

Syrian Left: On the political personality of Riad Al-Turk

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The story of the struggle of Riad Al Turk, leader of the Communist Party “Political Bureau”, against tyranny before and under the Assad regime, deserves the tributes it has received. In truth, the contemporary history of Syria is not poor in similar figures of struggle. But his audacity, his activity, and the simplicity of his speech and his lifestyle must be saluted. Many of those who worked with him and those who knew him closely have reported on it. This article will not address the activist personality of the deceased, often appreciated, nor his partisan personality, often criticized, but rather his political personality, considering the deep dilemma that the left which opposed the regime in Syria has always experienced, without interruption, particularly after 1970.

We can define the dilemma of the Syrian left by its intrinsic incapacity to destabilize the Assad regime which formally belonged to the same left camp, and used the same political language as its left opposition (progressism, socialism, secularism, liberation, imperialism, etc.), and had the same international allies. In other words, the Syrian left was not only incapable of threatening the Assad regime, but it also could not count on support from external “socialist” allies to help get rid of Assad. Those allies were more loyal of to the Assad regime than to its left opposition.

Therefore, the situation of the left in Syria was characterized by the inability to seize the power, whether by its own forces or with the help of external allies. This dilemma could have been resolved by the method adopted by the Ba’ath Party to take the power, that is to say by a military coup d’état, but the way in which Assad senior succeeded in imposing the monopoly of the Ba’ath Party in the ranks of the army and placing it under the control of the military security services, while fueling the spirit of community membership (“Asabiyya”) among the Alawite minority in the army, meant that this solution was no longer at hand.

Now, if we examine how Syrian communist opponents thought and dealt with this dilemma, we will find two tendencies: the first was born outside the traditional communist “family” and sought “revolution” in Marxist books. This trend, born in the international excitement of the 1968s, can be described as a cultural and political current. It was represented by the Marxist Circles which began to appear in the early seventies, and most of them transformed, in the summer of 1976, into the Communist Action League, which transformed into party in the summer of 1981. This movement was characterized by the predominance of the young, it gave more value to texts than to reality. Politics, as much as it involves deceptions and maneuvers that are covered up with beautiful formulas, was almost absent in this movement which showed the high level of combativity and voluntarism which distinguishes those who entrust themselves the mission of changing the world. This movement played a notable role in the opposition throughout the 1980s, before its militant structure was destroyed at the beginning of 1992, under the weight of successive campaigns of repression which did not spare its entourage and the social environment of its members.

This current did not see the dilemma that we have just formulated, it was optimistic and believed that the revolutionary left, which “possesses the revolutionary answers to the questions of reality”, is

capable, if it works with determination and seriousness (which it did not fail to do) of overthrowing the regime. In fact, in 1979, three years after the organization was founded, it made this goal its central slogan. He came back and froze it less than a year later, when he saw that those who were advancing and threatening the regime were actually the Islamists whom it considered worse than the regime itself. This current wanted to justify its approach by comparing it to a Leninist precedent, as if it were necessary to draw legitimacy from the text.

The second communist current was more realistic in its vision of the possibilities for political change. We can say that it was Riad Al Turk who “produced” this trend, which went in the opposite direction to the first, in terms of priority given to reality over texts, and in terms of use of the resources of apolitical know-how in favor of the process of change. Al-Turk was a reader of reality more than a reader of books. He looked at reality with the eyes of a politician and not with those of a theoretical intellectual. He used his political acumen as a market trader does in the souk, not as an economic researcher does. Those who worked with him say he was not very interested in writing and used to dismiss his party’s literature as “chatter”, that is, worthless talk, nonsense, or words that did not mean what they said, which underlines that Al-Turk was above all a man of action. This is where he draws most of his political value.

It seems to us that his thinking was governed by two firm convictions: the first is the need for political change in Syria, and the second is the incapacity of the Syrian left to undertake this task. It is a prelude to accepting the political change which could be done by some force other than the left. This explains, in our opinion, its indulgence towards Syrian Islamists who, in the early 1980s, demonstrated a great capacity to mobilize, act and threaten the regime. This capability was beyond the reach of the Syrian left. But indulgence towards Islamists, given the weak position of the left, requires tolerating the marginalization of fundamental left ideas, including secularism which opposes religious communitarianism, and the democratic idea itself. According to the “realistic” logic of this current, this marginalization can be accepted, since the objective of overthrowing the regime is more important than any other idea or value. The fact that the widespread repression by the Assad regime against all those who oppose it, whatever their ideas and values, explains that the overthrow of the regime, whatever be the method, and whoever be the actor, can be placed above any other task. It is evident that explanation of this conviction does not justify it, because its totalitarian nature, which overwhelms all other arguments, resembles too much, in the political domain, the generalized repression in the security domain.

In essence, Al-Turk’s logic regarding the Syrian revolution of 2011 does not differ from the way it treated the Islamist struggle against the Assad regime three decades earlier. He always bet on regime change by the Islamists, but this did not mean that he approved their ideas. In fact, the Islamists were the only internal force capable of destabilizing the regime. During this period (1980–2011), many members of the first current (the PAC) had become aware of the dilemma of the left in Syria, and their optimism had evaporated. During the revolution, many of them had adopted the logic of the second current. The threshold for acceptance of Islamists, including jihadists, had become low among a growing sector of Syrian left activists who had lost their identity in seeking to “overthrow the regime in any way possible.”

The political logic that led Al-Turk to accept the Islamists and work with them, also led him to overcome the traditional communist complex towards the United States of America, hoping that they would help bring down the Assad regime. He had previously considered the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime at the hands of the American army as a step forward.

Less than two years after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, Al-Turk attacked the West “with its colonial past” and attacked the United States which is “pushing with the (Syrian) regime to start the civil war”, and whose “position in relation to the revolution is no different from the Russian position”.

He also expressed his disappointment with the Islamists. Then, six years after these declarations, he would say: "We lived an experience (the Syrian revolution) in which the political Islamic movement was one of the main reasons that led us to failure." These statements, which call into question his own political logic, have confused his supporters. It is as if the fate of the Syrian left was to live in a perpetual tragedy of tension between its hopes and its capabilities.

We can criticize Al-Turk's political logic, but we have no right to blame the supporters of this strategy, because no other strategy has had significant success. In reality, the Assad regime, which is waging a political war that targets all types of opposition, regardless of ideology, is increasingly pushing everyone to make "overthrowing the regime any way" a priority. It is easy to see an increase in the percentage of leftists willing to work with Islamists in 2011 and beyond, compared to the early 1980s. Anyone looking for an explanation for calamities and tragedies experienced by Syrians will achieve no useful results if he neglects the Assad regime's relentless drive to crush all opposition and block all possible means of political change.

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P.S.

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