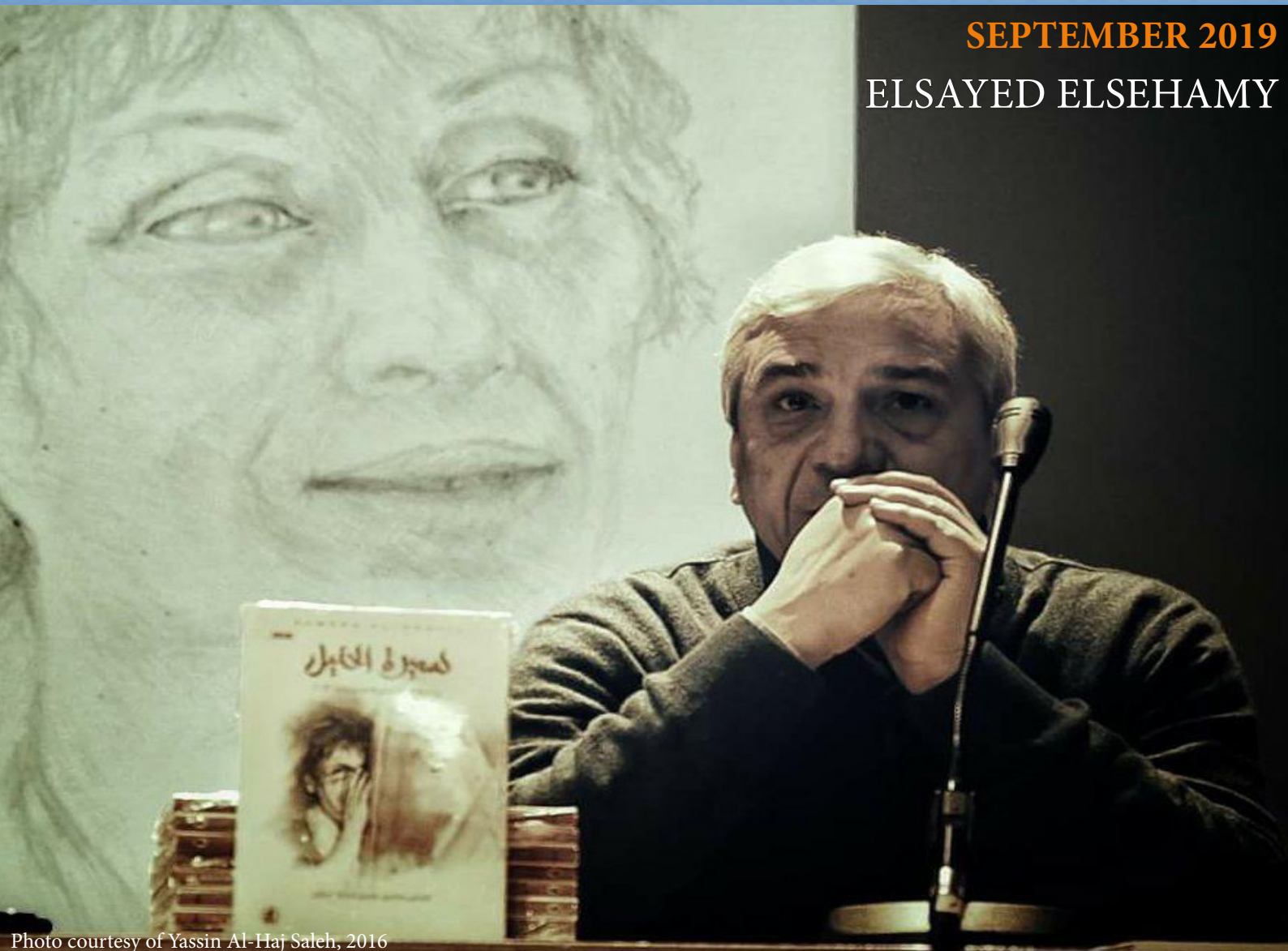
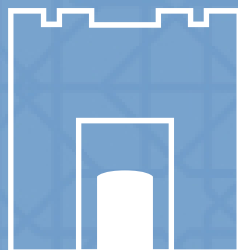


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# EVERYWHERE BUT NOWHERE:

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### Abstract

Following the Arab uprisings, the displacement of millions of Syrians has raised the phenomenon of collective exiles, seen in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Germany. Al-Haj Saleh's emerging account on exile is one of the accounts that tapped into the subject of exile in light of these uprisings. Al-Haj Saleh is widely known as a Syrian writer and scholar who witnessed the breakout of the Syrian revolution. He juxtaposes exile with the experience of prison. For him, the meaning of 'exiles' is relational to the meanings of home, freedom, and self. Adding to the academic literature on al-Haj Saleh's contributions to the Arab political and cultural realms, this paper discusses his take on the notion of exile following the Syrian revolution. In Arabic, the term 'exile' means *al manfa*, to negate something. Based on this linguistic conceptualization of the word, al-Haj Saleh tends to use the word 'exile' for any action negating another. Thus, the verb 'to negate' is synonymous with the verb 'to exile'. In this paper, I emphasize al-Haj Saleh's understanding of the term 'exile'. I illustrate my understanding of his views of exile as an act of negation of (A) history through 'political' eternity, (B) freedom through jail, and (C) this negation itself through the processes of enjailment and exilification. Building on that, I illustrate how he contends for the end of exile. My aim is to shed light on al-Haj Saleh's understanding of 'exile' and make it clearer for the readers.

“For more than two years and a half, we – Samira and myself – wanted to avoid exile and prison altogether. After more than 30 months from the beginning of the revolution, I became the exile, and after 33 months, she became the prisoner”

–Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2014)

## Introduction

The modern Arab experience of exile is massively depicted by Palestinian authors, especially in the works of Edward Said and Mahmoud Darwish. For Said, exile is “the unhealable rift forced between... the self and its true home” (Said, 2000, p. 173). Darwish, however, views exile in philosophical terms as a state of being that is not bounded to geographical terms: “You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room. It’s not simply a Palestinian question. Can I say I’m addicted to exile?” (Darwish in Shatz, 2001). Furthermore, exile is often seen as a personal and embodied experience, that represents “the aesthetic possibilities of displacement” (Malkki, 1995, p. 512). This view is clear in Said’s account, as “exile carries with it... a touch of solitude and spirituality” (Said, 2000, p. 173), while Darwish saw it as a permanent state; “what shall we do without exile?” (see, Butler et al. 2012). Following the Arab uprisings, the displacement of millions of Syrians has raised the phenomenon of collective exiles, seen in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Germany. Al-Haj Saleh’s emerging account on exile is one of the first accounts that tapped into the subject of exile in light of these uprisings.

Al-Haj Saleh is widely known as a Syrian writer and scholar who witnessed the breakout of the Syrian revolution. He spent 16 years in prison between 1980 and 1996 in Aleppo Central Prison, Adra Prison and the notorious Tadmor prison (al-Haj Saleh, 2012, pp. 13–14). Since 2000, he has been playing an active role in redefining the role of the ‘public intellectual’, through his work in journalism and translation (Massouh, 2015, p. 10). In his MA thesis, Massouh (2015) provides an overview of al-Haj Saleh’s life and scholarly productions about Syria, situating his intellectual contributions in wider themes in contemporary Arab thought. He argues that al-Haj Saleh upholds a humanistic, ideal way of critique as a form of agency and social responsibility (2015, p. 10). Al-Haj Saleh, for Massouh, seeks to denaturalize assumptions about authoritarianism and sectarianism in contemporary Syria throughout his cultural, discursive productions, “in an effort to expand the parameters of both what is imaginable and what is doable” (2015, p. 96). While Massouh tackled al-Haj Saleh’s scholarly productions and

public activities in exile, he did not emphasize al-Haj Saleh's understanding of exile. Haugbolle (2015) analyses the film *Baladna al-Raheeb* [Our Terrible Country] to discuss debates about revolution, exile and representations in Syria and the Middle East. He interrogates the role of intellectuals, as 'revolutionary icons', and their work in the path of revolutions and the counter-revolutions, depicting al-Haj Saleh's role in the Syrian Revolution. Al-Haj Saleh represents an intellectual leadership that is inspired by his life history and his scholarly productions, inspiring "collective action and reflection that is meant to transform the social imaginary and prepare the social conditions conducive for revolution" (2015, p. 18). While Haugbolle argues that exile produces self-critique (2015, p. 30), he tapped into how exile and defeat influenced al-Haj Saleh to produce radical critiques of the state, Islamism and modernity. Yet how al-Haj Saleh understands exile is still missing in the literature. Adding to the academic literature on al-Haj Saleh's contributions to the Arab political and cultural realms, this paper discusses his take on the notion of exile following the Syrian revolution.

