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Against the Tides of History: The Sublime Politics of Salameh Kaileh

Abstract

This paper is a political portrait of Salameh Kaileh (1955-2018), a Palestinian Marxist thinker and internationalist whose writing and activity represent a rather anomalous mixture of a fidelity to and disenchantment with the Arab communist movement. Kaileh urged the embrace of an Arab internationalism; the innovation of old communist organizational forms; the reappraisal of Arab communist history; and the criticism of Marxism, which he argued “is commanded from within.” As a political agitator, Kaileh remained at arms length from political movements across the region. His lifelong vision was to forge a transnational Arab left-wing front that could unify and direct the means of production in each country towards the egalitarian development of the entire region. To shed light on the main elements of Kaileh’s political-intellectual commitments, this paper will examine his criticisms of Marxist dogmatism, traditional communist party formations, and the tenets of the so-called ‘anti-imperialist’ camp in the context of the Syrian uprising. It will also trace his political life history, in particular his experiences as a *feda'i* in Iraq as a cadre of Al-Jarmaq, a Marxist student brigade of Fatah (c. 1970-80); an unofficial member of the Communist Labor Party of Syria (c. 1980-2000); an anti-globalization activist in Syria (2000); and a revered figure of the Syrian uprising as a founder of the Syrian Left Coalition and a mentor to young communists of the Syrian Revolutionary Youth (2011).

I. Political Formation

Born in 1955 in Birzeit, a small town north of Ramallah, Palestine, Salameh Kaileh lived through the high and low tides of Arab nationalism. This ideology fueled liberation movements against formal colonization and the “virtually uninterrupted sequence of imperial wars and interventions in the post-colonial period.”¹ The creation of Israel in 1948 only intensified the imperialist grip on the Arab world and, with it, the necessity of forging a united front to deter invading forces and liberate Palestine. Having been raised by a Nasserist father, Kaileh’s exposure to Arab nationalism began at home. And while he would later witness the ideological bankruptcy and failures of post-colonial nationalist states, he nonetheless preserved the impulse behind this ideology.

Indeed, Kaileh understood the region *as a region*, recasting Pan-Arabism, however, as a socialist Arab internationalism.² From this viewpoint, he imagined a transnational, left-wing organization capable of actualizing total social transformation and economic independence throughout the Arab world. In the contours of his vision, this united, region-wide front would systematically unify and direct the means of production in each country towards the egalitarian development of the

¹ Perry Anderson, “On the Concatenation in the Arab World,” *New Left Review* Volume 68, March-April 2011.

² By taking ‘the region *as a region*,’ to borrow from Adam Hanieh, one can account for “the changing hierarchies at the regional scale as an integrated unity that shapes social formations at the national level” and for “imperialism as an essential and ongoing theme in the shaping of the region’s political economy.” Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2013), 10.

entire Middle East and North Africa, and act as a mediating force for popular movements against imperialist forces, Israel, and Arab comprador states.

The Palestinian thinker argued that rehabilitating Marxism was a necessary condition for the realization of such a grandiose project. Marxism, he maintained, should be rescued from dogmatism, adapted and innovated in accordance with the historical specificities of the region and its global position in both time and place. His early radicalization towards the left was no doubt part of a larger trend of Arab intellectuals and militants who, following the 1967 defeat of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria against Israel, reoriented themselves ideologically. Sending shockwaves throughout the region, the defeat is often described as a turning-point for Arab intellectuals, a moment that “shattered their worldview and upended their revolutionary hopes.”³

The defeat, which fueled Israel’s continuous colonial expansion and left the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jerusalem, and Golan Heights under Israeli control, undermined Arab nationalism, the leadership of post-colonial states, and official communist parties within the orbit of the Soviet Union. For Palestinians in particular, the defeat was a crystallization of their disillusionment with Arab regimes that dated back more than a decade and that made emergent Palestinian armed resistance movements ever more imperative.⁴

Kaileh's experience of the tragedy of 1967 as a twelve year old in Birzeit sharpened his focus on the Palestinian national movement and instigated his political becoming. “Witnessing the war and the invasion of Zionist occupation forces made me conscious of the meaning of confronting Israel, liberating Palestine, and working in the resistance. I was invested in this project: to work in political thought and transform society.”⁵ Overcome by the conviction that liberation required political force and practice, Kaileh reflects that from then on: “I considered myself with Fatah before

³ Manfred Sing, “Arab Self-Criticism after 1967 Revisited: The Normative Turn in Marxist Thought and its Heuristic Fallacies,” *Arab Studies Journal* Volume 25, No. 2 (Fall 2017): 148.

⁴ The emergence of independent Palestinian resistance groups with Palestinian-majority membership in the 1950s, namely Fatah and the Arab Nationalist Movement, was largely symptomatic of this disillusionment. These militant groups “repeatedly managed to upset the regional status quo,” at a time when Arab states exploited the Palestinian struggle in rhetoric, treated Palestinian militant groups as a liability (Jordan, Egypt), denied Palestinians of their self-determination (Jordan), and later funded Palestinian militant groups as proxies to further their state interests in the region (Syria, Egypt). In Rashid Khalidi’s words, Fatah “deliberately tried to show up the Arab states for their lack of true commitment to Palestine,” and while the organization’s “fervent rhetoric was not matched by much effective armed action...it went over well with most Palestinians, who were frustrated by the Arab states’ lack of engagement.” By the mid-1960s, “a full-scale revival of the Palestinian national movement was underway... [which] threatened to seize the initiative in the conflict with Israel from the Arab states, and indeed helped to precipitate the events that led to the 1967 war.” Rashid Khalidi, *Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (S.L.: Picador, 2021), 69-128.

