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# Radical Encounters

*Islamists and leftists in the Middle East  
and North Africa (1960s-2010s)*

edited by Laura Guazzone and Rossana Tufaro



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**SAPIENZA**  
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In copertina | *Cover image*: Shaykh Hassan Malak heading a demonstration during the Tobacco Intifada, Kfar Rumman, Lebanon, 1973. Source: <https://jabalameleh.blogspot.com/>

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# Foreword

This volume represents the final outcome of the research project *Islamists, Leftists, and the Radical Battlefield in the MENA (1960s-2010s)*, funded by Sapienza University of Rome through its competitive grant program “Progetti Grandi”.<sup>1</sup> The project, which ran from 2022 to 2025, was the result of the research questions presented in the introduction to this volume, but it was also the product of the intellectual exchange between us, the two editors, representing two generations of researchers in Middle East politics.

Our intellectual “encounter” was supported by the friendly interest of a group of Italian researchers in Middle East studies, who first met in Rome at Sapienza University in May 2023 for a brainstorming discussion of the research question and the architecture of the research. In the continuation of the project, some of the envisaged research areas could not be developed as initially imagined. This was particularly the case for the more cultural section of the project, which should have researched the literary and artistic traces of encounters between leftists and Islamists. Nevertheless, we want to thank here the interest and contributions of our colleagues at Sapienza experts in contemporary Arab literature: Ada Barbaro and Arturo Monaco, to the development of the project.

We then looked up the authors of the project’s case studies and we were lucky enough to form a diverse and brilliant group of researchers with varied backgrounds and expertise, including young researchers and more experienced authors from different nationalities and affiliations. We also sought researchers who contributed to creating an archive of documents of the political movements and parties involved in encounters between Islamists and leftists, which we analyzed through case studies.

Once the research group was formed, the authors began diving deep into their research. Then, the 7 October 2023 Hamas’ attack on

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<sup>1</sup> Progetto Grande di Ateneo Sapienza 2022 / *Islamists, Leftists, and the Radical Battlefield in the Middle East and North Africa* / prot. n. RG122181679E22E5PP.

Southern Israel from Gaza and the ensuing genocidal Israeli military assault on the Palestinian Strip completely changed the conditions for our research. Contributing authors who were conducting research in the Palestinian West Bank, in Lebanon, and in Iraq had to abruptly end their fieldwork. In the face of an unpredictable, devastating war raging across multiple fronts, reorganizing the individual and overall research structures was not easy.

But we made it with the help of the authors in the research group. In February 2024, we gathered for our first online workshop to discuss the common framework of the research and the outlines of the different chapters. Then, in October 2024, the first drafts of the research chapters were circulated in preparation for an international conference at Sapienza University on November 15. In the conference, the different case studies were discussed in depth among the research group and an informed public of students and scholars, with the help of a small and generous group of academic discussants: Nathaniel George (SOAS), Daniela Melfa (University of Messina), and Andrea Teti (University of Salerno).

The elaboration of the documentary archive for the research was entrusted to Dr. Zhaleh Nayebossadrian, an Iranian researcher in Ancient Near Eastern history and an expert in digital humanities. The preparation of the archive, too, was subject to some important, although less dramatic, sudden changes, but it finally found a home in the EU Zenodo open research repository. The documents in the in-progress archive, mainly rare Arabic-language Islamist and leftist political publications, are now open to further research.<sup>2</sup> Documentary research was carried out primarily by Dr. Alessia Carnevale and Dr. Pietro Menghini, who explored various Tunisian and Iraqi archives, respectively, and identified and reproduced relevant publications to add to our database. We also express our gratitude to Dr. Hossam El-Hamalawi and Dr. Martina Biondi for donating part of their private archives to the ILEMED database.

*Laura Guazzone and Rossana Tufaro*  
Rome, January 15, 2026

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<sup>2</sup> The ILEMED open-access documentary database created within our research project is a work in-progress and is accessible at the Zenodo EU documentary repository at: <https://zenodo.org/communities/sapienza-iso-ilemed/>

# Islamist and Leftist Encounters in the Middle East and North Africa (1960s-2010s): An Introduction

*Laura Guazzone and Rossana Tufaro*

From the 1960s to the 2010s, in Middle Eastern and North African countries, leftist and Islamist movements rose to prominence as the primary transformative actors in the Arab world and Iran, consistently operating within the same terrain of political opposition and emancipatory politics. Despite this commonality—which persisted across different historical phases even as hegemony shifted between the two forces—scholarly literature has rarely examined their relationship systematically. When it has, the tendency has been to portray these movements as implacably opposed, locked in fundamental ideological and political antagonism. Of course, in the rich literature on contemporary Middle Eastern politics, analysis of Islamist and leftist movements is abundant; what is rare is specific attention to their relations.<sup>1</sup> Even in studies devoted to the specific question of political participation in Middle East authoritarian regimes (Lust-Okar 2005; Schwedler, Clark 2006; Albrecht 2010), the question remains unaddressed. However, the role of cross-ideological alliances was analyzed as a key factor in post-Arab Spring transitions to democracy (Stepen 2018). This volume challenges the narrative that sees Islamist and leftist actors as inherently politically antithetical and enriches the literature about political participation, as we argue that this conventional depiction of Islamist-leftist relations obscures more than it reveals, failing to capture the complex, nuanced, and often surprising patterns of interaction that characterised their historical encounters.

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<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions are Michaëlle Browers (2009), Nicolas Dot-Pouillard (2007, 2008, 2009, 2019, 2024) and some interesting works on cross-ideological relations in Egypt in the 1990s and 2000s (Shehata 2009; Abdelrahman 2004, 2009, 2015; Sallam 2022).

In effect, since their beginnings, the relationships between leftists and Islamist movements have been undoubtedly marked by sharp ideological antagonism—with each side rejecting the other’s foundational premises. Looking at 1940s Egypt alone, we can see how Abu Sayf Yusuf, the second secretary general of the Egyptian Workers and Peasants Communist Party, in his 1946 book *Ḥawla al-falsafa al-marksiyya* (On Marxist Philosophy), accused the Muslim Brotherhood of deceiving the masses and undermining the nationalist/democratic movement through the dissemination of false consciousness. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s critique of leftist ideologies was even more stark. Referring to capitalism and communism, Sayyed Qutb stated in his 1949 *‘Adāla ijtimā‘iyya fī al-Islām* (Social Justice in Islam) that “both philosophies [are] depending on the preponderance of a materialistic doctrine of life” (Shepard 1996: 77). More in general, the Muslim Brotherhood argued that “capitalism was equated with licentious individualism and thus with social chaos, communism with atheism, and both with materialism” (Mitchell 1993: 228). Then, an Islamist “authenticity critique” on the left emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. The critique asserted that leftist movements lack an organic connection to local society, presenting them as foreign agents with questionable national loyalties. The electoral victories of Islamist parties in the late 1980s and early 1990s, together with attacks against secular intellectuals in the 1990s, paved the way for a leftist counter-critique of Islamists, one that continues to shape leftist discourse in the contemporary moment. In Egypt, this counter-critique argued that it was the Islamist movement that lacked authentic roots in society and questioned Islamists’ loyalty to the homeland, given their ties with international networks of Islamist groups and governments (Sallam 2025).

However, ideological contradictions between the two sides have been historically counterbalanced by their common dedication to the cause of national liberation from foreign domination and colonial and post-colonial oppression. Arab Marxists have always established a dialectical link between social change and national liberation, whereas the national democratic revolution comes before the class struggle (al-Charif 2023; Giampaolo).<sup>2</sup> As for the Islamists, their dedication to national liberation rests on the persuasion that the materialist

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<sup>2</sup> In this introduction we refer to the chapters in this volume by quoting the author’s name in round brackets.

culture imposed by foreign domination is a fundamental cause of the weakness and backwardness of Muslim societies, as relentlessly argued by the founding fathers of Sunni and Shia Islamism, as well as by contemporary Islamist movements. Therefore, the unresolved question of national liberation represents what Rudé (1980) terms an “inherent ideology, “a sort of mothers’ milk ideology”, for all shades of resistance movements in the Middle East (Browers).

Indeed, a closer look at the empirical record reveals complex patterns of interaction that transcend sheer polarization and show how focusing on ideology, praxis, and their historicized evolution should aim at taking stock of how ideational registers move as a result of the political action and at explaining how the strategy of political actors evolve in changing political contexts, thus nuancing the sometimes over simplistic use of concepts such as accommodationism or opportunism to explain cross-ideological collaborations. For instance, despite enduring ideological antagonism, in the “long-1960s” Iraqi and Lebanese Communists also reached out to the popular masses by sharing in the Shia symbols and rituals of the fight against oppression (Menghini; Tufaro, Chaib). In the late 1970s, some leftist thinkers and activists -such as Palestinian Munir Shafiq and Egyptian ‘Adel Hussein - “converted” to Islamism through nationalism and anti-imperialism, advocating the revolutionary potential of Islam and its mobilizing power among the masses (Dot-Pouillard 2008, 2024; Giampaolo). Then, in the late 1980s, some Arab leftists, namely the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt, developed a much more nuanced analysis of Islamism that, considering its multiple class base and multipurpose discourse, rejected outright identification of political Islam with conservatism and fascism and opened to pathways for collaboration, albeit amid considerable internal debate (Harman 1994; el-Hamalawy). The Islamists followed their own trajectory. Generally speaking, during their political ascendancy in the 1970s and 1980s, they maintained their rejection of collaboration with the left, with leaders like Khomeini categorically refusing to enter into any partnership (Randjbar-Daemi). However, in peripheral contexts such as rural South Lebanon, forms of cooperation in local struggles or cultural platforms emerged nonetheless (Tufaro, Chaib). In a similar vein, especially in universities, Islamists were influenced by leftist ideology and practices (Carnevale; Guazzone; Biondi). Also, when facing adverse political conditions in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, Islamist activists and intellectuals increasingly

recognized shared democratic and human rights principles and actively pursued both oppositional and electoral partnerships with leftist forces (el-Hamalawy; Giampaolo; Guazzone; Gervasio, Pioppi).

The examination presented in this volume of the empirical record, encompassing multiple case studies and their diverse geographical, social, and institutional contexts, suggests a notable interplay between praxis and ideas. Rather than existing in a state of permanent opposition, leftist and Islamist movements have demonstrated considerable capacity for tactical convergence, alliance-building, and ideological cross-pollination across diverse settings throughout the 1960s - 2010s period. As shown by the case studies throughout this volume, these interactions have manifested across multiple levels —from local contexts including the religious milieu of Najaf, South Lebanon’s rural struggles, Palestinian resistance networks, and student movements in the Maghreb, to regional developments such as the widespread embrace of human rights and democracy norms, and regional effects of global power reconfigurations after the end of the Cold War.

## **Conceptual Definitions and Theoretical Framework**

For this research, we have chosen to work with a deliberately broad yet focused definition of the left that captures its essential characteristics while acknowledging its internal diversity. We define the left as encompassing the heterogeneous array of political actors who, notwithstanding their tactical, strategic, and ideological differences, share class analysis, socialism, and anti-imperialism as foundational principles informing their emancipatory political agenda. This includes the wide spectrum of leftist movements—from communist parties to socialist organizations, from Marxist-Leninist groups to the various currents of the so-called New Arab Left— all united by their secular orientation and their shared commitment to the radical emancipation of their societies from both international and domestic forms of subordination. By radical emancipation, we mean their vision of fundamental transformation— whether achieved through revolutionary means or gradual reform— that addresses the root causes of societal oppression rather than merely its symptoms. This dual focus on international and social dimensions reflects the particular historical context of the Middle East and North Africa, where leftist movements have consistently opposed both external domination (colonialism, imperialism, and various forms of

foreign interference) and internal hierarchies (class exploitation, social and gender inequality, as well as authoritarian governance).

Similarly, we define Islamism simply as the ideology that interprets Islam as offering a *nizām shāmil*, a comprehensive system including the political sphere, that derives from the sacred texts – the Quran and the Sunna – which remain open to interpretive effort (*ijtihād*) by those with adequate religious training. This interpretative approach distinguishes Islamists from Salafi and Jihadi movements, as Islamists embrace a prevailing reformist methodology in both theology and politics, viewing *ijtihād* as a legitimate and necessary tool for adapting Islamic principles to contemporary circumstances. Central to Islamist ideology is the conviction that establishing an Islamic state - i. e., a state governed according to Islamic law (*sharīʿa*) - represents not merely a political preference, but a religious imperative, essential for enabling both individuals and society to live authentically Islamic lives. Islamists are individuals, groups, social movements, and political parties that subscribe to this ideological framework, despite differences in their specific interpretations, strategies, and organizational forms.

The paucity of systematic empirical investigation into the political relationships between Islamism and the left in the Middle East led us to develop this collection of case studies, which examines specific countries and contexts across different phases of the 1960s–2010s period. By grounding our analysis in concrete historical experiences rather than abstract theoretical frameworks, we aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of how ideologically distinct movements have navigated their relationships within the complex political landscapes of the Middle East and North Africa. Therefore, the volume employs a multi-sited comparative approach that combines detailed case studies with cross-regional analysis. Our selection of cases was guided by several criteria: geographical diversity (spanning the Maghreb, Mashreq, and Iran), temporal variation (covering different phases within the 1960s – 2010s period), and institutional diversity (examining encounters in family networks, universities, rural communities, urban movements, and political parties). The methodological approaches employed by contributors range from micro historical analysis of social networks to institutional studies of organizational evolution, from discourse analysis to participant observation. This methodological diversity reflects our conviction that the complexity of ideological encounters requires multiple analytical lenses to be fully understood.

As highlighted in the title of this volume, our research focuses on what we conceptualize as “radical encounters” between leftist and Islamist movements across Arab countries and Iran during the 1960s–2010s period. We use “encounter” as an umbrella term for the diverse ways these ideologically distinct movements have interacted throughout the period under study. These interactions take multiple forms: sometimes involving political convergence around shared concerns and struggles; other times, cross-pollination of ideas and practices; and frequently manifesting as direct competition for the same political spaces and constituencies.

These encounters unfolded across several interconnected yet analytically distinct dimensions. At the ideological level, we observe how leftist and Islamist movements have grappled with common concerns, including social justice, anti-imperialism, opposition to Zionism, questions of democracy, human and minority rights, and responses to globalization. In terms of political practices, we examine how these movements have interacted towards the same political goals, with social environments influencing each other’s constraints and opportunities, leading to unexpected borrowings of tactics, horizons of meaning, and language. Finally, regarding agendas, we examine the enabling conditions that, under specific historical circumstances, facilitated the emergence of forms of cooperation.

## **The Temporal and Contextual Dimensions**

The temporal and contextual dimension of these encounters proves equally significant. Specific political events and circumstances have repeatedly brought leftist and Islamist groups into contact, creating complex patterns of competition and mutual influence.

We chose the 1960s – 2010s timeframe for our enquiry because it encapsulates the timespan in which most types of encounters between Islamists and leftists took place in modern history. The so-called “long-1960s” (1956-1979) are conventionally portrayed as the age of global radicalism, defined by decolonization movements, revolutionary ferment, and the emergence of global agendas of dissent around anti-imperialism and social emancipation. Together with representing the heyday of the regional and global lefts, this period was also characterized by the emergence of a new generation of Islamist militants, groups, and ideologues searching for alternative

Islamic answers to the bids of emancipation that were shaking the Arab and Iranian masses.

Arab authoritarian regimes often manipulated their rise to the forefront of grassroots socio-political opposition to pursue divide-and-conquer strategies, which pitted leftist and Islamist movements on opposing sides in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, this historical juncture also enabled intense, multidimensional encounters between leftist and Islamist movements.

With the advent of the 1980s, the exhaustion of Third-Worldist momentum, and the progressive demise of the socialist revolutionary experiences that had defined the previous phase, came a significant contraction in the influence of leftist ideologies among the Arab masses. At the same time, the success of the Iranian revolution, the geopolitical rise of petro-monarchies, the legitimacy crises of the post-independence Arab regimes, and the Western-sponsored neoliberal restructuring of the regional economies were among the key factors prompting a coeval "Islamic revival". Also, the rise to prominence of Islamist revolutionary movements allowed leftists to discover the revolutionary potential of Islam, bringing to more nuanced reassessments of their former positions and even leading to the already mentioned "conversion" to Islamism of prominent leftist intellectuals. In some cases, this prepared the ideological terrain for new forms of sustained tactical and strategic encounters to emerge throughout the 1990s and 2000s, centered on anti-war and pro-democracy themes. This new convergence was prompted by two primary triggers: on the one hand, the recurrent regimes' crackdown on civil society and the consequent weakness of liberal democratization drives; on the other, the succession of US and Western-backed military invasions and occupation in the region, the most important represented by the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the enduring Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Last but not least, during the 2000s in several countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia), significant examples of sustained convergence and cooperation took place right before and during the Arab Uprisings, triggered by the common opposition to dictatorship, police brutality, and neoliberal policies. Then, the abandonment of cross-ideological alliances after the revolution was a key factor in the failure of the post-Arab Uprisings transition to democracy in Egypt and Tunisia, and possibly in the descent into civil war elsewhere (Stepan 2018).

## Structure of the Volume

This volume is organized into four thematic parts that capture different dimensions and contexts of Islamist-leftist encounters across the 1960s-2010s period.

*Part One, "The Shiite-Communist Conundrum"* examines the distinctive dynamics in Shiite-majority contexts, where shared narratives and experiences of marginalization, along with revolutionary symbolism, created unique possibilities for ideological cross-pollination. Pietro Menghini's analysis of the Najaf environment reveals how family and social networks facilitated intimate exchanges between communist activists and religious figures in Iraq's holy city. Rossana Tufaro and Kinda Chaib explore how rural organizing in South Lebanon brought together progressive Shia clerics and leftist militants. Siavush Randjbar-Daemi analyzes the complex relationships between leftist organizations and political Islam in pre-revolutionary Iran.

*Part Two, "Between the University and the Stage"* focuses on institutional contexts, particularly universities and cultural spaces, where ideological encounters occur through more structured channels. Laura Guazzone provides a comprehensive analysis of Islamist-leftist relationships in Tunisia from the 1960s to the 2010s, while Alessia Carnevale examines how Islamist students in 1980s Tunisia learned cultural production techniques from their leftist counterparts. Martina Biondi traces the evolution of the Moroccan National Student Union (UNEM) from leftist to Islamist dominance, revealing patterns of ideological succession and adaptation.

*Part Three, "Struggles in the New Millennium"* examines how these relationships evolved in response to regional developments, U.S. interventions, and the changing international context after 2000. Hossam el-Hamalawy's militant "autoethnography" analyzes Egyptian leftist strategies toward Islamist movements, articulating the principle of tactical cooperation against the state. Mattia Giampaolo explores how the post-Oslo period created new conditions for Palestinian leftist-Islamist cooperation around shared rejection of the peace process. Gennaro Gervasio and Daniela Pioppi examine the unexpected electoral and ideational cooperation between leftist and Sadrist movements in post-2011 Iraq.

*Part Four, "A Postscript"*, offers a broader theoretical reflection and a presentation of documentary resources. Michaëlle Browers analyzes

cross-ideological alliances as expressions of “resistance as ideology”, while Zhaleh Nayebossadrian presents a new documentary archive that provides primary source materials gathered through our research and made available for future research on these encounters.

## **For a Typology of Cross-Ideological Encounters**

The chapters in this volume collectively challenge conventional narratives of ideological replacement and linear succession by revealing a more complex pattern of what we term “encounters” between competing opposition forces. Rather than simple succession or synthesis, the case studies demonstrate how Islamist and leftist movements developed tactical alliances and unexpected collaborations while maintaining distinct ideological commitments, often competing for overlapping social constituencies while simultaneously learning from each other’s approaches to mobilization.

The diversity of the historical moments and local contexts notwithstanding, political encounters between leftists and Islamists can be categorized along a spectrum of three distinct forms of engagement, each characterized by varying degrees of commitment and scope.<sup>3</sup>

*Limited Engagement* represents the most basic form of collaboration, where organizations participate in joint initiatives on a case-by-case basis with no long-term commitments. Such partnerships typically emerge around specific issues that generate broad consensus—such as Palestinian solidarity or opposition to Western interference and regime policy—and require minimal political investment from participants. This form of collaboration, reported in most of the case studies in this volume, does not require participating groups to reconcile their actions with their fundamental ideological principles, though it may occasionally create opportunities for deeper understanding. An example of single-issue collaboration is the Anti-Normalization Committee in Jordan, which was formed in 1995 by the Islamic Action Front (IAF) and a number of leftist parties. The committee was established to oppose any normalization of bilateral relations between Jordan and Israel in the aftermath of the 1994 peace treaty. Another such example includes the Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI), a broad-based coalition of

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<sup>3</sup> The following typology is inspired by: Schwedler, Clark 2006; Kraetzschmar 2011.

societal and political forces in Egypt, which in 2001 organized a number of pro-Palestinian demonstrations and fundraising activities in support of the second intifada (Abdelrahman 2011). As el-Hamalawy witnesses in his chapter in this volume, the EPCSPI did indeed foster further collaboration.

*Sustained Partnership* involves more comprehensive and enduring forms of collaboration that extend across multiple policy areas. While such alliances may begin with specific objectives, they tend to expand as new opportunities arise. However, this intermediate level of cooperation often operates within implicit boundaries, where certain contentious issues – namely women or non-Muslim rights- remain deliberately excluded from joint deliberations. Participants commit to ongoing collaboration while maintaining their distinct political identities and avoiding the development of unified ideological frameworks (el-Hamalawy; Gervasio, Pioppi). In other terms political actors in sustained partnership, use ‘cooperative differentiation’ in order to “maintain a public face of solidarity towards the movement’s targets while differentiating themselves in communications with their constituencies” (Hathaway, Meyer 1997: 67-68). An example of sustained partnership is the multi-issues convergence in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood and some leftists’ groups and civil society organizations during the 2000s, in the runup to and during the Arab Spring mobilization (Abdelrahman 2011; el-Hamalawy).

*Comprehensive Alliance* represents the most advanced form of cross-ideological cooperation, in which distinct organizations work to develop shared visions for comprehensive political, social, and economic transformation. In this model, participants engage with any relevant issue through meaningful dialogue about fundamental principles and values. This form of collaboration extends beyond policy coordination to encompass questions of identity and worldview, as partners seek to articulate common ground regarding both their ultimate goals and the strategies for achieving them, as seen in pre-Arab Spring Tunisia and in post-2011 Iraq (Guazzone; Gervasio, Pioppi).

*Triggers* Cross-ideological collaboration tends to emerge primarily when political circumstances create strategic advantages, particularly when opposition movements face shared challenges from authoritarian governance, Western intervention (such as the US attacks against Iraq in 1991 and 2003), or competing political projects (such as the Oslo accords). However, even sustained partnerships do not preclude

individual parties from pursuing separate accommodations with ruling regimes when it serves their particular interests, as in the case of the Tunisian opposition parties analyzed by Guazzone. In the same vein, even a comprehensive alliance does not automatically imply a commitment to the formation of new political entities emerging from the merging of existing actors (Gervasio, Pioppi).

*Structural constraints* The reasons why cross-ideological collaborations of all types have not (yet) proven durable in Arab countries and Iran over the 1960s–2010s period are also, although to a lesser extent, a theme analysed in our research. Overall, as Shehata stresses in the case of Egypt:

These attempts proved tactical and short-lived owing to the persistence of fundamental ideological divisions and mobilizational asymmetries between Islamists and secularists. The Egyptian regime, for its part, has successfully manipulated and deepened these divisions and asymmetries to ensure its continued survival and the continued weakness and fragmentation of its challengers. (Shehata 2010)

However, when political opportunities arise, whether through regime liberalization, increased repression, or external threats, Islamist and leftist forces tend to mobilize concurrently against common challenges. It is when opportunities fade or when one side appears poised to dominate that alliances often dissolve and confrontation resurfaces, as seen in post-Arab Spring Tunisia. This pattern suggests structural constraints on the durability of cross-ideological cooperation in contexts where winner-take-all political logic prevails.

The volume's findings contribute to several broader theoretical debates. First, they challenge binary understandings of secular-religious divides in Middle Eastern politics, revealing a spectrum of hybrid positions and tactical accommodations. Second, they demonstrate the limitations of cultural approaches that predict political behavior solely based on ideological positioning, showing instead how contextual factors and strategic considerations shape actual political practice. Third, they contribute to social movement theory by examining how ideologically opposed movements can simultaneously compete and cooperate within the same political fields. Equally important, the volume offers new empirical insights that expand knowledge and understanding of the forms, geographies, temporalities, spread, and nodes of operability through which encounters between the two political worlds are substantiated, and sheds new light on the

transformative impacts the latter exerted beyond teleological and elite-centered narratives.

A commonality across the chapters is how specific institutional and socio-political contexts facilitated unexpected exchanges between seemingly incompatible ideological groups. These contexts created what can be termed “bridging spaces”, where ideological boundaries became more porous, allowing the circulation of ideas, tactics, and symbolic repertoires, as well as circumstantial tactical or strategic forms of cooperation. These are part of what one of the contributors calls “the reconfiguring of a never-quite ideologically configured space” (Browers). For instance, in his chapter, Giampaolo quotes the striking example of the leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad speaking in Leninist terms about the role of the state, similarly Guazzone shows the convergence of Tunisian Maoists and Ennahda Islamists in the defence of human rights, a liberal concept alien to both ideological traditions.

The temporal dimension reveals both cyclical patterns and moments of simultaneous mobilization that complicate linear narratives of ideological succession. For instance, both Tunisia and Egypt experienced instances of advanced cooperation between sections of the left and the Islamists in the decade preceding the Arab Spring “revolution”, cooperations that were completely reversed into opposing political fronts after the electoral success of the Islamists (Guazzone; el-Hamalawy). Also, the sectarian dimension emerges as a crucial factor differentiating the dynamics of encounter across the region, with Shia-majority contexts creating distinctive conditions for leftist-Islamist interaction through shared experiences of marginalization and common symbolic repertoires.

The contemporary relevance of these historical patterns extends beyond academic interest, offering crucial insights for understanding current Middle Eastern politics. The volume’s findings suggest that the capacity for cross-ideological cooperation remains a significant feature of opposition politics in the region, even as new forms of polarization have emerged. The volume findings also point toward future research directions. The emphasis in much existing literature on elite-level political interactions has obscured the importance of social networks, institutional contexts, and everyday forms of ideological circulation. Future research might productively examine how digital technologies are reshaping these encounters, how generational change affects

ideological flexibility, and how transnational networks influence local patterns of cooperation and competition.

## Conclusions

Rather than the conventional narrative of fundamental antagonism between leftist and Islamist movements, this volume reveals a complex pattern of tactical maneuvering, mutual learning, and contextual accommodation. While genuine ideological synthesis and durable political alliance remain rare, the capacity for strategic cross-ideological cooperation has proven to be a persistent feature of opposition politics across the Middle East and North Africa.

The historical record analyzed in the case studies presented in this volume demonstrates that these relationships have been shaped more by structural conditions—authoritarian manipulation, external pressures, and competitive political environments—than by inherent ideological incompatibilities. Understanding these dynamics provides crucial insights not only for historical analysis but also for understanding contemporary political developments, where ideological commitment continues to intersect with pragmatic necessity in shaping opposition politics across the region.

Despite recurring cycles of popular protests, the post-Arab Spring authoritarian reconstitution in most Arab countries and the resilience (so far) of the Islamic regime in Iran, together with the global rise of populist and right-wing forces, and the reignition of new armed conflict in the Middle East – seem to have seriously diminished the political force of both leftist and Islamist oppositional movements in the region. But, for all the claims of ossification of both established power and exhaustion of its most radical oppositions, the Middle East and North Africa societies are “unlikely to become post-ideological any soon” (Browsers).

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PART ONE

THE SHIITE-COMMUNIST CONUNDRUM



# A Family Business: Communists and the Najaf Religious Environment in the Long-1960s (1956-79)

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the relationship between the left and the Najaf religious environment in the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, participation in the Iraqi Communist Party grew, also attracting members of notable religious families. This trend prompted a reaction from the religious community, leading, among other causes, to the formation of Islamic movements, such as the *Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islāmiyya*, which sought to oppose communism. Consequently, significant political and intellectual confrontations emerged between leftists and Islamists. These clashes unfolded in a close-knit context, in which opposing figures often shared strong social and family ties, enabling unexpected exchanges of ideas and alliances. This chapter explores these developments, aiming to nuance the perceived conflict between the two groups. It will specifically focus on the evolving attitudes of the Iraqi left toward religion, its use of religious discourse, the reactions of the religious community, and the intellectual exchanges between these two environments, against the backdrop of the events unfolding in Iraq during the 1950s and early 1960s.

KEYWORDS: Iraq; Shiism; Iraqi Communist Party; Hizb al-Da'wa; Najaf.

## Introduction

“I did not know Imam Ḥussayn was a member of the Iraqi Communist Party”, explained Sheikh ‘Abd al-Zahra al-Ka‘bī (1909–1974) after attending the ‘Abbāsī mourning procession (*mawkib ‘azā’ al-‘Abbāsiyya*)<sup>2</sup> led by members of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) during the ‘Ashura (‘*Ashūrā*’) of 1974 (Kafāh 2008). At such events, mainly during the 1950s and 1960s, traditional Shia religious chants or poems were used to convey communist ideas and slogans, drawing on the concept of the

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<sup>2</sup> In this case, the *mawkib* (pl. *mawākib*) refers to an organized group of believers holding a mourning procession on ‘Ashura or *Arba’īn* pilgrimages.

fight for the oppressed shared by both Shia tradition and communist ideals (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 100, 126-127; Nakash 2003: 161). Indeed, the expression “Shī‘ī – Shuyū‘ī” was used to describe the phenomenon of the significant number of Shia joining communist parties. These circumstances and expressions point to the strong connection between Shia communities and communism in the Middle East between the 1940s and 1960s (Kamel, Trombetta 2021: 72, 132), which was also the case for other communities, such as the Kurds.

Coherently with this phenomenon, Iraqi historian Ṣalāḥ al-Khursān (1955–2022) described the years after WWII and through the 1950s as a “communist tide” (*al-madd al-shuyū‘īyya*) reflecting Iraq’s political climate at the time (al-Khursān 2001: 87), while ‘Abd al-Ḥussayn Sha‘bān emphasized the key role played by Najaf in the “communist tide” (al-Amīn 2023).

In this contribution, we explore the entanglement between the ICP and the Shia community in Iraq, focusing on the close interaction between ICP members, or leftists in general, and the Najafi religious environment. This includes the *ḥawza*,<sup>3</sup> the shrine of Imam ‘Ali (*Haram al-Imām ‘Alī*); the people involved in these two institutions, such as clerics, guardians, *rawādīd*, etc.; the early formations of the Shia Islamist movement (as the *Jamā‘a al-‘Ulamā’*, the Ja‘afarite Party and, later, the *Ḥizb al-Da‘wa*); the *marja‘īyya*; and Najafi society as a whole with its centuries-long connection to the shrine.

This chapter investigates the exchanges between these two environments and the varying attitudes of the religious community toward the ICP, and vice versa, outlining the social, familial, and political relationships linking ICP members and the Najafi left with the religious environment, and highlighting how these connections complicated political factions. The analysis seeks to critically reassess the dynamics arising between leftists, the religious community, and the Islamist groups in Najaf, which was often portrayed as merely confrontational (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 51).

The research draws on various sources, primarily memoirs of former ICP militants, journals and magazines from the time, interviews with

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<sup>3</sup> lit. “source to follow” or “religious reference” This is a title given to the highest level of Twelver Shia religious clerics, with the authority given by a *ḥawza* (a seminary where Shia Muslim scholars are educated) to make legal decisions [note of the editors].

clerics and leftist militants,<sup>4</sup> and secondary literature in Arabic on the social and political environment in Najaf between the 1950s and early 1960s. These sources, rarely analyzed, provide an innovative point of view on the spread of communism in Iraq and its relationship with religion.

## The Spread of Communism in Iraq, the Creation of the ICP, and its Relationship with Religion

The ICP was founded between 1934 and 1935, but communist and Marxist ideas, introduced by Ḥussayn al-Raḥḥāl (1901–1981), had circulated in Iraq since WWI. Al-Raḥḥāl was influenced by the German Communist Party's attempted coup in 1919, which shaped his political views and ideas. Notably, the first Marxist meetings occurred in a mosque (Ismael 2008: 17-21; Franzén 2011: 33). However, early Communist organizations, like the *Mutadarrisī al-Afkār al-Ḥurra* (Students of Free Thought), founded by al-Raḥḥāl in the 1920s, opposed religion. The group published *al-Ṣaḥīfa* (The Newspaper), a daily addressing social issues and criticizing religion, which led to its ban in the early 1920s (Batatu 1978: 393–395). In 1926, students formed *Nādī al-Taḍāmun* (The Solidarity Club) to spread communism. Other Marxist study circles formed in Basra and Nasiriya, including future ICP leaders Yūsuf Salmān Yūsuf (“Fahed”) (1901–1949) and his brother Dāwud Salmān. These circles also adopted anti-religious stances, creating *al-Ḥizb al-Ḥurr al-lā-Dīnī* (The Free Atheists Party) in 1929 (Franzén 2011: 34-35).

By the late 1920s, these communist groups had abandoned their hostility to religion, realizing that it actually hindered the spread of their ideas in Iraqi society. This marked a shift in attitude and set the stage for the ICP's later use of religion.

White-collar workers and students comprised the bulk of these early communist groups. Influenced by Pan-Arabist thinkers like Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣṣrī (1880–1968), students embraced anti-imperialist ideas and sought to disseminate them among the urban lower class (Franzén 2011: 22).

From then until the mid-1930s, Iraqi communism expanded, culminating in the formation of the party under 'Āṣim Flayyeh in 1934-35. Candidates close to the ICP won parliamentary seats in the 1936-37 elec-

<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, numerous names of ICP militants, family members, clerics, and religious figures are mentioned. For some individuals, I have not yet found their dates of birth and death. Therefore, if the dates are not provided at the name's first mention, the reader should assume that I have not been able to find this information so far.

tions called by General Bakr Ṣidqī (1890–1937), who had assumed power in 1936. The ICP's growing influence concerned both Ṣidqī's regime and the civilian government elected following his assassination in August 1937. This led to a repressive campaign against the ICP, which culminated in the 1938 amendment to the Baghdad Penal Law that made communist proselytism punishable by death. (Franzén 2011: 37).

This period of repression, coupled with Fahed's rise as a leader in 1941 and the party's alignment with Soviet communism, slowly transformed the structure of the ICP from an urban movement supported by a few intellectuals into a mass movement with a strong presence in rural areas and smaller cities (Gabbay 1978: 129-131). In response to the repression, the ICP also became secretive, creating a widespread national network and establishing cells in factories, farms, and schools. (Franzén 2011: 38-39). The same structure based on cells and covert operations would be used as a blueprint by the Iraqi Free Officers movement (Franzén 2011: 39) and the *Ḥizb al-Da'wa al-Islāmiyya* (The Islamic Call Party) – although the latter did not aspire to become a mass movement like the ICP (Laval 2023: 161). Fahed's restructuring transformed the ICP into a powerful political force (Franzén 2011: 52).

Communism spread steadily in the country, gaining momentum after WWII thanks to Soviet victories and their anti-imperialist stance (Ismael 2008: 16). Additionally, the Iraqi monarchy's post-WWII legalization of unions provided the ICP with a legal foundation (Ismael 2008: 15-16). The party gained control of most trade unions, including those for teachers and students, thereby exerting significant influence over education and industry. Moreover, it also played a vital role in organizations for women (*Rabi'at al-Difa' 'an Ḥuqūq al-Mar'a* – The League for the Defence of Women's Rights), youth (*Munazzamat al-Shabība al-Dīmuqrāṭiyya* – The Organization of Democratic Youth), and professionals, such as the Lawyers' Association. During WWII, the ICP created a front organization, the *Ḥizb al-Taḥarrar al-Waṭani* (National Liberation Party), led by Muḥammad Ḥussayn al-Shabībī (Party name: Sarīm) (1919–1948) (Franzén 2011: 46-47). Jawād al-Zāhir counted fourteen “secret communist associations” between the 1930s and the 1950s (2017: 45). Deteriorating socioeconomic conditions prompted calls for reform and helped swell ICP ranks, making it the best-organized political force (Alaaldin 2017: 47; Franzén 2011: 63). This growth led to two significant attempts to seize power, in 1948 and 1952, and resulted in a greater repression by the monarchy and

British supporters, including Fahed's arrest in 1947 and execution in 1949 (Franzén 2011: 52). However, the ICP quickly reorganized in the early 1950s and expanded its popular base (Franzén 2011: 57).

### **Communism and Shiism: the ICP and the Use of Shiism**

While the ICP was popular throughout Iraq, it secured its largest following in the predominantly Shia regions of the center and south, which also happened to be the most economically underprivileged in the country.

Economic, social, and political changes at the end of the Ottoman period had transformed many members of tribes in southern Iraq into landless peasants. Post-WWII deteriorating economic conditions in Southern Iraq drove significant internal migration to central areas, especially Baghdad, where people sought better livelihoods (Alaaldin 2017: 48; Franzén 2011: 52; Nakash 2003: 98). This migration led to the emergence of extensive shantytowns (Franzén 2011: 15-16) in which these urban migrants came into contact with anti-imperialist and communist ideas, significantly boosting support for the ICP (Franzén 2011: 16-17, 52). This internal population movement also brought about a relative decrease in population of Southern Iraq, even threatening the importance of centres such as Najaf and Karbala (Nakash 2003: 97- 98).

Farouk-Sluglett noted that migration disconnected the rural population, now the city underclass, from the '*ulamā*' of the south, leaving them without religious guidance (Farouk-Sluglett, Sluglett 2001: 191; Alaaldin 2017: 48).

The ICP thus exploited this opportunity by leveraging the similarities between the narrative of oppression advocated by the Shia community and its own political agenda, which championed the cause of oppressed workers and the proletariat. As a result, Iraqi communists started appropriating the symbols of the Shia tradition to express their own political vision and grievances.

Abisaab and Abisaab have highlighted many similarities between the communist utopia and Shia millenarist and eschatological doctrines, including ideas of disengagement and resistance to the state (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 92-96), while Keddie has remarked certain aspects of Shiism that favor protests and rebellion (Keddie 1986: 3).

Moreover, they indicated how communism provided an alternative to capitalist development and supported anti-imperialist movements. Finally, the Karbala paradigm provided yet another point of contact by symbolizing the attempt to change an oppressive political system through revolution, a compelling allegory to fit leftist ideals.

Thus, ideological affinities combined with specific material conditions – characterized by socioeconomic and political marginalization – made communism particularly appealing to the “disenfranchised Shia” (Browsers 2012: 326-330; Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 117; Picard 1985: 1012).

The ICP consciously exploited these similarities to gain greater support amongst the lower classes, as most peasants and workers were Shia (Nakash 2003: 132-133). The same happened with the cadres of the ICP. A good number of them had a Shia background, notably, the party secretary from 1954 to 1963, Ḥussain al-Rāḍī (party name Salām ‘Adīl) (1924–1963), hailed from a *sayyid* family originally from Najaf. Batatu argues that, as a significant number of careers in the existing government were precluded to Shia – either for their religious confession or because they belonged to the lower classes – many were encouraged to join the ICP to acquire political clout (Batatu 1978: 422; Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 80; Naef 2001: 256; Nakash 2003: 132-133).

The debate on the use of religion was already ongoing in August 1935 in the second issue of the clandestine newspaper *Kifāh al-Sha‘ab* (The Struggle of the People):

There is a mistake committed by some of our comrades in the propagation of their ideas, which results in arguments and conflicts. [...] They focused on the issues of religion, the situation of women, and the Islamic family or the family in general. Comrades, although we believe that all those issues are very important and we appreciate their impact on the march of the socialist Revolution [...] We nevertheless have a program that we have to follow, and we must remember which goals are of primary importance. (Ismael 2008: 23)

This brief extract reveals the ICP’s pragmatic acknowledgement of the potential use of religion to spread communist ideals, whilst avoiding sensitive topics.

The writings of Ḥussayn al-Shabībī also help us understand how the ICP leadership approached the Iraqi masses. Iraq had a large class of peasants whose politicization was a challenge. In fact, they still lived

in “feudal relations of production”, deriving only “misery, poverty, sickness and ignorance...” from their struggle (Franzén 2011: 47). Against this background, exploiting the immediacy and familiarity of religious symbolism and rhetoric helped ICP militants spread their ideas more efficiently among the non-urban masses (Laval 2023: 81).

By the end of the 1950s, this strategy was implemented to its fullest extent, as proved by a report of the Iraqi General Security dated July 1959:

We have discovered that Communists are sending representatives to the villages, the small towns, and the countryside to explain to the simple people living there, especially those in the shantytowns, that ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib is a Communist and that he was foreseeing communism and that the relationship between Communists and Shi’ite are more than solid. (al-Būtānī 2010: 82; Laval 2023: 81)

The party even organized different committees for religious affairs. One was the *Lajna Rijāl al-Dīn fī al-Ḥizb* (The Committee of the Party’s Religious Men), created after the 1958 Revolution (al-Ḥakīm 2011: 161). Another was the committee for religious affairs established in Karbala, under the guidance of Sittār Ma‘rūf, along with ‘Adnān ‘Abbās, ‘Alī al-Nūrī, and Sajjād Ḥammāda, to manage the *Arba‘īn* pilgrimage. The committee kept in contact with the comrades who organized the *Arba‘īn* pilgrimage and the *mawākib* on these occasions. (‘Abbās 2016: 44-45)

The synergy between religion and leftist ideology that these formal measures aimed to strengthen is also revealed in the memoirs of ICP militants. For instance, in his book entitled *Hadhā mā ḥadath* (This is What Happened), ‘Adnān ‘Abbās declared that:

The party’s organization in the countryside pays the closest attention and respect to the religious sentiments and traditions of the people in these regions. At the same time, they pay much attention to their need for justice and equality and their readiness to fight against oppression and exploitation. We have tried to connect these feelings with the objective of the Communist Party and the spirit of Islam. (‘Abbās 2016: 45)

Similarly, Ṣāḥib Jalīl al-Ḥakīm (1933–2021), in his memoir entitled *al-Najaf, al-wajh al-ākhar* (Najaf, The Other Face), wrote:

Some accuse us, the Iraqi Communists, of being against religion, but this is only a lie. The literature of the Iraqi Communist Party is unambiguous. Do we find anything against religion in it? Or do we find anything that incites against religion in the Communist Party's program and internal regulations, which have been the basis of Communist work among the masses since its founding and until now? [...] It is well known that the Communist Party includes different nationalities, religions, and social classes. Thus, it is not reasonable for there to be anything against religion in the party's policy and program. On the contrary, the Communist Party respects all religions, and this is a fact. (al-Ḥakīm 2011: 155-156)

The approach adopted by the party was also evident in public demonstrations of religiosity, at which the ICP and its militants were ever-present. Through the committee mentioned above, the ICP also managed to organize *mawākib* independently, giving birth to the phenomenon of the "Red Processions" (*mawākib al-aḥmar*). These were recognizable for their "leftist slogans and politically charged, emotive folklore" (Ṣalāḥ al-Khursān 2001: 155; Alaaldin 2017: 51). In his memoir, Ṭālib al-Rifā'ī (1931–), one of the founders of the *Ḥizb al-Da'wa*, reported the presence of massive leftist processions following the 1958 coup. He explained that the *mawākib* were widely attended by people beating their chest for Imam Ḥusayn and chanting slogans that seemed to be "imported from the Kremlin" (Laval 2023: 83). Moreover, he recounted that the marchers used revolutionary poems and "spoke the language of communism" Ibid.

The communists came to control the procession in Ḥuwaish, one of the four neighborhoods of Najaf. During these events, the crowds often sang religious chants, poems, and slogans led by Ḥussaynī poets, singers, and preachers. In these demonstrations, traditional Shia religious chants and poems were invoked to convey communist ideas and slogans (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 100, 126-127).

For instance, when the monarchy was overthrown in 1958 and the hated prime minister Nūrī al-Sa'īd (1888–1958), who was close to the British, tried to escape dressed as a woman, communist demonstrators mocked him with this half-religious, half-political slogan:

Oh, Ḥussayn, listen to the voice of the free people;  
This dishonor will be remembered,

Fleeing in a woman's dress,  
 Fearing that the people would know where he was,  
 Oh, Ḥussayn, listen to the voice of the free people,  
 Nūrī be damned, along with his accomplices,  
 He deprived the people of their right to feed themselves,  
 Oh, Ḥussayn, listen to the voice of the free people. (Laval 2023: 84)

On the occasion of the pilgrimage 40 days after 'Ashura in 1958, the communist processions intoned the following verses:

Federal Union and Soviet friendship!  
 Long live the People's Republic of China!  
 Ḥaydar, Oh 'Alī! (Laval 2023: 85)

The slogan refers to the tension, in the years immediately following the 1958 Revolution, between pan-Arabists on the one hand, who wanted a union with the United Arab Republic (UAR) of Nasser, and the communists and Qāsīm on the other, who wanted a federation.

At the funeral of a leftist-leaning Ḥussaynī preacher, *shaykh* Muḥammad al-Shabībī, the father of Muḥammad Ḥussayn al-Shabībī, the crowd shouted:

Oh, father of the departed Ḥussayn!  
 Conqueror of colonialism,  
 And liberator of ideas.  
 He wants peace and justice!  
 He wants peace and justice! (Sha'bān 2012)

## The ICP and the Spread of Communism in Najaf

The ICP's favorable attitude to religion and its preoccupation with the welfare of peasants and the lower classes resulted in widespread acceptance and support for communism by Iraqi society. This led to a rise in party members, many of whom came from Najafi Shia clerical families. Najaf was both the leading center for Shiism in Iraq and one of the strongholds of the ICP in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Many members of religious and

<sup>5</sup> In particular, as Abisaab has emphasized, the Iraqi context in Najaf influenced many Lebanese Shia who had travelled there to complete their religious studies, like Ja'far Muḥsin al-Amin (1908–1981) and Ḥussayn Muruw (1909–1987), and played a central role in shaping the relationship between the Shia community and communism (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 129, 130).

clerical families joined the ICP, and many of the most militant members of the ICP were sons or relatives of ‘*ulamā*’, attesting to the broad reach of communism in Najaf in those years (Batatu 1978: 1000).

One was Šāhib Jalīl al-Ḥakīm, who hailed from a secondary branch of the al-Ḥakīm family, the same family of the great *marja*’ of the time, Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm (1889–1970).<sup>6</sup> In 1958, Šāhib al-Ḥakīm served as head of the preparatory committee for the General Union of Iraqi Students. He acted as secretary of the Najaf ICP local committee from late 1959 to mid-1962, and then became a member of the Middle Euphrates Region Committee and the coordinator of organizational work for the Middle Euphrates Region. He was a member of the Baghdad Regional Committee from 1972 and the head of the organizational office for the Baghdad Region until 1978. He then left the country to direct ICP organization in Syria and in Bulgaria (al-Quds al-‘Arabī 2013). His father, Jalīl, and his brother Salmān were both custodians of the Shrine of Imam ‘Ali (*Sadana al-Rawḍa al-Ḥaydariyya lil-Imām ‘Alī*).<sup>7</sup>

Another well-known member of the ICP hailing from a religious environment was Salām ‘Ādil, who was born into a low-income family in Najaf. His father, a mill worker, was the first in his family to complete secondary school. From 1955 until his death in 1963, Salām ‘Ādil served as ICP secretary, managing the party during its most significant period of expansion.

Šāhib Jalīl al-Ḥakīm and Salām ‘Ādil are amongst the best-known communists from religious families. al-Ḥakīm and ‘Ādil were both *sayyid* but came from minor branches of important religious families. Their background may reveal the socioeconomic reasons that drove them to join the party ranks (Naef 2001: 266). However, several other names are mentioned by those who lived at the time and remembered in other militants’ memoirs. Šāliḥ al-Ja‘afarī Kāshif al-Ghiṭā’, Muḥammad Šāliḥ Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (1909–1992), and Ḥussayn al-Shabībī – the son of a Ḥussaynī preacher (*Qārī’ lil-Minbar al-Ḥussaynī*)<sup>8</sup> and Fahed’s sec-

<sup>6</sup> The *marja*’ is a jurist whose *fatāwā* (pl. of *fatwā*) and jurisprudential opinions are widely followed and to whom religious taxes are paid. There can be more than one *marja*’ at the same time and people choose freely who to follow for religious guidance. Nevertheless, one jurist is usually recognized as the most authoritative, followed, and called the *marja*’ *al-a‘lā*. The *marja*’ is not appointed but is recognized by the consensus of his peer jurists and by his claim to the office of *marja*’*īyya*.

<sup>7</sup> These are figures who take care of the shrines, opening and closing them, keeping them in order, and generally looking after all of the related administrative aspects.

<sup>8</sup> These, along with the readers of the Ḥussaynī pulpit and Ḥussaynī poets, were

ond-in-command, who was executed with him on February 14, 1949, and was a central figure in “converting” Ḥussayn Muruw (1910–1987) to communism (Franzén 2011: 45-47; Naef 2001: 262) – were central ICP figures characterized by a common religious background. Other members from notable religious families included ‘Azīz ‘Ajina, Amin ‘Ajina, Mu‘īn Sha‘bān, ‘Abd al-Ḥussayn Abū Shaba‘ (1917–1980), Aḥmad al-Shammārtī, and ‘Abdul Razzaq Smīsam.

In their memoirs, many militants recalled the intellectual, social, and political climate in Najaf, where ideas were openly exchanged. Religion was often intertwined with leftist politics. Ḥassan al-Shubbar (1929–2021), a founding member of *al-Da‘wa*, noted that party members read books on communism, Ba‘athism, and Arab Nationalism to understand the ideologies and draw inspiration for the structure of the party (Alaaldin 2017: 53).

In an interview quoted in his memoir, when asked if it was a problem to belong both to the ICP and a religious family, al-Ḥakīm answered that communist ideals were seen as perfectly fitting with Islamic principles and that communism respected liberty, scholars, and thinkers (al-Ḥakīm 2011: 155). From his declaration, pointing to the similarities between Islam and communism, it appears that the widespread sentiment at the time was similar. At the same time, communist activists from religious families used their family credentials to convince people to support the ICP. They would, for example, leverage their belonging to *sayyid* families to persuade people to join or support the party.<sup>9</sup> In an article describing his memories as a youth, another leftist from a religious family, ‘Abd al-Ḥussayn Sha‘bān (1945–), remembered that, as a young boy, he saw examples of clerics who were aloof with lay believers, entertained close relationships with the oppressive ruling authorities, and were only attached to the ritualism of religion at the expense of what he saw as its true values. Rather, he found the true values in other religious men protesting for people’s rights, against imperialism, and similar issues, recalling, in particular, the father of the already mentioned Shabībī, *shaykh* Muḥammad al-Shabībī, a Ḥussaynī preacher, nicknamed “The Red Sheikh” (*al-Sheikh al-Aḥmar*) (Sha‘bān

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figures connected to rites and pilgrimages such as ‘Ashura or *Arba‘īn*. They recited stories and poems about Imam Ḥussayn and led the crowds during the rites indicated above.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Aḥmad al-Qaṣīr, former Communist militant in Najaf, on 04/03/2024.

2012; al-Āmīn 2023). Thus, the association between the left and religion came naturally to those who grew up acquainted with figures such as Muḥammad al-Shabībī. They saw no contradiction in coming from a religious family and joining the ICP, of being members of the party and going to religious ceremonies, as Ṣāhib al-Ḥakīm recounted in his memoir (2011: 162). He also narrated another episode concerning the head of an ICP section in the countryside who stepped out of a party meeting to pray and then returned without anybody feeling anything was out of place (al-Ḥakīm 2011: 156).

Schools also played a central role in spreading communism. In his memoirs, ‘Adnān ‘Abbās traced the lasting bonds created with other students and their participation in the 1952 *Intifāda* against the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, along with the older students who introduced them to the ICP, back to his primary education (‘Abbās 2016: 23-24). Moreover, Franzén has pointed out how members of the ICP were first introduced to communism at school (2011: 41). Aḥmad al-Ḥassanī al-Baghdādī, the son of Ayatollah Muḥammad al-Ḥassanī al-Baghdādī (d. 1973), who played an essential role in 1950s politics in Najaf, also confirmed that schools held a central role in the spread of communism in Iraq. Indeed, the ICP controlled most teachers’ unions. He also mentioned that some religious figures did not want to send their children to public schools for fear of communist indoctrination. Others were enraged by the opening of schools for girls (Sha‘bān 2012).<sup>10</sup> In Najaf, the best-known public school was the al-Khawarnaq School. Schools were central in spreading anti-imperialist ideas, as previously observed, promoting the ICP more in terms of its anti-imperialist stance, rather than its Marxist ideology (Franzén 2011: 33, 34).

Another ICP militant has drawn a vivid picture of the environment in Najaf. He presents his memories by recounting the story of one of the most famous cafés of the city at the time. The ‘Abdul Nanna Café served as a meeting place for both religious and leftist intellectuals, where associations held their meetings and discussions could be held freely. The coffee house culture as a place for political and social meetings was widespread at the time, and the cafés provided avenues for educated intellectuals to spread their ideas, read newspapers, and recite poetry to other customers, usually lower-class migrants from the countryside (Franzén 2011: 22).

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ayatollah Aḥmad al-Ḥassanī al-Baghdādī on 31/05/2024.

The ‘Abdul Nanna Café often hosted the meetings of *Anṣār al-Salām* (The Peace Supporters), a front organization for the ICP (Franzén 2011: 62). In fact, the owner of the café, Reḡā ‘Abdul Nanna (1922–1990), was an ICP member himself (al-Ghulām 2018: 14-15; Sha‘bān 2012).

*Anṣār al-Salām* was a pacifist movement founded in the summer of 1954 by politicians ‘Azīz Sharīf (1904–1990) and Nazīha al-Dulāīmī (1923–2007). The first *Anṣār al-Salām* conference, held in Kufa, was attended by many people from Kufa, Najaf, and Karbala. In total, about 40 activists participated, including many ICP comrades, peasants from Karbala, and students. It was coordinated by Muḥammad al-Shabībī and Šāhib al-Ḥakīm, as student representatives, Jassīm al-Ḥalwāī, and Khalīl Jamīl, who became responsible for the Anṣār after the 1958 Revolution, along with Nazīha al-Dulāīmī and others (Sha‘bān 2012).

Muḥammad al-Shabībī, a preacher of the Ḥussaynī pulpit (*al-Minbar al-Ḥussaynī*), was one of the most representative figures of the leftist movement among religious men. He used his position to spread communism, criticizing the government, and using the figure of Imam Ḥussayn to represent the oppressed and those who killed him to symbolize the oppressors. Sha‘bān recalls that the preaching from his pulpit and the crowd gathering to listen looked more like an ICP meeting than a religious one (Sha‘bān 2012).

Other associations like the *Anṣār al-Salām* were also formed: for example, the *Jamā‘a al-‘Ulamā’ al-Aḥrār*, also known as the *Raba‘ al-‘Ulamā’ al-Aḥrār* (The Group/The League of Free Clerics). The group, which was headed by ‘Abd al-Karīm Mashīṭa (1881–1959) and ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Kāshif al-Ghiṭā’, brought together religious men and clerics who sympathized with the left. Many of these clerics also participated in the various religious committees of the ICP (Smīsm 2019).

One of them was Ḥussaynī poet ‘Abd al-Ḥussayn Abū Shaba‘a (1917–1980), a member of the ICP Committee for Religious Men, who was known as the “Marxist Ḥussaynī poet” (*Shā‘ir al-Ḥussaynī al-Mārksī*) (Party name ‘Alī) (al-Ḥakīm 2011: 161; al-Quds al-‘Arabī 2013). In his poems, just like Shaykh al-Shabībī from his pulpit, Abū Shaba‘a criticized the oppressors of Imam Ḥussayn, Mu‘āwiya, and Yazīd, using them as metaphors for the Iraqī government, imperialists, and the traditional clerics deemed to be bearers of false religiosity. He called for social justice, connecting the struggle of Ḥussayn and the poor with their aspiration for reform, change, and the end of injustice.

Other Ḥussaynī singers (*rawādīd al-Ḥussaynī*), who shared his views and leaned toward leftist ideas, gathered around him. Sha‘bān and Ḥussayn Smeism have pointed out that Abū Shaba‘a turned the Ḥussaynī cause from a weeping tradition to a modern and living revolutionary challenge to injustice, indicating Abū Shaba‘a (and probably similar leftist Ḥussaynī poets) as those responsible for the new revolutionary meaning of the Ḥussaynī paradigm (al-Ḥakīm 2011: 161; Smīsm 2019).

Another member of the ICP religious committee was the older brother of the previously mentioned Saḥīb Jalīl al-Ḥakīm: Salmān al-Ḥakīm. He was not only one of the first prominent communists in Najaf, but also a custodian of the Ḥaydariyya Shrine of Imam ‘Ali. He was arrested several times along with another communist custodian of the Shrine, *shaykh* Waḥāb Sha‘bān, a member of the Najafi Sha‘bān family (Sha‘bān 2021). Other religious figures on the same committee as Salmān al-Ḥakīm and ‘Abd al-Ḥussayn Abū Shaba‘a, included *shaykh* Bāqir al-Fakhranī and Sayyid Nūrī al-Mūssawī (both of whom were pulpit preachers) and Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥakīm, son of Sayyid Sa‘īd al-Ḥakīm al-Basrahwī, the agent of Ayatollah Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm in Basra. ‘Abd al-Ḥussayn Sha‘bān states that many of the people in the committee were servants of the Ḥaydariyya Shrine, readers of the Ḥussaynī pulpit, seminar students, and members of *Anṣār* (Sha‘bān 2021).

The father of Salmān and Ṣaḥīb, Jalīl al-Ḥakīm, was also a leftist sympathizer and a guide at the Shrine of Imam ‘Ali. He cooperated with the ICP, trying to free prisoners, and hosted the first party meeting of the Middle Euphrates Section in his house after the 1958 revolution, which was also attended by its Secretary-General, Salām ‘Ādil, whom he was already acquainted with through the leftist milieu (Sha‘bān 2021).

## The Development of the Clerical Political Environment in Najaf in the 1950s

The spread of communism in Iraq did not go unnoticed by Shia clerics. The diffusion of these ideas in their families and close to their centers of authority called for a reaction, as they feared marginalization in Iraqi society.

Even before the wide diffusion of the ICP, clerics in Najaf had begun to mobilize to face the changes taking place in Iraqi society and intervene in the country’s politics. They played a decisive role in one

of the founding moments of the contemporary Iraqi identity: the Great Iraqi Revolt of 1920 (*al-Thawra al-ʿIrāqīyya al-Kubrā*) during which they mobilized Iraqi tribes against the British occupation, declaring a *fatwā* to fight against the occupiers (Kadhīm 2012; Nādhīmī 1974: 377).

Throughout the 1930s and the 1940s, many young clerics mobilized to aid the transition of their religious culture into the modern era, engaging with new ways of teaching and spreading Islam and attempting to reform Iraqi society and institutions from an Islamic point of view.

The associations and clubs that were formed to pursue these objectives followed a similar course to the first communist groups in Iraq. The most influential was the Najaf literary and educational society, the *Muntadā al-Nashr* (The Publication Forum), founded in 1935, interestingly, the same year as the ICP. The Forum was meant to spread Islamic culture and reform Iraqi society. It created several educational institutions, organized cultural events in Najaf, and published bulletins and a review, *al-Badhara* (The Seed). All these activities aimed to raise Islamic consciousness in Iraqi society and modernize Islamic education in the *hawza* to face the new challenges of a contemporary society. In fact, this approach also included supporting a more politically engaged vision of Islam, which slowly emerged from the writings of the members of the Forum (Laval 2023: 40-41).

Many young students of the *hawza* participated in the association and some of them would become activists in Iraqi and Middle Eastern politics in the following decades, as members of Islamist movements like *al-Daʿwa al-Islāmiyya*. The most prominent names include Muḥammad Riḍā al-Muzaffar (1904–1964), Muḥammad Ṣādiq al-Qāmūsī (1922–1988), ʿAbd al-Ṣāhib Dukhayyil (1930–1971), the aforementioned Ḥassan al-Shubbār, Ṣāliḥ al-Ẓālimī (1928–2008), Muḥammad Mahdī Shams al-Dīn (1936–2001), Muḥammad Baḥr al-ʿUlūm (1927–2005), Mahdī al-Ḥakīm (1935–1988), and Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh (1935–2010). The Forum was also endorsed by the *marjaʿ al-taqlīd* of the time, Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm, with many of his sons joining the *Muntadā al-Nashr* in various ways (Laval 2023: 37).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In addition, Mahdī al-Ḥakīm, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ḥakīm (1939 – 2003), ʿAbd al-Ṣāhib al-Ḥakīm (1942 – 1985), ʿAbd al-Ḥādī al-Ḥakīm (1949 - ), and ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Ḥakīm (1950 – 2009) should also be mentioned.

After WWII and the early 1950s, a stronger need for a more engaged Islam emerged, a form of religiosity that could politicize the *hawza* and confront other growing political and social forces and ideologies in Iraqi society and throughout the Middle East.

Between 1951 and 1952, this took the shape of a group of students of *Muntadā al-Nashr* and the *hawza*, sometimes referred to as the *Hizb al-Ja'afarī* (The Ja'afarite Party), who met regularly to discuss the social and political situation in Najaf and Iraq and how to reform it in an Islamic sense (Laval 2023: 43-44). Among these projects and calls for social reforms, the group of students that included most of the names mentioned above as members of *Muntadā al-Nashr* also called for the creation of a mutual aid fund to implement social services that were not provided by the State (Laval 2024: 45), probably echoing communist and leftists calls from the same period. These projects met with the opposition of traditional *hawza* environments, as they raised questions on the effectiveness and role of the traditional structure of the *hawza* and the Sanctuary in Najaf to help people in need.

Clerical opposition to the ICP became more structured in the fall of 1958 with the foundation of the *Jama' al-'Ulamā' fi Najaf al-Ashraf* (The Clerics Society in the Most Noble City of Najaf) by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Shukḥūṣ (1897–1960) and Muḥammad Ḥassan al-Jawāhirī. The focus of this organization was religious, not political, and it was independent of the *marja'iyya*. Its presidency was offered to Murtaḍā Āl-Yāssīn (1894–1978). The organization included many *Muntadā al-Nashr* activists who tried to contact 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim (1914–1963), who had taken power on July 14, 1958, pulling him closer to the clerics and the *marja'iyya*'s interests rather than those of the ICP. The organization pursued activities similar to those of the Publication Forum, organizing cultural events, preparing publications, and issuing declarations to contrast communist influence.

The *Hizb al-Da'wa* group was founded in 1957 by students and members of the *hawza*; in particular, students were formed in the Publication Forum and the Society of Clerics. Among them stood out Mahdī al-Ḥakīm and Ṭālib al-Rifā'ī, as well as Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr (1935–1980), who became the group's religious authority.

They pursued the discussions initiated by previous groups, via sporadic and unorganized meetings, to try and shape an Islamic society and State without, however, having a clear idea of how to form and organize such a political organization. The group was joined

by Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Adīb (1935–1996), again thanks to Mahdī al-Ḥakīm, who focused more closely on Iraq's political situation. The group worked on electing members of parliament close to their positions. Their aim was to gradually Islamize society and Iraqi politics by forming groups of influence connected to the Shia elites of the south and closely tied to the *marja'iyya* by political and economic interests (Laval 2023: 52).

The formation of a modern political party was a success thanks to the experience of Shia militants previously engaged with the *Ḥizb al-Tahrīr* in Iraq, such as Muḥammad al-Subyatī (1930–1988), who had a clear notion of the shape and function of a party (Laval 2023).

In this way, the *Ḥizb al-Da'wa al-Islāmiyya* (The Party of the Islamic Call) was founded in Najaf in 1958. One of its primary goals was to contrast the expansion of communism in Iraqi society.

## The Intellectual Debate

The development of a politicized vision of Islam in Najaf was accompanied and promoted by a vast literary production in the *al-Badhara*, *al-Najaf*, and *al-Aḍwā' al-Islāmiyya* (The Islamic Lights) magazines, as well as several pamphlets and books.

The *al-Mithal al-'uliyā fi al-Islām lā fi Baḥamdūn* (The Utopia is in Islam and not in Bahamadun) pamphlet (1954) by Muḥammad Ḥussayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭā' (1877–1954) has often been pinpointed as the signal that a new political season was blossoming in Najaf. It was published as a response to the US proselytizers' invitation to participate in a multi-confessional conference in Bahamdun, Lebanon, and discuss how to prevent the spread of communism in the region with other religious leaders. In it, al-Ghiṭā' explained that communism was strengthened by Western imperialism, as it relied on it for much of its popular anti-imperialist rhetoric (Mallat 1993: 36).