Al-Haj Saleh juxtaposes exile with the experience of prison. For him, the meaning of 'exiles' is relational to the meanings of home, freedom, and self – key aspects of the experience of exile. Exile represents part of the Syrian social fabric and political life. For al-Haj Saleh, exilement – the process of becoming an exile – can enable a structural view of the uprising. To understand al-Haj Saleh's, we cannot only look where the exiled is, but from where and how s/he becomes as such. Reading al-Haj Saleh, it is hard to depict one meaning for what 'exile' is. In Arabic, the word exile means *al manfa*, which means to negate something. Based on this linguistic conceptualization of the word, al-Haj Saleh tends to use the word 'exile' for any action negating another. Thus, in his view, the verb 'to negate' is synonymous with the verb 'to exile'. Hence, the loss of home becomes exile, the erasure of a person's points of reference is a form of exile, being black in a white-dominated society is an exile of oneself, being forced to do compulsory conscription is an exile of an individual's freedom, and writing about exile is one way of exiling that exile. As homeland is the cause of exile, the negation of exile requires a recreation of what might be a 'homeland' otherwise.

In this paper, I emphasize al-Haj Saleh's understanding of the term 'exile'. I construct a narrative from a selection of his works. Putting fragments together, I choose to illustrate my understanding of his views of exile as an act of negation of (A) history through 'political' eternity, (B) freedom through jail, and (C) this negation itself through the processes of enjailment and exilification (discussed below). Building on that, I illustrate how he contends for the end of exile. My aim is to shed light on al-Haj Saleh's understanding of 'exile' and make it clearer for the readers.

## **Political Eternity as Exile: exiling history through eternity**

Eternity is the planned duration of the Assad regime's rule in Syria, the intention of staying in power forever, through sectarianism, dynasty and inheritance. Eternity then is ensuring the eternal rule of the Assad Dynasty (al-Haj Saleh, 2017, p. 289). Eternity represents an exilement of history, of social and political change, and the imposition of a socio-political present that does not change (al-Haj Saleh, 2018a). In that context, political violence is a key tool for launching wars against the future and political change in Syria (Ismail, 2018). Eternity then is a form of escaping the future by fixating the present and exterminating whoever seeks change, whether individuals, movements or institutions.

Death itself cannot exile this eternity, as the political system seeks to reproduce itself on whatever means. When the death of the father is an inauguration of the beginning of the dynasty rule, the son, as the only and absolute heir, takes power to establish his own dynasty (al-Haj Saleh, 2017a, 2018a). In that mode of rule, politics is exiled, prevented and abstained, yet political activities become preventing and abstaining as well. The dynamism of political life, in that society, is fixated yet exiled. Thus, a form of political routine becomes dominant and politics lose their meaning. In that sense, Syrians are politically exiled, including those who support the Assadist regime as they exiled their moral agency in addition to their political exile (2018a).

However, the 2011 Syrian Revolution represents a rupture that breaks this exilement of history. It is an attempt to enter history after more than four decades of its exile, of politics of eternity. The revolution “will have achieved its objectives when [political] conscience replaces the eternal rule of absolute power... There is no room for real politics under eternity, absolutism, [and] personified power” (al-Haj Saleh, 2017a, p. 76). The regime that causes exile became exiled itself as the revolution fragmented its absolute sovereignty, and the Assadist regime navigates its own opportunity to remain as a political actor in the Syrian scene (al-Haj Saleh, 2018a; Mabon, 2017). However, the Assad regime’s exile is different from the majority of Syrians’ exile after the Uprising. The Assadist regime became unfree, they could not shape politics as they want. “The Assadist state became in an exile from history itself,” and of its history, not necessarily for another eternity, rather by this loss of sovereignty and entry to a socio-political history that necessitates political change and social transformation (al-Haj Saleh, 2018a). What is historical about the Syrian revolution is it broke Assadist’s eternal rule and forced it to move from eternity to the temporary. This is what al-Haj Saleh means by living in exile while he was a ‘citizen’ in Syria: “I still find it difficult to reconcile myself to the word exile. I used to observe it with the eyes of a prisoner, then with the eyes of a ‘citizen’ living in Syria” (al-Haj Saleh, 2015). He was politically exiled inside the country, as a prisoner and as a ‘citizen’ (al-Haj Saleh, 2011). In the following section, I discuss how al-Haj Saleh juxtaposes the experience of prison with exile.

