



**PART I**  
**Party families**

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## 2

# THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ARAB LEFT

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### Introduction

The Arab Left has been a foundational actor in Arab politics. This broad term refers to a multitude of political parties labeling themselves as ‘socialist’ or ‘communist.’ They have worked and mobilised for electoral gains, social change, anti-imperial foreign policies, or political take-overs, though rarely succeeded (Ismael 1976, ix; Darraj Barrouf 2000; Resta 2018). The label is also used more widely for individuals, intellectual groups, workers’ unions, or guerilla movements espousing Marxist principles. This is a testimony to the Arab Left’s wide-ranging popularity, but raises issues over what the label covers.

In the absence of a single definition, there is a considerable consensus over the Arab Left’s history told as a ‘rise and fall.’ Despite its popularity, the Arab Left never lived up to the promise of its ideals. Yet, its history is entangled in the important moments of Arab history, from the era of Arab Socialism to the Six-Days War defeat against Israel in June 1967 to the reverberations of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the New World Order following the Soviet Union’s demise. Within its domestic political context, the Arab Left has suffered under the weight of authoritarian repression and Islamist competition for popular support (Resta, 2018). Recent historiographical studies on the ‘New Arab Left’ after the Arab uprisings attest to the never-ending interest in its resurgence as a democratising force (Haugbølle, 2019; Hilla and Hermann, 2014).

This chapter historicises the Arab Left and anchor in its political parties rather than the movement as a whole.<sup>1</sup> It discusses its changing typologies during the twentieth century amidst changing Arab politics. We consider their changing forms, roles, social bases, ideological positioning and relationship with the regimes (Hudson, 1977; Catusse and Karam, 2013). This helps us avoid common limitations in writing the Arab Left’s history: from a quest for the ‘reasons for the defeat’ (including recriminations among former activists) to lengthy ideological and theoretical squabbles, to a nostalgic portrayal of the revolutionary era. Our goal is to draw out a variety of models and experiences across the Arab region from the Left wing in the Levant, the Maghreb and the Gulf, while connecting their history to the academic literature on democratisation and resilient authoritarianism.

The history of the Arab Left illustrates the challenges political parties face in the region. The Left, a victim of its own popularity, it was continuously targeted by the authorities; its leaders

and supporters jailed, and its parties banned, while lingering in the margins of decision-making. The Arab Left also suffered from internal fragmentation due to internal debates over the suitability of Marxist theory to Arab realities, criticism from religious conservatives, and tactical disagreements on whether to participate in limited political openings or remain in opposition. However, this chapter argues that left-wing parties should not be solely judged for their failures, but how they shaped modern Arab politics by politicising key social groups. This explains the continued interest in the Left despite its current limited political standing.

The chapter provides a historical overview of the four typologies of the Arab Left and it then offers an assessment of it since the Arab uprisings.

### **The first Arab parties: socialists, communists and the masses**

The first half of the twentieth century saw the radicalisation of bourgeois nationalist politics and the development of the first Arab communist parties. As the first Arab parties with mass membership, they formulated a suitable ideology for Arab culture and society (Ismael, 1976). They mobilised the urban middle classes and workers using modern techniques that allowed them to secure their political independence and usher in modern political life. These parties grew in strength, but a series of setbacks, from state repression to the Palestinian *Nakba*, drove them to extinction (Ismael, 1976).

The first parties were closely tied to the labour issue. Socialist ideas began spreading in the Arab world in the nineteenth century among intellectuals, but the first parties were formed by labor activists influenced by Marxist theories and the 1917 Revolution (Ismael, 2005; Rodinson, 1972; Halliday, 1997; Smolansky, 1974). During these early decades, the Soviet Union offered substantial support, including funding and logistical assistance and general policy directions, which, sometimes, clashed with local realities (Franzen, 2017).

Jewish migrants who galvanised workers on the ground (Franzen, 2017) established the two pioneer Communist parties in Egypt and Palestine. In Egypt, Joseph Rosenthal mobilised the Greek workers of Alexandria and progressively integrated Arabs in their ranks. During the 1919 Revolution, workers strikes shook the British protectorate and the Egyptian Communist Party was established in its wake. It took on the cause of the peasants – the *jellahin* – cultivating them as an oppressed class with revolutionary potential (Franzen, 2017). In Palestine, Rosenthal's daughter Charlotte was instrumental in establishing ties between the Comintern and the local Socialist Worker's Party. However, ethnic tensions hampered the party, as Jews rather than Arabs dominated it (Franzen, 2017). In the next decades, the party struggled with two competing aims: to Arabise the party's membership and to lead the struggle for workers' economic rights in a largely peasant country workforce, while facing the British colonial authorities. The party split along ethnic lines during tensions in Palestine in the 1930s (Budeiri, 2018; Swedenburg, 1996).

