

SYRIA: THE CHILDREN OF THE SIX-DAY WAR

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With a population of about 18 million, and one of the highest growth rates worldwide (2.4 percent—with previous estimates of even 3.3 percent), 52.2 percent of Syrians are between 15 and 54 years of age, and 44.8 percent are under the age of 15. The unemployment rate of the youth between the ages of 20 and 24 is officially 34.4 percent, but unofficial sources claim that unreported cases, if added, would greatly increase this percentage. Teaching outside of the state curricula has become ever more unthinkable. The number of attractive learning opportunities is severely decreasing for an ever growing group of young people. Syrian's contemporary educational institutions are falling behind in respect to modern curricula and teaching methods around the world.

By contrast, the number of expensive, private universities is growing steadily, although there are no established standards for their curricula. Membership in the Revolutionary Youth Organization and in the National Union of Syrian Students is compulsory and monitored by officials. Students in schools and universities are rarely able to refuse to become members of the Baath Party. For university students, political activities beyond the Baath-organized National Front of Progress have been forbidden since 1972, even for the parties of the Baath-controlled Progressive National Front. One result of this situation is that Syrian youth overwhelmingly dream of emigrating.

June 5, 1967: It was the second day of my final examination in school. Suddenly, the teachers entered the classroom and told us to pack up our things and to leave school immediately. The Arab-Israeli War had broken out. We ran out to the streets, shouting and ready to take up arms.

We were totally convinced that winning the war would be easy for us, due to the propaganda our governments and political leaders had made. Our Palestinian brothers would be able to return to their homeland, from which they had been expelled in 1948. We Arabs constituted a large community, connected on the basis of a common history and culture, in sharp contrast to the people coming from all over the world to build a state only nineteen years old.

But what happened was something different—something terrible in its effect on the enthusiasm and conviction of the youth: we were beaten with incredible ease, and Israel was able to occupy new territories that enlarged its original area by a factor of five. The Arab armies retreated extremely quickly. Arab identity thus suffered its greatest shock in modernity. Being desperate, some of us sought sanctuary in religion, trying to find explanations and solutions. Others joined the leftists and focused on upbraiding those who led us to defeat. Still others fled into their own seemingly absurd worlds, completely rejecting everything around them.

The Palestinian Resistance

The Vietnam War began to cast ever longer shadows. A popular song from that era went: “In Vietnam, half America has vanished—we will take care of the rest!” That is, fighting was seen as the answer. At the end of 1964, the Palestinian Resistance entered the scene, calling for support and participation. Blaming the sovereign classes and the so-called Generation Nakba (*Al-Nakba* is the official name for the loss of Palestine and the founding of Israel in 1948), it united leftist ideology and the will to fight for the nation. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was founded, which aimed to participate in direct action in neighboring Arab states.

Then a splinter group called the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) formed, which, ironically, was socially more radical and nationally more moderate. Syrians were also among its founders, including Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, a famous researcher and philosopher, as well as Saadallah Wannous, who later became the most important dramatist in the Arab world.

Armed resistance and students

Even more important, however, is the fact that young people quit their education to join the armed resistance. They, like others, drifted more and more towards the Left, fascinated by concepts like “alienation,” “privation,” “loss,” “refusal,” and “generation conflict”—hot topics that were often discussed at universities. So, the preconditions for “1968” here were different from those in Europe, partly contradicting the course and message of the European revolts. For example, the question of nation was very urgent for us, as was the issue of the armed resistance, but we also perceived Zionism as the cause of all our problems and defined the Soviet Union as our most vital support in the world.

Although the ideas and demands of the European students often ran counter to ideas that were important to us—for example, the role of Israel or the criticism of sticking together with the forceful “socialist brother” and his satellites—these students, especially in their tremendous enthusiasm and expressiveness, were crucial points of reference for many of us. Others had scarcely any reservations, identifying strongly with European students in their attitude of rejection, as well as their leftist tendencies, and fully embraced these new characteristics from Europe, though adapting them to their own purposes.

Transitions in cultural life

Influenced by the defeat in the Six-Day War and the student revolutions of 1968, an essential shift in cultural, intellectual, and political values occurred in Syria. People suddenly claimed that the songs of Um Kalthoum, who had been the queen of Arab singers of the twentieth century, had been responsible not only for our defeat but also for our backwardness. Political songs, which had been marginal up to then, suddenly gained great popularity, especially among the youth. These songs heaped scorn on the governments and expressed the unrest of the Arab nation. The images of Che Guevara or other symbolic figures hung nearly everywhere.

This time also revitalized poems of resistance and politics and led to the further development of their form. Many young poets became well known, and some of them are still counted among Syria’s leading poets today. Many were motivated by the feverish excitement nearly everyone felt, among them Mamduh Adwan, Ali Kanaan, and Nazih Abu Afash. New trends toward nihilistic and stingingly sarcastic plays arose in theater. After returning from France, Saadallah Wannous published his *Declarations of a New*



After taking the Syrian city Quneitra on June 11, 1967, Israeli soldiers round up and search the local Arab population.

