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THE SO-CALLED ARAB SPRING, ISLAMISM AND THE DILEMMA OF THE ARAB LEFT: 1970-2012

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abstract

THIS ARTICLE ADDRESSES THE GROWING MARGINALIZATION OF THE ARAB LEFT SINCE THE EARLY 1970S, AND ASSESSES ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT, ESPECIALLY, THE RISE AND SPREAD OF NEOLIBERALISM IN FEW ARAB AND MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES AND THE SIMULTANEOUS UPSURGE OF ISLAMISM. THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE SOVIET UNION EXACERBATED THE CRISIS OF THE ARAB LEFT, ESPECIALLY THE MARXISTS, WHO TRIED UNSUCCESSFULLY TO REVISIT AND CRITIQUE THEIR POLITICAL PROGRAMS, OBJECTIVES, AND METHODS AS WELL AS PROPOSE NEW SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS OF STATE AND SOCIETY. DEMOCRACY, THE NATIONAL QUESTION, STATUS OF MINORITIES, WOMEN'S AND HUMAN RIGHTS, TO NAME BUT A FEW CRITICAL ISSUES, APPEARING AT THE POLITICAL AGENDAS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTIES OF MAJOR ARAB COUNTRIES, WERE REFORMULATED OR APPROPRIATED BY VARIOUS ISLAMIST GROUPS ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD. PERPLEXED AND DIVIDED, THESE LEFTIST PARTIES TRIED TO RECLAIM THEIR POSITION AMONG THE MASSES. MANY OF

THEM LENT THEIR NUMBERS TO SECULAR BUT OPPRESSIVE ARAB REGIMES AS WELL AS POPULIST ISLAMIST PARTIES. OTHER LEFTISTS REMAINED OPPOSED TO BOTH SIDES, HAVING RESIGNED THEMSELVES FROM HISTORY, AWAITING A NEW "REVELATION" OR REVOLUTION WHICH FITS THEIR VISION OF AN IDEALIZED SOCIAL CHANGE. I ARGUE THAT DESPITE THE OSTENSIBLE SYNTHESIS BETWEEN ISLAMISM AND NEOLIBERALISM THE LAW OF THESIS-ANTI-THESIS-SYNTHESIS MAY GENERATE NEW SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONFIGURATIONS. IT MAY GIVE RISE TO DISTINCT HISTORICAL GROUPINGS, UNIFIED AROUND BROAD ISSUES, SUCH AS, GENDER EQUALITY, STATE SECULARISM, CONTROL OF PUBLIC SPACE, AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ISRAEL AND WESTERN HEGEMONY.

NEO-LIBERALISM, ARAB SPRING, ISLAMISM, SECULARISM, ARAB LEFT, SYRIA, EGYPT

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INTRODUCTION

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 augmented the crisis of the Arab Left, especially the Marxists-Leninists, who tried unsuccessfully to revisit and recast earlier political programs and methods of mobilization as well as propose new solutions to the problems of Middle Eastern state and society. Meanwhile, young Muslim reformists and modernists were engaged in exploring as well as critiquing a series of leftist ideas and demands. Democracy, economic modernization, national unity, resistance to Western imperialism, women's rights, human rights, and minorities' representation to name but a few strategic issues, appearing at the political agendas of major Arab Communist parties were reformulated and appropriated by diverse Islamist thinkers and activists across the Arab world. The ability of several Islamist movements to provide a host of social, economic and health services to its members has strengthened their popular appeal and ability to thrive apart from the state.

Today, Arab leftists are struggling to reclaim their lost position among the masses. Perplexed and divided they had lent their numbers either to "secular" but oppressive Arab regimes or to populist Islamist movements. Other leftists remain opposed to both sides of the political spectrum, having

resigned themselves from history, awaiting a new “revelation” or revolution, which fits their classical and probably utopian vision of historical change.

My article examines the growing marginalization of the Arab left since the early 1970s within Arab regional and international historical contexts and the manifestations of such marginalization in the upheavals that came to be known as the Arab Spring. “Arab Spring” refers in this study to the political, social, and civil uprisings, which unfolded from 2011 until today against oppressive states in the Arab World. I shed light on the gradual decline of Arab nationalism, and the forces of neoliberalism as they unfolded in a number of Arab and Middle Eastern countries, shaping religious ideologies and assisting in the emergence of Islamism in its various sociopolitical forms. By taking Egypt and Syria as two examples, I argue that the substantial power, which the Salafi Islamists (and the neo-Salafi) gained was a culmination of a long historical process dating to the 1970s.¹ I underscore the main factors behind the increasing appeal of Islamist discourses under Sadat (1918-1981); in Syria since the coming of Hafiz Asad to power in 1970 and the empowerment of Islamic political and civil organizations. Finally, I assess the current fragmentation and political indecisiveness of the Arab left and their implications for the masses engaged and touched by the Arab Spring. I identify the main positions taken by leftists today and the support they have gained, drawing upon the writings of leading leftist scholars and intellectuals. In the last section of my article, I note that the crisis of the Arab Left, whether through the engagement or disengagement of leftists in the upheavals is beginning to unleash forces which are detrimental to labor and women’s movements as well as to civil activism and resistance to global capital and American neo-imperial policies. Due to the broad geographical references and political connotations of the term Arab Spring, and the complexity and diversity of the term “Arab left,” I have limited myself to the major Marxist-Leninist Leftists in Lebanon and Syria. I should also note that I do not refer or discuss Arab liberal thinkers who have been misrepresented as leftists even if they have drawn in a sketchy way on Marxist class analysis.