## **Political Jail as Exile: exiling freedom through jail and exile**

For al-Haj Saleh, freedom signifies change, transgression and adventures. “Freedom is a movement from a condition to another... a coming out on coming out... we do not come out of ourselves into other selves (our memory, imagination, and foundational bruises...), but we change ourselves, their constitution, as if we gain new selves, with new frameworks for memory, imagination, and sensitivity, a new register of experience” (al-Haj Saleh, 2017b). In this understanding, coming out of the self is a liberating act and a condition for freedom: “Coming farther out of the self and breaking the usual rhythm... can also be a transformative and liberating experience. When the self conforms to itself... it becomes a suffocating prison” (2017). For him, the inner self of an individual can be a prison. As we carry internal prisons within us all the times, habits, beliefs and traditions can be acts of confinement and detention by other means. Then, changing the self is a laboratory action “of enlivenment and expansion, a blossoming into hospitality towards other ideas and other habits—towards others” (2017). Moreover, change requires motion, and movement necessitates changing positions. Then, ironically, “movement ceases to be an act of freedom when it repetitively takes the same paths to the same places, especially if the passage is enforced” (2017). When a passage is enforced, we need to enliven and

adapt. This way of enlivenment is processual and emancipatory, by using the forced coming out of home or imprisonment at home as acts of freedom and living differently.

If we are forbidden to come out of the house in which we live, for al-Haj Saleh, the house becomes a prison. And if we are ‘imprisoned’ outside the house, when we are forbidden from coming out, it is prison, it is exile (al-Haj Saleh, 2017b). Thus, imprisonment outside the house is a dispossession of freedom, of a ‘coming out’ that we know we can return from. “Imprisonment outside the house and the prohibition of return is exile” (2017). Then the act of negating freedom in prison is exilement. And similarly, negating freedom outside the home is exile per se. In that sense, exile is a continuation of jail by other means, and vice versa. In al-Haj Saleh’s view, when a prisoner turns her prison into a home, an opportunity for personal development, then it is termed as *enjailment*<sup>1</sup> (2017). Furthermore, turning exile into home is termed as *exilification*<sup>2</sup> (al-Haj Saleh, 2018b). With the two processes, we exile exile, negate the negation and find our ways of approaching freedom in places where we are relatively dispossessed from it.

## Exiling Exile: emplacing ourselves and homing the places

Through the process of enjailment, a prisoner naturalizes time in prison with productive activities by making the prison into a framework of (self-)change (al-Haj Saleh, 2012, pp. 202–203, 2017b, 2018b). “Enjailment cancels prison, deactivates it, and converts it into a space for liberation” (al-Haj Saleh, 2017b). This liberation is from inner prisons: from habits, rituals and traditions. Prison provides the time to existentially re-think our beliefs and re-define ourselves. Enjailment, then, is “a conflict we undertake in prison against prison” (2017). That’s to challenge its confinements and move between the cracks of prisons searching for the light of freedom. In his 16 years in Syrian prisons, al-Haj Saleh himself changed and his view of politics was reconsidered. His understanding of communism became different from what was before, and he became opposed to any dogmatic belief (al-Haj Saleh, 2012, p. 210). His ways of enjailment were reading, writing, watching TV, playing cards and sleeping (2012, p. 204-207).