The following decade was marred by instances of confrontation and popular riots across the region. Arab communist parties played a leading role, grew their membership and disrupted public order to secure concessions from the colonial authorities (Lawrence, 2013). This includes the 1919 Egyptian Revolution, the 1925 Druze and Syrian Revolts, and the 1936 Great Arab Revolt in Palestine. These parties soon evolved from workers' rights to the struggle for independence and Comintern provided tactical instructions and these Arab political parties became centralised and well-drilled organisation, obeying to instructions from a central committee issuing ideological directions to local cells of militants. The Soviet Union gave its blessing to Comintern-affiliated parties to strike tactical alliances with the nationalist bourgeois classes in 1920. Communists vowed to keep the proletariat away from the bourgeoisie and break

these alliances after the achievement of national independence (Franzen, 2017; Ismael, 2009; Laqueur, 1959).

The Egyptian case shows the limits of these tactical alliances with bourgeois nationalists and the risks for communist fragmentation. After 1923, the Egyptian communists orchestrated a series of labor strikes against the British and the *Wafd* government, but the latter passed a series of anti-communist laws, arrested communist leaders and closed their headquarters thus putting down the communist movement (Lockman and Beinin, 1987; Ginat, 2011). In the next three decades, the party splintered into a multitude of organisations. In the mid-thirties, the Left embraced nationalism but remained unable to unify into a single force (Meijer, 2002; Azaola-Piazza, 2018). The one-time front Democratic Union (*al-Ittihad al-Dimuqrati*) broke into the Egyptian Movement of National Liberation (*al-Haraka al-Misriyya li-l-Taharrur al Watani*, or HAMITU from 1943 to 1947), New Dawn (*Al-Fajr al-Jadid* 1945) also known as the Workers' Vanguard (*Tali'at al-Ummal*). In the mid-1940s, they temporarily struck an alliance with the Left-leaning branch of the *Wafd*, which later broke away to form the Banner (*al-riya*) (Meijer 2002; Azaola-Piazza, 2018). Thus, the Egyptian Left came out fragmented from its temporary alliance with the national bourgeoisie.

The communist parties in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq all became leading forces in the inter-war years thanks to Moscow's support and mass recruitment among a radicalised middle class (Ismael and Ismael, 1998). At the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935, the Arab communists were instructed to fight fascism by recruiting massively among the masses rather than the professional classes (Franzen, 2017). However, this turn also reinforced party dogmatism and an increasing authoritarianism against internal dissent and external opponents. The Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party (SLCP), established in 1925, illustrates these dynamics. The Comintern fostered a new group of younger leaders, including Khaled Bakdash, Niqula Shawi and Farjallah Helou, who typically spent several years in the Soviet Union for training (Franzen, 2017). On his return to Lebanon, Bakdash oversaw the party's growing numbers and took over formally in 1932, remaining in power until later in life. Bakdash weathered several crises including the party splintering into a Syrian and Lebanese party in 1943 (Ismael and Ismael, 2005; Rodinson, 2015). He ran the party through a combination of manoeuvring and repression of internal dissent, including in his personal opposition to the LCP's Secretary General, Fajrallah Helou, assassinated in 1959 (Munoz, 2018). Similarly, the Iraqi Communist Party (1934) grew as the largest Arab party thanks to the professional classes and students who were inspired by the ideas of social justice and nationalism (Franzen, 2011). A vanguard emerged thanks to Comintern support, including the leader Yusuf Salman Yusuf, known as Comrade Fahd, who underwent training from 1935 to 1937 and led the party from 1938. His policy of infiltrating institutions such as the army prompted an anti-communist law and waves of repression in 1941 (Jabbar 2013; Franzen 2017). Hence, the examples in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq tell a similar story of national fronts, party institutionalisation, Soviet Union support, and professional and middle classes joining the party's ranks.

The Maghrebi communists evolved amidst the nationalist struggle and a lively workers' rights scene. The first cells of the French Communist party, which had focused on European workers early on, began integrating 'assimilated' Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians during the 1930s during a decade of anti-colonial riots (Julien 1956; Sivan, 1976; Bouria et al., 1981; Koulaksis and Meynier, 1985; Sebag, 2001; Drew, 2014). Parties took off thanks to their links to the workers movement. During the War of Independence, the Algerian Communist Party broke with the French mother organisation, and its leaders Sadek Hadjeres and Bachir Hadj Ali joined the armed National Liberation Front in 1955 (Le-Foll Luciani, 2018). Moroccan Leftists developed within the nationalist *Istiqlal* party and its leaders included Abderrahim Bouabid,

Mehdi Ben Barka, and Abdallah Ibrahim. They possessed strong mobilising techniques and were able to reach the professional classes while speaking to the masses thanks to their working-class origins. They turned these formations into political parties with political programs, mass membership structures and local cells, communicating a consistent ideology through party newspapers against colonialism (Zisenwine, 2010).