¹ *Salaf* means ancestors such as the Prophet Mohammad, his early companions and the leaders of the first Islamic society. As a movement it emerged in mid-18th century in traditional, desert societies of the Arabian Peninsula. Its main inspirational figure was Muhammad ben Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792), the founder of the Wahhabi sect or Wahhabism. The guidelines of Salafism or Wahhabism are the lives, beliefs and practices of the righteous ancestors in order to cleanse religion from dissent, superstitions and paganism of the past. It calls for the elimination of Jahili (pre-Islamic) traditions and allegedly intends to purify religion; to unify Muslims against paganism; and to return to the original and authentic Islam. The following statement of Abdul Wahhab gives a clear idea about the doctrine of contemporary Salafi, or neo-Salafi organizations mainly like al-Qa’ida and its offshoots al-Nusra and ISIS. Abdul Wahhab stated that, “those who do not abide by [my] interpretation of Shari’a should be fought as if they were infidels (...) until they abide by the laws.” For more on Islamic movements read: Abu Samra 2007. For more on Wahhabism, see: AbuKhalil 2004; Dakhil 1998.

ISLAMISM IN EGYPT, 1918-1919

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. Its influence increased significantly in the early 1930s when Egypt was still under British colonial rule.² The Brotherhood cooperated with the Free Officers’ movement, a secret society within the Egyptian army, against King Farouk (1920-1965) and toppled him in 1952. After Nasser’s rise to power, however, the alliance between the Free Officers and the Brotherhood fell apart and the latter tried to assassinate him. Nasser arrested several followers of the Brotherhood and executed its leading members. Meanwhile, he was emerging into an Arab national hero following his confrontation with the British and French colonial powers in 1956. He reformulated socialism and promoted Arab Nationalism, spearheading a short-lived unity with Syria (1958-1961). In this context, he championed the cause of Palestine and its liberation, calling the masses to unite and form a sovereign Arab federation and resist European imperial domination. These hopes were shattered after the defeat (al-Naksa) in the second Arab-Israeli war 1967 but more importantly, Arab Nationalism as a political project received a severe blow. The defeat brought with it long and complex critiques of Arab nationalist thought, secularism, and the postcolonial state in order to arrive at an alternative model of political liberation and anti-Western activism. Islamism, in its Sunnite salafi and neo-salafi forms provided a powerful challenge to Western modernism and secular nationalism, which attracted many youth during the late 1960s. More importantly, the socio-economic and political forces of neoliberalism during the reign of Sadat (r. 1970-1981) helped buttress Islamist activities in Egypt. Sadat saw the Muslim Brotherhood as a counter balance to the Nasserites and the Communists, who opposed his neo-liberal economic policies as well as his plans to forge a peace treaty with Israel.³ Sadat aimed to alleviate Egypt’s huge economic strain caused by recurring wars with Israel. He solicited US support for a future peace agreement with Israel by expelling the 20,000 Soviet military experts from Egypt in July 1972.⁴ Before starting negotiations for peace, however, Sadat tried to restore the image of Egypt, by launching along with Syria a military attack on Israel on October 6, 1973. In 1978, he promulgated the Camp David Accords.

The Brotherhood welcomed Sadat’s ascendancy as President of Egypt, depicting him as a “devout Muslim.”⁵ The relationship between Sadat and the Brotherhood goes back to the early 1940s as Sadat had contacts with

² Cleveland, Bunton 2009; Rubin 2010; Egypt Muslim Brotherhood Documentary.

³ Salah 2001.

⁴ Cleveland, Bunton 2009: 374.

⁵ Salah 2001.

Hassan Banna and often attended his lectures and sermons. Nasser had relied on Sadat's liaison with Banna to appease the Brotherhood and also give an Islamic face to his regime. To that end, Nasser chose Sadat in 1965 to chair the Organization of the Islamic Conference to embellish the regime's Islamic character and increase its appeal to Muslims outside Egypt. Sadat released several members of the Brotherhood arrested in mid-1950s by Nasser and stressed the importance of building a state based on the twin elements of "Science and Faith."⁶



IN 1980, THE RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS ON
THE LOCAL RADIO AND TV STATIONS
WITNESSED A 21% INCREASE

The official TV and radio stations broadcasted Muslim prayers five times a day while some state legislations were based on Shari'a (Islamic Law) injunctions. Sadat also reached an agreement with 'Umar al-Tilimsani' the Supreme Guide of the Brotherhood (1973-1986), to release Islamists on condition that they go to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet army. In this atmosphere of relative stability for the Islamists, salafi ideas and practices were publicly promoted and spread through a myriad of free booklets and books originating in Saudi Arabia (the Brotherhood's own literature was still officially banned). Sadat allowed a few Brotherhood intellectuals to assume their former occupations and appointed two former leaders of the Brotherhood as ministers. The first, Dr. Kamil became minister of the awqaf (religious endowments) and all the mosques in Egypt were put under the supervision of this ministry. The second, Dr. Majid, became the minister of information (controlling the radio and television, and a number of newspapers and journals). In 1980, the religious programs on the local radio and TV stations witnessed a 21% increase.⁷ Reference to Islam (particularly the shari'a) was dominant in plays, songs and daily news. Most TV stations were airing live performances of religious rituals like Friday prayer. Sadat legalized the major journal of the Brotherhood, Al-Da'wa (The Call), which served to improve the Brotherhood's public image and to spread their political message nation-wide. In this atmosphere, the co-opted Brotherhood leaders and intellectuals hardly commented on Sadat's domestic policies, or raised awareness about his relationship to the US and Israel.⁸

⁶ Salah 2001.

