

After the Defeat, The Arab Left on the Offensive

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June 1967, an Endless Six-Day War · The defeat of the Arab armies in June 1967 did not immediately lead to the rise of the Islamist movements. During a brief period, the left filled the political void. In November, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) came into existence, led by the National Liberation Front (NLF) which had been fighting the British since 1963. In June 1969, it was the Marxist wing of the NLF which took over the young Republic. While the Arab armies were in a sorry state, a red dawn was rising.

1967 was a “strange defeat”. [1] On the one hand, the collapse of the Arab countries following their defeat by Israel was redolent of the 1948 Nakba: many Palestinians went into exile. On the other hand, there was a sweeping radicalization of the left. A new cycle of protest began in the Arab world where the struggle of the Vietnamese had a powerful echo. Aden might just be a second Cuba. [2] China appeared less ossified than the USSR: the cultural revolution of 1966 was being carried out by the youthful Red Guards. In the Arab world, the radicalization of the left after the 1967 defeat was also promoted by young people who looked to Europe. Thus the May 1968 events in France were studied closely by Tunisian, Lebanese or Palestinian students in exile, who soon made contact with the “Maoist” Gauche prolétarienne (GP).

CENTRALITY OF THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION

This radicalization of the left had been brewing since the mid-sixties. [3] In 1965, Ba’athist activists in Syria founded the Arab Revolutionary Workers Party led by Yassine Hafez and Elias Morqos, two intellectuals working towards a synthesis of Marxism and Arab nationalism. Within the Ba’ath party itself, a group of young officers led by Sala Jedid fomented a coup on 23 February 1966. It was now the left wing of the Ba’ath party that held the reins of power in Damascus, at least until 1970, when Salah Jedid was ousted by Hafez Al-Assad, his Defense minister.

In Lebanon, a “new left” arose in 1965. Three young students, Fawwa Traboulsi, Waddah Sharara and Ahmad Beydoun founded Socialist Lebanon (*Lubnan Ishtiraki*), which sought to define an alternative to the Chinese and Soviet paths to socialism—the Moscow-Beijing split was consumed—while a Leninist Current (*al-Tayar al-linini*), soon to become the Union of Lebanese Communists, gradually broke away from the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP). In Tunisia, the Groupe d’études et d’action socialiste (GEAST) and the review *Perspectives* had been criticizing Habib Bourgiba since 1963.

With the 1967 defeat, the radicalization of the Left gained momentum throughout the Arab world. This was the time of the “new left” (*al-Yassar al-jadid*). However, we must not be misled by this designation : any comparison with the French new left—Jeunesses communistes révolutionnaires, Union des jeunesses communistes marxistes-léninistes—has its limits. For the most part, the Arab “new left” movements did not originate in communist parties but in Arab nationalism. They were

concerned foremost with the issues of national independence and decolonization, and Palestine occupied a central position.

It was the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) which was most deeply affected by the June 1967 defeat: its members, from the Gulf to Lebanon were prompted to give nationalism a Marxist twist and Marxism a nationalist twist. Within their ranks, the Palestinians were to play a key role. Taking their ideas from a professor at the American University in Beyrouth, Constantin Zureik, the ANM had been led since the early fifties by a Palestinian in his thirties studying medicine in Lebanon, George Habash. Associated with him were Waddi Haddad, a Palestinian refugee from Safed and Hani Al-Hindi, a Syrian having fought against the Zionist militias in 1948 with the Phalanges of Arab Sacrifice (Kata'eb al-Fida al-arabi). The ANM had Nasserite sympathies and during the fifties and sixties it spread to Lebanon, Syria and Yemen and took part in the struggle against the British in South-Yemen from 1963 to 1967.

However, the Arab defeat of June 1967 led the ANM to revise its strategy completely. The hopes placed in Nasser's Egypt were dashed. This was the second disappointment experienced by ANM militants after the breaking up of the United Arab Republic created in 1958 by Syria and Egypt. Within the Palestinian national movement, George Habash had to deal with Yasser Arafat's rival Fatah, which was the first to launch armed struggle against Israel in 1965, from bases in South Lebanon and on the Jordanian border. It now became necessary to focus on Palestine and rely less on the Arab regimes for support.