After securing national independence, these tactical alliances within united fronts often turned sour. The national bourgeoisies often prevailed in the contest for power and were wary of the communists' ability to mobilise the masses and middle classes. Furthermore, the Palestine *Nakba* proved the crucible for Arab communists. The Soviet Union supported the partition of Palestine in 1947 for geopolitical reasons, which put it on the wrong side of Arab public opinion (Franzen, 2017). The Syrian CP's offices were burned down in November 1947 and the authorities banned the party's newspaper. Communists in Iraq were similarly targeted, including the arrest and execution of its leader Comrade Fahd (Franzen, 2017). Arab Communist parties went underground to escape regime repression and popular disaffection, while King Hussein banned them in the 1950s in Jordan. As clandestine organisations, communist parties grew more radical. They introduced an armed struggle component to their repertoire, such as the Iraqi National Committee for Unity of Soldiers and Officers, (Franzen, 2017) but repression struck them.

The repressive turn was similarly fatal for the Maghribi parties. In Tunisia, Ferhat Hached was assassinated by settlers in 1952, leaving the field open for the neo-Destour Party and Bourguiba to take over the state. The socialist wing of the *Istiqlal* party broke off from the party in 1959 and suffered a wave of repression from 1962. After Algerian independence in 1962, the communists had close to 10,000 members. However, the new authorities banned the Communist Party of Algeria in 1965 in the name of national unity. Some communists began to integrate 'state-party structure' individually (Le-Foll-Luciani, 2018), while the most committed Marxists were rounded up, jailed or fled in exile after the coup against Ben Bella. Thus, here too, after independence, communists were the victims of the tactical alliance with the nationalists.

Mass Arab politics declined during the Cold War, after Khrushchev scaled down the Soviet Union's support, and reoriented its policy from communist take-overs to economic support for progressive Arab regimes. This proved costly for Arab communist parties: some negotiated this transition (such as Bakdash's SCP), others were incorporated in the state coalition (Egyptian and Algerian communists), and most faced state repression and went underground (Iraqi, Moroccan, and Tunisian communists). Generational shifts further undermined these historic parties. This period represents a mixed bag for the Arab Left. Franzen claims they failed in their political bids because they were caught between incompatible forces: Soviet communism and Arab nationalism (Franzen, 2017). None the less, these parties revolutionised society and politics by attracting middle classes and workers to a message of social justice, while introducing modern, mass political structures.

### **Arab socialist party-states: the Baath, Nasser, FLN, and the AMN**

The 1950s saw the state-party model assert itself among progressive Arab countries. It drew from the experience of socialists and communists to reinforce the authority of Nasser's Egypt, the Baath party in Syria and Iraq, the Arab Movement of Nationalists (AMN), and the *Front the Libération Nationale* in Algeria. Their commitment to the ideas of the Left varied between picking and choosing principles of social justice or merely paying lip service to them, while they continuously targeted 'autonomous' Marxists.

Two Syrians, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar, established The *Ḥizb al-Ba'ṯ al-'Arabī al-Ishtirākī* (Arab Socialist Party for Resurrection) in 1942, during the era of ideological parties in Syria. The Baath had a distinctive message on Arab unity, independence from foreign control and social justice (Devlin, 1991; Reilly, 2018). The Baath truly embraced socialism when it merged in 1952 with the Arab Socialist Party (Perlmutter, 1969; Ismael, 1976). It won 22 seats out of 142 in the 1954 elections, coming in second place while advocating for workers' rights and pan-Arab unity (Reilly, 2018). It made serious inroads in Syria by stepping up its recruitment within the army and among teachers and students (Devlin, 1991). Overall, the party prevailed thanks to its organisation, tactical pragmatism in national elections, and judicious positioning in relation to military coups in the 1950s, while setting up branches in neighboring Arab countries.

The Baath's ideology provided a template for Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers movement after they took power in 1952, as they struggled to define a state-driven reform agenda to unite the country. During the first stage of the Egyptian revolution, the Free Officers were part of a broad alliance containing the Muslim Brotherhood and HADITU, the collaborating Egyptian Communists, until the 1954 purges (Azaola-Piazza, 2018). The 1956 Suez Canal nationalisation bolstered Nasser's prestige and gave him a broad mandate to pursue Arab Socialism (Abdel-Malek, 1964; Torrey and Devlin, 1965). He established a single party to translate his popularity into a coalition of power: the Liberation Rally in 1953 first, then the National Union (1956–62), and finally the Arab Socialist Union (1962–76). Hence, these Arab regimes built on the Arab Left party structure to mobilise and reinforce state populism.