Discussions on the future Islamic state and criticism of communism and Western values emerged from the debates amongst these groups. The discussions flourished in Najaf's vibrant cultural and political climate of the late 1940s and early 1950s, where ideas were discussed, exchanged, and analyzed. Clerics sought literature on communism and engaged in lengthy debates with ICP supporters (Laval 2023: 67).

These debates led to the two most important critiques of communism produced by the clerical environment, two works by Muḥam-

mad Bāqir al-Şadr: *Falsafatunā* (1959) and *Iqtisādunā* (1961). Both works, partly representing a break with Shia traditional establishment and scholarship, analyzed communism and capitalism and proposed an Islamic alternative: the first on philosophical terms, the second on economic ones.

In addition, the same debates also fueled many of the topics addressed by the articles published in the *Jama' al-'Ulamā'* magazine: *al-Aḍwā' al-Islāmiyya*. The group began publishing the magazine after 1958. An editorial committee was formed with many of the members of the *Muntadā al-Nashr* and the *Jama' al-'Ulamā'*: Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, Muḥammad Mahdī Shams al-Dīn, Muḥammad Riḍā al-Ja'farī, 'Abd al-Hādī al-Faḍlī, and Kāzīm al-Ḥilfī. Bāqir al-Şadr was in charge of writing editorials. The magazine published articles presenting a modern vision of Islam, connecting it to a comprehensive vision of a modern society based on Islamic principles that could engage with economics, politics, social problems, family structure, and a strong criticism of communism. The magazine published articles with titles such as *Islam, Colonialism and Marxism* (Āl Yāsīn 1960), or *The Worker Rights in Islam* (Al-Quraīshī 1960), followed, in the same issue, by *The Worker in the Communist Regime* (Al-Bikā' 1960). Articles such as *The Conflict Between Spirituality and Materialism* (Jalāl 1961) pointed to a more philosophical analysis of the confrontation between communism and religion. These publications shed light on the need of the *Jama' al-'Ulamā'* group to fight communism on its own grounds. The many articles presenting critiques of leftist ideas, just like Şadr's works, revealed the dominance of leftist ideas in the cultural and political field at the time in Najaf and thus the need to engage with these ideas and the impossibility of avoiding their discussion (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 97-98).

## The November 1956 Revolts

These strong ties and rivalries also took shape in connection with political events in Iraq, such as the November 1956 protests in Najaf, in response to the tripartite aggression against Nasserist Egypt.

On the morning of November 6, 1956 – 8 days after the Israeli invasion of Egypt on October 29, 1956 – a protest in support of Egypt broke out in Najaf (Sha'bān 2012). The Iraqi government, led by Nūrī al-Sa'īd, was aligned with the Western powers, particularly with Great Britain, even more so after the 1955 Baghdad Pact. Thus, being both

in support of Egypt and against the Iraqi government, the protests faced intense repression. After the first few days of protest, ca. 1500 members of the police forces were sent to Najaf to quell the uprising. The police went from house to house, searching for protestors and arresting them. Many of the demonstrators were arrested; two were even sentenced to death: ‘Alī Sheikh Ḥammūd and Maḥdī al-Dabbās. The former died under torture while in police custody, while the latter was hanged in Najaf and died calling for the victory of the ICP and the Iraqi People (al-Ḥamdānī 2018).

Demonstrations continued on November 21, when, during a strike, student unions clashed with police forces; many were arrested and expelled from school (al-Ḥamdānī 2018). On November 24, a protest was started by al-Khawarnaq Secondary School students, who gathered in the courtyard and refused to enter the classrooms. Then, Maḥdī Muḥsin Baḥr, a student, gave the signal to start the demonstration by chanting, “Down with Britain and France and Death to Israel” (Al-Ḥabūbī 1990). All the students joined in and also called for the downfall of al-Sa‘īd’s government. The same happened at the al-Ṣudaīr School. Both groups of students flooded the streets and were joined by large crowds of workers, shopkeepers, and even religious people (mu‘amammān). The demonstration marched toward the city’s main market and reached the courtyard of the Shrine of Imam ‘Alī (Al-Ḥabūbī 1990). The police opened fire, killing two students: ‘Abd al-Ḥussayn al-Sheikh Rāḍī, grandson of the *marja* ‘Sayyid Fahmī Ḥamāmī, and Aḥmad al-Dujjālī (al-Ḥamdānī 2018).

The police fled, fearing repercussions, and a small committee led by *shaykh* Aḥmad al-Jaza‘īrī was formed to govern the city, run its affairs, and contact the ‘*ulamā*’ to ask for a firm condemnation of the government’s actions. Salām ‘Ādil also mediated among the political forces that participated in the demonstrations: the ICP, the Ba‘ath Party, and the National Democratic Party (Kadhem 2012: 160).

The protestors carried the bodies of the two dead students to Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm’s house, waving their shirts covered in blood, hoping to drive him to take a strong stance against the government (Kadhem 2012: 160; Sha‘b ān 2018: 158). However, while there was widespread clerical support for Egypt’s struggle against Israel, France, and Britain, there was no official condemnation of the police brutalities by al-Ḥakīm as the *marja* ‘*al-a‘lā*, or officially from the *ḥawza*.

One of the most vocal clerics to condemn the repression of the protest was Muḥammad al-Ḥassanī al-Baghdādī (d. 1973) (Sha‘bān 2018: 158). He published a strong declaration denouncing the position of the Iraqi government:

The spectator position towards the armed tripartite aggression against Egypt is a violation of Islamic law, and it is a nullification of the truth of the Muslims’ independence from the authority of the polytheists, and this government, headed by Nūrī al-Sa‘īd, has no legal effect. We appeal to you to dismiss it at a time when we assure you that your carrying out of this duty unites the Muslims and cuts off the greed of the infidels. (Sha‘bān 2018: 159)<sup>12</sup>

When approached by officials to help calm the protest, as the delegation was led by Muḥammad Fahdil al-Jamālī, the son of a friend, al-Baghdādī received them but refused to help them quell the protests. The government had sent a delegation to a different ‘*ulamā*’ to ask for their help to pacify the protest. At the same time, the committee formed in Najaf also sent delegations to different ‘*ulamā*’ to try and convince them to condemn the government’s position. al-Baghdādī was the only one to provide an official answer (Sha‘bān 2018: 156-157). While most of the ‘*ulamā*’ did not offer direct support for the demonstration in Najaf, they did support the Egyptian cause. The society of Muntadā al-Nashr published an article by Muḥammad Taqī al-Ḥakīm (1922–2002) in which he expressed support for Egypt and compared the fight against Israel and imperialism to an Islamic fight (Laval 2023: 48). Several clerics, like Mahdī al-Ḥakīm and Muḥammad Baḥr al-‘Ulūm, were strongly influenced by these events, pushing them toward a more political vision of Islam, expressed through the *Muntadā al-Nashr*, while the *ḥawza* and the official hierarchy of the clerics in Najaf did not openly support the protests. Other religious figures also resented the protests as they were joined by a group of women from the Communist Party (Sha‘bān 2018: 156-157; Sha‘bān 2012).

A few days after November 24, security forces opened fire on protestors in the courtyard of the Shrine of Imam ‘Alī. This event created outrage among the Iraqis, and martial law was imposed. A general strike was called to face martial law, and the protests gathered strength in the rest of the country, too (al-Ḥamdānī 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Published in al-Kawthar n. 642.

The police arrested many of the main protesters and finally quelled the demonstrations. ICP activists from religious families were arrested. Şāhib Jalīl al-Ḥakīm took part in the protest and was arrested (al-Quds al-‘Arabī 2013). The owner of the ‘Abdul Nanna Café, Reḍā ‘Abdul Nanna, was also arrested, along with his ageing father, al-Ḥājj ‘Abdul Nanna (Sha‘bān 2012). Others, relying on the solidarity of the Najafi people, took refuge in houses and moved around to elude arrest, particularly in the Ḥawaish neighborhood, where a member of the Najaf ICP Committee, ‘Alī Salmān, who came from an important local family, called on locals to protect and shelter communists from arrest. A judge who had a son in the ICP issued short sentences to the arrested communists (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 80).

### **The Events of 1958 – 1960: Confrontation amongst the ICP, the Qāsim Regime, the Clerics, and the Ba‘athists**

The relationship between the left and the religious environment was further complicated when, on July 15, 1958, a military coup led by General ‘Abd al-Karīm Qāsim overthrew the Iraqi monarchy. The new regime allowed the ICP to open offices across Iraq. Although not formally in the government, it controlled administrative organs like tribunals, radio, and parts of the Army (Nakash 2003: 135; Laval 2023: 82). The communist influence also promoted two key reforms: a land redistribution reform and a personal status reform to secularize family law.

By the end of the summer of 1958, clashes emerged between the new regime’s components, mainly communists and Pan-Arabists. The regime’s militia, mainly controlled by communists, launched a campaign against ICP opponents like Ba‘athists and other religious figures who opposed communism in Iraq. The ICP employed not only violent methods, against their opponents, but also propaganda and defamation campaigns. Moreover, it formed associations led by leftist religious figures to spread its ideas through religious topics. It exploited its newspapers and control of the radio to organize a defamation campaign against Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm, who was accused of collaborating with the Ba‘ath. A poem mocking al-Ḥakīm was published by poet Abū Shaba‘a (*yā ayat Allāh, shlūn aya?* - Oh Sign of God, oh Sign of What?) (Laval 2023: 107).

After July 1958, tension increased between the ICP and the clerical environment as the former’s power and public presence grew enor-

mously. The newfound liberty to operate under Qāsim's Regime allowed the ICP to implement its strategy of using religion to spread its ideas even more forcefully. Furthermore, the ICP could now use violence to counter its opponents.

Communist violence led Qāsim to distance himself from the powerful ICP that threatened to overshadow his power and influence since his rise to power; he also tried to create a common front with some Shia religious establishment to counter ICP influence in Iraqi society. A failed coup by communist officers in the summer of 1959 permitted Qāsim to increase repression against the party (Gabbay 1978: 135-136).

Starting in the fall of 1958, the regime's repression of the ICP intensified the clergy's reaction. This led to the formation of groups like *Jama' al-'Ulamā'* and later, the *Ḥizb al-Da'wa*. The publication of magazines, books, and pamphlets, and the organization of cultural events increased – often with the support of the Ba'ath – as did public anti-communist declarations (Laval 2023: 104). The *Jama' al-'Ulamā'* even opened a publishing house, *Dār al-Aḍwā'*, that focused on publishing works on Islamic topics and anti-communist literature.

The rivalry between communists and the *marja'iyya* reached its peak with the publication of the *fatwā* against communism by Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm.

The *fatwā* and attacks on the ICP by clerics and conservative regime factions began during the campaign against the two communist-supported reforms: land redistribution and personal status law. Both faced strong opposition from the clergy, which criticized the latter for not adhering to Islamic precepts and the former for threatening the *ḥawza's* main source of revenue from large Shia landowners in southern Iraq (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 79). Land redistribution would have hurt the interests of these landowners and affected their donation of large sums to the seminary and sanctuaries in Najaf (Gabbay 1978: 136). Thus, the clerics moved to protect their source of income, organizing to counter communists, the main sponsors of these reforms.

On March 22, 1960, the *fatwā* against communism issued by Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm was published by the Iraqi press. The text of the *fatwā* recited:

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. It is not permissible to belong to the Communist Party, for that is disbelief and atheism, or promoting disbelief and atheism. May God protect you and

all Muslims from that and increase your faith and submission. Peace and blessings be upon you. (al-Zāhir 2017: 113)

The *fatwā* was pronounced by Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm as an answer to a question posed by a merchant from al-Nu‘maniyya concerning a private issue. It was not intended for publication. Nonetheless, Jawwād al-Shubbar (1912 - 1982), a scholar schooled at the *Muntadā al-Nashr* with a very politically active vision of Islam, decided to publish it. The *Jama‘ al-‘Ulamā’* even created delegations to convince other ‘*ulamā’* to publish similar *fatāwā* (pl. of *fatwā*) against communism. They included ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jazā’irī (1872–1962), Maḥmūd al-Shāhrūdī (1889–1974), Abū al-Qāsim al-Khū’ī (1899–1992) and ‘Alī al-Khalkhālī (1904–1973). Moreover, more specific *fatāwā*, like the ones concerning not buying meat from communist butchers or leaving inheritances to communists, were also published. Demonstrations were organized by ‘*ulamā’* all over Iraq with the help of pan-Arabists (Laval 2023: 104).

As part of this campaign, Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm commissioned Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr’s two main compositions: *Falsafatunā* and *Iqtisādunā*. In these works, Ṣadr criticized communism and capitalism while defending private property to support and protect the interests of Iraqi landowners (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 79-80).

Not all ‘*ulamā’* agreed to publish *fatāwā*. Muḥammad al-Baghdādī refused to issue a *fatwā* against communism, arguing it would also attack the Shia, as most Iraqi communists were Shia (Laval 2023: 105). Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm’s agent (wākil) in Basra, Muḥammad Sa‘īd al-Ḥakīm (1936–2021), also refused to publish a *fatwā* against communists as most of his sons were members of the ICP (like Hāshim al-Ḥakīm, head of an association of peasants, or Aḥmad al-Ḥakīm, member of the *Jama‘ al-‘Ulamā’ al-Aḥrār* in Najaf). Muḥammad Sa‘īd al-Ḥakīm was thus removed as agent of Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm. *Dār al-Aḍwā’* published a collection of *fatāwā* against communism.

Tension increased as members of the ICP and its other organizations, such as *Anṣār al-Salām*, were attacked and killed throughout Iraq (like Hādī Shaṭīṭ (1900-1960) or ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Wardī (1894-1961) (Laval 2023: 105). Also, an Army division was sent to quell communist violence. Interestingly, the head of the division appointed to repress communists in central and southern Iraq was Ḥamīd al-Ḥassūna, from a landowning family in Nasiriya with ties

to the *marja'iyya* (Laval 2023: 89). This shows a concrete example of the alliance between the *marja'iyya* and the landowners of Southern Iraq, defending their mutual interests. Such an alliance would also support the more conservative wings of the Qāsim regime that would take power in 1963 and carry out the communist massacres of 1963, marking the beginning of the decline of the ICP influence and power in Southern and Central Iraq (Ismael 2008: 107-113; Franzén 2011: 127-128; Nakash 2003: 136).

## Conclusions

In the 1950s, Najaf embraced communism and leftist ideas. ICP members used religion to promote their ideas, and many religious figures supported them. Indeed, their slogans reflected the strong bond between religion and the ICP's political views. Evidence from various documents reveals that religion was strategically used to promote communist ideas and gain support from Shia peasants and the urban lower classes. This incorporation led to a unique Iraqi version of communism that differed from the European and Soviet models. Moreover, the ICP sought religious support for their blend of religion and leftist ideas. This chapter has explored the connections between religious and leftist figures, their exchanges and sympathies. The older generations preserved ties to Najaf's religious community, albeit holding leftist views. In contrast, the younger generation, who attended public schools, joined the ICP and acquired significant roles in the party, leaving behind roles in Najaf's religious environment.

A significant family connection links the ICP's spread in Najafi religious society across generations. Family ties within the ICP were not exclusive to the Shia community. In the 1940s and 1950s, the ICP was a major political force in Iraq, drawing members from all communities, and family ties were crucial in linking it to local communities, as Alda Benjamen highlighted in her research on the Assyrian community in Iraq (2022: 29-30). A socioeconomic element is also evident in the spread of communism in Najaf. Most members of the religious families analyzed came from modest economic backgrounds and from the secondary branches of influential religious lineages. This modest socioeconomic background also coincided with the fact that most religious men sympathizing with the left or becoming members

of the ICP religious committees and associations were readers of the Ḥussaynī pulpit, or Ḥussaynī singers, and Guides and Guardians of the Ḥaydariyya Shrine of Imam ‘Ali. They were from the lower ranks of the religious hierarchy, involved in popular religious expressions like processions and mourning ceremonies of ‘Ashura, the *Arba‘īn* pilgrimage, and organizing *mawākib* for these events, as well as the popular veneration of the Imams (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014: 76-77).

Teaching in the *ḥawza*, producing works addressing Islamic jurisprudence and philosophy, most of the *mujtahidīn* remained beyond the ICP’s direct influence. Senior clerics and *marāja* ‘opposed the ICP and leftism and mobilized to halt their spread in Iraqi society. They acted to protect their ideological positions and material interests, particularly the *ḥawza* revenue from donations by large Shia landowners in Southern Iraq. When attacking communism, members of *Muntadā al-Nashr*, *Jama‘ al-‘Ulamā’*, and *Hizb al-Da‘wa* first had to counter and debate leftist ideas and positions, a mission to which the two main works produced by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr were dedicated, along with many articles from the *al-Aḍwā’* magazine. Interestingly, themes borrowed from leftist thought, such as social justice, contrast with themes like defending landowners’ interests. At the same time, themes such as social justice and workers’ rights would progressively disappear from the political discourse of Islamists, as the influence and power of communism declined, just like it happened in the case of Tunisian Islamism, as explored by Ben Salem (2020), and possibly pointing to a similar ascent and decline of such themes from Islamist discourse across different contexts.

This politically and intellectually active environment in Najaf during that period generated some of the most significant and influential ideas, theories, and movements for Shia political Islam in the second half of the twentieth century. The understudied interactions and contacts between the religious community and the left in Najaf, along with the intellectual and political exchanges and conflicts between them, could reveal an unexplored source of influence on the early development of Shia Islamism.

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# The Field and the Rifle: Leftists, Clerics, and the Making of a Revolutionary South Lebanon (1950s-1970s)<sup>1</sup>

Rossana Tufaro<sup>2</sup> and Kinda Chaib<sup>3</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The chapter explores how the rural world of Jabal ‘Amel became a privileged terrain of radical encounter in Lebanon’s “long-1960s”, where peasant struggles, leftist activism, and emergent political Shiism intersected and mutually reshaped one another. By foregrounding the village, the tobacco field, and the rural social milieu rather than Beirut’s parties and institutions, the chapter argues that South Lebanon functioned as a generative laboratory of radical politics, where everyday life, micro-histories, and local solidarities enabled unexpected convergences between Marxist and Islamist actors. To this aim, it intersects the personal and political trajectories of the militant clerics Hani Fahs and Hassan Malak, and the revolutionary militant ‘Ali Shu‘ayb from early childhood until the Tobacco Intifada of 1973, which saw leftists and militant clerics closely cooperating to champion growers’ rights. This rural vantage point, the chapter claims, is essential to understand both the rise and later reconfiguration of revolutionary left currents and political Shiism in Lebanon

KEYWORDS: Arab Left; Political Shiism; Rural History; South Lebanon; Tobacco Intifada.

## Introduction

In 1979, Lebanese filmmaker Maroun Baghdadi released *Kullunā li-l-Waṭan* (*We Are All for the Fatherland*), a militant documentary depicting the resistance of South Lebanon – or, more precisely, Jabal ‘Amel (*Jabāl ‘Āmil*) – to the first Israeli occupation of 1978. Through a stark and unapologetic lens, the documentary features the voices of three emblematic groups that, at the time, constituted the pillars of the South-

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraph 2, 3 and 4 of this chapter have been authored primarily by Rossana Tufaro. Paragraph 6 by Kinda Chaib. Paragraphs 1, 5, the introduction and the conclusions have been equally co-authored.

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ern resistance landscape: first, the resolute tobacco growers, symbolizing the enduring struggle for survival of southern villagers in a historically neglected and marginal area; second, the *fidā'iyyīn* and leftist militants engaged in armed resistance against Israel; third, militant Shia clerics, who traced the genealogy of southern deprivation and political oppression. Within only a few years, this landscape would transform dramatically. PLO cadres would depart to Tunis, the leftist resistance would lose its hegemony, and the resulting vacuum would be filled by political Shiism. Baghdadi's work thus stands as one of the last vivid portrayals of a social and political world that had defined the South throughout the previous decade, cementing its place in the national imaginary as the revolutionary and resistant heart of Lebanon.

In effect, throughout the 1960s, Jabal 'Amel underwent a crucial process of political radicalization, driven by state neglect and the profound social, cultural, and political transformations that the country was undergoing in the shadow of the Global 1960s. Resulting in the mass integration of Southerners into the broader constellation of leftist forces (Communists, Marxist-Leninists, Ba'athists, Arab Nationalists), this period also witnessed the emergence of a new generation of militant Shia clerics who, after having shaped their clerical consciousness in Najaf, would become an integral part of the Southern contentious landscape. Two conjunctural phenomena contributed to accelerating this process which, beginning from the late 1960s, profoundly redefined the South's everyday and came to constitute a paramount terrain of encounter and political action for both leftists and militant clerics (Tufaro 2025). The first was the return of the "tobacco question" to the forefront of Southern political confrontation, resulting in a series of mobilization cycles that pitted tobacco growers against both the central state and the entrenched *zu'amā'*<sup>4</sup> who had ruled them since independence (Tufaro 2023). The second was the beginning of Palestinian *fidā'i* operations from the Lebanese borderlands (Cf.: Brynen 1990) that turned the South into a crucial site of resistance and retaliation.

Against this backdrop, historiography has explored the relation between leftists and the emerging Lebanese political Shiism as one of antagonism to capture the consensus of Shia masses (Cf.: Abisaab 2015;

<sup>4</sup> Arnold Hottinger punctually defines the Lebanese *za'im* (pl. *zu'amā'*) as a specific type of political leader "who possesses the support of a locally circumscribed community, and who retains this support by fostering or appearing to foster the interests of as many as possible amongst his clientele" (1966: 85).

Picard 1985), focusing primarily on the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and Musa al-Sadr's movement (Cf. *inter alia*: Ajami 2012; Mervin 2002; Shanahan 2005; Al-Azzawi 2019). What has remained largely sidelined, instead, are the grassroots, peripheral dynamics of encounter between leftist activists and militant Shia clerics who, both prior to and outside of Sadr's movement and the top-down party agendas, worked together on the everyday struggles of the Shia community to produce transformative social action – a case in which the rural South represented a peculiar political laboratory.

By reconstructing the entangled life histories of radical leftists and clerics engaged in the tobacco movement and beyond, this study seeks to retrieve a part of that neglected history. Accordingly, it will first address the role played by leftists and militant clerics during the so-called Tobacco Intifada of 1973, which, ideological differences notwithstanding, witnessed a unique example of organic cooperation between the two actors throughout its preparation and progress. Then, it will move backwards and reconstruct the paths that led to the politicization of the two main clerical protagonists of the Intifada: namely *shaykh* Hani Fahs (Hānī Faḥṣ) and *shaykh* Hassan Malak (Ḥassan Malak), from their childhood in Jabal 'Amel to their seminar studies in Najaf where, throughout the 1960s, the two shaped their clerical commitment. It will then proceed to explore the forms of cultural cooperation that preceded the political engagement of Fahs in the rural struggles. Finally, it will intersect Fahs' and Malak's political biographies with that of 'Ali Shu'ayb ('Alī Shu'ayb), the son of small tobacco growers born in the village of Sharqiyeh, a few kilometers from Hani Fahs' hometown, and one of the founders of the Revolutionary Socialist Lebanese Movement (*al-Ḥaraka al-Ishtirākīyya al-Thawriyya al-Lubnānīyya* - MRSL), a radical leftist group, at the end of the 1960's. With four comrades, he led an armed operation against the Bank of America in Beirut during the October War (*Ḥarb Tishrīn*, October 6-24, 1973). The MRSL remained unknown until that precise moment despite operations (kidnappings, etc.) claimed under fictitious names.

Using the vantage point of social history, the chapter adopts a life histories methodology, intersecting the biographies of Fahs, Malak, and 'Ali Shu'ayb with the broader social, cultural, and historical context shaping their path to politicization. For the contextual reconstruction, it builds on secondary literature and a range of mixed primary sources, including periodical press, grey literature, and interviews. For

the biographical reconstructions, instead, it is based on the following main sources: for Hani Fahs, on his own autobiography in Arabic (Fahs 2005), compounded by a selection of interviews available online; for Hassan Malak, on an extended interview released to TV channel al-Manar, in which he traced his whole life and political activity from early childhood (al-Manar TV 2022); for ‘Ali Shu‘ayb, on a series of extended interviews conducted by one of the authors with his family members and former comrades in the MRSL in South Lebanon between 2016 and 2022.

The article foregrounds the rural ‘Amili milieu not merely as a backdrop, but also as a decisive generative context (cultural, economic, political, relational) – or, said otherwise, as a specific social and family universe (Bargel, Darmon 2017) – shaping both the individual trajectories and the specific convergences that allowed South Lebanon to become a distinct and transformative laboratory of radical encounters. This, the chapter argues, allows us to focus on a salient, yet, often overlooked element that defined Lebanon’s radical politics during the long-1960s: namely the role of lived experiences, micro-histories, and everyday intersections of material and social life in shaping the forms and trajectories whereby radical ideas circulated and produced transformative action outside of urban centers and top-down party politics.

## **Anatomy of an Intifada: Tobacco and the Insurgent South**

*Long live the unity of tobacco growers and their stubborn steadfastness towards achieving their legitimate demands, long live Lebanon.*  
(al-Mu‘tamar al-Waṭani li-Da‘m al-Janūb 1973: 30)

It was with these words that, on the evening of January 22, 1973, the occupiers of the Régie plant in Kfar Rumman (Kfar Rummān), on the outskirts of Nabatieh, ended the first public communiqué of what would be remembered as the Tobacco Intifada. The document was addressed to “the national and popular forces, the labor and democratic organizations, and the free press” to exhort them to sustain “the legitimate struggle of the steadfast tobacco growers” who, that day, after having participated in “the largest popular demonstration the history of the South”, decided to occupy the local headquarters of the tobacco monopoly – the *Régie Libanaise des Tabacs et des Tombacs* – “following the lack of responses from the officials” (Ibid.) to their longstanding demands.

Tobacco growing in Lebanon was structured in 1935, when the *Régie des Tabacs et des Tombacs* was created under the French Mandate. Under its impetus, tobacco cultivation reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Lebanese tobacco production, which was destined for both the local and export markets, spread mainly to disadvantaged, generally non-irrigated regions, most notably in Jabal ‘Amel, replacing food-crops (Verdeil *et al.* 2007). There, since the very institution of the monopoly, the tobacco question had represented a paramount source of conflict and resistance (Abisaab 2009; Khayyat 2022). In the mid-1960s, it loudly regained momentum, against the backdrop of the new industrial policies adopted by the Régie after the renewal of the monopoly license, in 1964, that had brought to the stagnation of purchase prices and the virtual freezing of new farming licenses, at a moment when the cost of living was about to double within a few years (Karyergatian 1965: 28-ff; Halawi 1992; Nasr 1978). The impact on growers’ livelihoods and the whole ‘Amili social and political fabric of was tremendous. In fact, by that time, about 70% of the South’s rural residents were estimated to rely on tobacco farming for subsistence. They consisted predominantly of small plot farmers and growers subcontracting from big landowners, who were struggling with chronic indebtedness, the speculative practices routinely applied by the Régie’s agents and the landowners’ intermediaries, and the lack of basic rights and protections (Tufaro 2023). The largest estates were owned by the main regional landed *zu‘amā’* – Sabri Hamade (Ṣabrī Ḥamādih), Kamal al-Asaad (Kamāl al-As‘ad), Abdul Latif Beydoun (‘Abd al-Laṭīf Bayḏūn), and Adel Osseiran (‘Ādil ‘Usayrān) – who, especially after independence, had taken political control of the Régie and progressively turned it into a “private reserve of money and clientele” (Traboulsi 2012: 165). They reserved most of the farming licenses for themselves and their clients, distributed workplaces in the Régie’s administration, benefited from better purchase prices, speculated on rents, and used subcontracting as a political weapon<sup>5</sup> (Cf. Murqūs 1974: 66-ff; al-Mu‘tamar al-Waṭanī li-Da‘m al-Janūb 1973). Moreover, they also had control over the sole state-licensed union of tobacco growers, which, along with excluding small farmers from membership, was used and weaponized from its very institution as a policing dispositive to reproduce the dominant *zu‘amī* relations (Zayn al-Dīn 1987).

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *al-Hurriyya*, n° 544, 07/12/1970

The movement debuted with a reactive, village-based set of contentious actions (i.e., purchase strikes, petitions, cultivation of unlicensed plots, clashes with Régie agents) to demand higher purchase prices and forms of compensation for natural disasters and against the speculative practices applied by the landowners' intermediaries and the Régie's agents (Tufaro 2023). Starting from 1968, it experienced an important process of class-based, cross-sectarian politicization and organizing. This, together with establishing the basic list of demands underlying their mobilization (increase in purchase prices, limitation of licensable surfaces to five *dunum*<sup>6</sup> per holder, grower supervision rights on the Régie's weighing and purchasing operations, nationalization of the Régie and expansion of the national tobacco industry, and access to social security rights, just to cite the most relevant), would also include a quest for – and the efforts to develop – an independent and democratic union (Ibid.).

Throughout 1972, the growers' movement and its constituent process underwent a steady scaling up. In the month of August, rumors began to circulate about the Régie's intention to cut production by 30%<sup>7</sup>. This drove an entire series of meetings, conferences, demonstrations, and discussions<sup>8</sup>, culminating in the conclusion that the time had finally come to escalate their struggle and reclaim what had been denied to them for years. Accordingly, on December 8, a demonstration was held in Beirut to deliver a petition signed by 16,000 growers to Parliament, reiterating the growers' longstanding demands and calling for the Régie to fully purchase the annual crop<sup>9</sup>. Faced with renewed silence from both Parliament and the Régie, the growers decided to organize another major protest on January 22, 1973, this time, in Nabatieh<sup>10</sup>. The turnout was outstanding, with 15,000 people from all over Jabal 'Amel marching from Nabatieh to the new Régie offices in Kfar Rumman, on the outskirts of the city.

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<sup>6</sup> A unit of surface area commonly used in Lebanon. It is equivalent to 1000 m<sup>2</sup>, or 1/10 hectare. Before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the *dunum* was 919.3 m<sup>2</sup>, but the metric *dunum* was set at 1000 m<sup>2</sup> during the British mandate in Palestine, and this value has remained.

<sup>7</sup> *al-Nidā'*, 08/08/1972

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *al-Hurriyya*, n° 606, 29/01/1973

<sup>9</sup> *al-Nidā'*, 09/12/1972

<sup>10</sup> *al-Nidā'*, 22-24/01/1973. For a detailed chronology of the Tobacco Intifada see: Chamussy 1973; al-Mū'tamar al-Waṭanī li-Da'm al-Janūb 1973.

All the high school students from Nabatiyeh and the surrounding area were there... we all marched on the Régie! (...) From the souk to Kfar Rumman! We were there on the first day, and we were there on the second day too. The tobacco farmers were there with their families. The army was there (...) On the second day, they shot in the direction of the crowd.<sup>11</sup>

It brought together the entire 'Amili social fabric – growers, their families, fellow villagers, clerics, intellectuals, and party and trade union cadres – which, in rallying around the tobacco question, voiced all the hardships and grievances shaping their everyday: the historical socio-economic marginalization of Jabal 'Amel, which the development projects promoted in the 1960s under the presidency of Fuad Chihab had only partially managed to improve; the self-serving policies of the Southern *zu'amā'*, whose core interests had moved to Beirut and whose approach to their constituencies got increasingly perceived as exploitative and oppressive; last but not least, state inaction against the escalating Israeli attacks and retaliations on border villages, where fields growers continued to cultivate undeterred, to clamp down on the Palestinian resistance.

As the rally reached the Régie's offices, a group of demonstrators breached the gates and the crowd occupied the building. Their intention was well clear: "to continue the occupation and escalate it until the full achievement of growers' demands, no matter at what cost" (al-Muṭamar al-Waṭanī li-Da'm al-Janūb 1973: 30).

The price growers paid for this act of defiance, however, exceeded all initial expectations. Leveraging on the state of emergency imposed over Jabal 'Amel since the beginning of the Israeli attacks, in late 1968, the army and the police immediately besieged the Régie building, preventing the occupiers from receiving any food or water. Amid escalating tensions, on January 24, at the end of yet another solidarity rally, a group of demonstrators sought to break the siege. Renewing the brutal treatment reserved only a couple of months earlier to the striking workers of the Ghandur factory in Beirut, the Army countered demonstrators with shotguns, injuring dozens of participants and murdering two growers: Na'im Darwish (Na'im Darwīsh) and Hassan al-Hayek (Ḥassan al-Ḥāyak). Moreover, several protesters were arrested, even during the following weeks. The popular reaction was disruptive. For days, strikes, rallies, demonstrations, and gatherings propagated from the South to the whole country, demanding accountability and

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<sup>11</sup> Mariam, 'Ali Shu'ayb's sister, interview, 2022

expressing solidarity with the growers' movement. Meanwhile, as the constituent process for the formation of a union accelerated, a fierce head-to-head confrontation pitted growers against authorities (regional governors, Régie administration, government, MPs) for weeks to finalize the dispute, obtain justice for the two martyrs, and resist the retaliations of security forces. It was a relentless, multifocal activation that, for about two months, mobilized tens of thousands of people and coalesced together, the discourses, the grievances, and platforms that had arisen around the tobacco question for years. Indeed, it marked a crucial fracture in the history of Jabal 'Amel which, after the colonial period, had no longer seen such a transgressive act of rebellion against its rulers and the destiny of subalternity to which it had seemed irremediably condemned.

### **Shaping the Protest: Growers, Leftists, and Clerics in the Tobacco Intifada**

Notwithstanding its massiveness, during the Tobacco Intifada (*Intifāda al-dikhhān*), as the revolt came to be known, a paramount organizational and political role was played by the Committee of the Protestors (*Lajna al-Mu'taṣimīn*).

The Committee was established by the Régie's occupiers at the beginning of the sit-in to coordinate and follow up on the movement's next steps<sup>12</sup>. After an internal debate, it was decided to strategically assign this delicate task to a coalition of representatives embodying the different souls and networks of alliances that the tobacco question had been able to coalesce over the years. The Committee had about a dozen members and included three macro-political profiles which, in that specific conjuncture, represented the forefront of 'Amili social opposition. The first, epitomized by Sobhi Hamadeh (Subhī Ḥamadah), was that of the politicized growers: i.e., growers who, while mobilizing first and foremost as growers, were also militants or sympathizers of leftist parties. Their presence in the growers' movement had become increasingly relevant in both quantity and role since the late 1960s, and

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<sup>12</sup> *al-Nidā'*, 22/01/1973. Together with those listed in the paragraph, the other members of the Committee were Zhafer al-Moqaddam (Zāfir al-Muqaddam), Talal Fayad (Ṭalāl Fayād), Jawad Daher (Jawād Dāhir), and Husayn al-Said (Husayn al-Sayyid).

reflected the rapid spread that, at that historical moment, left-leaning ideologies were exerting among the ‘Amili masses.

The second profile, epitomized by the teacher, poet, and Secretary General of the Lebanese branch of the Iraqi Ba‘ath party, Musa Shu‘ayb (Mūsā Shu‘ayb), was that of the leftist organizations which, in the same liminal years, had boosted organic relations with the growers’ movement. The first were the very Ba‘ath and the LCP which, reflecting their historical rootedness in Jabal ‘Amel (Abisaab, Abisaab 2014; al-Dandashlī 1989), had established relations with the growers’ movement since its inception. Their early engagement was mainly a solidarity one, prompted by the numerous local cadres (school teachers, intellectuals, *mukhtars*) active at various levels in the mobilized villages. From 1970, it took a more centralized and programmatic form, first by tightly integrating the tobacco question into a variety of shared party-sponsored campaigns and platforms in support of the South, and later by sponsoring the growers’ process of unionization (Tufaro 2023). From the early 1970s, the Ba‘ath and the LCP had been paired with the grassroots activism of the New Left<sup>13</sup>, most notably the Organization for Communist Action in Lebanon (OACL) that quickly earned a relevant position, especially among the youngest growers, and by the invisible grassroots activism of the MRSL in the tobacco fields, which remained largely concealed due to the clandestine nature of the movement.

The third profile composing the Committee of the Protestors were the militant Shia clerics, embodied by Sayyid ‘Ali Mahdi Ibrahim (‘Alī Mahdī Ibrāhīm), *shaykh* Hani Fahs, and *shaykh* Hassan Malak. Sayyid ‘Ali Mahdi Ibrahim was a well-known presence in the ‘Amili grassroots political landscape. Since the 1950s, he had been a vocal supporter of Arab liberation movements, especially the Palestinian one and, even before the Naksa, he had been a staunch advocate of armed resistance against Israel. He had always been a people’s cleric, one who privileged his community and its daily struggles to official clerical circles (Cf.: Bint]beil.org 2012). During the Intifada, he was in his fifties. He was one of the few politically committed clerics of his

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<sup>13</sup> The term New Left conventionally refers to the array of Marxist-Leninist organizations that emerged in the Arab world in the late 1960s as a reaction to the widespread disillusionment for the revolutionary potential of Arab Nationalism that had ultimately been sparked by the 1967 Naksa. For an overview of the history of the Arab New Lefts, see: Ismael 1976; Haugbolle 2017. For a specific focus on Lebanon and the origins of the OACL, see: Traboulsi 2022; Bardawil 2016, 2020.

generation, in a time when, especially in rural villages, most of them were mainly men of worship.

The context was different for Fahs and Malak. While both were of 'Amili origin, they had spent most of the 1960s in the Najaf *hawza* (seminar) completing their religious training. There, during the 1950s, a significant clerical movement had consolidated in response to the sweeping socio-economic and political transformations affecting the Iraqi Shia community (Batatu 1978; See also Menghini's chapter in this volume). The most important included the urbanization and proletarianization of the Shia peasantry, the reproduction of subaltern, unequal, and ethnicized dynamics of social mobility, and the rapid spread of mass politics — processes that echoed similar developments in South Lebanon and profoundly influenced the very backgrounds of the aspiring clerics, too. Particularly key to the development of the Najafi clerical movement was the spread of left-leaning ideologies among the Shia masses, most notably Arab Nationalism and Communism, which, as effectively summarized by Abisaab and Abisaab, provided Iraqi Shia with “a medium for national liberation, economic reform, and modernism—a modernism that argued against a capitalist and colonizing Europe” (2014: 78). Within this framework, two conflicting clerical tendencies emerged. On the one hand, a conservative trend, committed to the unwavering defense of the *hawza's* religious, legal, and scholarly authority against a secularizing society; on the other, an expanding reformist trend, advocating instead for a new role of Islam and clerics in society able to interpret and orient the present, starting with the bids for emancipation (social, national, cultural) that were underlaying the Shia adherence to leftist ideologies. This prepared the groundwork for a new generation of committed and militant clerics to emerge that, from Lebanon to Iran, would modernize Shia religious scholarship, sow the seeds for the rise of a distinctively Shia political Islam, and actively engage with the social question. Fahs and Malak belonged to this generation. Accordingly, albeit they had not directly experienced the evolution of the growers' movement, once they permanently re-settled in Jabal 'Amel, respectively as imams of Jibchit (Jibshīt) and Kfar Tibnit (Kfar Tibnīt), they did not hesitate to embrace the growers' cause and actively partake in the struggle.

It should be noted that the solidarity of local Shia clerics with tobacco growers was not, per se, unprecedented (Tufaro 2025). What

was new during the Intifada was the scope of the organicity of the clerics' participation. Indeed, for Fahs and Malak, it was not just a simple matter of solidarity, but rather of participant co-construction of political strategies and initiatives that, taken altogether, shaped the Intifada. In 2018, for instance, Fouad al-Muqaddam (Fu'ād al-Muqaddam), a grower affiliated to the OACL, remembered how, in the meetings leading to the organization of the January 22 rally, Fahs was a key presence, together with himself, Musa Shu'ayb, and Mahmoud Abu Zeid (Maḥmūd Abū Zayd, LCP) (al-Muqaddam 2018). Equally key was the role they played in the Committee of the Protestors during and after the Régie's occupation. It was a role that was exercised within the framework of a tacit division of political labor among the three souls composing the Committee, wherein each mobilized its social and political capital to maximize the advancement of the growers' interest according to the latter's day-to-day collective deliberations. As for the leftist members, their capital consisted of the organizational experience accumulated over the years, along with their extended network of platforms, organizations, and allies that were pivotal to organically endow the tobacco question with a national dimension. As for the clerics, it was their privileged access to religious institutions and personalities, Shia and non, and their very social role, which was strategized to mediate with authorities and police, or to provide religious places as a safe space for the growers' movement against security retaliations.

When, for instance, on January 24, the occupiers were violently evicted from the Régie plant and interrogated, they moved the protest sit-in to the *ḥussayniyya* of Nabatieh, and then to Kfar Tibnit, where Malak was imam, and continued to coordinate mobilizations from there over the following weeks (Janoubia.com 2013; al-Manar TV 2022). On another level, they led several growers' rallies, promoting and participating in a variety of solidarity conferences and initiatives, and helped to expand the solidarity movement far beyond the boundaries of the progressive camp (Tufaro 2025). This allowed the Intifada to represent a genuinely transversal 'Amili movement that was able to bridge the ideological divides, competitions, and mistrusts, among its different political souls. First, the ones between "old" (Ba'ath, LCP) and New Lefts (OACL and other revolutionary Marxist-Leninist groups arose in the late 1960s) which, saw their militants and sympathizers closely cooperating in the villages while,

in cities, factories, universities, and official position papers, they were still in a relation of mutual competition and critique. Second, between lefts and militant clerics themselves, whose social and political commitment was firmly anchored in an Islamic value system and political project that posited itself as an alternative answer to the problem-spaces shaping the 'Amili society.

Both the critical juncture and the organic cooperation brought about by the Intifada culminated with the celebration of the first conference of the National Union of Tobacco Growers in early April 1973<sup>14</sup>, which, after years of relentless struggle, finally endowed growers with their own self-representing platform. The union leadership was composed primarily of politicized growers from the LCP, Ba'ath, and OACL, anticipating the rapprochement between the old and new lefts that, on the eve of the Civil War, would ultimately result in the establishment of the Lebanese National Movement (LNM). At the same time, by shifting the growers' struggle from the sphere of communal mobilization to that of formal political representation, it ended the grassroots conditions that had enabled the organic convergence between militant clerics and leftist parties to produce conditions that were grounded precisely in the bottom-up, transversal, and communal nature of the Intifada. From that point onwards, the common engagement with social justice and the Palestinian resistance would be exercised along parallel tracks which, while occasionally intersecting again, would no longer foster the same kind of sustained, organic cooperation. The ultimate rupture occurred in 1974 as, against the backdrop of the rise of Musa al-Sadr's Movement of the Dispossessed, the weight of the ideological differences and political legacies would become a boundary that could no longer be ignored. The epitome of this rupture would be Fahs' decision to withdraw, upon al-Sadr's mediation, from the parliamentary elections held in Nabatieh that same year, in which he had initially decided to run on the left-sponsored list (Mominoum.com 2013). Henceforth, he would start an autonomous journey that would ultimately bring him towards al-Fatah (Cf.: *infra*). Malak, instead, would first move abroad and then return to Lebanon after al-Sadr's disappearance, in 1978, and begin a new militant journey in the emerging Hezbollah (al-Manar TV 2022: min 31.00 - ff).

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<sup>14</sup> *al-Nidā'*, 17/04/1973.

## Shaping the Militant Cleric: Fahs and Malak from Jabal ‘Amel to Najaf and Back

To better understand the dynamics that drove and molded the convergence between leftists and militant clerics during the Intifada, it is useful to examine the specific trajectories that shaped the clerical consciousness of Fahs and Malak in Najaf.

While both entered the *hawza* in 1963, Fahs and Malak returned to Jabal ‘Amel embodying two distinct orientations and lineages of clerical commitment. Hassan Malak returned as a politically trained, action-oriented Islamist. He arrived in Kfar Tibnit in early 1972, following an arrest and a cinematic escape from Iraq as a result of the wave of repression inaugurated by Hassan al-Bakr’s regime on the clerical movement, and most notably to the Islamic Da‘wa Party (*Hizb al-Da‘wa al-Islāmiyya*).

The first example of a modern Islamist party informed by a distinct Shia framing, the Da‘wa party arose between 1957 and 1958 from the Najafi reformist movement to address the urgent need for Islam and Muslims to take an active role in the political realm, too. Albeit compelled to operate in strict clandestinity, it rapidly achieved a considerable reach and influence, driven by the intense activism of its early members (cultural, religious, civic), the presence and support of prominent *marja‘iyya* figures and ‘*ulamā*’ and a highly organized underground political apparatus (Alaaldin 2017). Key to shaping its ideological and organizational structure was Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr), who, building on the Shia theological and juridical tradition and a close confutation of Marxism, elaborated a distinctively Shia social and political philosophy that profoundly influenced the coeval and future development of political Shiism (Cf. *inter alia*: Mallat 1993).

Malak’s involvement in the party started in 1966, when, after three years of fruitless attempts to reach Da‘wa members, finally – he recalls – “they opened to me: I began participating in the party activities and they became my mentors” (al-Manar TV 2022: min. 16.00 - ff). He first learned of the party during classes and immediately felt a resonance with his own outlook as a young aspiring cleric who was profoundly dissatisfied with the quietism and normative approach to religion that dominated the clerical environment in which he had been raised. Although he had arrived at the seminar with a letter of recommendation

addressed to the very Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, he was not exempted from the party's strict top-down recruitment practices, which tightly screened individuals' backgrounds for ideological reliability before admitting them into party cells. Eloquently enough, the author of the letter had been Musa al-Sadr, whom the young Malak had the chance to meet during a series of lectures the latter had delivered in Tyre on the eve of his departure. These exposed him to an entirely new model of cleric, one able to engage with youth using the language of the present in a moment when – in Malak's own words – "*shuyūkh* in Tyre were very traditional: if you asked them questions they could not give you [adequate] answers!" (al-Manar TV 2022: min. 10.00 - ff).

The expanding Da'wa's reformist-Islamist current, embodied by the very Muhammad Baqir, was key to Malak's political formation and, prompted by the rise of Arif's regime, underwent an important radicalization during Malak's militancy. This enabled Malak to combine a rigorous religious and ideological training with a broad-based grassroots activism that would educate him to underground political activity and community mobilization, as well as defiance of authority. The Da'wa militancy was also fundamental in helping Malak to establish solid relationships with the first generation of Lebanese party affiliates, such as Muhammad Mahdi Shamseddin (Muḥammad Mahdī Shams al-Dīn) and especially Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallah), both of whom would remain important points of reference after his permanent evacuation from Iraq. Malak's experience in the party was intense and totalizing. In 1969, for instance, together with Muhammad Baqir, he was part of the group of clerics<sup>15</sup> who, from Lebanon, wrote the first public accusation of Bakr's incipient repressive initiatives against the clerical movement. We do not know if, after his return, Malak remained involved in the underground activities of the Lebanese Da'wa branch. However, what is certain is that, while he remained close to Musa al-Sadr, he preferred grassroots militancy to the state-institutionalist alternative the latter was building for the Lebanese Shia. Accordingly, upon his arrival in Kfar Tibnit, his first public action was to stage a roadblock to pressure the qaimaqam (i.e., the provincial governor) to restore the water supply to the village. During the Intifada, he slept at the feet of the

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<sup>15</sup> The other clerics included Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah, Mortada al-Askari (Murtadā al-ʿAskarī), and Musa al-Sadr.

army tanks to ensure the villagers' participation in the demonstrations and participated in all of them, including the great rally held in Beirut following the Kfar Rumman massacre. He also immediately engaged with the village's youth, delivering religious lectures and organizing 'Ashura ('*Āshūrā*') celebrations; as he explains, when he arrived "you could feel in the air that the left was very widespread in the area" (al-Manar TV 2022: min 24.00 - ff).

Hani Fahs, instead, was primarily a *shaykh* of letters. He had arrived in Najaf as a young existentialist who, since his early teenage years, had found refuge and relief from the burdens of the present in literature and poetry. Unlike Malak, he was not born to a clerical family. His father was a carpenter, while his mother and sisters struggled to find livelihood in tobacco cultivation. Despite the economic hardships, he was able to achieve his secondary education at Nabatieh's public school, where, following his literary abilities and religious sensitivity, he had already earned the nickname of "*shaykh*". His encounter with *shaykh* 'Ali al-Zein ('Alī al-Zayn) was fundamental to his early sense of religion and literary talent. Since the mid-1930s, *shaykh* al-Zein was one of the main protagonists of the 'Amili literary renaissance and a vocal supporter of the 'Amili popular protests. He was described by Fahs as a distinguished intellectual and a convinced Arabist, whose constant engagement with youth in Jibshit and Jabal 'Amel, including with young leftists, had a profound influence on him and his generation (Fahs 1999; al-Dandashli 1988).

Like Malak, Fahs' decision to join the seminary was not immediate. Following the revolt of 1958, he dropped out of school for about one year and moved to Beirut where, at the time, young rural immigrants like him had few opportunities other than to pursue a casual job. However, it was an important formative experience for, along with pushing him to resume his studies, it also revealed the hard reality of the invisible – yet omnipresent – socio-geographical hierarchies shaping Lebanese society (Fahs 2005: 31-ff). In this perspective, Najaf represented not only a spiritual choice, but also a material one for, as for other 'Amilis of peasant backgrounds, the seminar constituted one of the few available options to continue studies and seek to exit poverty (Cf.: Nir 2016: 26).

Fahs' intellectual expectations for Najaf were certainly well-placed. In 1958, the *hawza* had inaugurated the pioneering Faculty of Fiqh that combined a modern approach to the teaching of Islamic jurisprudence

and theology with a variety of non-religious disciplines, such as literary criticism, English, sociology, and psychology. The Faculty was a direct emanation of the *Muntadā al-Nashr* (Publishers' Forum), a cultural-editorial platform established in 1935 by a group of modernist 'ulamā' with the aim of disseminating Islamic culture and sciences and promoting social reform through active public engagement. Together, the two institutions constituted a unique integrated intellectual ecosystem which, especially during the five years of the Arif regime (1958-1963), further tightened the organic link of the *ḥawza* to the outer world (cultural, social, political), multiplied internal nodes of debate and elaboration, and simultaneously contained, forged, and transcended all the political currents and expressions composing the clerical movement.

Key to both Fahs and the Faculty's development was the *marja'* Muhammad Taqī al-Hakim (Muḥammad Tāqī al-Ḥakīm), who, like *shaykh* al-Zein, would remain for Fahs a seminal model and life-long mentor. It was especially through his teachings and example that, Fahs explained, he shaped his critical and clerical consciousness – one that arose first and foremost from the close and totalizing intellectual scrutiny of the present and the role of religious knowledge and praxis in a changing world. Although al-Hakim was a Da'wa member, Fahs would never join the party, nor show sympathy for it. His was a mistrust against ideologism he had brought with him from Nabatieh, and that would accompany him for his entire life, including the Intifada.

The key event that pushed him towards active politics was, instead, as for most of the youth of his generation, the Naksa:

The Naksa of 1967 was a tremendous challenge, which was concentrated in many sites: geography, history, politics, thought, literature, etc. Politically, it was a challenge to the nationalist and leftist thought, which got exposed after decades of national independence, statehood, opposition, and propaganda. It was the same for the Islamic thought that, for a long period, stubbornly limited its resistance to the ills of modernity [...] without accumulating or establishing a renaissance answer to the questions of the time. (Fahs 2005: 143-144)

Fahs' early answer to the Naksa was ostensibly intellectual but not in the least political. With a number of peer *ḥalaba* (seminar's students), he established the magazine *al-Najaf*,<sup>16</sup> whose first issue eloquently

<sup>16</sup> Copies and selected articles from *al-Najaf* can be found in the ILEMED database, at the following link: <https://zenodo.org/communities/sapienza-iso-ilemed>

appeared with a black cover and the sole word “Naksa” written in red. It immediately became a prominent channel of critical thinking and political debate, where, reflecting the dominant pro-resistance sentiments in the *ḥawza* and the city, Palestine occupied a central place – an activism that, Fahs remembers with a certain sarcasm, quickly provoked the reaction of many “advocates of calm” (Fahs 2005: 144-145). The most important was undoubtedly Hassan Bakr who, after the coup, inaugurated his repressive policies against the *ḥawza* precisely by cracking down on solidarity with the Palestinian resistance. The first alarm bells rang with the prohibition, in 1969, for *ṭalaba* to celebrate the anniversary of the Battle of Karameh and the martyrdom of Amin Musa Sa‘ad (Amīn Mūsā Sa‘ad), also known as *al-Akhdar al-‘Arabī*. Amin Musa Saad was a ‘Amili Ba‘athist who had died as the first Lebanese *fidā’ī* martyr during a border operation at the Sheba‘a farms – a martyrdom which, in turn, testified the profound transnational entanglement of the Najafi clerical movement. Soon thereafter, the magazine was closed (Ibid.).

This marked a crucial breakthrough in Fahs’s personal biography, for it made clear that the oasis of freedom and critical thinking represented by Najaf for the past six years was coming to an end. Bitterly disillusioned, he returned to Jibshit with a “bundle of concerns, spanning from renewing Islamic thought to criticizing modernity [...] while recording a criticism of the Arab experience” – an experience that, according to Fahs, “was preoccupied with modernization without a modern thought or behavior” and whose advocates “remained mere bearers of ideas exposed, at times, to the convulsions of the opposition, and, at others, to the temptations of power” (Fahs 2005: 146-147). Accordingly, he would first try to “fulfill the necessity of an effective action” by actively engaging with the Jabal ‘Amel literary movement, seeking to reproduce the intellectual atmosphere and approach to public engagement he had experienced in Najaf. He continued to live his life between Jabal ‘Amel and the *ḥawza* until 1972, when, during what would become his last trip to Najaf, he realized the eyes of the security services had become too present to allow any further initiative (Id: 149-150). Henceforth, a new chapter of his life began – one in which, as we will better see in the following sections, the tobacco question would play a key role.

## Between Arabism and Palestine: Secondary Schools and the Seeds of a Militant Generation

Thus, when the Intifada broke out, Fahs and Malak were two young *shuyūkh* who had discovered in Najafi reformism and emerging political Shiism the ideational and operational framing for their clerical commitment. They were also two returning children of Jabal ‘Amel who, the mutual differences notwithstanding, had developed their early social and political sensitivities amid the same hardships and defining historical events that molded their generation and the ‘Amili community, including future revolutionaries as ‘Ali Shu‘ayb.

In effect, Hassan Malak (Bayt Līf, 1940), Hani Fahs (Jibshīt, 1946), and ‘Ali Shu‘ayb (Sharqiyeh, 1946 or 1947) were all born in the 1940s in three tobacco-producing ‘Amili villages, just few kilometers away from each other, at the border with Palestine. At the end of the 1950s, these villages were still described as uniformly “under-equipped”, isolated agglomerates of stone houses with “men and animals sharing the same water and the same accommodations” (République Libanaise 1960: 43). Basic modern amenities — electricity, clinics, paved roads, running water, sewage systems, and schools — would not begin to consistently appear until the 1960s. Most of the inhabitants relied on manual labor and traditional farming for survival, with land tenure dominated by the same handful of landed *zu‘amā’* against whom the tobacco growers would rise, particularly during the Intifada. Unless they came from notable or landed families, *shuyūkh* also primarily lived on subsistence agriculture and the modest donations made by the villagers for their religious duties. *Shaykh* Husayn (Ḥusayn al-Malak), Malak’s father, was one of them. Nevertheless, the clerical background provided him with certain educational advantages, subtly differentiating his path from that of other village youth. Before attending the sole primary school in the village, he had already been trained in reading and writing. Then, in 1953, he was registered at the Ja‘afariyeh College of Tyre under the advice of the founder, Sayyid Husayn Abdel Husayn Sharafeddin al-Musawi (Ḥusayn ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn Sharaf al-Din al-Mūsawī), who was a close friend of Malak’s father (al-Manar TV 2022: min 06.00 - ff.).

A staunch anti-colonialist and Arab nationalist, in 1920, Sayyid Sharafeddin had played a prominent role in the ‘Amili resistance against the French mandate (Mervin 2012; Chaib 2025). He had estab-

lished the college in 1938 to provide young Shia with a modern education, at a time when most secondary schools were still concentrated in Mount Lebanon, and the educational landscape of the South was dominated either by missionary or *za'im*-sponsored institutions. Reflecting Sharafeddin's socio-political commitments, from its very inception, it represented a crucial node for both political organization and mobilization around the Southern, Arab, and Palestinian causes, and an innovative, open educational hub, whose influence, thanks to the school's rapid expansion and its special programs for low-income students, deeply permeated the social, political, and cultural development of Jabal 'Amel (Qisṣa al-Ja'afariyyah 1961; Gharbieh 1996: 122-ff). This made Sayyid Abdel Husayn the first seminal example of a politicized, action-oriented, religious figure for Malak, to the point of being remembered as one of the four main figures who, together with his father, Muhammad Baqir, and Musa al-Sadr, made him the man he was:

My father taught me generosity and honor [...]; from Sayyid Abdel Husayn [Sharafeddine], I learned courage, audacity, and to stand against colonialism. *Khalas!* I participated in any demonstration against colonialism, including in 1958 against Chamoun! (al-Manar TV 2022: min 8.45 - ff)

By the outbreak of the 1958 conflict, the Ja'afariyeh had become a critical center of opposition to President Camille Chamoun's pro-Western, authoritarian rule – a rule that, throughout the 1950s, played an important role in propelling the transgressive Arabist and pro-Palestine activism of its students and staff. There were Communists, Arab Nationalists, Nasserists, but especially Ba'athists, at a moment when the party's rejection of Western imperialism embodied by the Baghdad Pact, unwavering loyalty to Palestine, and a clear class perspective had made it the most popular mass party in the South (Cf.: al-Dandashli 1988). Sayyid Sharafeddine's own son, Ja'afar, who was the school's headmaster, would be elected MP on the party's ticket in 1960. Ba'athist activity at Ja'afariyeh had become so intense that the school was described as a "quasi-political party center where meetings and ideological education took place simultaneously with the school curriculum" (Bardawil 2020: 41–42). Abbas Baydoun ('Abbās Bayḍūn) – who would become one of the most prominent leftist poets of his generation and write the notorious poem "*Yā 'Alī*" in honor of 'Ali Shu'ayb,

later put to music by Marcel Khalifeh – remembered those years with these words:

We used to attend party meetings in the classroom, the unit of party meetings was the class/grade, and they were the centers of party talk. The teachers who were party members used to go in, and in the middle of class you could ask about the constitution of the Ba'ath and the difference between Arab socialism and communist socialism. There was no distinction between the school and the party center, and it was not thought to be strange. (Id.: 41)

The context at Nabatieh's public school was by no means different. Nicknamed *Umm al-Madāris* ("the mother of schools") for, in the late 1950s, it still represented the sole public secondary school in Jabal 'Amel, Nabatieh had been a crucial political and educational hub since its establishment. Like Ja'afariyeh, it was closely integrated with the city's cultural and political environment, which, in the 1950s and early 1960s, constituted the vibrant heart of the literary, intellectual, and radical life of Jabal 'Amel. As a consequence – Fahs remembers – "from Nabatieh, the Southerners moved towards national, Pan-Arab, and humanitarian affairs, from the French mandate, to the occupation of Palestine, the Egyptian revolution and the Baghdad Pact, the nationalization of the [Suez] canal, and the Egyptian-Syrian unity" (Fahs 2005: 28).

Key to consolidate its role as a transformative political hub was the direction of Ahmad Jaber (Aḥmad Jābir), another Ba'athist who, as well as being remembered as a committed and innovative educator, also actively fostered student activism and political participation, allowing the school, its teachers, and students, to become a focal node for radical publications, debates, and demonstrations.

From the middle school, I went to Damascus with the students and the encouragement to participate in the unity celebrations and see Gamal Abdel Nasser, whom I saw. (Fahs 2005: 32)

This played a crucial role for secondary schools to become incubators for a militant generation that, within their halls, received early training in mass politics and forged an enduring commitment to Arabism and Palestine that would define their future political trajectories – one that also argued for the rejection of feudalism and imperialist oppression. They all belonged to a generation

whose childhood was marked by the direct experience of the Nakba. They could see the expanding Israeli settlements and the refugees' dispossession from their windows. Mostly of rural and peasant background, they spent their teenage years witnessing the sharp contrast between the neglect reserved to their villages by Chamoun's policies and the local *zu'amā'* and the unfolding reality of the agrarian and socio-economic reforms taking place in Egypt and Syria – a contrast further amplified by Chamoun's pro-Western stances and nationalist discourse, as well as the *zu'amā'*'s patronizing and self-serving rural politics. While they were too young to remember the Mandate years, they witnessed the first US boots-on-the-ground operation in the Arab world to forbid the insurgent anti-Chamounist opposition from taking power once the conflict of 1958<sup>17</sup> broke out and learned about the 'Amili history of resistance to colonial domination both in schools and at home.

As the 1960s arrived, Fahs and Malak found in Najaf the Islamic framing wherein to develop and shape their political commitment. As for their schoolmates, instead, most of them would become leftist party cadres, unionists, organic intellectuals, or, as like 'Ali, revolutionary militants. They would be the first generation to experience mass public higher education thanks to the developmentalist policies implemented during the presidencies of Fuad Chihab and Charles Helou (Farsoun 1973). They would animate the student movement and often return to or even remain in Jabal 'Amel as committed teachers in the expanding public educational infrastructure. Ideologically, some would remain loyal to the Ba'ath, even after the failure of the United Arab Republic and, above all, the Naksa would put an end to the Arab Nationalist utopia that inflamed the late 1950s. Many others, instead, would progressively shift towards Communism and Marxism-Leninism, where they would find new ideational and operational contexts to drive the struggle for the radical emancipation of Arab societies. Together, they would stand united again when the Intifada erupted – transcending the boundaries of their early affiliations to participate collectively in the renewed fight for transformative social change.

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<sup>17</sup> For further details on the war of 1958 and its specific articulation in the South see, respectively: Gendzier 1996; Nir 2004.

## Houses, Circles, and Forums: Poetry and Literature as a Political Battleground

While Malak returned to Jabal ‘Amel only in 1972, Hani Fahs had already had the chance to connect with some of the leftist militants with whom he participated in the Intifada through the channel of cultural activism upon his first tormented return from Najaf – and whom he probably knew from school and the milieu of ordinary Southern life he had shared with them (namely certainly with ‘Ali) before his departure to Iraq.

Back then, the cornerstone of his public engagement and intellectual enquiry was the unwavering commitment to Palestine. Accordingly, he recalls, he began to engage with the ‘Amili literary scene, seeking out like-minded intellectuals who combined a genuine support to the Palestinian resistance with an open and critical approach to literary work – one that deliberately avoided rigid political or cultural dogmas. With this spirit, he started to closely collaborate with some of the most important poets and writers composing the ‘Amili engagé landscape, such as Muhammad ‘Ali Shamseddin (Muḥammad ‘Alī Shams al-Dīn), Elias Lahoud (Ilyās Laḥūd), Shawqī Bazi‘ (Shawqī Bazī‘), Hamza Abboud (Hamza Abbūd), Abbas Baydoun, and the very Musa Shu‘ayb, with whom, inspired by the Najafi experience, he established the Writers’ Forum of Jabal ‘Amel (*Muntadā Udabā’ Jabal ‘Āmil*). The Forum was intentionally conceived as an alternative cultural platform to the Cultural Council of South Lebanon (*al-Majlīs al-Thaqāfī li-Lubnān al-Janūbī*), the most prominent cultural association in the region, which, by the eve of the 1970s, had also become the main hub for the ‘Amili leftist intelligentsia (Cf.: Yūsuf, Abdul Amīr 2025). In particular, the Forum’s founding members blamed the increasing influence of the LCP - especially after the rise to prominence of Habib Sadiq (Ḥabīb Sādiq) within the Council - for seizing its influence “in a political way that seemed exclusive and reductive” (Faḥṣ 2005: 145). The Forum, on the contrary, proposed a fully open approach, whose intellectual influences spanned from the contemporary Arab literary vanguard, such as Gamal al-Ghitani or Adonis, to the classic and popular Iraqi poetry of al-Mutanabbi or Muzhaffar al-Nawab (Faḥṣ 2005: 148-149). The same openness characterized membership and collaboration, bridging leftist intellectuals of various ideological extractions with cleric-intellectuals of different sects, such as Fahs himself or Bishop

Georges Khodr (Ibid.). Their public engagement combined formal symposia in universities and public halls with open-air readings and debates in the villages “in the manner of the peripatetics or the new Spanish Sun Theater [...] sitting on dirt or mats around special cups of tea” (Ibid.). Private houses were also prominent sites of cultural production and dissemination where youth and villagers flocked to gatherings and public declamations.