⁵ Fatmeh Houhou, “Rahīl Falastīnī al-Sūrī al-Maghrabī Salāma Kīla: Munāḍil lam Yathnahu al-T‘dhīb ‘n Itlaq Shararat Fikriyya w lam Tahbtuhu Hazmiyya ‘n Zira‘a al-Amal” (The Syrian Moroccan Salameh Kaileh: A Resistance Fighter Who Wasn’t Deterred by Torture from Making Intellectual Sparks and Who Wasn’t Discouraged by Defeat From Cultivating Hope),” *Facebook*, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/329091257148445/photos/a.884023368321895/1965823556808532/>.

I really knew what Fatah was.”⁶ Despite having only a youthful impression of the armed movement, the enthusiasm and reverence Kaileh felt towards Palestinian militants in the wake of such a cataclysmic event was prevalent throughout the Arab world. The defeat “revived the concussed post-1948 Palestinian national movement and transported it from being a relatively marginal element to center stage.”⁷ No longer would Arab states be taken as the principal agents of liberation. Indeed, Palestinian *feda’iyeen* emerged “as a symbol of Arab defiance and bold militancy as compared to the failed incompetence of the Arab armies along with their self-professed progressive regimes.”⁸

During this time, self-criticism became a reflexive means through which Arab intellectuals reckoned with the deficiencies of their professed ideologies, their strategies for liberation, and their political alignments.⁹ The New Arab Left emerged in this context as an interrogation of nationalist ideologies, dogmatic interpretations of Marxism, and the top-down relationship between the Soviet Union and official communist parties in the Arab world. Intellectuals of this nascent tradition determined that the defeat was in large part due to the failures of so-called progressive regimes, as well as traditional communist parties, “in mobilizing, organizing, preparing, and leading their masses on the path of the people’s protracted war of liberation against imperialism.”¹⁰ In fact, “it wasn’t until after 1967 that Arab communists, to varying degrees, began a serious process of self-criticism regarding the Palestine issue,” such as denouncing their previous endorsement of the official Soviet policy in support of the 1947 Partition Plan.¹¹ After initial hesitation and cautiousness towards the nascent Palestinian armed resistance, communist parties would soon offer their full and explicit support to Palestinian *feda’iyeen*. In the aftermath of Black September in 1970, “the Lebanese, Syrian, and Jordanian communist parties, in a telegram to the Palestinian leadership, expressed their support for ‘our joint battle and with all our means and with arms.’”¹² From

⁶ BBC Arabia, “Salāma Kīla fi al-Mashhad” (Salameh Kaileh on Al-Mashhad), Youtube, February 12, 2016, news segment, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9nseo9YJsk>.

⁷ Ahmad Samih Khalidi, “The Ripples of The 1967 War: Arab Defeat Changed the Course of Palestinian History, but the Final Chapter Remains Unwritten,” *Cairo Review* no. 25 (Spring 2017): 28-29.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ The object of their criticism at the time varied. Some confronted imperialism as the determinate reason for the defeat. Others held to account post-colonial regimes that failed to realize the nationalist projects they initially sought to achieve, even if for reasons not entirely in their control. And still others turned to face society, criticizing the conservative cultural and religious practices, values, and traditions that plagued even the young revolutionaries of the time, hindering an emancipation that was as social as it was political. See: Fadi A. Bardawil, “The Inward Turn and Its Vicissitudes: Culture, Society, and Politics in Post-1967 Arab Leftist Critiques,” in *Local Politics and Contemporary Transformations in the Arab World: Governance beyond the Center*, ed. Malika Bouziane, Cilja Harders, and Anja Hoffmann (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 91–109; Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Arab Left* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University, 1976); Sing, “Arab Self-Criticism after 1967 Revisited: The Normative Turn in Marxist Thought and its Heuristic Fallacies.”

¹⁰ Ismael, *The Arab Left*, 106.

¹¹ Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 36-42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

then on, communist parties voiced increasingly more radical positions on the Palestinian resistance. Marxism and militancy became the main coordinates of emancipatory politics in the Arab world, and in Kaileh's case were intimately connected to his own political becoming.

Salameh Kaileh became part of the Palestinian national movement in the early 1970s when he was granted a scholarship to study political science at the University of Baghdad. There, he immersed himself in the study of history, politics, and philosophy, and "became interested in developing an alternative to existing parties."¹³ He joined Al-Jarmaq, an armed left-wing student brigade associated with the Marxist current of Fatah.¹⁴ It was during this time that his relationship to Marxism matured. The student brigade was internationalist in character, operating from a number of countries with members from all sects and Arab and non-Arab nationalities, and drew political inspiration from revolutionary movements in the emergent Third World, namely those in China, Vietnam, and Cuba.¹⁵ These political experiments provided examples of alternative models of development and revolutionary progress that followed from each country's historical specificities. After the brigade split from Fatah, its cadres sought to build an Arab communist party, but were keen on preserving the organization's ideological autonomy.¹⁶ Al-Jarmaq was assertively against the influence of the Soviet Union on the ideological and political commitments of left-wing organizations in the Arab world, and with the rise of communist China, one of the brigade's founders, Naji Alloush, a Palestinian thinker, early recruit to Fatah, and maternal uncle of Kaileh, reaffirmed: "We did not come out from under the umbrella of Moscow to put ourselves under the umbrella of Beijing."¹⁷

By the early 1980s, the student brigade found itself at odds with Iraqi authorities and certain political blocs within the Palestinian national movement, prompting its cadres to relocate to Syria. Although Kaileh did not continue on as a member of the organization, he too resettled in Syria after having been blacklisted and denied his right of return by Israel for being a militant in the

¹³ Houhou, "Rahīl Falastīnī al-Sūrī al-Maghrabī Salāma Kīla."