In spite of the 1960–1962 radical reforms involving the nationalisation of key economic sectors, the expansion of the bureaucracy, economic planning, and a commitment to social reform (Ginat, 2011: 13), Nasser's route toward state-led Arab socialism was pragmatic rather than ideologically committed to Marxism (Ismael, 1976). Drawing on the Yugoslav model ('socialism with a human face'), the state further reduced large landowners properties, raised taxes on big fortunes, and reiterated the state's commitment to a strong welfare model in education, social life and work provisions (Ginat, 2011). However, like the Baath, Nasser's revolution rejected class struggle as divisive and preferred to speak of unity, social justice and social equality. He maintained private property and opposed the Marxist refutation of religion. Nasser was not a doctrinaire Marxist, but Ismael (1976) argues he was able to communicate its principles to the Arab masses. The policies he implemented secured the support of students, peasants, workers, and the middle class, alongside the army, and formed a strong ruling coalition (Abdel-Malek, 1962).

The Baathist and the Egyptian Arab socialist models spread to the Arab region, calling for pan-Arab revolutionary take-overs and the establishment of state-socialism through single-party rule. The examples of the Palestinians in the Arab Nationalist Movement and the Algerians attest to the attractiveness of the model.

The Arab Nationalist Movements represent a hybrid form of political party in this period (Kazziha, 1975; Hoepf, 1985). Created as a response to the 1948 Arab defeat and Palestinian disaster, the ANM sought to unify an Arab vanguard and mobilise the energies of its youth toward liberation (Kazziha, 1975). The lack of democracy, the wealth of the notable classes, the dispersal of youth energies, and the frequent interventions of the army in politics dismayed the party's members across the region (Kazziha, 1975) and the party offered a 'transnational' answer to that. It did not operate as traditional parties. Instead, the AMN frequently organised meetings, demonstrations and strikes as modes of action. Party recruits typically returned to their home countries with their diplomas (as doctors or engineers) and as a vanguard to establish cells of the movement, especially among students in Jordan, Iraq, and the Gulf (Kazziha, 1975; Ismael, 1976).

The AMN did not become a classical party in the Levant and its members were often arrested in Jordan and Lebanon in the mid-1950s (Kazziha, 1975). In Kuwait and Bahrain, it filled the gap, as parties of the Left were absent there. Ahmed al-Khatib in Kuwait returned from the AUB in 1954, worked as doctor and was elected to Kuwait's parliament in 1963. He addressed local issues of social justice that won him support among workers of the oil industry (Kazziha, 1975: 72; Jadaliyya, 2012). After 1960, the AMN made a sharp 'turn to the Left.' Musa Ibrahim (managing editor of its newspaper *al-Hurriya*) wrote about the need for the AMN to join the Arab social progressive revolution, taking up the cause of students, workers and peasants and taking away the revolutionary prerogative from the defeated communist parties (Kazziha, 1975). Therefore, the AMN introduced the notion of class struggle in its ideological material, in great part as a way to conform to the ideological winds from Cairo and Damascus. These calls lost strength after the United Arab Republic's demise in 1962 (Kazziha, 1975).

Nasser's regime-state model also influenced Algeria's *Front de Libération Nationale*, after its independence in 1962. Faced with the sizeable task of overcoming 132 years of colonialism, Presidents Ahmed Ben Bella (1962–5) and Houari Boumedienne (1965–1978) embraced the principles of state-led socialist revolution, financed with the country's hydrocarbons (Ottaway, 1970; Etienne, 1977). The state-party was an inclusive structure, from the neo-ulema to the secular Leftists. Any Algerian aspiring to positions of responsibility had to have a party membership card. It doubled down as an instrument of authority and control with local cells spread out across the country, with some political scientists defining it as parallel 'double-pyramid' structure (Michel, 1967; Harbi, 2006). Several other proto-socialist regimes in the Maghreb were similarly set up, including Libya under Qadhafi (from 1969). In South Yemen, a Nasser-inspired Marxist guerrilla National Front fought to secure independence from Britain from 1963 to 1967 and established the People's Republic of South Yemen run by the South Yemen Socialist Party (Stookey 1982; Halliday, 1990). It has been the 'most radical socialist experiment' in the region (Lacker, 2017).

The Arab defeat of 1967 is traditionally seen as the end of the Arab unity project and the Arab Left. Yet, its dislocation actually came in 1962 due to the United Arab Republic's absent structural basis (Dawisha, 2003). In its wake, the Syrian and Egyptian regimes doubled down on their socialist aspirations through their respective parties while cracking down on Marxist organisations (Beinin, 1987). At its 6th National Congress in 1963, the Baath adopted a final document embracing social revolution through class struggle. It denounced private property as petty bourgeois socialism, nationalised industries and redistributed lands (Ismael, 1976; Reilly, 2018). It did, however, reject 'divisive' communism in the name of unity (Ismael, 1976; Franzen, 2017). In 1970, a 'corrective' coup by Hafiz al-Assad and his supporting military officers punished the neo-Baath for its radicalism and the 1967 defeat. Similarly, Nasser reasserted state control by establishing the Arab Socialist Union in 1962 to shore up allegiance to the regime (al-Astal, 2002). After a yearlong wave of arrests, torture and jailing of Egyptian communists, in 1965 the two remaining Egyptian communist parties decided to voluntarily disband and integrate into the ASU (Beinin, 1987; Azaola-Piazza, 2018). Nasser weathered the political consequences of the 1967 defeat, but his successor Anwar Sadat dropped Arab socialism altogether.