In effect, Jabal ‘Amel had a strong tradition of oral poetry, *zajal*, that was deeply rooted across all generations. Gatherings in homes — during evening get-togethers, meals, and reunions — were often occasions for poetic duels. Every young person in the region had written or recited poetry at some point; many of them, as Musa and ‘Ali Shu‘ayb, would be known for their verse locally and even nationally. Everyone knew and respected the best poets — those with sharp tongues, skilled in witty repartee, and the kind of language that forges eloquent speakers. In Sharqiyeh, for instance, ‘Ali Shu‘ayb and Musa’s village, at least until the mid-1980s, any gathering or meal at sunset would spark improvised poetic duels between the best poets of the village and surrounding areas especially when, during the summer, Beirutis and even expatriates returned despite the nearby Israeli occupation<sup>18</sup>.

Forms of resistance were thus forged in the everyday lives of the population. The transmission and circulation of cultural practices — from the tobacco fields of South Lebanon to the football fields — show that a spirit of revolt can emerge from places and learning practices in rural worlds. During interviews (2020-2022), former MRSL militants mentioned specific spaces and moments — sometimes marking significant biographical turning points (*zajal* duels, football matches, sports clubs, markets, hunting, etc.) — that served as occasions to nurture a “desire for something else.” For instance, when, in the late 1950s, a well-known *zajal* poet, holding a small bottle with a clear liquid that was not water but pure ‘*araq*, marched through his village during the ‘Ashura reciting revolutionary verses followed by a crowd of enthusiastic teenagers, this was seen as an anecdote, a drunken outburst. However, one must also consider the impact that these revolutionary words, spoken by a beloved poet, could have had on the young people who followed him. Such commemorations transmit

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Jamile, Sharqiyeh, 2017.

a value system (Mariot 2017; Chaib 2019) that supports the idea that a society at war forges its own destiny (Gensburger 2015; Oeser 2010; Hughes 2008). They can be conceived as networks of intersecting perspectives — between the anticipation of the future, the memory of the past, and the lived experience of the present (Ricoeur 2000) — and this is reflected in cultural practices. Implicitly, this also raises questions about the relationship with political élites and institutions, as well as about political emulation, and even competition.

In commemorations — as in funeral rites (Ben-Amos 2013) and other public performances — power asserts its (exclusive) right to determine what is allowed to be said, seen, and remembered. Exploring the choreographic, playful, and liturgical aspects of gatherings, whether large or small, provides insight into contexts of domination (Scott 2009). Minor shifts (Wedeen 1999), as grains of sand in the machinery, may reveal through jokes, subverted slogans or images, or even specific gestures as the *‘araq* poet criticizing *zu‘amā‘* and their domination through the untouchable lens of a religious practice, namely the *‘Ashura*. These elements can be understood as forms of resistance discourses that helped shape an atmosphere in which some of those who would later take up arms — against the state, against the landowning class, and against an army stationed at their doorstep — came of age.

For *‘Ali Shu‘ayb*, the age came publicly in 1973, as the MRSL, in the wake of the October Arab-Israeli war, staged an attack on the Bank of America in downtown Beirut to seize money for revolutionary guerrilla activities (the same amount the US gave to the Israeli state that same year) and demand the release of the Palestinian *fidā‘iyyīn* detained — an operation that brought MRSL to prominence and turned *‘Ali* into an enduring symbol of revolutionary prowess in Lebanese popular culture as Marcel Khalifeh sang it in the words of Abbas Baydoun (Chaib 2026). But, a real turning point can be found years before that. Husayn, *‘Ali*’s cousin and close friend, recalls listening to one of *‘Ali*’s poems, in the summer of 1968. Being very familiar with *‘Ali*’s poetry, that precise moment marked a rupture, in terms of tone and words, form and content (Ibid.). He presented it as a moment of unprecedented violence by *‘Ali* and said his anger was physical, raw. In the aftermath of 1967 war, and in a rough context for southerners peasants, it was the moment when *‘Ali* and his comrades founded the MRSL, a movement that chose armed struggle as a solution and

direct confrontation as a means of bringing about change, at the local, national, and international levels.

For Fahs, instead, it came in 1972, as two successive events brutally opened his eyes to the fact that cultural activism was no longer sufficient to fulfill the “urge for effective action” that had driven him from Najaf. The first was the news of the devastating Israeli raids against the Palestinian refugee camp of Nabatieh in retaliation against the PFLP attack at the Munich Olympics, in the month of September (United Nations 1972). The second was the very resurgence of the tobacco question, whereof he learned during his last visit to Najaf (Fahş 2005: 150). It was a moment described by Fahs as marked by a profound sense of shame and betrayal against his own origins and family, especially his mother and sisters who bitterly sacrificed their lives in the tobacco fields while he discussed literature and commitment (Janoubia.com 2018).

As a reaction, he definitively dismissed the existentialist posture that had accompanied him since his teenage years and chose the path of grassroots militancy. Accordingly, in 1974, he actively joined al-Fatah (Ataie 2021), whereof, especially during the Civil War, he would become a prominent member (al-Mawla 2014). Meanwhile, as soon as he came back to Lebanon, he dived into the growers’ movement – a diving that marked the beginning of a new transformative chapter of his political journey:

I went in the direction of the tired, in my direction, as I was born next to the tobacco seedling, and put an end to what could have become a betrayal. [...] I went (in 1972) to the tobacco farmers, who led me and I did not lead them, and they introduced me to a political experience without which I would have remained blind. (Janoubia.com 2018)

### **Entangled Politicizations: ‘Ali Shu‘ayb in the Mirror of Fahs and Malak**

By looking at the education and commitment of young men outside partisan frameworks, we can focus on the construction of relationships to the world in specific social and family universes (Bargel, Darmon 2017). Like Hani Fahs, ‘Ali Shu‘ayb also attended the public school of Nabatieh. He was among the children who had to face immense sacrifices to reach school, including walking many kilometers. More

than provoking a political partisan commitment, this seminal period raised their awareness and that of many others.

Elements emerge from the interstices in unrecalled trajectories: ‘Ali’s anger was rooted in the working conditions of the women around him, in the daily injustice he and his relatives suffered, in the economic realities that crushed the inhabitants of rural areas, in a highly unequal national system, in a country where religious communities play a primordial role, and in a regional context where the injustice experienced by the Palestinians was obvious.

Commitment was above all a matter of encounters, of *a priori* innocuous elements that left their mark on the individual, even before intellectual encounters and readings and much more than the heated debates in university courtyards, places to which these children of tobacco had little access. The discussions took place elsewhere, far from these inaccessible places; indeed, their inaccessibility was one of the catalysts of anger. The poetry ‘Ali wrote (Cf.: *infra*), as are the texts written about him and the hagiographic accounts provided by his relatives and former comrades. These voices offer a glimpse into the path denied to this child from poor rural southern Lebanon.

In the aftermath of 1967, ‘Ali Shu‘ayb, Hani Fahs, and many others of their generation, experienced the Naksa as a subjective and personal turning point, a tangible biographical rupture, and one that was collective as it was endured by an entire generation.

So, ‘Ali’s trajectory is not just his personal one. It is also that of all working-class youth from rural backgrounds who confronted injustice daily. It is the radical trajectory of one of the many children who grew up in the tobacco fields on the border of occupied Palestine and ended up on the steps of an American bank in October 1973.

‘Ali, was born in South Lebanon, a stone’s throw from Palestine on the eve of the Nakba in a family of nine. He loved school, literature, the hills of his village, and poetry. His parents, Sa‘ide and Tawfiq, were small farmers. They owned one cow and less than half a hectare of land around their house, where they grew a few tobacco plants.

The society in which he grew up was a “peasant society” (*mujtama‘ fellāhī*)<sup>19</sup>. For decades, tobacco growing had been a main source of income for the region’s small farmers. The monopoly of the Régie

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<sup>19</sup> As named by Abbas (former MRSL militant from ‘Ali’s clandestine cell from a village nearby Sharqiyeh and Jibshit) named it. Interview, July 2021, South Lebanon.

meant that at every stage - from authorization to sales - the producers depended on the Régie. And “you know, growing tobacco isn’t twelve months of the year, it’s thirteen!” – an often repeated phrase by small farmers’ children, pointing to the fact that the very practices associated with this crop are extremely time-consuming.

‘Ali’s parents, like most small farmers in South Lebanon, grew tobacco on the small plots adjacent to their house. They sold the produce to the Régie if they obtained a license, or via intermediaries if not (Cf: *infra*). Income from this activity depended on the large landowners who hired day laborers, and on the Régie that held the monopoly. Many of them kept the surplus – an invisible form of peasant resistance (Scott 1989; Linebaugh 1991) – for their own consumption, bypassing the rules imposed by the Lebanese state and the Régie.

Sa’id, ‘Ali’s younger brother, took part in the tobacco-related activities along with his brothers and sisters, as did ‘Ali from the age of five and Fahs. From plantation to harvesting, it is a laborious, fatiguing activity mobilizing the entire family. At every stage of cultivation, labor begins early in the morning, at night, far before sunrise with each step carried out manually with timeless tools and gestures.

In fact, the whole family works for the Régie [...] They just didn’t pay (*mā by’atō haqq-hon*), the income wasn’t enough. It was to keep the population poor... The big [landowners] managed to get good prices, the *iqtā’iy īn*, those who had *dunums* by the hundreds or even thousands, over 100 *dunums*... We didn’t have much, we had 3 *dunums*... [...] [...] We also had a cow, which gave us milk. We also planted a little wheat, a few onions and a few potatoes, sometimes lentils, a little, for us, to eat, there’s not much room next to the house. But there was no water for the crops. Here in the village, the land was owned by Riad el Solh: they had 200 *dunums* here. Another part of the village belonged to another large family... Yes, half or more of the village belonged to large landowners.<sup>20</sup>

Land concentration, Maryam pointed out, had an impact on its configuration and use, just as the monopolistic relationship with tobacco cultivation played a role in structuring anger. The very modalities of property registration also had a considerable impact on access to land, and in fact reveals strong social hierarchies based

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Maryam, ‘Ali’s sister, July 2021.

on significant disparities in access to administrative and political resources.<sup>21</sup>

Sa'īd's description of tobacco harvesting also highlights an important aspect of the rural economy: namely the role of women that often remains invisible. Although their activity was only partly salaried, it was fundamental to the domestic economy. Indeed, some women were salaried for part of the year<sup>22</sup> and employed either on estates close to their homes or in town (Abisaab 2010). This, however, did not reduce the burden of domestic work<sup>23</sup>. Hani Fahs "felt abhorrence and resentment for being a cleric who did not practice physical labor", while [his] mother and [his] two sisters "were still dreaming of a day off to stay up late and sleep a little later in the morning". (Fahş 2005: 150).

'Ali's older sisters, notably Zaynab and Kemle, worked on an estate owned by large landowners, as did many of the women from poor families in the region. Their income quickly became necessary for the family's subsistence. 'Ali insisted that Maryam, who was eight years younger than him, continue her studies, while their older sisters could not<sup>24</sup>. Despite social distrust and fear for his daughter's reputation, his father Tawfiq finally agreed<sup>25</sup>. Those close to 'Ali explain that, from the early 1960s onwards, he protested against the working conditions and remuneration of his sisters, cousins, and neighbors. A rebellious schoolboy familiar with tobacco work, he saw his sisters earn a few *piastres* for tasks that kept them busy for most of the day. He helped

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<sup>21</sup> For example, in the nineteenth century, the village of Sinay — adjacent to that of 'Ali — belonged to a *muqāta'ji*, an intermediary who held the land and the right to levy taxes. At the end of the Ottoman Empire, the *muqāta'ji* worked to transform this right to levy taxes into rights of ownership, which were subsequently formalized by land registry during the French Mandate. Between 1917 and the late 1930s, Sinay was sold twice. The first purchaser, from a merchant family in Saida, became an important political figure under the Mandate. It was during this period that he registered the village in his name in the new cadastral system, with the exception of dwellings of the farmers' to whom he had granted property rights (El Nour *et al.* 2015).

<sup>22</sup> This was often the case in large landed estates in South Lebanon, as it was with the development of textile mills in the mountains (Chevallier 1971) or warehouses in peri-urban areas (Abisaab 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Domestic work here is defined as any activity related to running a household (*bayt*), including adjoining gardens.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Zeynab, 2016, illiterate to her great regret.

<sup>25</sup> Maryam would continue her secondary studies in Lebanon and then pursue university studies in Iraq, thanks to a partisan scholarship, the only possibility for many young people from working-class backgrounds.

organize a local strike which, after a few days, led to the doubling of their daily pay<sup>26</sup>. In other villages in the area, local strikes were also organized by tobacco workers (Tufaro 2023).

The domestic economy, in its monetary dimension, was taken care of by men. They were the ones who went to the Régie to sell the family's production, as Sa'id recounts:

When it was all over, my father went to the Régie [des tabacs] in Nabatieh, once a year... And once a year, he sold his tobacco. There, he paid the debts, he reimbursed the people and there was a little money left over, a little eh [he laughs]... For us, the little ones, it was a feast, he would come back with *lahme ba 'ajīn* and cakes.

This little pleasure, for Sa'id and his siblings, was superfluous (Bonnecase 2019) but pure happiness for a child. This fleeting pleasure also generated an awareness of the daily injustice experienced by these "children of tobacco". As a child, on his daily walk to the secondary school in the town of Nabatiyeh, which was seven kilometers from his village, 'Ali walked past bakeries. Those who bought cakes were most often civil servants, landowners, and city merchants, some of whom acted as intermediaries for the sale of tobacco. These were the people who Maryam denounces to this day as profiteers of the system. They had access to pastry shops and institution, while the children of small farmers had to toil in the fields on public holidays, during vacations, and after school during the quilting season.

Zaynab, one of 'Ali's older sisters, recalled other journeys, those made to the hills during the 1960s, armed with revolutionary leaflets under her peasant skirt, along with slogans and instructions to be passed on to neighboring villages under the cover of some benign agricultural activity. It was her farming activities, coupled with her status as a woman, that enabled her to move around without arousing suspicion while the intelligence services were looking for her brother who was hidden in those very hills he knew so well. He, too, had walked these hills playing, hunting,<sup>27</sup> and going to school, every day, just a few miles away.

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<sup>26</sup> Interviews with Zeynab, 2016, South Lebanon, and with Kemle, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> There were no hunting rifles in poor families, since hunting licenses were expensive. Social divisions also emerged during these ritualized bird-hunting outings for young men: some had guns, others hunted using traps (Interview with Sa'id, 2022).

‘Ali loved school, but was quickly confronted with a violent reality: continuing his studies would be complicated. After the “brevet”, there was no school within walking distance and he did not take the path Hani Fahs took by going to Najaf. Although an excellent pupil, ‘Ali was unable to study for a baccalaureate. A few years later, he obtained his diploma in Syria as an independent candidate. In the rural Shiite community, schools were state-run and foreign language skills were weak. At the end of the 1960s, the Lebanese system imposed a selective foreign language test that could only be passed by those who went to high standard private schools. The luckiest members of this generation, blocked a priori before the baccalaureate, took their exams in Egypt (for the “richest”) or Syria<sup>28</sup>, like ‘Ali.

The paths of future militants were also shaped by their movements through the tobacco fields, the sharing of tasks in the villages, joint agricultural activities between villages, and later by their clandestine activities, which benefited both from human and labor networks and from their deep knowledge of the territory (Provence 2005). They were socialized in these regions where the memory of demonstrations and struggles against the Mandates are woven into local narratives and where many were traumatized by the “catastrophe” linked to the creation of the State of Israel (1948).

## Conclusions

In our journey through the entangled biographies of Fahs, Malak, ‘Ali Shu‘ayb – and, more broadly, of their entire generation – we have sought to explore the numerous interplays that, bridging the local and the global, the individual and the collective, allowed South Lebanon to become a distinct and transformative laboratory for radical encounters. In particular, we have seen how, before maturing their respective ideological backgrounds, they shaped their early social and political sensitivities by sharing the experiences of rural deprivation – ones substantially marked by persistent struggles with local elites and state agencies caused by the tobacco economy – providing the fertile ground for the emergence of an awareness of injustice and the need to fight for

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Hussayn, friend and cousin of ‘Ali, 2016, South Lebanon. This information, which is rarely available (perhaps because it primarily affected impoverished populations and communities that were hardly visible at the time), is corroborated by Elizabeth Picard (conversation, 2017, Paris).

dignity. Some of the tobacco children joined clandestine movements to achieve their goals of justice, others turned to religion with the same ideas. So close, yet so far, their trajectories were shaped by the same socio-economic background and, for decades, they remained close. Having grown up in the shadow of the Nakba and matured with the Naksa, schools and oral literary culture provided an early forge and future sites for the articulation of their resistance identities – may it be as young Islamists, revolutionary militants, or heterodox committed clerics. The latter, in turn, would find their definition by the eve of the Civil War, sculpted by the unfolding struggles, conflicts, and revolutionary horizons South Lebanon was incorporating – and whereof the Tobacco Intifada represented a crucial transformative moment. Overall, by shifting the focus to the periphery and to everyday intersections of material life and political awakening, this article reveals how historical transformation is forged – not only through top-down processes, but also within the lived spaces, struggles, experiences, relations, and solidarities defining the everyday.

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# The Iranian Left and Political Islam: Episodes and Encounters (1941-1979)

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## ABSTRACT

Since its advent on the Iranian political scene in September 1941, the modern Iranian left has had a complex and turbulent relationship with Islamic forces. The creation and expansion of Iran's modern communist party, Tudeh, in the 1940s and 1950s was met with apprehension by the Shia clergy. The clergy's disdain for the socialist attitudes of Tudeh created opportunities for black propaganda operations.

This chapter will analyse episodes of the complex interaction between leftist forces and the clergy by focusing on incidents that occurred in the period of pluralism, between 1941 and 1953, and then turn its attention to the attitude and interaction with the left of the emerging senior activist cleric, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, between his rise to political prominence in 1963 and the demise of the Pahlavi state in February 1979.

**KEYWORDS:** Iran; Tudeh; Political Shiism; Khomeini; Iranian Revolution.

## The Beginnings

For most of the period between the Allied invasion of September 1941, which brought an end to the rule of Reza Shah, and the August 1953 coup against Mosaddeq (Moşaddeq) that restored Pahlavi autocratic rule, the Iranian left was embodied by the Tudeh Party of Iran, founded a fortnight after the invasion. The Tudeh refrained from publicly adopting Marxist-Leninist tenets from the outset and pledged broad allegiance to the principles of the Mashruṭe constitution and anti-fascism, clearly avoiding any anti-religious stances.<sup>2</sup>

For the entire period during which the party could operate overtly on the Iranian political scene (1941-49), The Tudeh maintained a

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<sup>2</sup> Party programme approved by the first congress in *Nāme-ye rahbar*, 16 Shahrivar 1323 [September 7, 1944].

cautious respect for Shia Islam. On the eve of the first party congress in August 1944, the main party organ, *Rahbar*, acknowledged that efforts had been made to mobilise “the clergy and social classes who had strong adherence to religion” in the religious cities of Qom and Mashad. A Tudeh representative in Qom, Javāheri, wrote on *Rahbar* that the party had sought to make it clear to the clergy that while they were mainly concerned with *ma‘ād* (resurrection in the afterlife), the party focused on *ma‘āsh* (daily sustenance), and referred to these as complementary, not antagonistic to each other.<sup>3</sup>

The party’s first comprehensive charter, which was approved at the congress, called for equal rights for all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation and freedom of religion for all minorities. It did not, however, provide any interpretation on how the party should come to terms with religion and particularly political Islam.

In early 1947, *Rahbar* provided a more substantial treatment of the party’s view towards religion, at a time when Tudeh’s pro-Soviet and Marxist worldview and perspective had emerged into the open in a more substantial manner. An article entitled *Hezb-e Tude va diyānat* (The Tudeh Party and Religion) claimed that the party did not interfere with the religious beliefs of its individual members and stated that its guidance, when it came to matters of faith, was entrusted to the clergy, as party organisations were exempt from wading into such remits. It also claimed that similarly to the Islamic faith, the Tudeh also aspired to bridge the gap between rich and poor. The analysis also touched upon one of the main points of criticism levied by religious circles against the party: agitating for gender equality. It claimed that such a stance was limited to instances such as calling for equal pay for men and women in factories. Moreover, it did not extend to “Islamic Shari‘a” regulations, for which the party professed the utmost respect.<sup>4</sup>

The party’s main writers and theorists only occasionally attempted to engage in more substantive interpretations of the Islamic religion as, for example, prominent party theorist Ehsān Tabari (Ṭabari) did in a detailed study based on the work of Western orientalists that appeared in the party’s intellectual monthly *Nāme-ye mardom* shortly prior to the formal ban of the party in February 1949.

<sup>3</sup> *Nāme-ye rahbar*, 8 Mordād 1323 [July 30, 1944].

<sup>4</sup> “Hezb-e Tude va diyānat”, *Nāme-ye mardom*, 16 Dey 1325 [January 6, 1947].

## The Curious Case of *Negahbānān-e Seḥr va Afsun*

The Tudeh continued to show outwards respect for Islamic principles and the clergy at the beginning of the Mosaddeq era in Spring 1951. At that time, the party had already been banned after an attempt to assassinate the Shah at the University of Tehran. With the central committee partly in exile and partly underground inside the country, the Tudeh main conduit for public activities were a set of front organisations. Ostensibly bereft of any declared connection to the party, these organisations were organised alongside professional or thematic guidelines. According to a study of the party produced by the main political officer in charge of the left at the American Embassy in Tehran in 1952, there were at least nine such organisations. The two more prominent ones were the *Jam'iyat-e Melli-ye Mobāreze bā Sherkathā-ye Este'māri-ye Naft dar Irān* (The Society for the Struggle Against Imperialist Oil Companies in Iran) and the *Jam'iyat-e Irāni-ye Havādārān-e Ṣolḥ* (The Iranian Society of Peace Supporters). The latter fulfilled an important role as the local chapter of the International Peace Partisans movement, a global front organisation that was set up through Soviet patronage by a special congress held in Paris in April 1949.<sup>5</sup> By presenting itself as a broad, non-ideological organisation devoted to the cause of preserving world peace after two devastating world wars, the Peace Partisans succeeded in garnering support from non-communist fellow travellers. It was an important instrument for the preservation of a public presence in regions such as the Middle East, where the various communist parties aligned with Moscow had either been proscribed or were subject to severe restrictions (Kirasirova 2023). Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, a leading female member of the Partito Comunista Italiano, observed the activities of the Syrian chapter of the Peace Partisans from close range while in Iran, where she spent several weeks in the Summer of 1951 and participated in the Iranian political scene. Macciocchi's arrival came several weeks after the Society of Peace Supporters engaged feverishly in collecting signatures for the Stockholm Appeal, a brief statement produced in April 1950 that called for "the outlawing of atomic weapons as instruments of intimidation and mass murder of peoples." Aided by the lack of any

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<sup>5</sup> For a caustic but informative early assessment of the Peace Partisans movement and for a more recent, extended appraisal, see, respectively: Mclachlan 1951; Johnson 2008.

explicit reference to the two emerging Eastern and Western blocs, tens of millions of signatures were collected around the world for what was supposedly a bi-partisan appeal against nuclear weapons.

Collecting the support of non- and even anti-communist political figures for the Stockholm Appeal was high on the agenda of Tudeh's front organisation. The Peace Supporters' newspaper, *Maslahat*, which was effectively founded as a tool to promote the Appeal itself, devoted great attention to endorsements by the senior Shia clergy, such as that of Ayatollah Abolqāsem Kāshāni, who would later confide to Macciocchi that his signature was driven by his intense opposition to British imperialism (Macciocchi 1952: 163-164).

The emerging ties between the Tudeh and elements of the clergy alarmed Western intelligence agencies, which resorted to a black operation to stem this rise. In October 1951, the head of the national gendarmerie suddenly announced the discovery of a book that had been allegedly prepared and printed outside of Iran by the Tudeh party and smuggled in via Paris. Entitled *Negahbānān-e seḥr va aḥsun* ("The Guardians of Sorcery and Witchcraft"), the book purported to present a selection of writings by senior Tudeh ideologues on Islam, Islamic principles, and the Shia clergy.

As we now know thanks to Mark Gasiorowski's research, *Negahbānān* was the product of an extensive psychological warfare or black propaganda operation undertaken by the CIA in the context of TPBEDAMN, a wide-ranging initiative to counter communism in Iran through propaganda operations (Gasiorowski 2013: 12) .

The book included a select, instrumental series of quotations from older articles, such as the aforementioned one by Tabari and other writings condemning Western forms of bourgeoisie. It was subject to an extensive propaganda campaign managed by the two main TPBEDAMN Iranian operatives, journalists 'Ali Jalāli and Farrokh Keyvāni, who were well-integrated in the popular press of Tehran. In particular, they were connected to *Tehrān-e moṣavvar*, one of the more popular "yellow" periodicals of the time.

*Tehrān-e moṣavvar* took the lead in exposing and attacking Tudeh over the *Negahbānān* book. It claimed that the book exposed the true intentions of the party were it ever to come to power and led the charge when the Tudeh overt press strenuously denied all allegations of being behind its publication. Indeed, a Tudeh journal, *Kabutar-e ṣolḥ*, conducted a typographical analysis and compared the unusual font

and layout of the book to that of a recently printed bulletin of the Voice of America service in English, highlighting the evident similarities between the two.

*Neghbānān* was written in a deliberately provocative style and contained frequent, long quotations and references to anti-religious statements made by Soviet leaders Lenin and Stalin, as well as robust anti-Islamic remarks. The few party publications that dealt directly with Islam, most notably the aforementioned Tabari article in the *Nāme-ye mardom* monthly, as well as works by writers close to the party such as Mortazā Rāvandi, were also quoted.

Rather than engaging in the standard definition of Islam as revelation, the book claimed that, like other faiths, Islam also was “a material phenomenon, which was a product of the social, economic and productive conditions of its time.” The Shia phenomenon of the rise and occultation of the Hidden Imam is defined as “one of the biggest examples of *afsun*,” or “spell” cast by clerics on societies. The book claimed that the early Islamic wars of conquest were proof that the faith had failed to make inroads into the deprived parts of contemporary society and associated the importance of Mecca in early Islam with its role as a commercial, rather than a religious centre (1951: 33).

The book also focused extensively on providing a definition of historical materialism and presenting it as the best process for the proletariat to dispense with ancient traditions and customs (1951: 72). Its anti-religious nature was heavily emphasised.

The book ended with a series of quotes by Lenin on religion effectively being the “opium” of society and Stalin’s claims that every religion was anti-scientific; indeed, opposition to religion was an important part of educational activity in the Soviet Union from its outset. It concluded by highlighting the need to combat the “reactionary nature” of the clerical class (*Ertejā‘-e siyāh*, a term later often employed by the Shah) and railing against the “illiteracy” of clerics. Given its previously cautious attitude, the text marked a very clear departure from Tudeh’s public stance on religion.

Despite Tudeh denials, several prominent clerical writers eagerly embraced the hypothesis that the book was a genuine Tudeh publication and took advantage of the opportunity to thoroughly attack the party, Marxism, and historical materialism. It allowed the clergy to settle the score with a party they had always suspected of seeking to implant and spread atheism in Iran. Mehdi Serāj Ansāri (Anšāri), a cleric who

was active in book and journal publications, claimed that Tudeh had concealed its real intentions and views on religion in the initial phases of its existence, and subsequently exploited the laxity of society and successive governments to further its agenda, producing anti-religious books to amplify the views of Marx and Lenin. He believed that Tudeh had “opened up its anti-religious fist” through the publication of the book and called it an “insult to religious sanctities.” Khālesizāde (Khālesizāde), a prominent cleric based in Iraq who had taken part in the 1920 revolt against the British, called the book a clear attack on God, the Twelfth Imam, and other pillars of Islam and Shiism.

An early consequence of *Negahbānān* was an incident that took place in Qom in January 1953. Khomeini’s first important press appearance came in early 1953, when a reporter for the popular magazine *Taraqqi* was dispatched to Qom to report on the severe clashes that had erupted after Ayatollah Borqē‘i, a cleric embedded in the activities of the Tudeh front organisations returned from an international conference in Vienna organised under the auspices of the international Peace Partisans movement and its Iranian chapter, the National Council of Peace Supporters.<sup>6</sup> He was met by a contingent of anti-communist seminary students, who pressed him to cut ties with Tudeh. Presumed supporters of Borqē‘i lined the streets and chanted slogans such as “Death to the Decrepit Islam!” and “Death to [the Grand Ayatollah, head of the Qom seminary] Borujerdi!”. In the ensuing confusion, which resulted in the destruction of the store owned by Borqē‘i’s son, a member of the Peace Supporters, at least one protestor was killed by the security forces that had to resort to firearms to contain the violence.

While attempting to record Ayatollah Borujerdi’s opinion on the incident, the *Taraqqi* reporter was referred to Khomeini, who was introduced as his official representative. Khomeini tersely told him that Borujerdi believed that Borqē‘i should be exiled from Qom as it was a “religious town” and that the Mosaddeq government should refrain from extending voting rights to women, as it was considering at the time.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Borqē‘i and another mid to high-ranking cleric, Ayatollah Kamarei, were within the orbit of the National Council, and delivered keynote addresses at the International Peace Conference in Vienna, in late 1952. Their speeches received ample coverage in the Council’s overt newspaper *Maṣlahat* and were the likely cause of the Qom violence.

<sup>7</sup> Report on the Qom commotion in *Taraqqi*, January 24, 1952.

## The Tudeh Party and Khomeini's Rise to Prominence

The clergy's deep mistrust and enmity towards the Tudeh Party persisted for the remainder of the Mosaddeq administration and led to some clerics siding with the coup plotters in August 1953, when an initiative masterminded by the MI6 and the CIA led to the overthrow of Prime Minister Mosaddeq. There is evidence that both intelligence services sought to leverage the clerics' anti-communism on that fateful day. *Millat-e Mā*, an Islamic-oriented newspaper, which is now known to have had contacts with the network of anti-Mosaddeq agents directed by Jalāli and Keyvāni, beseeched Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi on the day of the coup, August 19, to "break his silence, for Tehran is in the hand of the Bolsheviks."

The clergy stood by impassively and occasionally supportively as, throughout the 1950s, the post-coup military government proceeded to systematically dismantle the remnants of the Tudeh Party's operation in the country. By the time Ayatollah Borujerdi died in 1961 and his understudy and mentee, Ruhollah Khomeini, rose to prominence, the Tudeh Party was ensconced in an uncomfortable exile in Eastern Europe. From there, it reacted with cautious optimism to the Shah's land reform programme, formally launched through a referendum in early 1963.

Tudeh's increasingly caustic view towards landowners and their perceived allies in society at large would strongly influence its initial reaction to the 15 Khordād 1342 (June 5, 1963) uprising, which marked the first instance of crowd-driven mobilisation against the Pahlavi state following the August 1953 coup. The uprising came as a major surprise to the Tudeh leadership (Randjbar-Daemi 2021).

The extent to which the 15 Khordād uprising was caused by or related to the state's land reform process remains debatable. Indeed, in the period preceding the uprising, Khomeini appears to have paid little attention to the topic in his sermons and communications. According to one of his closest disciples, Ayatollah Hoseyn-ʿAli Muntāzirī (Montazeri), Khomeini reacted sternly to a pamphlet produced by another senior cleric that was firmly against the Shah's six principles of the White Revolution, arguing that land reform was contrary to Islam and performing prayers over confiscated land was effectively *harām*. Khomeini told Montazeri and several other disciples that this was "the wrong way to lead the struggle" and that it would lead peasants and even parents to rise

up against the clergy if they insisted on claiming that land reform or expansion of education were contrary to the Shari'a (Montazeri 2001: 104). Moreover, they argued that the clergy should not oppose the principle of land reform but rather should act against the increasing power of the Pahlavi state. Khomeini urged the clergy to shift the public's attention towards the Shah's intention to seek a popular confirmation for his reforms through the referendum which would be held on January 26, 1963 and declared that the initiative was against the constitution and potentially tantamount, in the future, to the Shah seeking and obtaining approval for further autocratic decisions in the same manner (Montazeri 2001: 104).

The Tudeh Party leadership in exile in East Germany lashed out at Prime Minister 'Alam in early January 1963, accusing him of driving the "rise" of incompatibility with religious principles for the government's first backtracking in the extension of voting rights to women.<sup>8</sup> In an article at the beginning of the Persian new year, in late March 1963, which was ostensibly a reaction to the Shah's announcement on February 27 on the final extension of women's right to vote and hold public office, the prominent female cadre Maleke Mohammadi (Moḥammadi) praised, through a pseudonym, this breakthrough as the result of the continuous collective struggle for emancipation by women.<sup>9</sup>

Khomeini's public remarks on these matters were in considerable contrast to those espoused by Tudeh. In a speech to university students on April 30, 1963, Khomeini declared that the seminary system was not on the whole opposed to land reform but had not been consulted in this regard by the government. He defined it as a "distraction" for peasants (Khomeini 2001: 191). In the same speech, Khomeini also stated that he was not opposed to women casting ballots but called their election to public office as tantamount to "prostitution." It was, according to Khomeini, a matter of the lowest importance when compared to the government's ongoing limitations on the freedom of expression and press (Ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> "Jaraqgehā-ye ki khāmush shud", *Mardom*, 15 Dey 1341 [January 6, 1963]. This commentary did not address the fact that the government's initiative had been scuppered by the decisive intervention of leading clerics such as Ayatollah Kāzēm Shari'atmadāri and Khomeini himself.

<sup>9</sup> Mīnu, "Sar-āghāz-e yek marḥale-ye novin dar mobāreze-ye zanān", *Mardom*, 1 Farvardin 1342 [March 21, 1963].

The Tudeh adopted a strident tone after the events of March 22, 1963, when the city centre of Tabriz became the scene of a heated confrontation between local seminary students, who were holding a protest at the same time as the Feyziye (Feyziye) seminary in Qom, and what the state-controlled media referred to as “intellectuals and women supporting female suffrage.”<sup>10</sup> Four days later, the party’s Radio Peyk broadcast a commentary explaining that the Tabriz clashes were the result of the clergy’s attempt to prevent women from obtaining a “small token of their rights,” following the government’s backtracking on this issue. It then urged the clergy to refrain from adopting a “reactionary stance.”<sup>11</sup> By the middle of 1963, Tudeh media had converged on a caustic depiction of the role of the clergy in Iranian politics and considered it inimical to the party’s cautious support for certain principles of the state’s reform programme.

The 15 Khordād uprising caught the Tudeh leadership in East Germany by surprise. The party had not issued a call for mobilisation and reacted to the events unfolding in the country with a mixture of wariness for the firm religious and clerical foundations of the newly found street opposition to the Pahlavi state and trepidation for the resumption of significant popular momentum against the royal court a decade after the August 1953 coup. A detailed analysis of the uprising produced by the Shah’s secret police, the Sāvāk, identified members of the Liberation Movement of Iran (LMI), *bazār* merchants connected to both religious groups and the secular National Front, members of pious mourning societies, remnants of the Fadā’iyān-e Eslām radical group, supporters of Ayatollah Behbahāni and other senior clerics, as well as troublemakers from the southern quarters of the capital; however, it found no meaningful participation by Tudeh sympathizers (1999: 182). Another Sāvāk report indicated that whilst this group was usually eager to get involved in any anti-governmental protest, this time it viewed the protestors as “reactionary and supportive of the large landowners” and believed that a more reactionary administration would take hold if the uprising were to be successful ” (1999: 147).

<sup>10</sup> Reports in *Kayhān* and *Ittilā’āt*, 6 Farvardin 1342 [March 26, 1963]. The confrontation resulted in the death of at least two people.

<sup>11</sup> Radio Peyk commentary, 25 March 1963, as translated in FBIS-FRB-63-059.

For a fortnight after the uprising, the daily broadcasts of Radio Peyk, Tudeh's radio station, which at the time was operating from Bulgaria, became the sole carrier of the party's initial reactions. The first analysis was broadcast at the same time as the publication of a brief article on the Soviet government's official media organ. The uprising was interpreted as a reactionary response to the anti-feudal land reform and the extension of voting rights to women. It directly accused the clergy of taking its cues from the large landowners.<sup>12</sup>

The initial analysis by Radio Peyk pivoted between appreciation for the anti-regime nature of the protest and its previously voiced disdain for the attitude of landowners and clerics with regards to the reforms of the White Revolution. It idealistically referred to the protestors as being "thirsty" for far-reaching reforms in the economic, social, and political realms and their being driven to the streets mainly by the twin ailments of poverty and unemployment. It then warned that those who "present this movement as the work of a handful of landowners and reactionaries" are mendacious,<sup>13</sup> prior to adding that "a number of reactionary groups of landowners and religious men are trying to make capital out of the general unrest and the popular feelings against the regime, in the interest of their own class."<sup>14</sup>

In a further commentary the following day, Radio Peyk advocated the free distribution of land to peasants, the "eradication of "colonial influence," and the "granting of real freedom to women" as the current slogans of the Iranian people, and advised that the struggle to achieve such goals should remain "free of the conspiracies of the landowners [...] and the reactionary men of religion."<sup>15</sup> The notion that the protests could not have been spurred by the landowners and the clergy was reinforced through another speech two days later, this time in Kurdish,<sup>16</sup> which strongly doubted that large cities such as Tehran, defined

<sup>12</sup> *Izvestija*, 6 June 1963.

<sup>13</sup> Radio Peyk commentary on the demonstrations broadcast on June 6, 1963, as translated in SWB, ME/1269/D/1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Radio Peyk commentary, June 7, 1963, as translated in SWB, ME/1270/D/2.

<sup>16</sup> At the time of the 15 Khordād uprising, Radio Peyk presented its habitual Persian and Kurdish services, the latter being managed by members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, such as Karim Hosāmi (Hosāmi) and 'Ali Ghilāvej, and had briefly commenced Arabic language programming in late March 1963, following the coup of the 'Āref brothers against 'Abdolkarim Qāsem in order to provide propaganda support for the vanquished Iraqi Communist Party.

as “one of the hotbeds for Iranian revolutionary movements” in the past couple of decades, would feature tens of thousands of protestors willing to “follow a few men of religion and reactionary landlords and demand the abolition of land reform or be opposed to the emancipation of women.”<sup>17</sup> While admitting that a group of “rotten reactionaries who regrettably are dressed in religious robes” have penetrated the ranks of the protesters to further their own goals, the commentary insisted that the root cause of the 15 Khordād uprising were the conditions of the “masses of the impoverished, hungry, deprived and oppressed people fed up with life,” due to rampant unemployment, suffering, homelessness and another “thousand and one misfortunes” and not the “inspiration and instigation of a number of landlords and rotten, reactionary men of religion.”<sup>18</sup>

The Radio Peyk reports were to a great extent mirrored in *Mardom*'s own analysis of the 15 Khordād uprising. The Central Committee's organ explained that there was little doubt that “reactionary elements have striven to use and abuse the religious sentiment of some,” but remained confident that the protesting crowd was steering clear of this stance and aiming instead for broad political objectives such as the freedom of political prisoners, free elections, and above all the end of the “[post-August 1953] coup regime.” It was the Sāvāk, according to this analysis, which sought to assign a reactionary and anti-reformist nature to these demonstrations.<sup>19</sup>

The party therefore expressed its conviction that Khomeini and the other high clergy were unable to mobilise substantial masses through what it referred to as their reactionary agenda, mostly consisting of opposition to female suffrage and collusion with landowners opposed to the state's land reform programme. It therefore shared some peripheral commonality in this regard with the Shah himself, who ironically

<sup>17</sup> Radio Peyk commentary in Kurdish, June 9, 1963, as translated in SWB, ME/1271/D/7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. The opinion expressed in these radio commentaries would be airbrushed out of the party's retrospective account of 15 Khordād after the 1979 Revolution, when the exigencies of the time mandated Tudeh claim instead that it had been a steadfast backer of the “Imam's Line” at the time. See, in this regard, the three-part article on Tudeh and 15 Khordad in *Nāme-ye mardom*, 12-14 Khordād 1360 [June 2-4, 1981] and the pamphlet *Hezhdah sāl poshtibāni az khaṭṭ-i Emām*, which contains a highly selective sample of the material contained in this section.

<sup>19</sup> “Haft-e khunin-e Khordād-māh”, *Mardom*, 1 Tir 1342 [June 21, 1963]. The article alluded to the frequent statements by the authorities on the reactionary aim of the uprising ringleaders.

often adopted the term *ertejā<sup>c</sup>-e siyāh*, or Black Reaction, to juxtapose the clergy with his other nemesis, the *ertejā<sup>c</sup>-e sorkh*, or Red Reaction, whilst vilifying both of them.<sup>20</sup> This choice of words led to a strong verbal attack against the monarch by Khomeini in his famous June 3, 1963 address at the Feyziye seminary that spurred his arrest and the rioting three days later. Indeed, it is considered the spark that ignited Iran's Islamic revolution.

In mid-December, Radio Peyk commented on a *Le Monde* analysis addressing the rise in Khomeini's popular support during the months following the uprising by urging the clergy to "demand the total elimination of feudalism and the complete freedom of the masses of our society, including women."<sup>21</sup> This report elicited a strong reaction by *Be<sup>c</sup>sat*, a seminary journal edited by some of the future statesmen of the Islamic Republic, which noted how the clergy was always in step with popular demand but fell short of engaging with the broadcast's emphasis on land reform and women's rights.<sup>22</sup> A more elaborate distinction between the two types of clergy was provided a few months later, when "progressive" clerics such as Khomeini and Mahmud Tāliqāni (Ṭāleqāni) were separated from Sheykh Kāzem Yazdi, Fazlallāh Nuri, and Abolqāsem Kāshāni, who were accused of collaboration with the royal court on various occasions. The contemporary clergy were hence asked to engage in the creation of a united front with all national and anti-colonial forces.<sup>23</sup>

Tudeh did not reconcile with Khomeini on the issues of land reform and women's rights and remained wary of the clergy's opposition to these matters into the latter half of 1964. However, it progressively found common ground with the militant cleric over a more paramount concern: resistance against the American influence and presence

<sup>20</sup> In a land reform speech in Kermān a week prior to the uprising, the Shah urged society to avoid both types of *ertejā<sup>c</sup>* as if they were "impure animals." This remark was reported on both *Keyhān* and *Eṭṭelā<sup>c</sup>āt* of 6 Khordād 1342 [May 27, 1963] and later censored from the official compilation of the Shah's speeches and declarations (Pahlavi 1968).

<sup>21</sup> Radio Peyk broadcast, 18 December 1963, as translated in FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Services)-FRB-63-245.

<sup>22</sup> *Be<sup>c</sup>sat*, 2, Day 1342 [December 1963].

<sup>23</sup> "Ru-ye sokan-e mā bā pishvāyān-e dini ast", *Mardom*, 15 Mordād 1343 [6 August 1964]. This commentary was read out on Radio Peyk a fortnight later and caused another caustic reaction within *Be<sup>c</sup>sat*, 9, 31 Shahrivar 1343 [22 September 1964], where the Radio's depiction of Nuri, Yazdi and Kāshāni were chastised.

in Iran. Whilst most foreign affairs issues addressed by Khomeini's Moḥarram speech in 1963 focused on attacks on Israel,<sup>24</sup> Khomeini tilted towards overtly anti-American rhetoric following his return to Qom. The controversial extension of the Statute of Forces Agreement to cover American staff employed by the Iranian state triggered a new round of outrage amongst the opposition and was conducive to Khomeini's famous October 26 speech in which he virulently attacked the Shah and his government (2005: 41-42).

By mid-November, the printed version of Khomeini's speech had begun to circulate amongst opposition circles in Western Europe. A selection of the speech was first reprinted in the organ of the National Front abroad, and then by the Socialist League. Whilst repeating the main parts of Khomeini's charges against the extension of the Vienna convention on diplomatic immunity, both publications omitted a segment in which the cleric vented his opposition to the employment of women in male elementary schools, and vice-versa, which he cautioned was an evident source of moral corruption. Moreover, concerning the authorities' insistence that women be allowed to hold public office, he noted once again that "its [moral] corruption and futility are clear for all" (Rowḥānii 1978: 734-735).<sup>25</sup> Additionally, both publications failed to reproduce the only section of the text related to state reforms in which Khomeini noted that these were conducive to the emergence of a black market in the hands of the United States and Israel.<sup>26</sup>

The first mention of Khomeini's communiqué in Tudeh media were the salient passages quoted by *Mardom* with a predictable focus on Khomeini's rage against the United States. It specifically addressed his belief that the extension of the Vienna Convention would cast the country into slavery, as well as his strong criticism of American support for Israel, which he accused of making Muslim Arabs homeless. However, once again, there was no mention of Khomeini's disparag-

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<sup>24</sup> The Tudeh did not comment this aspect of Khomeini's speech in its approach to the Ayatollah in 1963-64 for the likely reason of Israel's warm relations with the Eastern bloc prior to the Six Day War of 1967.

<sup>25</sup> This printed version is significantly different in this regard to the speech, the latter not including any mention of women's rights or the state's reform initiatives.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, Khomeini's communiqué as published in *Iran-i āzād*, Ābān 1343 [November 1964]: 4 and *Sosyālism*, Ādhar 1343 [December 1964]:1-2.

ing remarks regarding women's rights or his assessment of the Pahlavi state's reforms.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, together with the rest of the secular opposition, Tudeh decided to focus on the common ground with Khomeini and sought to converge towards and benefit from his sudden emergence as a toughened, exiled opposition figure to the Pahlavi state. In so doing, the party effectively chose to avoid juxtaposing its elaborate analysis of the land reform programme and other aspects of the White Revolution to Khomeini's increasingly trenchant dismissal of them. Therefore, to a large extent, it manufactured an image of Khomeini which was not, as we will see below, true to the cleric.

### **Khomeini and the Marxist Left: from the 1960s to the Revolution**

Khomeini kept his distance from many mainstream secular Iranian opposition groups during his long exile in Najaf (1964-78) and his brief stay in Paris (October 1978 - February 1979). He did not endorse or support urban guerrilla warfare in Iran related to the Siyāhkal episode in February 1971, nor did he seek ties with the nascent Fadā'i-yi Khalq and Mujāhedīn-e Khalq radical underground guerrilla groups. Instead, he maintained a stridently anti-leftist discourse which appears to have been inspired by the anti-Marxist positions which, as we have seen, emerged from the *Negahbānān* affair.

Various leftist groups viewed Khomeini as a prominent, determined exile who opposed the Shah. During a broadcast on October 17, 1965, the Tudeh's radio station openly admitted that its support for Khomeini had only begun when the cleric began protesting against the SOFA. Throughout his extended exile in Najaf, Radio Peyk continued to feature Khomeini in its programming; to the extent that the Sāvāk was troubled by the cleric distributing sermons to Radio Peyk emissaries in Baghdad. Around the same time, the Shah seized on Radio Peyk's constant coverage of Khomeini's exile in his hubristic book *En-qelāb-e sefid* (The White Revolution). In a passage in which he attacked Khomeini for his role in the July 1963 uprising and questioned

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<sup>27</sup> "‘Elāmiye-ye Āyātollāh Khomeyni", *Mardom*, 1 Ādhar 1343 [22 November 1964]. The text published here was ostensibly read on Radio Payk on the evening of November 27, according to a Sāvāk report in (2005: 519) and SWB, ME/1722/1.

his origins, the Shah claimed that the cleric's connections with foreign countries was demonstrated by the Radio Peyk coverage: "...the Radio of the nation-less refugees of the former Tudeh Party, that is the party which is fundamentally opposed to God worshipping, praises this individual as an Ayatollah." The Shah also mocked what he referred to as the radio's efforts to depict Khomeini as a saintly figure (Pahlavi 1968: 722).

This issue was also addressed by popular magazines. In a general attack on Soviet propaganda activities against Iran, the editor of the widely read weekly *Khvāndanihā* claimed that the "organ of the atheists of the world [Radio Peyk] occasionally defends the clergy with such fervour as to make it appear that it has a prophetic mission attached on to itself" and further chided Radio Peyk for its repeated opposition to American economic aid to Iran.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to Tudeh, another emerging element of the opposition that collected many elements of the New Left, the Confederation of Iranian Studies, also started to promote Khomeini as a significant element of opposition to the Shah. The Third Congress of the Confederation, held in London in January 1964, featured the recent 15 Khordād uprising prominently on its agenda. Its final resolutions contained a joint message to Khomeini and two other senior Ayatollahs residing in Iran, Seyyed Kāzem Shari'atmadāri and Mohammad-Hādi Milāni. It praised these "brave clerics" for the "Muharram [June 6, 1963] Revolution," which was more than a simple uprising and should be considered "the proof of our joined unity and strength" (Showkat 2010a: 136-137). Despite these auspices, the relationship between the Confederation, which grew considerably in strength as increasing numbers of Iranian university students emigrated to Europe and North America, and Khomeini remained one-sided. The Confederation's representatives travelled to Najaf twice to meet with Khomeini in person, thereby becoming the only representatives of a non-religious group to do so during the Ayatollah's long exile in the Iraqi shrine city. The first of these meetings occurred on June 25, 1966. The Confederation's main journal described the purpose of this visit, which was conducted by a delegation returning from a student conference in the Philippines, as discussing "possible avenues for the future cooperation between the Confederation and the oppositional

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<sup>28</sup> *Khvāndanihā*, 4 Khordād 1344 [May 25, 1965].

clergy." Khomeini was reported as being "in complete agreement" with regards to cooperation and contact between the Confederation and seminary institutions in Qom and beyond. He also proclaimed that the clergy would cooperate with the Confederation opposition students "according to Islamic rulings" (Showkat 2010b: 257-258). An inkling of this approach can also be seen in the letter which Mostafā Khomeini, the Ayatollah's eldest son and effective chief of staff, sent to Cosroe Chaqueri, the Confederation's head of publications, on August 30, 1968. Mostafā lamented the lack of religious articles and content in the few issues of *16 Ādhar*, the Confederation's main information periodical, which had reached Najaf. He also claimed that it was not possible to approve of any of the political parties on the scene, as the "majority of the Iranian population are Muslim" and adhere to the faith. He therefore exhorted the Confederation and other radical secular opposition organisations to embrace Islamic principles. Chaqueri's response was predictably piqued and noted that the Confederation was a student body composed of members of different persuasions that had always striven to raise awareness in international human rights circles on the oppression inflicted by the regime on "our clerical brothers," especially with regard to Khomeini senior. Chaqueri also acknowledged the reproduction of the letter by Qom seminary students but ultimately did not budge on the issue of greater adherence to Islamic principles (Shawkat 2010b: 260-261).

The second and final meeting between Confederation representatives and Khomeini took place in August-September 1969, when Mahmud Rafi<sup>c</sup>, the organisation's treasurer, and Majid Zarbakhsh, its structural director, travelled to Baghdad after attending the fifth congress of the General Union of Palestine Students (GUPS) in Amman. After participating in the complicated event in the Jordanian capital, where they expressed their opposition to the presence on stage of King Hussein, viewed as an opponent of the Marxist-inspired radicalism of most of the Confederation and the GUPS, the two representatives reached Najaf to meet with Khomeini and his son and effective chief of staff, Mostafā. This encounter does not appear to have produced any substantial changes in the relationship between the two sides. According to Zarbakhsh's memoirs, one of the top items on the Confederation's regional agenda was pushing back against the activities of Taymur Bakhtiyār, the former founder of the Shah's Sāvāk secret police, who had fallen out with the monarch and sought refuge

in Iraq, where he had become an outspoken conspirator against the Pahlavi state.

The circumstances surrounding Zarbakhsh and Rafi (Rafi‘)‘s arrival at Khomeini’s residence in Najaf are a stark reminder of the substantial cultural differences between the secular, radical opposition in Europe and Shia-inclined elements. As they visited the cleric during the midday prayer time, they were invited to either join in the collective prayers led by the Ayatollah or call again later, which they did.<sup>29</sup> This *faux pas* aside, Khomeini appeared quite receptive to the party and engaged in what Zarbakhsh referred to as a “very friendly private conversation,” in which the Ayatollah expressed his frank judgment on a variety of issues and again pledged, in a vague manner, to work together with the Confederation against the Pahlavi regime. Moreover, Khomeini acknowledged the existence of two kinds of clergy in Iran, a “combatant” radical one that emerged following the June 1963 uprising and a part that remained beholden to the royal court. When it came to Bakhtiyār, however, he exhibited a more pragmatic opinion, claiming that Bakhtiyār was an influential member of the opposition and should not be outed and condemned, as the Confederation representatives wished to do at a press conference in Baghdad the following day.<sup>30</sup>

An informal breakfast hosted by Mostafā Khomeini the following morning led to another incident that was highly indicative of the fraught relationship between the two sides. Khomeini’s son and confidante raised the issue of their sensitivity to the championing of foreign role models, noting disapprovingly that the National Front in the Middle East, a group of independent communist activists (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2017), were publishing laudatory articles about Lenin and Che Guevara on the anniversary of their birthdays. Mostafā’s comments also raised criticism by another member of Khomeini’s inner circle attending the breakfast, who pointed out that they should be considered important personalities connected to the global struggle against imperialism.<sup>31</sup>

The Confederation’s stance on Khomeini’s activism remained low key in the run-up to the Revolution of 1977-8, as the Ayatollah continued to show little or no interest in engaging with the organisation be-

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<sup>29</sup> Hamid Ahmadi Oral History Interview with Majid Zarbakhsh, Tape 6, Berlin, Research Association for Iranian Oral History, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

yond the aforementioned issue of its broad adherence to Islamic principles. The Confederation continued to issue short, supportive statements on Khomeini's activism at its various Congresses, but no further substantive contact occurred between the two sides, particularly as Khomeini's caustic attitude towards the left showed little signs of change.

This stance became clear once large street demonstrations began against the regime. For example, in his first interview with Western media, *Le Monde* in Najaf in April 1978, Khomeini resolutely opposed any substantial discussion of the authorities' insistence on Black and Red colonialism and sternly refused any contact or collaboration with the Marxist left, as was alleged by state propaganda, adding that he had asked his followers to avoid any collaboration with Marxists, even for the sake of overthrowing the Shah. Khomeini justified this position by explaining that he believed that the left would establish "a dictatorial regime opposed to the spirit of Islam" upon reaching power. Khomeini added, however, that Marxists would enjoy freedom of expression in the kind of society that his political side sought to establish and was certain that his Islamic faith would effectively counter leftist ideology. In a message on June 11, 1978, marking the anniversary of the June 1963 uprising, Khomeini devoted a substantial amount of time to the Shah's frequent claim that an end to his reign was likely to coincide with the emergence of a communist regime in Iran, a scenario which in his view could "deceive" those who were not well-informed. Khomeini then made the quixotic statement that communism in Iran was an American creation, in the same way as the Tudeh Party was a British one. He mentioned unspecified instances of communist movements in the Middle East that were aided and abetted by the United States in order to prevent nationalist-religious liberation struggles. He then forthrightly proclaimed that the road to emancipation of any nation from "the claws of colonialism" was religious, which had its roots "in the depth of the soul of that nation" (1978: 44-45).

These remarks did not go unnoticed within the ranks of the opposition but were rarely rebutted in an outright manner. In winter of 1977, Cosroe Chaqueri, who had authored the aforementioned terse exchange of correspondence with Khomeini's son and had since become an independent leftist activist and publisher, wrote an open letter from his base in Florence, Italy to Khomeini, lamenting the cleric's frequent attacks on the left. He singled out the religious activists supportive of

Khomeini's depiction of an unholy alliance between Marxism, Zionism, and imperialism as proof that information placed at the cleric's disposal "ran against reality." In an introduction written several months later, as the revolutionary fervour was in full swing in the summer of 1978, Chaqueri pointed to the Khomeini's June 11 address as a case in point.

Chaqueri's address, which was widely distributed as a pamphlet amongst the Iranian opposition at the time,<sup>32</sup> was not immediately reciprocated by similar critiques of Khomeini's attitude to the left.

There is little sign that Khomeini was swayed by Chaqueri's claims. On the other hand, some of his sternest words against communism came during his address to university students at the beginning of the academic year in October 1978. He took issue with Chinese leader Hua Kuo-Feng's controversial state visit to Iran and accused him of "walking over the corpses of our dear compatriots who had been slain by the Shah's forces due to their patriotism and liberty-seeking." Moreover, he also accused the Soviet Union of backing the Shah's killing of innocent civilians "back on 15 Khordad [June 1963 uprising] and today." He then proclaimed that "all communist powers turn the blood of the deprived populations into a lethal weapon for destroying humanity, alongside the bloodsucking Americans." Khomeini also defined the Tudeh Party as "a dirty party connected to the Shah's apparatus" and urged the nation to "cut off the hands of the foreign agents, both Right and Left" (1978: 235-237).

These manifest expressions of opposition to the left caught the attention of intellectuals and writers. *Iranshahr*, a newspaper launched in October 1978 by prominent author Ahmad Shamlou (Shāmlu) in London, published a detailed analysis of Khomeini's anti-leftist sentiment along with critiques by smaller components of the secular left. A group of students based in Europe that tacitly backed the Fadā'i movement underscored the role of Cuban, Vietnamese, Laotian, Angolan, and Cambodian communists in bringing about "historic" defeats for imperialism. Other commentaries pointed out that such anti-communist statements undermined the very unity of opposition forces that Khomeini frequently demanded in his statements. This unity was frayed by the beginning of the academic year, as according

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<sup>32</sup> The Changhiz Davarpanah (Dāvarpanāh) collection hosted at the Istituto Italiano di Studi Orientali at Sapienza University of Rome has several original copies of this pamphlet.

to *Iranshahr* separate red (leftist) and green (religious) banners and marches took place at the University of Tehran once the academic year was underway.<sup>33</sup>

The alarming rate of Khomeini's anti-leftist statements caused consternation in other sections of the left, too. Iraj Eskandari, Tudeh's First Secretary, stated in an interview with the *World Marxist Review* published in November 1978 that the Shite clergy

...should not be regarded as a force that wants to put the clock back to medieval times. To a considerable extent their stand reflects popular feelings. The fact that the religious movement is today playing an important role in mobilising the democratic and national forces against the dictatorial, anti-national, pro-imperialist regime of the Shah is only to be welcomed.

He then continued:

When Muslim leaders like Khomeini take up anti-imperialist positions and declare that the Shah's regime is anti-popular and anti-Islamic and that it should be overthrown, we regard this as a positive phenomenon. This does not mean, of course, that we agree with the religious leaders on all points, but one has to be realistic. It would be different if the all was to set up a theocratic state. But, as far as we know, the Iranian religious leaders have never called for this ...

Shortly after the publication of this interview, which was never published by the party's Persian press organs, Tudeh sought to obtain a direct audience with Khomeini in Paris. In November 1978, it sent an emissary with a seminary background, Mohammad-Rezā Qodveh, to Neuphle-Le-Château, the village outside Paris where Khomeini was based, with the hope that the Ayatollah would receive him and make amends for his "misunderstandings" on Marxism and the left. A senior cadre resident in Paris, Bābak Amirkhosravi, coordinated other attempts, including relying on a party member, 'Ali Javāheri, who like Qodveh had clerical ties. The meeting never took place, as their conduit in Khomeini's inner circle, his son-in-law Mortazā Eshrāqi, immediately turned cold when apprised of Javāheri's intentions.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Iranshahr*, 12 Ābān 1357 [3 November 1978].

<sup>34</sup> Babak Amirkhosravi's account of the Tudeh attempts to establish a dialogue with Khomeini in *Andishe-ye puyā*, 11, 2013.

Amirkhosravi and his companions ultimately succeeded in ensuring that a letter addressed to Khomeini from the Central Committee was handed to him. The missive, which was revealed decades later, praised Khomeini's seasoned brand of anti-colonialism, stated the party's readiness to collaborate with the Ayatollah despite his frequent vitriol against the left, and proposed the creation of a United Front for the National Liberation of Iran, under which Tudeh, the radical clergy, and other sections of the opposition could operate.<sup>35</sup> The party did not receive a reply. At times, Khomeini claimed, as he did on the day the Shah left Iran, January 16, 1979, that Marxists would be "free to express their opinions," but never sought to include them into the political process after the demise of the monarchy.

The first major group of the Iranian left to address Khomeini's anti-leftist attitude in public was the Fadā'i-ye Khalq Organisation, in January 1979.<sup>36</sup> Previously, one of the early ideologues of the Fadais, Bizhan Jazani, had written a detailed analysis of the nexus between Islam and Marxism whilst in jail, probably in 1972 or 1973. The text was not publicly available during the revolutionary period and was only published in the mid-1980s. The Fadā'i letter focuses on Khomeini's role in the revolutionary process for the first time since the aforementioned analysis of the early Qom uprising in January 1978. It explained:

Considering the sensitive role that you played in this round of the people's struggle, it is evident that each of your decisions and *fatwas* [...] have an important effect on the increase or decrease of the contradictions within the people's resistance front, on the unity of the people, and ultimately in the emergence or vanishing of the chances of complete victory of our people over imperialism and its agents.

and expressed its concerns in the following manner:

The struggle that is taking place is for freedom and liberation. It is an anti-dictatorial, anti-imperialist and patriotic struggle. ... Real freedom and democracy will be gained only after the overthrow of imperialism

<sup>35</sup> Central Committee letter to Khomeini, 2 January 1979, as reproduced in Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> According to the senior Fadā'i leader Majid Abdolrahimpur (Abdolrahimpur), another prominent Fadā'i who would later support the Islamic Republic, Farrokh Negahdār, was the author of this open letter. For more on the origins of this letter, see: Randjbar-Daemi 2023.

and reaction is the most revered aspiration that has united all social strata and classes of the people from workers and students to office workers, the clergy and farmers and has brought them to a struggle to death against the regime.

The Letter then issued a warning on the current developments:

If your understanding of the Islamic Shari‘a and the Islamic movement means persistence in the anti-imperialist and anti-dictatorial struggle, we admire such an understanding by you because this struggle and sacrifice has been the highest aspiration and hope of all Fedayi martyrs and comrades and has always been a part of their skin, flesh and blood. But if, on the contrary, the purpose of appealing Islam and its teachings is the repressing of every opposing thought, form and opinion, the chaining of thought and revival of an inquisition and instruments of repression, the revival of the slogan of “only one party” and the muffling of every freedom-seeking voice under the pretext of defending the Koran and the Shari‘a, we are certain every liberationist patriot will condemn it and we believe that the people also will rise to expose and destroy it because they see it as a ploy in the hands of imperialism and reaction. (Touhidi 1979)

The Letter then presciently pointed to the lack of tolerance for political diversity that was emerging within the ranks of Khomeini’s most loyal followers:

The Fadā’i Organisation also issued one of the earliest warnings addressing the extent of the physical disruption of secular activism by religious activists:

It is seen and heard that from time-to-time elements chanting “the only party is Allah’s party” attack people, passers-by, shops and public places, bookstores, freedom-loving speakers or popular gatherings and think they can impose their opinions and thoughts, their life-style and demeanour on everything and everyone.... we do not see any trace of progressiveness in these abominable actions. These elements should realize that our people, after 25 years of repression and coercion, have only today found an opportunity and want to choose their own lifestyle. They should decide themselves about what to read, wear, say and believe. For this they have given lives, endured torture and we should ensure that they have the power of defending what they have gained as well.

Khomeini held fast, however, and does not appear to have changed his beliefs during the early stages of the post-revolutionary order. By 1983, the Islamic Republic turned against the last remnants of the left, the Tudeh Party and its allied Fadaian Majority organisation, that it still barely tolerated and eliminated them from the scene, accusing them of espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union.

In conclusion, since 1941, the left had repeatedly sought to engage the politicised clergy and build bridges on issues and remits which could create common ground between them. It ultimately failed to do so because of the extent to which anti-communism permeated the worldview of senior clerics such as Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini's frequent anti-leftist pronouncements during the Revolution and the extent to which he was not beholden to a genuine rejection of communism should have come as a clear warning regarding his possible intentions after the downfall of the Pahlavi state. Nonetheless, as this chapter has explained, it was subject to thorough scrutiny by only a small segment of the leftist forces which were on the Iranian political scene in 1978 and excluded from it by Khomeini's supporters and disciples by 1983.

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PART TWO

BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY AND THE STAGE



# Islamists' Encounters with the Left in Tunisia (1970s-2020s)

Laura Guazzone<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the complex encounters between the left and the Islamist movements in Tunisia from the 1970s to the 2020s, challenging narratives that reduce their relationship to pure ideological confrontation. The analysis identifies three defining historical moments. First, the university student movement (1977-1991) witnessed intense competition between leftist and Islamist students that, paradoxically, stimulated a crucial learning process for Islamists about political mobilization practices, communication techniques, and social question. Second, the *Collectif du 18 Octobre* (2005-2009) represented an unprecedented attempt at value-based political compromise, producing three joint declarations on women's rights, freedom of conscience, and state-religion relations that articulated shared democratic principles while revealing persistent disagreements on sensitive issues. Third, the first post-revolutionary Troika government (2011-2014), which initially embodied this cross-ideological cooperation but ultimately failed, as leaders prioritized elite consensus over transformative change, abandoned necessary reforms, and contributed to a democratic reversal.

