

Syria: Sovereignty, Terrorism, and the Failure of the United Nations

Interview with Syria's Ambassador to the UN Bashar al-Ja'afari

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On January 8, in his sparsely-furnished New York City office, the Syrian Arab Republic Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Dr. Bashar al-Ja'afari, sat down with Al-Akhbar for an interview. The veteran diplomat, who has held his position at the UN since 2006, and lives restricted to a 25-mile radius of New York City, has much more to say than the half hour allowed. Defiant as always, he discussed the challenges he faces at the UN, explained why he thinks the organization has lost its way, and censured Western states and media for their hostility toward the Syrian government.

First, however, we discussed the exhibition of Aleppo-based Syrian photographer Hagop Vanesian, titled "My Homeland," which opened the same day at the United Nations headquarters.

Al-Akhbar: How did this exhibition come about?

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: This is the first breakthrough we've had at the level of the United Nations since the beginning of what is commonly called "the Syrian crisis." For four years, I have been trying very hard to do something inside the UN. Every time we attempted to do something, we were confronted by a huge amount of bureaucracy, excuses, apologies (sometimes), denial of our rights (sometimes), negligence, etc.

I'm very glad that we finally succeeded in organizing this exhibition — which doesn't address the whole, dramatic picture of the Syrian crisis, but only focuses on what happened to and in Aleppo, the second-largest city in Syria, after the capital, Damascus. It's about Syria, it's about the Syrian people. It's not about the Syrian government or the Syrian opposition or the Syrian coalition thugs or Da'esh (ISIS). It's about Syria, about what happened in Aleppo, through undeniable photos.

The exhibition is the work of a highly-professional Syrian photographer of Armenian origin, who is himself a citizen of Aleppo. He is an eyewitness to the terrorist rampage that hit this beautiful city, Aleppo, which has always been a cradle of civilization. He is suffering greatly. He lost his home, his family. He will show only 26 photos, but he has an archive of thousands of photos. He has complete archives of Aleppo, before and after, building by building, how it was before and how it became.

AA: Why do you think that the UN has allowed this exhibition now? You mentioned you'd wanted to sponsor exhibitions in the past but hadn't been allowed.

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: The Saudi mission, the French mission, the Danish mission, the British mission, the German mission... they have countered Syrian government activities in the UN. Every time we complained about it they said, "You can do the same." Today we said, "We have an exhibition." They were cornered. They couldn't say no (chuckles), because they kept telling me "You can do the same." We are not attacking Germany or France or others, we are showing the reality in our country.

AA: An Associated Press article that has been running in the mainstream papers slammed this exhibit; citing an official in the opposition Syrian National Coalition calling the photographer a "propagandist."

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: This is what they are good at. They don't look at the picture in its entirety, in its comprehensiveness. They don't address what the photographs are talking about objectively. They have prejudices, wrong preconceived ideas about what's taking place in Syria. They start with wrong ideas and end with wrong ideas. It's really unfortunate, because here we are not talking about just some gallery in New York. We are talking about the United Nations headquarters!

We are speaking the language of the UN: territorial integrity of states, political independence of states, sovereignty of states, equal membership of states. All these sacrosanct terms are enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. We are not starting from scratch or re-inventing new language. We are in full harmony with the UN language and the UN provisions of the Charter.

Others are not, because they don't belong to the UN world. They [the media] are, of course, against the Syrian government. They are against anything that might explain positively, or objectively speaking [the Syrian crisis], to the so-called "international community" — I don't believe in this word. They have been falsifying facts, spreading rumours, making propaganda against the Syrian government for years. And they are living off this criticism, it has become a source of their livelihood, their own welfare. The more you criticize the Syrian government, the more money you get from the petrodollar countries, the more visas you get from Western world, the more you go to five-star hotels, the more you appear on TV screens as dignitaries of the Syrian people, as representatives — exclusive representatives — of the Syrian people.

Anybody who opposes this exhibition belongs to a political current opposing the truth. Any honest, objective Syrian who loves his homeland, who says he feels sick because of what is going on in Syria, should have a great interest in showing what is going on in Syria. All Syrians should push for organizing more exhibitions, not only at the United Nations but all over the world, to explain what Da'esh and al-Nusra Front and the other terrorist groups sponsored by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, are doing. The Turkish intelligence is deeply involved in sponsoring Da'esh, and in stealing our plants and factories.

AA: You are the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic at the United Nations, and Syria is an important subject in the news. Are you asked to appear on major TV channels?