State-parties of the Arab Left made good use of the principles of Arab socialism but continued to target communists and concentrate power. The repression of communists under these Arab socialist regimes challenges the idea that this was the apogee of the Arab Left in the region. In addition, their ideological positions were not sufficiently consistent with Marxism. State-parties embraced social justice and anti-imperialism but rejected class struggle and secularism. This watered down and hybrid form did offer though an original synthesis between a

national revolution and a social revolution (Ismael, 1976). In the following decade, a renewed form emerged from the new generation's desire for a purer rapport to Marxism.

### **The New Arab Left: proto parties in a global revolutionary world**

The period following the June 1967 defeat against Israel corresponds to the 'fall' of the Arab Left, after which Islamism swooped in to capture the hearts and minds of the masses (Ismael, 2004). A new historiography has shed light on its reinvention into a 'New Arab Left' after 1967 (Haugbølle, 2017; di-Capua, 2018). Guerrilla groups, Marxist discussion circles and university student movements grew in response to the weakness of socialist and communist parties. They attracted their disillusioned social bases to break from their nationalist and bourgeois tendencies and pursue a revolutionary alternative.

The 'New Arab Left' emerged from within the old parties and took inspiration from a return to the original sources of Marxism-Leninism. Haugbølle illustrates the characteristics of this New Left in comparison with the New European Left: a young movement that criticised multiple forms of oppression, favored 'direct action' and a total social revolution (Haugbølle, 2017). China's Maoism inspired them and they worked outside party structures, setting their sights on an 'evolution in the name of socialism' as a tangible political project rather than the empty rhetoric of their predecessors (2017: 501–502).

The most illustrative case was the Palestinian movement, which became the New Arab Left's vanguard (Dot-Pouillard, 2017). Pro-Palestinian ANM groups splintered into autonomous organisations in two broad camps: a Left-leaning Palestinian Arab nationalist camp and radical Leftist-socialist camp (Baumgarten, 2005). They shared a belief in armed struggle as the means of liberal Palestine and the Arabs. The PLFP of Georges Habash and Muhsin Ibrahim, and the DLFP of Nayif Hawatmeh represented these competing currents.

These Palestinian revolutionary Leftists inspired revolutionary praxis from Morocco to the Gulf, from the ashes of the old Lefts: the Revolutionary Workers party in Syria, Socialist Lebanon (*Lubnan Ishtiraki*) founded by Fawwaz Traboulsi, Ahmad Baydoun and Waddah Sharara, the Organisation of Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL), and the Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party of Kamal Jumblatt; in Tunisia, the *Perspectives / Amal Ettounsi* movement (Mohamed Charfi, Gilbert Naccache, Nourredine Ben Khidder). In Egypt, *tanzim al-shuyu'i al-misri* (1969) became the Egyptian Communist Workers' Party (ECWP, *hizb al-'ummal al-shuyu'i al-misri*) in 1975 (Gervasio, 2020). In Morocco, the *23 Mars* and *Ila al-Amam* movements, operating underground, saw the rise of influential figures such as Aziz Belal, Edmond el Maleh and Abraham Sefaty (Heckman, 2018; Koumiya, 2019). In Oman, the Dhofar rebellion interconnected with other revolutionary movements across the Arab Gulf (Takriti, 2013). In Algeria, the Leftist struggle continued through the *Party d'Avant-Garde Socialiste* (PAGS) but was unable to grow against a regime that marketed its image as the 'Mecca of Revolutions' (Rahal, 2016; LeFoll-Luciani, 2018). Yemen, Oman, and south Lebanon became sites where these organisations came to acquire training in guerrilla tactics alongside Palestinian groups.

These organisations of the 1960s and 1970s do not fall under the formal rubric of political parties. Tarek Ismael labeled them as 'parasitic groups of opportunists' who were soft on their understanding and application of Marxist theory. They often emphasised fighting strategies over class struggle and conversion of the masses, and lacked internal democratic structures, thus repeating the mistakes of authoritarian Arab regimes (Ismael, 1976). Others in Lebanon were more akin to theoretical discussion groups, populated by intellectuals such as Yassine al-Hafiz, Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, Ilias Murqus, and Afif Lakhdar (Haugbølle 2013; Bardawil, 2020). Yet, their status as proto-parties is precisely what made their strength.