FROM TUNIS TO ADEN

The 1967 defeat had a paradoxical effect on the ANM, which gradually fell apart. However, its various national branches gave birth to political entities which would have significant roles to play in the future. In December 1967 George Habash and Waddi Haddad founded the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP): the time had come for a "people's war of liberation" partly inspired by the Maoist model. The reference to Marxism-Leninism became a keynote: in Lebanon, ANM activists, gathered around Mohsen Ibrahim, founded The Organization of Lebanese Socialists (OLS) in 1969. A year later, they created the Organization of Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL): this symbol of the new left associated former members of the ANM and Socialist Lebanon, defectors from LCP who had formed the Union of Lebanese Communists, plus some Maoists and Trotskyites. It was a new left profile that would be hard to imagine in Western Europe. During the civil war that started in April 1975, the OCAL, which no longer exists today, formed an alliance with Kamal Jumblatt, the Druze leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and with the Communist Party. Later it was among the organizations that founded the Lebanese National Resistance Front (Jammul) in the summer of 1982 to resist the Israeli invasion. During the Lebanese civil war, the OCAL had close links with the Fatah and Nayaf Hawatmeh's Marxist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The OCAL also had other rival formations on the far left, such as the Arab Socialist Action Party founded in the mid-seventies by Lebanese supporters of Habash's PFLP.

While Palestine occupied a central place in the emergence of the new left, another fascinating experiment was taking place in Yemen and Oman. Since 1969, the National Liberation Front had established a socialist regime in South-Yemen, modeled after the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Soviet republics. The People's Democratic Republic of South-Yemen provided a rear base for the Palestinian organizations. In Oman, since 1963, the Dhofar Liberation Front had been fighting Sultan Taimour, backed by the British. With the support and influence of South-Yemen, the Omani guerrilla moved towards Marxism and took the name Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf. [4]

And finally the new left movement spread to the Maghreb as well. While in Algeria the NLF was

firmly in command, having eliminated since 1965 the leftist, “self-management” faction led by Ahmed Ben Bella, it was in Morocco and Tunisia that protest movements developed, especially on campuses. The Moroccan movement Forward (Ila-l-Amam) was founded in 1970, while in Tunis Le Travailleur tunisien had replaced the Groupe d'études et d'action socialiste (GEAST) since 1969. The new organization bore a dual relationship to Arab nationalism and to Marxism. Some of its members came from the Ba'ath party: the Chebbi brothers, Ahmed and Issam, the first of whom would become minister of regional development in the first transitional government which followed the fall of Zinedine El-Abidine Ben-Ali in January 2011.

The young Tunisians protesting the rule of Habib Bourgiba were also influenced by French “Maoism”. Le Travailleur tunisien actively supported the Palestinian struggle [5] and some of its members trained with Palestinian organizations in Lebanon. It also arabized its Marxism: French, the usual language of its review Perspectives tunisiennes, was gradually abandoned.

These new left movements which emerged following the Arab defeat of June 1967 did not necessarily cleave to the European model. Of course the “working class question”—and that of the peasantry—loomed large in Lebanon in the late sixties, and in the early seventies there were major strikes in the Ghandour factory in Beirut and among the tobacco workers, while the austerity policies adopted in Egypt after the June 1967 defeat were fought by taxi drivers and textile workers among others. But it was definitely the Palestinian revolution, the vanguard of the Arab revolution, that played the key role in the emergence of these new left movements, which often came out of the Arab nationalist movement rather than the Communist parties. Frequently tied to the USSR, these were deeply affected by the June defeat and also went through a period of leftist radicalization.

THE COMMUNIST PARTIES' STRATEGIC SHIFT

Since the mid-sixties, student activists—but also the younger officers—were more inclined to look to the NMA and the Ba'ath party than to the various CPs, and this was because the latter had long been paying the price of their alignment with the Soviet Union. For indeed, the USSR had accepted the plan to divide Palestine in November 1947 and recognized Israel, Stalin's priority having been to weaken the British position in the Middle East.

Israel's occupation of the Left Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Syrian Golan Heights and the Egyptian Sinai in the summer of 1967 was a game changer for the communist parties. They distanced themselves from the recognition of Israel and pledged support to the Palestine resistance movements. It was the CPL that made this strategic move first and most clearly. Its general secretary Nicolas Chaoui published several articles in the Party press calling for Communists to step up the fight against Israel.

The second CPL Congress in July 1968 was devoted to the re-foundation of the Party: a new, younger, leadership was elected. Undertaking a radical self-criticism, the Party became more responsive to the issues of Arab unity and recognized the central role of the Palestinian question in the “Arab liberation movement.” The Third Congress in January 1972 sent out a call for unity, no longer addressed to the Arab Communist Parties alone but to all “progressive” forces: the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Arab Socialist Union which had absorbed the Egyptian Communists since 1965, the Yemeni National Liberation Front, the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'ath parties. Not only did the CPL denounce Israel but also Saudi Arabia and other “reactionary regimes.” And among the class alliances advocated, it recognized the presence of “*anti-colonialist elements within the petty bourgeoisie.*” [6]

The post-1967 years were also marked by the rise of armed struggle against Israel: the Lebanese Communist party did not merely ally itself with the Fatah and the PLO. In 1970, it founded the

Partisan Forces (*Quwat al-Ansar*) of South Lebanon, with the support of the Syrian, Jordanian and Iraqi Communist parties. As for the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) led by Khaled Bagdash, it had allied itself with the Syrian Ba'ath party since February 1966, and joined Salah Jedd's government. Its third congress in June 1969 also approved the principle of armed struggle against Israel. However, after 1970 when Hafeez Al-Assad took power, the SCP followed to the letter the policies of the Syrian Ba'ath—including the latter's June 1976 decision to fight the PLO in Lebanon. A Party for Communist Action in Syria, founded that same year, challenged the SCP's line and called for the overthrow of the Assad regime.