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: Mainly, I address the media at the UN, at the stakeout, which is the podium for diplomats, for ambassadors. I also go on TV from time to time. But to be honest, when they record interviews, I speak for 20 minutes, then they show only 20 seconds, 10 seconds, whatever fits their agenda. You saw what happened with Anderson Cooper, Christiane Amanpour, and others. They always try to manipulate the facts, and they do their

best to deviate from the direction of the conversation into little, negative, details, so that the audience will have a negative idea of what I am saying. Simultaneously, as I am speaking, they show a negative video clip on what's going on in Syria, accusing the government of doing so and so. Which means that they are indirectly telling viewers that this ambassador is not telling the truth. You see how they manipulate?

Christiane Amanpour was lying when she was interviewing me on the so-called chemical weapons. She was lying, not telling the truth at all! This is why I told her, "You know what? You also may be a weapon of mass destruction, because you are poisoning public opinion and deviating from the main points I'm making."

AA: You are now under a 25-mile travel ban, how did they justify imposing this restriction on you?

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: Yes. They didn't give me any reason, they didn't explain anything. They just notified me that from now on, you won't be able to go beyond 25 miles [of New York City's Columbus Circle]. It's an American sovereign decision. I'm an ambassador to the United Nations, not to the United States, so maybe they are taking advantage of that nuance. Of course, it is not justifiable. I have the right to move according to the Vienna Diplomatic Convention. But if they want it this way, let it be.

AA: Prior to this, had you been traveling in the US or elsewhere?

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: Yes. Maybe my activism caused me this trouble.

AA: Your activism consisted of meeting with members of the Syrian-American community?

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: Yes, meeting with them, explaining to them what's going on in Syria. They needed information, they needed to be briefed about what's going on in their homeland. They are all extremely worried, they have families there.

AA: Speaking of traveling, recently, there were reports that you launched an official complaint at the UN regarding US Senator John McCain and other heads of states traveling illegally to Syria and meeting with anti-government fighters.

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: Yes, this is what transpired in the media. I didn't ask to circulate the letter, I wanted it to be shared only by the members of the Security Council, but it was somehow leaked. But I would like to confirm that, yes, I sent a letter drawing the kind attention of the secretary-general and the members of the Security Council to this flagrant and blatant interference in domestic affairs, this violation of our sovereignty, the illegal crossing of our borders. Whenever one of those who cross illegally into Syria gets killed by the terrorists, then the Syrian government is blamed for not protecting him, although they entered Syria illegally. Many journalists have been killed, unfortunately. It is unfortunate, but they are responsible for their own fate. They didn't enter Syria via the Syrian government. We would have protected them. We would have shown them where to go and where not to go. But they had bad intentions. So, many of them got killed, beheaded, kidnapped.

So, indeed, I forwarded this letter with some specific names, even though there are thousands, but we gave just some names. John McCain, an American senator, goes and meets with Da'esh (ISIS) in Aleppo. In one picture, he was with a man from ISIS. And the

other “moderate” criminals. The American weapons delivered to them ended up in the hands of al-Nusra Front and Da’esh. All these people are “moderate,” as you know. Bernard Kouchner, the former French Foreign Minister, entered Syria illegally, too. Can you imagine that? A senator from the USA, a former minister from France, Turkish intelligence... and then they tell you that, “you know what, we are extremely worried about the spread of terrorism.”

AA: In UN sessions, your microphone has repeatedly had suddenly “technical difficulties” and been cut, or the video feed has had sudden inexplicable “technical difficulties”...

Ambassador al-Ja’afari: Many times, many times. I have been the only Ambassador at the United Nations since 1945 whose speeches were cut off, or not recorded at all. It has never happened otherwise in UN meetings. Never. Two of my speeches were not recorded. One, under the Chairmanship of the former Qatari ambassador... of course, Qatar. But what adds insult to injury was that Ban Ki-moon himself was at sitting at the podium, and he supported the move taken by the President of the General Assembly. That triggered a very negative reaction from many ambassadors who intervened. The biased position of the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly was obvious from the very first days, thanks to these wrongdoings.

This has been a phenomenon related exclusively to me. Let me elaborate. Every time I speak, for instance, at the Security Council, they choose a bad interpreter who is unable to fully interpret what I am saying. So the people do not get my message. They do it on purpose. One day, I was invited to address the Security Council. I saw one of the Security Council staff members addressing the interpreters. He gave them a hand signal: change. I saw it with my own eyes. So they changed the good interpreter with a poor one, thus ensuring that my political message does not transpire fully.

They do the same things in the General Assembly. The British ambassador cut me off one time while I was speaking. He said “you have exceeded four minutes.” I said, “Who gave you the right to fix four minutes? I am a member of a concerned party, and I have the right to explain.” To justify his wrongdoing, he also cut off the Iraqi ambassador after me. We were the only two ambassadors speaking at that session, and it was on Syria and Iraq. The issue was on terrorism in Syria and Iraq, and he cut off both of us after four minutes!