University campuses became leading sites of Leftist activism. Students rebelled against social paternalism and authoritarian rule, often connecting with the above-mentioned organisations, announcing a revolutionary wave. In Egypt, Leftist activism began infiltrating campuses in 1972–3 with students disappointed with the failed promises and ‘collaborationalism’ Egyptian communism (Gervasio, 2020). This blend of hope and disillusionment is encapsulated in the trajectory of Arwa Salih who describes in her memoirs *The Stillborn* the ‘romanticisation of the defeat’ and the performative nature of student activism over the true struggle (Hammad, 2011; Hammad, 2016; Lyndsey, 2019). In Tunisia, the *Perspectives/Amel Tounsi* Leftists found a willing audience on campuses. But, as former activists Cherif Ferjani and Ben Haj Yahia wrote dismissively, the struggle contained a lot of posturing and arguing from ‘professional revolutionaries,’ who ‘moved from the [intellectual] circles [reading groups] to the [militant] cell before having finished reading the Marxist basics’ (Ben Haj Yahia, 2009). Instead, their strength was their organisational skills in disrupting Bourguiba’s regime and crafting popular slogans for the masses. The movement though crumbled following the 1968 and 1972–3 repressive waves and lacked firm party structures to continue operating (Ayari, 2009).

The 1967 defeat reshuffled the deck of Arab Leftism by mobilising students, intellectuals, workers and guerrilla fighters as the fulcrum of the Left in Arab politics. However, these groups often lacked the formal party structures to challenge the genuine sites of power. They often dissipated once their revolutionary aspirations were not met. Their rejection of rigid party structures made them temporarily strong, as they sought to recover the enchantment of the revolutionary dynamic. However, their revolutionary romanticism illustrates the Arab Left’s continued inability to translate enthusiasm into tangible gains.

### **The Arab Left in the era of resilient authoritarianism, Islamism and civil society**

This section considers the fate of left-wing parties after 1967 when they had to adapt to the challenge of Islamist competition (Harman, 1994; Garcia, 2018) and the authoritarian manipulation of *façade democracy* (Brownlee, 2007; Browsers, 2004). To survive, the left-wing shifted strategies, seeking official recognition to ensure survival, but effectively robbing them of their revolutionary credentials and accelerating the Left’s demise. Parties completed their transformation ‘from representative parties to clientelist organisations, tributaries to communitarian or tribal considerations with little real political power’ (Catusse and Karam, 2013: 11–12). This transformation occurred despite their participation to elections, which accelerated their downfall.

After the era of mass parties, of Arab socialism and the New Arab Left, Arab left-wingers were forced to adapt in countries that allowed a degree of liberalisation. The socialist parties in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco were progressively included. Egyptian President Sadat replaced Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union with his own National Democratic Party in 1976, leaving in its wake Left-leaning figures to constitute a progressive party, the *Tagammu’*, which would become the new party of the Left (Waterbury, 1983; Jadaliyya, 2011; Stacher, 2012). The Moroccan UNFP suffered more than a decade of repression during Hassan II’s ‘years of lead’ (Schaar, 1969; Waterbury, 1970; el-Mossadeq, 1987), but then joined the national front on the Sahara Green March. In January 1975, the party met in Casablanca to reinvent itself as *al-ittihad al-ishdiraki lil-quwat al-shaabia* or *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires*, to turn the page on its revolutionary platform and run in national elections. In Jordan, King Hussein had banned the communists in 1957, but allowed them to run again during his 1980s liberalisation, and later authorised the Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party and the People’s Democratic Party (HASHD), authorised to compete in 1992 (Shteivi, 2014).

These refurbished parties ran in national elections and were meant, from the regime's perspective, to alleviate the economic-related discontent that had led to riots across different countries (1977 Egypt, 1984 Morocco and Jordan 1989 and 1992) and that had strengthened Islamist parties. However, these left-wing parties scored poorly after decades in the wilderness, as they were unable to mobilise support. In 1984, the Moroccan USFP secured 12% of the vote and the Egyptian *Tagammu'* came third behind the *neo-Wafd* and the Muslim Brotherhood in 1984 with 11% of votes, and the total of left-wing actors won a mere 7 seats in parliament (Milton-Edwards, 1993; Lust-Okar, 2001; Blaydes, 2011; Stacher, 2012; Azaola-Piazza, 2018). According to Ellen Lust (2001: 545), the Left 'lacked ideological foundation and mass support [...] unable to provide political leadership or make effective political demands.' Left-wing parties were managed by the regimes, becoming subordinate and powerless through their integration into façade democratic systems.