¹⁴ Fatah, which formed in 1959, was a broad organization that included under its umbrella varying, and even contradictory, political ideologies and trends, all united by the imperative of liberating Palestine by any means necessary. It was this ideological diluteness that initially afforded the Fatah-affiliated Marxist current relative freedom in determining its political program and ideological leanings in contrast to those of traditional communist parties within the Soviet Union's orbit. In fact, according to historian Tareq Y. Ismael, Fatah "claims that it is the New Left. Abu-Iyad, one of the most important members of [Fatah's] Central Committee, considers his organization to be 'related to progressive thought more than those who merely declare their support for [Marxist-Leninist] thought,'" i.e. official communist parties. See: Ismael, *The Arab Left*, 108; For a rich historical sketch of the Palestinian national movement, see: Khalidi, *Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, 69-128.

¹⁵ Attia Abu Saada, "Tarīkh Nāṣa' li-Abtāl Katība Al-Jarmaq" (History of the Heroes of the Al-Jarmaq Brigade), *Baddawi Gaza*, April 5, 2013, <https://bit.ly/38UNTKZ>.

¹⁶ By the end of 1974, under the leadership of Alloush, the student brigade, with the exception of one member, split from the main organization of Fatah partly on the grounds that Yasser Arafat was leading the party towards a political settlement with Israel.

¹⁷ Wael Mallaha, "'An al-Katība al-ṭalābiyya w Nājī 'Alūsh'" (On the Al-Jarmaq Brigade and Naji Alloush), *Palestine Intifada*, September 2, 2018, <http://palestineintifada.net>, <http://palestineintifada.net/spip.php?article1623&lang=ar>.

Palestinian national movement.¹⁸ Upon moving to Damascus nearly a decade after Hafez Al-Assad carried out a military coup and consolidated his power, Kaileh quickly confronted the limits of political practice in the country, as well as the ideological corruption of the official communist parties that aligned with the ruling Ba'ath Party. Despite the dismal political climate in Syria, however, he soon forged links with the Communist Labor Party of Syria (CLP) which offered a political alternative to existing communist forces in the country.¹⁹

The CLP, previously known as the League of Communist Action, strove to build “a third pole of national political forces within the framework of a united popular front that could overthrow the [Ba'ath] regime and cut off the path of extremist religious forces,” as well as confront global imperialist forces.²⁰ The party “subscribed since its origins to an internationalist approach, linking the fate of the popular classes throughout the region and the world,” and aimed to establish a democratic and revolutionary government in Syria in the place of the Ba'ath regime.²¹ It comprised varying political tendencies and was dynamic in its political practice and theory, encouraging critique, political debates, and discussions around the party's program and analyses of the historical-political context.²² The Hafez regime was quick to launch a number of repressive campaigns that resulted in the imprisonment of dozens of the organization's cadres and leaders.

Kaileh found in the organization a space for genuine political thought and engagement that cut across the dogmatism of official communist parties. Though not an official member of the CLP, he was an active participant in the organization's political actions and discussions, even opening his home to host party meetings. On account of his extensive involvement, Kaileh was imprisoned in 1992 alongside the party's remaining leaders and members which, at the time, effectively immobilized the organization. For eight years, the Palestinian intellectual spent time between two infamously brutal prisons, Adra and Tadmur.²³ When, on the anniversary of the Corrective Movement in 1995, the government offered an amnesty that would supposedly grant the communist political prisoners freedom in return for “leaving political work, withdrawing from the organization, and cooperating with state security,” all of the CLP prisoners, including Kaileh, refused.²⁴ Despite being severely tortured, they did not waver. Kaileh remained imprisoned for another five years, until 2000, and some of his comrades for much longer.

¹⁸ BBC Arabia, “Salāma Kīla fī al-Mashhad.”

¹⁹ The official communist party at the time was part of the National Progressive Front, a coalition of legal political parties in Syria that acknowledged the supreme leadership of the Ba'ath Party in all of spheres of society.

²⁰ Mahmoud Issa, “Rihlat al-Munaḍil Salāma Kīla fī al-Sūjūn min 1992-2000” (The Prison Experience of Resistance Fighter Salameh Kaileh, 1992-2000). Unpublished document shared with author.

²¹ Joseph Daher, “Syria's Labor Communist Party, a Rich Political History,” *Syria Untold*, October 16, 2020, <https://syriauntold.com/2020/10/16/syrias-labor-communist-party-a-rich-political-history/>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Issa, “Rihlat al-Munaḍil Salāma Kīla fī al-Sūjūn min 1992-2000.”

²⁴ Ibid.

Organizations, such as the CLP, sought to reverse the subordination of official communist parties to nationalist forces, to fracture the tightening grip of nationalist parties on the state, and to build a united front against internal and external capitalist-imperialist forces. The political experiment of the CLP was short-lived but its demise, and the demise of other independent left-wing forces, exemplifies the real consequences of the Soviet Union's support of so-called progressive Arab states. Once the USSR “pursued a course of active cooperation with moderately progressive regimes whose main redeeming feature was opposition to Western imperialism,” official Arab communist parties followed suit.²⁵ Meanwhile, independent communist forces, which would later be violently suppressed by these very regimes, found themselves politically impotent and abandoned. In the case of Syria, the Soviet Union’s political, economic, and military support of the Hafez regime contributed to the violent persecution of autonomous communist forces and, in the last instance, effectively disabled the political potential of embattled communists in the country. Indeed, as we shall see, the fate of communist organizations in the Arab world would remain entangled with developments in the Soviet Union long after its foreign policy towards these Arab regimes and its relations with official Arab communist parties shifted.

