

Trabulsi, Fawwaz. *Šurat Al-fatī Bi L-’aḥmar: ’ayyām Fī S-salam Wa L-ḥarb*. Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 1998. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.¹

On the Arab scene, the collapse of the union between Egypt and Syria convulsed the Arab nationalist movement and opened up a chain of reconsiderations, crises and divisions that raised questions about the economic and social implications of Arab nationalism. In fact something more difficult and complex was thrown open to discussion: what should be the sequencing and the priorities between the three manifestations of the nationalist trinity: unity, freedom or socialism? There were disagreements and schisms in the Baath Party over this and these became more intense after the Baath Party took power in Syria and Iraq. The Nasser regime's response to Syrian secession was apparently to turn in on itself and adopt more radical economic, social and political policies: nationalisations, criticism of the bureaucracy, the launch of the National Charter, the creation of a vanguard party inside the Arab Socialist Union, etc. The fledgling Algerian experiment had an obvious effect in this period, as a radical programme that organically linked nationalist and social issues and offered a creative solution for agriculture (*autogestion* or workers' self-management), as well as other new proposals to bring the left together in the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). The birth of the Palestinian Fatah movement brought a distinctive response to the same problematic, and the call for "Palestine as the way to unity" replaced the slogan "Unity as the way to liberate Palestine". But this substitution created more problems than it solved, as we will discover later.

The discussion reached out to include the communist parties. The Egyptian, Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi parties reconsidered their positions on Arab unity, the Arab nationalist movement and Abdel Nasser in ways that produced contradictory reactions and divisions. The reconsiderations were at cross purposes - the Arab nationalist movements moved to the left, while in the communist movement the reviews were in a nationalist direction or had a nationalist problematic, without the two necessarily meeting.

Lebanon for its part had economic and social concerns raised by Chehabism and by the revelations in the famous IRFED report on class differences and disparities in growth between the regions and sections of Lebanese society. Conflict broke out between the Chehabists and their opponents, and the latter scored a significant victory when they prevented President Chehab from obtaining a second term. On the other hand, the start of President Charles

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Helou's presidency saw a revival of populist and social movements. The social base of Chehabism, which was made up of the Phalangist Party on one side and the bloc of Kamal Jumblatt and the left on the other, started to split in the face of those movements. The Btekhney Festival, promoted by Jumblatt and the leftist parties in the summer of 1965 to defend the rights of farmers, was a landmark for those movements in that split. Lebanese society began to discover that the country had remote peripheries, poor people and shantytowns that were proliferating on the edges of the cities. For the first time the refrain that "foreigners are stealing the livelihood of the Lebanese" became common and people began to associate poverty with foreigners and the spectre of Karl Marx that loomed on the Syrian-Lebanese border when Salah Jadid was in power in Damascus. While al-Amal newspaper called for national mobilisation to confront the socialist threat that was on the march from Masnaa on the Syrian border, the Rahbani brothers in their play *Hala and the King* spoke out to warn the leaders: "When poverty gets hungry, it'll eat the king." But the king was oblivious, along with a large part of his subjects.

The collapse of Intra Bank helped to expose the deep crisis in the structure of the Lebanese economy and the banking sector that dominated it, pointing to a decline in Lebanon's role as financial mediator in the world of petrodollars. The local coalition hostile to Chehabism initially tried to exploit the crisis, to serve its cause in its conflict with the followers of the former president. The call then went out for the "ruling class alliance" to reunite and for the one hundred dominant families to face the danger that was bearing down on them all. Then there was an attempt to ignore the many lessons that could be learned from the crisis but that were soon overtaken by the war of June 1967.

In that same period the first cells of Palestinian liberation movements appeared and we started to get used to their names and their clandestine operatives in the American University and in the camps. In the offices of the al-Muharrir newspaper, where I worked in the cultural department, Ghassan Kanafani was watching these beginnings, tracking news of them with the appetite of both a novelist and an activist, as he burned cigarettes voraciously, his nerves always on edge, sipping unbelievable quantities of coffee sweetened with saccharin. Ghassan once told us the story of two young men from the camps who were detained while trying to cross the Lebanese-Israeli border at Tell al-Nahhas and accused of smuggling. They tried without success to deny the charge, saying that they only wanted to go back to Palestine, but who then would believe that anyone would want to go back to Palestine simply to go back to Palestine?

"Socialist Lebanon"

Seven people including two women initiated the meetings that led to the foundation of the Socialist Lebanon movement. Professionally, we were either in education or the media, and those of us with political party experience had acquired it in the Baath Party. We were joined by some individuals from the American University and the Nabaa group, and some Palestinian, Yemeni and Iraqi students. There were also some people we had expropriated from the Communist Party. We had contacts with representatives of the Chinese bloc in that party, Nihad Hashishu and Comrade Antoon, who was cheerful, shy and mysterious and who concealed his real name from us for many years. He was also in touch with the Leninist tendency that was driven by Nakhla Mutran, Edmond Aoun and Nassib Nemer. Oddly, they were influenced by reformist Italian communism critical of Stalinism and at the same time supportive of the leadership of Khaled Bakdash and his continued tutelage over the Lebanese Communist Party.