In the socially unstable climate of the 1980s and 1990s, authoritarian regimes banked on progressive alliances to counter Islamist growth and the Left supported regimes in the name of reform. In turn, the popularity of these parties plunged further. In Egypt, *Tagammu'* representation declined from five seats in 1990 to two in 2005, as it broke the boycott of national elections opposition parties were calling for on several occasions (Blaydes, 2011; Brownlee, 2012). Moroccan socialists became accepted members of the opposition and a 'party of notables' and vouched for the reformist drive of the monarchy (Bennani-Chraïbi, 2008; el-Maslouhi, 2009). In 1997, despite another poor electoral showing, Hassan II invited them to head an 'Alternance' (alternative) government to ensure a smooth transition after his passing a year later (Miller, 2013). From then onward, radical and progressive opposition came from left-wing movements outside of elected institutions. Among them was the Egyptian *Kifaya* movement ('Enough') against Mubarak Presidential reelection bid (2004–2005) (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2007: 11–12); Jordanian Leftists working with grassroots organisations including with Islamic charities; or trade unions in Morocco and civil society activist organisations for the reform of family code (Clement, 1984; Beinini, 2001). As left-wing activism shifted outside party structures, the Arab Left lost traction as a viable opposition force. It had become too vulnerable to regime interference, petit bourgeois tendencies, and ignored working-class interests. By the 2000s, these parties had successfully broken from their past heritage to become pillars of the regime by acting as an accepted loyal opposition rather than organisations with strong social bases advocating for radical change. The authoritarian regimes included Leftist personalities, guaranteeing them seats in an ineffective parliament, preserving the system and falling in the trap of liberalised autocracy (Brumberg, 2002).

Alongside these parties there were others that remained at the margins of the institutional game: banned, excluded or irrelevant through contingent circumstances. They represent multiple trajectories in the decline of the Arab Left. In Lebanon, Kamal Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party could not overcome sectarian political dynamics put in place with the 1988 Taief Agreements with a handful of seats. Instead, the Left grew outside of party structures and turned its message toward democratic reform. Meanwhile *Hizbullah* coopted the revolutionary agenda, especially after the 2006 War (Naef, 2001; Abisaab and Abisaab, 2004). In the Gulf, aside from individual personalities, a few left-wing factions joined larger reformist coalitions such as Kuwait National Liberation Front and the Democratic reform (Dazi-Heni, 1996). In Bahrain's dynamic political scene, several political elites presented the Emir in 1992 with petitions to restore political life, the national assembly and free and fair elections (Da Lage, 1996). In the ensuing political dialogue in 1996, two notable socialists Ahmed al-Shamlane and Saed al-Asbool took part but were later arrested. The NLFB and the Popular Front of Bahrein in exile came together to cooperate and demand political opening in 1981 but failed to secure any gains.

In the Maghrib, Islamists and Leftists clashed repeatedly in the 1980s and 1990s (Alexander, 2000; Ayari, 2017; Buehler, 2018). The Algerian PAGES and the Kabyle based *Front des Forces Socialiste* benefitted from the 1988 regime liberalisation reforms but could not compete against the electoral strength of the *Front Islamique du Salut*. They chose to side with the authorities during the Civil War following a series of assassinations of secular and progressive figures (Rahal, 2017). Similarly, Tunisian Leftists were progressively re-included in the 1980s: the Communist Party's legalisation, the participation of the reformist *Mouvement des Socialistes Democrates*, and the growing civil society including the Tunisian league for human rights (LTDH) area testimony to that. During the early Ben Ali years, these actors proved similarly accommodating to his regime's excesses in the 1990s to counter the growing strength of *Ennahda* (Garon, 2003).

The fate of the Palestinian Left offers a cautionary tale of a party that diluted its principles and lost popular support. The Palestinian Communist Party maintained its identity and legitimacy despite Israeli occupation, and Gresh (1989, 36) cites the healthy figure of 35,000 workers represented by pro-PCP trade unions. The Intifada and its aftermaths forced the PCP to play second fiddle to larger political developments including occupation and national politics. After joining the National Council during the Oslo accords negotiations, it moderated its ideology in support of the PLO's state building. Writing in 1992, Tamari found the Palestinian Left had broken its fierce ideology and was 'unable to challenge reactionary forces on social freedoms (including the status of women) and individual liberties, while the masses were drawn to the Islamist platform.' During the legislative electoral rounds of the 1990s, the Left took a backseat to PLO/Fateh politics (Mahler, 1996; Abu Amr, 1997) and by the 2006, commentators lamented how its positions was characterised by severe confusion and inconsistency. The electoral result in the 2006 legislative elections was dismal: 7.9% compared to 44.4% and 41.4% for Hamas and Fateh respectively. The score translated in only five out of 132 seats (Ladadweh, 2014).

The 'fall' of the Arab Left did not come from seismic shifts from outside its control. Instead, these examples address their response to Islamist competition and authoritarian repression. For Ottoway and Hamzawy (2007) the story lies in their failure to reorganise and their lost hold on their traditional bases. In the few countries that somewhat liberalised, they ran in elections but failed to secure widespread support, while in the others, they remained clandestine or disappeared altogether. Along the way, they diluted the substance of their ideology, negotiated their place between recognised opposition and co-optation, and prompted the public's disinterest in a watered down version of the Left. In fighting and compromising to remain relevant, the Arab Left lost its identity and accelerated its downfall (Jabar, 1997).