Similar to the prisoner, the exiled goes through a process of *exilification* (al-Haj Saleh, 2018b): making the exile an opportunity “to resume a life that has been put on hold, or to work to make exile an opportunity for a new beginning is the most important challenge faced” by the exiled (2018b). By rendering exile a new beginning, a different struggle added to the old one in the home country, the exiled does not spend the rest of her years awaiting return. In addition, exile has its special regime of temporality; “The past suddenly seems to be the time of freedom and the present is confusion and anxiety, while the future is a hoped-for return or a sustained confusion and struggle” (al-Haj Saleh, 2017b). In this context, Al-Haj Saleh argues that the exiled seeks to exile exile through this process of *exilification* (2017b; 2018b). Exiling exile is by accepting it and its new challenges and conditions and starting new commitments for a different world; neither by isolating oneself from the new social

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1 Enjailment is the translation of the Arabic term *Istibbas*, coined by the author from the word *habs* which means imprisonment. *Istibbas* (as translated by Rana Issa and Suneela Mubayi) is when a prisoner lives in prison as if it is her home, making use of imprisonment (al-Haj Saleh, 2012, p. 202, 2018b).

2 Similar to the term enjailment, exilification is the translation of the Arabic term *istilja*, from the origin *luju* which is to take refuge. The author coined this term to account for exiles’ lives.

environment in expectation of going back home nor the dissolution in the new society, in an attempt of a complete erasure of the past (2017b). Exiling exile is then synonymous to exilification in al-Haj Saleh's terms. Following this understanding, maintaining "the old constitution of the self, considering this an act of resistance," is counterproductive (2017b). "Holding on to an old self out of national loyalty is the true treason. We need in exile, as in prison, to change ourselves, to become free" (2017b). Separation of the 'old' society, tradition and habits is "the only thing that liberates" the exiled (2017b). Exilification happens when we attach new meanings to the exile and when we make it an opportunity of learning. For Syrians, the struggle becomes double: struggling in the new place, in what is so-called the host country, while their real struggle was within their community.

For al-Haj Saleh, exilification can be manifested in many ways. Establishing friendships eliminates the foreignness of a place and reduces its identity as exile (al-Haj Saleh, 2015). Friendships help the exiles to emplace themselves in the new destinations and build their identities and lives in the new conditions (2015). Another way of exilification for al-Haj Saleh personally is through work; writing functions as a bridge to Syria and public engagement connects him to other Syrians. This public engagement "is an attempt to build a nation where we are. Writing... was my identity in Syria, not just a job... but a method to explain the world and to navigate in it, indeed for being in the world: a chosen nation. Because of writing... I have not suffered the problems of most exiles. I took writing with me, as work and nation" (2015). Learning the language of the host country familiarizes the exiled with the place and makes its intensity as such less counterproductive and fosters inhabitation therein. 'Owning' a house to live in helps the exiled also to reconcile her past and accept the new conditions. Exile also provides the opportunity to rethink our beliefs from inside out and ponder the path they reached so far. Exile can be an emancipatory experience for rethinking politics, history and progress (2015). The processes of exilification and enjoinment are not just coping mechanisms. For al-Haj Saleh, they are ways of familiarizing the individual with the status quo of the enforced conditions, towards emplacing herself in the new conditions and turning them into a 'home'. It is noteworthy to add that exilification is not an oriented, fixed process with guidelines, but a way of becoming and flourishing regardless the enforced conditions. In a nutshell, in al-Haj Saleh's understanding, exile is being flexible.

## **The End of Exile: the world of exile and the exile of the world**

The word 'exile' for al-Haj Saleh, is not adequate to describe the case of most of Syrian refugees. Exile, most properly like prison, cannot be subsumed into and limited to a certain space or time. The embodiment of the experience of exile reshapes and remakes the space-time nexus: when histories of anxiety and oppression are accumulated and materialized on an individual's body wherever s/he goes. That is not to say that 'exile' has its own autonomy, characterizing it with different regimes of spatiality and temporality separated from their surroundings. To the contrary, Al-Haj Saleh's account neither depoliticizes nor dehistoricizes the experience of exile. He accounts for its particularity and personal mediation; however, he does not essentialize it as such. Then, exile is an experience, however vague, an individual finds herself identifying with. It is a state of dispossession. This experience cannot be reduced to the individual level, yet it is a multi-layered, socially and politically mediated experience, situated in a certain place and time.