The UN has lost its credibility. The UN has lost a lot of the principles of its founding fathers. The UN of today has nothing to do with the UN of the Charter. This is why everybody has forgotten about the Charter; people do not speak of the Charter. They don’t speak about sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence, equality among members. Now they speak about the rule of law, human rights, the environment — because this is very dear to the heart of the private sector: money — partnerships. Now the Secretary-General is focused on partnerships, because he wants to privatize the United Nations.

The budget of peacekeeping operations is three times higher than the regular budget! Rather than extinguishing the conflicts, and decreasing the number of peacekeeping operations, we have increased the peace-keeping operations. We have right now 36 special political missions, aside from 15 peacekeeping operations. Twenty years ago, we didn’t have any special political missions. This is a new phenomenon. By the way, the special political missions and the peace-keeping operations are not in the Charter. These are some of the ways they are deviating from the Charter itself. Together they consume \$7.9 billion per year. And they are solving nothing.

When one of the peacekeeping operations, such as the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force Zone (UNDOF) on the Syrian occupied Golan makes mistakes, they hide it, they don't share the information with the Security Council. For instance, Israel is dealing with Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front) right now in the Golan, helping the terrorists and treating their wounded in Israeli hospitals. Israeli TV shows Netanyahu visiting them. Still, the report of the secretary-general denies this fact, and the report of the Secretary-General does not address this fact, does not acknowledge that there is cooperation between Israel and the terrorists in the Golan.

AA: The media accuses President al-Assad of being responsible for Da'esh, and other terrorists. Who do you blame for the proliferation of terrorists in Syria?

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: I'm sure you're aware of the alarming reports of Da'esh coming from Camp Bucca in Iraq, the famous American prison in Iraq. Al-Baghdadi, the caliph of Da'esh, was at Bucca. He was released by the Americans, not by the Syrian president. The men who committed the massacre in Paris, they were fighting in Syria and came back to France. France allowed them to go to Syria, where they killed scores of people, and in Iraq. Then they came back, normally, and the French police let them in. The same terrorists. They are good when they kill Syrians, and they are bad when they kill the French.

In 2012, Laurent Fabius, the French minister of foreign affairs, said himself that the jihadists — he didn't call them terrorists then — were doing well. The French minister! A permanent member of the Security Council in charge of maintaining international peace and security. He described their dirty actions by saying that they are doing well. The French minister of the interior, who is now the prime minister of France — the one who was crying over the bodies of the people killed in Paris — what did he say? At that time, the French ministers were competing to see who could go furthest in their animosity towards President al-Assad. "He should step down; he should go; he should resign." It was à la mode then. The French minister of the interior said at the time, "I cannot do anything to prevent and stop French jihadists from going to make jihad in Syria." He cannot, as minister of the interior, stop the terrorists coming from France from going to Syria to kill Syrians! Through Turkey, of course. Why? Because freedom of speech, freedom of what... freedom of lies. He "cannot stop them."

Now, he can. Now, he knows the outcome of what he did. We warned him, in our statements: don't play with the terrorists, they will come back to you. They thought they were big powers and exempt, immune against this terrorist disease.

It is said publicly today that the Americans with the Turks will start training the terrorists in Turkey in spring. It has become public, no shame whatsoever. The Jordanians are doing the same, in secret camps in the northern part of Jordan, run by the French and the British and the Americans. The same thing in Saudi Arabia. The same thing in Doha and Qatar. This is scandalous behaviour.

That's why I say, there's no United Nations anymore, it's over. Multilateral diplomacy is not working, it's being manipulated by the powerful. This is why they want to privatize the United Nations, so that the influential donors can control the decision-making mechanisms, without giving a damn about the provisions of the Charter.

We are member states, and we are here based on this famous concept and principle of equal sovereignty. All that has disappeared, it's about business now. Can you believe that

Saudi Arabia is sponsoring the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre? Can you believe for a second that Qatar is sponsoring the committee for alliance amongst civilizations, the dialogue among cultures and civilizations and religions? They are buying the UN with dirty money.

AA: In reference to Syria's destroyed heritage, US Secretary of State John Kerry has implied that it is America's duty to protect Syria's heritage. What is your take on his statement in light of the US' involvement in the Syrian war?

Ambassador al-Ja'afari: This man is disconnected from reality, totally disconnected. I heard this from an American man who fought with him in Vietnam. He told me, "This man has always been disconnected." But, he's not the only one.

On the other hand, there are many honest senators and genuine people in Congress who opposed the American administration's plan to attack Syria. There are genuine people, and the American constitution is based on beautiful values. Once applied, that is.

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