### Epilogue: the Arab Left after the Arab Spring

During the 2011 Arab uprisings, protesters demanded social justice and regime change, which spurred talk of the Arab Left's revival. Nine years on, it has missed another historical rendezvous. Are these parties more than vestiges of the past or a full-fledged actor in Arab politics? This past decade shows it is stuck between a cumbersome ideological legacy and current challenges. Based on Hillal and Herman's mapping efforts (2014), it seems unlikely that the Arab Left will experience a renewal of its political parties despite the continued popularity of its ideals across the board.

The Arab uprisings decade went from hopes of an Arab resurgence to depressing disillusionment. This is illustrated in the Leftist Lebanese scholar Achcar's reading of events. In *The People Want* (2013), he offered an optimistic Marxist reading of historical forces ushering radical transformation. By the time he wrote *Morbid Symptoms* (2016), the Arab world saw the return of authoritarianism and violence in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere, with the exception of

Tunisia. He diagnosed deeper issues that stifled the ‘people’s will’ and undermined the likelihood of a Leftist revival. Their only hope lied in a ‘radical turn in the region’s political trajectory, one capable of erasing the reactionary developments of the last few decades reviving progressive social projects on a profoundly democratic basis... the emergence of an organised and determined progressive popular leadership’ (Achcar, 2016: 21–22).

The Arab Left wing was caught in its own feet during these events. It still suffered from the crisis of identity and values diagnosed in the previous section. The Arab uprisings elicited a diversity of positions. First, a defeatist position embraced a nostalgic remembrance of the Arab Left and when it was great, especially in its revolutionary era and the glorious sixties decade (Lyndsey, 2019; Guirguis, 2020). They were the remnants of the forum on the Arab Left from 2008–11 in *al-Adab*, as it opened its pages for its thinkers to chart an ideological route after the crisis of cultural heritage, or *turāth* (Agbaria, 2019). The old guard reiterated its anti-imperialism of old which clashed with the aspirations of a new generation, for whom the Arab uprisings were about progressive values and social justice. They clashed on the Syrian crisis, with the older generation supporting the Baath regime, while the younger generation supported the social uprising against the authoritarian Assad (Dot-Pouillard, 2012; Majed, 2014; Dot-Pouillard, 2016). The Syrian question revealed a rift between supporters of the national question versus those of the social question.

This generational tension will come to define the Levantine Arab Left going forward. Lebanese Leftist intellectual and figurehead, Fawwaz Traboulsi called on new programs, new values and modes of action better suited for this context rather than the era of ‘vanguard parties’ and traditional communists. For him, the future *can* learn from the past. He explains that mass parties are no longer suited for this era of politics, and the Left should ‘discover techniques that are suitable for the struggles and competitions of democratic electoral regimes’ (Traboulsi, 2012). Jordan novelist Ahmad Bustani speaks for the younger generation and calls for a break away from this compromised legacy. He denounces the old Left’s ‘complacent participation [that] has contributed to the aura of democratic legitimacy which surrounds and covers up the oppressive and divisive practices of authoritarian regimes’ (Bustani, 2014). The Arab Left wing has been riddled with problems: applying nationalist frameworks at the expense of ethnic minorities, aligning with the states for state preservation, and failing to express the concerns of its base. In conclusion, Bustani writes, the ‘Arab Leftist project lacks a clear intellectual foundation that anyone who wishes to call him- or herself a Leftist can do so, even as his or her proposals contradict the fundamental principles of the Left’; emphatically, the Arab Left has failed because ‘it has not yet been born [it is] a compilation of psychological complexes and dissonances’ (Bustani, 2014).

The chances of a political revival of the Arab Left on the ground also appear bleak. In 2014 and 2015, Jamil Hilal and Katja Hermann carried out an ambitious mapping of existing left-wing actors. The result illustrates the Arab Left’s continued crisis of identity and ideological inconsistencies. These groups are committed to the masses, but fiercely oppose their Islamist aspirations; they adopt a staunch anti-imperial posture, but continuously explains its failures through external events; they rehash criticism of Marxist theses, organisational party rigidity, bureaucratic centralism and importance of the party, without addressing the continuous history of factionalism and recriminations they have always been characterised by (Hilal and Hermann, 2014). Despite their best efforts, their attempt to offer a single framework encompassing democratisation and economic justice remain incomplete and a burden.

Hence, the possibilities for a ‘New Arab Left Project’ is boxed in by the conundrum of its identity and its past legacy. As these left-wing parties move forward, their hopes of revival rest on whether to maintain their polarising stance (authentic to their long heritage) or dilute their

principles to appeal to broader audiences to reconstitute strong social bases. Despite all their disagreements, the voices of the Arab Left rarely see the future in terms of political parties and as a vanguard for political change, but rather as a struggle to stay relevant. Perhaps, like the Phoenix, the Arab Left has to fall completely before it can rise again.

### Note

- 1 In line with the rationale of this edited volume, we exclude movements such as trade unions or NGOs at the margins of electoral politics. They deserve a full and proper enquiry.

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