II. Recasting Marxism

To Salameh Kaileh, the degeneration of thought engendered a decay of organization. He argued that the dogmatism enveloping official communist parties in the Arab world led to ideological stagnation and political deficiency. Thus, forging an alternative to traditional communist parties and developing independent and enduring political projects meant first having the courage to deviate from Marxism proper.

Kaileh viewed Marxism as a method, a mode of thinking. Yet, he found that official communist parties in the region invoked Marxism as a “scriptural text,” imposing *a priori* theoretical understandings onto the unfolding historical process rather than developing theory in accordance with it.²⁶ Kaileh and others referred to this form of Marxism as ‘Soviet Marxism,’ which was associated with Stalin's reconfiguration of Marxism into a formulaic, rigid, and complete doctrine. This, the Palestinian thinker says, was the Marxism that reached the Arab world, and in this inherited form, became reduced to a degenerative custom.

Indeed, under the leadership of Stalin, the Soviet Union subordinated ideology to state interests, rendering the political directives derived from its foreign policy the correct interpretations of Marxism. As such, Marxism reflected Soviet state interests, becoming “not a force of change but a force in defense of the status quo.”²⁷ In the Arab world and elsewhere, communist parties were

²⁵ Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World*, 22.

²⁶ Salameh Kaileh, *Mā al-Mārksīyya? Tafkīk al-'Aqil al-'Ahādī* (What Is Marxism? A Deconstruction of the Monolithic Mind), (Damascus: Dar Al-Yanabee', 2006).

²⁷ Ibid.

viewed by many to be nothing more than mere extensions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Indeed, the CPSU was “largely responsible for the general guidelines of the strategy and tactics of the Arab communist parties, even on matters bearing directly on Arab affairs,” such as the partition of Palestine.²⁸

By the time Kaileh began writing about such matters in the 1980s, the Soviet Union had loosened its grip on foreign communist parties and shifted to a *realpolitik* approach. This increasing independence from Moscow contributed to the willingness of Arab communist parties “to undertake theoretical criticism of previous party positions and to innovatively experiment from a truly Arab perspective.”²⁹ However, by and large, these parties continued to predominantly adhere to the official line of Moscow and to endorse a mechanical formulation of Marxism. “Arab communist party policy in the 1980s represented, in essence, the continued application of doctrines developed in the 1950s and 1960s.”³⁰

Kaileh particularly criticized official communist parties in the Arab world for adhering to a teleological and “linear development of human society” that was largely based on Stalin’s deterministic conception of history.³¹ Because Stalinism, a “condensation of the phenomenon of Soviet Marxism,” treated the propositions of Marx, Engels, and Lenin as transhistorical, immutable laws rather than a set of revisable and criticizable postulates, Kaileh argued that Arab communist parties largely failed to develop and popularize adequate understandings of the trajectory and character of capitalism in the Arab world.³²

These theoretical shortcomings had utmost practical significance. By measuring the real world against the text, official communist parties “answered and analyzed everything even before it had

²⁸ Tareq Ismael’s comprehensive book, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World*, discusses the complicated relationship between official communist parties in the Arab world and the USSR. He shows how, on the whole, Arab communist parties adhered to the official policies and directives of the USSR and, on account of this, oscillated in their political positions to reflect the changing policies of the Soviet Union. This, he argues, ultimately harmed their image, undermined their leadership, and spoiled their relationships with other political organizations in the region. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World*, 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

³¹ Salameh Kaileh (under pseudonym Saeed Al-Maghrebi), *Naqid al-Tajriba al-Ṭanzīmīyya al-Rāhina* (A Critique of the Current Organizational Experience), (Manshurat Al-Wa’ aee, 1988).

³² Certainly, this is a generalization, and indeed a simplification. In this rough sketch, there appears the risk of reducing Arab Marxists to mere appendages of the Soviet Union, infantilized and incapable of producing their own intellectual scholarship or of criticizing dominant Marxist interpretations in the context of the Arab world. The diagnosis of communist dogmatism is *political* through and through. This is to say that the understanding of the overarching trend must be sought in the complex socio-political space that Arab communists found themselves occupying.

The idea that Arab communists were bound to fail in anchoring themselves in their societies has been rehearsed from various angles. For a critique of flattened characterizations of this sort, in which, one may say, politics itself is abstracted away, see Samer Frangie’s “Theorizing from the Periphery: The Intellectual Project of Mahdi ‘Amil,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44 (2012): 465-482. doi:10.1017/S0020743812000426. Here, the author disputes claims that Arab communists and intellectuals did not make any worthwhile contribution to contemporary Arab thought through an exposition of the theoretical contributions of Lebanese Marxist and member of the Lebanese Communist Party, Mahdi Amel.; *Ibid.*

even occurred” and thus, “determined tactics that were at odds with reality” at crucial moments in history.³³ Instead of interrogating the inherited, rigid understanding of the stages of production in light of developments in the Arab world, official communist parties surrendered themselves to determinism. In Kaileh’s estimation, the adherence to such a deterministic conception of social development led communist parties to concede leadership to nationalist forces during national liberation movements against colonial powers, the ramifications of which endure to the present day. As such, Arab communist parties failed to lead the path toward revolutionary progress or become real agents of change.