The chapter argues that while shared opposition to authoritarianism created opportunities for dialogue mediated by liberal human rights activists, and while the October 18 experience paved the way for post-revolutionary coalition politics, deep-seated cultural polarization between "secular modernity" and "Arab-Islamic tradition"—reinforced by colonial legacies and Bourguiba's regime discourse on "*tunisianité*"—prevented sustained collaboration. The failure to build upon these encounters, coupled with a "consensus at all costs" approach that froze the democratization process, ultimately facilitated popular disillusionment with democratic politics and the emergence of President Saïd's authoritarian regime in 2021. The study thus illuminates both the transformative potential and structural limitations of cross-ideological political cooperation under and after authoritarianism.

**KEYWORDS:** Tunisia; Ennahda; Cross-Ideological Alliances; Student Question; Opposition Politics; Democratization.

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## Introduction

In Tunisia, as elsewhere in the Middle East, post-independence opposition politics saw a relay race between the left and the Islamists in standing up to the subsequent authoritarian regimes. This relay race evolved through a triangular political relationship among the regime, the opposition, and society, as well as through direct and indirect encounters among the opposition's different currents. This chapter focuses on these encounters and the cross-influences and collaborations they produced despite profound ideological differences and persisting political mistrust and confrontation.

The history of political opposition politics in Tunisia saw two primary cycles in the 1960s-2010s period. In the first 60s-80s cycle – and more precisely between 1957 and 1978 – leftist political formations such as the Tunisian Communist Party (1934-1993, then *al-Tajdid*: 1993-2012) and, namely, the GEAST (*Group d'Études et d'Action Socialiste en Tunisie*) aka *Perspectives* (1963-1975) movement led the opposition to the Habib Bourguiba regime. In the second cycle of the 1980s-2010s, it was the turn of the Islamist movement (first *al-Jamā'ā al-Islāmiyya*, then MTI from 1981 to 1988, and then Ennahda from 1989) to lead the political opposition to the regimes of Habib Bourguiba and, later, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. During both periods, two sets of opportunities and constraints simultaneously influenced the different Tunisian opposition lineups: one set came from the global historical, political, and cultural contexts in which the oppositions elaborated their *zeitgeist* or, better, their “problem spaces.”<sup>2</sup> The second set derived from overlapping and entangled regional and domestic/local contexts. As Dot-Pouillard (2018) underlines: “The tensions between the ‘Progressives’ and the Islamists are not specifically Tunisian (...) they are inscribed in the regional arena.”<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop, this chapter addresses the following question: What were the key moments in the encounter between the left and the Islamists in Tunisia since independence? What was the impact, if any, of the encounter with the left on the evolution of Tunisian Islamist ideology and practices throughout the period considered? What was

<sup>2</sup> “Problem space” is “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs” (Scott 2004: 4).

<sup>3</sup> If not differently acknowledged, all translations in this chapter are by the author.

the legacy of the pre-revolutionary Islamist–leftist encounters on post-revolutionary politics in Tunisia?

The chapter tries to answer these questions by: 1) tracing the history of the three main historical moments of encounter, first in the Tunisian students' movement in the mid-1970s – early 1990s, then in a joint opposition initiative during the last decade of the Ben Ali regime in the 2000s and finally in the Troika coalition government (2011-2014); 2) singling out some of the factors that hindered the feasibility of political collaboration between the left and the Islamists in pre and post-revolutionary Tunisia. The analysis developed in this chapter draws on three primary sources: this author's previous research on Tunisian Islamism; interviews with leftist and Islamist activists conducted in Tunisia in September - October 2024; and an analysis of Islamist publications gathered and archived for the research project from which the present volume originates.<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned, three main historical moments defined the encounter between the left and the Islamist movement in Tunisia and left a legacy in the post-revolutionary political alliances. The first defining moment was in 1977-78, when Islamist university students first competed against their leftist colleagues in Tunisian university elections. In that period, Islamist-leftist competition in the Tunisian student movement produced intense and sometimes violent confrontations with no cross-ideological dialogue, let alone collaboration. Nevertheless, this first encounter stimulated among Tunisian Islamists a learning process about political, cultural, and mobilization practices, as well as internal debates about the left and the social causes it supported.<sup>5</sup> The second defining moment of encounter took place much later, in 2005, with the establishment of the oppositional *Collectif du 18 Octobre*, where Ennahda personalities, who had survived the regime eradication drive the regime unleashed in 1990-91, cooperated with personalities from the opposition parties and civil society associations not co-opted by the Ben Ali regime. The *Collectif du 18 Octobre* discussed and adopted several joint documents outlining a ground-breaking, shared vision of the fundamental political principles for a democratic Tunisia. The

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<sup>4</sup> Some publications by Tunisian Islamists archived in the ILEMED open-access documentary database created within our research project are accessible at the Zenodo EU documentary repository at: [urlly.it/31dr0b](https://urlly.it/31dr0b).

<sup>5</sup> Carnevale's chapter in this volume analyzes these issues in detail through the prism of cultural activism.

cumulative experience of these two cross-ideological encounters paved the way for the emergence of the first post-revolutionary coalition government, known as the Troika government, which reunited in 20011-2014 Islamist Ennahda party with two secular social-democratic parties – Marzouki’s Congress for the Republic- CPR and Ben Ja‘afar’s Etakattol and represents the third defining moment of Islamists-leftists encounter in Tunisia.

## Clashes and Encounters in and around the University

As in most post-colonial Arab countries,<sup>6</sup> the university played a crucial role in social struggles and political mobilizations before and after Tunisia’s independence in 1956, serving as a privileged site of intellectual formation, ideological socialization, and contentious politics.

Within this common Arab framework, however, the Tunisian university space had peculiarities due to the central place occupied by the “educational question” in the ideology of the neo-independent Tunisian state (Siino 2004; Abbassi 2006: 16). This approach made Tunisia one of the first Arab countries to have a genuinely modern student movement connected to international and regional debates (Dhifallah 2004). The Tunisian university space underwent an evolution similar to that of other Arab countries (Zayed *et al.* 2016) and experienced a transition from leftist students’ domination in the 1960s-1970s to Islamist domination in the 1980s and 1990s, while maintaining until the end of the 1980s what Camau called a role of “substitute political space” (Camau, Geissner 2003: 321).

In fact, student political mobilization in Tunisia dates back at least to 1910, when students from the Zaytouna mosque school and those from the modernist Sadiqi College joined the anticolonial struggle (Chanoufi 1993). However, at independence in 1956, Tunisia had only an embryonic university system (the University of Tunis was established in 1960), and most Tunisian students pursued their studies at French universities. Therefore, the *Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie* – UGET – the first and main Tunisian student union – was established in France in 1952.

After independence and following Bourguiba’s victory in the power struggle with the Arab-Islamic-oriented leader Salah Ben Youssef (the

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<sup>6</sup> See Biondi’s chapter in this volume for an analysis of the students’ movement in Morocco.

Neo-Destour party secretary general until 1955), the UGET—with the regime's encouragement—subsumed the Zaytuna students' organization (Dhifalla 2004: 216). This regime-led absorption silenced the voice of the Zeitunian students (“*Ṣawt al-ṭālib al-zaytūnī*” was the name of their publication) and marked a fracture between the modernist youth affiliated with the Neo-Destour party and the educated youth with an Arab-Islamic background. More broadly, the schism Bourguiba encouraged between Western-oriented and Arab-Islamic cultures is one of the roots of the suffocating polarization between the “secular” and the “Islamic” that engulfed Tunisian political development in the following decades.

During the first post-independence years, from 1956 to 1961, Tunisian university students' activism primarily developed in Europe. At this early stage, the ideological differences among Western-educated Tunisian students were somewhat framed and bridged by a form of “students' patriotism”, expressed in the UGET union's qualified support for the Bourguiba regime's development policies (Camau, Geissner 2003: 171-172). In effect, the newly independent Republic was short of qualified cadres for its new national institutions, and the first generation of post-independence Tunisian university graduates experienced a strong liaison with the state apparatus, with the vast majority of student leaders from the UGET union becoming leaders of the single party or senior civil service officials (Dhifallah 2004; Siino 2021: 3-4).

Things changed since 1961: while the regime was still intent on including university graduates as “servants” of the State and the Party, university students of the time became more critical and rebellious towards Bourguiba's policies. Protest currents emerged within the UGET itself, and the student union became the arena of a struggle between pro-regime students and protest student groups with Marxist or Arab Nationalist inspirations (Dhifallah 2004; Siino 2021: 5-6). Then, in 1963, Bourguiba hardened his regime and outlawed the Tunisian Communist Party. In the same year, the most radical and influential of the leftist student protest groups was established: the Groupe d'Études et d'Action Socialiste (GEAST), also known as *Perspectives*, after its journal (Jebari 2022).

Following the demise in 1969 of a brief experiment with a socialist economy led by Ahmed Ben Salah, since 1970 the Bourguiba regime adopted a liberalist option, which, among other things, resulted in a more selective access to the University (Melfa 2019: 61). In 1971, at the UGET 18th congress in Korba, the confrontation between pro- and anti-regime student currents led to the paralysis of the union and the

emergence of an openly anti-regime leftist student movement. As a result, the GEAST-Perspective group opposed the absorption of the UGET union by the Neo-Destour party and created alternative UGET “provisional” structures, producing a growingly stark Marxist critique of the Bourguiba regime’s policies (Bouguerra 2019). The regime confronted this radical critique with a wave of repression culminating in March 1968 (El Waer 2018). Further repression led to the 1972 student revolt movement (Ayari 2016: 123-124).

While the leftist anti-regime hegemony of the university students’ movement consolidated during the first half of the 1970s, a different generation of Tunisian students was coming of age. In the late 1960s, a few *‘ulamā’* of the Zaytuna school created informal study groups (ar. *ḥalaqāt*: circles) to discuss Islamic issues outside the regime’s control. These groups advocated a return to “pure” Islam to counter Bourguiba’s westernization and the socio-cultural alienation it caused. Rachid Ghannouchi (1941–), Abdel Fattah Morou (1948–), Hamida Enneifer (1942–), and Salah Eddin al-Jourshi (1954–), the founders of what was to become the Tunisian Islamist movement, were among the high school students who participated in these informal study groups. These young men shared a similar background: they came from traditional religious families and were educated in Arabic-language Islamic studies, unlike most post-independence Tunisian elites, who pursued French-language, Western-style education.

In 1970, Ennahda’s young founding members decided to form an underground new Islamist movement, *al-Jamā’a al-Islāmiyya*, which advocated for an Islamic renaissance (in Arabic: *al-nahḍa*) in Tunisia, based on a new reformist approach to the sacred texts and creative socio-cultural reforms to accommodate modern realities, striving for a religious revival at the national level. Working through *ḥalaqāt*, they increasingly established a presence in mosques and high schools, especially in Tunis and in central and southern Tunisia, with the help of younger cadres such as Habib Mokni, Salah Karker, and Fadhel Beldi. Mourou’s affiliation with the Association for the Safeguarding of the Qur’ān, an official institution established in 1967 by Bourguiba’s regime to revamp its Islamic credentials in response to the rise of left-wing ideologies, also facilitated a rapid diffusion of the *al-Jamā’a al-Islāmiyya* study and preaching movement.

Since the mid-1970s, this new generation of Islamist-inspired students began entering Tunisian universities. At the time, the social

recruitment of university students was changing: young people from well-to-do urban families, who had prevailed in the post-independence decade, were now joined by students from the country's interior regions (South, Northwest, and Centre-West) from petty-bourgeois families. This sociological transformation of students' origins directly affected their cultural interests, socialization, and political orientation. A reorientation also facilitated the impact of broader global and regional factors, such as the growing critique of Third Worldism, particularly in French cultural debates (Ayari 2016: 134-37) and the diffusion in Arab world and in Europe of conservative Islamic preaching supported by the newly rich monarchies of the Peninsula. The effects of the regime's repeated waves of harsh repression of leftist activists since 1963, and the change in the social origin of new university students, provoked a rapid decline of leftist hegemony on Tunisian university campuses and the rise of an Islamist hegemony that emerged in the early 1980s and lasted until recently.<sup>7</sup>

In the first half of the 1970s, the small number of Islamist students concentrated in the University's hard sciences faculties and colleges. At the time, they concerned themselves only with purely "religious", moral, and personal matters, such as finding prayer rooms within the university space and providing for affordable meals. As one early Islamist student told this author: "When we started praying at the University, some other students would tell us: 'Why do you do that to us? We came from the countryside to get rid of traditions and find some freedom, and now you want to bring us back'."<sup>8</sup> This moralizing attitude also shows in the contents of the leading Islamist publication of the time, the monthly journal *al-Ma'rifa*, founded in 1972<sup>9</sup> which initially focused almost entirely upon the propagation of moral and religious values. The critique of the Tunisian socio-political situation was argued in very general, vague terms, as exemplified by this editorial published in *al-Ma'rifa* in 1972:

Our country suffers from several fundamental problems, without them being thoroughly examined and analyzed, such as the problem of morals, the problem of self-confidence, the problems of sex, individualism

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<sup>7</sup> In March 2023 and November 2024, the Islamist student union UGTE gained the majority of votes in university students' elections.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Salah Eddin al-Jourshi, September 28, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> One issue of *al-Ma'rifa* had already appeared in 1962, but the regime subsequently outlawed the magazine.

and the lack of readiness to offer help and sacrifice for others, cultural imitation, the problem of economic development and its relationship with morality, etc. These problems stem from our historical, political, and educational circumstances, as well as the impact of international circumstances on our situation. We must have our own criteria to judge our circumstances. [By this] I mean a special culture and a special analysis of the universe, the human being, and life. (*al-Maʿrifa*, n. 3/1972: 10)

Later on, however, Islamist university students encountered and quickly learned the communication and mobilization techniques previously developed by their leftist colleagues. They began spreading their message through public meetings, posters, and mural bulletins (Chinese: *Dazibao*; Arabic: *al-jarāʾid al-ḥāʾiṭiyya*).<sup>10</sup> Then, in the 1980s, closer encounters occurred within the left-dominated Tunisian counterculture scene, including in alternative or “committed” music.<sup>11</sup>

In the realm of university politics, as early as the 1972-1973 academic year, a few Islamist students took to the floor at the student assemblies of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities and the Faculty of Political Sciences and Economics, which were traditionally dominated by leftist groups. Then, during the university elections in November 1977 at the Manouba campus in Tunis, an event occurred that some leftist students recall as the first “battle” between them and the Islamists, in which the latter gained the upper hand.<sup>12</sup> The clashes took place in the Manouba campus in Tunis, where the Faculty of Law, a fief of the left, was in front of the National School of the Engineers, a fief of the Islamists. Facilitated by physical proximity, clashes erupted in the square between the two faculties when the news spread that the Islamists were running in the Faculty of Law elections.

The leftist students of the time recall that the spread of the popularity of the Islamists among university students was rapid. As for the reasons for this rapid ascent, the explanations differ: former leftist students attribute it to the purported support the Islamists received from the regime, which would not hinder them or their activities and helped them, for instance, by “printing their publications in the printing

<sup>10</sup> Interview with ʿAdel Thabti, Islamist militant and member of the Islamist Student Union UGTE (Tunis, October 31, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Carnevale’s contribution to this volume analyzes in detail the encounters between the left and the Islamists in the Tunisian cultural scene of the 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Bechir Jomaa, member of the *Perspective* group and its UGET provisional structure (Tunis, October 31, 2024).

house of the regime party".<sup>13</sup> Islamist students of the time, instead, claim that they acquired popularity because they started not just spreading a well-received call to return to Islam, but also took care of the often-poor students' personal and economic conditions. 1977 was also the year when Islamist university students adopted the name Islamic Tendency in the Students' Movement (ar. *al-Ittijāh al-Islāmiyya fi al-Ḥaraka al-Ṭaliba*), a name later adopted by the entire Tunisian Islamist movement.

The following year, in January 1978, the first nationwide general strike in the country's history paralyzed Tunisia, called by the national trade union, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). At the time, Rashid Ghannouchi strongly condemned the strike to which the leftist parties and the student movement adhered.<sup>14</sup> Shortly thereafter, however, when the Iranian Revolution galvanized Islamists worldwide in 1978-79, Tunisian Islamists fully realized the scope of the social question and its mobilizing potential. The Iranian experience – in the words of the Ennahda leader Ghannouchi – enabled Tunisian Islamists to "Islamize some leftist social concepts and to accommodate the social conflict within an Islamic context" (Tamimi 2001: 66). In effect, although one of the founders of Ennahda recalls that it had been since 1968 that Tunisian Islamists had begun discussing the class structure of the Tunisian society, the nature and role of its left movements and trade unions,<sup>15</sup> it took a long time for Islamists to move politically beyond broad slogans about social justice. As some Islamist students declared to Wolf: "We quickly realized that our training and ideas were weak in comparison to those of our opponents, that we had to strengthen our ideology" and: "The discourse of the [far left] was strong, we did not have the intellectual means to counter their arguments effectively" (Wolf 2017a: 42). In mosques, student circles (*halaqāt*), and high schools, the first milieus that Tunisian Islamists created or penetrated since the early 1970s, they could use traditional religious means for preaching and proselytism but competing with and confronting their leftists' counterparts on the university campus

<sup>13</sup> During interviews with this author, this accusation was repeatedly made by former leftist students and repeatedly denied by their Islamist counterparts; either party, however, brought no detailed evidence.

<sup>14</sup> In January 1978, *al-Ma'rifa* (n. 5, year 4) published an editorial eloquently entitled "Before the Iron Curtain comes down" (*Qabla 'an yunzil al-sitār al-hadīd*) and an article by Hamida Enneifer entitled "Brink and suicide" (*al-Ḥawf wa al-intihār*).

<sup>15</sup> Online interview with Salah Eddin Jourshi, September 29, 2024.

required a different, less single-minded approach. It also required Islamist students to confront their own ideological discourse with that of their opponents and with its connection to the specific Tunisian social and political situation. In their internal debates, the Islamists had to consider the left's political programs, slogans, and ideology, but, according to some critical Islamists, the analysis of the left's ideological discourse was done "too late and too little".<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the weakness of *al-Jamā'ā al-Islāmiyya*'s ideological elaboration on the specificities of Tunisian religious, societal, and cultural realities was one of the main contentious points that in 1978 brought a group led by Hamida Enneifer to leave the Jama'ā to establish a new Islamist group called *al-Islamiyyūn al-Taqaaddumiyyūn (Progressive Islamists)*, which was much more attentive to Tunisian specificities (al-Jūrshī 2010; Guazzone 2023).

In effect, the political 'coming of age' of Tunisian Islamists was a consequence of the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution, the experience of the 1977 student mobilization in the universities, and the recognition of popular socio-economic malaise, as expressed in the 1978 general strike. A more political turn was evident in the articles in the Islamist journal *al-Ma'rifa* from 1978 to 1979. For instance, the cover of the March 1979 issue of *al-Ma'rifa* featured pictures of Khomeini and protesting Iranian women under the title "Victory of Islam" (*Intiṣār al-Islām*). This confluence of factors pushed Tunisian Islamists to enter politics openly. The vanguard role played by the Islamist students' movement in the broader ideological evolution of the movement<sup>17</sup> became evident in 1981, when the Tunisian Islamist movement adopted as its new name "Movement of the Islamic Tendency» (ar. *Ḥarakat al-Ittijāh al-Islāmī bi-Tūnis*; fr. *Mouvement de la Tendence Islamique - MTI*), a name inspired by that previously adopted by the Islamist university students. Profiting from a short-lived opening towards multi-partyism initiated under Prime Minister Mzali in April 1981, the Islamist movement adopted the new name and requested recognition as a legal political party.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Salaheddin al-Jourshi, founding member of the Jama'ā Islamiyya and then member of the splinter Islamist group *al-Islamiyyūn al-Taqaaddumiyyūn* (Tunis, September 29, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of Ennahda's ideological evolution, see, among others, Guazzone 2023.

In its first press conference in June 1981, the MTI presented a political platform which resonated with some of the critiques the leftist student movement had brought against the Bourguiba regime since 1963:

The Islamic world, of which our country is a part, is witnessing the worst forms of pillage and alienation since the Middle Ages. Decadence affects the essence of our nation, prompting it to abandon its mission of enlightenment leadership. On the one hand, [this situation is] *for the benefit of the colonial West, and on the other hand, for control by internal minorities*, disconnected from their origins, which clash with the people's aspirations. [...] Islam has become almost only a symbol of threat [...], mainly because of the abandonment and assault of its values, institutions, and men. [...]. In addition to these cultural data that our country shares with the rest of the Islamic world, Tunisia, since the end of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, has experienced [...] special crises, the intensification of social conflict, and the disruption of the mechanisms of *global growth*. *This situation arose from the ruling Destour Party's tendency to maintain a monopoly on power.*<sup>18</sup>

Shortly after, the regime rejected the MTI's request for recognition, and a first wave of regime repression hit the leaders of the MTI in the second half of 1981. However, the repression strengthened MTI's public image, and in the following years, the Islamist students' movement began to challenge the hegemony of the university leftist groups openly. In 1982, clashes between Islamist and leftist students intensified as the Islamists began to win the majority of seats in the students' elections. In society at large, at the time of the 1984 nationwide so-called bread riots, the MTI Islamists had finally recognized the depth and mobilizing power of the Tunisian social question. As the MTI was gaining a voice within both the state and civil society at the time, many of its followers actively supported the popular, spontaneous protests that erupted in January 1984 against the IMF-imposed increase in bread prices. Following this experience, Ghannouchi, the MTI president since 1978, began encouraging MTI followers to join the UGTT union, a move so willingly embraced by militants that, in 1989, Islamists represented about 20 per cent of the workers' union (Camau, Gessner 2003: 294). In the Tunisian context, the MTI strategy of UGTT penetration is a

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<sup>18</sup> *al-Bayān al-ta'asisī li-Ḥarakat al-Ittijāh al-Islāmī bi-Tūnis* (The founding communiqué of the Movement of the Islamic Tendency in Tunisia) as published in [ikwanwiki.org](http://ikwanwiki.org), available at: [urly.it/3vz71](http://urly.it/3vz71) (Accessed May 20, 2022). Our emphasis.

symptom of cross-pollination from the left, but also an effect of the central social and political role of trade unions, in Maghreb countries in general and in Tunisia in particular. This entryist strategy is, however, a symptom of the evolution of the Tunisian Islamist ideology, namely their recognition of the mobilizing power of the UGTT, as well as their effort to adapt and reconnect their discourse to Tunisian history and realities through the social question.

Also, the Islamist university students recognized the importance of unionism and, in 1984, proposed a new “Students Charter” aimed at refunding the UGET; a “democratic offer” that was rejected by the leftists as a hostile takeover bid.<sup>19</sup> Having thus failed to control a renewed UGET, the Islamist students opted for creating a new student union, the *Union Générale Tunisienne des Étudiants* (UGTE), which was established at the Faculty of Sciences in March 1985. Finally, in 1988, under the new regime of President Ben Ali, what remained of the leftist groups succeeded in reactivating the “original” student union, the UGET. The two student unions – the Islamist UGTE and the leftist UGET – remained active and confronted each other until 1991. However, after 1988, the new UGET quickly became paralyzed again between pro- and anti-regime currents. In turn, the Islamist UGTE continued to gain almost all seats in university elections until it was dissolved in 1991, in the framework of the sweeping and violent repression of the entire Islamist movement that President Ben Ali unleashed after the relative electoral success of the Islamists (now renamed as Ennahda) in the 1989 general elections.<sup>20</sup>

Our review of the relations between Islamists and leftists in the Tunisian students’ movement from 1972 to 1991 shows no signs of positive exchanges between the two opposition fronts. On the contrary, there was a complete ideological repudiation, confrontations, and violent clashes. As members of both leftist and Islamist students’ unions (UGET and UGTE) affirm, at the time: “There were no political dialogues”.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, this first intense encounter in the student movement produced what we can call cross-influences from the

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<sup>19</sup> Author’s interviews with ‘Adel Thabti, member of the Islamist Student Union UGTE (Tunis, October 31, 2024); Abdellatif Mekki, UGET president (1989-1990) (Tunis, November 2, 2024); Habib Masit, member of Perspectives (Tunis, October 28, 2024); Bechir Jomaa, member of *Perspectives* (Tunis, October 31, 2024).

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed analysis of the campaign of eradication of Tunisian Islamists under Ben Ali in 1990-91, see, among others: Wolf 2017a: 73-76.

<sup>21</sup> See notes 9 and 11 above.

leftists to the Islamists, stimulating an Islamist learning process in oppositional politics.

### **Attempts at a “Historical Compromise”:<sup>22</sup> The *Collectif du 18 Octobre 2005***

Tunisia’s modern political history undoubtedly has some important specificities, and the legacy or path dependence of Tunisian political elites’ experience with reformism and pacted change is possibly the most relevant to our analysis (Hibou 2009). It is important to note that in modern Tunisian history, there have been several attempts to unite the various cultural and political streams into a common front by bridging existing differences. The most important national experience in this sense was the diffusion of Bourguiba’s discourse on the “*tunisianité*” (“being Tunisian”), promoting a unique synthesis between a Mediterranean western modernity, patriotic nationalism and a loose sense of belonging to the Arab and Muslim community (Ben Achour 1987), which was the ideological underpinning of Bourguiba’s modernist reformism (Hibou 2009). However, the existence of a “Tunisian exception” within the common historical features of the Arab countries in the modern era, based on broadly, consensual reformism, has been rightly described as “a myth” in the academic literature (Camau 2018). Some Tunisian scholars went as far as to affirm that:

As practiced in Tunisia, the coexistence of two languages (Arabic and French) and two cultures (Eastern and Western) does not have an integrating effect but rather *a major effect of social destruction*. (Krichen 1987: 297)<sup>23</sup>

In effect, Tunisian ideological and political struggles have been mirrored -but not bridged- in the cultural sphere, where the combined use of French, modern standard Arabic, and Tunisian dialect sometimes expresses an effort to reunite the different political-cultural Tunisian streams through convergence and compromise. More often,

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<sup>22</sup> The use here of the expression “historical compromise” points to an analogy with the Italian “*compromesso storico*”, the attempted political cooperation between the Christian Democrats and the Communists that emerged in Italy in the mid-1970s (Cf: Enrico Berlinguer “Riflessioni sull’Italia dopo i fatti del Cile”, *Rinascita*, October 12, 1973).

<sup>23</sup> Our emphasis.

however, the choice between languages serves as a mark of distinction and separation (Jerad 2017).

It is against this cultural and political backdrop that one should situate the experiences of political dialogue and compromise between the Tunisian left and the Islamists, and namely the encounter that took place in the 2000s, referred to as the “October 18 (2005) initiative”. As already mentioned, this was the second defining moment of the encounter between the left and Islamists in Tunisia and came to the forefront in 2005, with the establishment of the *Collectif du 18 Octobre* (aka: “October 18 Collective for Rights and Freedoms”),<sup>24</sup> where Ennahda personalities just out of prison, such as the future prime minister Ali Larayedh, cooperated with opposition forces not co-opted by the Ben Ali regime, including civil society personalities and human rights activists of the LTDH (*Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l’Homme*), who had helped the *Association Internationale de soutien aux prisonniers politiques*,<sup>25</sup> together with political personalities such as Najib Chebbi of the center-left Progressive Democratic Party and Hamma Hammami of the far-left Tunisian Communist Workers’ Party.

As we will see, the activities of the *Collectif* lasted almost until 2010, the eve of the revolution and of Ben Ali’s regime’s fall and produced several joint documents outlining a shared vision for broad political and cultural principles of a democratic Tunisia, which could have provided a starting point for the 2014 constitution. The experience of the October 18 Collective paved the way also for the emergence of the first post-revolutionary coalition government, which was in charge between 2011-2014 (the “Troika” government), formed by Ennahda and two center-left parties: Mustapha Ben Ja’afar’s Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom (*al-Takatul al-Dimuqrātī min ajl al-‘Amal wa-l Ḥurriyāt*) and Moncef Marzouki’s Congress for the Republic (*al-Mu’tamar min ajl al-Jumhūriyya*).

The background to the October 18 encounter comprised two distinct but intersecting processes. The first was in the development of a new activism for democracy and human rights in Tunisia since the mid-1970s, which was activated especially by the liberal, splinter wing

<sup>24</sup> Aka *Collectif du 18 Octobre* in French. The October 18 Movement was launched in 2005, a month before the UN World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis. See: Wolf 2017a: 101-103.

<sup>25</sup> Established in 2002 and headed by Islamist Mohamed Nouri, the AISPP mainly worked in support of Islamist political prisoners in Tunisia.

of the Neo-Destour ruling party led by Ahmed Mestiri, in connection with leftist Tunisian activists who experienced police repression, unfair trials, and several rounds of prison sentences (Schade-Poulsen 2024). For instance, one of the co-founders of Amnesty International's Tunisian section was Habib Mersit, a member of Perspectives and a former political prisoner.<sup>26</sup> This opening to the question of human rights, previously considered as a "bourgeois trap", helped the development of a new indirect political dialogue between the left and the Islamists, when the latter experienced the full weight of regime repression. Liberal political figures mediated this indirect political dialogue in the Tunisian press, especially after the establishment of the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme* (LTDH) in 1976 and the brief regime's flirtation with multipartyism under Prime Minister Mzali in 1981. The liberal weekly *Erraï*, published from 1977 to 1987, was probably the main venue for this indirect dialogue.<sup>27</sup> On this subject, Hasib Ben Ammar, one of the co-founders of the LTDH and founder and director of the *Erraï* newspaper,<sup>28</sup> declared:

We opened our columns to everyone. Even to Rashid Ghannouchi (an Islamist) and Mohamed Harmel (a Communist), while not supporting their positions. We did this in the name of free expression. I even published an editorial that defended fundamentalists. (Garon 1998: 52)

This attempt at a broadly democratic dialogue between all components of the Tunisian opposition, mediated by liberal figures such as Ben Ammar, was, however, limited and short-lived. In fact, in the early 1990s a broad swath of Tunisia's secular middle class became supportive of Ben Ali's ruthless crackdown on Ennahda, believing it necessary for preserving the country's secular-modern underpinnings, particularly in the face of the violence occurring in next-door Algeria, where in January 1992 a military coup crushed the 1991 electoral victory of Islamist FIS.

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<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with Habib Mersit, Tunis, September 28, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Interviews with Hechmi Ben Fraj and Hichem Abdessamad, members of Perspectives (Tunis, October 29, 2024) and Lofti Hajj, journalist and member of the October 18 strike and Collective (Tunis, October 30, 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Ben Ammar was a former mayor of Tunis and Minister of Defense under Bourguiba, member of the dissident liberal group that left the regime party PSD in 1971 (on this group see Schade-Poulsen 2024: 27-28).

However, even in the early 1990s in Tunisia, there were exceptions to the secular middle class's broad endorsement of Ben Ali's policy of "eradication" of the Islamist movement through police repression, manipulated trials, and harsh imprisonments enacted right after Ennahda's electoral success in mid-1989. One of these rare exceptions was Moncef Marzouki's outspoken stance. A physician turned human rights activist, Marzouki consistently challenged Ben Ali's abuse of the justice system to crush his political opponents and, already in 1994, called for Ennahda's legalization as a party (Perkins 2004: 197). Forced into exile by Ben Ali's repression in 2002, Marzouki, another co-founder of the LTDH, strived to keep the Tunisian opposition alive from France. To this end, he kept open a communication channel with Ennahda leadership in exile in London, aiming at creating a national front of the opposition to the Ben Ali regime, stating:

In Tunisia, the choice is not between Islamists and democrats. The choice is between those who are against the despotic regime and who want to replace it, and the forces that want to compromise with it, whether they are Islamists or democrats. A national front would not aim to compromise on democratic principles, nor to compromise on identity, and would aim to set a national line.<sup>29</sup>

Marzouki's position was part of a second, broader process of rapprochement among the different souls of Tunisian opposition that, since the 1980s, saw a growing dialogue in France between all shades -Islamists included- of Tunisian opposition parties and associations (Zederman 2020: 95-98). On May 23-25, 2003, Marzouki and others organized a closed meeting at Aix-en-Provence in France, gathering representatives of different parties and movements of the Tunisian opposition for a national dialogue: the Congress for the Republic -CPR led by Marzouki himself; the Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom - FDTL (aka Ettakatol) led by Mustapha Ben Ja'afar; the Democratic Progressive Party - PDP<sup>30</sup> represented by Mohamed Goumani, together

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<sup>29</sup> Marzouki interview to *al-Quds*, October 2003 (as quoted in Eric Gobe *L'Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord* 2003: 323).

<sup>30</sup> First established in 1983 as the Progressive Socialist Rally, the party led by Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, a former pan-Arabist turned Marxist when he joined the group Perspectives, gathered a broad range of currents, from Marxists to liberal pro-democracy activists and progressive Muslims (*al-Islamiyūn al-Taqaddumiyūn*) such as Goumani himself, who later joined Ennahda political office.

with various representatives of Tunisian civil society organizations (CNLT, AJA, AISPPT, RAID, CPIJ, CNDLE, CIDT and others). The debates developed at the Aix meeting produced the “Declaration of Tunis”, which aimed at establishing “a new political and social contract for Tunisia”.<sup>31</sup> As one participant in the meeting declared: “Aix has broken the effect of demonization, the rapprochement between the Islamists and the others was possible” (Zederman 2020: 97). Marzouki, the future first post-revolutionary Tunisian president, declared in retrospect: “In effect, it was in Aix in 2003 that the Troika, which in 2011 created the transition government, was formed” (Marzouki 2013: 80), thus explaining the origin of the political alliance between Ennahda and two center-left movements that governed Tunisia in 2011-2014.

However, in 2003, the PDP and the FDTL did not sign the Tunis Declaration (Abdessamad 2017: 32). In the words of Najib Chebbi, leader of the PDP, his party did not sign the Declaration of Tunis because:

I thought the alliance between the democratic and the Islamist movements was premature. It was not an ideological exclusion. We recognize the right to exist politically to the Islamists, we demand general amnesty, of which they would be the principal beneficiaries [...]. We can go in the same direction, but in a separate row. (Geissner, Gobe 2005: 298)

Thus, in 2003, the first attempt to unite the Islamists and the left in a unified Tunisian opposition front was inconclusive. The most influential leftist groups and parties, including the former Tunisian Communist Party, renamed *Tajdid* (Renewal) since 1993, and the GEAST-*Perspectives* Group, did not even participate directly in the Aix meeting. It is nevertheless interesting to recall that in the early 1980s, the Tunisian Communist Party (PCT) had developed a frontist strategy aimed at including the Islamist movement. To this end, the PCT protested the imprisonment of MTI leader Ghannouchi as early as 1987 (Melfa 2017: 80). More generally, it is worth noting that Marzouki’s stance aligned with the supposed preference for reformism through compromise and bargaining that many consider a distinct “path dependence” feature of the political culture and historical experience of Tunisian elites (Hibou 2009). This often-claimed tradition of reformism is typically dated back to Ibn Khaldun and Khair al-Din, but as mentioned, it is also often

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<sup>31</sup> The text of the Declaration of Tunis can be accessed at: [urly.it/31dqzt](http://urly.it/31dqzt).

described as a myth (Camau 2018). Nevertheless, the Tunisian elites' apparent inclination to compromise and bargain resurfaced repeatedly in the following tumultuous years in Tunisia's political history.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of the 2000s, the Ben Ali authoritarian regime felt confident enough to somewhat relax the treatment of the tamed opposition. After the 2002 constitutional reform that enabled Ben Ali to run for another presidential mandate, most of the remaining long-serving Islamist political prisoners were released. They cautiously began reconnecting with civil society organizations active in defending human rights. In the same years, a few other initiatives created an atmosphere favorable to the inclusion of the Tunisian Islamists in a coordinated opposition to Ben Ali. A background experience was provided by the "Platform of Sant'Egidio", adopted at a unified meeting of the Algerian opposition, including the Islamic Front of Salvation-FIS, held in Rome in January 1995 at the initiative of the Catholic Comunità di Sant'Egidio.<sup>32</sup> Other events fostered attempts at a cross-ideological compromise in Tunisia; for instance, the Tunisian lawyers' protest sit-ins and general strike in March-May 2005, during which leftist and Islamist-leaning lawyers protested side by side (Gobe, Ayari 2007).

By 2005, many Tunisian political and civil forces had become convinced that all recognized methods of political action were now impracticable under Ben Ali. Thus, in order to draw international media attention to the issue of liberties in the country, a diversified group of eight opposition personalities, representing various political parties and civil organizations, on October 18 2005, undertook a hunger strike at a private office in Tunis – just one month before the World Summit on Information Society was going to be hosted in the capital city. The eight strikers were: 1) Nejjib Chebbi: founder and leader of the center-left Democratic Progressive Party -PDP and one of the most active organizers of the hunger strike; 2) Ayachi Hammami: a democratic lawyer and a former leftist member of the students' movement, who hosted the strike at his bureau at rue Mokhtar Attia in Tunis; 3) Hama Hammami: the spokesperson of the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party -PCOT, who was a longtime opponent of any alliance with the Islamist "obscurantism"; 4) Lofti Hajj: a journalist and activist for human rights, previously close to the

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<sup>32</sup> See details at Saint Egidio initiative: [urly.it/31dqz-](http://urly.it/31dqz-) .

Progressive Islamists, and founder of the Tunisian Journalists' Union in 2004; 5) Samir Dilou, an Islamist human rights lawyer and former militant of Islamist students' Union UGTE; 6) Rauf Ayadi: member of the CPR (Marzuki's) Party and former member of the leftist Perspective group; 7) Mokhtar Yahiaoui, a dissident judge, without a clear political affiliation; 8) Mohammed Nuri, Islamist president of the International Association of Support to the Political Prisoners - AISPP founded in 2002. The strikers made three fundamental demands: freedom of organization for all, freedom of information and expression, and freedom for political prisoners, along with the adoption of a law on general amnesty.

As hoped, the well-timed hunger strike drew the attention of the international press gathered in Tunis for the International Information Forum. What was surprising, however, was the extent and rapid emergence of broad national support for the strikers, who were visited by many other personalities and saw the creation of a national Committee of Support and local committees of support in various Tunisian cities and in Paris (Abdessamad 2017). The enthusiasm surrounding the successful October 18 hunger strike was such that it seemed to be the prelude to the creation of a long-sought united front of the Tunisian opposition and to the reconciliation of its different political families: the leftists, liberals, and Islamists. The success the hunger strike at the national level and its international impact prompted the strikers to seek ways to maintain momentum. The strike ended with the announcement of the creation of an "October 18 Collective for Rights and Freedoms" (also known as the *Collectif du 18 Octobre*), established in December 2005 by several representatives of Tunisian parties and NGOs (Hajji 2006).

In comparison to those adhering to the National Committee of Support for the hunger strike, the adherents to the *Collectif/Collective* were fewer in number. Still, they included Ennahda Islamists, the four main opposition political parties (CPR, FDTL, PDP, and PCOT), and several human rights NGOs.<sup>33</sup> The platform of the *Collective*, as expressed by its Paris Committee, clarified its method and required its

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<sup>33</sup> Compare the list of the 124 signatories to the Committee of Support (Abdessamad 2017, 117-118) to the list of the 21 signatories to the *Collective*, at: [urly.it/31dqzw](http://urly.it/31dqzw) (Accessed October 10, 2024).

members to share three common principles of equality, independence, and non-violence:

The collective is a space of convergence; it remains open to all activists and political and associative organizations that adhere to its founding platform. It prioritizes transparency, collegiality, and consensus-seeking in its operations.<sup>34</sup>

Starting from this platform, between 2006 and 2009 the Collective activated a forum where the forces it represented discussed and adopted three important joint declarations about the fundamental tenets for a future democratic state in Tunisia: 1) *The Declaration about Women's Rights and Gender Equality* (March 8, 2007); 2) *The Declaration on Freedom of Opinion and Conscience* (October 18, 2007); *The Declaration on the Relationship between State, Religion and Identity* (December 20, 2009).<sup>35</sup>

On the whole, these three joint declarations went, at least partially, beyond finding a common language to express general principles, and laid down concrete steps to translate principles into legislation and into political, economic, and social life. In the Declaration on Women's Rights and Gender Equality the Collective affirmed its "its support to all the acquired [womens's] rights" already enshrined in Tunisian legislation in the realm of personal status -such as the forbiddance of polygamy, equal rights in education, labor and political participation, but also noted in detail how legal equality (when existing) was not fully translated into practice in every of the realms considered. Then it called for: the "explicit mention of gender equality in the Constitution"; the adoption of "legislative provisions and judicial mechanisms to punish authors of discrimination against women"; stated that "the veil issue is (...) a personal choice which cannot be subjected to any interference, to forbid or impose it". The declaration also acknowledged that, on some issues, such as equality in inheritance, the Collective was unable to reach consensus and needed more dialogue.

The Declaration of Freedom of Opinion and Conscience, adopted following a three-month public conference, was less detailed. After

<sup>34</sup> *Plate-forme politique pour une action commune*, at: [urly.it/31dqzx](http://urly.it/31dqzx) (Accessed October 10, 2024). Our emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> The original text of the declarations is in Arabic; the French translation of the first two declarations can be found in the *Brochure du Collectif* at: [urly.it/31dqzx](http://urly.it/31dqzx). Lofti Hajji, one of the strikers and a member of Collective, provided this author with the Arabic text of the third -and, possibly, most thorny -declaration.

a prologue that mentioned some of the issues most debated in the conference -from apostasy to the legitimacy of international covenants such as the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights – this declaration spelt out that:

Elements of consensus about...values and standards: freedom of conscience, which relates to individual choice, must be guaranteed to every citizen, man and woman, and includes the right to adopt or not a religion...accomplishing rites, practices, and teaching...Freedom of conscience in our country is not in the least contradiction with the place and importance of Islam...in terms of culture and civilization.

Also, the 2009 Declaration on the Relationship between State, Religion and Identity was the result of a series of seminars and internal discussions that, as the text states:

Highlighted the existence of three challenges facing the Tunisian people in their aspiration to...a sound relationship between religion and state...1) The tyranny of authority: one of the manifestation of which is the subjugation of the Islamic religion to the political will of the existing regime...; 2) The tyranny in the name of religion resulting from a one-sided extremist reading of Islam...; 3) the tyranny in the name of modernity that works to eliminate religion from public life...from within and outside the state apparatus. In the face of these challenges, the Collective affirmed that: 1) the desired democratic state can only be a civil state based on the principles of the Republic and on human rights that derives its legitimacy from the will of the people...5) the desired democratic state must give Islam a special status as the religion of the majority, without any monopoly or exploitation.

From our brief survey of the texts adopted, it emerges that the joint declarations were substantive but became less incisive as they addressed the sore spots in the relationship between the “Democrats and the Islamists”, as the 2009 text referred to the two sides in the dialogue. In effect, shortly after the establishment of the Collective, several leftist feminists and human rights activists expressed their critique about the political method and goals of the Collective in an open letter entitled *À propos d'une derive* (“About a drift”), which stated:

A democratic debate is one thing; an alliance at all costs is another. We are not convinced that the “October 18 Collective for Rights and Freedoms” option (relayed by a counterpart structure in Paris) is opportu-

ne or relevant. If the Ennahda movement says it supports the rule of peaceful alternation and refrains from violence, who would complain about that? However, for this movement to have its place within the democratic family, it would have to give up its Islamic State project, the formidable consequences of which for democracy and human rights are well known. In which case, Ennahda would no longer really be an Islamist party. Moreover, that would be known.<sup>36</sup>

An important part of the Tunisian leftist political forces thus backtracked from its support to the intra-opposition dialogue activated in the October 18 initiative because of their lack of confidence in the genuine commitment of Ennahda Islamists to the democratic process in general and in particular to the method of consensus (*ar. tawāfuq*) adopted by the Collective. Nejbi Chebbi, leader of the centre-left PDP and one of the Collective's staunchest supporters, responded with another open letter, entitled "Beginning of a debate", in which he discussed and rejected the doubts expressed by leftist critics of the Collective.<sup>37</sup> Then, the impact of the October 18 initiative was further diminished because some key opposition figures, including Marzouki himself, were apparently unconvinced by its strategy, arguing that "a dictatorship cannot be reformed". Moreover, friction between the Collective's leaders, Chebbi and Ben Ja'afar, quickly heightened, as both intended to run in the 2009 presidential elections. In effect, the Collective's viability began to crumble at the beginning of 2009, when Chebbi emerged as an alternative candidate to the incumbent president, Ben Ali, in the upcoming presidential election, but did not receive the endorsement of the other parties represented in the Collective. As for Ennahda, which was still banned and had its leadership in exile in London, it decided to form part of a unified front of the Tunisian opposition at its Eighth Congress held in London (Wolf 2017a: 192-193). At the same time, however, the Ennahda leadership was also conducting cautious negotiations with the Ben Ali regime to secure some form of readmission in Tunisia (Geisser, Gobe 2008).

Overall, the October 18 initiative, which included the hunger strike and the Collective Forum, did, in effect, represent a unique attempt at establishing a value-based political compromise between

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<sup>36</sup> The letter is dated February 2006, and its text is in the Appendix to Abdessamad 2017.

<sup>37</sup> The text of Chebbi's rebuke is in the Appendix to Abdessamad 2017.

the “Democrats”, including parts of the left, and the Islamists, as the analysis of the joint declarations confirms. This unprecedented development occurred because it was a prerequisite to establishing a joint front against the Ben Ali regime. In this framework, compromise and consensus were means to a political end. On the whole, the October 18 initiative was a brave departure from the existing taboo of mutual recognition between the left and the Islamists, a departure made possible by the emergence since the mid-1970s of a more liberal left, savvier in human rights and less ideological and, at the same time, by the ideological evolution of Ennahda leadership in exile that enabled its commitment to democracy (Ghannouchi 1993; Tamimi 2001) sourced in the liberal reading to Islamic values elaborated since the late 1970s by the Progressive Islamist current within Tunisian Islamism.

However, as clearly stated in the open letter “About a drift” quoted above, the leftists remained wary of the Islamists’ real political intentions. Conversely, the Islamists remained convinced that a renewed expulsion of Ennahda from the “legitimate” Tunisian political arena remained possible. This shows how overcoming the political exploitation of a purportedly impassable cultural dichotomy between a “Western” progressive modernity and an Arab-Islamic “reactionary tradition” -instigated by French colonialism and reinforced by Bourguiba’s regime narrative about the *tunisianité*- required more mutual trust and practical political experience than opposition politics under an authoritarian regime allowed for.

### **After the Revolution: The Troika Alliance and the Reemergence of Ideological Polarization**

The polarization between secularists and Islamists in Tunisia reemerged in full force after the 2010-2011 popular mobilization that initiated the region-wide Arab Spring and led to the downfall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia (Nachi 2011). As detailed below, the re-emergence of unbridgeable political rifts between the two sides was clearly manifested in 2012 and led to a deep political crisis in 2013.

After the flight of Ben Ali, in March 2011, the Revolutionary Defense Council, the broad front of all mobilized opposition forces, merged in the transitional High Authority for the Realization of the Goals of the Revolution, in charge between March and October 2011 of organizing the “transition from the revolution to the elections” of

the National Constituent Assembly. However, in June 2011, the newly legalized Ennahda party left the High Authority, criticizing the body for establishing itself as a parliament without electoral legitimacy and for failing to respect the principle of consensus. This move clearly signaled the end of the revolutionary convergence and the start a new phase of post-revolutionary political competition.

The results of the first competitive general elections on October, 23 2011 saw a robust victory for Ennahda Islamists, who nevertheless chose to counter fears of an Islamist takeover forming a trilateral coalition government – the so-called “Troika” government – with the second and third winners of the popular vote: social-democratic parties of Marzouki (CPR) and Ben Jaʿafar (Ettakatol); invited to join the coalition government, Chebbi’s PDP declined. The Troika government stayed in power from October 2011 to January 2014. However, Troika did not navigate well the test of government, faced as it was with big structural socio-economic and administrative problems, the people’s high post-revolutionary expectations, as well as with the opposition, since mid-2012, of the leftist parties, of the growing Ansar al-Shariʿa Salafi party, and of the counter-revolutionary ambitions of the nostalgics of the deposed regime (Guazzone 2013). Moreover, the power-sharing agreement among the three members of the Troika remained opaque and was not fully respected, as many of Ennahda’s unilateral moves demonstrated.<sup>38</sup> The perceived small political role of CPR and Ettakatol caused half of their elected representatives in the Constituent Assembly to abandon the parties.

Since spring 2012, growing dissatisfaction with the Troika government allowed the former Prime Minister, Caïd Essebsi – a minister under Ben Ali and a member of the Constitutional Democratic Rally regime party – to form Nidaʿa Tounes (Call for Tunisia), a new party promising to provide a liberal, modern alternative to the Islamists. The establishment of Nidaʿa Tounes created a bipolarity in the Tunisian political landscape that the leftists sought to break by forming in October 2012 the *Front Populaire*, a front uniting twelve left-wing, nationalist, and green political parties and associations, as well as many independent intellectuals. The pre-revolutionary polarization

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, Ennahda’s prime minister, Jebali, decided in 2012 to extradite to Libya, Baghdadi Mahmoudi, a Gaddafi acolyte, without the consent of President Marzouki (Cf. Amnesty International “Extradition of Former Libyan Prime Minister from Tunisia”, available at: [urly.it/31dqxz](http://urly.it/31dqxz) (Accessed October 10, 2025)).

of Tunisian political life was thus reconstituted, leading each political pole to struggle for its constituency and to forgive the alliances forged in the opposition to Ben Ali, despite the enduring socio-economic crisis and the persisting popular protests.

Thus, after the first free political election in 2011, Tunisian political actors opposing the Ben Ali regime progressively moved from convergence to competition and reverted to old political patterns (Govantes, de Larramendi 2023). A detailed analysis of this development is beyond the scope of this article; however, it has been observed that the fragmentation of left political actors and the rigidity of their ideological discourse (e.g., the unwillingness to distinguish between Ansar al-Shari'a Salafis and Ennahda Islamists) were possibly just as much to blame as the often-examined shortcomings of the Ennahda Islamists in government (Marks 2018; Guazzone 2013). What is clear is that the renewed post-revolutionary conflict between Islamists and leftists in Tunisia reached a violent climax in 2013 with the assassination of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, two leaders of the Democratic Patriots' Movement (PPDU), a radical communist party within the Popular Front, which accused Ennahda of Belaid's murder. These political killings, whose instigators remain unknown to this day, shocked the country, sparked widespread protests, and toppled the Troika government (Guazzone 2013; Govantes de Larramendi 2023).

In October 2014, the general elections resulted in Nida'a Tounes becoming the leading party with 37.6% of the vote, followed by Ennahda with 27.8%, while the Front Populaire secured only 3.7%. Since then, Ennahda Islamists lost their leadership role in the government and aimed to maintain their legitimacy in the Tunisian political arena primarily through a conciliatory "consensus" approach, namely participating as a minor partner in the national unity government led by Nida'a Tounes, whose leader, Essebsi, also won the presidential election in November 2014.

As analysts have shown (Grewal, Hamid 2020; Blanc 2024), this compromise meant that, for the sake of consensus, there was no effective opposition to the 2015-2019 national unity government. As a consequence, controversial but necessary policies, such as transitional justice and security sector reform, were abandoned, and at the same time, no bold action was taken on the economy or on issues such as establishing the Constitutional Court. In turn, the inability of

the unity government to tackle the real needs of the country and frequent political bickering in Parliament led to intense widespread disillusionment with representative politics parliamentary politics (Yardımcı-Geyikçi, Özlem 2018) that, coupled with the extreme COVID-19 crisis experienced in Tunisia (Guazzone 2024), led to the electoral success of candidates outside the political system in the 2019 general and presidential elections. In the end, the disillusionment of average Tunisians with political parties, institutions, and, more broadly, the very idea of representative democracy enabled the success of the constitutional coup enacted by the “anti-political” President Kaïs Saïed in July 2021 and the consolidation of his new authoritarian regime in Tunisia.

The disregard for the legacy of the dialogue between the leftists and the Islamists, prepared by the student movement in the 1970s and 1980s and realized in the October 18 initiative, is only one of many factors that contributed to the reversal of the democratic transition in Tunisia after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. However, the abandonment of that cross-ideological encounter and of the transformative debates that led to the joint declarations reached in 2007-2009 was a clear symptom of the structural weaknesses of the transition. At the same time, the alternative path taken, that is, “bargained competition” between the political elites that earned Tunisia the Nobel prize in 2015 (Boubeker 2016), did not translate into a progressive change of political culture and practices. On the contrary, it ended up freezing the democratization process and reversing the acquis of the 2011 revolution. As some analysts noted, already in 2017, the new Tunisian government formed in September harbored “more Ben Ali-era figures than any time since 2011” (Wolf 2017b).

Both the leftists and the Islamists paid a high price for not pursuing their encounters. In 2019, the Popular Front broke up, primarily due to strategic disagreements. Some members of this leftist Front favored a possible rapprochement with Nida’*a* Tounes to counter Ennahda, while others saw both parties as primarily neoliberal and dismissed them both. In addition, in the name of realpolitik and pragmatism, some of the Popular Front leaders wanted to adapt to the economic pressures weighing on the country and accepted the negotiation of the controversial Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (Dcfta) with the European Union finally reached in 2019, while others, including Hamma Hammami, defended loyalty to the social values of the traditional left and opposed the Dcfta head-on.

As for Ennahda, Ghannouchi, the party president, imposed his strategy of compromise with the rebranded elites of the old regime on the party's cadres when, in 2016, he struck, almost in secret, an agreement with Essebsi known as the "pact of the two *shaykh*". By this pact, Essebsi and Ghannouchi provided mutual political protection for each other's survival. Two key aspects of the "pact of the two *shaykhs*" were the increase in the age limit for presidential candidates, which enabled Essebsi to run for president, and an agreement to allow most members and supporters of Ben Ali's former ruling party to participate in politics and business. This effectively blocked efforts at post-revolutionary transitional justice in Tunisia (McCarthy 2019).

In the end, this "at all costs" consensus strategy weakened both parties (Boubekeur 2016). Nida'a Tounes split into multiple factions, rival political groups in Parliament, and was eventually replaced by Qalb Tunis, a new centrist party formed just before the 2019 general elections. As for the Islamists, their renowned internal discipline gradually eroded. As Blanc (2024) notes, the growing internal dissent in Ennahda was not so much about the strategy of compromise pursued by Ghannouchi but rather about the way it was imposed on the party without internal debate. Over time, prioritizing the party's image as legitimate and dependable while marginalizing its ideology and the political expectations of its electorate proved a genuine strategic mistake for Ennahda. This strategy in the end led first to a drastic fall in votes for Ennahda in 2019 and then to a collective resignation letter from the party by one hundred of its higher cadres in September 2021, who were faced with Ghannouchi's unwillingness -and the weakened party's inability- to confront president Said Kais's "constitutional" coup of July 2021 that led to the renewal of authoritarianism in Tunisia.

## Conclusions

The political dynamics in Tunisia from the 1960s to the 2010s reveal a complex interplay between the left and Islamist movements. Despite their profound ideological differences and historical confrontations, these two groups experienced moments of interaction and mutual influence, particularly within the university student movements in 1975-1985 and later, in the 2000s, through joint anti-regime actions and collaborative initiatives in the *Collectif du 18 Octobre*.

Between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, encounters between the Left and Islamists in the university space facilitated the political education of Islamist activists despite intense confrontation. In contrast, the shared experience of repression under Ben Ali's authoritarian regime in the 1990s and early 2000s fostered a degree of solidarity and collaboration. Between 2005 and 2009, the activities of the *Collectif du 18 Octobre* represented a significant attempt at political compromise, bringing together diverse opposition forces to articulate a shared vision for Tunisia's future as a democracy. The legacy of these encounters paved the way for the cross-ideological post-revolutionary coalition government of the Troika (2011-2014).

However, the deep-seated mistrust, together with ideological and political divides between the left and Islamists, persisted, ultimately hindering sustained collaboration after the Arab Spring revolution. The shared failure to fully bridge these divides contributed to the political polarization that reemerged during Tunisia's post-revolutionary transition and, more broadly, to the eventual emergence of popular dissatisfaction with democratic politics and, subsequently, to the reestablishment of an authoritarian regime after 2021. In conclusion, the historical interactions between the left and Islamists in Tunisia underscored the potential and limitations of cross-ideological collaboration in the face of authoritarianism. While encounters between the left and the Islamists in Tunisia facilitated important political learning and temporary alliances, enduring ideological rifts, electoral maneuvering, and external pressures ultimately constrained the ability to achieve lasting political transformations and democratic consolidation.

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# Lessons from the Left: Islamist Student Activism and Cultural Work in 1980s Tunisia

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the cultural dimension of the rise of Islamist student activism in Tunisia. It focuses on Islamist cultural activism in the 1980s and the ways it sought to challenge the hegemony of the left in Tunisian universities. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Tunisian university campuses constituted a central arena for the organisation and propagation of political Islam. Here, Islamist students confronted the strong legacy of leftist revolutionary thought and practice. Cultural work had been historically integral to leftist activism. On campus, leftists used film screenings, poetry readings, concerts and the like as political tools and a means of propaganda. This model was of inspiration for emerging Islamist actors. Songs, in particular, were a privileged instrument in this cultural confrontation. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, interviews with artists and activists, archival research, and the analysis of protest songs, the article investigates the encounter between Tunisian Islamists and leftists in terms of cultural activism. It examines how the use of cultural products and artistic practices fostered ideological negotiations within the Tunisian Islamist student movement. The analysis highlights the continuity and transformation of radical student activism in Tunisia, showing how Islamists learned from leftist counterparts and integrated elements of earlier student activism, while at the same time leaving a significant mark on leftist political culture. By examining this often-overlooked cultural dimension, the chapter wishes to shed new light on the mutual impact of the confrontation between Islamist and leftist activists, and to offer a new perspective on the development of post-independence political activism in Tunisia.

**KEYWORDS:** Tunisia; Student Movement; Islamists; Cultural Activism; Protest Songs.

## Introduction

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, university campuses constituted a central arena for the organisation and propagation of the Tunisian Islamist movement. In this period, Tunisian universities were a

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battleground for ideological contention: here, Islamist students had to come to terms with the strong legacy of leftist revolutionary thought. Since its inception, the leftist student movement has made extensive use of culture as a political tool. This cultural activism – characterised by debates, film screenings, poetry readings, and concerts – provided a model to the emerging Islamist movement.

This chapter examines the cultural dimension of Islamist student activism in 1980s Tunisia. It is based on extensive fieldwork and interviews conducted with artists and activists in 2018-19 as part of my doctoral research project on counter-culture and “committed songs”<sup>2</sup> in 1970s-80s Tunisia. While addressing the rise of political Islam and including sections dedicated to Islamist cultural productions, the primary focus of my thesis was leftist politics and culture. In fact, in Tunisia, *al-ughniya al-multazima* (*la chanson engagée*, in French) is mainly associated with *gauchiste* culture. More broadly, in Tunisia, as throughout the Arab region, committed culture and resistance culture (*al-thaqāfa al-multazima*) have been inextricably linked to Arab nationalism and socialism, communism, and the left. In the present chapter, the focus shifts to the Islamist side of the story and analyses counter-culture and cultural activism from a different angle, especially looking at Islamists’ elaboration and use of cultural work. It does so also in light of the unexploited or under-exploited material provided by fieldwork and of the documentary work on Islamist press conducted in the framework of the project coordinated by Prof. Laura Guazzone in 2023-24, which includes this publication.

This chapter seeks to answer the following questions: what impact did the encounter/clash between Islamists and leftists produce on university campuses in terms of cultural activism and cultural production? How did the cultural hegemony of the left in universities influence its new rivals? What kind of ideological negotiations did the use of artistic practices foster within the Islamist student movement? In order to address these questions, I will: 1) trace the rise of the Islamist movement in Tunisia, emphasising the role of universities as a privileged arena for contentious politics and for the articulation of a radical discourse, in continuity and in dialogue with the legacy of the

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout my work I use the term “committed” instead of more conventional labels such as “protest” or “political” songs because I situate the Tunisian *chanson engagée* or *al-ughniya al-multazima*, within the larger tradition of “commitment” (*al-iltizām*) in the artistic, literary and intellectual field of the Arab region.

leftist student movement; 2) explore how Islamist actors developed the ideological and political confrontation with the Left on campus and discuss its impact, especially in terms of their approach to art and cultural work; 3) provide examples of how this ideological encounter materialised in cultural production, namely in the experience of music groups that were close to or associated with Islamist student activism.

This seeks to address a twofold gap in the literature on the cultural history of the country. First, cultural studies and cultural history studies regarding Tunisia have mainly been interested in the alternative artistic production of the Arab Uprising, while the post-independence period, in terms of both popular/protest culture and cultural policy, remains understudied. Secondly, studies concerning both the post-colonial and the post-revolutionary period have been more interested in the cultural production of progressive, leftist, and liberal youth. Notwithstanding the relative attention dedicated to the new Islamic public sphere and related pop culture in the Arab and MENA region over the last decades, Islamic/Islamist cultural production in Tunisia remains largely unexplored.

Islamist cultural production in the 1980s was a marginal phenomenon that certainly had a lesser impact on the Tunisian cultural and intellectual field, especially if compared to the important legacy of the country's leftist culture. However, I argue that studying this minor cultural experience may provide new insight into and a different perspective on the rise of the Tunisian Islamist movement. In particular, it may shed new light on the rifts and continuities of the Tunisian radical student movement, and on the mutual impact that the confrontation between Islamist and leftist activists produced in terms of ideological discourse and political practice.

## **Leftists, Islamists, and the Student Movement: Ruptures and Continuities in a Radical Tradition**

In 1981, the Tunisian government concluded the amnesty process for leftist political prisoners with the release of the last dissidents from prison. In that same year, the Tunisian Communist Party (PCT), was officially recognised, after having operated in semi-clandestinity for eighteen years, along with socialist parties such as the MUP and the MDS.<sup>3</sup> These events marked the end of the *gauchiste* protest cycle

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<sup>3</sup> The acronyms respectively refer to *Mouvement de l'Unité Populaire* founded by Ahmed Ben Salah, and *Mouvement des Democratés Socialistes* founded by Ahmed Mestiri.

(Ayari 2017) which had begun in the 1960s and which had been met by police violence, mass trials, imprisonments, torture, and confinement. A decade of repression had crushed the revolutionary drive of the radical left. Many key figures of leftist underground parties redirected their commitment towards human rights organisations and other civil associations, or in the cultural and intellectual field (Kréfa 2016). The rehabilitation and often co-optation of the left and cautious steps towards a multi-party system façade came from a regime on the verge of collapse and threatened by the rise of political Islam. Islamic activism in Tunisia had emerged in the late 1960s as proselytism (in the form of *Tabligh* groups) promoted a bottom-up process of Islamic revival within what was then perceived as a westernised society that had abandoned its religious values (Wolf 2017: 34). It is from within this *da'wa* movement that *al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya* was founded in the early 1970s by the leaders of the Tunisian Islamist movement: Rachid Ghannouchi, Abdelfattah Mourou, and Hmida Ennaifer. From the mosques of the capital and the coastal regions, *al-Jamā'a al-Islāmiyya* spread to villages in the southern and internal regions, where it found fertile ground in the newly established high schools and associated mosques (Ayari 2017). In the meantime, especially since the Sadat era, there had been an increase in the diffusion of the Muslim Brothers' literature outside of Egypt. Their thought was to have a major influence on the Tunisian Islamist movement, both in terms of ideology and organisational structure (Wolf 2017: 37).

In 1972, as the movement launched its first magazine, *al-Ma'rifa*, Islamist students began to be elected as members of academic councils (Ayari 2017: 140). Islamism was starting to encroach upon university, gradually changing its face. According to Wolf, Tunisian Islamist students issued their first statement as "students of the Islamic Tendency Movement" (MTI) in 1977, in the context of the first violent clashes with their leftist and Destourian<sup>4</sup> counterparts (Wolf 2017: 43). However, the foundation of the movement is generally dated to 1981 when, following the legalisation of the PCT, the Islamists demanded the authorisation for the creation of a party. The request was rejected and followed by a wave of mass arrests (Ayari 2017: 141)

Initially, Islamic activism was tolerated by the regime that had been busy, since the late 1960s, repressing the radical left. Tolerance towards the religious factions of society and even co-optation within the state

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<sup>4</sup> From the name of the state party: *Parti Socialiste Destourien* (PSD).

party have been interpreted as a tactical choice to marginalise the left. Moreover, the Islamic revival seemed to fall in line with the generalised moralisation and Arabisation of the regime's discourse and policy, as well as with the broader regional shift towards ideologies and politics focused on Arab-Islamic identity (Camau, Geisser 2003; Ayari 2017). Indeed, this shift would also radically reshape socialist and Arab nationalist discourse and deeply impact leftist political culture (Ben Haj Yahia 2018; Melfa 2019; Carnevale 2026). In the 1970s, however, the radicalisation of Islamist discourse started to pose a serious threat to the status quo. The University was a crucial space for the articulation of political Islam as a revolutionary discourse and as a practice capable of mobilising educated youth and destabilising the regime. However, the MTI did not take root in a political void. It found its place in the radical tradition of the student movement, which had been hegemonized by *gauchisme* since at least the late 1960s.