Looking at the social structure of the uprising that causes exiles, al-Haj Saleh neither romanticizes nor idealizes the experience of exile or the one of homeland (Malkki, 1995, p. 514). His way of understanding exile grabs its causes and its effects altogether in one conjuncture. He accounts for his subjective, phenomenological experience while situating it in the social fabrics from which it erupted. Exile for al-Haj Saleh can be understood as a liminal status of being torn between the conditions of exile and the destroyed country (al-Haj Saleh, 2015). The conflation of ‘inside’ Syria and its ‘outside’ is extensive, where “we [as Syrian refugees] live “outside”, but “inside”, we have loved ones that are enduring a much crueler fate than ours: kidnapping, detention, and disappearance” while we are outside the country (2015). While exiled Syrians are outside the country, their personal experiences become more and more centered around living outside and looking back and inside—that is around ‘exile’ (2015). These experiences make the autonomy of exile impossible and render exiles not just exiles (2015), but part of the Syrian political life.

Between here and there, Syrians are not distant from the political events inside their country and the political situation of the host communities. For al-Haj Saleh, what Syrians experience is not limited to them. The Syrian question is the world’s question. Its story is the story of the world; “Democracy is in crisis all over the world and Syria is a victim of this crisis” (al-Haj Saleh, 2017c; Young & al-Haj Saleh, 2017). Put differently, the Syrian conflict shows that the world is being Syrianized: “The world is a large Syria... and to change it most probably means to spread the horror that befell us [the Syrians] all over the world” (al-Haj Saleh, 2017c). That view for him is not only on the political level, but also realized on the personal realm as well: “The freedom of my loved ones and the future of the world are interlinked” (2017). Al-Haj Saleh’s letters to his missing wife, Samira al-Khalil, who was kidnapped in Douma in December 2013, could be read as evidence of how the personal is politicized and the political is personalized while talking about the Syrian revolution<sup>3</sup>. Massouh (2015) notes that al-Haj Saleh writings on prison and exile should not be read as a personal account. However, it is “is an invitation for Syrians to write with one another, to rewrite their history collectively, and to reclaim what it means to be part of a global, modern citizenry” (2015, p. 97).

Al-Haj Saleh conceptualizes ‘the world’ as an analytical (imaginary) category that equates that of ‘exile’ with ‘home’ (al-Haj Saleh, 2018a; Young & al-Haj Saleh, 2017). Thinking of the world as an exile makes us think of all injustices around the world, from which Syria is an example. Such injustices, for al-Haj Saleh, are interconnected and interdependent. Then, the world of exiles is part of, and similar to, the exile of the world. In other words, exiled individuals are in the world which is an exile itself. The world is an exile in which we all are relatively and differentially dispossessed. And, for al-Haj Saleh, we live by the premise that “neither home nor exile is in the world,” because we are in the world. Our home is the world, which is our exile as well (al-Haj Saleh, 2018a). Thus, the world’s dystopia/utopia is immanent and within. It is here and now, and we bring it into being with every action (al-Haj Saleh, 2017b). That’s why for him “we must change the world in the world” without taking higher moral stances regarding the conflicts we are part of (2017b). In that view, changing Syria is a way towards changing the world and the world’s change will befall the Syrians (al-Haj Saleh, 2017c).

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<sup>3</sup> For another example, see al-Haj Saleh’s commentary on Abdel Basset al-Sarout’s martyrdom (al-Haj Saleh, 2019; al-Jumhuriya, 2019).



In sum, al-Haj Saleh's account of exile is interconnected and multilayered. Exile for him is an(y) act of dispossession and negation of rights. One can say that the negation of history through 'political' eternity is a cause of the negation of political and moral lives, which culminates into a negation of freedom and basic rights. This dispossession of rights can be reconciled through enjoinment and exilification. Then, exile is not an exception, it is the norm and the living condition of millions around the world. However, al-Haj Saleh's account provokes open-ended questions about the future of the exiles and their relation to the 'homeland'. What is left at stake by the exilification process? To what extent will exilification affect the political causes of the exiles? How does exilification affect homeland politics and create new transnational networks? Finally, the future of the exiled also needs more contemplation from al-Haj Saleh; is exilification a way of living in a permanent liminality?<sup>4</sup>

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