Despite their progressive policies, state-run economies, and anti-Western and anti-Israel positions, nationalist regimes “acted primarily to strengthen capitalism and an emerging, state-linked capitalist class.”³⁴ In fact, Arab nationalist forces neglected the question of class, downplaying or outright rejecting it as divisive to Arab unity.³⁵ Despite their political alignments and socialistic commitments, these regimes “aimed at demobilizing and persecuting any left-wing forces that attempted to strengthen the autonomous mobilization of workers and other social forces.”³⁶ Consequently, independent communist forces were immobilized, imprisoned or exiled, while official communist parties were “appeased and satisfied within the limits established by capitalism, contented and accepting of the state of affairs.”³⁷

The socialistic commitments of progressive regimes came to an end in the 1970s and 1980s, when Arab states adopted policies of liberalization or entire programs drawn out by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Indeed, these regimes galvanized around the internationalization of capital and openly welcomed the involvement of US-led financial institutions in the restructuring of their economies without regard to the detrimental social consequences this would engender. Meanwhile, in the wake of the neoliberal era and the eventual fall of the Soviet Union, traditional communist parties in the Arab world abandoned their political imaginations of a socialist future, turning instead to a nostalgia for a state-capitalist past.

III. The Global Descent

Salameh Kaileh rejected the negative form of anti-imperialism purported by Arab nationalists which, he argued, failed to reflect an emancipatory political project. While cross-national solidarity with regimes that defy the American empire has political significance, the obfuscation of the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, 71-78.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ As Hanieh puts it, “This strategy of demobilization could be seen in another innovation of Arab nationalism—the creation of state-led, corporatist unions and other federations that were billed as representatives of working classes but that, in reality, were frequently used to suppress struggles and prevent them from emerging outside of the state structures.” Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, 71-78.

³⁷ Kaileh, *Mā al-Mārksīyya? Tafkīk al-‘Aqil al-‘Ahādī*.

question of class and capitalist development rendered any gesture of anti-imperialism merely rhetorical. Arab nationalists reduced imperialism to an existential and external threat, while facilitating financial imperialism according to their own cross-border class interests. Meanwhile, official communist parties that largely supported nationalist forces on the basis of their anti-imperialism became confined to the political realm of the nation-state, eternally subordinated to self-professed progressive regimes in the name of national security.

Kaileh argued that the struggle against imperialism required a vision of the entire region as a single political and economic unit which entails, in turn, a region-wide, left-wing front that could actualize total economic and social independence. In his vision, this front would unify, organize, and direct the productive capacities, natural resources, and markets of the region toward the egalitarian, transnational development of the entire Middle East and North Africa. Under the leadership of this front, “each country can overcome its basic deficiencies (labor, agriculture, industrial, etc.) and establish a vast market capable of accommodating a large industrial revolution.”³⁸ Only through unity, he argued, could the entire region be truly emancipated from the yoke of imperialism.³⁹

While the region is indeed plagued by a chronic state of underdevelopment, its natural resources make it one of the richest areas in the world, a contradiction that is a necessary feature of capitalist development on a global scale. With the transition from coal to oil and the discovery of oil in the Gulf in the 1920s and 1930s, the energy-rich Middle East became capitalism’s main energy source and of strategic economic interest to Western countries and companies that sought control over its untapped reserves.⁴⁰ Though the people of the region and future generations have been denied the fruits of this discovery, Anglo-American oil companies, Western countries, and the ruling classes of oil-producing states became increasingly enriched. These ruling classes siphoned off national wealth and negotiated agreements with foreign oil companies to the detriment of their national interests and the greater region.⁴¹

After World War II weakened the hegemony of France and Britain and national liberation movements in the Arab world proliferated, the United States, militarily and economically superior to its European counterparts, launched sustained imperialist interventions in the Middle East. As a

³⁸ Salameh Kaileh, *Tarīq al-ʿIntifāda Limādha Tathūr al-Ṭabaqāt al-Shaʿbiyya* (Road to Intifada: Why Do the Popular Classes Revolt?) (Italy: Dar Al-Mutawassit, 2007), 72.

³⁹ Adid Nassar, “Salāma Kīla: al-Munāḍil w al-Mufakar w al-ʿInsān” (Salameh Kaileh: Resistance Fighter, Thinker, Human), *Al-Hiwar Al-Mutamaddin*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=625355>.

⁴⁰ According to political economist Adam Hanieh, “the Gulf region of the Middle East – namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and the smaller Gulf states – held the world’s largest supplies of cheap and easily accessible hydrocarbons” that had yet to be explored. “This brought with it profound geopolitical consequences, conferring on the region a potentially decisive role in determining the fortunes of capitalism at the global scale – ‘a stupendous source of strategic power,’ as a US Department of State memo described Saudi Arabia in 1945.” Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, 21.

⁴¹ Ibid.

rising superpower, it sought to curb the expansion of the Soviet Union, thwart Soviet-aligned post-colonial governments, and, above all, secure the region's oil reserves by any means necessary.⁴² Western states, led by the United States, sponsored forces that could act as its proxies against communist and nationalist forces and backed coups to install political factions conducive to their interests. Such interventions did not only take the form of military incursions and regime-change plots, however. Even in the post-colonial period, newly independent nations were increasingly subjected to economic domination by the West.⁴³ On the whole, these interventions transformed regional hierarchies that in turn shaped national social formations in every country across the Middle East and North Africa.⁴⁴

The global economic recession of the 1970s and 1980s marked the global descent into neoliberalism driven by US-led international financial institutions, namely the IMF and the World Bank. Facing rising international oil prices, mounting inflation, eroding purchasing power, and increasing rates of global unemployment, among other things, Western countries looked to the markets, labor reserves, and resources of Third World countries to adapt to the crisis and fortify global capitalism. Consolidating this relationship of dependency, the IMF and World Bank imposed 'development plans' whereby Third World countries would implement austerity measures conducive to the interests of advanced economies in return for loans. Oil-importing countries in the Middle East and North Africa, in particular, were facing severe balance-of-payment deficits as a result of rising oil prices and turned to international financial institutions for loans and to oil-rich Gulf countries, which enjoyed a massive influx of petrodollars, for financial aid.⁴⁵