Theater and performed his play *Evening Entertainment for the Fifth of July* in a new form. It was the advent of modernized theater, presenting itself in a new, revolutionary light to its audience.

The committed art

Syrian cinema also sparked new art forms. The Public Establishment for Cinema was founded to bolster new film trends. Young students went to Europe to study the art of film-making, and, upon their return, formed a group including the now most widely known Syrian directors, such as Omar Amiralay, Samir Zikra, Haitham Haqqi, Muhammad Mallass, and Osama Muhammad. The wave of new art forms was also manifested in the visual arts. Old forms were vehemently called into question, and innovative styles were introduced that gave free reign to experimentation. The number of exhibitions increased and new art societies were launched, which also had influence on a political level.

In general, one can say that Syrian young people experienced the social and political events of the European revolts from another point of view. Those who studied in Europe experienced them first hand. Abu Ali Yassin, for example, was a member of a commune in Frankfurt, Germany. After coming back to Syria, he published his work, *The Taboo Triad: Religion, Sexuality and Class Struggle*, in which he raised exceedingly bold questions. He also came out with the study *Democracy in Education*, establishing his reputation as one of the most important representatives of the new Syrian generation of researchers.

The film director Omar Amiralay and theater director Saadallah Wannous, at that time both living in France, mutually planned the production of several crucial films, including the film *Daily Life in a Syrian Village* (1976), which is still banned in Syria today. At the same time, Saadallah Wannous, as mentioned above, began to work on his innovative theater pieces and took an active part in the Palestinian Resistance. In those days, many Europeans, like the French dramatist Jean Genet, came to participate in the Palestinian cause or, at least, to experience the resistance movement first hand.

Between the poles

All these developments occurred in conflicting political circumstances. On the one hand, there was a leftist, separatist, and authoritative system that observed the aftermath of the 1968 upheavals with cautious optimism. On the other hand, there was a powerful

pan-Arabic faction that called for people to take up arms and fight. This tempted many youth, especially, to express their anger using weapons. Moreover, leftist Arab intellectuals were struggling to find their own modernity but were unable, without uprooting themselves, to produce powerful revolutionaries in leftist groups and Trotskyist, Maoist, and Marxist circles.

There were also many activists in the Palestinian Resistance who were enthusiastic about helping to shape the forms of public life, arts, and culture. Political organizations were established, among them the Arab Communist Organization (ACO), which was responsible for bomb attacks in Damascus where its members took people hostages in a hotel located in the city center. Some members of the ACO were executed while others were kept in prison for twenty-nine years.

Students go on strike

Even in the ruling Baath Party, there were young people who were averse to any right-wing authoritative tendencies. Some of them left the party in 1968; others defended the party leadership, and in 1969, a coup was within reach under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad. In 1970, this was completed with the “Correctionist Movement.” The leftist and Baathist students subsequently went on strike and organized demonstrations in a central place in Damascus but were brutally suppressed by the security forces.

Only isolated demonstrations followed these incidents. The engineering students went on strike for a week, insisting that their demands be met. Likewise, art students provoked the authorities with critical posters and caricature drawings circulated under anonymous names. Some of these artists are now considered great representatives of the Syrian art scene.

Turning point in political thinking

The events of the years 1967 and 1968 marked a turning point in the political thinking of Syrian intellectuals. A comprehensive revision in political thinking in the form of modernization started, spurred by intellectuals such as Yassin al-Hafes, Elias Mirqos, and pragmatic politicians like Odei and Jamal al-Atassi and Riad al-Turk. This development transformed into a deep and reality-oriented process of modernization. By the mid-1970s, this process manifested itself in the demand for democracy. Up to today, this remains one of the core demands of different oppositional groups.

The events also released a tremendous energy within the young generation. The system clearly recognized the message of this, as shown by its legal prohibition of any political activities by students, even those who were members of the coalition parties. In reaction, it established its own student and youth organizations, more or less forcing children and young people to join. This gave it a monopoly in youth organization activities, which helped generate a climate of suppression and manipulation that, at the same time, offered pre-formed political solutions and the illusion of stability.

In the present, the ban on political action by young people makes it very difficult to integrate the younger generation into the activities of the democratic opposition. Considering the educational system devoid of meaning, the high rate of unemployment, everyday worries, and the constant search for a change in the situation, the youth today seem like an explosive gas tank—ready to disperse their energy at the slightest provocation.

The opposition today

On December 1, 2007, 167 members of the democratic opposition assembled for the first time in recent Syrian history. They formed the National Council of the Damascus Declaration, calling for the state to change into a constitutional democracy according to the political standards of modern times and to leave the totalitarian one-party system behind. The meeting was held under exceptional circumstances involving tight control on the part of the security forces, which created an atmosphere of intimidation and oppression. The signatories averaged 54 years of age, which indicates that, in 1968, they were 15, an age when people in our country begin to get interested in politics. In a way, then, one can say that the children of the Six-Day War and the youth revolts of 1968 comprise the opposition in Syria today.

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