⁷ Salah 2001.

⁸ Salah 2001.

On their part, the Islamists held that Sadat was using them for his own goals and that his espousal of religion was not genuine. To them, Sadat appeared to be indifferent to Islamic law and pietistic practices.⁹ The Brotherhood however learnt to benefit from the "Open" policy of Sadat, as their followers grew in number especially among university students and recent migrants to Cairo from rural areas. Meanwhile militant puritanical Islamist groups were gaining ground, such as al-Jihad, al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group) and al-Takfir wa-al-Hijra (Excommunication and Emigration). The last group rejected Sadat's policies and pledged to overthrow him due to his, "disgraceful peace treaty with the Jews" as they called it.¹⁰ Thus, on October 6, 1981 Sadat was assassinated while attending a military parade celebrating the 1973 October War.

Militant Islamist members were arrested, and others executed along with Muhammad Abdul al-Salam Faraj, the operation's mastermind. Shortly after (October 8th), the Egyptian police force launched a campaign against the city of Asyut, a stronghold for these Islamists. They committed a massacre but failed to take control of the city.¹¹ Leaders of these militant groups, who were imprisoned at the time of Nasser, were inspired by the teachings of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), which formed the basis for most militant Islamist movements in the twentieth century. Qutb's views about Islam, modernism and the West radicalized a generation of young men recruited by Islamist movements world-wide. He was accused of planning to assassinate Nasser in 1954 before he and 18,000 members of the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested. Qutb was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor but was released in 1964 to be rearrested and executed in 1966 for the ideas he spread in his book, Ma'alim Fi al-Tariq (Milestones).¹² In Milestones, which acted as the Islamist Manifesto for the radicalized youth, Qutb argued that the salvation of humanity through Islam is an ultimate and absolute truth. He called on all Muslim believers to strive by all means to implement Islam and to eradicate all other systems of rule. In his view, all forms of rule and governments outside the framework of shari'a and Islam should be rejected because they have actually intercepted and seized the role of God through their secular (liberal or socialist) nature. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of the Islamists would be

⁹ Salah 2001.

¹⁰ Salah 2001.

¹¹ Salah 2001.

¹² Haddad 1983: 67-99.

to build al-Hakimiyya (God's rule on earth), which can only be achieved through the categorical destruction of the existing systems of governance.¹³

During the 1940s and the 1950s, the Muslim Brotherhood attracted a following among rural migrants to Cairo and urban middle class students and civil servants.¹⁴ During the time of Nasser, the Brotherhood's cadres suffered major blows as I noted earlier. But under Sadat, as Carrie Rosefsky Wickham noted, Islamist student associations, combining prospective specialists in the medical sciences, engineering, pharmacy, and agriculture, rejuvenated the Brotherhood's activities in Cairo and Alexandria.¹⁵ At the same time, these associations created diverse reformist and militant Islamist trends, with varied approaches to the state. Sadat's regime had encouraged religious activism on university campuses in order to suppress and marginalize the leftists. The Brotherhood's representatives, who enjoyed the support of community and family networks, were gaining new ground. They proselytized about their Islamic vision within the framework of socio-religious activities, such as "annual summer camps financed in part by government subsidies."¹⁶ Over the years, Salafi local leaders and not merely the Brotherhood, extended a range of social and economic services to depressed urban neighborhoods, especially in Alexandria.¹⁷ Much like the Brotherhood, however, their organizations attracted wealthy businessmen and professionals.

ISLAMISM IN SYRIA

Families of notables and large landholders dominated urban politics in Syria, who impeded the development of an organized and unified peasantry, and helped fuel its restlessness.¹⁸ In 1960, Hafiz Asad (1930-2000), Salah Jadid (1926-1993), Muhammad `Umran (1922-1972); Abdul Karim al-Jundi (1932-1968) and Ahmad al-Mir (b. 1920/21), who were residing in Egypt formed a secret organization within the Arab Nationalist Ba`th party, the

¹³ Sayyid Qutb believed that Islam is "the way of life ordained by God for all mankind, and this way establishes the Lordship of God alone – that is, the sovereignty of God – and orders practical life in all its daily details. Jihad in Islam is simply a name for striving to make this system of life dominant in the world. As far as belief is concerned, it clearly depends upon personal opinion, under the protection of a general system in which all obstacles to freedom of personal belief have been removed. Clearly this is an entirely different matter and throws a completely new light on the Islamic Jihad." (Qutb 2006: 86) For more on al-Hakimiyya read in full chapter 4, "Jihad in the Cause of Allah" (Qutb 2006: 63-86).

¹⁴ Munson 1988: 77.

¹⁵ Rosefsky Wickham 2013: 35-39.

¹⁶ Rosefsky Wickham 2013: 35.

¹⁷ Rosefsky Wickham 2013: 251-252.

¹⁸ Lefevre 2014: 28.