It wasn't long before some of us decided to suspend the process of forming a new movement and to join the Leninist tendency. These comrades, including Wadah Sharara and Christian Ghazi, stayed there several months but then came back to us disappointed. We refounded the group: one of the founding members had left us after winning first prize in the national lottery. The incident was remarkable for its humorous aspect, without that meaning there was a definite causal relationship between the good fortune of the comrade in question and his leaving the group. At first we would sign our writings "The Tanious Shaheen Group" after the leader of the peasant uprising in Kesrawan in 1858 but later we were known by the name of the publication that we put out - "Socialist Lebanon".

In his political memoir, Wadah Sharara has provided an incisive sociological diagnosis of the environment in which the Socialist Lebanon movement and later the Communist Action Organisation developed – among the second generation of rural migration to the city. He has also given an elaborate analysis of the rituals of the organisation (secrecy, methods of communication, the role of publishing, pseudonyms etc.) But the strange thing about his memoir is that the narrator is invisible: Wadah didn't want to talk about his role in the experiment or else he wrote in the first person plural rather than the singular. Whatever the case, Wadah's role was as crucial for the ideas that the group came up with and the policies it adopted as it was for the internal rituals that it followed and that he later analysed so well from an anthropological perspective, if not without irony.

Codenames

In party activity, you spend decades living under an assumed name, a name that with time becomes more precious to you than the name your parents gave you at birth. The first thing I acquired in Socialist Lebanon was my codename. I didn't choose it myself: it was chosen for me by chance and I adopted it. As far as I can recall, Sami Suweidan, who was the most astute and energetic of the first student activists to join us, was constantly picking up "contacts" in secondary schools, the university, in the Ellija district where he lived and even in his village in the south. Sami picked up these "contacts" and referred them to me, because at the time I, together with Yolla Politi, was in charge of student activities. In the party lexicon, especially during the initial period of enthusiasm, people were divided into two classes: those who had become "one of us" (in their party language the Iraqis call them *khosh walad*, or good lads) and those who were waiting. Those who were waiting, and they were far from being few, were divided in turn into two groups, with no third option available: those with whom we had succeeded in making contact, and those with whom we had not yet made contact. Anyway, Sami made an appointment for me to meet one of the new "contacts" - that is, one of the people in the first group of the second class, and since he didn't want to disclose to him the real name of the person he would meet, because of our need for strict secrecy, he introduced me to him as Comrade Bassam. I didn't object to the name at the time or at any other time, and it stuck to me throughout my time in the party, and by that I mean for a quarter of a century. I won't deny that Comrade Bassam and I got along fine. Just like him, I often smiled and I still do, which is something I find hard to explain after everything that has happened, and I'm wary of looking into it too profoundly in case I discover something I don't like. My frequent smiles might be misleading. If they reveal a certain shyness, they might also suggest that I am more friendly and tolerant than I really am. But that is a story to be told on another occasion.

The fact that I was happy with my new name was not the most important thing about the fact that I adopted it. I had lost my original codename, and there's a short story to that. When I translated Trotsky's *Permanent Revolution*, my comrades in "the organisation", the name by which we called our group, asked me to use a pseudonym to avoid provoking the sensitivities that prevailed in the communist movement about the banished Bolshevik leader and so that the organisation as a whole would not have to bear the burden of being accused of Trotskyism, which it would do almost anything to avoid, especially as the organisation, including me, had dissociated itself from Trotskyism. As my pseudonym for the translation, which was published by Dar al-Talia in 1965, I chose the name Bashar Abu Samra. The first name had

the same pattern as my real name and the family name was the name of the clan branch to which the family belonged. It was a simple name and I soon used it in a number of writings on several occasions. But something unexpected occurred. After one marathon meeting of the organisation, in the early hours of the morning, while we were hurrying towards Bab Idris to have a cup of sahlab and some konafa at Jalilati's, we saw someone sticking a death notice on a lamp post. We went up to find out what it was about, and the person who had died was none other than Bashar Abu Samra. I was shocked that my namesake had died, while my colleague was roaring with laughter. But now I'm surprised that, faced with that piece of paper, bordered in black and announcing the death of Bashar Abu Samra, it never occurred to me that Bashar might have been assassinated by one of Stalin's clandestine agents. My reaction was on another plane altogether. Instead of seeing in the piece of paper confirmation that no one but me would bear that name, I took the death of my namesake as a bad omen and decided not to use the name again.

The pseudonym of Trotsky's translator was dead but the charge of Trotskyism continued to pursue me. Despite this matter of deaths and death notices, the codenames that parties used in those days promised joy, hope and romance – Bashar the herald of good news, Zahi the resplendent, Bassam the smiler, Jamil Shuayshia the handsome and radiant. I am talking about the time before people with names such Aboul Ghadab, “the father of anger”, appeared on the scene, let alone Aboul Mout, “the father of death”, or Aboul Jamajim, “the father of skulls”.