In return for financial support, governments in the Middle East and North Africa carried out far-reaching economic reforms that were detrimental to the majority of their populations, as well as to the development of their countries and of the region at large. This type of reform entailed,

⁴² In the Truman Doctrine of 1947 and the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, the United States explicitly announced its intent to intervene militarily in the Middle East to curb the Soviet Union's growing influence. This aim, however, was underpinned by the US' interest in the region's "great natural resources," as an earlier draft of the Truman Doctrine confirmed. The Eisenhower Doctrine, a particular reaction to Gamal Abdul Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, referred explicitly to the region's oil reserves. The US government sought to dispatch its armed forces to the Middle East which it emphasized hosted "about two thirds of the presently known oil deposits of the world." The document also highlighted the centrality of these reserves for the functioning of global capitalism: "The nations of Europe are particularly dependent upon this supply, and this dependency relates to transportation as well as to production." Indeed, this policy of securing the flow of oil by all means necessary was affirmed again and again by the US presidents to come. To read more on this matter, see: Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, 23 and David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-25.

⁴³ Michael Heinrich, "The Theory of Imperialism," *Theories of International Relations*, ed. Manuela Spindler and Siegfried Schieder (New York: Routledge, 2014), 179-98.

⁴⁴ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, 10; Larissa Bandar, "An Interview with Salameh Kaileh, the Dangers of Globalization from an Arab Perspective," *Qantara*, 2006, <https://ar.qantara.de/content/hwr-m-slm-kylh-mkhtr-lwlm-mn-mnzw-rby>.

⁴⁵ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, 138-216; Linda Matar, "Twilight of 'State Capitalism' in Formerly 'Socialist' Arab States," *Journal of North African Studies* volume 18, no. 3 (2013): 416-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2012.735802>.

among other things, labor market deregulation, the liberalization of trade and investment, the privatization of state assets, and the promotion of export-oriented activities. As a social consequence of these reforms, ordinary people faced impoverishment, decreasing wages, and exponentially rising costs of living. Meanwhile, the ruling classes amassed great wealth, bearing no responsibility for the immiseration of their people.

The growing dependency of countries in the Middle East and North Africa on international financial institutions empowered the latter to weaponize debt forgiveness, coercing countries to pursue foreign policies predominantly advantageous to the interests of the United States, including normalizing trade relations with Israel, in return for a clean financial slate.⁴⁶ With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the US-Soviet hegemonic struggle, imperialist wars and interventions in the region intensified, as did the leverage of international financial institutions on the direction of the region's economic development. Consequently, privatization accelerated in both scope and pace.⁴⁷

The imperialist grip on the economic trajectory of the entire region, as well as its role in shaping regional hierarchies, undergirded Salameh Kaileh's call for a united front across the Middle East and North Africa. While each country has its own specificities and allegiances, Kaileh argued that the mass protests against austerity measures in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan between the late 1970s and early 1990s were symptomatic of the region's common economic formations which were shaped by both internal and external capitalist forces. Across the region, countries witnessed their productive capacities gutted, people impoverished, and natural resources plundered. Emphasizing the role of national ruling classes in directly facilitating the interests of external forces, he argued that "since the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties of the last century, the Arab regimes have merged with globalization even before it was fortified by following the conditions of the International Monetary Fund."⁴⁸ US imperialism "became not only an external occupying force, but also an internal exploitative force, employing its political and intangible faculties, its military power, and its agents in the Arab world (the Zionist entity and the

⁴⁶ Adam Hanieh demonstrates how during the MENA Economic Summits, a series of intergovernmental meetings held annually between 1994 and 1998, normalization with Israel was explicitly linked to the consolidation of neoliberal reform: "Perhaps the most revealing confirmation of these linkages was the establishment of the so-called Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZs) in Jordan and Egypt. The first of these zones came about as a result of economic agreements signed between the United States, Israel, and Jordan in 1997. Under the QIZ agreements, goods produced in the zones were given duty-free access to US markets, provided that a certain proportion of inputs were Israeli (8 percent in the case of Jordan, 11.7 percent in the case of Egypt). Soon after the first agreement was signed, an additional twelve QIZ sites were established in Jordan. These agreements were intended to weld together Israeli and Arab capital in the joint exploitation of cheap labor, with exports aimed at the US market." Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, 77.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 138-216.

⁴⁸ Larissa Kaileh, *Mā al-Mārksīyya? Tafkīk al-'Aqil al-'Ahādī* (In conversation with Salameh Kaileh, the Dangers of Globalization from an Arab Perspective), *Qantara*, 2006, <https://ar.qantara.de/content/hwr-m-slm-kylh-mkhtr-lwlm-mn-mnzwr-rby>.

reactionary Arab regimes) to plunder the wealth of nations, increase the poverty of masses, and accumulate its capital.”⁴⁹

IV. In the Case of Syria

In the case of Syria, the government’s economic transformation from state-interventionist to market-oriented decimated the public sector and subordinated the country to the forces of the international market. In the early decades of Ba’ath Party rule, the government carried out policies aimed at “initiating an internally induced and independent path to economic development, mitigating foreign dominance, and alleviating the economic impediments that existed during the post-colonial period.”⁵⁰ Indeed, “the country had seen significant extension in state support for many basic social needs, with levels of education, health, and literacy improving considerably in these earlier years.”⁵¹