"Military Committee," which later became the military wing of the Syrian Ba`th Party.¹⁹ It aimed to reconstitute the party, as Hanna Batatu stated, and to purge the Syrian army from potential enemies, that is, those loyal to Nasser. Against Batatu, Umar Abdullah notes that the army strove in fact to recruit members of loyal sectarian communities, namely, the Alawite, the Druze and the Christian, three minority sects in Syria.²⁰ Asad's economic plans undermined the interests of local artisans and small traders as Rafael Lefevre noted.²¹ These elements coalesced with the discontent of marginalized Sunni dignitaries, as well as religious leaders drawing support from the middle and lower classes in major Sunni-dominated cities and neighborhoods.

After the disintegration of the United Arab Republic in 1961, the Military Committee started to gain influence within the ranks of the Ba`th party in Syria at large. This was exemplified by the coup of 1966 as gradually Asad, Jadid and `Umran had become the strongmen of Syria. Then, in 1968 the Syrian Ba`th party split into two factions: the first was led by Jadid and the other by Asad. The two fractions competed over decision-making within the party and the army, culminating in 1970 with Asad's coup against Jadid. He emerged as the single ruler of Syria and gradually controlled the army, the secret police and various intelligence agencies. In addition, all high-ranking positions in the army, state and the Party were given to loyal Ba`th members. Two historical events paved the way for Asad's ascendancy: The first was the loss of the Golan Heights in the second Arab Israeli war (1967):²² Asad, who was the minister of defense, accused Jadid and others of corruption and adventurism and held them responsible for the humiliating defeat of the Syrian army. The second was the 1970 Black September when king Husayn of Jordan (1935-1999) launched a military campaign against the PLO and Palestinian refugee camps in Amman. Asad refused to help the Palestinians unlike Jadid who sent the Syrian tanks to protect them only to be destroyed by the Jordanian air force.²³ Asad emerged unscathed while thousands of Palestinians were killed and the PLO moved its offices to Beirut.

After the 1973 Third Arab-Israeli war Asad tried to bring Syria closer to Western countries especially the US and its allies in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Lebanon. He supported harsh policies against the PLO

¹⁹ On the history of the Ba`th party read the seminal book of Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry: The Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and their Politics* (Batatu 1999: 144-155).

²⁰ Abdallah 1983: 52-53.

²¹ Abdallah 1983: 63.

²² Batatu 1999: 145.

²³ Batatu 1999: 174.

and attempted to bring it under his control. He also blocked any weapon transportation to the Palestinians and leftist parties during the first phase of the civil war (1975-1982). On the contrary, in 1976 the Syrian army intervened in Lebanon against the PLO-Leftist coalition and prevented the collapse of the right-wing Christian coalition. The American foreign minister at the time, Henry Kissinger, announced that peace would not come to the Middle East until Syria had taken administrative control of Lebanon. The US feared the creation of a strong leftist regime in Lebanon similar to that in Cuba.²⁴ The Syrian army, under the orders of Asad, helped the right-wing militiamen destroy a major Palestinian refugee camp, Tall al-Za`tar (5,000 were killed), and in 1977 assassinated Kamal Junblat (1917-1977), a leftist leader of the Lebanese National Movement.²⁵ The Syrian army helped the right wing Christian parties to rebuild their powers, and weakened the PLO-Nationalist Movement politically and militarily.²⁶ The Syrian policy in Lebanon started to change in 1978 when Egyptian president Sadat started peace negotiations with Israel. The Asad regime shifted its alliances drawing new ties with the PLO and the Lebanese Nationalist Movement and regionally with Libya, Algeria and Southern Yemen. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and the Syrian army was forced to evacuate most of the territories in Lebanon except for the Northern and the Eastern areas. They re-entered Lebanon in 1987 to end the explosive civil war but left the country again in 2005 as a consequence of the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri (1944-2005).²⁷

The initial attempts to found a branch of the Brotherhood in Syria occurred in Aleppo in 1935 by a group of university students who had studied in Egypt. Their efforts led to the unification of several Sunnite Muslim charitable organizations, and culminated in 1945 in the formation of an association called Shabab Muhammad. The latter's name was changed to the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁸ Dr. Mustafa Siba`i (1915-1964) became its first supreme guide until 1961. The Syrian Brotherhood spread among Sunnite Muslims in the cities and attracted the middle class, urban merchants, residents of the old city of Damascus, the ulama (religious scholars and

24 Abdallah 1983: 68-79.

25 The Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a coalition formed at the brink of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) and made up of secular national and leftist parties. It championed a political campaign to eliminate sectarianism. It called for the founding of civil courts, promotion of civil marriages across religious lines, and most importantly it proposed a democratic political system where resources and power sharing should be based on equity and merit rather than religious identity. It established an alliance with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to achieve the proposed political reforms of the LNM; to defend the Palestinian revolution and refugee camps in Lebanon; and to support resistance against Israel. (Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014).

26 Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014.

27 Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 106, 127, 213-214.