The New Left: Elitist or Populist?

Socialist Lebanon created an extremely fertile climate for political education, debate and dialogue. It was a workshop for intense intellectual creativity and political activism. I imagine that many of those who shared this experience would agree with me that those years in their lives left an indelible impression on their personal development.

I don't think I would be exaggerating if I spoke in this respect about an innovative Marxism that, in order to break free of the mechanistic and deterministic aspects of Soviet Marxism, tried to reread the source texts by Marx and Engels and took advantage of Antonio Gramsci's and Louis Althusser's contributions, which criticised the excessive emphasis on economic factors and emphasised instead the special role of the political domain and of the cultural moment in producing the forces of change.

Although our criticism of the Soviet experiment was novel and daring, although we rejected Soviet patronage over other countries and other communist parties, although we openly denounced the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and took a neutral position on the Sino-Russian conflict, it must be said that we never thought about the question of democracy in the experiment of constructing socialism, but merely advocated correcting the course of the Soviet experiment by building “socialist relations of production” and emphasising the political, ideological and organisational leadership of the working class.

This was similar to our approach when we criticised the Nasserist experiment, making use of the writings of Anouar Abdel-Malek, Mahmoud Hussein and Samir Amin – a criticism that illuminated the flaws in the experiment, without which it was impossible to understand how easily the Nasserist system was dismantled after the death of Abdel Nasser. Now, however, I think that that criticism was rather unjust and that we might have been demanding more of Abdel Nasser than he claimed for himself. It was an injustice that is evident when we take into account the uncritical way we were later drawn to follow the Palestinian resistance.

In a serious and novel reading of some aspects of the Lebanese system, several studies, which we later brought together in the book *Socialist Action and the Contradictions of the Lebanese Situation*, emphasised the service-based and intermediary role of the economic system and the role of trade and the banking sector in constricting growth in productive sectors, limiting the labour market and creating monopolies. Unlike a Marxist school that says that capitalism sweeps away all pre-existing structures, I think we identified the way in which pre-capitalist structures are renovated in order to play a role in a capitalist society: the historical coexistence between the bourgeoisie of finance and trade and previously feudal families, and the role of agriculture-based leaders (political feudalism) as a political team ruling in the name of the bourgeoisie and serving their interests. In sectarianism we saw the top-down political and ideological structure of the Lebanese capitalist system, not just an ideological instrument to mislead people or a means to split the ranks of the masses.

Perhaps our most obvious contribution was our critical analysis of the Chehabist project, which was unlike the delusions that were dominant in leftist circles at the time. We saw Chehabism as an attempt to rationalise and regulate capitalist development and at the same time as a project to unify and expand the capitalist market by developing the peripheries and building infrastructure. Although we did not overlook the aspects of the project that

tried to build up the state and ensure its relative independence from the traditional centres of power, we may have misjudged the importance of that attempt and the extent to which the bourgeois elements involved in finance, trade and services were resistant to it. We also overlooked something that was doubly important in light of the earlier experiment – the role of Chehabism in addressing sectarianism indirectly through regional development, public services and social insurance.

The organisational structure of any group held together by secrecy is tied to the kind of economic activity that is dominant among the members. Our organisation was an organisation of intellectuals and it gave exaggerated importance to intellectual improvement. That could turn into purely quantitative improvement, with private relationships arising in it such as those that usually arise between teachers and pupils, or between pupils and the outstanding students among them. In turn these relationships soon hold true for organisational relationships, with all that means in terms of identification, envy, admiration, rivalry and repression. Discussion occupies a very important place at the heart of these relationships, and usually what mattered in the discussions was skill in argumentation and a talent for using concepts or for citing original texts - in short, anything that could silence your rivals rather than convinces them. A comrade was once introduced to me as “an excellent comrade” because he was strong in the classics, which meant that he had a command of classical Greek philosophy. I was surprised at the assumed link between that skill and competence as a party member.

This intellectual approach to the real world was also evident in our political education system: members had to read the source texts of Marx, Engels and Lenin, along with the commentaries and interpretations, on the assumption that understanding and mastering the theoretical concepts was an essential prelude to understanding the programmes and policies derived from those theories. I still believe that we were putting the cart before the horse, in the sense that what matters in relations between the party and the public is the ability to convey objectives, agendas and policies and not necessarily the theoretical and doctrinal instruments for producing them. At that time, however, we wanted to give people the horse and the cart, and maybe starting with the cart.

What saved Socialist Lebanon from being just another version of the vanguard ideology-based parties was that the other side of this intellectual elitism, its antithesis and what compensated for it was an extreme populism, a special focus on grassroots activity, grassroots structures such as workers'

committees and student committees and the fact that it gave particular importance to public meetings in schools, universities and places of work.