Prior to 1967, there had been two reasons for the decline of communist influence in the Arab world. First of all, their alignment with the Soviet policies concerning the division of Mandate Palestine: the MNA and the Ba'ath Party had largely outflanked them on this issue. And second of all, their underestimation of the importance of Arab unity: by opposing the creation of the United Arab Republic, they had also alienated many young officers and students who were sympathetic to a rhetoric of Arab unity and wanted to move beyond the nation states created by the former colonial powers with their mandate system. After 1967, there came a major shift, whose main beneficiary was the Lebanese Communist Party. Through its alliance with the Palestinians but also with the new left embodied by the Organization for Communist Action in Lebanon, it became a key player in the Lebanese civil war after 1975, and in the resistance to the Israeli occupation of South-Lebanon after 1978.

WHAT REMAINS TODAY OF THE POST-67 ARAB LEFT?

In 2017 the new left movements which arose after the 1967 defeat have run out of steam. The OCAL and Le Travailleur Tunisien have disappeared. The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen collapsed at the beginning of the nineties. The Party of Communist Action in Syria, which in 2011 advocated a moderate opposition to Bachar Al-Assad and opposed armed rebellion, nevertheless lost its chief leader, Abdel Aziz, who "disappeared" on the highway to the Damascus airport in September 2012, kidnapped by governmental security forces.

Yet there are a few survivors. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine has its MPs on the Palestinian Legislative Council and can still attract tens of thousands of supporters to its rallies in Gaza. The Lebanese Communist Party is still very much alive: it has small grassroot bases in South Lebanon and the Bekaa valley, some labor union support and it did quite well in the May 2016 local elections. In Tunisia the MPs of the Popular Front and Workers' Party are the heirs of Le Travailleur Tunisien.

Unlike the French "May 68", the Italian equivalent is often described as "creeping", with a high point in the second half of the seventies. The post-67 radical movements in the Arab world can also be called "creeping": no "big nights," no general strikes or coordinated revolution, but a "strange defeat" which initiated a cycle of civil unrest and armed revolts which lasted over a decade. In challenging the Arab regimes or opposing Israel, the new left stole the march on political Islam by a good many years. But the red cycle gradually died out: the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the rise, throughout the eighties, of Islamist organizations—from the Hezbollah to Hamas and including the Tunisian Movement of Islamic Tendency (Ennahdha)—pulled the carpet out from under the radical left, most often at the time by appropriating parts of their anti-imperialist agenda. [7]

So what remains of that period? Political formations in Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia steadfastly maintain their heritage. Social movements which occasionally revive those old demands: an intellectual heritage too, and a politics of memory, of a somewhat melancholic cast, with documentary films, a patient archiving of photographs and posters from the golden age of the PLO or the publication of former activists' memoirs. While waiting for better days.

Translated from French by [Noël Burch](#)

[Nicolas Dot-Pouillard](#)

Research fellow with the Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO) in Beirut. Core researcher in the Wafaw programme. Author of *Tunisie: la révolution et ses passés*, Iremmo/L'Harmattan, 2013.

Nicolas Dot-Pouillard

Noël Burch

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Footnotes

[1] Bloch, Marc (1968) [1946]. *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* [L'Étrange Défaite]. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

[2] Chris Kutschera, « [L'étoile rouge pâlit-elle à Aden ?](#) », *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 1982.

[3] On the history of nationalist and left-wing movements in the Arab world since 1948, see the authoritative collection of essays edited by Muhammad Jamal Barout: *Al-Ahzab wa-l-Harakat wa-l-Tandhimat al-Qawmiyya fi-l-Watan al-'arabi* (Nationalist Parties, Movements and Organizations in the Arab Homeland), Centre d'études pour l'unité arabe, Beyrouth, 2012 (in Arabic).

[4] Jean-Pierre Viennot, « La guérilla du Dhofar entre dans une nouvelle phase », *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 1972.

[5] Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, « [La Tunisie et ses Palestines. De Habib Bourguiba à Umran Kilani Muqaddami](#) », IFPO, 29 June 2012.

[6] Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismaël, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*, University Press of Florida, 1998.

[7] Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, « [De Pékin à Téhéran, en regardant vers Jérusalem : la singulière conversion à l'islamisme des "maos" du Fatah](#) », *Cahiers de l'Institut Religioscope*, no. 2, December 2008.