However, following Hafez Al-Assad’s coup, Syria’s economy was transformed from a state to private capitalist system. In fact, Assad’s first gesture towards liberalization was without the instruction or support of international financial institutions. “The state capitalists that initiated progressive measures ‘from above ’reversed them at a later period, once their class interests changed,” carrying out neoliberal reforms under the decisive command of the ruling class.⁵² With piecemeal economic liberalization, the state bourgeoisie, as well as the emergent state-affiliated commercial class, became the new agents of investment, prioritizing commercial rather than industrial investment, authorizing the establishment of mixed sector companies under private management, and liberalizing trade, which precipitated a balance-of-payments crisis, among other things. Under the pretext of national security and in the interests of the new merchant bourgeoisie, “state capitalists revitalized the private sector, the activities of which had remained limited but were never destroyed during the ‘state capitalist ’experience of the 1950s and 1960s.”⁵³ Although under Hafez Al-Assad, economic liberalization was relatively gradual, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a turning point. The regime lost its main patron and realigned with Western powers, pursuing economic policies in accordance with the dictates of US-led international financial institutions which seriously undermined its previous economic strategy.

After Bashar Al-Assad inherited the presidency from his father in 2000, economic liberalization accelerated, appearing as an irreversible trend. As the regime and its associated classes became increasingly enriched, the masses fell deeper into immiseration. “The glitz of these reforms began to be visible in ostentatious displays of wealth on the part of the upper echelons of society,” while

⁴⁹ Kaileh, *Road to Intifada: Why Do the Popular Classes Revolt?*, 72.

⁵⁰ Matar, “Twilight of ‘State Capitalism ’in Formerly ‘Socialist ’Arab States,” 421.

⁵¹ Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, 159.

⁵² Matar, “Twilight of ‘State Capitalism ’in Formerly ‘Socialist ’Arab States,” 417.

⁵³ Ibid.

the state simultaneously reduced its spending on health and education, phased out subsidies on key commodities, liberalized trade and investment laws, promoted public-private partnerships, and lowered corporate taxes, among other things.⁵⁴ In its pursuit of unbridled liberalization, the state failed to protect ordinary Syrians, support its productive sectors, and preserve its central economic and social role.⁵⁵

Newly out of prison in 2000, Salameh Kaileh was cast back into drastically transformed society. He became involved in the anti-globalization movement, an international anti-capitalist movement that rejected “neoliberal policies and wars led by capitalism, whether in the Arab region or elsewhere in the world.”⁵⁶ The anti-globalization movement in Syria focused predominantly on playing an “explanatory role” in society. Thus, in an attempt to “clarify the problem of globalization” to the greater population, the Palestinian thinker and his comrades published *Al-Badil (The Alternative)*, a publication that focused on various subjects, such as specific economic policies pursued by the Syrian government, imperialist wars driven by the logic of capital, debt and Third World development, and the neoliberal trajectory of other countries in the Arab world, such as Egypt and Morocco. The activists distributed their publication widely and organized forums and public discussions to encourage a nation-wide conversation about the country’s economic direction. Though the regime largely turned a blind eye to the anti-globalization movement, the margin granted to them by the state was narrow. By 2006, around the time that it embraced a doctrine of complete market openness, the regime intensified its campaigns of repression against those involved in the movement, arresting an increasing number of activists, many of them students.

The uprisings that rippled across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010-11 were in large part precipitated by the preceding decades of austerity. This chain of events, which was a rare moment in human history, further underscored the interconnectedness of the region, including their comparable socio-economic realities that reflected a path towards de-development.⁵⁷ With the advent of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Salameh Kaileh and a number of leftists and communists of various sects, ages, and political backgrounds found it necessary to forge a broad leftist front in order to unite the progressive left-wing forces in the country. The Syrian Left Coalition (SLC), an umbrella body of young communist and leftist cadres, sought to articulate the emancipatory ideals emerging from within the movement itself and to put forth a program that reflected emancipatory and egalitarian ideals of the political, social, and economic kind. In its political program, the organization called for overthrowing the regime, redrafting the Syrian constitution, strengthening Syria’s productive sector, increasing the state’s social support, closing the urban-

⁵⁴ Linda Matar, *The Political Economy of Investment in Syria* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 109-12; Ali Kadri, *Unmaking of Arab Socialism* (London, New York: Anthem Press, 2016), 136.

⁵⁵ Linda Matar, “Macroeconomic Framework in Pre-conflict Syria,” in *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 106.

⁵⁶ Bandar, “Hiwār ma’ Salāma Kīla: Makhatir al-‘Awlama min Manzūr ‘Arabī.”

⁵⁷ Matar, “Macroeconomic Framework in Pre-conflict Syria,” 103.

rural developmental divide, and building revolutionary forces against Israel and for the liberation of Palestine and the Golan Heights, among other things. It also argued that Syria's national independence and security hinged on rehabilitating and advancing the country's national productive industries and agricultural sector, as well as on undoing the regime's neoliberal economic policies. "There is no independence within the confines of the economic dependence engendered by neoliberal policies."⁵⁸

The SLC also published a newspaper called *Al-Yasari (The Left)*, which was clandestinely discussed, written, and printed in Kaileh's home. The publication focused on theoretico-political questions confronting the mass movement. It was distributed discreetly to leftist groups and individuals organizing in the movement and published online for those inside and outside Syria who were ambivalent or suspicious of the uprising.⁵⁹

Among the national forces of the uprising, the SLC and its mass organization, the Syrian Revolutionary Youth, were one of few leftist organizations that seriously aligned themselves with the revolutionary movement.⁶⁰ Traditional communist and leftist organizations in Syria, among those that were granted full or limited state approval, revealed their complete abandonment of the people. "Instead of practicing self-criticism for [their] failure to engage in the revolution, to rationalize it and protect it from infiltration," the traditional Syrian communist parties and leftist organizations, such as the official Syrian Communist Party (Bakdash) and the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists (Kassioun), "lashed out at the revolting peoples and attacked all those who joined its ranks in the harshest and most slanderous terms."⁶¹