28 Shamieh 2013: 349.



THE US FEARED THE CREATION OF A STRONG LEFTIST REGIME IN LEBANON SIMILAR TO THAT IN CUBA

jurists), and professional groups. Unlike the Egyptian Brotherhood it could not penetrate the Syrian army, most likely because of Syria's diverse sectarian and ethnic composition.²⁹

The Syrian Brotherhood rejected the policies of withdrawal and "quietism" known to the Sufi groups and adopted political activism and social action.³⁰ Under Siba`i the Brotherhood became one of the principle founders of the Socialist Islamist Front (SIF) as four of its members won parliamentary seats in 1949. Siba`i himself became the deputy chairman of the parliament. In 1961 the Brotherhood won 10 seats in the parliament and formed a bloc called the Islamic Cooperative league.³¹ In addition to partaking in parliamentary politics, the Brotherhood became involved in the war efforts against the Zionists during the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, and in later years sent volunteers to be trained in military camps established by the PLO in Jordan.³² The model for this activism was the line of Jihad (sacred war for the purpose of converting non-Muslims to Islam) provided in their view by Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, the al-Salaf al-Salih (the virtuous companions of Prophet Muhammad covering the first three generations of Islam).³³ In the early 1950s a radical wing emerged among young members of the Syrian Brotherhood who perceived Siba`i's policies as a deviation from the ideal commitments of the organization. They attempted through their ties with members of the Egyptian al-Tanzim al-Khas (special military wing), to form a similar military unit in their own organization in Syria.³⁴ The militant Syrian Islamists who were part of this

29 Abdallah 1983: 88-95.

30 *Sufi* (from the Arabic word *tasawwuf*) is an Islamic mystical tradition which seeks to contemplate God through inner reflection and at times physical-spiritual exercise. The Sufis seek gnosis which is direct knowledge of God based on revelation or apocalyptic vision. The gnostic vision brings forth the idea that all worshippers of diverse creeds are similar and one. For more on Sufism see: Mathewson Denny 1994: 211-237.

31 Shamieh 2013: 352-355.

32 Shamieh 2013.

33 Abdallah 1983: 88-95.

34 The Egyptian Al-Tanzim al-Khas (TK) was founded in 1940 initially to fight colonialism and Zionism. Membership was strictly selective as only men (military or civilians) who displayed commitment and loyalty to the Brotherhood would be nominated. The nominated member should possess a great tolerance for secrecy, solid faith, and readiness to make sacrifices. During the 1940s the TK attacked British soldiers in coffee shops and night clubs and bombed military trains transporting British soldiers. In addition, they assassinated two Egyptian prime ministers in 1945 and 1948: Ahmad Maher (1888-1945) who opposed the candidacy of the Brotherhood in the 1944 parliamentary elections and Nuqrashi Pasha (1888-1948) for signing of the Bevin-Sidqi Protocol 1946 (revision of the 1936 Treaty between Britain

unit planned and executed several attacks on theatres and musical events. In 1964 the same Syrian Islamist unit instigated the 1964 Hama insurrection. Historians of the Islamic movement in Syria argued that the militant Islamists in the Brotherhood were terrified by the resolutions of the 1963 Conference of the Ba`th Party, which had come to power. The young Ba`th regime adopted a host of socialist economic, cultural, socio-religious, and legal reforms.³⁵ It called for the elimination of the Islamic waqf (religious endowments) system, and study of the religious sciences, and took steps to secularize personal status law. The Kata'ib Muhammad (Muhammad's Brigades) became the name of the organization of the militant Islamists who in 1964 organized an uprising in Hama, the third major Syrian city, and called on all Syrians to join their jihad against the Ba`th regime, which they branded not merely as un-Islamic or secular but ultimately atheist.³⁶ The uprising lasted 29 days. The Syrian Prime Minister, Amin al-Hafiz (1921-2009), ordered the army to quell the uprising at any cost.³⁷

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THE UPRISING LASTED 29 DAYS. THE SYRIAN PRIME MINISTER, ORDERED THE ARMY TO QUELL THE UPRISING AT ANY COST

The conflict between the state and the Syrian Ba`th party goes back then to the early 1960s during which time the Brotherhood elected new leaders and called for a change in the party's methods and Jihadist goals. A split occurred in 1969 between the Brotherhood branch in Damascus represented by `Isam `Attar (r. 1957), which rejected militancy against the Ba`th regime and other branches of the party. In northern Syria, Brotherhood leaders rose against `Attar and declared the necessity of armed Jihad against the state. In 1973 the Syrian President Hafiz Asad (1930-2000) proposed a new national constitution, which stressed the secular identity of the president. It was met with outright rejection from the Brotherhood who organized massive popular demonstrations and riots in the cities of Hims and Hama, the hotbed of the current Arab Spring. The regime crushed the demonstrations by force but the constitution was also ameliorated. It asserted that the

and Egypt). During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war the TK mobilized a number of military units to participate in the first Arab-Israeli war. The TK attempted to assassinate president Jamal Abdul Nasser in 1954. For more on the Syrian radical Islamists see: Barout, Darraj 2000: 260.

³⁵ It should be noted that the Ba`th version of socialism is distinctly different from the Marxist-Leninist concept of socialism or so-called 'scientific socialism.' Unlike the latter, which is premised on class struggle, the Ba`thist socialism is conflated with Arab nationalism that calls for the cooperation and unity of classes in Arab society against foreign aggression and feudalism.

³⁶ Barout, Darraj 2000: 268-269.