In 1979, Tunisian sociologist Abdelkader Zghal commented:

The most disconcerting aspect, for positivist and neo-positivist intellectuals, is that the spearhead of this movement of the return of the sacred in the Muslim world is not constituted, as one might have expected, by students from theology faculties threatened by unemployment, but by students from science faculties (mathematics, physics-chemistry) and technology institutes. Furthermore, the social origin of these students is generally not different from that of students mobilised by the different trends of the secular left. They are generally children of the urban or semi-urban petty bourgeoisie, living on the edge of poverty. (Zghal 1979: 41)<sup>5</sup>

Scholars have shed light on the continuity represented by political Islam in the frame of the student movement: two "cycles" of protests (leftist in the 1960s-70s; Islamist in the 1970s-80s) pertaining to a common process of radicalisation of politicised and educated youth (Geisser 2015; Ayari 2017; Dhifalla 2017). The rise of political Islam in Tunisia ran parallel to a deep transformation of the discourse of the radical left, with a shift from a decidedly secular, universalistic, and even cosmopolitan stance, to the effort to theorise an Arab, Muslim, and national path to socialism, and reconcile the Arab-Islamic identity with the cause of progress and social justice (Entelis 1974; Melfa 2019).

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<sup>5</sup> Translations from French are by the author.

The Arab defeat of 1967 has been widely examined as the main turning point in the ideological shift of Arab thought. Indeed, it came to embody the failure of secular Arab nationalism (Zghal 1979; Haugbolle 2017). Since 1967, Tunisian (leftist) youth had protested against the regime's opportunism regarding the Palestine question, its alignment with the Western bloc in terms of foreign policy, its increasing authoritarianism, and its failure to meet the economic and social expectations of the younger generations. However, the ideological transformation was completed by the generation beginning higher education in the 1970s, which then took the reins of the movement. In the 1970s, the Tunisian University (established in 1960) came to be increasingly populated by students from rural areas, the internal and southern regions, and modest backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> This was the result of post-independence nationalist policies and especially of educational policies, including the establishment of public primary and secondary schools across the country.

While the Arabisation and "ruralisation" of university corresponded to the rise of political Islam, primarily affecting the sociological composition of this movement, this transformation had a great impact on the (declining) left, too. The language shift within the Left, for example, reflected the sociological changes taking place within this militant milieu, with Arabic replacing French as the privileged language of political intellectual production (Ben Haj Yahia 2018). The process of deep Arabisation and even Islamisation of the left would even lead to "conversions", as was the case with the MAWAD group in the early 1980s, which approached Islamist positions (Ayari 2017).<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the Tunisian ideologues of political Islam were introducing Islam as the only solution to the backwardness, economic dependence, and corruption of Arab countries. Indeed, *al-Islām huwa*

<sup>6</sup> What Ayari calls "*filiation extra-muros*." The notion of *sudism contestaire* has been used to analyse the overrepresentation of militants from southern and internal regions. This phenomenon has its roots in the legacy of the Youssefist movement (Ayari 2017: 69). In the aftermath of independence, the faction of the Neo-Destour guided by Salah Ben Youssef was annihilated by the faction led by Bourguiba. Ben Youssef had its stronghold in southern and internal regions which remained at the margin of post-colonial developmental plans.

<sup>7</sup> *al-Munāḍilūn al-Waṭaniyyūn al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyūn*, or the Patriotic Democratic Militants, split from the WATAD, itself a Pan-Arab Marxist-Leninist offspring of *Perspectives - el-ʿĀmel el-Tūnsi*. The splits and complex ideological shift of the leftist movement have also been recounted to me by the militant, unionist and musician Mohsen Ben Hammad during various encounters and interviews.

*al-ḥall* was the slogan of the Muslim Brothers (Guazzone 2015: 181). Despite the irreconcilability of historical materialism with an ideology rooted in religious principles, in Tunisia and elsewhere, political Islam had to come to terms with Marxist thought. Militants were compelled to study it, and even to borrow from its vocabulary, and rework its categories and concepts. The accomplishment of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 was of course a watershed moment that had major repercussions also on peripheral and “moderate” Tunisia (as compared to the wider Arab-Muslim region). The Islamic Revolution in Iran concretized the possibility of success for a revolutionary Islamic political project, as its major theoretician, ‘Ali Shariati, reconciled Quranic terminology and Islamic (Shia) doctrine with the thought and vocabulary of anti-colonial Marxism (Campanini 2005; Bayat 2017).

Tunisian Islamist publications issued in this period – especially with the beginning of protests in Iran – reflected the increased need to engage with Marxism and to debate, from an Islamic perspective, issues such as social justice, hegemony, and the conflict between oppressors and the oppressed, as well as democratic participation. Testimonies gathered by Anne Wolf in her history of Ennahda attest that Islamist activists were well aware of the legacy of leftist thought and practice in the Tunisian university space, as well as of the need for them to deal with the weight of this tradition and the strength of its discourse. The encounter with leftist students revealed to the Islamist youth that their “ideological background was not sufficiently developed to keep up with the heated political debates on campuses” (Wolf 2017: 42), that they did not have the “intellectual means to counter their arguments effectively” (quote from an interview in Wolf 2017: 42). In order to challenge the hegemony of the radical left, Islamists had to study Marxism.<sup>8</sup>

This ideological encounter is reflected in the magazine *15\*21: al-Majalla li-l-fikr al-Islāmī al-mustaqbalī* (The Magazine for Future Islamic Thought), which marked a cleavage within the Islamist movement. The magazine, which served as a platform for the progressive Islamist trend (*al-Islām al-taqaddumī*), also known as *al-yasār al-Islāmī* (Islamic left), was launched in 1982 by Hmida Ennaifer and other former

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<sup>8</sup> For a broader picture on Islamist/leftists ideological and political encounters in Tunisia throughout the decades, from the 1960s to the 2010s, and for insights on the legacy of these encounters on post-2011 “democratic transition” dynamics, see Guazzone’s chapter in this same volume.

leaders of *al-Jamā‘a al-Islāmiyya* who had become increasingly critical of the Muslim Brotherhood and of its influence on the Tunisian movement. These “dissidents” were instead oriented toward a “Tunisian Islam consonant with the country’s specific Islamic heritage – including its Islamic reformist movement and the centuries-old Zaytouna legacy – to find responses to modern-day challenges” (Wolf 2017: 46) and were influenced by thinkers advocating a democratic and plural Islam, such as Malek Bennabi (Wolf 2017: 40). Indeed, the title suggested the possibility of a “modern” Islam, one that would be ready for the challenges of the upcoming 21st century. The articles challenged historical materialism and discussed the failure of Arab socialism; questioned the incompatibility of Islam with democracy, modernity, and science; discussed the role of Muslim women; and engaged with the thought of contemporary Islamic intellectuals, such as Malek Bennabi and Mohammed Arkoun, of Marxists and Third-Worldist intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon. Issue 8, 1984, dedicated to “The Intellectual and Power”, featured an article on “Culture and Revolution in Antonio Gramsci”,<sup>9</sup> the Italian Marxist militant and anti-fascist thinker, revealing the preoccupation of Tunisian Islamists (as that of their comrades in other parts of the Arab-Muslim region) with issues concerning hegemony, ideology, and culture.<sup>10</sup> The magazine was published, discontinuously, until 1991. While remaining limited to intellectual circles – since the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood was the main driver of grassroots activism (Wolf 2017: 40) – the experience of the “Islamist left” was emblematic of the intellectual effort for reconciliation that characterised Tunisian Islamism, as well as the weight and inevitability of Marxist thought.

In the meantime, political Islam was asserting itself as the main force of radical opposition to the regime. The movement intervened extensively and profoundly in the university space. Its student section awarded prizes to pious students, participated in sports events, provided housing to the movement’s leaders, and controlled the food

<sup>9</sup> Kamāl al-Ghazzī, “al-Thaqāfa wa al-thawra ‘inda Anṭūniū Ghrāmshī”, 15\*21, 8, 1984, 21-23.

<sup>10</sup> For Gramscian readings of the Muslim Brotherhood, see for example: Massimo Campanini (2019) on Hassan Hanafi and his “Islamist organic intellectual and Hazem Kandil (2011) on the strategy of “extensive Islamisation” of Egyptian society and “counterhegemonic strategy” addressed to replace secular values and practices with Islamic ones.

quality in the cafeterias. This organisational effort would lead to the establishment, in 1985, of the UGTE (*Union Générale Tunisienne des Etudiants*), an independent student union leaning towards Islamism. The UGTE was legalised in 1988, during the brief and fragile window of liberalisation offered by the new regime of Ben Ali, who, on November 7, 1987, deposed the Father of the Nation, Habib Bourguiba. In that same year, striving to gain institutional recognition, the MTI changed its name to Ennahda (*Harakat al-Nahda*, The Renaissance Movement) to meet the requirements set by the new law on political parties (prohibiting references to linguistic, racial, or religious issues) and participate in the elections planned for 1989. The UGTE would be dissolved by the authorities in 1991, amidst the general violent repression of the movement, which was completely annihilated by 1992 through mass arrests and harsh prison sentences. Those who escaped arrest went into exile.

During its short period of activity, the representatives of the new student union had won most of the seats on faculty councils to the detriment of Destourian and leftist students (the latter were organised in “provisional unionist structures” since the hijacking of the UGET<sup>11</sup> by loyalist students in 1971). The political and cultural hegemony of political Islam radically changed the face of Tunisian universities. Throughout the 1980s, religious symbols and rituals were proudly displayed on campus for the first time: male students grew beards, female students wore the *hijāb*, and university cafeterias closed for the month of Ramadan (Waltz 1986; Pepicelli 2015; Wolf 2017; Ayari 2017).

## **The Campus as a Cultural Battlefield: Music for the Islamist Camp**

As explained, Tunisian Islamists acknowledged the legacy of the left in the Tunisian student movement and recognised the impact that this encounter/clash had on their own intellectual training and discourse. Besides the strictly ideological aspect, the confrontation with the left also shaped the political practice of the Islamist movement inside universities. One major output, of course, was the student union.

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<sup>11</sup> *Union Générale des Etudiants de Tunisie*: founded in 1952 and until then the only recognised student organisation. The union had constituted a crucial breeding ground for the nationalist elite; however, over time, it had become contended by leftists and students loyal to the PSD.

Propaganda techniques and intellectual activities, as well as cultural and aesthetic practices organised on campus by Islamist activists signalled continuity with the radical student movement tradition. “Posters, wall journals, discussion circles of the cultural and political kind: this was the tradition of the student movement. Every morning as you entered the faculty you would find the posters”, explained ‘Adel Thabti, a member of UGTE’s executive bureau in 1990-91.<sup>12</sup> He particularly emphasized the importance of *al-jarā’id al-hā’iyya*, newspapers displayed on walls (better known by the Chinese term *dazibao*). According to Ayari, Islamist *dazibaos* appeared at universities as early as 1974 (2017: 144). Each political movement had its own “wall journal.” MTI’s wall journal was *al-Ḥadath* (The Event). Besides constituting an aesthetic intervention on its own, decorating and thus politicising the university’s physical space, according to Thabti, it was part of a “cultural movement” within Islamist activism. The wall journal presented “topics of a political kind but also topics of a cultural kind, such as pieces of poetry and short stories”, explained Thabti.<sup>13</sup>

The Left had extensively used culture as a political tool, as an instrument of propaganda against the regime, as a means for the articulation of a contentious political discourse, and to construct and strengthen a dissident political community. A leftist counter-culture flourished in post-independence Tunisia and took shape in a variety of artistic fields, leaving an important imprint on the country’s cultural and intellectual life for decades (Omri 2012; Carnevale 2021b). The *Nouveau Théâtre*, founded in the late 1970s with a Brechtian influence, is an example of a committed artistic movement which has come to hold a prominent place in the country’s cultural scene. Amateur filmmaking and *ciné-clubs* were crucial to the politicisation and mobilisation of Tunisian radical youth and represented a precious space for political debate. Finally, as I have written elsewhere, music served as a fundamental tool for leftist “popular education” and was considered an effective “instrument of struggle” (Carnevale 2026; 2021a).

While leftist committed songs first appeared in the mid and late 1970s, the 1980s are considered the golden age of the Tunisian *ughniya multazima*. The highly politicised campus environment of the 1980s, along with the regime’s loosening of its grip on the left,

<sup>12</sup> ‘Adel Thabti, interview with the author, Tunis, 31/10/2018.

<sup>13</sup> Thabti, interview, Id.

provided a privileged stage for this kind of militant “popular” cultural production. This committed culture was the product of cultural work carried out by actors who firmly believed in the role of art and education as effective tools of social transformation, and in the need for a vernacular culture capable of reaching the “people”. In this, they were largely inspired by the Gramscian concepts of cultural hegemony and the organic intellectual. Creating hegemony amongst youth through cultural means was an explicit objective of leftist parties, both underground (such as PCOT and WATAD) and official (the PCT was legalised in 1981).<sup>14</sup> According to Nebrass Chammmam, frontman of *al-Baḥth al-Mūsīqī*, a musical group very close to the PCOT and founded in 1980:

Historically, all militant cultural activity in Tunisia came from the Left [...] Before January 14 [2011] culture was the only way for the Left. There were no political parties presenting their programmes, everyone used bands or cultural events as a form of propaganda [...] We had never heard about an Islamist poet, or band, or theatre company.<sup>15</sup>

However, with the rise of the MTI and especially with the UGTE seizing the majority of seats on academic councils, an Islamist version of culture found its way on campus. The “University week”, for example, was organised by the student representatives every year in the spring. It was a week dedicated to “committed music concerts, painting exhibitions, theatre plays.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, besides engaging with the intellectual references of the left, the Islamists also learnt from their rivals about the relevance of culture and art for the political socialisation of youth. ‘Adel Thabti confirms that:

The Islamists, whether they liked it or not, were influenced by what was happening in university life, by the left, by confrontation. They had to read Marx and engage with Marxist ideas at university; they had to listen to Sheikh Imam.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The acronyms respectively refer to: *Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie*, *Ḥizb al-Waṭaniyyīn al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyīn* (The Democratic Patriots Party), and *Parti Communiste Tunisien*.

<sup>15</sup> Nebrass Chammmam, interview with the author, Gabes, 19/01/2019.

<sup>16</sup> Thabti, interview, Id.

<sup>17</sup> Thabti, interview, Id.

Egyptian oud player and singer Sheikh Imam was a champion of Arab committed music and inspired many generations of leftist students and workers (Booth 2009). However, his legacy was also claimed by Islamists. In 1984, he had participated in the Tunisian tour organised by the leftist-dominated UGTT<sup>18</sup> with his long-time artistic partner, the vernacular poet Ahmed Fouad Negm, and shared the stage with young leftist musical groups. However, in 1989, Sheikh Imam returned to the country invited by the Islamist student union, the UGTE.

It was in this context that an Islamist-oriented committed song began to emerge in the mid-1980s, in the orbit of the UGTE. These bands had been created a few years later than the leftist and Arab nationalist ones and were destined for a much shorter life, given the violent repression that would annihilate the Islamist movement in 1991-92. They were formed by university students, mainly coming from scientific faculties, and included members with an academic musical education. The band *'Ushshāq al-Waṭan* (Lovers of the Country), was founded in 1983. Their lyrics, written by Tunisian poets close to the Islamist faction, such as Bahri al-Arfaoui, are in classical Arabic. Exceptions are represented by songs from the Palestinian folk repertoire and from Sheikh Imam's repertoire, in Palestinian and Egyptian dialect respectively. *Firqat al-Shams al-Mūsīqī* (The Sun Musical Ensemble), or simply *al-Shams*, which was founded in 1985 and featured a large orchestra, used the Tunisian vernacular in some of its lyrics. *Al-Marḥala* (The Phase) was founded in 1986, prompted by songwriter Tawfiq Mestawi, a pioneer of Islamist protest songs who later pursued a solo career.

Following the path of leftist cultural activism on campus, Islamist student activists began to use music as a tool for propaganda and popular education to attract youth, awaken their conscience, and win them over to their cause. According to Jalal Garsi, who was a member of *'Ushshāq al-Waṭan* during the 1980s:

Faced with the Left, who knew how to use culture, penetrate society, and convey messages through music, Islamists realized that it worked and therefore encouraged the creation of musical groups with this tendency.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*, founded in 1946.

<sup>19</sup> Kacem and Garsi, interview (2018), Id.

Thus, during part of the 1980s, universities represented a safe space, an environment of relative freedom or, at least, an arena in which political confrontation could take place. This perception was shared by both Islamists and leftists engaged in the cultural domain. Salah Hmidet, also a former member of *'Ushshāq al-Waṭan*, recalled that:

The committed music groups were in total sync with the students [...]. What we couldn't say outside the university, we said inside the university. Performances attended by thousands of students took place on campus. Committed songs gave us the opportunity to be in a world where we could feel we were living a reality different to that we lived outside the university.<sup>20</sup>

Nebrass Chamam, from the leftist band *al-Baḥth al-Mūsīqī*, used similar words, stating that the university: "Is somewhat the opposite of what happens outside. Outside, we do not have the right to form a political party, whereas the party that governs and controls the country has no right to exist inside the university."<sup>21</sup>

This is not to say that university was a peaceful place. On the contrary, it was the site of violent clashes between the different factions that tried to dominate it. Moreover, student activism, including cultural activism, continued to be subject to a certain degree of control and "disturbance", as some activists have defined the more or less subtle ostracism pursued by the authorities. The members of Islamist bands that I have interviewed recalled universities being surrounded by police during their musical exhibitions, as well as the tricks they used to secretly introduce musical instruments onto campus. The UGTE-sponsored Sheikh Imam's tour itself was not free of trouble. A scheduled exhibition at Al Manar campus was cancelled after it had sold 10,000 tickets. According to Thabti: "Sheikh Imam was practically kidnapped by the Ministry of the Interior to ensure that the concert would not take place."<sup>22</sup> The incident resonated in the national press.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Salah Hmidet, interview with the author, Tunis, 18/06/2018.

<sup>21</sup> Chamam, interview, Id.

<sup>22</sup> Thabti, interview, Id.

<sup>23</sup> The episode is reported in the periodical *Realités* (n. 186, 10-16 March 1989), in an article entitled "Cheikh Imam au campus. Les péripéties d'un gala", reporting that the singer had been summoned by the security services.

During an interview with three members of the Islamist band *al-Shams*,<sup>24</sup> one of them, Abdellatif Najar, explained that:

In this period, there was a fight between two poles: the Islamist pole and the leftist pole. [*His companion, Hicham Khalfaoui, intervenes, correcting him: "Arab Muslim."* Najar continues:] Arab Muslim and left. The two are against the dictatorship. At the university, if you want to be committed, that would be either with this party or with the other. We don't have a choice. Even if you don't want to integrate, the situation at the university will lead you to one of the two.

Khalfaoui tries to clarify:

In other words, if the songs of one band are convenient for one party, [the band] will soon be involved in their festival ... and they find themselves classified. But it is not real. There is not necessarily a link between the band and the political party.

Similarly, Nizar Louaichi, leader of the band *al-Marḥala*, affirmed that he was closer to the UGTE and the Islamist side but:

I am not with this party, no. But I play [for them]. [...] I consider myself an artist, so to speak, I don't have to enter into this [...] If the leftists invited me, I would accept. But they never did, because they saw me playing for the Islamists, so they classified me.<sup>25</sup>

However, he later recounted what he defined as "a small anecdote: one day they arrested me, because... I was active in the student domain, at the Beaux Arts." The episode occurred during the Sheikh Imam UGTE-sponsored tour, when Louaichi was supposed to accompany the Egyptian artist on stage. Something similar happened to one member of *al-Shams* on the same occasion.

These testimonies confirm the idea of a highly politicised university space, a domain contended by two opposing factions, both on the verge of being definitively crushed by the regime, both trying to hegemonize the radical discourse and vie for the role of revolutionary vanguard. It was a violent battle that would also be fought through aesthetic and cultural practices. The ambivalence or reluctance sometimes exhibited

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed Tebai, Abdellatif Najar and Hicham Khalfaoui, interview with the author, Tunis, 21/06/2018.

<sup>25</sup> Nizar Louaichi, interview with the author, Tunis, 21/02/2019.

by musicians in the Islamist camp on their activism and affiliation is also telling. This is even more striking when compared with the pride and willingness of their leftist counterparts to prove their commitment.<sup>26</sup> This reluctance can probably be explained with the stigmatisation of Islamism in the history of contemporary Tunisia and elsewhere, a trend associated with violence, backwardness, the discrimination of women, and terrorism. This was true even during the period of my fieldwork (2018-19), prior to the persecution of political opponents. At that time, Ennahda was part of the ruling coalition. However, by then, it had already largely disappointed public opinion and was accused of sponsoring terrorism and political assassinations.

Apart from rare occasions, leftists and Islamists did not share the stage: "The University week was about the Islamists. The leftists were just there to watch",<sup>27</sup> explained Chiheb Kacem, leader of *'Ushshāq al-Waṭan*. "The two poles, leftists and Islamists, wanted to attract neutral students. So, they organised cultural and political activities. One example is *Yaum al-Ard*, for Palestine: everyone organises their own event. The ones invite *'Ushshāq al-Waṭan*, the others invite *Awlād al-Manājim*."<sup>28</sup>

The Islamist committed song trend mostly depended on university activism and was mainly limited to the capital, unlike its leftist counterpart, who had a few more options, such as public cultural centres and minor festivals, and even managed to participate in some major national events throughout its history. In fact, leftist groups enjoyed the support of the UGTT (The Workers' Union), a major counterpower with a capillary presence throughout the country, of the PCT, which had been legalised, and many leftist-leaning or sympathetic state functionaries and cultural actors. As Adel Thabti himself stated, "We cannot talk about the committed song without talking about the student movement." Similarly, for sociologist Mounir Saidani, the Islamist committed song phenomenon did not "extend beyond the sphere of student youth." According to the Tunisian scholar, the phenomenon arose from the Islamist movement's attempt to "broaden its sphere of influence as much as possible." The movement realized

<sup>26</sup> I have written specifically on protest songs as a tool of cultural memory for the Tunisian left in "Recording another History" (2021b).

<sup>27</sup> Chiheb Kacem and Jalal Garsi, interview with the author, Tunis, 15/11/2018.

<sup>28</sup> Literally "The Children of the Mines", a leftist protest musical group from the Gafsa mining region, active since 1977.

that “this could not be achieved by sticking solely to purely political or Islamist positions. Other ways had to be sought. And one of the ways was through art, especially through songs.”<sup>29</sup>

However, universities were not the only stage. For example, the *Maison de la culture* in Den Den, a suburb of Tunis, welcomed the rehearsals of *‘Ushshāq al-Waṭan*.<sup>30</sup> In rarer cases, Islamist bands were also hosted in the very “fief” of leftist counterculture: the *Maison de la Culture* “Ibn Rachiq” in Tunis city centre. Here they exhibited in a few events dedicated to alternative music along with their leftist colleagues such as *al-Baḥth al-Mūsīqī* and *Awlād al-Manājim*. There also were some rare appearances on TV programmes, especially thanks to the popular TV host Nejjib Khattab. In 1988, *‘Ushshāq al-Waṭan* even participated in the foremost musical event in the country, the Carthage Festival and, in 1990-91, at the peak of anti-Islamist repression, they managed to perform at the Tunis Municipal Theatre (the circumstances of which will be better outlined below).

While most committed leftist artists refused to recognise the Islamist bands as part of the Tunisian committed song scene,<sup>31</sup> those on the Islamist side perceive their experiences as belonging in the larger tradition of *al-ughniya al-multazima*. “*C’est un chemin déjà tracé*” (It’s a path that’s already been mapped out) stated a member of *al-Shams*.<sup>32</sup> The editorial operation of the *Fondation Temimi*, directed by Prof. Abdeljelil Temimi (2018), is significant in this regard. The volume entitled “The Place of the Committed Song in the National Memory” is one of the very few publications on Tunisian committed songs. It was the result of seminar sessions organised by the Foundation that managed to bring together Islamist and leftist musicians and activists and collect their testimonies.

### *al-Ughniya al-Ḥādifa*

While the left had a major impact on the development of an “Islamist” committed song, the proponents of this trend also needed to find and

<sup>29</sup> Mounir Saidani, interview with the author, Tunis, 05/05/2019.

<sup>30</sup> Ali Jouhri interview with the author, Tunis, 03/04/2019; Chiheb Kacem and Jalal Garsi, interview with the author, Tunis, 22/02/2019; Ayari also mentions the *Maison de la culture* in Den Den for the same reason (2017).

<sup>31</sup> This is a recurrent position of the leftists that I have interviewed, but there are exceptions and nuanced positions in this regard.

<sup>32</sup> Tebai, Najjar and Khalfaoui, interview, Id.

root their legitimacy in the Islamic tradition. While music has generally thrived in Muslim societies, Islamic thought and jurisprudence has debated its permissibility for centuries, reaching very different conclusions. The most austere interpretations of the sacred texts categorically prohibit musical instruments and especially female voices. Indeed, the presence of women at public events has been historically restricted in Muslim (as in many other) contexts. These interpretations only accept religious, vocal chants. Some softer interpretations allow the use of few types of instruments, most notably percussions. However, the use of music is not foreign to the tradition of political Islam. The elaborate ways in which, for example, present-day Salafi Jihadi groups have tried to frame their sophisticated *anāshīd* as *halāl* (Pieslak 2017) and the bold use of musical instruments by Islamist groups (Berg 2017) reveal the precariousness and ambivalence of the legal status of music within the Islamic “discursive tradition” (Van Nieuwkerk *et al.* 2016),<sup>33</sup> as well as the centrality of music as a tool of Islamist propaganda.

However, a more “moderate position” within the Sunni discourse on music contends that “music in itself is not a problem. It is the lyrics, the style of the performance, and the company in which it is performed [...] that might be problematic” (Otterbeck 2016: 155). Within this framework we find advocates of *al-fann al-hādif*, “purposeful art”, who consider art a powerful tool for disseminating Islamic values. According to Otterbeck, this idea “reminds us of the discussion in Marxist and socialist circles about the function of art. Art was commissioned to propel the citizens, especially youth, into action for the cause” (Otterbeck 2016: 159). This moderate tradition is emblemized by figures such as Egyptian scholars Mohammad al-Ghazali (1917-1996) and Youssuf al-Qaradawi (1926-2022) who are, in fact, mentioned by *‘Ushshāq al-Waṭan* as direct influences.<sup>34</sup> The Tunisian band adopts the concept of *al-fann al-hādif* and their posters and logos state “*min ajl ughniya ‘arabiyya hādifa*” (for a purposeful Arab song).<sup>35</sup> Tunisian Islamist bands went as far as featuring veiled and

<sup>33</sup> A concept borrowed from Talal Asad’s classic essay “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam” (1986) and used by the authors in the introduction to discuss the multiple “Islamic” approaches to music across time and space.

<sup>34</sup> Garsi also specifically mentions al-Qaradawi’s book: *al-Halāl wa al-ḥarām fī al-Islām* (*The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, 1960), Kacem and Garsi, interview (2018), Id.

<sup>35</sup> See the cover picture on their FB page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=128272475968910&set=a.128272455968912>

non-veiled women<sup>36</sup> in their choirs and performing on stage, and employed large orchestras featuring instruments typically associated with “Western” music such as guitar and bass. Moreover, their lyrics were never explicitly religious. Islamist bands were proud of their large orchestras and their academic training in music, sometimes even reproaching their leftist counterparts of favouring lyrics over music and lacking artistic sensitivity [*fig. 1*].

This openness to a more liberal interpretation of Islamic thought may be due to the fact that Tunisian Islamism had to speak to a society which had been – notwithstanding the Islamic revival of the 1970s – largely and profoundly secularised. Moreover, we must consider the entrenchment of Tunisian Islamist thought in the national reformist tradition. Indeed, asked about their intellectual references, Garsi and Kacem immediately referred to the Zaytouna reformist tradition. “Tunisian Islamists were avant-garde compared to others in the Orient”, Garsi pointed out.<sup>37</sup> This “moderate” position is even more evident if compared to what was happening, in the same period, in Egyptian universities, where Islamist students dominating the university scene used to “interrupt concerts, theatrical performances, and entertainment”, while Islamist unions “banned films, dancing, and both popular and classical music”, viewing them as “alien to Islamic culture” (Bayat 2007).<sup>38</sup>

Activists and musicians close to the UGTE were compelled to engage in ideological negotiation in order to legitimise their use of art and aesthetic practices. Sociologist Mounir Saidani has explained that:

To enter the domain of art is to come into contact with other ideas, values, and worldviews ... Therefore, one is obliged to make revisions, to reread, to rethink one’s positions and alliances ... If these individuals want to be artists and be identified as such, they will be compelled to negotiate their relationship with ideology and with a clear and rigid political positioning.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Women were however present in Islamist movements included in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, since its early stage (Pepicelli 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Kacem and Garsi, interview (2018), Id.

<sup>38</sup> See also Van Nieuwerkerk (2008, 2016) on how the Islamisation of Egyptian society, especially in the 1990s, had a major repercussion on the artistic and cultural field, which also led to the phenomenon of “repentant artists.” At the same time, however, the aforementioned moderate (*wasatiyya*) tradition opposed this fundamentalist trend.

<sup>39</sup> Saidani, interview, Id.

“They’re not just a bunch of bearded men!” exclaimed Jalal Garsi (*‘Ushshāq al-Waṭan*), referring to the Islamist activists with whom they had to interact. “We raised the question, and they questioned us.” Band member Chiheb Kacem added: “We need to consider that Islamists tend to prohibit musical practice... it is considered *ḥarām*.” A religious and intellectual inquiry accompanied the young Islamist students’ approach to musical practice. Through *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) and *tajdīd* (renewal), Garsi explained, they overcame the taboo surrounding musical instruments, as well as that on the female voice, associated with licentious circumstances involving alcohol and “dancing women.” “That’s what is *ḥarām*”, they explained. However, they added, if it “respects Islamic norms” and “if the objective is noble, like supporting a political cause or awakening consciences, [art] is always something extraordinary and it is accepted.”<sup>40</sup>

In any case, the lyrics put to music by these bands present themes and a rhetoric that were not that dissimilar to that of their leftist colleagues. As underlined by Habib Belaid, who played a major role in the circulation of leftist songs thanks to his radio programmes at *Radio France Internationale*:

It is not through their songs that we discover this affiliation [with the Islamist movement] [...] they sing the same things as the others: injustice, lack of freedom, the aspirations of the Arab peoples, of the Palestinian people... but there was no religious discourse in their songs.<sup>41</sup>

The love for a country hijacked by traitors and sold to foreign powers is another recurrent motif in the repertoire of these bands, and one that is massively present in leftist and Arab nationalist songs, too. This theme characterizes the hymn and eponymous piece by *‘Ushshāq al-Waṭan* (1984) that displays straightforward and

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<sup>40</sup> Kacem and Garsi, interview (2018), Id. On “purposeful art” as a valuable instrument to revitalise Islam and to edify the *umma*, see also Winegar (2008) on Egypt.

<sup>41</sup> Habib Belaid, interview with the author, Tunis, 13/03/2019.

emphatic lyrics in classical Arabic, sung by a choir including a female voice:<sup>42</sup>

عشاق الوطن ... عشاق الوطن  
 العشق أنت لحن العشق يا وطني  
 فيك الضعيف يُهاني  
 ما بات حر في أمان  
 عشاق الوطن ... عشاق الوطن  
 أنت يا وطني تُؤلمني تغزوك أفكار  
 أنت يا وطني تُبكيني تنهشك الأشرار  
 و لكن العشق باق لكن العشق باق

Lovers of the homeland! Lovers of the homeland!  
 Love,<sup>43</sup> you are the melody of love, my homeland  
 Here the weak is humiliated  
 The free man cannot sleep peacefully  
 Lovers of the homeland! Lovers of the homeland!  
 Oh, homeland you hurt me, ideas invade you  
 Oh, homeland you make me cry, the wicked devour you  
 But love remains, love remains

The same preoccupations are shared by *al-Shams'* signature piece, "*Khyūt el-shams*" (Sun Threads, 1985), albeit in a very different register and style. The lyrics were written in Tunisian vernacular by the band's poet, Hicham Khalfaoui, whose North-Western rural<sup>44</sup> origins emerge clearly in the song.

<sup>42</sup> The song is available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6p1\\_cwNBWQ4&ab\\_channel=bureauculturelennahd](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6p1_cwNBWQ4&ab_channel=bureauculturelennahd). The video shows a collage of repertoire images.

<sup>43</sup> '*Ishq*: deep love, passion, devotion, adoration. From the same roots of the band's name.

<sup>44</sup> The North-West is a mountainous region, mostly rural and underdeveloped notwithstanding its natural resources. A later performance of the song is available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxUEPTtcM9E&list=RDpxUEPTtcM9E&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxUEPTtcM9E&list=RDpxUEPTtcM9E&start_radio=1)

خيوط الشمس دايماً المد  
 والحصاد ما تتحد بعد  
 يسلم يما رحمك اللي يمد  
 بالرجالة زنو دي ما تترد  
 سدي يما بيديك الملاح  
 نجمة حمراء و هليل الذباح  
 أنا وليدك تحتهم نرتاح  
 هو ما الخيمة الواسعة ولمراح  
 سدي يما و رصي عالخاللة  
 و لا تخلي فلة للبدالة  
 ياما ركبو الشمس والعدالة

Sun threads continue to stretch  
 And the harvesters are countless  
 Blessed be your womb, mother, which offers  
 Men whose arms don't retreat  
 Weave, mother, with your beautiful fingers  
 A red star and a thin crescent  
 And I, your son, rest under them  
 They are the tent and the pasture  
 Weave, mother, and beat well on the loom  
 Don't leave any openings for opportunists  
 So many times they rode the sun and justice

The song is characterised by a popular aesthetic. It displays themes and images drawn from rural and traditional life, juxtaposed with patriotic symbols and a politically-charged lexicon, together serving to convey a militant message.<sup>45</sup> The poem makes use of a very typical image of rural Tunisia and Amazigh/Beduin heritage: a woman weaving

<sup>45</sup> Combining popular aesthetics and ideological discourse was common in Tunisian leftist songs (Carnevale 2026, 2021a).

carpets. However, its symbols refer to the national flag and its Islamic heritage, the star and the crescent, that should protect the children of the nation. As is common in Arabic nationalist poetry and literature, the woman (the womb) is identified with fertile land, producing men (arms) that are supposed to give dignity and strength to the nation, and defend it from invaders and traitors.

Islamists, leftists, and Arab nationalists alike, opposing first the Bourguiba and then the Ben Ali regimes, shared the belief that colonialism, albeit in new shapes, still dominated the politics and economics of the Arab lands. “*al-Isti‘mār*” is<sup>46</sup> the title of a ‘*Ushshāq al-Waṭan*’ song that requires no interpretation:

هم جاو من كل مكان سرقوا شمسنا و القمر  
 كلاو الحوتة عامت فلايكهم في بحرنا و الموج شاهد  
 الاستعمار في وطني يلعب شطرنج  
 للعدل للحرية قال كئش مات  
 [...]
   
 يا شعب [...]
   
 إصح و قطع خيوط الظلمة  
 كون ليك همّة و كسر الأغلال

They came from every direction, they stole our sun and our moon  
 They ate our fish, their ships sailed our sea, and the wave is a witness  
 Colonialism plays chess in my homeland  
 To justice and freedom said checkmate  
 [...]
 Oh, people [...]
 Stand up and cut the threads of darkness  
 Be determined and break the chains

The Palestinian issue is the other major theme in the repertoire of committed music groups across the political spectrum. In “*al-Ghāra*” (The

<sup>46</sup> The song is available here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk4YYAAOkII&list=PLYR2xnkzhGPuboyeNkH9WkUtO2X7FWrFA&index=57>

Raid, 1989), written by Fethi al-Gasmi, *‘Ushshāq al-Waṭan* denounced, albeit without making any explicit references, the attack of the IDF Air Force on Hammam-Chott – the Tunis suburb where the PLO had been headquartered since the 1982 invasion of Beirut – which killed Palestinian leaders and also Tunisian civilians. In 1991, the same band presented a song entitled “*Ṭarīq al-naṣr*” (The Path to Victory), written by Bahri Arfaoui. Once again, without any explicit references, it clearly supported the Intifada’s “children of the stones”:<sup>47</sup>

ينازلون الموت بالحجارة  
 و يخرجون للرصاص بالهتاف  
 و ينبتون في خرائب المدينة  
 يعيشون في الجراح  
 في السجون في المساجد  
 في الحقول في المصانع  
 في الكليات كالخطاف  
 في البيوت في الشوارع  
 في الأحياء في المزارع  
 يرددون إننا هنا لا نخاف

They defy death with stones  
 They face bullets with chants  
 They sprout from the ruins of the city  
 They nest in wounds  
 In prisons, in mosques,  
 In the fields, in the factories  
 In the faculties like swallows  
 In the houses, in the streets  
 In the neighbourhoods, in the farms  
 They repeat, we are here, we are not afraid

<sup>47</sup> These lyrics recall those by Mahmoud Darwish put to music by the leftist band *al-Hamā'im al-Bīḍ*, “*Yuladūn*” and analysed in Carnevale 2026.

As proof of the continuing and at times contradictory dynamics of co-optation/negotiation/repression between dissident factions and their discourse, these two songs (“*al-Ghāra*” and “*Tarīq al-naṣr*”) were also performed by *Ushshāq al-Waṭan*, with a large orchestra, at the very peak of Islamist repression, at a very prominent event: the 1990 and 1991 editions of the “Tunisian Song Festival” held at the Municipal Theatre in Tunis and broadcast live on television.<sup>48</sup>

As pointed out previously, in 1989, Ben Ali had already started to tighten the ranks against the Islamist movement. Anyone suspected of sympathising with political Islam became a target of persecution, and risked arrest, detention, and torture. Indeed, “In 1992, Ennahdha was eradicated from the Tunisian territory” (Ayari 2017: 152). Penalties and stigmatisation continued systematically for ex-prisoners, even after the detention period, preventing them from reintegrating into society (Hibou 2006). The stiffening of the Ben Ali regime led to a general demobilisation of Tunisian society and a depoliticisation of universities, with repercussions on the student cultural domain (Sino 2002). The testimonies of *al-Shams* members synthesised the parabola of the new regime’s *changement*: “In ’87, there was this change, November, Ben Ali. We breathed a little freedom. Later... it was like a trap... to flush everyone out.” The musicians recalled police surrounding the faculties at their exhibitions, which forced them into hiding. “But the true massacre was in 1990. Four of us were arrested, Amer was killed.” Some members of *al-Shams* were accused of being affiliated with the Algerian FIS,<sup>49</sup> an accusation that they denied. Some of them spent some years in prison, while Amer Degbeuchi, who was also a muezzin, was reportedly thrown out of the fourth floor of the Ministry of the Interior. The members of the group, who also denied any affiliation with the MTI or the UGTE, underlined that the regime was targeting people just for praying at the mosque. As for Amer, “he sings and prays. There was nothing political.” The band had to stop performing on campus. “We continued through other means”,<sup>50</sup> they said, recording in secret, or shifting to purely instrumental music and changing the band’s name.

<sup>48</sup> Again, thanks to the intervention of TV host Nejib Khattab. Salah Hmidet, interview with the author, Tunis, 18/06/2018. See also: Temimi (2018).

<sup>49</sup> *Front Islamique du Salut*.

<sup>50</sup> Tebai, Najjar and Khalfaoui, interview, Id.

The university experience also came to an end for the other bands associated with the UGTE. Their members had to reinvent and “cleanse” themselves, converting to other types of music or artistic domain. *Al-Marḥala* dissolved shortly after Ben Ali came to power. “After barely a year, we decided to stop”, recounts Nizar Louaichi. “It was impossible, just problems. Moreover, one of our friends, who played the lute, had to report to the police four times a day.”<sup>51</sup> The members of *Ushshāq al-Waṭan* also distanced themselves from student activism and redirected their previous engagement towards social themes that were not in conflict with the new rhetoric of the Ben Ali regime. After the aforementioned participation at the Tunisian song festival in 1990 and 1991, the group faded away, too.

In the years following 2011 (and before the recent severe crackdown on political opposition and freedoms), these bands could re-emerge in a newly politicised public space and revive their old repertoire, performing in streets, at cultural centres, at festivals, and sometimes even at political rallies and events sponsored by Ennahda, a party which had now become one of the main protagonists of the so-called democratic transition.

## Conclusions

This chapter has addressed cultural aspects of militantism in the highly politicised and contended Tunisian university during the final phase of the Bourguiba regime and the beginning of the Ben Ali era. It focused on the continuity represented by emerging political Islam in the framework of the radical student movement and illustrated how the confrontation between leftists and Islamists shaped their respective discourse and practice. In particular, it highlighted how Islamist student activists were compelled to “learn” from their leftist counterparts, who had a longer history of activism and even of violent confrontation with the regime on (and beyond) campus. This interaction prompted Islamists to engage with, adapt, and integrate elements of the earlier student movement’s practices and of Marxist thought to counter the hegemony of leftist students. As cultural work was a central aspect of leftist activism, Islamist students acknowledged its efficacy to attract

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<sup>51</sup> Louaichi, interview, Id. On the repression against Islamists, see for example: Hibou 2006.

educated youth and attempted to follow the same path. Songs were a privileged instrument in this cultural battle over the university space. Despite its limited visibility and scope, Islamists' cultural work on campus provides a window into often-neglected aspects of the transformation and development of radical ideological discourse and practice in post-independence and authoritarian Tunisia.

# الشُّرُوق

إخبارية جامعية مسجلة تصدر يوم الثلاثاء

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## عشاق الوطن "للشُّوق":

### لَسْنَا مَنْظُفِينَ عَلَى الموسيقى



● عشاق الوطن

من يعلم !!  
تركيب لا غير

● كيف تقيمون تجارب الفرق الملتزمة من خلال هذا المهرجان ؟

● مع احترامنا لكل هذه التجارب لاحظنا ان الكلمة عازالت طائفة على الاغنية فانكامل مفقود والجانب الفني غائب فكل ما في الامر هو تركيب كلمات على لحن ، والاداء ضعيف شابه في ذلك شان العزف البياتي وهذا راجع في نظري لاختيار بعض المجموعات التي تسعى لتبليغ الكلمة بالاساس !

● ومع ذلك يبقى المهرجان خطوة هامة ينتج للجمهور التعرف على كل التجارب حتى يكون حكمه موضوعيا.

● لماذا لا تشاركون في التظاهرات الدولية ؟

● بدون الدخول في التفاصيل اقول ان مشاركة بعض رموز الائمة الملتزمة املتها علاقات شخصية لا فنية ولا تمت للكفاءة بصلة. 1987 تقدمنا للمشاركة في مسابقة ارادة فرنسا الدولية فاقصينا بطريقة غامضة، وخرج عربيا لجميل تونس.. على كل سماع انه من كان السبب (...) ورغم الاقصاء سواصل فوجئنا بالجمهور الذي كان يحفظ اغانيها عن ظهر قلب ! كما فوجئنا بالجمهور

عشاق الوطن...  
فرقة عريقة... ضمنى الكثير لدى المهتمين بالاغنية الملتزمة... فرقة متكاملة شكلا ومضمونا... هي اول فرقة في تونس دخلت تحت في الائمة الملتزمة...  
(عشاق الوطن) ليس لها عدة مع الامة... تستخدم الالات الشرايية والغربية بحثا عن التبلغ فمادامت الموسيقى لغة عليية...  
عشاق الوطن... هي الفرقة الملتزمة التي قبلها الموسيقون غير الملتزمين باعتبار احترامها للاصول الموسيقية ومحافظةها على الجمالية الفنية.  
الشُّوق التفت احد رموز هذه الفرقة واجرت معه الحديث التالي

فقد عرفناه من خلال نوايية وشعره...  
بحري العرفاوي اهدانا قطعة شعرية عبر الصحافة لحناعا له ولم نعرفه بعد !  
وفي الامة الاخيرة اصبح يرافقنا ويلقي قصائده...  
ثم اتنا لم نتعامل فقط مع بحري العرفاوي فقد تعاملنا مع الشاعر قنصي

لَسْنَا مَنْظُفِينَ عَلَى الموسيقى

● لاحظنا تعاملكم المكثف مع الشاعر بحري العرفاوي لم هذا التعامل ؟

● نطقة الالتقاء كانت الالتزام... بحري العرفاوي شاعر ملتزم متجارب مع القضايا التي طرحها الفرقة... كلمات شاعرية وغنائية يسهل تطويقها للتلحين... لم تكن تعرفه حين تعاملنا معه

## عالم النجوم

Fig. 1 "Ushshāq al-Waṭan to al-Shurūq: we are not intruders in music", al-Shurūq, 12-04-1988.



Fig. 2 References to Palestine and to the “stolen land” are explicit in the cover of ‘Ushshāq al-Waṭan’s cassette *Nidā’ al-ard* (The call of the land), 1987.

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# Political Orientations in the *Union Nationale des Étudiants du Maroc* (UNEM). Nationalism, Internationalism and the Left, up to the Islamist Shift (1956–1997)

Martina Biondi<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to trace the development of the *Union Nationale des Étudiants du Maroc* (UNEM), the major actor in the Moroccan student movement, over its first four decades. Established in the immediate post-independence period under the auspices of the *Istiqlāl* Party, UNEM was influenced by different prevailing and polarizing orientations, namely left radicalism and political Islam. This contribution explores the specific role played by UNEM in the Moroccan political landscape and sheds light on its influential international network. Drawing on a variety of hitherto unexplored primary sources in Arabic and French, the contribution argues that control of UNEM was a crucial factor for the affirmation of both the leftist and Islamist extra-parliamentary movements in the Moroccan political arena.

KEYWORDS: Student Unionism; Morocco; Transnational Networks; Left; Islamism.

## Introduction

In the historical analysis of youth activism and student movements in North Africa, student unionism stands out as a key phenomenon across the region (Abdalla 2008; Henry 2016: 877–895; Manduchi 2014; Moore, Hochschild 1968: 21–50; Temlali 2022: 153–171; Wallon 2016). As illustrated by the Egyptian case, students were an integral part of the emerging nationalist political forces (Erlich 1989). Nonetheless, promises made to develop an accessible national education system were largely disregarded in postcolonial Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco (Baldinetti 2018: 418–439; Benrabah 2007: 225–252; Chenoufi 1993: 139–210; Wyrzten 2015). This contributed to greater agitation

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of the student body. While the National Union of Algerian Students was integral to the regime, in Tunisia and Morocco, the national student unions progressively grew more independent and critical of state power. In particular, the *Union Nationale des Étudiants du Maroc* (UNEM; in Arabic: *Ittiḥād al-Waṭanī li-Ṭalabat al-Maghrib*), the longest standing Moroccan student union, became a leading source of protest and dissent from the 1960s. Notably, while drawing significant support from its extensive international network, it turned Mohammed V University in Rabat, the *Qarawiyīn* University of Fez and, later on, numerous new university institutions, into political laboratories that critiqued the shortcomings of the Moroccan university system.

Student unionism in Morocco is a scarcely researched subject. The only studies in European languages date back to the 1960s and 1970s (Moore, Hochschild 1968: 21–50; Palazzoli 1974: 399–437) and therefore only document the partial course of UNEM. In the second half of the 1990s, some works in Arabic had the merit of insightfully tracing UNEM's evolution (al-ʿAwnī 1997; Ḍarīf 1996; al-Ghazālī 1997), although they exclusively addressed an internal perspective. Despite the recent reassessment of UNEM's presence at the *Maison du Maroc* in Paris (Bouaziz, Denglos 2022), the interconnected national and international implications of Moroccan postcolonial student unionism have yet to be fully explored.

In light of recent historiographical interest in the entanglement of student (trans)national activism (Goebel 2015; Hendrickson 2022), this contribution examines UNEM's trajectory, with particular attention to the role of its sections abroad. It traces the union's leadership and ideological development through its annual congresses and major initiatives, focusing, in particular, on the positions of the French sections and their impact on the union's political life.

As in other colonial contexts, a Moroccan national student union had yet to be established when Moroccan students began participating in transnational student networks abroad. In 1927, the action of Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian students in France led to the creation of the *Association des Étudiants Musulmans Nord-Africains* (AEMNA) in Paris. Its objective was to promote national independence and education (Ageron 1983: 25–56). Following independence, AEMNA integrated Maghrebi student organizations operating in France and sought to reinforce national educational institutions on a common basis (Pervillé 2010: 241–250). The massive presence of Algerian, Tunisian, and

Moroccan students in France has been described by Sylvie Mazzella (2009: 13–30) as a remarkable aspect of the “mondialisation étudiante” and one that played a significant role in migration and cooperation politics between Maghreb countries and France.

Maghrebi students also actively participated in international networks throughout the Cold War. In 1946, AEMNA members contributed to the establishment of the Communist-oriented International Union of Students (IUS) in Prague, which aimed to bring together student associations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Similarly, Maghrebi students helped shape transnational platforms, fostering Afro-Asian solidarity within the context of, for instance, the 1956 Afro-Asian Students’ Conference in Bandung (Utama 2022: 213–239).

From a national perspective, as Susan Miller (2013: 169) points out, “UNEM as an incubator for a new generation of activists”. UNEM became a major component in the ascent in the 1960s and 1970s of the Moroccan “New Left”, which was embedded in Third Worldism and anti-capitalist networks. The Moroccan New Left emerged from the inability of leftist parties to provide a strong opposition to the regime and was stimulated by the convergence of the Marxist-Leninist movement, the student movement, and a cultural intelligentsia engaged in the international anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle (Biondi 2026). Considering the recent interest in the history of the Arab New Left (Gervasio 2020: 148–168; Haugbølle 2017: 497–512) and radical student activism in the region (Jebari 2022: 1–24; Manduchi 2015), UNEM represents a significant phenomenon through which to reassess contemporary Moroccan political history.

New Left’s political orientation in UNEM proved, however, short-lived. Following its repression by the regime and the Union’s interdiction from 1974 to 1978, Islamist groups gained influence in universities and eventually seized control of UNEM in the mid-1990s. In reassessing the often nostalgic narrative of decline and crisis in the 1980s and 1990s (al-‘Awnī 1997: 3; Darīf 1996: 13, 40), along with that of the failed attempts to curb the rise of Islamist forces (al-‘Awnī 1997: 72), this contribution analyzes the shifting political orientation of UNEM towards Islamism in the competition with the left. It also situates this shift within the broader context of the growing appeal of political Islam in Morocco and across the region (Joffé 2012).

The study covers the development of UNEM from its establishment in the mid-1950s, within a nationalist framework, to the second half

of the 1990s, when the driving force of the radical left waned in the face of the rising Islamist ideology. Drawing on a variety of hitherto unexplored primary sources in both Arabic and French – including militants’ memoirs, press articles, archival and official documents such as correspondence, bulletins, pamphlets, and proceedings produced by UNEM and its federations abroad – this contribution argues that the control of UNEM by emerging political forces originating outside official parties and composed of a new generation of young activists was crucial to the rise of both leftist and Islamist extra-parliamentary movements in the Moroccan political arena. It also contends that the overseas sections played a significant role, both foreshadowing and contrasting the shift toward reformism, which represented an intermediate stage between leftist radicalism and the emergence of political Islam within the Union.

### **In the Wake of Independence: Student Nationalism Takes a Left Turn**

After several attempts to form a national union of Moroccan students in the early 1950s were rejected by the French colonial administration (Vermeren 2022: 170), UNEM was established in the aftermath of Moroccan independence. Marking the unification of pre-existing student associations (*Association générale des étudiants de Rabat*, *Association des étudiants marocains*, and *Union des étudiants marocains* which was based in Paris), UNEM’s founding (I) Congress was held in Rabat on December 26, 1956. The Congress brought together nearly 2,000 students (Daoud 2007: 31), including freshmen from the newly established Muhammad V University in Rabat.<sup>2</sup> At its inception, UNEM had a nationalist orientation and was closely aligned with the *Istiqlāl* (Independence) Party. Accordingly, it pledged allegiance to King Muhammad V, who was invited to the preparatory meeting held in August 1956, while his son, Crown Prince Moulay Hassan, was appointed Honorary president at the I Congress (Palazzoli 1974: 399–400).

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<sup>2</sup> UNEM’s highest body, the Congress, was held annually and consisted of delegates elected from its sections in Morocco and abroad. The Congress had the authority to amend the statute, approve the financial statement, and elect the 23 members of the Administrative Committee. UNEM also included a seven-member Executive Committee, headed by the elected President. “L’organisation de l’U.N.E.M’”, *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 6.

UNEM's main goal was to realize the nationalist movement's promise of mass education, long denied by the colonial regime (De Poli 2015: 117–248). In line with this, UNEM sought to establish a popular and democratic university<sup>3</sup> and advocated major overhaul of national education and public administration (VV. AA. 2017). According to the first article of its statute, students were considered an integral and active part of the Moroccan nation.<sup>4</sup> This enabled the Union to engage with the country's social, economic, and political issues, and also reflected UNEM's commitment to mobilize a young generation of students in the nation-building process. However, UNEM's aspiration to intervene in the Moroccan public debate would soon lead to disagreements with the Makhzen. Tensions arose when UNEM challenged the authorities over their reluctance to sever ties with the former colonial power, and criticized their limited progress in national education.

UNEM enjoyed greater independence than the youth branches of various parties and unions, such as the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Marocaine* (JOM) that had been founded in 1957 as a youth branch of the *Union Marocaine du Travail* (UMT) (Menouni 1979: 175–176). Nonetheless, it was not autonomous from political influence and, over time, tended to embody emerging extra-parliamentary political currents.

In line with the *Istiqlāl* Party at its II Congress, held in Fez in 1957, UNEM called for the Arabization of school and university curricula and the removal of French professionals and troops stationed in Morocco. The need to sever ties with the former colonial administrators was further emphasized at UNEM's III Congress, held in Tetuán in 1958 (Palazzoli 1974: 401). The Congress also condemned police intervention at demonstrations supporting the Algerian cause of independence and the 1958 Iraqi Revolution, which took place within the framework of anticolonial and inter-Arab solidarity.<sup>5</sup> The IV Congress, held in Agadir in August 1959, demanded action in favor of the nationalization of industry and the reorganization of the agricultural sector, praising the creation of national credit institutions.<sup>6</sup> This political-economic measure was implemented by the government of Abdallah Ibrahim

<sup>3</sup> Archives Départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis (hereafter: ADSSD), 409J/38, Union nationale des étudiants du Maroc (UNEM), Section de Lyon, "Qu'est-ce que l'U.N.E.M.?", February 1965, 1.

<sup>4</sup> "L'action national de l'U.N.E.M.", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 2.

<sup>5</sup> "L'U.N.E.M. à travers ses Congrès", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Archives Nationales, Paris (hereafter ANP), 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations –

(1958–1960), the first *Istiqlāl* Prime minister who was part of the party's left wing (Monjib 1992: 137–155).

At the same time, the November 1959 rift of the *Istiqlāl* Party's left branch, which led to the creation of the *Union Nationale des Forces Populaires* (UNFP), was a major turning point for UNEM. Its more radical leftist components prevailed aligning the Union with the new party of Mehdi Ben Barka and Abdallah Ibrahim (Ben Messaoud 1972: 7). As a consequence, starting in the early 1960s, UNEM took a distinctly anti-monarchical turn (Palazzoli 1974: 399–413). It was the V Congress, held in Casablanca in July 1960, that signaled the political shift in UNEM's political orientation. The Congress called for the redistribution of former colonial lands<sup>7</sup> and, with regard to higher education, addressed issues such as housing programs on the Rabat campus, the implementation of engineering programs, the recruitment of graduate students, and the provision of scholarships to study at both national and foreign universities.<sup>8</sup> In terms of internal alliances, the Congress, hosted in the *Maison de l'Union* in Casablanca, reinforced its proximity to UMT and its youth branch, JOM, with which UNEM contributed to the establishment, that same year, of the *Union Marocaine de la Jeunesse* (Menouni 1979: 176).<sup>9</sup>

During the VI Congress, held in Azrou in July 1961 and attended by Health and Education Minister Youssef Ben Abbas at its inaugural session, delegates criticized the education system for its infrastructural limitations, the severe lack of modern educational programs that hindered the nation's prospects for development, and the ineffectiveness of mass education and Arabization initiatives.<sup>10</sup> This led to a rift by UNEM members affiliated with the *Istiqlāl* Party, who established the *Union Générale des Étudiants Marocains* (UGEM) in 1961.

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UNEF, Union nationale des étudiants de France (1928–1970), Quatrième congrès national de l'Union nationale des étudiants du Maroc, 1959, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations – UNEF, Cinquième congrès national de l'UNEM, 1960, n.p.

<sup>8</sup> "Revendication de notre Union", *L'étudiant marocain. Organe de l'U.N.E.M.* (July 1960), 5.

<sup>9</sup> "L'intervention de l'Union marocaine de la Jeunesse", *L'étudiant marocain. Organe de l'U.N.E.M.* (July 1960), 3.

<sup>10</sup> In 1966, Education Minister Mohamed Benhima reversed the Arabization process. Citing its failure to improve educational standards and the shortage of qualified teachers of Standard Arabic, he reintroduced the French language in secondary education. Primary education was later fully Arabized under Minister Azzedine Laraki in 1980, but secondary and higher education remained bilingual (Boutier 2016: 11).

The split, which brought UNEM closer to UNFP, did not jeopardize its rise and, despite its increasingly harsh criticism of the government, UNEM received recognition as a public service association in December 1961. The VII Congress, held in Rabat in July 1962, focused on scholarships and housing for the many Moroccan students abroad.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it addressed the ongoing constitutional process, criticizing the absence of an elected constitutional assembly. In December 1962, UNEM called for a strike in protest against the new Constitution, which it accused of having been adopted through an undemocratic process.<sup>12</sup>

From that point onward, UNEM activists began to face persecution. The VIII Congress, held in Casablanca in July 1963, opened just a few days before the repression that hit both UNFP and UNEM in August. Aligning with the positions of UNFP's leader, Mehdi Ben Barka, the new UNEM Secretary, Hamid Berrada, formerly in charge of information and cultural activities in the Executive Committee, denounced the ongoing Sand War, an armed dispute over the border between Morocco and Algeria, in the name of inter-Maghrebi solidarity. After being arrested and subsequently released, he went into exile. In November, Berrada also faced accusations of involvement in the 1963 UNFP complot and was sentenced to death in absentia.<sup>13</sup>

The death sentence issued against UNEM's President, the repression against its Executive Committee members, and the subsequent cuts to university subsidies were all intended to weaken the Moroccan student movement as a whole. In early 1964, students responded with a wave of strikes involving the universities of Fez and Rabat, educational institutions in Tangiers, and the cities of Casablanca, Oujda, and Tiznit, where secondary students mobilized in solidarity with UNEM.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, militants from abroad occupied the Moroccan embassies in France, Germany, and Yugoslavia (Monjib 1992: 324).

The IX Congress, held in Rabat in September 1964, reaffirmed UNEM's anticolonial, anti-imperialist, and pro-peace positions. These

<sup>11</sup> ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations – UNEF, Résolutions du 7<sup>e</sup> Congrès, 1962, 2.

<sup>12</sup> "Chronologie – vie politique", *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1 (1961), 412.

<sup>13</sup> Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereafter: BNF), *Complot contre les étudiants marocains. Document n. 1 sur l'UNEM*, UNEM Paris, 1964, n.p. On the 1963 UNFP complot, see: Bennouna 2002.

<sup>14</sup> BNF, *Complot contre les étudiants marocains. Document n. 1 sur l'UNEM*, UNEM Paris, 1964, n.p.

stances strengthened the Union's ties with inter-Arab and inter-African international networks of solidarity, promoting cohesion among Maghrebi students, despite the strained relations between the Moroccan and Algerian governments following the Sand War. From an internal perspective, the Congress advocated a faculty recruitment campaign and the establishment of new campus infrastructure to accommodate the growing number of university students.<sup>15</sup>

The authorities responded to UNEM's direct opposition to the regime by seeking to banish its activities and conducting new arrests. Following the Congress, the police conducted raids and shut down UNEM's headquarters in Rabat. The newly elected President, Mohamed Haloui, who had expressed solidarity with former UNEM's President Hamid Berrada, was arrested, released, and subsequently charged by a Rabat court with engaging in activities that endangered State security. In October, an investigation was opened against UNEM on the grounds that its founding bylaws did not comply with the new provisions on student unionism, which, issued on June 21, 1963, prohibited university unions from including high school students among their members.<sup>16</sup>

In 1965, a circular issued by the Ministry of Education prohibited anyone older than 16 from accessing the second cycle of higher education, thereby preventing approximately 60% of the student body from pursuing their studies and earning a baccalaureate (high school diploma) (Rollinde 2003: 122). This measure clearly aimed to limit youth opposition and decrease the number of individuals with a baccalaureate. A decade after independence, it became evident that the promise to build a nation based on mass education had failed. In March 1965, high school students called for an indefinite strike against the measure restricting access to higher education. The demonstrations spread to several cities, including Rabat, Fez, Meknes, and Kenitra, and on March 23, in Casablanca, the street movement turned into a popular uprising. Urban guerrilla warfare continued for three days with barricades in the streets and buildings set on fire, while UNEM called for the overthrow of the regime (Dahmani 2017). General Mohamed

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<sup>15</sup> ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations – UNEF, UNEM, Travaux du IXème Congrès de l'UNEM, 1964, n.p.

<sup>16</sup> BNF, *Complot contre les étudiants marocains. Document n. 1 sur l'UNEM*, UNEM Paris, 1964, n.p.

Oufkir, at the head of the army, bloodily repressed the revolts, leaving hundreds of victims on the ground. There were 1,500 casualties according to local sources and 70 according to the authorities, while over 2,000 people faced trial for rioting (Vermeren 2016: 44–46).

The March 1965 riots had a significant impact also on Moroccan political life. Leading to a five-year state of exception that froze parliamentary activity, they broke the national pact and inaugurated a long season of protest and a harsh repression known as the “Years of Lead” (Biondi 2026: Chapter 1). During its X Congress held in Rabat in August 1965, UNEM expressed its outrage at the dismantling of the educational system and denounced the March 23 massacre.<sup>17</sup> At this point, the police assaulted the Union headquarters to intimidate its members (Daoud 2007: 113).

In 1966, the government directly led by King Hassan II established mandatory military service. The measure sought to restrict student unionism and youth political activity, but it proved insufficient. In January, Hassan Bensmain, UNEM’s Vice-President and member of the Executive Committee for Cultural Affairs, was arrested and condemned to six months of prison for a public order offence.<sup>18</sup> The XI Congress was held at UNEM’s headquarters in Rabat in July 1966, as the Ministry of Education had declined to provide a larger venue, as it had in the past. Executive Committee members were summoned by the police and prevented from participating in the Congress.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding this the 170 delegates in attendance denounced the kidnapping and disappearance of UNFP’s leader Mehdi Ben Barka in October 1965 in Paris.<sup>20</sup>

The Congress also called for the expansion of the academic system through the creation of new national universities.<sup>21</sup> Besides, it addressed international issues, such as the struggle against colonialist imperialism,

<sup>17</sup> ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d’associations – UNEF, Xème de l’U.N.E.M. à Rabat du 21 au 26-X-1965, n.p.

<sup>18</sup> “L’U.M.T. solidaire de la lutte des étudiants”, *L’Avant-garde. Organe de l’Union marocaine du travail*, 356 (February 5, 1966), 3.

<sup>19</sup> International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (IISH), *al-Ittihād al-Waṭani li-Ṭalabat al-Maghrib. al-Mu’tamar al-waṭani al-ḥādī ‘ashar* [National Union of Moroccan Students. Eleventh National Congress], Rabat, 1966, 2.

<sup>20</sup> On the Ben Barka affaire, see: Daoud, Monjib 2000.