The marginal role of progressive forces in Syria – an unmistakable symptom of a nearly 50-year dictatorship that gutted any political potential in society – made the Syrian uprising very contentious within leftist circles globally. The mainstream Left that aligned itself against the uprising failed to properly understand the catalyst of the popular revolt and the cross-border class interests of the regime that "continues to deploy the same neoliberal approach that was endorsed during pre-conflict times," even a decade after the conflict.⁶² Yet, on account of the historical legacy of the early Ba'ath Party and the government's anti-imperialist rhetoric, however contradictory, the mainstream Left either adopted an apologia towards the regime or outright aligned with it.⁶³

⁵⁸ "Al-Shabāb al-Sūrī al-Tha'r" (The Syrian Revolutionary Youth), *Jaredatona*, April 13, 2013, pp. 10–11.

⁵⁹ Unfortunately, paper and online copies of the newspaper no longer exist.

⁶⁰ The Syrian Revolutionary Youth was a broad left-wing organization that was considerably active in the uprising. For a detailed account on the Syrian Revolutionary Youth, see: Yasmeen Mobayed, "The Antinomies of Kassioun: The History of a Communist Organization in Syria, 1999-2015," *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung* (2022): 23.

⁶¹ Nassar, "Salāma Kīla: al-Munādīl w al-Mufakar w al-'Insān."

⁶² Matar, "Macroeconomic Framework in Pre-conflict Syria," 108.

⁶³ In Ali Kadri's words, "The Syrian state's role in CIA ['black-site'] rendition/torture programs, its participation in the First Gulf War, and its later furtive role in squeezing Iraqi resistance, are landmark pro-US-led imperialist positions. But the most important contribution the regime provided to the military face of capital was to furnish it with the conditions for prolonged civil strife in Syria." Kadri, *Unmaking of Arab Socialism*, 133.

Salameh Kaileh disregarded neither the threat of US-led imperialism, nor its determinant role on the outcomes of political movements that threaten its hegemony. However, he argued that those who stood against the uprising on the basis of ‘anti-imperialism’ denied the Syrian people of their roles as active political and historical agents and instead looked to global forces as the ultimate forces of change. Kaileh likens this line of thinking to that of the liberal camp in Syria which likewise considered the United States and Western powers to be the primary agents within the revolutionary process with the power to force regime change. He found that, to these so-called ‘anti-imperialists’ and liberals, the Syrian people are mere objects upon which global powers act. He contended: “While there is no doubt an imbalance of power, every quest for change stems from this imbalance. What changes is the party’s ability to organize the class that it seeks to express and to develop the conflict in such a way that allows for a change in the balance of power.”⁶⁴

The SLC, like many progressive organizations of the Syrian uprising, was violently repressed by the regime and too weak to direct the movement or to stand against reactionary forces. Many of its members faced death, detainment, or exile. In April 2012, Kaileh's house was ransacked by plain-clothed security agents who found copies of *Al-Yasari*, a discovery that was more than enough to incriminate the thinker. He was imprisoned for nearly two months, during which he was interrogated, tortured, and denied his daily medication, which he had been taking daily since recovering from cancer in 2004. Upon his release, he was exiled once more, but continued to write and think about the problems facing Syria and the wider region.

Despite the spontaneous, and at times contradictory, nature of the Syrian uprising, or perhaps because of it, Kaileh affirmed that the duty of Marxists and leftists within the movement was to “develop the revolutionary experience of people so that they could achieve victory in another revolution.”⁶⁵ In fact, he found the moment to be opportune for the cultivation of ideas and practices within the processual, revolutionary unfolding of the event.

V. Conclusion

Writing in the early days of the 2011 uprisings, Perry Anderson argued that while Arab nationalism has proven to be a flawed ideology, the collectivism it asserts must be salvaged if an understanding and transformation of the region is to be attained. With the crystallization of a common Arab nationalism,

there followed the rise, corruption and failure of Nasserism and Ba’athism. They will not revive today. But the impulse behind them will have to be recovered in the Arab world, if revolt is to become revolution. Liberty and equality need to be rejoined. But without fraternity, in a region so

⁶⁴ Salameh Kaileh, “‘An Taq̄sīm Falastīn w al-Taba‘iyya li-Mūskaw” (On the Partition of Palestine and the Dependency on Moscow), Secular Studies and Research Centre, July 12, 2018, <https://www.ssrcaw.org/ar/show.art.asp?t=2&aid=605103>.

⁶⁵ Kaileh, “On the Role of the Syrian Left in the Syrian Revolution.”

pervasively mauled and inter-connected, they risk souring. . . Required is a generous Arab internationalism, capable of envisaging—in the distant future, when the last sheikh is overthrown—the equitable distribution of oil wealth in proportion to population across the Arab world, not the monstrous opulence of the arbitrary few and the indigence of the desperate many.⁶⁶

Salameh Kaileh understood that “the contours of a new vision that will guide the revolutionary work in its next stage” can only be defined through the constructive destruction of old forms.⁶⁷ No doubt that Kaileh’s political vision appears utopian. But his utopianism is symptomatic. Where sober realism – that is, of the critical bent – fails to distinguish itself from unbridled cynicism, utopianism takes on a sound political significance. So long as politics is entrenched in history, the scandalous character of this injunction appears dialectical: activating the imagination in order to expose the sheer appearance of complete understanding.

⁶⁶ Perry Anderson, “On the Concatenation in the Arab World.”

⁶⁷ Kaileh, *Naqid al-Tajriba al-Ṭanzīmīyya al-Rāhina*.