³⁷ Shamieh 2013: 356.

president of Syria must be a Muslim. Asad went as far as publicizing his conversion to Sunni Islam and started to observe Friday prayer.³⁸

The popular base of the Islamists grew in the late 1970s, which allowed the Lawyers' Union of Damascus and the General Conference of the Engineers, to call for an end to Martial law, and the emergency courts and stressed the need for a democratic regime. A general strike spread in major Syrian cities (outside Damascus) but yielded no political victories.³⁹ The radical Islamists then started to launch violent attacks against the regime. Marwan Hadid (1934-1976), a leading member and a co-founder of al-Tali'a al-Muqatila (the militant vanguard), called all Muslims to perform their "obligatory duty" to start Jihad (sacred struggle) against the 'atheist' regime of Asad.⁴⁰ Thus, on June 1979 they attacked the Artillery School of Aleppo and killed no less than 60 army officers and in February 1982 seized control of parts of the city of Hama and called on all the Syrians to join the Jihad.⁴¹ The retaliation of Asad's regime was severe: heavy artillery shelled the old urban center of Hama, and then tanks marched into the city destroying buildings, churches, mosques: an entire district was razed. Civilian casualties were also high as at least 10,000 inhabitants were killed. Then Asad promulgated the 'Law 49,' which categorized membership in the Brotherhood as a crime punishable by death. As a result, thousands who were siblings of Brotherhood members, friends and associates were arrested and executed without trial. Some others fled the country to Western capital cities where they formed the Islamic Front in Syria (IFS) that declared Jihad against the Asad regime.⁴²

Hafiz Asad died in 2000 and was succeeded by his son Bashar. Bashar initiated a few economic changes and liberal reforms. The growing frustration with the regime as such came not only from sectarian and ideological currents represented by the Sunnite Islamists. Bashar had allowed more investments in the economy through private capital and reduced state intervention. He also lifted the oil subsidy, farm subsidies, and significantly facilitated trade

³⁸ Cleveland, Bunton 2009: 400-401.

³⁹ Abdallah 1983: 112.

⁴⁰ In 1975, al-Tali'a al-Muqatila was founded by Marwan Hadid, an agronomist from Hama, and Said Hawwa (1935-1989), a teacher from the same city. Hadid was instrumental and effective in developing the Tali'a. He studied agronomy at the University of `Ayn Shams in Egypt and earned another degree in philosophy from the University of Damascus. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood at an early age and had a direct connection with Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. He also played a major role in the 1964 Hama insurrection and in the resistance against the 1973 secular Constitution. He was arrested in 1975 after a clash with the intelligence police forces (mukhabarat) and died under torture in 1976. (Barout, Darraj 2000: footnote 49; 320, 275).

⁴¹ Barout, Darraj 2000: 279.

⁴² Cleveland, Bunton 2009: 407.

with Turkey (thus encouraging limited neo-liberal reforms). These reforms led to the formation of a “new bourgeoisie” or the “third generation of Ba`thists” (or “the fat cats” as the new bourgeoisie groups were called in Sadat’s Egypt). Supported by the regime, “the fat cats” eventually dominated critical sectors of the economy, which had flourished through globalism, such as the import export business; the new banks; the new airline companies, and the new telecommunicating companies.⁴³ But this limited economic liberalization was not accompanied by fundamental socio-political and legal reforms associated with democratization. Consequently, the new bourgeoisie enjoyed a level of free movement, protected by the regime, while the vast majority of Syrians remained politically marginalized with no say in the decision making processes. Those who felt the brunt of Syrian neo-liberalism were largely the peasants, the urban poor and local merchants of the remote provinces whose interests were undermined by the “open” economic exchanges with Turkey. This may explain, to some extent why the earlier protests of the Arab Spring started out in rural areas and towns like Idlib, Dar`a, Homs, Hama and the like.

In line with the argument of Yasin al-Haj Salih, Muhammad Jamal Barout, a Syrian scholar and international researcher finds that:

“The most violent episodes in Syria since 2011 have taken place in peripheral cities such as Deraa [Dar`a], then Douma, which carried the brunt of these episodes, and the cities of Rif Dimashq, all of which suffered from multidimensional marginalization, oppression by local authorities, and repression by an arbitrary central government, and received a few benefits from [the country’s] economic growth.”⁴⁴

The Syrian left (members of the ruling National Front) have already been co-opted by the ruling Ba`th party, while the independent leftists are largely ineffective consisting of a few prominent intellectuals who have no social base and capabilities for mobilizing the youth. The Islamists, in comparison, have publicized their views among hundreds of young men and women through an array of civil organizations. They received strong financial and political support from major Arab oil countries, Turkey, and Western governments, which paved the way for their forceful and massive participation in the current civil war in Syria. It is important to note, however, that the diverse religious and sectarian composition of the Syrian population sets it apart from Egypt and Tunisia where Muslim minorities play no role in supporting the state. The presence of militant

⁴³ Al-Haj Salih 2008.

⁴⁴ Barout 2011: 1.

Salafi Sunnites in the Syrian opposition forms a real threat to the status and existence of several Muslim minority groups such as the `Alawites, the Druze, the Twelver Shi`ites and the Isma`ilis as well as the Christians including Armenians and Assyrians.

