London Anarchist Bookfair

Leila Al Shami

29 October 2016

Today I was invited to speak at the London Anarchist Bookfair, an event I was excited to attend, to talk about the situation in Syria. Unfortunately the event did not take place. We were shut down by a guy called Amir Taaki (a British-Iranian who claims to be a developer of Bitcoin and someone who apparently Forbes magazine considered 'their top 30 under 30 list for 2014' as he had previously proudly told me by email) along with around seven of his friends (one dressed in full military garb, a real revolutionary maybe?)

Firstly, I would like to apologize to those who attended the event and had wanted to learn about the situation in Syria, an issue of critical importance. Some had come from as far afield as Birmingham to hear myself and Robin Yassin Kassab speak. Unfortunately as we were about to begin, Amir and his friends stormed the event chanting "PKK", "YPG" and accusing myself and Robin of being "fascists", "Arab nationalists" and "supporters of jihadi groups such as Ahrar Al Sham which advocate stoning women to death". I will not respond to the claims as anyone who is familiar with mine or Robin's work will know they are absurd. And for those not familiar, I refer you to our book 'Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War' (Pluto Press); make up your own minds.

Amir had previously contacted me by email demanding (not asking) that he be given 30 minutes of our talk to talk about Rojava, as he had spent some time there fighting for the YPG and working with various committees. (He had previously been refused a platform by the Bookfair). I responded that we already had a Syrian Kurdish anarchist, Shiar Neyo, invited to come and talk about Rojava for the second half of our talk (he was speaking at the No Border's session for the first half) and that our talk was not just about Rojava, but about Syria as a whole, plus there was another talk organized at the Bookfair for 5pm which focused specifically on Rojava. He responded claiming he "is probably the person who knows the most about Rojava at the moment" and that he is "qualified to speak about Syria more than anyone else right now." Such arrogance epitomizes everything that is wrong with egotistical western solidarity. That he – a foreigner who has spent a few months in the region – believes he is more qualified to speak on Rojava than a Syrian-Kurd from Rojava himself.

So, as a result of his bullying, he was given a 10 minute platform to speak, even though the organizers had tried to get him off the stage. He used his time to talk about "Mesopotamia" and "pyramids" and then refused to leave the platform. It then descended into a physical punch-up between Amir and his cronies and audience members who had come to hear myself, Robin and

Shiar speak about Syria – both Arab and Kurdish struggles. We had in particular wanted to focus on anti-authoritarian struggles, self-organization as well as issues of militarism, sectarianism and the rise of Islamist extremist groups. There would have also been one hour for audience questions and discussion, to learn from each others views and perspectives. But we were met with aggressiveness. I have spoken at events with *Shabiha* in attendance where we were treated with more respect. In the end the audience, myself and Robin left. And Amir remained talking to his seven friends …

Amir and his friends did a great disservice to the Kurdish struggle today by claiming to represent it and shutting down open debate. Myself, Robin and Shiar had gone in the spirit of mutual solidarity across Kurdish and Arab struggles and we were faced with blind sectarianism by people who rudely and aggressively prevented our event from taking place. If anarchism is about cult-like chanting the name of a political party and preventing Syrians from talking about Syria, then I am not an anarchist.