<sup>21</sup> IISH, *al-Ittihād al-Waṭani li-Ṭalabat al-Maghrib. al-Mu’tamar al-waṭani al-ḥādī ‘ashar* [National Union of Moroccan Students. Eleventh National Congress], Rabat, 1966, 25.

and voiced support for the North Vietnamese government.<sup>22</sup> The XII Congress, originally scheduled for July 1967 in Rabat, was forbidden by the authorities and preceded by various waves of arrests earlier that year. Solidarity for UNEM was expressed by UMT and JOM, which continued to provide support until the student union turned to a more radical orientation.<sup>23</sup>

## The Rise and Fall of a Revolutionary Orientation

In the second half of the 1960s, despite the repression against the student movement, UNEM experienced a strong increase in membership, reaching 3,000 members within its Moroccan sections (Palazzoli 1974: 403). The discontent of a new generation of educated youth strengthened student unionization while the abandonment of any prospect of collaboration with the regime laid the groundwork for UNEM's radicalization. In this context, regional friction emerged between militants from *Qarawiyyin* University in Fez, which would soon adopt a Marxist-Leninist orientation, and the UNFP-related Faculty of Letters in Rabat.

During the second half of the 1960s, UNFP grew closer to the *Istiqlāl* Party and formed an official opposition bloc that sought to restore the parliamentary system and inaugurate a new era of reform. Following the formalization of *al-Kutla al-Waṭaniyya* (National Bloc) on July 22, 1970, UNEM members in Fez accused UNFP of having created a merely electoral alliance to collude with the monarchical system of power (Bouaziz 1981: 125). Some UNFP members, disappointed by the *Kutla* and already affiliated with UNEM, came into conflict with the party leadership (Vermeren 2016: 47). At the XII Congress, held in 1968, the line of UNFP and the *Parti de la Libération et du Socialisme* (PLS) would prevail for the last time, electing President Abdellatif Menouni.

The XIII UNEM Congress, scheduled for July 1969 at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Rabat, was disbanded by the authorities; however, it was able to resume its works in Casablanca on August 9–11

<sup>22</sup> "Après le XIème Congrès des étudiants", *L'Avant-garde. Organe de l'Union marocaine du travail*, 384 (27 August 1966), 4.

<sup>23</sup> "Le J.O.M. solidaire des étudiants", *L'Avant-garde. Organe de l'Union marocaine du travail*, 409 (25 February 1967), 1; "Les travailleurs solidaires des étudiants", *L'Avant-garde. Organe de l'Union marocaine du travail*, 408 (16 February 1967), 4.

with over 300 delegates.<sup>24</sup> On this occasion, the New Left's revolutionary line, inspired by Marxism-Leninism, gained prominence over political parties (Bouaziz 1981: 130). The Fez group gained control of the UNEM Executive Committee, with the appointment of Abdellatif Darkaoui, while the election of Mohammed Lakhssassi as president resulted in the departure of various members from the PLS area (Vermeren 2016: 51).

The Congress presented a minimum list of demands addressing both the domestic and international issues, including greater political freedom, agrarian and economic reforms, the fight against imperialism, and an increased support for Palestine.<sup>25</sup> In an interview, newly-elected President Mohamed Lakhssassi defined UNEM as the "vanguard of progressive forces", calling for the unity of the popular masses in the Arab world. Lakhssassi acknowledged the growing radicalization of students in light of the infrastructural and organizational limitations of universities, the outdated study programs, the lack of support to economically disadvantaged students, as well as the shortage of faculty members.<sup>26</sup>

Embodying a clear opposition to monarchical power, regarded as the main cause of the regression of Morocco's social system, UNEM became a laboratory for youth radicalization and for the development of the Moroccan Marxist-Leninist movement. This stance led to a break with the UNFP and a generational split with its party cadres, who were accused of supporting, from the opposition, a political system dominated by monarchical authoritarianism (El Ayadi 1999: 201–204).

In the face of UNEM's radical turn, the Makhzen did not take long to react again with an iron fist. While new waves of arrests took place, the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at Rabat University purged programs of authors such as Marx. A further deterrent to the circulation of destabilizing ideas was the closure of the *Institut de sociologie* in Rabat (Ben Messaoud 1970: 48–55).

Despite UNFP's attempts to maintain UNEM under its control,<sup>27</sup> the XIV Congress held in 1971 witnessed the consolidation of the Union's radical component. As recalled by UNEM's new President,

<sup>24</sup> "13ème Congrès. L'UNEM s'est redéfinie", *Lamalif*, 32 (1969), 20.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Mohamed Lakhssassi: cette année sera celle de la radicalisation", *Lamalif*, 32 (1969), 21.

<sup>27</sup> Private Archive Abdelghani Bousta (hereafter PAAB), Union nationale des forces populaires, Section des étudiants de Paris, Pour une 14<sup>e</sup> congrès de sauvegarde et de renforcement de l'action unitaire, Paris, 15 December 1970, n.p.

Taieb Bennani, the first half of the year was marked by continuous mobilization. Boycotts and strikes were organized to denounce the repression of the New Left, demand improvements in university infrastructure and technical education, and call for the reopening of the *Institut de sociologie*.<sup>28</sup>

At the XV Congress, held on August 11, 1972, members of the Marxist-Leninist movement officially gained leadership of UNEM. In a context in which political parties were acknowledged as “completely incapable of taking any action to improve the conditions of the masses” due to their “unstable, reformist, and wait-and-see nature”, (Ben Messaoud 1972: 7) militants from the *Front uni des étudiants progressistes* list secured a majority of the vote, leading to the dismissal of the incumbent Executive Committee and the President-in-office.<sup>29</sup>

UNEM elected Abdelaziz Menebhi, a member of the Marxist-Leninist *Ilā al-Amām* branch, as its new president. The Congress called for the release of political prisoners and the creation of a new Constituent Assembly for the development of a democratic, popular, and anti-imperialist project. Proposals were also presented to relaunch an agrarian reform which would have included the redistribution of former colonized lands and the socialization of the means of production (Ben Messaoud 1972: 7).<sup>30</sup>

Following its takeover by the Marxist-Leninist movement, on January 24, 1973, UNEM was outlawed, and the members of its Executive Committee were arrested. Dozens of UNEM militants were arbitrarily jailed and severely tortured while awaiting indictment and trial. On September 2, 1973, a court in Casablanca announced the first verdict and many UNEM members were given long-term sentences. Abdellatif Darkaoui, who was in charge of external relations for the UNEM Executive Committee, received a fifteen-year sentence, while President Abdelaziz Menebhi and Vice-President Abdelwahed Belkebir were sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment for conspiring against national security.<sup>31</sup> Although declared to be on the run, they were

<sup>28</sup> “Le président de l’U.N.E.M. précise les perspectives de l’actuelle année universitaire”, Lamalif, 51 (November 1971), 10–11.

<sup>29</sup> “La répression au Maroc”, *Souffles. Revue culturelle arabe du Maghreb*, 2 (October 1973), 7.

<sup>30</sup> The initial redistribution of colonial lands began in 1966. On the Moroccan process of agrarian reforms, see: Bessaoud 2016: 115–137; Swearingen 1987.

<sup>31</sup> PAAB, Maroc. 22 ans de répression, *al-Ikhtiyār al-thawrī fī al-Maghrib* [The

being held under arbitrary custody and would reappear in prison the following year, facing another trial in 1976.<sup>32</sup>

## **A Sprawling Transnational Network: Mobilization from Abroad**

Since its foundation, UNEM has placed significant emphasis on the anticolonial struggle for independence, as well as on student transnational activism aimed at promoting democracy in postcolonial regimes.<sup>33</sup> In 1959, UNEM, *Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie* (UGET), and *Union Générale des Étudiants Musulmans Algériens* (UGEMA) jointly established the *Confédération des Étudiants du Maghreb* (CEM) in Tunis. Operating within the broader Afro-Asian movement, CEM held its II Congress in Rabat in December 1960, reinforcing the international coordination of the Maghrebi unions. CEM's activities included supporting the Algerian and Palestinian causes, promoting inter-African student solidarity, and establishing a parallel North African student confederation aimed at uniting the North African student movement under Maghrebi leadership.<sup>34</sup>

Through the CEM framework, UNEM participated in the aforementioned IUS platform, fostering international student collaboration.<sup>35</sup> In March 1967, during the IUS IX Congress held in Ulan Bator, UNEM was elected to the IUS General Secretariat.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in the 1960s, UNEM was fully integrated into the international student movement, advancing and organizing antimilitary, antiracist, and pro-peace protests against US imperialism and the Vietnam War. At the same time, UNEM was the focus of international solidarity campaigns in response to the Moroccan regime's repression. At the same time, the repression did not prevent UNEM from welcoming representatives of

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Revolutionary Choice in Morocco], 24 (March 1978), 44.

<sup>32</sup> "Disparition de Aziz Menebhi", *Souffles. Revue culturelle arabe du Maghreb*, 2 (October 1973), 14.

<sup>33</sup> "L'activité internationale de l'U.N.E.M.", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 5.

<sup>34</sup> ANP, 19870110/134 Fonds d'associations – UNEF, 2ème congrès de la Confédération des étudiants du Maghreb, Rabat 24-27 décembre 1960, Rapport morale, 1–10.

<sup>35</sup> "Union internationale des étudiants", *L'étudiant marocain. Organe de l'U.N.E.M.* (July 1960), 2.

<sup>36</sup> "Solidarité avec les peuples en lutte contre l'imperialisme", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 5; "L'activité internationale de l'U.N.E.M.", *Attalaba*, 3 (December 1967), 5.

international student unions to its meetings and from continuing to express support, through statements and congressional resolutions, for the struggles of students and popular movements in the Global South.<sup>37</sup>

Abroad, UNEM reached the remarkable number of 17,000 members, a figure that reflects the considerable scale of the Moroccan student diaspora.<sup>38</sup> During the latter half of the 1960s, UNEM strengthened its network in France, where Anis Balafrej, son of progressive nationalist leader Ahmed, was active. Moreover, the “French May” of 1968 involved many Moroccan students living in the country. Over the years, UNEM had also established branches in Algeria, Egypt, and Syria, as well as in Belgium, Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and Yugoslavia. However, the vast majority of its abroad members were concentrated in France, where sections were opened in Amiens, Besançon, Caen, Clermont-Ferrand, Grenoble, Marseille, Lyon, Nice, Orléans, Paris, and Toulouse, among other cities. In the French capital, the *Maison du Maroc* at the *Cité Internationale Universitaire* served both as a residence for Moroccan students and as a hub for UNEM activities (Bouaziz, Denglos 2022).

One of the main activities of UNEM’s overseas sections in the early 1970s was documenting, publicizing, and mobilizing against the repression of students in Morocco. For instance, UNEM-Paris published a pamphlet detailing the early 1972 waves of arrests, which occurred from Marrakesh to Rabat and Beni Mellal, while also collecting messages of international solidarity for UNEM from IUS and numerous Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian organizations.<sup>39</sup> Contextually, a day of solidarity with Moroccan students was held by the section on March 23, 1972 and the section demanded the lifting of the ban on UNEM when it was enforced in 1973.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> IISH, *al-Ittiḥād al-Waṭani li-Ṭalabat al-Maghrib. al-Mu’tamar al-waṭani al-ḥādī ‘ashar* [National Union of Moroccan Students. Eleventh National Congress], Rabat, 1966, 3–4.

<sup>38</sup> “L’UNEM et le nouveau contexte”, *Lamalif*, 102 (1978), 9.

<sup>39</sup> BNF, *Le Maroc de la répression et des procès politiques*, Paris, U.N.E.M., 1972.

<sup>40</sup> La Contemporaine. Bibliothèque, archives, musée des mondes contemporains in Nanterre (hereafter, LC), ARCH/0301/2, Fédération de l’Europe occidentale des Étudiants progressistes marocains, UNEM, Section de Paris, Pour la levée de l’interdiction de notre union, 24 January 1975.

During the ban in Morocco, UNEM conducted most of its political activities from abroad, where intensified activism helped compensate for the deadlock faced by Moroccan student unionism. UNEM's sections abroad were organized within the *Fédération du Moyen-Orient*, the *Fédération de l'Europe de l'Est*<sup>41</sup> and the *Fédération de l'Europe Occidentale de l'UNEM* (FEO-UNEM). In particular, the *Fédération de France de l'UNEM* (FF-UNEM) was at the core of FEO-UNEM. The FF-UNEM's Federal Office shared its headquarters at the *Paris Maison du Maroc* with the UNEM-Paris section, where also its bulletin was published.<sup>42</sup>

FF-UNEM conducted extensive protest campaigns against repression and disseminated information concerning the political trials underway in Morocco. It denounced the 15-year sentences imposed on UNEM's President Abdelaziz Menebhi and Vice-President Abdelwahed Belkebir during the Casablanca trial held in August 1976, providing them with legal assistance, and coordinating with Amnesty International, which maintained an international observer at the trial.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, FF-UNEM sections mocked the regime through cartoons and satirical jabs that ridiculed the country's tourism promotion campaigns, which stood in stark contrast to the severe restrictions on freedom of expression (Heckman 2021: 199-203).

While another demonstration calling for the lifting of the ban on UNEM was held in Paris on January 24, 1976,<sup>44</sup> the FEO-UNEM Federal Council, which was convened in Antony (Île-de-France) from December 28, 1976, to January 1, 1977, emphasized its commitment to restoring, within the bounds of legality, an organization that would be militant, unified, mass-based, and autonomous. Moreover, the Federal Council called for the unity of Maghrebi and Arab nations and highlighted the need to integrate Western Sahara into Morocco.<sup>45</sup> A unitary position on Western Sahara was eventually reached following

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<sup>41</sup> On the presence of Moroccan students in Eastern Europe from the 1960s, see: Mellakh 2016: 39–56.

<sup>42</sup> ADSSD, 409J/38, *Union nationale des étudiants marocains (UNEM), Section de Lyon, Statut de la Fédération de l'Europe occidentale de l'UNEM*, n.p.

<sup>43</sup> ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, *Process de l'UNEM*. 9–12 août 1976, September 1976, 1.

<sup>44</sup> ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, *Plateforme d'orientation générale de la Fédération de l'Europe de l'Ouest de l'UNEM*, année 1976–1977, 10.

<sup>45</sup> ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, *Plateforme d'orientation générale de la Fédération de l'Europe de l'Ouest de l'UNEM*, année 1976–1977, Paris, 1–9.

intense confrontations within FEO-UNEM, which were prompted in response to significant changes in the region.

The Green March, which symbolically marked the beginning of the Moroccan occupation of the Western Sahara in November 1975, caused a significant rift within the Moroccan Marxist-Leninist movement, which had already been weakened by repression. Within it, only *Ilā al-amām* remained committed to the principle of self-determination for the Saharawi population and, consequently, opposed the unilateral annexation of Western Sahara (Biondi 2026: Chapter 3). The shift in favor of Moroccan annexation of Western Sahara was evident among FF-UNEM sections. For instance, after 1975, the Besançon section of UNEM altered its position on Saharawi self-determination and independence claiming that annexation to Morocco would have been beneficial for the Saharawi population rather than Spanish colonial rule, which, however, was already giving way.<sup>46</sup>

More directly, in a joint statement from their Grenoble section, the newly formed *Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme* (PPS, founded in 1974 after the dissolution of the *Parti de la Libération et du Socialisme*), the *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* (USFP, established in 1975 following a split from UNFP), and UNEM affirmed the legitimacy of Morocco's claim to territorial integrity, its efforts to regain the Western Sahara, and its goal of ending Spanish colonial rule in the region.<sup>47</sup> This statement signaled UNEM's new alignment with the legal Moroccan left parties and their belief that the annexation of Western Sahara represented the fulfillment of the national liberation struggle (Gaudio 1978: 403).

## The University as a Battlefield: Leftists, Islamists, and the Siege of UNEM

In Morocco, long-term imprisonment of its members led to the suffocation of the New Left's revolutionary forces.<sup>48</sup> This also affected the student movement. Despite the formation of informal groups

<sup>46</sup> ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, Section de Besançon, *Bulletin*, 3 (March 1976), 11.

<sup>47</sup> ADSSD, 409J/38, UNEM, Les mass media in France et le problème du Sahara occidental (February 1975), n.p.

<sup>48</sup> "De nombreux étudiants al'raient été arrêtés au cours des derniers semaines", *Le Monde* (2 July 1977), 4.

representing a new generation of Marxist-Leninist students, such as *al-Ḥaraka al-Qa'dī* (Grassroots Movement) and the France-based *Étudiants progressistes marocains*, representatives of the USFP and PPS were prepared to bring the movement back into legality and reclaim the leadership of UNEM. PPS representatives participated in the newly established *Conseil de coordination national inter-facultés* when, in 1976-77, they responded positively to the Ministry of Education's proposal to hold student elections under the administrative supervision of the faculties.<sup>49</sup> After five years of interdiction, this served as the premise for UNEM to resume its activities, which occurred in November 1978.<sup>50</sup>

The new orientation resulted, however, in a fracture between FEO-UNEM Federal Office, where resistance to the growing influence of leftist parties within the Union remained particularly strong, and the Moroccan sections (UNEM-Maroc).<sup>51</sup> As a consequence, FEO-UNEM delegates were barred from attending the XVI Congress in 1979.<sup>52</sup> At this Congress, a new majority was formed by the USFP, together with representatives from the PPS and several Marxist-Leninist members who supported the annexation of Western Sahara. Their 166 delegates prevailed over those of *al-Ḥaraka al-Qa'dī*, which nevertheless managed to elect 100 delegates. The Congress adopted a resolution in which UNEM declared its support for the "Moroccanization" of Western Sahara and the preservation of national sovereignty.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the Marxist-Leninist *Ilā al-Amām* line advocating self-determination for Western Sahara was officially abandoned by the Union (Ilā al-Amām 2018: 244).

Despite the rapprochement over positions of national unity, repression against UNEM did not cease. On January 24, 1980, a strike organized to demand the release of political prisoners led to a new wave of arrests among UNEM members, as well as a renewed, albeit temporary, ban on the association (Ben Messaoud 1980: 6). When

<sup>49</sup> "L'UNEM à la croisée des chemins", *Lamalif*, 130 (1981), 16.

<sup>50</sup> "L'UNEM et le nouveau contexte", *Lamalif*, 102 (1979), 9.

<sup>51</sup> LC, ARCH/0301/2, Fédération de l'Europe occidentale des Étudiants progressistes marocains, Communiqué de 112 délégués de 25 sections de l'Europe occidentale concernent l'opération scissionniste entreprise par le Bureau fédéral de l'U.N.E.M. contre le mouvement des étudiants marocains en Europe occidentale et contre l'Union nationale des étudiants du Maroc, 1<sup>o</sup> January 1978, n.p.

<sup>52</sup> PAAB, Parti de l'avant-garde démocratique socialiste (PADS), Étudiants, jeunes, et répression au Maroc, 1993, 4.

<sup>53</sup> "L'UNEM et le nouveau contexte", *Lamalif*, 102 (1978), 10.

UNEM resumed its activities, it revealed divisions among political currents deeper than ever before, both within Morocco and abroad.

The XVII Congress, held at the Mohammedia School of Engineers in Rabat from August 22 to September 6, 1981, confirmed UNEM's fragmentation and marked a point of no return for what had been a left radical force (al-ʿAwnī 1997: 3–7). As a socialist orientation prevailed with 41 members of the Administrative Committee and most of the Executive Committee, tensions between its socialist and radical left wings led numerous delegates to withdraw resulting in a paralysis of the Congress's activities (Ḍarīf 1996: 74).<sup>54</sup> Following the failure of the Congress, a reorganization and a change of statute were recognized as necessary for the Union to navigate this impasse. Consequently, transitional committees emerged in many university centers, including Marrakesh, Meknes, Oujda, Casablanca, and Fez; however, they failed to achieve UNEM's refoundation and reunification.<sup>55</sup>

Between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the student population almost doubled. The steady incremental growth of the university student body continued into the second half of the decade, reaching 139,573 students in 1986–1987 (Santucci 1986: 780). Despite the establishment of new public universities,<sup>56</sup> the structural problems of the educational system worsened further (Ibn Abdeljalil 1987: 43–51). In this context, a new university reform project, grounded in a World Bank plan, was approved, severely undermining university funding.<sup>57</sup> This occurred approximately ten years after the first university reform had attempted to reorganize the sector without student participation, as UNEM was banned at the time (Daoud 1980: 8–22; Esseghrouchni 1986: 16–18).

Weakened by internal competition and constrained by the new university governance system, UNEM experienced political demobilization throughout the 1980s.<sup>58</sup> In 1985, UNEM's Executive

<sup>54</sup> "La résurrection de l'UNEM", *Lamalif*, 108 (1979), 10.

<sup>55</sup> PAAB, Parti de l'avant-garde démocratique socialiste (PADS), *Étudiants, jeunes, et répression au Maroc, 1993*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> From the second half of the 1970s onwards, new university institutions were established in the cities of Casablanca, Fez, Marrakesh, Oujda, Mohammadia, El Jadida, Agadir, Kenitra, Meknes and Tangier-Tetuán, in addition to the two preexisting national universities, Muhammad V in Rabat and Qarawiyīn in Fez.

<sup>57</sup> World Bank Group, Washington, D.C. "Announcement of Morocco to Launch First Phase of an Education Reform Program on March 24, 1986", *Bank News Release*, no. 61 (1986), 1.

<sup>58</sup> "L'UNEM à la croisée des chemins", *Lamalif*, 130 (1981), 15.

Committee was still unable to convene its Extraordinary Congress (Santucci 1985: 259). As campuses became increasingly militarized, university strikes grew ever rarer.<sup>59</sup> Amid exams boycotts<sup>60</sup> and confrontation with the police on campuses,<sup>61</sup> UNEM took a significant turn with the rise of political Islam within Moroccan student unionism.

The first violent confrontation between Islamist forces and the trade-unionist left dates back to the mid-1970s, when *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya*, an Islamist movement founded in 1969 (Tozy 1999: 230–232) and authorized in the fall of 1971 (Zeghal 2008: 161), assassinated trade union activist, former UNEM member, and USPF founder Omar Benjelloun on December 18, 1975. By mobilizing students and youth, *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* sought to weaken the left's cultural hegemony (Tozy 1999: 231; Zeghal 2008: 162). During UNEM's interdiction, attempts by *al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* militants to occupy universities and schools resulted in minor skirmishes with the *Syndicat national des lycéens*, which attracted high school students with leftist orientation (Rollinde 2003: 169–70). Although initially supported by the regime to oppose the New Left on university campuses, the movement did not survive the fallout from Benjelloun's assassination. *Al-Shabība al-Islāmiyya* was outlawed in 1976, after its founder Abdelkrim Muti fled abroad (Wegner 2011: 22). Nevertheless, with the advent of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the global revitalization of political Islam, Moroccan Islamism entered a new phase.

In the 1980s, the *Jāmi'at al-ʿAdl wa-l-Iḥsan* (Justice and Charity Group) led by Shaykh Abdesslam Yassine, emerged. The group attracted students in order to penetrate university networks and institutions (Munson 1993: 191). By 1984–85, supporters of the Islamic group were officially able to assert their presence within UNEM (Park, Boum 2016: 118). The entry of an Islamist nucleus into UNEM, and, more generally, the emergence of an Islamist-led student movement, took place with the tacit consent of the authorities, serving an anti-leftist purpose (VV. AA. 2017: 102; Wegner 2011: 19). At the same time, the strengthening of

<sup>59</sup> "Tafāqam azmat al-jāmi'a wa-l-rudūd al-ḥukūmiyya" [The University Crisis Worsens: The Governmental Responses], *Anwāl*, 23 (30 December 1981), 4.

<sup>60</sup> "Répression dans le mouvement étudiant", *Maroc répression. Bulletin de l'association de soutien aux comités de lutte contre la répression au Maroc*, 100 (1989), 11.

<sup>61</sup> LC, ARCH/0301/2, Association de soutien aux comités de lutte contre la répression au Maroc, Étudiants progressistes marocains, À propos de la lutte estudiantine à l'Université Mohamed I de Oujda, Paris, 21 December 1987, 10.

Islamic studies at the expense of the humanities – also linked to efforts to contain the New Left – fostered the Islamization of Moroccan youth.

By 1991, *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* was present on university campuses with its own student groups (Ḍarīf 1996: 149). In February 1992, the student branch of the *Organisation du Renouveau Estudiantin au Maroc* (OREMA) (Ḍarīf 1996: 83) was established by members of the *Ḥaraka al-Iṣlāḥ wa-l-Tajdīd (Mouvement réforme et renouveau)*, which had developed out of *al-Shabība al-Islamiyya*. A third Islamist group, *Ṭalabat al-Mīthāq* (Students of the Charter), emerged in 1993 with the aim of uniting the Islamic student front (Ḍarīf 1996: 163–171; Monjib 2018: 30–33).

Islamists became the dominant force in several university centers, including Marrakesh, Meknes, Agadir, and Kenitra, often clashing with leftist students. In November 1991, a leftist student was killed in Oujda by a member of the *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsān*, and seven people died during clashes between Islamists and leftists at Mohammed Ben Abdallah University in Fez (Park, Boum 2016: xviii). This episode led to nearly 50 arrests and prison sentences for the members of both factions (Rollinde 2003: 296). In February 1993, an attack by Islamist students claimed the life of another leftist UNEM activist.<sup>62</sup>

The emergence of political Islam in student activism positioned UNEM at the center of a conflict between Islamist and leftist forces vying for control of the national Moroccan student Union. Amid the left’s crisis of representation, the *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* was able to mobilize student support and leverage it to reclaim influence within UNEM. In 1991, students from the *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* were included in UNEM’s National Transitional Council. Established in Fez, it, however, failed to relaunch the union on a pluralistic basis (al-‘Awnī 1997: 36; Ḍarīf 1996: 82–83).

Factionalism and the impossibility of dialectical confrontation were predominant at UNEM’s last national meeting, held in Kenitra in November 1995 (Ḍarīf 1996: 83). It, nevertheless, foreshadowed the definitively takeover of the Union by members of the *Jāmi‘at al-‘Adl wa-l-Iḥsan* the following year. The new Islamic orientation also extended abroad to the *Maison du Maroc* in Paris, once a left revolutionary stronghold of UNEM. Favored by Islamic-oriented presidencies of the *Maison* in the early 1990s, the entry of Islamist students and the

<sup>62</sup> PAAB, Parti de l’avant-garde démocratique socialiste (PADS), Étudiants, jeunes, et répression au Maroc, 1993, 23.

assumption of positions within the *Maison's* organizational body resulted in a tense cohabitation with leftist representatives (Bouaziz, Denglos 2022: 255–264).

In the second half of the 1990s, the Islamist takeover of UNEM was accompanied by an increasingly pervasive dynamic of institutional control over the higher education system. In 1997, nine new university chancellors were appointed, five of whom came directly from the Ministries of Interior and Information. On January 20, 1997, a circular issued jointly by the Ministries of Interior, Information, and Higher Education sought to restrict access to university campuses for non-registered students, increased police presence and surveillance, and impose authorization requirements for organizing on-campus events (al-Ghazālī 1997: 163–164). In the face of a substantial depoliticization of the student body and the downsizing of student unionism, UNEM lost much of its historical political influence. Nevertheless, this did not undermine UNEM's Islamist orientation, which it has maintained throughout the 2000s and continues to uphold to the present day (UNEM 2025).

## Conclusion

At the heart of the Moroccan student unionism for over forty years (1956–1997) and beyond, UNEM encompassed a wide spectrum of often conflicting political orientations, while the authorities sought to control, repress, and depoliticize it. As this study has shown, UNEM's initial nationalist orientation was quickly reversed due to widespread dissatisfaction with the Moroccan regime's inability to sever ties with the elitist French colonial educational system. The lack of commitment to establishing a free and open university, coupled with unfulfilled promises to create employment opportunities for graduates, contributed to the Union's radicalization.

As such, UNEM became the arena for the development of the Moroccan New Left at the expense of the UNFP. Foreshadowed by an increasingly critical stance toward the country's government, a Marxist-Leninist orientation was consolidated at the 1972 Congress with the election of President Abdelaziz Menebhi. More broadly, this dynamic reflected the rise of the Arab New Left as a transnational and influential ideology in the region. For example, in a parallel case, at the XVIII Congress of the *Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie*, held in Korba in August 1971, the Tunisian New Left secured a majority

over representatives of the *Parti socialiste destourien*, triggering waves of arrests and violence that culminated on February 5, 1972, in “Black Saturday” (Jebari 2022: 119–120).

Similarly, UNEM and its leadership were subjected to extensive waves of arbitrary arrests, mock trials, and persecutions characteristic of the Years of Lead, culminating in its banning from 1974 to 1978. During this period, UNEM’s sections abroad vocally protested against the repression, highlighting the high degree of internationalization of the Moroccan student movement and its integration into broader transnational solidarity networks. With more members abroad than in Morocco, activities conducted overseas came to represent the entire student union. Notably, the French sections anticipated emerging tendencies within the union, such as the (re)affirmation of the “legal” political left, as well as the conflicts with the resilient wing of the radical left.

UNEM’s return to legality was facilitated by the new dominant orientation of the PPS and USFP, which marked the definitive abandonment of the *Ilā al-Amām* Marxist-Leninist faction on the issue of self-determination for Western Sahara. However, these parties were only able to reestablish a fragile leadership over the Union. In 1981, the XVII Congress officially confirmed UNEM’s fragmentation and its inability to relaunch the organization on a unitary basis. This phase also coincided with a narrowing of UNEM’s internationalist outlook, as its foreign sections were no longer involved in the Union’s internal affairs. Consequently, the union progressively lost the international dimension that had characterized it from the outset.

UNEM’s inability to manage the dialectic among its various currents paved the way for the penetration of political Islam into student unionism. Islamist groups expanded rapidly during the 1980s, clashing with leftist forces on campus, until UNEM transformed into an Islamist-oriented organization by the mid-1990s. Despite the ideological polarity of these movements, leftist and Islamist extra-parliamentary forces recognized youth, and consequently the national student union, as a strategic asset, each seeking to monopolize it during different decades. Islamism’s appeal to a new generation of students mirrored the consolidation of the Islamist movement in the Moroccan public and political sphere, a dynamic shaped by the global rise of political Islam as a renewed framework of identity in Arab-Muslim countries from the 1980s onward.

After initially tolerating it, the regime began to fear the strength of Islamist mobilization and sought to contain it more decisively from the 1990s onward, also imposing tighter direct control over universities. Nevertheless, Islamism continued to shape UNEM's political orientation for decades. Although its capacity to mobilize and exert influence over the university student body no longer matches that of the Union's heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, its predominance still persists to this day.

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PART THREE

STRUGGLES IN THE NEW MILLENIUM



# “Sometimes with the Islamists, Never with the State!”. The Egyptian Left and the Question of Islamism

*Hossam el-Hamalawy*<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

For decades, the relationship between Egyptian leftist organizations and Islamists, namely the Muslim Brotherhood, has been marred with animosity. Since the 1930s, leftist activists and their Islamist counterparts have never coordinated or joined ranks. Given the Muslim Brothers’ conservative social agenda and their involvement in breaking strikes on several occasions, communists have labelled the Islamists as “fascists.” The 1970s deepened hostilities even further as Islamist activists, backed by security services, regularly clashed with leftist students on university campuses. At the outbreak of the Islamist insurgency in 1991, the left applauded the state crackdown and the ensuing “War on Terror.” Then, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of a new political tradition that departed from the historical stances of the Egyptian left vis-à-vis Islamism. This chapter examines the emergence of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Socialists (RS) in the 1990s, their responses to Islamism both theoretically and in practice, and the implications this has had for the Egyptian political landscape, both before and after the 2011 revolution.

KEYWORDS: Egypt; Islamism; Communism; Muslim Brothers; Arab Spring.

## Theoretical Framework, Research Questions, and Methods

This study builds on the theoretical contributions of Trotskyist thinkers, such as Sameh Naguib and Chris Harman, to understand how Egyptian communists have historically related to Islamism, why many of them sided with the state in its crackdown on Islamists over the decades, including the infamous Rabaa Massacre in 2013, and why the RS departed from the earlier leftist consensus. The author of this chapter is a long-time member of the RS and has been personally involved in these issues. Hence, research is primarily based on autoethnography, as well as archival work and open-ended, informal, conversational interviews.

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## Decades of Rivalry, Animosity, and Bloody Clashes

Relations between Islamists and the left have always been strained. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Muslim Brotherhood Society (MB), which was founded in 1928, regularly clashed with leftists from the “Second Communist Wave.”<sup>2</sup> They competed for control of trade unions, occasionally engaged in strike-breaking, and accused Marxists of being both atheists and agents of foreign powers (Butland, Zohdi 2023; Benin, Lockman 1988: chap. XI). These hostilities deepened even further during the “Third Wave of Egyptian Communism” that emerged following 1968. In the 1970s, acting at the behest of Anwar Sadat’s security services, Islamist students were used to counter the left, leading to bloody fights on university campuses. Though less intense, these clashes continued into the 1980s and 1990s under Hosni Mubarak. There was no coordination or joint action between the two camps. Throughout this period, the left was guided by theoretical positions that can be described by two main courses of thought.

The first viewed Islamists as fascists and advocated siding with the state to repress them, providing uncritical support to the declared “War on Terror.” Any joint work with the Islamists or even allowing them any legal status was vehemently rejected. According to this position, the Islamists could all be lumped together in one basket labelled “MB.” Any differences between the MBs, jihadis and takfiris were seen as merely a division of labor or as marginal, at best. This was the view of the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP) and the legal Tagammu‘ Party, which the ECP controlled and used as a front for its activities for extended periods. Rifaat el-Said, the ECP guru who headed the Tagammu‘ Party for decades, theorized and publicized these positions in books, articles, media statements, and internal party documents (al-Sa‘īd 1993; Najīb 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> Leftists categorize the history of Egyptian communism into distinct “waves.” The first began in 1919 with the establishment of the Egyptian Socialist Party, which later became the Egyptian Communist Party, but was dismantled by the Wafd government’s crackdowns in 1924. The second emerged in the late 1930s, marked by the creation of communist study circles that eventually developed into multiple organizations and factions, experiencing brief periods of unity, and concluded with the dissolution of the Egyptian Communist Party in 1965. The third wave started in 1968 with the resurgence of student and worker movements, suffered a severe blow in 1977, and effectively ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The fourth ensued with the emergence of the Revolutionary Socialist Tendency.

The second stance viewed Islamists as reactionaries, as fascist terrorists, but advocated a joint front by the opposition forces to expose, confront, and isolate them. This position was prevalent among the more radical wings of the communist movement, to the left of the ECP, such as the Egyptian Workers Communist Party, the most influential leftist group in the 1970s. This group later merged with another smaller party, the Egyptian Communist Party - 8th of January, to form the Unified Workers Party in the late 1980s, as the Third Wave was effectively coming to an end. The party literature, as was the case with the ECP, acknowledged there were different streams within Islamism, but viewed them essentially as various extensions of the MB (Ḥizb al-‘Ummāl al-Shiyū‘ī al-Miṣrī 1977; al-Shāf‘ī 1978; Ḥizb al-‘Ummāl al-Shiyū‘ī al-Miṣrī 1980, 1982; Ḥizb al-‘Ummāl al-Muwahḥad 1993).

However, the Egyptian left presented two anomalies during this period. The first, which was inspired by the Iranian Revolution and saw a gradual rise of popular support for Islamist groups across the region by the late 1970s and early 1980s, led a part of the left to view Islamism as a revolutionary anti-imperialist movement of the oppressed and to desert the ranks of communism to either join already existing Islamist organizations, found new ones, or remain independent but express Islamist sympathies.<sup>3</sup> The second concerns the high-profile communist lawyers who volunteered to defend Islamists in courts, such as Ahmad Nabil el-Hilali and Hisham Mubarak. Their activity, however, was primarily motivated by humanism and morals, rather than a theoretical revision of the historical positions of Egyptian communism. Indeed, they never engaged in any joint political action with the Islamists outside of the courts.<sup>4</sup>

## New Left, New Politics

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Egypt’s Third Wave in 1991, a new political tradition arose that departed from the historical stances of the Egyptian left vis-à-vis Islamism. By the late 1980s, small circles of students involved in the Palestine solidarity movement began to be influenced by Trotskyism. In the ensuing years, their study groups evolved into two organizations: the Revolutionary

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<sup>3</sup> Emad Abu Ghazi, personal communication with the author, September 7, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Aida Seif al-Dawla, personal communication with the author, September 9, 2024.

Socialists Tendency and the Labor Emancipation Group. These two groups merged to form the Revolutionary Socialists Organization (RS) after the Second Palestinian Intifada.

Debates engulfed the emerging Trotskyist study groups on the nature of Islamism, especially with the outbreak of the insurgency by the Islamic Jihad and Gamaa Islamiya in 1991. Some members toed the traditional leftist line regarding Islamist groups of all streams as fascists; however, others who would later represent the dominant RS position disagreed. While recognizing the generally reactionary nature of Islamism, the RS refused to label the Islamists as fascists, based on a different theoretical understanding. Islamism was viewed as the product of the failed modernization of the “uneven and combined development” of capitalism in Egypt. They believed Islamism was rooted in a utopian conception of a moralist society, one held predominantly by rural-to-urban migrants who were shocked at the disintegration of traditional societies under modern capitalism and colonialism (Jād 1994). While the Islamist answer to such grievances was not necessarily progressive, unlike fascism, the movement did not aim to crush workers’ organizations in an unstable society undergoing economic and political upheaval.<sup>5</sup>

The RS argued that another feature of Islamism – especially of mainstream movements like the MB – was its multi-class nature. While the core cadres of the movement originated from the petty bourgeoisie and middle-class professionals, support for Islamism also existed in various forms among large sections of the traditional landowning elite, the bourgeoisie, as well as the working class, farmers, and the urban poor (Jād 1994). Such a broad class alliance represented a source of strength for Islamist groups, but only as an opposition force or during periods of political stability. However, once in power or facing a political issue that required a concrete stance, these groups were immediately thrown into crisis. Indeed, a single policy could rarely address the grievances of such conflicting class interests. This meant that Islamist groups, especially the MB, largely shied away from taking concrete positions on socioeconomic issues. They tended to fluctuate between confrontation and compromise with the established political order and were prone to splits at every turn.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sameh Naguib, Signal call with the author, September 20, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The RS achieved further ideological depth and support after the leading British Marxist theoretician, Chris Harman, following lengthy discussions with the RS, wrote his famous article entitled “The Prophet and the Proletariat” (Harman 1994). Building on this theoretical understanding and in contrast with the traditional left, the RS adopted the slogan “Sometimes with the Islamists, never with the State” in the literature it distributed on university campuses and elsewhere in the 1990s. In practice, this slogan translated into siding with MB students on campus when it came to “democratic” issues, when the State Security Police banned Islamist candidates from running in student union elections, expelled Islamist students from schools, and detained and tortured their leaders and supporters. The “galleries” (*ma`ārid* – paper banners exhibited on university campuses by the Socialist Students, the student wing of the RS) regularly condemned the military trials of MB leaders and police raids against their younger members. However, the Socialist Students also confronted the MB on issues such as freedom of expression and the rights of women and Coptic Christians. For instance, in several cases in the latter half of the 1990s, the attempts of MB students to impose gender segregation in classrooms and to censor campus theater plays were condemned by Socialist Students. Sectarian remarks made by MB figures were also denounced.

A veteran RS member recalls, “We were a kind of leftist the Muslim Brothers had not met before. They could not quite figure us out at the beginning. Anyway, we were still too marginal for them to bother with. We were only a few individuals” (el-Hamalawy 2007). However, by 1999, the MB was increasingly taking notice. On a few occasions, during that year, the MB at Cairo University allowed the Socialist Students to speak at rallies against the US airstrikes on Iraq. This was a sign that the MB, at least among the student milieu, was finally acknowledging the RS as a force that had to be given visibility for any serious mobilization on campus. Nonetheless, this did not entail an overall rapprochement between the two groups at the national level. Indeed, MB students sometimes assaulted RS members at Ain Shams University and the American University of Cairo. Even at Cairo University, where the two groups were slowly coming together to coordinate anti-war protests, MB organizers were always nervous whenever the RS chanted slogans against Mubarak or highlighted the Egyptian regime’s complicity in US imperialist policy in the region.

## The 2000s

The outbreak of the Second Palestinian Intifada had an earthshaking impact on the Egyptian political scene. Solidarity protests ignited across university campuses and professional syndicates. Street politics were revived after a decade of repression, and the War on Terror had stifled dissent of all shades. The RS played a central role in the student mobilizations, linking regional issues to the local plights of Egyptians under Mubarak's regime. This anti-regime agitation earned the RS the wrath of the security services, which cracked down on its cadres, while also earning it the respect and credibility of the student community, driving steady growth in its membership.

Then, in 2000-02, the mass pro-Palestine protests threw the MB into crisis. Since the 1995 security crackdowns and the ensuing military tribunals, the MB had resorted to a policy of non-confrontation with the regime, at any cost, and refrained from street mobilization. Moreover, it regularly intervened at protests held on university campuses and professional syndicates to curb their members' fervor or stop demonstrators from chanting against the police and Mubarak. In October 2000, for example, after the Socialist Students at Cairo University clashed with state security agents and burned police vans at an Intifada solidarity protest, the MB students organized a march to denounce the "socialist sabotage." On numerous other occasions, MB students physically tried to prevent other students from marching outside the campus gates of Cairo University, which was within walking distance of the Israeli embassy. Similar incidents took place at other universities across Egypt.

This timid approach came with a cost. The street ferment provided opportunities for the secular opposition, including the RS, to grow and generate pressure on the MB senior leadership from its base cadres. Leftists and ordinary students politicized by the events regularly taunted MB activists at universities and professional syndicates for their absence at mass mobilizations and their collaboration with the security forces to diffuse dissent (el-Hamalawy 2002; 2003).

Following the pro-Palestine riots and bloody clashes with security forces near Cairo University, in which thousands of students and local residents clashed with the police and chanted slogans against Mubarak, at the beginning of April 2002, members of the MB began to show up at events organized by the Egyptian Popular Committee for Soli-

ilarity with the Palestinian Intifada, which a wide range of independent and leftist activists had founded. Prominent human rights lawyer and former communist activist Ahmad Seif, the Director of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, who hosted the committee’s meetings, recalled, “They [MB] did not have much choice, as they would have lost credibility in their constituencies if they had not turned out. Still, they only sent representatives [usually, Essam al-Eryan or Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh, the two most popular party elders with Islamist youth at the time] and avoided mass mobilization.” More importantly, Seif added, “The Brotherhood was bowing to pressure from its youth, who were unhappy with a complacent stance vis-à-vis the authorities” (el-Hamalaawy 2007).

On April 5, 2002, a group of young MB activists published an open letter to the group’s Supreme Guide, Mustafa Mashhour, in the London-based daily *al-Hayat*, questioning the group’s strategy of acquiescence to security crackdowns and calling for a more active involvement in the Palestinian solidarity movement. Seif explained: “The alternative was approaching the radicals in the opposition, as the ‘legal’ opposition, namely Tagammu‘, Wafd, and the Nasserists, were too hostile. The radicals in the opposition, on the other hand, were happy to get whatever help the Brothers were willing to contribute” (el-Hamalaawy 2007).

The MB initially approached RS members, considering them the “least hostile” leftist dissidents, to suggest that the Islamists collaborate with the left in the Palestine solidarity and anti-Iraq war movements. This move triggered a debate in leftist circles and the RS. The ECP, Tagammu‘, most of the human rights organizations, and a wide range of independent leftists, who were part of the Third Wave and had rekindled their activism thanks to the Second Palestinian Intifada, refused any form of coordination with the Islamists. However, they always made an exception for the Labor Party, which was headed by Magdy Hussein, a former leading member of the Egyptian Workers Communist Party before he converted to Islamism in the late 1970s. The usual scene at such a joint (and usually small) protest was that the crowd would split into two circles: one led by leftists and Nasserists, chanting leftist slogans, and another by the Labor Party members, chanting Islamic slogans.

While there was a consensus on the nature of Islamism based on the theoretical stance that had evolved in the 1990s, internal debate raged

amongst the ranks of the RS over united front tactics and how to concretely relate to the Islamists, namely the MB, in the Palestine solidarity movement. A faction eventually split off at the end of 2003, while the RS leadership won over the rest of the rank and file to explore the possibility of a closer coordination with the MB.<sup>7</sup> Among the Egyptian left, the RS stood alone, supported by a few left-wing human rights activists, including members of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center.

In 2003 and 2004, the MB remained committed to its non-confrontational policy. The group continued sending “representatives” to Palestine and Iraq solidarity protests. However, their engagement in these causes revolved around charity work and demonstrating within the boundaries set by the regime, in full coordination with the security services. The government even went so far as to allow the MB to participate in state-sponsored “anti-Iraq war rallies” at the Cairo Stadium and in the provinces, in early 2003, as a safety valve to diffuse dissent. In a surreal scene, the Supreme Guide of the MB was given a platform to speak at Cairo Stadium for an event that was covered live by the tightly managed, local, state-run TV and press. However, this did not end the regime’s crackdown on the group, which resumed routinely shortly after these events.

Meanwhile, the leftist-led Palestine solidarity committee developed into a broad anti-Iraq war front, organizing small street protests that eventually exploded into battles with the police. On March 19 and 20, 2003, downtown Cairo witnessed the most significant upheaval since the 1977 Bread Uprising (Stork, Bencomo 2003). Protesters burned down posters of Mubarak in Tahrir Square and destroyed the billboards of the ruling National Democratic Party. Frustration only increased among the youth base of the MB. One middle-ranking MB cadre at the time recalled the anger amongst his peers at “leaving the street empty for the leftists” (el-Hamalawy 2007).

Hence, one can pinpoint the MB leadership’s willingness to work together with secular leftists over the burning issues of the day: Palestine and Iraq. By December 2003, the MB Supreme Guide was given a platform to speak at the 2nd Cairo Anti-War Conference, organized by the RS and Karama Nasserists, and also attended by international leftist anti-war activists. This move raised the wrath of the ECP and other leftists. At the conference, the coordination amongst participants was

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

not smooth. Friction arose on several occasions between the MB youth and the RS members as the latter distributed their literature among attendees.<sup>8</sup>

The following year, the leftist campaigners who led the Palestine solidarity movement and later the anti-war movement felt sufficiently emboldened by three years of street mobilization to protest Mubarak directly. By the end of 2004, two anti-Mubarak coalitions emerged. *Kifāya* (Egyptian Movement for Change) was a united front comprising primarily members of the Karama Nasserist faction, led by Hamdin Sabbahi, members of the liberal al-Ghad Party, led by Ayman Nour, figures from the ECP, and a few Third Wave veterans. The other coalition, the Popular Campaign for Change, included the RS, left-wing human rights activists, and independent radical leftists. The two coalitions merged more or less spontaneously in the following months and came to be known simply as *Kifāya*. Predominantly comprised of intellectuals, middle-class professionals, students, and university graduates, it never evolved into a mass movement. Still, its media-savvy tactics ensured its message and activism reached a broad national audience (el-Hamalawy 2021).

“When *Kifāya* came onto the scene, some Brotherhood youth wanted to follow suit”, recalled a middle-ranking MB organizer (el-Hamalawy 2007). *Kifāya*’s rise, however, coincided with a change of leadership in the MB: the appointment of Mahdi Akef as Supreme Guide following the death of Maamoun el-Hodeibi in January 2004. Akef was known as one of the group’s elders who was willing to listen to its younger members, open to reaching out to the secular opposition, and who advocated greater activity on the political scene, in contrast to the group’s traditional, non-confrontational line.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after a few *Kifāya* demonstrations in June 2005, a group of MB activists, led by ‘Ali Abdel Fattah of Alexandria, held talks with the RS and independent leftists, launching the National Alliance for Change. The alliance was understood from the outset to be tactical, temporary, and anti-Mubarak, with the primary goal of confronting the expected vote rigging in that year’s presidential and parliamentary elections. On the ground, however, the alliance did not induce fundamental political

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Abdel Moneim Mahmoud, Personal communication with the author, September 26, 2024.

change. After planning a joint protest with the RS in Cairo's Abdeen Square in July 2005, the MB failed to appear, citing police pressure. Two more joint demonstrations were held at the Lawyers Syndicate in downtown Cairo. The first was an organizational disaster, while the second was relatively better coordinated. The alliance was effectively shelved after the winter parliamentary elections, but it helped inaugurate a new, generally positive atmosphere and established communication channels to facilitate future talks and coordination (el-Hamalawy 2007).

Relations between the MB and the left, notably the RS, were further cemented in 2006, another pivotal point. The administrative prosecution of reformist judges in the spring of this year caused an upheaval in the judicial branch, as a faction of judges lobbied to assert their independence from the executive authority. This triggered protests in Cairo in May, when the MB mobilized in coordination with *Kifāya*. The ensuing police crackdown led to the detention of over one thousand MB members and dozens of *Kifāya* activists, including leftist bloggers. In prison, relations between the detainees were friendly (el-Hamalawy 2007). Outside, the RS solidarity campaign with both their own and MB detainees won the gratitude and admiration of MB leaders and youth. The administrators of Ikhwan Web, the English-language portal of the MB, reached out to the RS bloggers for help with media and content sharing, and several young MB members were mentored on the use of blogs and social media by RS and independent leftist bloggers. This was instrumental to the international solidarity campaign launched by the MB to demand the release of its prisoners, who had been rounded up and tried in military courts during a further wave of repression at the end of 2006.

At the same time, the MB and the RS further developed their coordination mechanisms in universities, which had been an arena for clashes and bloody rivalry during the previous decade. In November 2005, the MB, the RS, and various independent activists created the Free Student Union as an alternative to the state-dominated student unions. The new entity was based at the Universities of Helwan and Cairo, where the RS had a considerable base. However, it was not until the mass rigging of the student union election in October 2006 that the MB decided to throw its full weight behind the free union and create branches in Ain Shams, Mansoura, Azhar, and Alexandria Universities (el-Hamalawy 2007), too. While the project did not succeed in creating a genuine grassroots alternative to the security services-run student unions, it did help end the friction and assaults between the RS and

the MB and created a friendly atmosphere on campuses for political discussion and occasional joint action.

Meanwhile, MB leaders such as Essam el-Eryan and Mohamed el-Beltagi were regular guest speakers at the Center for Socialist Studies, the RS head office. This brought Islamist youth to the center where the RS could approach them, distribute their literature, and recruit them. Throughout this period of rapprochement and joint work, the RS was continuously accused by the rest of the left of tailing the MB. However, the RS continued to produce independent publications, presenting a Marxist perspective on politics, and distributed its literature (newspapers and pamphlets) at all joint events held with the MB, without compromising on issues related to gender rights and religious freedom. The RS continued to criticize the MB’s record in such matters and the weak support it provided to the rising tide of industrial actions.

## Revolution

The MB faced a new crisis with the revolutionary outbreak of January 25, 2011. While the group’s leadership did not initially endorse the protest call, it did not prevent its younger members from joining the demonstrations. The leadership did, however, endorse street mobilization on the Friday of Rage, January 28, when it became clear that a national uprising was looming, whether they were part of it or not. The MB base cadres and supporters played a central role in the Tahrir sit-in and its defense from the attacks of pro-regime thugs. This, however, did not stop their leadership from initiating talks with the regime, through Mubarak’s Vice President and former chief spy, Omar Suleiman, to try to reach a compromise. However, no agreements were reached: not only because of the regime’s bloody onslaught at Tahrir Square, during the infamous “Battle of the Camel”, but also because of the pressure exerted by the MB’s base cadres who were firmly committed to continuing the revolt at Tahrir Square. These conflicting stances across hierarchical and generational lines would reappear in the following years.

The RS, like other groups participating in the Tahrir sit-in, coordinated the defense of the square and support logistics with the MB, whose field leader was Mohamed el-Beltagi.<sup>10</sup> This did not, however,

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<sup>10</sup> Sameh Naguib, Signal call with the author, September 20, 2024.

prevent the RS from pursuing independent propaganda and agitation that departed from the MB's general line of compromise. For instance, during the 18 days of protest, the RS was the only group to issue an anti-military communique, on February 1, the day before the Battle of the Camel (al-Ishtirākiyūn al-Thawriyūn 2011).

The coordination effectively came to an end with the fall of Mubarak on February 11 and turned into rivalry and occasional confrontations on the ground.<sup>11</sup> The MB leadership and most of the Salafis entered into a Faustian bargain with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). They would dismiss their militants on the streets and safeguard the prerogatives of the military, and most of the old regime's institutions, in exchange for their admittance into the ruling coalition through elections, in which the MB and the Islamists rightly believed they were bound to prevail. Hence, the MB and the Islamists generally refused to endorse any mass mobilization in the streets and squares throughout 2011, regularly praising the army, the SCAF, and even the much-detested interior ministry. They attacked leftists and the revolutionary forces as instigators of strife through their official statements and news platforms. The only partial exception, among the Islamists, was represented by radical Salafi cleric Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, who warned, as early as February 11, of the military's role in the counterrevolution (YouTube 2011). Indeed, his supporters were present at almost all confrontations with security forces over the following months.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout 2011, RS publications, statements, and social media posts strongly criticized the MB's collaboration with the SCAF and its opportunistic stance. Sectarian acts and statements by various Islamist factions were also regularly denounced. However, a few points distinguished the position of the RS compared to that of other leftist groups. First, in its propaganda and agitation, the RS did not use the derogatory language employed by the revolutionary youth, describing the Islamists as *da'naggiya* (Egyptian dialect: bearded ones) or ridiculing their religious beliefs. Second, the RS carefully distinguished between the MB/Salafi leaders and their bases, aiming to divide them along class and generational lines. Any opportunity to work jointly with the Islamist base cadres was seized, in the hope of influencing them. Third,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Haitham Ghoneim, Personal communication with the author, June 21, 2022.

though staunchly secular, the RS did not advocate polarization along secular-Islamist lines, admonishing that this might allow elements from Mubarak’s regime to reenter the political scene (Najīb 2011).

In practice, on the ground, this translated into attempts to reach out to the MB and Salafi youth participating in the revolutionary upheavals, such as the Mohamed Mahmoud Street Uprising in November 2011 and the Occupy Cabinet Clashes with paratroopers the following month. Both events were dismissed and downplayed by MB and Salafi leaders, but on the ground, some sections of their youth groups disobeyed their organizational directives.<sup>13</sup> The RS youth also participated in the sit-in in front of the Ministry of Defense organized by Abu Ismail’s Salafi supporters in May 2012, carrying their red flags, distributing Marxist literature, and later clashing with the military forces that violently dispersed the sit-in (el-Hamalawy 2012b). The successive waves of industrial action and social protests denounced by Islamist leaders included substantial sections of their power base and supporters, who, on several occasions, spontaneously joined the strikes based on their class interests as workers and civil servants.<sup>14</sup>

This RS strategy, however, came at a cost. The group was under constant attack by the leftist organizations that continued to follow the traditional line and labelled the Islamists as fascists. However, an even more severe, internal challenge emerged and exploded during the 2012 presidential election. The RS had grown rapidly during the previous year. However, despite its increased industrial presence, the bulk of the recruits were revolutionary youth, most of whom had had no political experience before 2011. Their conception of politics rested on uncompromising confrontation with the forces of the state in squares and other flashpoints. They had joined the RS primarily because of the group’s early and solid anti-SCAF stance and its heavy involvement in street mobilization. These young revolutionary members were extremely hostile to Islamists, in general, and the MB, in particular, envisaging the groups as a tool used by the SCAF and traitors. The RS struggled to integrate and convert these new members from street fighters into a cohesive organizational cadre. This meant engaging in internal political and ideological battles, in which the leadership attempted to contain the ultra-leftist streak prevalent among the organ-

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<sup>13</sup> Saif al-Islam Eid, personal communication with the author, September 26, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Hisham Fouad, personal communication with the author, September 26, 2024.

ization's youth and some of its veteran members. This was evident during election times, when the ultra-leftist members refused to engage in electoral politics altogether. Moreover, the RS leadership had to face the political challenges represented by adventurism and movementism (el-Hamalawy 2013).

These political issues all came to the forefront, threatening the organization's implosion by the time the presidential election began in 2012. Internal disagreements led the group to dally and not clearly state its position on this issue. Meanwhile, the fluid situation brought about by the revolution meant that its base membership was already active in campaigns supporting different candidates, including Hamdin Sabbahi, Khaled 'Ali, and Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh (who left the MB and rebranded his politics to become more inclusive, attracting a considerable number of secularists) or endorsing a total boycott of the elections. Support for Morsi's candidacy was not even remotely considered. On the eve of the first electoral round, the RS leadership issued a statement aimed at striking a compromise between its conflicting internal views. While expressing its disappointment with the opposition's inability to field a single candidate representing the revolution against the counterrevolutionary candidates, like Ahmad Shafiq and Amr Moussa, the statement called on its members and supporters to vote for an opposition candidate, without specifying anyone in particular (al-Ishtirākiyūn al-Thawriyūn 2012a). Thus, those who were planning to boycott the elections would not be penalized. The results of the first round shocked the RS and the revolutionary camp, in general, presenting them with difficult choices.

The RS leadership then issued a communique endorsing Morsi against Shafiq (al-Ishtirākiyūn al-Thawriyūn 2012b). The group was immediately denounced by most of the opposition, and a deep internal split ensued, with most of the base members and some of its veterans rejecting the position advanced by the leadership. Feeling the pressure and fearing an implosion, the RS leadership backtracked and issued a new statement implicitly endorsing the boycott (al-Ishtirākiyūn al-Thawriyūn 2012c). Members who still wanted to vote for Morsi were allowed to do so and would not face any penalties.

However, days before the second electoral round, the SCAF took several measures that the RS, the MB, and most of the opposition perceived as the prelude to a military coup. The SCAF-appointed Justice Minister issued a decree on June 13, granting the Military Police, MI officers,

and NCOs the power to arrest civilians and to refer them to military courts until a new constitution was drafted (al-Waqāi‘ al-Miṣriyya 2012). The next day, the Supreme Constitutional Court scrapped the Political Isolation Law, which the Islamist-dominated parliament had rushed to enact in a desperate bid to ban Shafiq and Omar Suleiman from the presidential race. Moreover, it ruled that the election of one-third of the parliamentary seats violated the Constitutional Declaration; hence, the legal status of the Islamist-dominated parliament was questionable. The SCAF moved quickly to dissolve parliament, issuing an addendum to the Constitutional Declaration on June 17, the day the polls opened, that allowed it to retain all legislative powers until a new parliament was elected (al-Jarīda al-Rasmiyya 2012; Wickham 2013: 261).

As the threat of a coup loomed, the RS mobilized in Tahrir Square and denounced the potential military intervention in the election results (al-Ishtirākiyūn al-Thawriyūn 2012d; Bayān mushtarak 2012; al-Ishtirākiyūn al-Thawriyūn 2012e). This move drew the respect and appreciation of MB youth, who cheered the RS at Tahrir Square and MB press conferences. When Morsi was declared the winner, an implicit sigh of relief was heard across the opposition, even among those who had boycotted the elections (el-Hamalawy 2012c).

## Counterrevolution and the Aftermath

With the MB in office, any prospect of official coordination with the RS was put to rest. RS platforms and publications regularly denounced Morsi’s compromises with the defense and security establishments. More importantly, the RS, whose power base amongst blue and white-collar workers was steadily expanding, decided to focus its attack on Morsi’s neoliberal policies and polarize the Islamists’ power base amongst workers across class lines rather than along a secular-Islamist divide.

Immediately following Morsi’s inauguration, workers besieged the presidential palace daily for months. It started with workers and civil servants, but soon, almost anyone with a problem in the country – be it political, personal, or economic – came to the palace’s gates demanding that Morsi find a solution. The MB denounced the protests as a “counterrevolutionary plot” but failed to disperse them (el-Hamalawy 2012a). Elsewhere, in the workplace, protests were on the rise. In 2012 alone, the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights recorded at least 3,817 industrial actions and social mobilizations, more

than the total number of social protests the country had seen over the entire decade spanning 2000-2010 (al-Mirghanī *et al.* 2013: 1–2). The newly appointed Interior Minister, Ahmad Gamal Eddin, refrained from policing “political protests” and mainly focused on combating “crime” and cracking down on industrial actions and social protests (Ennarah 2014: 414). This produced an Orwellian situation in which the Islamists’ base cadres, who supported Morsi and were members of the MB and Salafi groups, were victimized and arrested in the crack-down on strikes. The RS reached out to these members, developed a close working relationship with them, and, on occasion, successfully recruited them.<sup>15</sup>

Outside of workplaces, the RS repeatedly clashed with MB activists, most notably on university campuses and during the infamous Ittihadiya clashes around the presidential palace at the end of 2012.<sup>16</sup> RS militancy against the MB would skyrocket to a new level with the Port Said Prison Massacre. On January 26, 2013, police opened fire on rioters demonstrating outside the prison. They were angered by the death sentences handed down to the defendants accused of perpetrating the infamous stadium massacre, the previous year, in which 72 al-Ahly football fans died. Prison guards sprayed the protesters with automatic gunfire from the watchtowers. CSF armored vehicles roamed the city streets, shooting at anyone within range. Police also fired at residents in their homes with Goryunov machine guns. Thirty-eight citizens were killed, including a 17-year-old RS member, Ahmad Sami. The following day, police opened fire on the funeral marches, killing nine more. Hundreds were injured.<sup>17</sup>

Morsi defended the action of the police, accusing the protesters of being “thugs” and “counterrevolutionary conspirators” (Alif Shīn Alif 2013; al-Dakhākhnī *et al.* 2013a, 2013b). His cabinet officials repeated the same claims, with one minister describing the unrest that spread in the Suez Canal towns as a “revolution by a group of thugs” (al-Miṣrī al-Yawm 2013). Not a single police officer was held accountable for the massacre.

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<sup>15</sup> Haitham Muhammadein, Personal communication with the author, September 26, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> The Ettehadiya clashes took place on 21 June 2014, when thousands of protesters went down to the Ettehadiya Presidential Palace asking for the repeal of the newly issued protest during the International Day of Solidarity with the Egyptian detainees.

<sup>17</sup> I traveled to Port Said following the massacre and recorded video interviews with local doctors and activists.

Increasingly isolated, the MB threw its lot with its Salafi allies, adopting a sectarian rhetoric. Meanwhile, the secular opposition launched the National Salvation Front (NSF). Discussions ensued in the RS over whether or not to join the front. Eventually, the RS refused to participate, citing the NSF’s alliances with Amr Moussa and other officials from the Mubarak regime. Another campaign, however, attracted both the RS and NSF. Two Nasserist activists and a former RS member, Hassan Shahin, initiated the *Tamarrod* (Rebellion) Campaign in the spring of 2013 to collect petitions calling for the impeachment of Morsi and to hold protests on June 30, a year since Morsi had assumed office. The NSF initially dismissed the campaign but then quickly came around to endorse it.<sup>18</sup> The RS also expressed interest and threw its weight behind the campaign.

*Tamarrod* was initially decentralized. This left room for the RS to pursue its anti-military and anti-*fulūl*<sup>19</sup> (remnants of the Mubarak regime) propaganda and agitation while collecting signatures for the *Tamarrod* petitions. However, by June, the campaign was increasingly centralized, and the three *Tamarrod* leaders flirted publicly with the army, welcoming the participation of elements from the *fulūl* and security establishments. This raised concerns and suspicions among the RS leaders.

Nonetheless, the RS continued to prepare for the June 30 protests. The RS viewed the expected mass mobilization as a “new revolutionary wave”, which the group had to be part of and would try to influence. After all, industrial action, despite police repression, was increasing daily. The Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights recorded, in the run-up to June 30, 2013, at least 4,567 social protests since the beginning of the year (Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights 2014: 4). In the final weeks before the mobilization, the RS boycotted coordination meetings with the NSF and *Tamarrod*, as the latter insisted on a propaganda line courting the military, the police, and the *fulūl*.

Eventually, the RS participated in the mobilization but raised the slogan, “*Yasqūṭ kull mann khān, ‘askr, fulūl, ikhwān!*” (Down with all those who betrayed the revolution: the military, remnants of the old

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<sup>18</sup> Former National Salvation Front leading member, Signal call with the author, August 6, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> *Fulūl* is a term that was coined after the January 2011 revolution to describe the remnants of the Mubarak regime.

regime, and the MB!). The group sought to create a third alternative to the MB and the military, raising banners that included stencils of revolutionary martyrs killed by the army and the police, chanting anti-military slogans, and distributing anti-military literature. Yet, the tide of reaction was too powerful. In Cairo and several provinces, RS activists were mobbed at protests and sit-ins.

The RS initially perceived the military's July 3 takeover as similar to that of February 11, 2011, when the army had deposed the president to avoid the collapse of the entire regime under the pressure of the revolution. While refusing to label the event as a "coup", the RS leadership, in an article published on July 4, called on all revolutionaries to remain vigilant and oppose any repressive measures expected to be taken by the military against the Islamists, as the same measures would eventually also be employed against workers and leftists (Najīb 2013). The article triggered adverse reactions from several RS activists, especially among its youth base, who saw the MB and the new *fulūl*; hence, any repressive measures taken against them should be considered revolutionary action. Debates raged in the organization on how to relate to the changing situation. The military immediately deployed, conducting a series of massacres against the Islamists. Meanwhile, the Islamists' rhetoric was highly sectarian and divisive, and their marches were becoming increasingly violent.