Evidently, much of the energies of the leftist parties around the Arab World have been absorbed by struggles against oppressive systems of governance leading to physical extermination of whole cadres of Communist parties. The Syrian-Lebanese Communists, much like their counterparts in Iraq and the Sudan, have nurtured traditions of resistance to state tyranny, global capital, and colonialism. The programs proposed by the Iraqi Communists stressed agrarian reforms that would limit abuses by the large landholders, decrease taxes, offer governmental loans, and, more important, give small lots of land for landless peasants.⁴⁵ They also supported secularization and state-directed initiatives to privatize religion and prevent the clerics from shaping questions of political representation, public education, and family law. The Syrian-Lebanese Communists, much like the Iraqis, were directly touched by the Arab Spring. They too have called since the inception of their parties, for abolishing of economic concessions given to foreign companies in countries adjacent to Israel. They struggled to build independent trade union movements, and women, youth, and labor associations. They brought attention to the way British and French colonialism in Greater Syria as well as militant Zionism has destroyed local production, decreased the value of the land, and created unemployment in rural and urban locales. The founders of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), inspired by the Soviet Union, proposed a program for social modernization and economic development distinct from the model offered by capitalist Europe, which the majority of people associated with colonialism.⁴⁶ During the Cold War (1947-1991), they played an important role in anti-state and anti-Israeli resistance movements, allying themselves with the PLO and other leftist organizations, which came to form the Lebanese National Movement. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the departure of the Palestinian Liberation Movement (PLO), the Communists launched an armed resistance to liberate South Lebanon from Israeli occupation. Gradually, they clashed with political organizations supported by Syria, and lost ground to powerful foes, namely, Islamist organizations. Several leading Communist figures, thinkers, journalist, teachers, and unionists, were assassinated by militant Islamists, and scores of leftists were denied access to areas historically known to be loyal to the Communists. Meanwhile, the disintegration of communism in the Soviet Union during the early 1990s

⁴⁵ Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: Chapter 4.

⁴⁶ Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 82. For more on the spread of communism among students, see: Batatu 1978.

dealt a blow to their political programs, and commitments. Unlike the Islamists, who pushed forward their agendas, programs, and aims during the Arab Spring, the Communists were for the most spectators, trying to find a way to shape the views of the rebellious masses and lead them.

With these historical experiences and backgrounds to Arab leftist activism, we are better equipped to understand the diverse approaches as well as the confusion surrounding the reception of the Arab Spring reflected in the statements of Communist thinkers. Notwithstanding, they have attempted to suggest ways in which the leftists should act in the face of the massive upheavals and destructive wars unfolding in the region, and discuss the approach, which leftists must take toward the Islamists and the Arab regimes involved in these upheavals.

THE LEFT AND THE ARAB SPRING

The waves of street protests and demonstrations, which swept the Arab cities, were quickly described by many Arab leftist organizations and thinkers, as revolts for freedom, bread and dignity.⁴⁷ The left recognized the anger of the masses and sympathized with their needs, hoping that profound transformations will ensue.⁴⁸ This spontaneous enthusiasm for the Arab Spring soon started to change paving the way for a cacophony of leftist critiques. Some leftists watched with dismay the outcome of the parliamentary elections in Egypt and Tunisia and questioned the support of Western powers as well as Saudi Arabia and Qatar for these developments. A number of leftists cautioned against optimism noting that the demise of Asad's regime in Syria would signal a new phase in American domination over Arab politics because Syria is "the last bastion of Arab nationalism."⁴⁹ Another group of leftists, however, retained their earlier optimism insisting on the need to respect liberal principles of democracy, political diversity and human rights, without turning to the local realities of the Syrian and Egyptian settings. This group, hardly familiar with the ideas and practices of the Islamists and their sources of legitimacy have underestimated their power and placed their trust in the promises of "revolutions" and something else which I will describe as a teleology. This teleology shows that history is a progress, and its "natural" course is change in the direction of a secular democracy, a change away from public religion. They draw support for this teleology from Europe itself.⁵⁰ Fawwaz Traboulsi, a Marxist

47 Traboulsi 2012a: 6, 7.

48 Mroue 2014: 328.

49 Hamzi (interview) 27-04-2012.

50 Khalil Salim finds that the Egyptian Islamists do not have a socio-economic and



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thinker articulates this discourse as he divides the current Arab left into two neat clusters.⁵¹ The first, he argues consists of nationalist leftists and Communists who support "dictatorships" like the Syrian regime merely on the basis of its anti-American alliances and resistance to Israel. The second group, he adds, are liberals and former Marxists who expect a Western military intervention (following the Libyan scenario) to deliver democracy to Arab countries. Traboulsi fails, however, to account for the leftists' understanding of the Islamists' role in the power structure following the Arab Spring.⁵² Clearly, the leftists who looked with suspicion at the Syrian opposition viewed the Salafis as an impediment to democratic change but also as an extension of Western Imperialism. The leftists who supported the toppling of the Syrian regime through militancy or/and external intervention have given little consideration to the role of the Islamists in the new configurations. This is the position of those who fetishize the poll box, supporting the removal of a dictatorship even if there is a good chance it may lead to another one.⁵³

What does it mean to be a leftist today, is a central question that Traboulsi raises in one of his recent essays. The leftist, he answers, is someone who connects the issue of freedom to equality. Attaining democracy is as such imperative and an ultimate goal. It requires the destruction of dictatorships and replacing them with republican, civil and democratic laws and institutions. Traboulsi makes no mention of what type of a democratic model he is seeking, nor the pitfalls of a capitalist-driven and Western-styled liberal system. The teleology of progress, the modern separation of state and society, privatization of religion are all embedded in this Western-based narrative of democratic change but the socio-economic features

political platform to solve the problems that necessitated the revolution. He thus expected the Egyptian youth to reject an authority that relies on pre-modern laws to rule Egypt and address the crisis (Salim 2012).

51 Traboulsi 2012b.

52 Traboulsi 2012b.

53 Sa'adallah Mazra'ani, a leading figure of the Lebanese Communist party, argues that instead of criticizing democracy, which is a "civilizational achievement that has a timeless value," we, he meant the left, should focus our attacks on imperialism and its agents. (Mazra'ani 2012: 9).