Whilst denouncing the military massacres and the Islamists' sectarian violence, the RS leadership viewed the events as a conflict between the two wings of the counterrevolution. The task of the revolutionaries was to create an alternative to both. Such a position, albeit abstract and confused, was different from that of other leftist factions that rallied behind the army and endorsed crackdowns against the Islamists. Two significant events marked this vast divide between the RS and the rest of the left.

The first occurred when, on July 26, Sisi called on the people to take to the streets to "authorize the army to confront the possible terror threat" in what became known as the *Tafwīd* mobilizations that were instrumental to shoring up support for the army's crackdowns, amidst a hysterical fascist turn in society. The RS issued two statements denouncing the *Tafwīd*, refusing to participate in the protests, and warning of the rise of "military fascism" (al-Ishtirākiyūn al-Thawriyūn 2013a; 2013b). This earned it the wrath of the rest of the opposition that parroted the military propaganda, labeling anyone who refused the *Tafwīd* as "fifth columnists for the MB."

The second event concerns the violence in Rabaa and Nahda Squares on August 14, the biggest massacre in the history of modern Egypt. One week before the crackdown, all leftist parties, except for the RS, had signed a joint statement calling on the army to forcefully suspend the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins. It was a war on fascist terror from their point of view (al-Ghūl 2013). The RS refused to sign the statement and, on the day of the massacre, issued a statement denouncing the crackdown and describing Sisi as the “leader of the counterrevolution” (al-Ishtirākīyūn al-Thawriyūn 2013c).

By the end of September, the RS, the April 6 Youth Group, the Strong Egypt Party, various independent activists, and other leftists, who felt increasingly uncomfortable with their leaders’ uncritical support for the military, launched the *Thuwwar* Front (*Jabhat Ṭarīq al-Thawra* 2013). This was the last serious attempt to create an alternative to the MB and the army, to consolidate what remained of the non-Islamist opposition, and to rekindle street mobilization amidst the rising repression. The front organized a series of street protests in 2013 and 2014, before it ceased to effectively exist, as repression extended to all shades of dissent, not just that of the Islamists, and public mobilization was routinely met with live ammunition. Revolutionary initiatives and energy crumbled under the weight of security crackdowns and the mass demoralization amongst the ranks of dissidents. The front remained active on university campuses, where RS students constituted its backbone, and continued to operate until the beginning of 2015.

Throughout this period, a gradual shift was brewing regarding how the RS reflected on the events that had taken place between June 30 and July 3, 2013, and the ensuing political developments. The first time the RS explicitly used the term “coup” and labeled MB protesters as “anti-coup protesters from the Islamists”, was on October 6, 2013 (Facebook 2013). The term shocked some of its members, who still insisted that no distinction should be made between the Islamists and the military, the two wings of the counterrevolution, and who continued to view June 30 as a “revolutionary wave.” This triggered a lengthy internal debate that was not resolved until 2015, when this view was officially abandoned via a series of statements and articles written by some of the organization’s leading figures. According to these publications, the June 30, 2013 protests were to be understood as a reactionary mobilization, one which was doomed to hand power over to the counterrevolution, rather than embodying the “revolutionary wave”

that had been hijacked by the military (Mukhtār 2015; al-Ishtirākiyūn al-Thawriyūn 2015a, 2015b; Najīb 2015a, 2015b).

This shift, however, did not translate into joint work with the MB for two main reasons. First, any form of joint work with the MB would have resulted in political suicide, subjecting the RS, which already had increasing numbers of cadres incarcerated, to lethal state violence. The RS was reeling from the security crackdowns, which have continued to this day, and was adapting to the new reality in which street politics had come to an end. A return to a clandestine modus operandi and calculated moves were necessary to survive the repression. Second, the MB ceased to exist as a well-defined political entity. The group split into several factions, with many fleeing abroad, going completely underground, or resorting to armed operations. No common ground existed for joint work, even if the RS were open to it.<sup>20</sup>

At the time of writing, the RS does not conduct any joint organizational work with Islamist groups, either in Egypt or in exile. However, RS platforms and spokespersons have taken up the cause of Islamist prisoners, regularly calling for their freedom and exposing the grotesque human rights violations that they have been subjected to. On their release, incarcerated RS leaders have spoken of their respectful treatment by Islamist detainees, especially the MB. This is where we stand today.

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<sup>20</sup> Sameh Naguib, Signal call with the author, September 20, 2024.

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# Contrasting the Oslo Zeitgeist: between Rejection and Loyalty. The Left and the Islamists in post-Oslo Palestine

Mattia Giampaolo<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In 1993 in the backyard of the White House in Washington DC, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin signed the Declaration of Principles, known as the Oslo Accords. The accords were signed in an international political climate that was characterized by the willingness of the USA to shaping a *new world order* in the framework of a new *zeitgeist* drawn on the economic neo-liberal assault and *liberal peace*. Despite the participation in the new asset of this new phase of the peace process of the Palestinian leadership, opposition to the accords has been represented by the “rejectionist bloc” formed by the left-wing organizations and the Islamist ones ( Hamas and the Islamic Jihad). In this respect, the formation of the Alliance of the Palestinian Forces (*Taḥāluf al-Quwa al-Filasṭīniyya*) was one of the attempts to unite forces in order to contrast both the Accords and the Israeli occupation. Despite the short-lived project and based on an opportunistic behavior of the political forces and the support of the Syrian regime, it represents one of the few political experiments that could triggered a firm opposition to the Accords.

KEYWORDS: Palestine; Marxism; Islamism; Imperialism; National Liberation Movement; Peace Process.

## The Oslo Zeitgeist: Imposing and Opposing Paradigms on the Peace Process

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, philosophical historiography coined the term “zeitgeist” to denote the intellectual and cultural conceptions characteristic of a specific historical period. This notion refers to the mentality commonly attributed to an era, which finds its locus in a social group (homogeneous or heterogeneous) that acquires special significance in a particular time, thereby imprinting its intellectual signature on other groups without destroying or absorbing them (Mannheim, Kecskemeti 1968)

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In contemporary times, the context of international relations saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the two blocs, leading to the global emergence of American hegemony. In American presidential documents from 1990, then-President George H.W. Bush spoke of a *new world order*, which also implied a new way of thinking within the Soviet Union in the global system (Miller, Yetiv 2001).

The announcement of George Bush's victory in the First Gulf War paved the way for a broader strategy encompassing four fundamental objectives: building shared security arrangements in the Gulf, strengthening efforts to control the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, promoting economic development, and seizing new opportunities for the establishment of an Arab-Israeli peace process (Herrmann 1991). A new *zeitgeist* was emerging, one that, having annihilated the Soviet danger, advanced without apparent obstacles, enabling the United States to become "the sole architect of the global capitalist system" (Ahmad 2004). This was the "End of History" posited by Francis Fukuyama (Sela 2009: 105), and the triumph of Margaret Thatcher's motto TINA (There Is No Alternative), where the decline of the planned economy of real socialism left market economy and liberal democracy as the only viable global solutions.

It was not coincidental that the Oslo Accords were among the first experiments in the artificial creation of institutional structures conducive to neoliberalism. With the approval of the United States, international financial institutions, and the United Nations, the Oslo Accords aimed to establish "a central, functional governing entity that respected democratic practices and the liberal economic approach, representing the exercise of the full spectrum of liberal values, and being, in fact, the best opportunity for peace and security" (Haddad 2016: 86).

This study seeks to reconstruct the political experiments that took place between the forces of the radical Left and Islamist movements in the aftermath of the signing of the Accords. These experiments materialized, in 1991, with the establishment of the Palestinian National Forces Alliance (*Taḥāluf al-Quwa al-Filasṭīniyya*), an alliance between Islamist organizations and the Palestinian left to counter the diplomatic path imposed by the PLO and its hegemonic organization, Fataḥ (hereafter referred to as Fatah), initiating an alternative movement of opposition. Although several scholars have emphasized the tactical or, even worst, opportunistic nature of this political experiment (Strindberg 2000; Usher 1995; Leopardi 2020), particularly

due to its short duration and the divisions that became evident from the outset, at the same time, this alliance contained historical continuities that speak volumes about the convergence between these two opposing factions of the Palestinian political scene. This work aims, based on previous studies on the relations between Islamists and the Palestinian Left (Strindberg 2000; Sing 2011), to integrate the political trajectories of the 1970s and 1980s, which saw what Sing terms the *conversion* of Maoists into jihadists and the establishment of a real political alliance that aimed to counter the *spirit of Oslo*. In light of new documents, such as the series of interviews conducted by ‘Azzam al-Tamimi with Munir Shafiq (one of the “converts” mentioned by Sing), as well as some original writings concerning the relationship between the Palestinian left and the Iranian revolution, this work seeks to piece together the theoretical and practical mosaic that led to the formation of this alliance. Finally, this research argues that, despite formally collapsing after a few months, the alliance and the intellectual debate it simulated left a political legacy that is still clearly visible today on the ground.

### **Common Grounds, Conversions and Contaminations in the Palestinian Political Camp (1974-1987)**

It is often forgotten that the Palestinian liberation struggle is fundamentally a struggle for national self-determination, and that alliances, however inconsistent and seemingly contradictory, are part of a broader tactic that tends to downplay ideological aspects. This was true in Europe during the liberation wars against nazi-fascism and is equally present within national liberation movements in the so-called Middle East.

The common ground lies in tactical alliances and is rooted in unity not only among ideologically diverse political actors but also among geographically separated colonial and peripheral realities. In this sense, Western imperialism and the colonial apparatus represent a common ground that has connected various political and national contexts, ultimately forming a converging ideological corpus of struggle and creating a *cross-ideological* common ground. Here, national liberation strongly converged with the concept of revolution, no longer conceived merely as a national confrontation between divergent classes (although leftist formations continue to incorporate this in

their ideological corpus), but rather focusing on “more immediate” objectives concerning oppression.

Israeli occupation and Western support for it served as a binding agent within a cross-class struggle, where the ideological element remained isolated within the national liberation movement (al-Charif 2018). If this was essentially true for the dominant faction of the PLO, Fatah, it was equally the case for the Palestinian left, despite the presence of class elements within its ideological apparatus. In its foundational document, *“al-Ishtirātījiya al-siyāsīya wa-al-tanzīmīya”* (The Political and Organizational Strategy), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP henceforth) states that the enemies to be fought against were essentially three: Israel, the international Zionist movement (Western imperialism) and the reactionary, feudal, and capitalist Arab regimes (PFLP 1969). References to class struggle are present; throughout the first part of the document, the position on the revolutionary role of the working class and peasants is clarified. However, it is simultaneously acknowledged that socialist revolution is a subsequent phase following the struggle for national liberation.

As for the contention that we are now passing through a stage of national liberation and not of socialist revolution, this relates to the subject of which classes are engaged in the struggle, which of them are with and which are against the revolution at each of its stages, but it does not eliminate the class question or the question of class struggle [...] To sum up, our class view of the forces of the Palestinian revolution must take into account the special nature of the class situation in under-developed communities and the fact that our battle is one of national liberation, as well as the special nature of the Zionist peril. (PFLP 1969)

This position, far from ambiguous given that the document itself emphasizes the necessity of class struggle in Palestine, has nonetheless impacted the broader liberation movement, allowing the Popular Front to be an integral part of the PLO, within which the Fatah movement accurately represented a national political force devoid of any ideological constraints (Kadi 1969; al-Charif 2018). Additionally, other leftist forces within the Organization, such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP henceforth), which separated from the PFLP for ideological reasons, formed an independent organization that was highly critical of both real socialism and Arab socialism (Al-Charif 2018). However, even in this case, the dimension of class

struggle, more elaborated than that of the Popular Front, seems to take a backseat to the liberation struggle.

Indeed, as noted in the Organization's political program, the main enemy of the Palestinian revolution was 'Zionism in all its expressions, both inside and outside Israel [...] and its primary ally, represented by Western imperialism' (DFLP 1975). This meant that the very conception of the Palestinian revolution (*al-thawra al-Filasṭīniyya*), although programmatically articulated along ideological lines advocating for social and political change in society, converged entirely within the "armed struggle as the only mean for the liberation of Palestine" (*al-kifāh al-musallah huwa al-tariq al-wahid li-tahrir Filasṭin*), drawing upon the guerrilla warfare strategies of the Cuban, Vietnamese, and Algerian revolutions (Aburish 1999).

What emerges instead is that criticism of the bourgeoisie and the dominant classes is primarily directed outward from the Palestinian context, and while the Palestinian bourgeoisie is identified as an enemy of the revolution, it is relegated, in terms of priority, to a secondary position. However, this does not imply that ideological differences did not play a role in the political dialectic among Palestinian factions. On the contrary, the hegemony of Fatah within the PLO significantly influenced the tactical approaches of the two main leftist forces regarding the ultimate strategy of the liberation struggle (Sayigh 1997; Al-Charif 2018; Leopardi 2020).

Despite its strength within the PLO, Fatah's political choices also contributed to a growing division and dialectic within the organization itself. This was primarily due to the fact that the Palestinian issue, while a national question, has always been influenced by regional and international events.

The defeat of 1967 led to a gradual reconsideration of the role of Arab countries and Arab nationalism in general. The events of 1971 and 1973 would be crucial in bringing to the fore, as seen in many countries in the region, the alternative nationalist idea of political Islam. Ideologically, while it is true that Palestinian nationalist forces emerged strengthened from the post-1967 defeat (Sayigh 1997), it is equally true that the wave of political Islam exerted a certain influence within the Palestinian political context. This shift was undoubtedly sealed by the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, which stimulated a series of strategic changes within the PLO.

Faced with the potential withdrawal of Israeli forces from Sinai, the Golan Heights, and the Palestinian Occupied Territories, the PLO, as Maher al-Charif states, “found itself responding to a central question regarding the fate of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the event of an Israeli withdrawal” (al-Charif 2018: 136). Within the PLO, two currents of thought emerged: one advocating for the establishment of an autonomous Palestinian authority within the occupied territories, and the other rejecting this option, continuing instead on the path of the liberation of all of Palestine (al-Charif 2018). The adoption of the former orientation, formalized with the PLO’s Political Transition Program during the 12th Palestinian National Council (*al-Barnāmaj al-siyāsī al-marḥalī li-Munazzamat al-Tahrīr al-Filasṭīniya. al-Maqarr min al-Majlis al-Waṭanī al-Filasṭīnī fī dawrat in‘iqādihi al-thāniya ‘ashara*), better known as the Ten-Point Program, led to a division within the PLO (PLO 1974). The document represented an initial step that would gradually initiate what would become the political and diplomatic process of the PLO and an implicit recognition of the State of Israel.

The Popular Front, within the PLO, represented the only political force that firmly opposed the adoption of the program, while the Democratic Front, one of the promoters of the document, aligned itself with Fatah and other smaller political formations. The dialectical conflict over the PLO’s shift ultimately triggered a series of reactions within individual organizations. The most notable was within Fatah, where a leftist current tied to Maoism began a long process of conversion toward Islamism in the early 1980s (Sing 2011). The process of Islamization, although limited to a few dozen militants, gradually formed based on various factors both internal to the Palestinian field and related to events on the regional and international front.

The initial impetus for this process was a 1981 writing by Munir Shafiq: “*al-Islām fī ma‘ārat al-ḥadāra*” (Islam in the Struggle for Civilization), which, according to Sing, marked Shafiq’s coming out as an Islamist (Sing 2011). Shafiq was a member of the Communist Party in Lebanon before joining Fatah in the late 1960s and forming a leftist (Maoist) wing that, already in the early 1970s, took a clear stance against Fatah’s strategic shift following the adoption of the Ten-Point Program. Shafiq’s reflection thus falls within the dynamics both external and internal to the Palestinian political field, which viewed the Egyptian-Israeli peace process after the 1973 war and the altered international context as a significant shift in the balance of

power that would negatively affect the liberation of Palestine. In his writing, Shafiq critiques, while acknowledging its merits, the PLO's focus on *Palestinianism*, which prioritized the liberation struggle of Palestine over the struggle for Arab unity. In one passage of his work, he states:

It is evident that achieving the complete liberation of Palestine—namely, defeating the Zionist enemy and the heavily armed imperialist adversaries that support it through material power and political influence—cannot be realized [...] Perhaps a quick glance at the position of hundreds of millions of people during every instance of a genuine confrontation with the Zionist enemy serves as evidence that the Palestinian issue, when approached with seriousness, sacrifice, and redemption, possesses the hearts of countless individuals and evokes within them all the potential for striving towards jihad and liberation [...] On the contrary, there is no more practical issue that can serve as a basis for unification than this, and no other issue can mobilize millions of people as effectively as the aspiration towards the land of Jerusalem; this is not in conflict with any steps taken during the jihad [...] Walking this path rather means removing the obstacles along it. (Shafiq 1981: 151)

Shafiq aimed for a resurgence of the anti-colonial struggle among all Muslim peoples, particularly Arabs, in a context where even those regimes that had participated in wars against Israel had now compromised with the “Zionist enemy”. His critique extended to the limitations of Soviet socialism and its position on the Palestinian issue. In a 2012 television interview with Azzam al-Tamimi, Shafiq vehemently accused the Soviet Union of supporting Fatah and the Democratic Front in imposing the Ten-Point Program with the aim of “liquidating the liberation struggle and compromising in a rapidly changing international context” (al-Tamimi 2012). It is in this situation that the idea of the centrality of Islam as a radical political alternative to Soviet socialism and Arab nationalism began to take shape. Islam represented a mobilizing factor for the masses oppressed by Zionist colonialism and Western imperialism.

This idea was further reinforced by a pamphlet written by two militants from the Maoist faction of Fatah, Muḥammad al-Baḥāyṣ (Abu Ḥasan) and Bāsīm Sulṭān al-Tamīmī (Ḥamdī), titled “*As’ila ḥawla al-Islām wa al-mārksīyya min warā’ al-qubḏān*” (Questions about Islam and Marxism from Behind Bars), which emphasized the waning influence of Marxism within the liberation struggle and its inability

to mobilize the Palestinian masses regarding the strategic objectives of the revolution. The pamphlet was based on questions raised by political militants in Israeli prisons concerning the crisis moment of the liberation movement and the need to establish a more direct connection with the masses (al-Bahais, al-Tamimi 1990). Furthermore, there was a growing awareness of the negative effects of real socialism and the authoritarian nature of Eastern European and Asian states, as well as the fact that, from the outset, the Soviet Union had contributed to the birth and legitimization of the State of Israel. This realization was inextricably linked to the necessity of breaking away from Marxist-Leninist doctrine and creating an alternative based on a return to Islam and its universalistic character (al-Bahais, al-Tamimi 1990). The goal was to create an independent pole that would detach itself from Soviet autocracy and “Western colonial and imperial hegemony”, enabling Arab and Muslim peoples to be the protagonists of their own destiny.

Building on the writings of Bahays and al-Tamimi, Munir Shafiq, in a volume dedicated to the two martyrs titled “*Shuhadā’ wa-masīrat Abū Ḥasan wa ḥamdy wa ikhwānihimā*” (Martyrs and course of life: Abu Hasan, Hamdi, and Their Brothers), synthesized various levels of critique and analysis regarding power dynamics, not only at the international level but also within the Palestinian national context concerning the liberation struggle:

These martyrs were fully aware that the Palestinian revolution, to which they had devoted their youth, the essence of their thoughts, and the purpose of their efforts, had a limited impact on the struggle against the Zionist enemy due to the growing gap between armed forces and military capabilities. They recognized that the Palestinian revolution could not liberate Palestine alone because the liberation issue was broader, as the Israeli entity encompassed within itself and behind it a substantial international force, from the potential of major powers to the global Zionist movement. [...] Therefore, when the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization presented the Ten-Point Program at the end of 1973, Abu Hasan and several others saw it as a coup against the principles and objectives of Fatah, opposing it. (Shafiq 1994: 7)

Despite being at odds with Marxist ideology and critical of the failures of real socialism, the conceptualization of the Palestinian revolution within Islamism shared common characteristics with certain Palestinian leftist organizations, particularly the Popular Front for the Lib-

eration of Palestine. The points of contact were closely related to the struggle against Zionism and the Western imperialism that supported it. While the 1980s would mark the end of liberation struggles in the so-called Third World and the absence of “best practices” to emulate, the emergence of new revolutionary Islamist movements and experiences would serve as a stimulus not only for Islamist movements but also for the Marxist left.

In this regard, the Iranian revolution of 1979 prompted a series of theoretical reflections that also influenced the Marxist left. In a letter included in the party bulletin of 1980, titled “Solidarity with Iran”, the Secretary-General of the PFLP, George Habash, addressed Ayatollah Khomeini in the following terms:

The American insolence was met with revolutionary determination in Iran, and once again American superiority was degraded... Consequently, imperialism will attempt to use any means possible to regain its dignity, and might again rely on force, endangering the security and peace of the whole world, despite its deceitful claims that it wants to maintain security and peace. However, we have deep faith in the capability of the Iranian masses to foil all the stubborn imperialist attempts [...] You can be certain that the PFLP unconditionally supports the Iranian masses, under your leadership, against American impudence. The Arab masses also take this principled position, which is in total contradiction to the contemptible position of most of the Arab governments, which serve imperialist schemes against the interests of their peoples. In your relentless battle against the imperialist octopus, you are expressing the interests of the peoples of the area, and we will struggle with you until the total defeat of the common imperialist enemy and the victory of all peoples. (Habash 1980: 32)

On the Islamist front, the Iranian revolution, as extensively analyzed in the literature, played a fundamental role in stimulating a general reflection on the revolutionary character of Islam. Despite this, the approach towards the left and the aforementioned letter from Habash seems to follow a common line, as articulated by Munir Shafiq:

[...] the doors began to swing wide open for studying Islam and the historical Islamic experience, accompanied by the influx of masses into the streets of Iran, raising the slogans ‘God is Great’ and ‘There is no God but God’ [...] But what had the most significant impact in rapidly addressing the issue related to Islam and its role in the battle against

global imperialist control, in confronting tyrants and agents, and in inspiring people on their path towards change and progress, was the reaction with which the Palestinian and Arab masses received the call ‘God is Great’ from Tehran. It became clear through intuition that this call resonates deeply within the masses of the Arab nation, and thus any inquiry into the line of the masses or the specific characteristics of the revolution in our country. (Shafiq 1994: 22)

The centrality of the Iranian revolution was also attributed to the regional political value it acquired. Fathī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Shiqāqī (al-Shiqaqi), founder of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement, emphasized in his work *“al-Khumaynī al-ḥall al-Islāmī wa-al-badīl”* (Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and the Alternative) that, based on analyses from major Israeli newspapers of the time, the Iranian revolution caused the loss of a key ally in the region (the Shah’s Iran) for the Jewish state and significantly shifted the balance of power in favor of the Islamic revolutionary front (Al-Shiqaqi 1979).

In this process of the Islamization of certain political figures and organizations, there are also instances of reverse influence—namely, the presence of leftist ideological elements within Islamist formations. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) provides several illustrative examples, particularly through the writings published in its main journal *al-Ṭalī‘a al-Islāmiyya* (“The Islamic Vanguard”).

In an article by Ahmad Sadeq titled *“al-Islām wa al-khubz: min Tūnis ilā al-Maghrib”* (“Islam and Bread: From Tunisia to Morocco”), although the text employs a religious vocabulary, the analysis draws heavily on Marxist concepts—such as the economic and political relations between Arab countries and the West, and a sharp critique of the market liberalization policies pursued by states like Tunisia and Morocco (Sadeq 1984).

This was accompanied by a series of articles criticizing the Arab Left, particularly those parties which, instead of addressing the pressing social and political issues of their societies, had aligned themselves with the region’s authoritarian regimes, failing to denounce the repression those regimes directed against Islamist movements (Hussein 1983).

Although the language of these publications was increasingly shaped by religious terminology, their analyses remained deeply influenced by the socialist and communist political heritage of many of the movement’s members. As noted by Erik Skare, many PIJ militants originally came from non-Islamist Palestinian factions such as Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and

the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). Despite this background, they maintained an analytical framework consistent with leftist organizations (Skare 2021; Rekawek 2023).

In this broader context of reformulating ideological paradigms and the gradual Islamization of some militants who once belonged to the Palestinian left, the formation of Islamist organizations within the Palestinian sphere, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and, later, Hamas, exemplifies the extent of the ideological and political ferment occurring throughout the region. Despite the ideological and strategic differences between Islamist groups and those linked to the left in Palestine, what distinctly separated the two components were their political choices regarding the PLO. At the moment the opportunity arose to unite forces against the PLO's "Oslo turn", it became an obstacle to formulating a common plan of struggle.

### **Between Independence and Fluctuation: Islamists and leftists in practice (1987-1995)**

In 1993, while Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin shook hands in the White House backyard in Washington, ten Palestinian factions (Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, PFLP, DFLP, PFLP-CG, Fatah al-Intifada, al-Sa'iqa, Palestinian Revolutionary Communist Party, Palestinian Liberation Front, and Palestinian Popular Struggle Front) established, with the support of the Syrian regime, the *Taḥāluf al-Quwa al-Filasṭīniyah* (the Alliance of Palestinian Forces) or *Taḥāluf al-Quwa al-ʿAshar* (Alliance of the Ten Factions). This short-lived political experiment was marked by internal frictions among the various factions and the dominant role of the Syrian regime in opportunistically supporting the alliance.

Considering that the primary objective of the alliance was to oppose the peace agreements and challenge Fatah's hegemony within the new trajectory (Strindberg 2000), the starting point for the analysis is the position of the main political organizations (the Democratic and the Popular Fronts and the two Islamist movements, Hamas and Islamic Jihad) in relation to the PLO. This is of utmost importance, as it elucidates the power dynamics among the various organizations within this political experiment.

The Palestinian left has consistently demonstrated a dual attitude towards the PLO and its actions within the liberation struggle. On one

hand, the Marxist-Leninist ideological substrate positioned the two main Palestinian leftist factions in a strictly revolutionary camp (in the sense of radical social and political change); on the other hand, the alliance within the PLO with Fatah (considered a moderate and reformist current) led to a fluctuating attitude from the Palestinian left, especially since the first half of the 1970s, oscillating between firm opposition and loyalty to the organization (Usher 1995; Leopardi 2020). This dynamic perfectly mirrored the trajectory of the Arab lefts in general, which, under the shadow of nationalism and the strategy of staged revolution (first national liberation and then socialist revolution), ended up becoming a political bloc around the dominant class (Gervasio 2020). In the Palestinian context, despite the absence of a state apparatus, the PLO represented the source of political legitimacy within which Palestinian political forces operated. Being outside of it, at least until the period preceding the expulsion from Beirut, meant opposing what was considered the “Palestinian state in exile” (Sayigh 1997) and losing political weight within the PLO itself.

However, the positions of the two main organizations of the Palestinian left, the DFLP and PFLP, were not entirely the same. The former was already the initiator of the Ten-Point Program in 1974 and engaged in a series of discussions with the Israeli left, later becoming a staunch supporter of the “National Authority Program” (the establishment of an Authority in the liberated territories) (al-Charif 2018). In contrast, the Popular Front remained rigid regarding any compromise solution with Israel, consistently maintaining a rejectionist stance towards the political-diplomatic path of the PLO. Strongly opposed to the National Authority project and the Ten-Point Program, George Habash’s organization often found itself isolated from other organizations and in a position of weakness as Arafat’s choices to abandon the liberation of all of Palestine garnered him a modicum of legitimacy on the international stage.

In the Occupied Territories, the power relations among the political factions were entirely different. The so-called “mass work” (*al-‘amal al-jamāhīrī*) within trade unions, student organizations, and rural areas placed the factions of the Palestinian left in a position of strength compared to Fatah (Tabar 2013). This allowed them to play a leading role during the First Palestinian Intifada, representing a significant breath of fresh air after years of crisis and subordination to the PLO structure. Both the Popular Front and the Democratic

Front, along with the Palestinian Communist Party, represented the main forces of the popular uprising. Coordination through leaflets for strikes, roadblocks, and organizing a series of initiatives aimed at resisting Israeli occupation was predominantly in the hands of the left (Hiltermann 1991; Tabar 2013). Nevertheless, the differing objectives among Palestinian factions brought back strong tensions and fluctuations regarding the positioning of the PLO's decision-making apparatus. While Arafat sought to capitalize on the results of the Intifada through open dialogue with the United States, the Palestinian left aimed to maintain mass mobilization. Once again, the line was dictated by Fatah and the PLO, and despite hostile positions toward Arafat's choices, leftist organizations maintained an ambiguous stance with the aim of renegotiating their weight within the PLO from a position of strength (Tabar 2013). A demonstration of this was the favorable vote by all political factions for the 1988 Algerian declaration of independence, wherein the PLO took decisive steps toward recognizing Israel, renouncing armed struggle, and sitting at the negotiation table (Cobban 2018).

Conversely, the Intifada brought to the forefront the actions of the Islamist movements: the aforementioned Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. While the former, as noted, was already present on the Palestinian political scene and had engaged in various military actions within Israel and the Occupied Territories, the latter emerged during the popular uprising, transitioning from social-charitable activities to the establishment of an Islamist political movement.

Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, despite sharing the main forms of mobilization of the Intifada alongside other Palestinian factions, positioned themselves independently from both the PLO and the newly formed Unified Leadership of the Intifada (UNLU). Their independence, particularly from the former, was understood as a stance that was distinctly opposed to the diplomatic political path undertaken. Both organizations referred back to the PLO's original goal of liberating the entire Palestinian territory through armed struggle. The difference lay in the ideological and theoretical substrate of the movements, which viewed the liberation struggle through a return to Islam as a revolutionary factor. Nonetheless, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad emerged not as actors on behalf of global jihad, but maintained their scope of action at the national level, becoming an alternative to the national movement (Challand in: Guazzone, Pioppi 2010; Skare 2021). In a late 1990s document addressed to European diplomats in

Amman, Hamas emphasized that “the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) is a Palestinian national liberation movement that struggles for the liberation of the Palestinian occupied territories and for the recognition of Palestinian legitimate rights” (Al-Tamimi 2008: 285).

A defining aspect of their role in the process of political-social formation and strengthening was their ability to forge ‘strategic alliances’ with countries and actors that were at the time opposed to the ongoing peace process. Arafat’s choices in Algiers and later his participation in the Madrid and Washington conferences in 1991 were not only criticized by the two main Islamist movements, but counter-initiatives were organized to launch a plan of struggle and a regional front to oppose the diplomatic process. In 1991, the Iranian regime organized a conference in Tehran titled “*al-Muṭamar al-dawlī li-da‘m al-thawra al-Islāmīya lil-sha‘b al-Filasṭīnī*” (The International Conference in Support of the Islamic Revolution for the Palestinian People) with the explicit aim of supporting the continuation of the Intifada and opposing dialogue with the United States and the latter’s role in legitimizing Israel’s occupation of Palestine (Majlis al-Shūrā al-Islāmī 1991). In point 11 of the final document of the conference, it was emphasized:

The conference participants consider the American efforts aimed at holding a so-called conference Peace in the Middle East is a continuation of the humiliating Camp David Treaty. It is an ominous conspiracy and a great danger, aiming at eliminating the Palestinian revolution. The conference calls on Islamic and Arab countries and revolutionary forces and Islam to rise up against these efforts, and condemns the surrender steps taken in the path to officially recognizing the Zionist entity occupying Palestine. (Majlis al-Shūrā al-Islāmī 1991: 2)

These positions, while the ideological foundation and emphasis on the Islamic character did not significantly differ from those emerging from various statements by the Palestinian leftist forces (especially the PFLP), reflected a shared sentiment. In the document commemorating the organization’s twenty-fifth anniversary, the PFLP stated, in relation to the peace process, that:

[...] the influential leadership in the PLO it stood as a serious obstacle to this realistic, revolutionary path for the Palestinian national struggle. This view was represented by the thesis of rapid political investment in the uprising, and the approach of offering free concessions. At the basis

of this wrong view lies a lack of accurate understanding of the Intifada, and thus a lack of confidence in the possibility of its continuation and development. The Palestinian right viewed and views the Intifada as a passing station that must be exploited as quickly as possible, ignoring its essence, which is that it, that is, the Intifada, has actually transformed [...] and thus to throw themselves into the arms of the American project to settle the conditions of the region, including the Palestinian issue, hoping to find a location in this liquidation process. (PFLP 1992)

These common views, particularly regarding the necessity to oppose the diplomatic processes in Madrid and subsequently in Washington, led the Islamists and the Palestinian left to find various points of contact.

This alliance was, for the most part, driven by political interests that, in the long term, proved to be largely opportunistic. Pragmatism appears to have been the prevailing attitude shared by both the Left and the Islamist formations. The latter sought to carve out a space within the Palestinian political arena in order to establish themselves as a counter-hegemonic force to the PLO, while the former aimed to challenge the dominance of Fatah within the peace process (Leopardi 2020).

In practice, tensions between the two sides—particularly from the mid-1980s onward—were evident, especially in the Gaza Strip. The emergence of groups and associations affiliated with political Islam, notably within student movements and in the establishment of charitable organizations, generated a series of frictions between leftist and nationalist factions on the one hand, and Islamists on the other (Roy 2013). Within the student movement in particular, Islamists in Gaza—unlike in the universities of the West Bank—succeeded in securing a majority of seats (around 75%) in student representative bodies, thereby heightening tensions with blocs linked to Fatah and to leftist factions (Robinson 1997).

On the eve of the First Intifada and later during the Oslo Peace Process, the Islamists appeared to represent a genuine alternative to both the PLO and the left. What ultimately consolidated the relations between the two camps were the developments on the diplomatic front, where Islamist and leftist factions undertook joint political efforts to resist the new direction of Palestinian politics.

Facilitating this process were, among other things, a series of regional intellectual initiatives that were addressing, from various perspectives, the relationship between nationalism and Islamism. This occurred within the broader framework of the ideological revision

process following 1967, which, in the early 1990s and in the aftermath of the Cold War, provided an additional window for theoretical elaboration. The contribution to the debate, Michaëlle Browers' outlined in her work, was based on the fact that "the Islamists brought some of the popular appeal that the Arab nationalists had lost, and the Arab nationalist brought access to channels of power and official institutions that had been closed off too many Islamists" (Browers 2006). This debate, already active for about a decade, unfolded through various conferences, the most significant being the one held in Beirut in 1994. This gathering brought together intellectuals, political organizations, and prominent figures from the Arab political scene. The Palestinian Front, Hamas, and the Popular Front (Browers 2006) participated alongside distinguished intellectuals such as the aforementioned Munir Shafiq. An entirely alternative front was emerging compared to the recent past, characterized by a desire to analyze defeat and move towards an alternative that would facilitate dialogue between two factions that, at least within their respective countries, found themselves on opposing sides. The Palestinian context, in this regard, provided an excellent opportunity to assess the credibility and feasibility of a meeting between the nationalist and Islamist elements.

The common denominator was the national struggle, the continuation of the Intifada, and resistance against American imperialism. It is on these points that the Alliance of Palestinian Forces (APF) of 1993 was founded, formed by the ten Palestinian factions in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords, signed in the Yarmouk camp in Syria and supported by Hafez al-Asad's Syrian regime (Strindberg 2000). Asad's decision to promote and politically support the alliance stemmed from the fact that Syria, with the Golan Heights still occupied since 1967, remained outside the U.S. diplomatic process and, while not opposed to dialogue, pursued a diplomatic project for "total peace" (including negotiations with Israel over the Golan) (al-Asad, Seale 1993; Strindberg 2000). This positioned the Syrian president on the "rejectionist front", making Damascus the voice of those opposed to Oslo (Strindberg 2000). The Palestinian forces arrived in Yarmouk under different political conditions. The Palestinian left came to the alliance table particularly weakened both ideologically and in terms of popularity among the Palestinian masses. Ideologically, the collapse of the Soviet Union negatively impacted the paradigms upon which

socialist organizations had relied. Internally, the fluctuating and ambiguous position toward the PLO's choices diminished their weight within the political landscape. The Popular Front's threats to leave the PLO after the Madrid conference remained merely on paper, as they preferred to maintain a critical position within it (Leopardi 2020).

In contrast, the Islamist forces, independent and free from Arafat and the PLO's influence, advanced an alternative agenda, effectively placing themselves in a position of strength. The credibility of the Islamist formations lay in their appeal to those segments of the population opposing Oslo and believing in the strength of the Intifada, presenting themselves as "untainted" organizations that had never engaged with the "Zionist enemy" and representing, given the centrality of Islam in their political programs, organizations capable of fulfilling the tasks of the national struggle (Hroub 2006).

This difference in power dynamics and political credibility had decisive effects on the duration and stability of the alliance. Despite the shared foundational basis of the Islamist and socialist factions, ideological differences continued to play a dominant role in fueling divisions. In this regard, the reading and analysis of the alliance should be understood as an opportunistic phase for all the forces involved. While the left viewed the alliance with the Islamists as an opportunity to revitalize a radical agenda opposing Oslo to regain credibility among the Palestinian masses, the Islamists sought to capitalize on the strong momentum that the Intifada had provided them.

## **Beyond Opportunism: a Conclusion**

Despite the apparent opportunism, it is noteworthy to emphasize how the exchanges and interactions, rooted in the alliance, continued in terms of political and ideological dialogue. In this regard, both the newspapers and magazines of the factions, as well as the Yarmouk camp in Syria, became genuine spaces for debate. In 1995, at the Yarmouk camp, Fathi al-Shiqaqi, the leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, delivered a lecture on Islamism and fundamentalism in Ghassan Kanafani Hall. In his speech, al-Shiqaqi analyzed what the future of Palestine should be and the role of the state, surprisingly starting from Lenin's conception of the state, asserting that "the state is repressive by nature, or a tool of repression against the governing classes as defined by Lenin. It is the most dangerous instrument of

power created by human society” (Skare 2021: 200). This is not, of course, a ‘Leninist’ turn by the Islamic Jihad, but it is interesting how al-Shiqaqi framed the issue of the state and its relationship with the population in terms closely aligned with Marxism. In a passage regarding the relationship between civil society and the state, he stated in an interview with the PFLP magazine *al-Hadaf* that “the state controls everything today from legislation to jurisdiction and executive power. There is thus no legislative authority independent from the state preventing the latter from infringement, particularly since unlimited security apparatuses support this state” (Skare 2021: 209).

This raises central questions, particularly in relation to the liberation struggle and the diplomatic framework of Oslo, which aimed, albeit indirectly, at the establishment of a state in Palestine. Here, the mobilizations of the Intifada and the experiences of “mutualism” developed to counter Israeli occupation policies seem to emerge with considerable force. The popular committees, grassroots organization, and the development of various structures parallel to the occupation represented another point of contact with the Palestinian left. Despite these developments never finding a structurally common ground and the alliance reflecting more immediate political needs in opposition to the PLO’s project, they persisted over the years, continuing to unite different fronts in the national liberation struggle.

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# Leftists and Sadrists in Post-2003 Iraq: The Rise of a Protest Movement and the Challenge of Developing a Popular Base

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## ABSTRACT

The chapter examines the trajectories of progressive social and political actors in post-2003 Iraq, as well as their relationship with the Sadrist trend (*al-tayyār al-Ṣadrī*), often described as the political force with the largest popular following in the country. The Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the broader *al-tayyār al-madani* (“the civil trend”) have played a limited role in post-2003 Iraqi society. However, the protests of 2010-11, the mass movement of 2015-16, and the “October Revolution” of 2019-20 not only provided new opportunities for mobilisation but also revealed that the sectarian consociational system had yet to achieve stable dominance over the population. In this context, leftist and Sadrist activists met in the streets and embarked on forms of cooperation that culminated in the 2018 *Sā’irūn* electoral alliance between the ICP and the Sadrists. Although short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful, this experiment represents a significant case of political collaboration and attempt at ideological convergence.

The chapter examines the ICP-Sadrist cooperation from the perspective of the progressive front, questioning the potential for building a broader, pluralist coalition for change uniting progressive and Islamist forces against the dominant sectarian system. Rather than assessing the sincerity or opportunism behind this political convergence, the analysis focuses on the structural changes that influenced the political actors, and particularly the role of mass protests and the legitimacy crisis of the Islamist-dominated political establishment. The study is based on secondary sources, political documents, and interviews with activists and intellectuals conducted during three research trips to Iraq between February 2023 and December 2024.

**KEYWORDS:** Iraq; Iraqi Communist Party; Sadrist Trend; Civil Trend; Protest Movement; Sectarian-Consociational System.

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## Introduction

This chapter aims to analyse the trajectories of the “progressive social and political actors” (Majed 2020) in post-2003 Iraq and their relationship with the Sadrist trend (*al-tayyār al-Ṣadrī*), the Shia Islamist movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr, often represented as the political organisation with the larger popular following in the country.

The Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), the oldest Iraqi party still in existence (Batatu 1983; Salucci 2005; Ismael 2008), has a long political tradition and is still largely respected in the country, although it has gradually lost nearly all its historical social base. Around the party – or in its tradition in the broader sense – other smaller *tayyār madanī* or “civil trend” groups (trade unions, women organizations, independent intellectuals, etc.) emerged in the post-2003 political space, especially since 2011. However, the impact of both the Communist Party and the larger civil trend on society at large has been very limited due to the country’s dire conditions, widespread political violence and, above all, the post-2003 consolidation of a sectarian consociational political system, the *muḥāṣaṣa tāʿifiya* (sectarian apportionment) dominated by Islamist parties.

While the progressive civil trend remained a soul-searching endeavour and lacked any true social base, a strong and popular protest movement, largely autonomous and not controlled by any organised political actor, emerged in the country. As the protests of 2010-11, the mass movement of 2015-16, and the *Thawra Tishrīn* (October Revolution) of 2019-20 revealed, the sectarian consociational political system has not been able to gain a true hold on the population as a whole. The expanding protest movement gave momentum to the civil trend, offering the leftist-secular activists with an opportunity to break out of their small progressive circles – often linked to international NGOs – and reach out to a broader audience and potential social base. Leftist and Sadrist activists, the only organized political groups actively participating in street demonstrations, came together during the protests. In 2015-16, they initiated early forms of cooperation that eventually led to the 2018 electoral alliance, between the Sadrists and the ICP, known as the *Sāʿirūn* (Cf. *infra*) Alliance or Alliance Towards Reforms. Despite being short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful, the experience represented both a significant case of cooperation in political practice and a meaningful attempt at ideological accommodation.

This chapter examines the ICP-Sadrist cooperation experience from the perspective of the progressive front. It aims to explore the potential for establishing a broader, “pluralist” coalition for change, merging progressive/secular and Islamist forces against the sectarian and consociational political system that has dominated Iraq since 2003, thus overcoming the difficulty of political transformation in a divided society.

Rather than assessing the “sincerity” or “opportunism” behind such a political convergence, this study focuses on the changes in the structural context of political action – such as those driven by cycles of mass protests and the legitimacy crisis of the Islamist-dominated political establishment – and how these changes have affected the trajectories, vision, and behaviour of political actors, making the coalition both possible and desirable in the eyes of its protagonists. Shared experiences of political action, in terms of both the grassroots and institutional forms of cooperation necessary for an electoral alliance, are also likely to have consequences on the individuals and groups involved.

The chapter is based on secondary sources and political documents, as well as interviews with activists and intellectuals conducted during three research trips to Iraq between February 2023 and December 2024.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Progressive-Secular Front after 2003 and the Emergence of *al-Tayyār al-Madani***

In the days following the fall of the Ba‘ath regime and the beginning of the US-led occupation of Iraq, ICP General Secretary Hamid Majid Musa – not without criticism and internal debate – accepted to sit on the first US-led Iraqi Governing Council, thus accepting the reality of the US occupation.

The ICP, “diluted its anti-capitalist rhetoric almost overnight. The outcome of this transformation was obvious: a seat on the governing council of Iraq and official political recognition for the party’s leadership by the occupation authorities. However, the cost for the party was astronomical and involved its being cut off from the movement against

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the occupation forces, as many of the individuals engaging in active resistance came to see the members of the governing council, including the ICP, as ‘collaborators’” (Ismael 2008: 296-297).

Despite this decision, judged by some to be opportunistic, the ICP did not lose its internal cohesion and distinguished itself in the fight against sectarianism, as well as boasting the highest participation of women of all Iraqi political organisations (Jabar 2010).

The ICP did not boycott the January 2005 elections. On the contrary, and coherently with its presence on the council and the liberal reorientation of its programme and ideology, it led the *Ittihad al-Sha‘b* (People’s Union) list, which gained two seats (0.83%) in the transitional Iraqi National Assembly. However, these results did not mirror the efforts of a party that had presented 257 candidates (Jabar 2010).

The *Ittihad al-Sha‘b* experience was short-lived, as the ICP decided to run with the Iraqi National List (INL), a much wider coalition led by Iyad ‘Allawi, in the December 2005 General Elections. The INL was an attempt to bring together all the non-confessional political forces in the country. It commanded 8% of the vote and 25 MPs, although only one of them was affiliated to the Communist Party.

These poor results were partly the consequence of the sectarian polarization of the Iraqi political field and partly due to the ICP’s de facto subaltern position in the electoral alliance, with the party only present in the larger cities. Still, campaigning in a broad coalition provided the party with the opportunity to gain recognition, especially amongst the younger segments of the population, who were unfamiliar with the ICP’s history under the previous regime.

The latter part of the 2000s witnessed an increase in sectarian violence, mainly due to the perception that the occupying forces had handed the “new Iraq” to the Shia. In this problematic context, the ICP, sometimes regarded as a peculiar expression of Shia, did not have an easy time and faced relative marginalisation.<sup>4</sup>

The causes of this weakening of the party probably included the massive return of exiled militants from the B‘ath period, who were largely unprepared for the post-2003 situation.<sup>5</sup> One of the results of the party’s marginalisation was its failure in the 2010 general election. In view of the electoral competition, the ICP reformed the 2005 *Ittihad*

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Raed Fahmi, ICP Secretary General, Baghdad, February 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

*al-Sha'b* coalition, enlarging it to include other forces with secular tendencies and representatives of minorities, such as the Assyrian one. The list failed to gain any seats, thus revealing the deep crisis of secularly inspired parties in Iraq.

However, while at the parliamentary level the situation appeared deadlocked and dominated by the confessional system, certain sectors of Iraqi society – particularly the secular ones in the broadest sense – were beginning to coordinate efforts to create an alternative. This led to the emergence of *al-tayyār al-madani*, or “the civil trend” (Robin-D’Cruz 2018): a loosely organized movement that, between 2009 and 2014, evolved into a self-aware entity. It brought together a broad coalition of academics, journalists, cultural figures, and local civic organizations – many of them connected to or funded by international NGOs, development programs, and foreign (primarily European) embassies. The movement also included several political parties, most notably the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), which remained its largest and most organized component.

Beyond these developments, the true novelty on the Iraqi political scene was at the beginning of the 2010s the reappearance of street politics and the emergence of loosely or semi-organized protest movements made up of people who, despite the ongoing lack of security and widespread violence, decided to take to the streets and squares to reclaim their rights and denounce the inefficiency and inability of the new authorities, both at a local and central levels (Majed 2020).

The most significant protest in the first wave, was the so-called “electricity *intifāda*” (June 2010) in Basra, Nasiriyah, Hillah, Karbala, Kufa, Ramadi, Kut, and Baghdad. It was an uncoordinated and reactive, spontaneous and localized response to the government’s failure to provide electricity as temperatures exceeded 50 degrees (Alkhudary 2024).

The explosion of the protest movement gave the Iraqi left – ICP and others – an important opportunity to raise their voice and be recognised by a wider public. In brief, the left attempted to regain at least part of its traditional grip on the popular classes through a harsh confrontation with the government that was passing measures to make lawful protests very complicated; indeed, basically illegal (Human Rights Watch 2010).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See also: ICP Central Secretariat official statement, 22 June 2010. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=219940> [Accessed 26 March 2025].

At the beginning of 2011, the so-called “Arab Spring” or “Arab Uprisings”, which affected Iraq in February, represented a new opportunity to relaunch the protest movement. After more than a week of protests in several cities, protestors called for a “Friday of Rage” on February 25. The violent response of the government, which prompted a widespread repression against anyone participating in or publicly supporting the protests, led to 29 deaths just on that day. Among them were many *al-tayyār al-madani* supporters, including ICP militants and sympathizers who, in some cases for the first time, marched in the streets to voice their demands and confront the violence of power.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the response of the security forces, the unrest continued through the summer of 2011, with a significant participation of secular forces and especially the left. The ICP, which was particularly engaged in these mass protests, considered them “revolutionary storms” (ICP Central Committee, quoted in Mlodoch 2014: 165) and paid careful attention to the “emergence of new forms of political activism with young people using online social media” (Ibid.).

Alongside the protests, 2010-11 also experienced a peak in trade union activism, especially in the oil industries of the Basra region, which form the heart of the Iraqi economy. In fact, it must be emphasized that the ICP had played a key role in the re-founding of trade unions after the end of the dictatorship.<sup>8</sup> However, as time passed, control of the workers’ organizations had also gradually, although not totally, slipped into the hands of the ruling confessional parties (Majed 2020).

The protests continued in 2012 and 2013, especially in the Sunni regions, against unemployment and the sectarian nature of the Iraqi regime. It is noteworthy that, together with the left(s) and the civil trend, the Sadrist movement also supported the protests that mainly targeted Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the Iraqi strong man since the 2005 elections and the leader of the Shia Islamist State of Law Coalition, the Da‘wa party dominated bloc. Contentious political episodes continued, albeit rather sporadically, but the rise of the Islamic State (IS), culminating with the fall of Mosul (June 2014), seemed to have put an end, in the name of security, to any possible protest.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with ‘Ali Saheb, member of the ICP and Director of the Information Centre, Baghdad, February 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with members of the ICP, Baghdad, February 2023 and Basra, February 2024 and with Abbas Kazem, Iraqi Observatory for Workers and Employees’ Rights, Basra, February 2024.

## The 2015-2016 Protests and the Development of the Sadrist-Communist Alliance

By 2014, the Islamist-dominated Iraqi political establishment was suffering a full-blown crisis of legitimation. Several factors contributed to this political predicament. The Islamic State had taken control of large parts of the country, including the cities of Falluja and Mosul, revealing the inability of the Iraqi government to secure the integrity of the national territory and protect its population, while falling oil prices precipitated a financial crisis. The April 2014 elections, the first following the withdrawal of US troops in 2011, took place in a context of growing violence, instability, and increasing public discontent towards the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. His State of Law coalition won the most seats in 2014 but fell short of an outright majority. Maliki's bid for a third term as Prime Minister faced significant opposition even among Shia Islamist parties that accused him of despotism, sectarian policies, and a failure to manage national security (Hasan 2019). Following months of political manoeuvring, Maliki finally stepped down in August 2014. Haider al-Abadi, a fellow member of the Da'wa Party, but considered a more moderate figure, was approved by Parliament as Iraq's new Prime Minister.

In the 2014 elections, the civil trend sought to unite with a secular political platform focused on establishing a civil state, forming the Civil Democratic Alliance (*al-Taḥāluf al-Madani al-Dimuqrāti*, CDA). However, the alliance headed by the ICP, only won 3 out of 328 seats. The ICP's candidate, Jassim al-Helfi, came third in Baghdad with 17,000 votes, but lost his seat due to the quota system. It was a clearly disappointing result for the ICP (Robin-D'Cruz 2018).

In this uncertain political context, a new powerful wave of protests erupted in southern Iraq. In the summer of 2015, large demonstrations were held in Basra. They continued throughout 2016, spreading to other major cities in central and southern Iraq and reaching the capital, Baghdad. As in previous waves, the protests were fuelled by widespread frustration over the mismanagement of public funds and the lack of essential services, particularly electricity and clean water. Electricity shortages were especially severe during the very hot summer months, serving as the immediate catalyst for the initial wave of protests (Majed 2020; Jabar 2018; al-Hamoud 2019).

With respect to the protests of 2010-11, the 2015 mobilization cycle had a more explicitly political character and was more coherently organized by civil society (Jabar 2018; Alkhudary 2024). According to Jabar, “it was neither sectoral (by workers, professionals or students) nor local (confined to a certain geographic area) nor factional (solely owned by a certain community or sect). It was an all-embracing protest against the entire political system as an institution, culture and practice” (2018: 17).

Protestors directly linked material deprivation to a political diagnosis: the widespread corruption caused by the *muḥāṣaṣa* system, the sectarian and party-based quota system through which the political elites distributed power and resources amongst themselves. Another key aspect of the protests was an explicit and strong criticism of politicized religion and Shia Islamist parties, voiced primarily by demonstrators from Shia-majority regions in central and southern Iraq. Protest slogans like “In the name of religion, thieves robbed us” and “Secularism! Secularism! Neither Shia, nor Sunni!” made this stance unmistakably clear. All of these grievances ultimately converged in the broader assertion of Iraqi national identity – well-represented by the omnipresence of the Iraqi flags at demonstrations.

The “secularist-nationalist” framing of the protests, set against the sectarian and party-based factionalism of the Islamist-dominated political landscape, enhanced the credibility of the progressive forces and, more in general, of the civil trend. Actively present at demonstrations and occupied urban spaces, veteran progressive activists were well-positioned to capitalize politically on the situation. The initially spontaneous protest movement soon increased its organizational capacity through the creation of coordinating committees (*tansiqīyāt*), networks of activists that facilitated discussions and debates. The most influential, in 2015, was *Mustamirrūn* (“continuing/we continue”), which emerged from the activist networks of the 2011 movement and included established leftist and progressive organizations, amongst which the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was the most prominent (Majed 2020; Alkhudary 2024).

At the same time, however, the secular-nationalist framework of the protests alarmed the Islamist establishment and even more so as the protests came from within their own Shia constituencies (al-Hamoud 2019). Prime Minister al-Abadi opted for a compromise: proclaiming a programme of reform but also taking wide-scale

military and security precautions “transforming the demonstration site in central Baghdad and the bridges leading to it into barracks” (Jabar 2018: 20). Other Islamist factions, most notably former PM al-Maliki’s supporters and the militias of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (*Qūwāt al-Hashd al-Sha‘bī*), opted to attack the protests directly in an attempt to violently repress them. Supporting al-Abadi’s more conciliatory stance, senior Shia clerics in Najaf urged the government to reform unless they wanted to risk a “sweeping upheaval”. Nonetheless, the Najaf clergymen remained concerned by some of the slogans that seemed directed against religion and, by extension, against the clergy itself (al-Hamoud 2019). Indeed, when young Najaf seminar students tried to join demonstrations in Baghdad, they were stopped by protesters (Jabar 2018).

Most notably, however, Sadrist movement leader Muqtada al-Sadr declared his unequivocal solidarity with the protest movement, marking a clear departure from the position of the rest of the Shia Islamist establishment. He in fact encouraged his followers to take to the streets *en masse*, helping to overcome “protest fatigue”, and guaranteeing the continuation of mass demonstrations. This decision was not a complete surprise as the Sadrist movement had already supported the 2011 wave of protests, as well as the 2012-13 unrest in predominantly Sunni areas as mentioned above (Majed 2020).

According to many accounts, it was at these protests that leftist and Sadrist activists began to coordinate.<sup>9</sup> The simple fact of standing side by side in the streets – sharing the same risks and political space and recognizing each other as the only representatives of structured and experienced political organizations – increased their mutual respect and gradually brought them closer together. Informal meetings were held, and joint committees were established to organize political actions. Jassim al-Helfi, a member of the ICP politburo at the time, recalls that – as he was highly active and visible during the protests – along

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<sup>9</sup> The first encounter between the leftists and the Sadrists at the protests was recalled by many interviewees of the progressive front such as: Jassim al-Helfi (former member of the ICP politburo, Baghdad, December 2024), Yaser Salem (current member of the ICP politburo and ICP spokesperson, Baghdad, February and December 2024), ‘Ali Saheb (Baghdad, February and December 2024), Ahmad Abd al-Hussein (Editor in chief, *al-Ṣabāḥ* Newspaper, Baghdad, February 2024) and by ‘Ali Taher al-Hamoud (Professor of Sociology at the University of Baghdad and Director of al-Bayan Centre, Baghdad, February and December 2024).

with a few others, he received an invitation to meet Muqtada al-Sadr. This marked the beginning of ICP-Sadrism cooperation.<sup>10</sup>

Coordination with the Sadrists served a number of strategic functions for the progressive front:<sup>11</sup>

1. It was a way to connect secular-leftist militants with a broader social base. Many activists recalled that the benevolence of the Sadrists allowed them secure access to popular neighbourhoods, such as Sadr City in Baghdad and other Sadrist strongholds, and even use the mosques' network for political work.
2. It provided security guarantees vis-à-vis intimidation from state and non-state forces. For instance, Yaser Salem, an activist and member of the ICP politburo, recalls the kidnapping of a leftist student, who was later released thanks to Sadrism intervention, as a watershed moment in their relationship with the Sadrists.<sup>12</sup>
3. Strategically, it served to exacerbate and exploit existing conflicts within the Shia Islamism power structure sharpening the political and ideological contrast between the Sadrists and the other Shia Islamism factions.<sup>13</sup>

For their part, the Sadrism movement also stood to benefit from an alliance with the civil trend and, more broadly, the protest movement. The Sadrists, in fact, aimed to present themselves as an alternative to the (de-legitimised) Shia Islamism political establishment by reconstructing an image of a nationalist and reform-oriented popular force standing against the sectarianism and corruption of the post-2003 Iraqi elites.

As affirmed by Dhiaa al-Asadi, Former Head of the Sadrism bloc in Parliament, the movement was ready to cooperate with whomever shared the same political priorities: (1) a more efficient and corruption-free government and (2) rule of the majority rather than a sectarian-consociational system.<sup>14</sup>

The presence of experienced activists from the leftist and Sadrism movements played a crucial role in shaping the political agenda of the

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Jassim al-Helfi, Baghdad, December 2024.

<sup>11</sup> These points were mentioned by several interviewees. See footnote 9.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Yaser Salem, Baghdad, February 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with 'Ali Taher al-Hamoud, Baghdad, February 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Dhiaa al-Asadi, Basra, December 2024.

protests. Their involvement helped channel the widespread dissent into more structured demands that could be articulated in negotiations with the political establishment. The political agenda focused on dismantling the influence of sectarianism and party factionalism on the governance by appointing “independent technocrats” as ministers and explicitly calling for a civil state. Other proposals included the reform of the civil service to set government ministries outside of party-political patronage, a reform of the electoral law and judiciary, and issues concerning economic and social justice (Jabar 2018; Majed 2020; Alkhudary 2024).

In March 2017, the relationship between the ICP and the Sadrist movement was formalized and a Sadrist delegation met with ICP Secretary General Raed Fahmi in a meeting designed to “strengthen coordination and cooperation [between the two parties] and develop the peaceful protest movement.”

However, not everyone in the ICP and the *tayyār al-madanī* more in general was convinced of the alliance. The progressive front was highly suspicious about joining forces with an Islamist movement with a powerful armed wing that was widely perceived as part of the establishment (Majed 2020; Alkhudary 2024).<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, after the disappointing results of the 2014 elections, a further attempt was underway to create a united secular front. *Taqaddum* (Progress) was launched in October 2017, bringing together the ICP and former members of the Civil Democratic Alliance (*al-Taḥāluf al-Madanī al-Dīmuqrātī*, CDA). However, the initiative quickly fell apart after the ICP withdrew and declared its formal electoral alliance with the Sadrist movement. Outside of the ICP, the Sadrist-ICP convergence led to further fragmentation amongst the civil groups involved in the protests.

*Mustamirrūn*, which was closely linked to the ICP, continued its alliance with the Sadrists, while a new group called *Madaniyūn* united activists around a strictly secular platform that rejected collaboration with any political entity, especially the Sadrists. This new platform eventually attracted several key members of *Mustamirrūn* who were against working with the Sadrists (Alkhudary 2024).

Many civil trend activists saw the ICP’s alliance with the Sadrists as a strategic disaster and a betrayal of the civil trend’s identity and

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews with ICP activists, Baghdad, February 2023 and February 2024.

purpose. They feared that the Islamists would hijack the protest movement and use it to their political advantage, eventually sidelining the civil trend.<sup>16</sup>

However, key members of the ICP Politburo (such as Jassim al-Helfi and Yaser Salem) and other prominent independent leftist activists (such as writer and journalist Ahmad ‘Abd al-Hussein) had been working on bringing the Sadrists and civil trend together since the early days of the protest movement, when the Sadrists initiated the first exploratory meetings between the two camps. They saw the alliance as a historical opportunity to build a truly sufficient critical mass and radically change power relations in Iraq.<sup>17</sup>

The first formal contacts between Muqtada al-Sadr and the ICP leadership in the spring 2017 gave rise to a full-fledged electoral alliance for the 2018 elections under the “Alliance Towards Reforms” banner, also known as *Sā’irūn (Tahāluḥ Sā’irūn lil-Iṣlāḥ)*. Its main components were the Sadrist Integrity Party and the ICP, along with a number of minor groups: the Youth Movement for Change Party, the Party of Progress and Reform, the Iraqi Republican Group, and the State of Justice Party.

Notwithstanding the low voter turnout, the *Sā’irūn* was the winning coalition with the largest share of votes and 54 seats in the Iraqi Parliament.

Support for the Sadrist-led coalition nearly doubled, rising from 917,589 votes (7% of the total) obtained by the Sadrists in 2014 to 1,493,542 votes (14% of the total) obtained by *Sā’irūn* in 2018. It is calculated that about one-third of this growth came from the Sadrists’ leftist allies, while two-thirds resulted from an expansion of the Sadrists’ own voter base (Sowell 2018).

The ICP only secured two seats (in Baghdad and Dhi Qar) despite fielding 58 candidates nationwide. Kirk Sowell analysed *Sā’irūn*’s electoral performance and found that, although civil candidates helped increase *Sā’irūn*’s share of the vote in some provinces, leading to more seats for the Sadrists, the candidates themselves did not benefit similarly from the alliance (Sowell 2018). This tempered the ICP’s initial enthusiastic response to the election results.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. This is also the opinion of Alkhudary (2024) and Yahya (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with Jassim al-Helfi (Baghdad, December 2024), Yaser Salem (Baghdad, February and December 2024) and Ahmad Abd al-Hussein (Baghdad, February 2024).

## The Sadrist-ICP Ideological Accommodation

A key aspect of the Sadrist-ICP alliance was the level of cultural and ideological interaction and adjustment it involved, setting it apart from previous cross-sectarian and cross-ideological electoral alliances such as those led by Iyad ‘Allawi in 2005 and 2010. The earlier alliances had been more similar to strategic deals among elites. They lacked significant ideological depth and required little ideological compromise from their participants.

Efforts to foster a political dialogue between the left and the Sadrists began as early as 2010. According to Robin-D’Cruz (2019), at the end of the 2000s, Muqtada al-Sadr initiated the creation of cultural institutions to develop connections between the Sadrists and Iraq’s secular-leftist and liberal cultural spheres. This followed the setbacks the Sadr movement had experienced in 2008 during the al-Maliki “Charge of Knights” military operation in Basra to crush the Sadrist militia, the Mahdi Army. Around that time, Muqtada al-Sadr began exploring the possibility of shifting the movement away from its overtly sectarian Shia alignment.

In 2010, Faris Kamal Nadhmi, a prominent Iraqi scholar and progressive intellectual, introduced bold and controversial ideas, which he published in a forward-thinking article advocating the convergence between the Sadrist movement and the civil trend (Nadhmi 2016). The article, later republished several times and featured in Sadrist outlets, framed the alliance using concepts from South American liberation theology, which blends Christian theology with Marxism, and Gramsci’s idea of a historical bloc. Nadhmi also urged the Sadrists to demonstrate their reformist commitment by ending the sectarian and party quota system in ministerial appointments and promoting technocratic alternatives. This was five years before the 2015 protest movement began.

The explanation for these early attempts to develop a cultural and political convergence—one that appears to surpass a mere functional strategy—is complex and multifaceted.

Dhiaa al-Asadi, a prominent Sadrist figure, offers a detailed analysis of the convergence between the Sadrist movement and the Communists, based on three main pillars: social, ideological, and strategic—a

complex explanation that, although lengthy, is worth recounting in full.<sup>18</sup>

From a social perspective, Sadrists and Communists shared common roots amongst the most deprived social strata. The Sadrist movement – founded during the UN sanctions of the 1990s – established its strongest presence in areas such as Saddam City (now Sadr City) in Baghdad, as well as Nasiriyah, Basra, and al-‘Amara in the south, which were once strongholds of the Communist Party.

Moreover, al-Asadi explains, there was a perceived sense of closeness and familiarity between Communists and Shiites; indeed, many Communists come from Shia religious families (al-Asadi, for instance, has two uncles who are Communists). Moreover, the Communists’ active presence at the protests – often risking their lives – along with their long-standing tradition of opposition to the regime, earned them a reputation for honesty and patriotism that transcends ideological differences.