“

OPPRESSION IS WORSE THAN COLONIALISM
OR OCCUPATION

of this secular state remain vague. Traboulsi, envisions the desired democratic state to be a neutral body disentangled from the surrounding regional and international socio-political struggles. This demands “a political procedure that leads to the prohibition of religious institutions from intervening in the state and the state from meddling in religious institutions.”⁵⁴ Needless to say, the violence unleashed by the Syrian and Iraqi Ba`th regimes were both done in the name of prohibiting religious institutions from intervening in the state. So, how is this alternative viable? Traboulsi’s imagined future state could be considered a liberal state along Western democratic lines. In other words, he dismisses the complex reality of non-Western post-colonial modern states and their political and economic dependency, and the position they occupy in the world system. Moreover, he overlooks the Islamists’ hegemony on politics and public life in several parts of the Arab world, treating it simply a phase or chapter in this teleology. As such, neither the Islamists nor the alternative secular forces are treated in any depth or importance in leftist accounts.

The other limitation of the liberal and quasi-Marxist perspectives on the Arab Spring is their total neglect of the intricate regional and international dimensions of the conflicts taking place within national borders. On the one hand, these perspectives lump many diverse social classes under the term “the masses” and come to venerate them as independent local actors who want to change their conditions through “revolt” read as any form of armed uprising. They brush aside the complex international networks, which has been created in globalized ways, which have precisely undermined and minimized the effectiveness of local actors and their intentions and goals. They overlook also subtle forms of imperial intervention and schemes of international powers shaping and changing reality as seen and experienced locally. Muhammad Sayyid Rasas, a Syrian leftist thinker, draws attention to foreign factors and how they were adapted by Syrian insurgents, especially leftists, who oppose the Asad regime.⁵⁵ He draws attention to the statement, made by a leading member of the Arab Workers Revolutionary Party (AWRP), in Fall 2002, on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq, that, “Oppression is more dangerous than Colonialism.”⁵⁶ This idea, according to Rasas, gained momentum

54 Traboulsi 2012a: 9.

55 Rasas 2016.

56 Rasas 2016.

among leftist parties [read Marxists] in Syria, [and the Arab world at large] after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, and the disillusionment experienced by thousands of Marxists. Riyad al-Turk, a leading figure in Syria’s Communist movement, popularized the same problematic and convoluted idea through his notion of, “the Colonial zero.” He argued that the American invasion of Iraq elevated the country from the level, “below zero” to “zero.” He gave credence to the notion that oppression is worse than colonialism [read American imperialism] or occupation [Israel].⁵⁷ In 1998, al-Turk embarked on visits to Europe and Canada, where he was expected to give lectures and meet with Arab expatriates. During his stay in Canada, Rasas wrote, met secretly with American foreign policy officials.⁵⁸ This visit paved the way for the succeeding changes in his political agenda and the statements he made against his own earlier leftist positions. Years before the unfolding of the Arab Spring, al-Turk declared that:

“Western winds will rage in on Damascus. We have to be ready for them by putting on a new garb, one that is different from the Communist-Marxist one, and we should have a new political platform suitable to thwart these winds but without entering into a confrontation with them.”⁵⁹

Rasas continues to deconstruct the new political line of al-Turk who in 2003, encouraged the Central Committee of the Syrian Communist Party – the Politburo – to adopt a political agenda suitable for the coming of “Western winds” and asked the Committee to change the party’s name and abandon Marxist ideology. This move coincided with the passing of a law by the US Congress in 2003 known as the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA). According to Rasas, it was not until the US administration’s approach to the Syrian upheavals became known that al-Turk and his comrades in the Syrian opposition realized that they were betrayed by the American government. The latter declared that its target was to change certain policies of the Syrian regime in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine rather changing the regime itself. Indeed, al-Turk’s political project fell apart due to his abandonment of Marxist activism and its national-democratic principles.⁶⁰

57 Rasas 2016.

58 Rasas 2016.

59 Rasas 2016.

60 Rasas 2016.

In conclusion, the dialectical historical forces of thesis-anti-thesis-synthesis may very well generate a new socio-political configuration, one that transforms the relationship between the left, Islamism and neoliberalism. The struggle against Israel and American imperial aims in the Middle East has become the basis for a new historical grouping of certain Islamists, neoliberals and leftists. At the same time, the demand for secularism, state democracy, espousal of gender equality and minority rights have become a rallying point for another historical grouping of leftists and neoliberals drawing their inspiration from experiences particular to the West. There is little hope at the moment that the leftist-liberal narrative of progress toward a secular liberal society free of Islamists will be shaken off to pave the way for more complex and fruitful understanding of the relationship between political economy, secularity and public religion in Arab society. Leftists will have to revisit their current perspectives, and approaches toward religion in general, and various forms of Islamism in particular. I suggest that studying and learning from the experiences of Latin American leftist groups, including those tied to the liberation theology movements is an important step in this direction. It should be coupled with a serious attempt to cooperate and collaborate with selective Islamist groups against Imperial hegemonic powers to achieve concrete goals tied to the attainment of social justice, such as, equal distribution of wealth, resistance to globalized capital, prevention of environmental disasters, to name but a few. These goals have to be pertinent to both leftists and Islamists, rather than being transient. Leftists are required to deconstruct Western liberalism and universalistic values of secularism in order to accommodate new models of resistance, and utilize the potential of religious subjects and activists, who are supportive of leftist goals.

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