From an ideological perspective, al-Asadi continues, modern Shia Islamist movements in Iraq, including the Sadrists, have been significantly influenced by Marxist ideas, as seen in the works of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980). According to Dhiaa al-Asadi, Baqir al-Sadr’s writings emphasize the issue of social justice, arguing that there can be no harmony or social stability without justice, and that material conditions are crucial – points also stressed by the Communists.

Furthermore, al-Asadi explains that both Sadrists and Communists prioritize community and society over liberal individualism. Yet another point of ideological convergence, in his view, is the internationalism of the Left, which he sees as analogous to Islamic universalism. Al-Asadi also argues that the famous Communist phrase, “religion is the opium of the people”, is often misinterpreted. Rather than rejecting religion itself, Marx and the Communists were critiquing reactionary and oppressive religious institutions, and quite rightly so. Finally, he highlights the shared emphasis on anti-imperialism as a further key ideological point shared by the two movements.

The final strategic pillar, al-Asadi concludes, is rooted in the idea that a just but impious (*kāfir*) government is preferable to an unjust Islamic government. Communists can be valuable allies as long as they share the same political objectives.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Dhiaa al-Asadi, Basra, December 2024.

Reviewing al-Asadi's analysis, it could be argued that strategic motivations based on shared objectives have historically proven to be the most significant factor in cross-ideological cooperation as, for example, during the broader anti-colonial struggles in the region. On the contrary, competition over similar ideological, symbolic, and social spaces has often led to intense conflicts between leftist-Communist and Islamist movements. For instance, while Baqir al-Sadr may have drawn from leftist intellectual trends – as rightly mentioned by al-Asadi – he adapted these ideas to support a firmly anti-Communist movement, the Da'wa Party. He was particularly concerned about the growing influence of Communism among Shiites, which he saw as a threat to Islamic values and sought to counter through his religious and political activism.

However, the common ground and the long history of political and cultural interaction between the leftist intellectual tradition and the Shia community should be recognized as a distinctive feature of Iraqi (and Iranian) history. In comparison to other countries in the region, the cultural divide between the Communist-leftist tradition and the religious one is less clear-cut in Iraq. Individual life trajectories bridging this divide are fairly common. Yaser Salem, for example, currently a member of the ICP politburo, remembers that his interest in Communism first arose from reading *Iqtisādunā* by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr during his studies at the Islamic seminar (*hawza*) in Najaf.<sup>19</sup>

Another important factor to consider is the distinct nature of the Sadrist movement compared to other Shia Islamist groups, such as the Da'wa Party. As already mentioned, the latter emerged as a political and ideological response to the growing communist influence among the Shia population, organizing itself as a structured party with a well-defined political agenda and ideology. According to Dhiaa al-Asadi, the Da'wa Party is the product of a "top-down formal process", whereas the Sadrist Trend (*al-tayyār al-Ṣadrī*) represents "the disadvantaged social classes through a bottom-up movement."<sup>20</sup>

From its outset, the Sadrist movement has been rooted in popular religiosity, messianism, and a ritual-bound Shia identity, thriving in the 1990s when political expression and organization were severely restricted. Its main aim at that time was to reconnect the clerical class

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Yaser Salem, Baghdad, February 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Dhiaa al-Asadi, Basra, December 2024.

and, notably, the movement founder and *mujtahid* Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr (1943-1999) with the Shia masses without having to rely on a modern political party, lay activists, or structured ideologies (Jabar 2003; Menghini 2025).

As a result, in post-2003 Iraq, Sadeq al-Sadr's son, Muqtada, found himself at the helm of a movement that combined messianic religiosity with conservative cultural puritanism and anti-imperialism, but that lacked a structured political programme or any emphasis on a well-defined theory of the Islamic State. This was facilitated by the fact that both Baqer al-Sadr's and his cousin Sadeq al-Sadr's theories of Islamic government were based on the decisive role of individuals or communities in choosing their own model of government, as per the concept of *wilāyat al-umma* in contrast to Khomeini's *wilāyat al-faqih* (Mallat 1993; Menghini 2025). The Sadr family tradition was confirmed by the current charismatic leader of the movement, Muqtada who stated: "I am not in favour of the Islamic State, nor of any other model. I call for political direction to be in the hands of the people. What the people decide should be the right model" (Sadr 2015: 10).

This is not to say that the Sadrist movement is void of any ideology, but that its ideological position (particularly with respect to religious authority and social ethics) is flexible and could better be observed via everyday social practices rather than in a textual form or textual culture.

This distinction highlights the tension between the textualism of the traditional *marja'īya* associated with the Najafi *hawza* and the practice-based *marja'īya* of Sadeq al-Sadr, which aimed to integrate religious authority into everyday social life (Menghini 2025).<sup>21</sup>

Yet, since 2005, the participation of Sadrists in elections has led to greater engagement in professional politics and the emergence of a lay activist class, working in political, journalistic, and cultural spheres. This process of political professionalization clashed with the movement's initial messianic approach to religious mobilization and its corresponding lack of systematic political ideological resources. In a context in which Islamist ideologies have been discredited due to years of failed governance, it's not surprising that the Sadrists should attempt to fill this ideological void by turning to non-Islamist ideological and

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<sup>21</sup> Dhiaa al-Asadi also insisted on this. Interview, Basra, December 2024.

symbolic resources, particularly those from the civil trend that gained traction during the protests that erupted cyclically since 2010-11.

Cooperation between the Sadrist movement and the civil trend still encountered significant ideological obstacles that required innovation and compromise; however, the lack of a systematic Sadrist ideology allowed for greater flexibility and adaptability. Muqtada was open to consulting with non-religious and non-Islamist academic experts such as Faleh Abdel Jabar, an Iraqi sociologist and ICP member, for example, or Faris Kamal Nadhmi, an independent intellectual mentioned earlier. And in the end, he incorporated much of the civil trend's political agenda into his own rhetoric. At the same time, cultural and social issues like the reform of the Personal Status Law or alcohol consumption were contentious topics that could be set aside for practical reasons.

The *Sā'irūn* electoral programme incorporates all the requests that were formulated and brought forward during the protests (*barnāmaj tahāluf Sā'irūn* 2018). This is most evident from the programme's incipit that defines the *Sā'irūn* coalition as "a cross-sectarian and anti-sectarian national project" that seeks to establish "a civil state based on citizenship (*dawla madaniya 'alā asās al-muwāṭana*) and ensuring social justice." Clearly, adopting the concept of a "civil state" based on citizenship rather than on Islamic *marja'iya* did not necessitate a deeper ideological revision of an existing political ideology by the Sadrists. It is noteworthy that the word "Islam" is nowhere to be found in the programme, nor is any reference made to Islamic law. Instead, the programme refers to the Iraqi Constitution as the basis for legislation. For instance, Article 6 of the programme's first part, states that one of the objectives of the coalition is:

"Guaranteeing the legitimate rights of minorities in accordance with the Constitution, in a way that guarantees freedom of religious beliefs and the participation of other minorities in political and social life."

The programme also contains explicit reference to the need for a full national sovereignty:

"[The *Sā'irūn* alliance aims at establishing] a strong state with its institutions, capable of making its own independent decisions, in a way that reflects its prestige, the country's national sovereignty, concern for the safety of its lands and unity, and the establishment of balanced Arab, regional and international relations built on the basis of common interests, non-interference in internal affairs, and mutual respect for the sovereignty and independence of each state."

Or the idea of a technocratic government: “In formulating and implementing public policies, the state should rely on national and honest competencies of professionals and technocrats, working sincerely to serve the people and the country, by implementing change and reform programs, far from discrimination and the quota approach.”

The programme also includes several points on social justice, public services, and the need to develop national industrial and agricultural sectors. In fact, the *Sā'irūn* programme required far more detail than a typical electoral platform as it also served as the programmatic foundation of the ICP-Sadrists alliance. This was even more evident in a consociational political system like Iraq's in which parties founded by sectarian elites did not require detailed social or economic programmes. They simply claimed to represent their communities' access to public resources.

A question remains as to who the authors of the electoral programme were—or, more broadly, who acted as the “social brokers”, to use Robin-D'Cruz's expression (2019), in the Sadrists-ICP convergence and formal alliance.

The Sadrists movement is a complex organization and like any mass movement it includes different groups and constituencies, including a clerical component, lay members such as politicians, intellectuals, journalists, etc., Shia under-proletariat, and the leadership and members of the militia (Robin-D'Cruz 2019).<sup>22</sup>

When Muqtada al-Sadr decided to integrate the Sadrists into the protest movement and, later for the elections of 2018 to foster a political coalition with the ICP, he drew heavily on a range of Sadrists actors, in political and cultural roles, who already had strong links to Iraq's secular cultural domains.

These included, for example, the already quoted Dhiaa al-Asadi, a lay member of the Sadrists trend and head of the Sadrists parliament bloc, and religious figures from his *shūrā* Council who had a background in leftist thought and praxis, such as *shaykh* Sadeq al-Hasnawi. For the ICP, the already mentioned Jassim al-Helfi, born in Sadr City, and Yaser Salem, from a religious family of Najaf, played important roles. Al-Helfi had developed a close relationship of mutual trust

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<sup>22</sup> The various components that make up the Sadrists Trend were also mentioned by 'Ali Taher al-Hamoud, interview in Baghdad, February 2023 and Jassim al-Helfi, interview in Baghdad, December 2024.

with Muqtada al-Sadr himself since the early days of the protests in 2015 and was part of the political coordination bureau of the alliance, together with Dhiaa al-Asadi.<sup>23</sup> In summary, most of the alliance's social brokers shared life trajectories across the leftist-Islamist divide, something that – as already mentioned – is more common in Iraq, than in other cultural or national contexts.

## The Tishrīn Revolution and the End of the Alliance

Despite its electoral victory, the *Sā'irūn* coalition proved problematic from the outset. Not only was the ICP disappointed with its own electoral performance, but its representatives in the alliance's political coordination bureau also complained about a lack of consultation, from the Sadrist side, on major political issues of common concern.<sup>24</sup>

However, the formal end of the alliance was triggered by the eruption of a new wave of protests of unprecedented magnitude in Iraq's recent history: the *Thawra Tishrīn* ('October Revolution'). This time, the epicentre of the demonstrations was Baghdad, particularly Tahrir Square. Starting in early October 2019, over a million protesters repeatedly took to the streets demanding services, employment, an end to corruption, and national sovereignty – demands encapsulated in the slogans "We want a state" (*nurīd dawla*) and "We want a homeland" (*nurīd waṭan*). The protests soon spread to all major cities in central and southern Iraq. The unprecedented scale of participation was met with an equally exceptional level of violence by both state forces and militias. From the very first weeks of mobilization, brutal repression resulted in the deaths of hundreds of demonstrators and injuries to tens of thousands more (International Crisis Group 2021).

Both the ICP and the Sadrists participated in the demonstrations, as they had in 2015-16, with the latter once again playing a vital role in boosting numbers and protecting protest squares from militia violence. Then, on October 27, the ICP withdrew its two deputies from Parliament in protest against the state repression – a move that was not followed by the Sadrist's deputies (International Crisis Group 2021).

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews with Jassim al-Helfi, Baghdad, December 2024 and Dhiaa al-Asadi, Basra, December 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

This time, however, neither the ICP and the broader civil trend, nor the Sadrists were able to exert the same level of guidance they had jointly maintained in the 2015-16 protests.

This might have been simply due to the sheer numbers of protesters that were much larger than in previous cycles. However, other explanations may be found in the different social and demographic character of the *Tishrīn* Revolution as compared to previous waves of protest. In 2015-16, according to various sources, the mobilization was predominantly composed of middleclass demonstrators with high to intermediate levels of education who held white-collar occupations, with many over 30 years old (Jabar 2018).<sup>25</sup> In 2019, there was a significant shift in the protest demographic, with many more protesters aged less than 20, who had not completed their high-school education and/or were unemployed (Alkhudary 2024). Basically, *Tishrīn* was led by young socially disadvantaged people alien to the older generation of activists. The older generation and more experienced activists, both from the progressive and Sadrist sides, underlined in interviews the fact that *Tishrīn* had the potential of a revolution in terms of mass participation and the breaking of taboos (this was especially emphasised by the progressive side). However, they all agreed that the protest lacked a shared political agenda and clear leadership, which led to the unleashing of destructive rather than constructive energy.<sup>26</sup>

Offering the Sadrist perspective, Dhiaa al-Asadi argued that the protestors didn't have a clear vision of a political alternative to the sectarian-consociational system. The Sadrists were worried, for instance, of a possible return to a presidential system or about the demonstrators' calls for a strong man to rescue the country. Moreover, in the words of al-Asadi, the Communists, or more in general the *tayyār al-madanī*, were responsible for not controlling the protestors who at times violently criticized religion and exhibited contempt for religious symbols, institutions, and even for Muqtada al-Sadr himself. According to Dhiaa al-Asadi, more in general, the left and the civil trend were "not able to respect the other when the other is the religious other."<sup>27</sup> The left

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<sup>25</sup> The difference between the protests in 2015-16 and 2019 was also conveyed by Dhiaa al-Asadi (interview, Basra, December 2024) and 'Ali Taher al-Hamoud (interviews, Baghdad, February and December 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Interviews Baghdad and Basra, February and December 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Dhiaa al-Asadi, Basra, December 2024.

was therefore guilty of not having protected or defended its allies, the Sadrists. The Sadrist perspective is also confirmed by ICP militants such as Jassim al-Helfi, who also noted how the Sadrists expected something from them they could not deliver. They were neither in control of the square, nor of their rank-and-file; not in any way comparable with the internal discipline commanded by the Sadrist movement.<sup>28</sup>

The situation precipitated on January 3, 2020, with the US assassination of Qasem Soleimani, head of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Commander of the paramilitary Popular Mobilization Forces (*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*) in Baghdad. This event radically changed the Sadrists' approach to the protests. Muqtada al-Sadr immediately called for a million-man demonstration against the US presence in Iraq, and soon afterwards, officially ordered the Sadrists to withdraw from the streets (International Crisis Group 2021).

The Sadrists' withdrawal played a crucial role in dampening the *Tishrin* uprising and stabilizing the political system, amid widespread social unrest and demands for significant political change. In fact, the Sadrist movement possessed the unique capacity to physically control protest spaces through a combination of mobilization power and strategic use of violence – both of which were instrumental in suppressing the *Tishrin* demonstrations. No other political actor or militia could have played this role as effectively.

There is no clear-cut explanation for the Sadrists' sudden withdrawal from the protests. One contributing factor may have been the increasingly tense political climate caused by the escalation of hostilities between Iran and the United States following Qassem Soleimani's assassination (Robin-D'Cruz, Mansour 2020). This tension may have been further exacerbated by internal Sadrist dynamics, as different factions within the movement held divergent views on the political course to follow.<sup>29</sup>

For instance, the Sadrist militia, *Sarāyā al-Salām*, operates as a distinct entity within the movement, with its own internal logic. As it is more deeply embedded in Iraq's political economy, it is less likely to pursue insurgency or civil conflict – especially amid heightened pressure from powerful foreign actors (Robin-D'Cruz, Mansour 2020).

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jassim al-Helfi, Baghdad, December 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Another key factor was the Sadrists' inability to control the protest movement during *Tishrīn*. The demonstrations took on a life of their own, straying from the Sadrists' preferred direction. The combination of mass mobilization spiralling out of their control, brutal state repression, and deepening US-Iran tensions fuelled mutual distrust and fear between the progressive forces and the Sadrist movement and led to the conditions for the Sadrists' withdrawal from the protests as well as their subsequent shift toward a repressive and stabilizing role.

After 2020, the protests continued but on a smaller and more local scale before being further dampened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The civil trend emerged from *Tishrīn* more fragmented than ever, with growing scepticism about the reformist potential of the Sadrist-ICP alliance. Some protest groups and networks sought to translate the *Tishrīn* experience into formal political action by forming parties and entering the electoral arena. However, the rapid disintegration of *Imtidād* – the so-called “Nassiriya Party” and the largest political grouping to emerge from *Tishrīn* – further weakened the momentum of the protest movement and deepened the activists' disillusionment with formal politics (Bobseine 2022).

In the 2021 elections, which were boycotted by the ICP, the Sadrist bloc emerged as the largest force in the country but fell far short of the majority required to form a government. In absolute terms, its share of the vote dropped significantly – from nearly 1.5 million votes in 2018 to 885,310 (roughly 10% of the total vote). The elections triggered a deep political crisis, which was only resolved after the Sadrist bloc resigned from parliament in June 2022, paving the way for the formation of the al-Sudani government in October. Over the summer, following their withdrawal from Parliament, the Sadrists attempted to reignite street protests but did not succeed in rallying a broader base than their own constituency.

## Conclusions

The coalition between the ICP and the Sadrist movement remains, in the words of Jassim al-Helfi, “a historic political opportunity” and, arguably, the only viable path to assembling a coalition broad enough to challenge the current consociational regime.

As explained in this chapter, such a convergence would provide mutual advantages. To the left, it would offer access to a wider social

base, strengthen its connection with the real country, and ensure a safer route through a repressive and violent political landscape. To the Sadrists, the alliance could reinforce their nationalist and genuinely popular credentials in contrast to the discredited, sectarian, and corrupt Islamist establishment.

While the Sadrist movement is undoubtedly part of the “Shia house” (*bayt al-shi‘a*), it has distinct characteristics that set it apart from other Islamist parties and organizations – particularly its lower-class constituency and its ideological flexibility. However, the movement is far from monolithic. Like any mass movement, it encompasses internal complexities and contradictions. Some factions may be less inclined to cooperate with progressive and secular forces, especially in politically tense moments such as those triggered by the Tishreen protests and, even more so, by the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and, more in general, by rising tension in the region.

More importantly, the imbalance of power remains perhaps the greatest obstacle to sustained cooperation. This is evident in the lack of consultation between Sadrists and the ICP after the 2018 elections, as well as in the Sadrists’ perception that the ICP was unable to assert control over the square during Tishreen.

On the other hand, the protest cycles since 2010–11 have fostered conditions for dialogue, cooperation, and ultimately a shift in the political behaviour of both the left and the Sadrists.

A rare poll amongst residents of Sadr City in Baghdad – a former Communist and now Sadrist working-class neighbourhood – highlights a crucial dynamic: the movement’s disenfranchised base may increasingly favour a more revolutionary and explicitly anti-sectarian course (Mansour and Robin D’Cruz 2022), one that the secular left could potentially provide. This shift could push the Sadrists to renew their alliance with leftist forces out of fear of losing popular support. As Jassim al-Helfi, himself a native of Sadr City, put it: “Where the disenfranchised are, the left is.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Jassim al-Helfi, Baghdad, December 2024.

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PART FOUR

A POSTSCRIPT



# Cross-Ideological and Transnational Oppositional Alliances in the Middle East: Resistance as Ideology?

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## ABSTRACT

Amidst grand, global theorizing about “the end of ideology”, “post-ideology”, and “post-materialism”, important work in both ideology studies and MENA-based scholarship has stood out as a challenge. I argue, with attention to the case of the so-called Resistance Axis, that what we are witnessing in the current moment—and have been for some time—is an ideological reconfiguring of a never quite ideologically configured space: one that attests less to ideological waning than to strategic ideological bridging, and to both the durability of anti-imperialist resistance in a region that has long been subjected to imperial and colonial practices that seek its erasure and the flexibility – even fluidity – of ideological configurations that this region has developed in response to its modern history. The ideological battlefield in the MENA is sometimes cross-ideological, often transnational, but far from settled (for all the competing claims of exhaustion, resilience, and ossification of both established power and its most radical resistance), and unlikely to be post-ideological any time soon.

KEYWORDS: Ideology; Framing; Resistance Axis; Islamism; Pan-Arabism.

## Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have long been configured in grand and global theorizing about the state of ideologies as the outlier or contrasting case. When Daniel Bell put forth his provocative claim about the “End of Ideology”, whereby ideology became irrelevant for the developed world, due to the emergence of a “rough consensus” on political matters among its “intellectuals”: “the acceptance of a Welfare State; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism” (1960: 373); new ideologies were to remain the purview of politics in Asia and Africa. Embedded in the analysis of Bell

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and others are a series of claims: that ideology is no longer needed (with modernization and secularization moderating the fissures wrought by economics and religion), that competing ideologies (to liberal capitalism) have been exhausted (predominately, Marxism), that the character of ideological debates has shifted toward less material political controversies such as life styles and self-expression. MENA scholarship has long challenged these accounts, often offering its own related or competing claims: that grand ideologies of the West never full “took” in the region (whether to critique local actors for insufficient adherence or for being hindered by appropriation<sup>2</sup>) or that the regions’ own ideologies have become themselves exhausted (whether through a retreat from ideological thinking or through the victory of one ideology to which all others converge).

Some scholarship still tends to import Western ideological content in looking for particular (Western) ideologies while expecting not to find it, asking questions, such as “Where are the leftists?” or “Where are the liberals?”, thereby broaching the topic with preconceived ideas about what is to be found. Such work, unsurprising, can only find lacks, absences and gaps, often producing work with pithy titles such as “What’s left of the Arab Left?” or “Arab liberalism without Liberals?”. But most scholarship offers more nuanced perspectives. As Haugbolle (2016) has critically noted, broad-based protest activity in the region too often tends to be dismissed as “post-ideological”, not because the actors lack ideological visions but because those protests do not center on any one of the traditional ideologies and/or because political ideologies – the protesters’ ideational registers, their “hopes, visions, and calculations” – are in the process of transformation as a result of the political action underway. Further, when scholars analyzing the Middle East and North Africa ask such questions as whether Arab nationalism or Islamism are proper ideologies (meaning whether they are internally coherent or sufficiently fleshed out) – or, alternatively but with a similar gesture, posit such variegated ideological families as Arab nationalism and Islamism as single monolithic ideological structures – it is not wonder they fail to see the ideological power of these patterns of political thought in the first case or miss entirely the hybrid

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<sup>2</sup> The latter critique is perhaps most fully articulated in Laroui’s *Contemporary Arab Ideology*, published in French in 1967, first translated into Arabic in 1970 by Muhammad Aitani, with Laroui later producing his own Arabic version in 1995.

elements that ideologies in the region draw from a number of ideological traditions in the second case. It is this hybridity (and fluidity) that accounts for the ability of ideological actors and groups to work across political divides and to recreate and reformulate their work in practice.<sup>3</sup> As Freedan has noted, “not every ideology is dropped from a great height on an unwilling society, crushing its actually held views and convictions and used as a weapon against non-believers” (2003: 1). So too, Maynard has rightly noted, unidimensional conception of ideologies as existing along a unidimensional liberal-conservative continuum “is deeply deleterious to the understanding of politics, especially globally, but even in the US” (Id.: 315).

My 2009 book traced some of the dominant accounts of contemporary Arab ideologies that suggested exhaustion, moderation, and convergence:

Arab nationalism and socialism have been supplanted by political Islam (Tibi and Sivan); an intellectual or ideological convergence is taking place, whether through the formulation of Islamic liberalism (Binder) or by virtue of various conversion experiences toward political Islam (Burgat); or we have reached a postideological age, characterized either by increasingly pragmatic thinking (Salem) or by post-Islamism (Roy). None of the views ... consider the possible emergence of a simpler ideological rapprochement among the various contending political groups in opposition – let alone their joining forces despite enduring ideological differences in order to challenge the regimes in power. Without dismissing some aspects of the supplantation, convergence, conversion, and post-ideological pragmatism theses, I argue that the relationship among competing ideologies of opposition in the contemporary Arab region is best characterized as accommodationist, with strategic alliances forming among more pragmatic and moderate wings of otherwise opposed ideological factions of marginalized groups. Further, alliances are as much a product of, as they are a source for, shifts (but not an end)

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<sup>3</sup> It is also this hybridity and fluidity that render any attempts to construct an ideological grouping as a “problem.” The most common version of this is, of course, the rendering of Islamism as such as a “challenge” to US democratization efforts. E.g., Ottoway’s claim that “Islamist organizations in all their varieties undoubtedly present one of the major challenges to democratization in the Arab and to a lesser extent in the Muslim world. Islamist organizations also present a domestic challenge to all major European countries, which have sizable populations of Muslim immigrants or poorly integrated citizens of Arab origin” (2009: 44). While Ottoway characterizes this problem “more political...than ideological”, she does so only because she see Islamism as ideologically deficient.

in ideological debates that have occurred over the past several decades.  
(Browsers 2009: 7)

At the time I was writing this, I was in many ways addressing the unidirectionality of the inclusion-moderation thesis and its underappreciation of the ongoing role of ideology. I was interested in how among excluded groups had come to form alliances, often across ideological divides—in other words, how regime divide-and-conquer strategies can often contribute to the structural conditions that bring together anti-statist forces. But the ideational patterns and commitments and points of reference of even the most strategic actors cannot be simply discarded for something entirely new. For me, perhaps less interesting than the question of what ideologies *are* is the question of what ideologies *do*, in terms of creating meaning and continuity for groups and individuals across time and space. Although political entrepreneurs can certainly manipulate ideologies to mobilize populations for material gains, their ability to do so in a way that resonates depends on their ability to appeal to many people's already existent identities, commitments and felt understandings of self and community. These things cannot easily be dismissed as purely instrumental or epiphenomenal—but neither are they entirely determining. Rather, we require rigorous analysis of their multiple context-specific interpretations.

While there are many things I would love to change about this book, I think the basic argument holds up well enough. There was a moment in the midst and even in the wake of the Arab uprisings when many were suggesting we had reached some sort of post-ideological moment due to the cross-ideological and trans-national (at least in terms of the demonstration effect) character of the protest activity we saw—just as the “radical battlefield of the MENA” was politicizing a wider and more diverse collection of individuals and groups under a broader ideological umbrella. This was followed by an abundance of surprise (and disappointment) when so many Islamist groups seemed to be the first benefactors of the elections that followed and this was followed by a resurgence of anti-Islamist counterrevolutionary forces that sort to reconfigure the authoritarian neoliberal states that had just been overthrown. Now we see new work emerging about ideological convergences (a new “end of history”) around slightly reconfigured Huntingtonian poles.

Here I wish to put forth a slightly different analysis of what we are seeing, one that is, I believe, borne out by the other chapters in this innovative accounting of the ideological battlefield of the broader middle eastern and north African region. Rather than an ideological end, what we are witnessing in the current circumstances – and have been for some time – is an ideological reconfiguring of a never quite ideologically configured space: one that attests less to ideological conversions or convergences than to bridging, and something that may attest to both the durability of anti-imperialist resistance as an ideological framing bridge in a region that has seen so much imperialism and colonialism and the flexibility – even fluidity – of ideological configurations that this region has constructed to address these conditions in its modern history. The ideological battlefield in the MENA is sometimes cross-ideological, often transnational, but seldom without challenge or need for adaptability (for all the claims of resilience and ossification of both established power and its most radical resistance), and unlikely to be post-ideological any time soon. Rather, in contexts of authoritarianism and imperialism, social actors and social movements use framing (particularly bridge framing) to connect different ideological groupings to build consensus and encourage collective action (Bedford, Snow 2000).

### **What and Whither Ideology/ies?**

The end of ideology has been proclaimed many times over the course of modern history, with such calls reaching center stage in the 1950s-1960s (notably, right when others claim the ideology in the Middle East reaches its “apex”) and then again in the 1990s. These days, the so-called “Age of Ideology” in the West is generally seen as having taken place 1914-1989, corresponding to the period between World War I and the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe (Stråth 2013: 17). According to Paul Salem’s account of the Arab “age of ideology” runs in a slightly delayed and somewhat shortened parallel, having similarly begun “around World War I with the collapse of the Ottoman empire”, but reaching “its apex in the 1950s after the loss of Palestine and the breakthrough of a new middle class into power” and already said to have begun receding “in the 1970s after the relative consolidation of political and economic systems” (1994: 2). These accounts have, of course, been contested in various ways.

One of the most consistent sources of rebuttals has come from within the broad field of “ideology studies”, among those who tend to orbit around the *Journal of Political Ideologies* (JPI), established in 1996, and understand ideological thinking and expression as a “permanent and ubiquitous” facet of political life (Freeden 1996: 8). As endless ideology scholars have noted, “as long as human beings remain political creatures”, they will continue to generate and attempt to systematize ideas. As such, ideologies will remain central, “as a product of social activity and an indispensable feature of the political” and must be “taken seriously” (Freeden, Sargent, Stears 2013: Chapter V). Yet, where ideologies are located, how they are analyzed, and the power they are said to hold varies considerably. As Jonathan Manard notes: “Research on ideology is neither going through a sudden recent increase nor a long run decline, but has been steadily proliferating and evolving over the past three decades” and the different perceptions about the state of ideology studies is really a result of the “intellectual parochialism” or disciplinary isolation among the various fields of research on ideology and the differing ideas about what constitutes “ideology” or “ideological analysis” (2013: 300).

While the question of what counts as an “ideology” is certainly interesting in its own right, I do not consider it to be nearly as interesting a question as other questions one might ask. If we view ideologies broadly as JPI does, as “patterns of political thought” worth investigating, we might instead focus on analyzing what are put forth as actual arguments or framings situated within these patterns in order to discern the contexts out of which ideological arguments or framings emerge and to which they are addressed, the political purposes to which they are put and how they situate political actors in groups and among groups, and how these configurations shift and change over time and in different contexts. In other words, we might begin by asking what are the actually-existing ideologies in the region. What is the character of that which is being touted as such? This celebration of JPI’s definition shares the gesture in Haugbolle and Bandak’s call to “understand ideology not merely as a bounded, finite system of political thought (such as socialism, liberalism, or Islamism), but rather as political imagination that plays out not just in contentious and institutional politics, but also in lifestyle, taste and everyday practices”—that is, a form of political thinking and reconciling that takes place “in practice”, with others and with

the political traditions that make up a political world (2017: 196). Ideological thinking is particularly vital during unsettled moments, since in Geertz's words, ideology serves to "to render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful, [and] to so construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them" (1973: 220). An important insight powerfully demonstrated by Gianni Del Panta (2020) and others about how sometimes ideology is not the before (the check off box) that creates the after, but that ideological formation is often something that comes about in a process of socio-political practice, an in-between, a re-creation that must be contextualized within a variegated and evolving field. The work presented in the chapters to this volume demonstrates the analytical traction that can come from attention to the ideological dimension of politics as the in-between and go-between of oppositional politics in the region.

### **The Cross-Ideological in a Polarized World**

It must strike more than just me that it is incredibly ironic that so many are again talking about ideological convergence—in the form of an "ideology of resistance" or what has come to be called the "axis of resistance", so named by both its advocates and detractors, when referring to the broad alliance of material support stemming from Iran – at a moment where, globally, the trend seems to be toward ideological polarization. Convergence would *seem* to require *depolarization*. But does it? Past work on ideological convergences seemed to suggest a need for something characterized as (ideological) moderation. But we might again critically consider our analytical vantage point. One might see an ideological convergence at the level of political parties (perhaps an expectation of those who follow a Downsian convergence model), such that Ennahda's "post-Islamist" embrace of a neoliberal state can be explained; but at the same time one sees polarization at the level of public opinion or among a broader swath of political parties or among a variety of civil society actors--especially in cases where the opposition exists outside of official party structures, which would seem to characterize the politics of most countries in the region. Ester Sigillò's recent study of Tunisian Islamism well exemplifies the ways in which a more intentionally situated analysis (in this case, drawing upon a relational social movement theory approach) can uncover important

variations in a context where many have declared political Islam's end. She argues convincingly that while "the strategy of party cadres may undergo a process of ideological transformation, activists who mobilise outside the party can follow somewhat different trajectories", thus revealing more "multi-faceted ideological and organisational transformations beyond changes at the party level" (2023: 153, 155). Focusing on a slightly different relational and situated approach—with attention to international v national foci as opposed to internal v external to the political party structure—Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (2013) also find both variation and change in a contested ideological field. Their analysis importantly demonstrates, against those who would suggest that Tunisia is post-Islamist, that ideological actors remain constrained to some extent by an ideological field of vision—that is, ideologies, retain some authority over individuals and groups seeking to branch out in new directions.

In his 40-year retrospective on political Islam, Nader Hashemi offers a poignant critique of the notion of political Islam as a "gateway drug" to *jihādī* radicalism (2020). Political psychologists working in ideology studies tend to talk about ideological types along a conservative-radical continuum. That logic cannot account for an organization such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which seems to be a sort of inspiration for both conservative and radical values and politics. Though in recent years it has proven largely statist and thus acted as a largely conservative (some would say moderate) force, those ideological strands and groupings that claim a history with that organization are more variegated. Is it the organization that is the "gateway" (that is, does it convert to militancy?), or is it that some radicalized individuals from other ideological groups look to it as an alternative (and perhaps sometimes are often disappointed, break off) or is it that these groups develop their radicalism in conversation with or study of (are somehow interacting with) other (leftist) forces? How does or does not this apply to the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose "success" in consolidating a new regime after a wide variety of individuals and groups participated in overthrowing the oppressive and corrupt regime led by Reza Shah in 1979 inspired the transformations, convergences, and "conversions" that characterized much of the ideological landscape of the MENA region in the 1980s?

Gregory Gause has noted how "ambitious regional leaders" may be tempted to mobilize support through transnational ideologies,

particularly when their hold on power is weak or threatened and when such ideologies might weaken adversarial state actors (2023: 330-31). Gause gives less attention to how As Kirasirova (2023) and others have demonstrated, the Arab left, which has perhaps always been the most global of ideological families, even as it has long been associated with (regional) Arab nationalism and more localized struggles against colonial and capitalist incursions, was revitalized in the 1950s by the World Peace movement. While this movement “started as a Soviet led series of international meetings of intellectuals ‘in defense of peace’ amid ‘conditions of uncertainty’ over the future of atomic warfare, ‘recent memories of colonial violence’, and ‘awareness of residual inequalities in the merging postwar international system’—all of which made the ambiguity of the ‘peace’ framing widely appealing—it revitalized and expanded the sphere of activities that the left had built in the interwar period (Kirasirova 2023: 651-2).<sup>4</sup> As such, as Kirasirova puts it, the left “contributed to local and regional politics while at the same time, negotiating global constellations of power that included, but were not defined by, the intellectual and material resources of the Soviet state” (2023: 652).

However, we should also consider whether resistance requires both ideology and ideological flexibility to maintain its network of alliances (or axis). Where other scholars have drawn attention to the “whethers” and “whys”—the transnational political, economic, and military networks that power transnational alliances—it is also important to interrogate the “hows” and “from what” of ideological framing strategies both enable and constrain the actors that form and reformulate these social movements over time.

## Resistance Ideologies and Ideological Alliances

The idea of a resistance in the sense of “popular, organized resistance to colonial occupation or imperialist oppression” (Harlow 1987: 24) is a centerpiece of movements throughout the MENA region, from the resistance to European colonialism in north Africa, to Zionist colonialism in Palestine, to the world powers (predominantly the US, these days) who intervene in the region to prop up authoritarian powers and Israel’s settler colonial project. As such, “resistance” forms

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<sup>4</sup> For a rich account of the interwar left in Lebanon see: Tanoury-Karam 2020.

what I have characterized in previous work, following Bedford, Snow and others, as an ideological “framing bridge.” At the same time, the way in which it draws upon both direct experience and cultural narratives that circulate widely, it exceeds the strategic, capturing features of what Rudé terms an “inherent ideology” and describes as “a sort of mothers’ milk ideology”, in contrast to what he terms a “derived ideology”, which typically take the form the more structured systems of ideas, including political and religious ideas, from which they are derived (1980: 28). In its most recent iteration, it has taken the form of the “Axis of Resistance” (so-called both by its champions and its critics<sup>5</sup>), which offers a strategic framing of Islamist resistance that allows space for alliances with non-Islamist groups who bear their own repertoire of ideas about anti-imperialism, self-sufficiency, indigeneity, and even authenticity. Wastnidge and Mabon usefully characterize the Axis as “a mix of strategic alliance, security community, and ideational network”, which while “not a homogenous entity and contains multiple political projects and interests within it” reveals “a shared ideational heritage and normative vision” (2024: 955).<sup>6</sup>

One might inquire as to the extent to which the frame bridging<sup>7</sup> that the Axis offers is more or less ideological. The same claim about thinness has been made in regard to Pan-Arabism and Islamism, which form important resources as ideological ancestors to the ideological framework of resistance. In analyzing “the ways in which local elites and peoples imaged in their region and acted politically within it”, Lynch notes how for much of the twentieth century “pan-Arabism defined the normatively appropriate arenas for competition and intervention and served as an authentic, widely shared, and even taken-for-granted regional concept for most of the people living in the region” (2025: 37-38). Lynch refers to the Resistance Axis idea as an “identity project.” However, it is in some respects less identitarian than its precursors. While centered on resistance to foreign intervention,

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<sup>5</sup> While there are differing accounts as to the origin of the appellation, most accounts suggest it was first used by Iran and its allies in response to US president George W. Bush’s designation of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the “axis of evil” in 2001.

<sup>6</sup> I find Wastnidge and Mabon’s rendering of “resistance ideology” as a “nomos” less helpful.

<sup>7</sup> Bedford and Snow define frame bridging as a process of linking ideologically congruent but structurally distinct movements, groups, or individuals around particular issues (2000: 624).

support for Palestine, and consolidating and modernizing the newly emerging states (while typically treating such entities as building blocks to a larger, Arab solidarity), Pan-Arabism built its solidarity on a notion of Arab identity, based in shared language, culture and history. Much of pan-Islamism has built its solidarity on more sectarian notions of Islam, while carrying over much of the same conceptions of the structure of a world order where foreign powers encroach upon a downtrodden who must rise up to resist, and with much of the same powers forming the objects of resistance. While both Islamists and Arab nationalism are premised on pan-state ideas, with pan-Arabism typically treating their state-building projects as building blocks to a larger entity and pan-Islamists conceptualizing nation-states in even more transitory ways.

The Resistance Axis continues the use of religion to legitimize claims, yet Islamist ideology cannot account for its formation. The Axis is neither limited to nor entirely inclusive of the myriad Islamist groups in the region. While neither inclusive of all groups that share support for Palestine and opposition to Israel, it is the case, as Lynch notes, “resistance as an identity was carefully tailored to avoid sectarian connotations”, relying instead on a “more broadly appealing narrative of countering American and Zionist domination” (2025: 43). One sees this in Hezbollah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah’s statement in 2016, on the annual “day of the injured”, when he commemorated martyrs across the region, stating: “the enemy does not target us on the basis of religion, but for opposition to Zionism and having a culture of resistance.” While in many respects the Iranian regime has formed the center of the axis, this coalition has come to include not only Hezbollah in Lebanon (since its founding in 1982), but also the Houthis in Yemen (since at least the overthrow of Yemeni president ‘Ali Abdullah Salihi in 2014), and parts of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq (after the Islamic State conquered much of Syria and Iraq in 2014), and Hamas in Gaza. From at least the 2011 uprisings that challenged the Asad regime (thus forcing a reliance upon Hezbollah and Iran, as well as Russia) until Asad’s overthrow in late 2024, the Syrian regime has been considered part of that Axis. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) similarly claims to receive assistance from Iran and a place in the axis. It is also worth noting that, at times, the “axis” is rendered even wider, to include Russia, China, and even Venezuela.

The Axis was never merely a network of partners and proxies serving Iran's foreign policy and/or security strategy, despite US and Israeli claims to the contrary. While it certainly is the case that Iran views these alliances as central to its "deterrence architecture" (Rouhi 2025), a means of encouraging stronger opponents to remain within various "rules of the game" without confronting them directly (Sobelman 2025), the alliances also serve local, national, regional, and transnational interests that are sometimes at odds with each other and with any particular formulation of an axis. The various substate groups in the alliance are both tied to national concerns, while at the same time exceeding national boundaries, both through the transnational linkages of their alliance and the transnational character of the forces they seek to resist. As such, its political aims tend to tie self-determination with more post-Westphalian terms of national liberation. So too, while Iran certainly played a role in the establish of many of the groups in its access, those groups that took root and gained support did so because of local oppositions to foreign occupations, failing regimes, and the like, in the spaces in which they operate.

While in the past Frieden and others might have characterized the so-called (by both its advocates and detractors) "the Axis' resistance ideology" as a "thin" ideology (like nationalism and feminism) at best, in contrast to "full" or "thick" ideologies (2003: 98), my point here is less to settle the debate over nomenclature (ideology – thin or thick – or identity) than to draw the attention to the way in which cross-ideological engagements reveal both the power and saliency of such thin ideological framings in practice. In short, the resistance axis consists of a strategic frame bridging among separate groups who are able to pull from a powerful cultural and conceptual repertoire of inherent and derived beliefs "compounded by the circumstances then prevailing and what E.P. Thompson has called the 'sharp jostle of experience'" (in Rudé 1990: 35). However, it not only inherits and derives from already existing ideologies that operate as a resource and constrain it. The bridging processes involved in this strategic alliance also involve what Bedford and Snow term "meaning work--the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings" (2000: 613). As such, resistance repertoires form the building blocks for generation of beliefs or meanings that offer "innovative implications and extension of, or antidotes to, existing ideologies or components of them" (Ibid.). This ideological framing,

or the meaning construction involved in framing the axis, involves all three facets that Benford and Snow (2000) deem central for social movement actors seeking to effectively mobilize people: diagnostic framing (identifying the problem and assigning blame), prognostic framing (proposing solutions and strategies), and motivational framing (providing a call to action or rationale for participation).

### **Bridges Reframed, Jostled, and Refracted**

Anti-imperialism forms much of the common core of the axis. The various groups that move in and out of the axis do so more or less in relation to what is being resisted or refused. Beyond that, the relations among the groups are attended by different histories and commitments. Most renderings of the Axis put Iran at the center, but that is largely a result of the fact that Iran is the only state actor with the resources that come from being a state. The theocratic-dictatorial state of Iran cannot form a hegemonic ideological source or core for the Axis. Both Hezbollah and Hamas begin as Islamist resistance to Israel. Both emerge as largely as militia forces (though both also call for non-military—that is, cultural, religious, and political—forms of resistance) operating outside of the state (or, in the case of Palestine, nascent state) structures. Koss (2018) argues that a flexible conception of resistance has allowed both groups to both adapt to changing circumstances, to retain ability to maneuver politically while resisting calls to give up their weapons or eliminating their ability to act as an independent militia. At the same time, that range of maneuver is constrained by the very politics that often brings these groups together.

The ideological bond between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah is facilitated by not just an Islamist but also a Shia identity and a shared subscription to the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*, embodied in the supreme leader of Iran; whereas Hamas' is a Sunni Islamist organization that claims an intellectual and organizational heritage in the Muslim Brotherhood. But it is worth remembering that the ideational heritage of resistance has always exceeded religion and sect and even the Resistance Axis in which Iran centers itself has, at various points, included non-Islamist entities in its network of military and economic support. El Husseini (2010) has well documented the ways in which Hezbollah grew out of the Movement of the Dispossessed (*Haraka al-*

*Mahṛūmīn*) established by Musa al-Sadr in Lebanon in 1974. Hezbollah emerged in response to Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and originally focused on the aim of liberating south Lebanon from Israeli occupation. However, it was participating in parliamentary elections by 1992, when its "Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc" won 12 seats. In an interview with *al-Waṭan al-'Arabī* magazine after the election, Hezbollah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah both clarified the party's commitment to resistance and drew links between its various levels of resistance:

Our participation in the elections and entry into the National Assembly do not alter the fact that we are a resistance party. We shall, in fact, work to turn the whole of Lebanon into a country of resistance, and the state into a state of resistance. In the past, a number of state officials promised that if negotiations did not lead to the liberation of the land, the entire population, and the state itself, would be transformed into a resistance force" (in Wilson Center 2023).<sup>8</sup> After Israel withdrew in May 2000, the emphasis in Hezbollah's conception of resistance shifted from liberation to deterrence (from ongoing Israeli aggression) and by 2005 began participating in the Lebanese government, such that many spoke of the organization/s "nationalization." When Syria's President Bashar al-Assad came under threat from its own uprising and Islamic State forces, Hezbollah's notion of resistance again took transnational form, as the group began activities by at least 2013 to shore up the Syrian regime. While the group has evolved over its relatively short history, she demonstrates that Hezbollah is "first and foremost...an anti-imperialist group. (El-Husseini 2010: 806)

While in Lebanon "the resistance" is often used as a shorthand for Hezbollah, the idea of resistance a centerpiece of Palestinian political thought since at least the 1960s, with a largely secular notion at its basis for much of its earliest history. As Harlow notes, the term "resistance" (*muqāwama*) was used as early as 1966 by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani to characterize the Palestinian literary field from 1948-1966 (Harlow 1987: 2; see also: Kanafani 1966). While certainly the concept of resistance in Arabic has a longer pedigree, with earlier popular and national resistance groups and movements (not all of which are easily or accurately termed "secular"), its

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<sup>8</sup> Alagha (2018) well documents how Nasrallah and Hezbollah work to develop a culture of resistance through a wide variety of social services, media, art, rallies, and public campaigns.

association with the Palestinian struggle (*al-muqāwama al-Filasṭīniyya*) and its popularization by Kanafani is well established.<sup>9</sup> Thus, on the one hand, this accounts for the prominence and resilience of Palestine in resistance framings. On the other hand, it also suggests a framing that exceeds a religious bridge. Thus, in this sense, Hamas draws from an earlier (and non-Islamist) tradition, even as it is responding to the waning of the PLO's global revolution and its growing concessions to the Israeli occupation. When the group officially launches during the first Palestinian intifada, in January 1988, Hamas identified as an Islamist resistance movement, both a radical alternative to the PLO and an offshoot of the MB, which itself was a broad network in Palestine going back at least to the early 1940s, and inspired by Islamic Jihad's "relatively minor, yet quite popular" armed operations and the general success of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the newly created Hezbollah movement in Lebanon (Baconi 2018: 18-21).

Despite a shared focus on resisting Israeli and, by extension, US aggression, Hamas' relationship with Iran and Hezbollah has had its ups and downs. Its Sunni character, its ties to the MB, which has more often stood as a competitor to Iran's project than as an ally to it, have contributed toward the instability in relations, even as it shares a common conceptual repertoire of Islamist resistance. Its relationship to other members of the axis is tested whenever Sunni politicians and Muslim Brotherhood Islamists raise the specter of a growing "Shia crescent." Most recently, this was seen when the brief rise of the Brotherhood after the Arab uprisings, particularly after the election of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, prompted Hamas to strengthen its ties with Cairo and saw its relationship with Iran fray as a result.

In many respects, Hamas' relationship to the Axis since 1999 has been mediated by Syria, to where the group moved its political bureau from Amman to Damascus (with just a brief stay in Qatar), after the Jordanian government closed their offices and evicted their leadership, which both increased their access to material support from Iran and

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<sup>9</sup> In a cogent analysis of this longer history of the cross-pollination of the Shia Palestinian resistance frame, Julia Kassen argues that "The roots of Shia resistance can be traced back to the eighteenth century, specifically to South Lebanon and the figure of *shaykh* Nasif al-Nassar al-Amili al-Wa'ili, who allied with *shaykh* Zahir al-Umar in Palestine to resist Ottoman rule that was denying the Shia their sociopolitical agency. The Ottomans used to repress them harshly, burning their books and literature. As such, Palestinians and Shia Lebanese have shared a long historical trajectory of shared anti-colonial resistance" (2025: 345).

deepening Syria's role as a tactical centerpiece in the "Axis of Resistance." At the same time, it is from Syria that Hamas launches its entry into Palestinian formal politics. The impact of that national context on the framing is apparent in the lack of reference to resistance in their political platform for the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. After the results of that election were overthrown, Hamas' armed wing, the Ezzeddine al-Qassem Brigades sought to resist both Israel and Fatah externally, as well as competing Salafi groups within Gaza, conditions in which the resistance framing would more prove more efficacious.

Yet, a broader notion of "popular resistance" reemerges after the Arab uprisings and reconciliation talks with various local and regional actors. This framing was used particularly by Khaled Meshaal, then head of Hamas' political bureau, to articulate a broad notion of nonviolent civil unrest and demonstrations against Israel across the region. The 2017 Hamas Document of General Principles and Policies, first political document since 1988 covenant, underscored armed resistance as a main focus for the group, while also seeming to articulate to that resistance in ways that seem to harken more to anti-imperialism. Hamas' discussion of the Great March of Return in Gaza, a series of demonstrations that began in 2018 by independent activists and later endorsed by Hamas (who technically governed Gaza), reconfigured resistance across all Palestinian factions and various civil society actors who had representatives on the High National Committee, in a promotion of national unity and with hopes for Fatah-Hamas reconciliation.

In fact, during a period marked by Hamas' growing criticism of the Assad regime for its crushing of the Syrian opposition, the group situated itself (at least ideologically) outside of the so-called axis of resistance as the rift with the Syrian and Iranian governments (and to some extent with Hezbollah) continued to grow, perhaps most visible, again, in the move of its political bureau from Damascus to Doha, Qatar in early 2012 (with a political office briefly set up in Egypt that same year). The Syrian government and Hamas did not formally restore ties until 2021 or 2022, after the Syrian uprising had died down, and several Arab countries began restoring relations with Syria, and intensifying Israeli attacks on Gaza as well as Syria. This period also proved tense for Hamas-Hezbollah relations, with each side criticizing the other for the rift with Syria, though the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, starting with the military coup against

Morsi in Egypt and culminating in the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar in June 2017 and the election of Yahya Sinwar to the head of Hamas' political wing in February 2017, likely motivated Hamas to improve its relations with Hezbollah. Certainly, sometime starting in 2017, Hamas' was configured by US policy makers as well as their own rhetoric as part of an axis of resistance. Though this repositioning should also be seen in light of the 2017 Hamas Charter, which as Khaleb Hroub notes "stresses the nationalist and resistance aspects of its purpose far more than the religious and pan-Islamic ones" (2017: 101).

## Conclusion

The fact that ideational and ideological elements shift as political actors and social movements operate within their giving political opportunity and threat structures is not a new insight. It is, rather, a mainstay of social movement literatures (McAdam *et al.* 1996) and much good work on Islamist political movements (e.g.: Wiktorowicz 2004), including the contributions to this issue. At the same time, the fact that political actors are constrained and enabled by ideologies, by translocal political contexts is worth remembering as we consider what is possible and probable in the political terrain of the Middle East and North Africa. At a historical juncture where the only armed resistance to actions that various independent bodies within the UN have concluded constitute genocide has come in the form of Islamist groups, one is tempted to flatten the radical field into Islamist alternatives at their end. It is too often forgotten that political Islam only came to prominence on the world stage less than 50 years ago. The Muslim Brotherhood was established in Egypt in 1928 but remained relatively fringe until the 1967 War. More radical Islamic groups, bearing the names like "Islamic Jihad" or "Islamic Group", emerged throughout the mid to late 1970s. The highly oppressive Islamic Republic of Iran established in 1979 likely came as an unwelcomed as a surprise to the broader Iranian society that was protesting the brutality of the Shah's regime. Hezbollah emerged from the chaos of the Lebanese Civil War in 1982, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, out of a variety of militant currents—local and transnational—that were active in the country's Shi'a community during the 1960s and 1970s (Daher, Randolph 2019). Hamas traces its roots back to those who fought alongside *shaykh* Izz

al-Din al-Qassam and the Muslim Brotherhood, but is not established until 1987 during the first Intifada and after the PLO has shifted away from armed struggle toward diplomatic engagement (Baconi 2018). Too much popular discourse in the West treats political Islam like some lingering vestige of a primordial existence that the region needs to shake so it can catch up to the rest of the world—and continually faults it for failing to do so—which may be why the Arab uprisings took so many by surprise. The fact is that Islamism, when viewed contextually and relationally, is not only oppositional, not the only opposition, and not only one thing. Further, we might consider something Hudson (1972) noted regarding the first phases of the Palestinian resistance movement: that the “threat” it has posed has always consisted more of political and psychological factors than military ones. Current attempts to eradicate ideological threats through military means may well merely set the scene for the next ideological iteration.

In 1981, Sadiq al-‘Azm noted how “the impact of the Iranian revolutionary process”, drew together “former radicals, ex-communists, unorthodox marxists and disillusioned nationalists of one sort or another”, such that political Islam had come to replace “the familiar opposition of national liberation against imperialist domination by the more reactionary opposition of East against West” and “historical process may be moved by economic interests, class struggles and socio-political forces” by an understanding of Islam as “the ‘prime mover’ of history” (22). ‘Azm’s aim there was to criticize both those who would interpret events as such (and the list of Arab intellectuals he accuses is long, encompassing Edward Said, Adonis, Anwar ‘Abd al-Malik and a number of contributors to the daily *as-Safir*), as well as those who would fall under the sway of this ideological trend. While al-‘Azm’s critique is perhaps too sweeping in regard to the political commitments of those on the left whom he takes to task, it does point to something that is worth clarifying here: that while Islam can form and has formed a powerful register for resistance in the region, it should not be taken as the only or inevitable (let alone the most authentic) form resistance might take. To suggest would seem to fall into precisely the sort of Orientalism or Orientalism in reverse dynamic al-‘Azm drew attention to in his critique. At the same time, the Resistance Axis does not seem as simply and necessarily reactionary in the sense al-‘Azm suggests either. Rather, a longer view of resistance ideologies in the region demonstrates hybridity and liminality and that it is not just secular

thinkers and leftists but also Islamists that have changed and adapted over time. Islam as such is neither sufficient to explain the dynamics in the region, nor an idea that can be comprehend in isolation from the material conditions of economics, imperialism, settler colonialism and the like. Rather, what we see is another instance of broad political alliances drawing upon counterhegemonic narratives to resist dominant economic and political structures. Resistance may facilitate alliances and solidarities in the realm of ideas, but they emerge out of material conditions, and it is the changing of those material conditions that remain their ultimate goal.

The MENA region has faced a long history of external intervention—due to its strategic location, its energy resources, the investment of European policies in the Israeli settler-colonial project, among other factors. The interest in—and certainly one might argue need for—formulating resistance and resistance alliances to those interventions seems unlikely to fade soon. Thus, while the human propensity to resist oppression and aggression may be instinctive, the forms that resistance takes are shaped and bolstered by ideological frameworks—the solidarities, motivations, and meaning-making structures that give resistance its particular character, coherence, direction, and force.

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# Digital Preservation: Archiving to Explore the Intellectual History of Islamist-Leftist Encounters in the MENA Region

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## ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the development and academic value of the ILEMED Digital Archive, a project designed to explore the ideological interactions between Islamist and leftist movements in the MENA region. It outlines the digital humanities (DH) methodology used to transform rare political and intellectual documents and publications from the 1960s to the 2010s into an open-access resource. This undertaking involved expert-led curation, digital capture of source materials, meticulous Optical Character Recognition (OCR) correction, and a FAIR principles-aligned metadata schema based on Dublin Core, using EuroSciVoc as the primary controlled vocabulary.

The paper argues that this archive not only preserves a fragile historical record and democratizes access to knowledge but also promotes innovative research methodologies like “distant reading.” By empowering scholars to analyse discursive connections and reconstruct transnational intellectual networks, the project makes a meaningful contribution to both MENA studies and digital humanities.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Humanities; MENA Studies; Political Islam; Leftist Movements; Intellectual History; Digital Archiving.

## Introduction

The ILEMED<sup>2</sup> digital archive (<https://zenodo.org/communities/sapienza-iso-ilemed/>) represents a significant outcome of a research project focused on exploring the political interactions between Islamist and leftist movements in the MENA region through the 1960s – 2010s. Its creation aims to fill a notable gap at the crossroads of modern history and digital humanities. The archive documents concentrate on a period

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<sup>2</sup> ILEMED stands for: “Islamists and Leftists Encounters in the MENA Documentary Project”.

of profound crisis in secular pan-Arab nationalism. In the ensuing political and ideological transformation, political Islam emerged as a dominant mass ideology, fundamentally reshaping regional discourse (Kepel 2002; Bayat 2007). The relationship between the rising Islamist movements and established leftist currents, however, was not merely marked by conflict; it involved complex dialogues and polemics within shared discursive spaces. These intricate exchanges, often recorded in ephemeral intellectual journals, have been largely overlooked in academic research. To remedy this, the archive utilizes digital humanities (DH) methodologies to transform these fragile print materials into a robust, searchable digital resource (Borgman 2007; Berry 2012; Gold, Klein 2016). The archive's curatorial and open-access policies challenge traditional historical narratives and encourage the dissemination of knowledge. This paper thus seeks to answer the question: How was the ILEMED archive developed as a DH project, and what are the scholarly implications of a structured, open-access digital resource for the study of modern MENA political thought?

## Project Aims and Objectives

The primary objective of the project's digital archive was to merge preservation with the encouragement of new scholarship. The first goal was to preserve rare and deteriorating documents, safeguarding a historical record vulnerable to decay and, sometimes, also to censorship. The second was to democratize accessibility through an open-access initiative on the Zenodo<sup>3</sup> repository. This platform ensures long-term preservation and provides a stable digital object identifier (DOI) for every item. This approach seeks to eliminate geographic and financial barriers that often hinder field research, particularly for scholars in the MENA region.

The final objective was to promote innovative research methodologies. By producing machine-readable texts through Optical Character Recognition (OCR), the archive supports "distant reading" techniques, enabling scholars to track the evolution of key political concepts across the entire corpus in ways that manual reading cannot achieve (Cf., *inter alia*: Moretti 2013; Jockers 2013).

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<sup>3</sup> Zenodo (<https://zenodo.org/>) is a general-purpose open-access repository developed under the European OpenAIRE program and operated by CERN.

## The ILEMED Archive: Contents, Structure, and Access

The archive's collection is the result of expert curation by a team of junior and senior researchers specializing in the MENA region's intellectual history.<sup>4</sup> While the broader research project investigated seven key countries (Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia), this initial phase of the digital archive presents materials from four of these nations: Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, and Morocco. The collection is organized to highlight two primary ideological currents:

1. Leftist Publications: from a spectrum of leftist thought (communist, socialist, Arab nationalist) that provided platforms for theories on post-colonial liberation, anti-imperialism, and social justice.
2. Islamist Publications: Periodicals linked to various Islamist movements, which were central to articulating theories of Islamic governance and modernity.

Crucially, the primary criterion for selecting a specific article was not a rigid ideological label, but its role in fostering direct and indirect dialogue, polemics, and debates between these groups. Each entry comprises a fully digitized, OCR-processed material from the original document for computational analysis. It should be noted that some documents are not fully OCR-able due to limitations in image quality or constraints related to field photography. The sources of these journals are diverse, drawn from private collections, university libraries, and local institutions, creating a unique corpus rarely found in a single location.

The ILEMED Digital Archive is openly accessible on Zenodo as the community "ILEMED Project". Through the ILEMED community can be found all the documents and publications. This community hosts all the project's documents and publications, providing long-term preservation and stable citation options through DOIs. Users can browse the collection using Zenodo's search functionality to query detailed metadata by year, country, author, date, or subjects. The collection is searchable in English via keyword tags and context words provided in the descriptions. Every document can be read online or downloaded as a PDF file. The downloaded PDF includes an OCR layer, allowing in-document searching that facilitates both broad discovery and in-depth textual analysis in the original language.

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<sup>4</sup> Field documentary research was conducted with the help of Alessia Carnevale (Tunisia), Hossam El-Hamalawy (Egypt), Martina Biondi (Morocco) and Pietro Menghini (Iraq).

## Methodology

The archive's digitization strategy was adapted to the accessibility and condition of the source materials. Whenever possible, physical documents were digitized using flatbed scanners to create high-quality surrogates. For materials in remote or private collections, such as those from Iraq, researchers utilized digital photography, upscaling images to ensure the best possible capture under field conditions. This flexible approach was essential for assembling the corpus while retaining the "artefactual qualities" of the originals (Kirschenbaum 2008). To enable computational analysis, these images were processed using the open-source Tesseract OCR engine, which supports Arabic, Persian, and French. Recognizing the high error rates inherent in these scripts, all OCR outputs underwent rigorous manual review and correction to certify data integrity.

A structured metadata schema, inspired by Dublin Core<sup>5</sup>, was implemented to enhance resource discoverability. To index subjects effectively, the archive adopted EuroSciVoc<sup>6</sup> as its primary controlled vocabulary, supplemented by non-standardized keywords chosen to capture culturally specific nuances. This comprehensive strategy, tailored to the Zenodo repository's infrastructure, assures the archive adheres to the FAIR Principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) through standardized metadata and open-access protocols (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2016).

## Scholarly Contribution and Literature Review

The ILEMED archive contributes to three pivotal scholarly conversations. First, it enriches the growing body of work on "archival activism", which seeks to preserve the histories of marginalized communities and their counter-narratives (Flinn 2007; Cifor 2016; Lin 2017). Second, it strengthens the developing field of digital humanities within MENA studies, complementing large-scale platforms such as the Digital

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<sup>5</sup> Dublin Core consists of 15 metadata elements for describing various resources, including Title, Creator, Subject, Date, Format, and Description.

<sup>6</sup> EuroSciVoc, the European Science Vocabulary, is a multilingual taxonomy used by the EU's CORDIS to classify EU-funded research projects. Based on the OECD's Frascati Manual, it employs natural language processing to enhance searchability and interoperability within the European research community.

Library of the Middle East (DLME) by offering a thematically focused, curated collection. Finally, the archive provides a finer understanding of historiography surrounding leftist and Islamist movements. It allows scholars to empirically investigate the ideological transformations that predate and follow the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, directly addressing the postcolonial critique of Orientalism by foregrounding the region's own intellectual production and moving beyond the distorting frameworks that have historically dominated its study (Said 1978).

## Results and Implications for Research

The ILEMED archive's paramount scholarly impact stems from its thematic center on ideological exchange, which distinguishes it from broader digital repositories. This curated scope, combined with OCR-enabled full-text search, allows researchers to move beyond a limited canon of texts to explore the broader intellectual landscape. For example, scholars can now systematically trace how leftist terminology (e.g., *Imperialism*, *Colonialism*, *Labor movement*, *Human rights*) intersects with Islamist literature or investigate discussions on secularism across different national contexts. This functionality reveals solid evidence of discursive cross-pollination and facilitates the reconstruction of transnational dialogues with greater precision.

By providing machine-readable texts, the archive shifts research possibilities away from dependence on a few classic texts toward a more extensive, data-driven exploration of the intellectual field. This empowers scholars to map intellectual networks, identify conceptual borrowings, and reconstruct debates in their full complexity, setting it apart from discovery platforms or archives of non-searchable images.

## Conclusion

The ILEMED Digital Archive represents a milestone of importance for both MENA Studies and Digital Humanities. For historians, it preserves and provides global access to an invaluable collection of primary sources crucial for crafting nuanced narratives of the region's contemporary intellectual history. For the digital humanities community, it serves as a methodologically transparent model for creating a thematically focused, multilingual archive of non-Western materials. The completion of this first phase of building the ILEMED

archive is not an end but a beginning; the ILEMED archive is planned to be expandable, and some other original leftist and Islamist publications and documents are already available for archiving, provided adequate scholarly interest, partnership, and financing are secured. By converting delicate documents into FAIR data, the ILEMED archive establishes a new foundation for intellectual inquiry, empowering a new generation of researchers to study the significant political dialogues of the past and their lasting relevance.

## Overview of ILEMED Archive Holding

Country	Ideological Current	Type	Publication Title
Egypt	Leftist	Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>al-Intifāḍ</i></li> <li>• <i>al-Shararā</i></li> <li>• <i>al-Ishtirākī</i></li> <li>• <i>al-Ishtirākīyya al-Thawriyya</i></li> <li>• <i>Awrāq Ishtirākīyya</i></li> </ul>
		Book	<i>The Prophet and the Proletariat</i>
		Website	<i>Ishtirākī Portal</i>
Iraq	Islamist	Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>al-Aḍwā'</i></li> <li>• <i>al-Najaḥ</i></li> <li>• <i>Risāla al-Islām</i></li> </ul>
	Leftist	Journal	<i>al-Mirbad</i>
		Congress Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Fifth Congress of the Iraqi Communist Party</i></li> <li>• <i>Sixth Congress of the Iraqi Communist Party</i></li> </ul>
Morocco	Leftist	Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Lamalif</i></li> <li>• <i>L'Avant-garde</i></li> <li>• <i>Aṭṭalaba (Ar)/ Attalaba (Fr)</i></li> <li>• <i>al-ṭālib al-maghribī (Ar.) / L'Étudiant marocain (Fr.)</i></li> </ul>
Tunisia	Islamist	Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>al-Fajr</i></li> <li>• <i>al-Ma'rifā</i></li> <li>• <i>al-Mujtama'</i></li> <li>• <i>15*21 majalla li-l-fikr al-Islāmi al-mustaqbal</i></li> </ul>

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## Authors' Biographical Notes

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