A Eulogy to My Father’s Generation

Nasser Rabbat

My father, Omar Rabbat, passed away in November 2013, before the revolution that became a civil war in Syria had completed its third year. He died outside his beloved country and was buried in a small village in Lebanon, less than 20 miles from the Syrian border. Toward the end of his life, his anguish had become more poignant, and he expressed it in ever more desperate ways. The stroke that finally killed him paralyzed half his body and slurred his speech. “What is hurting you most?” a visiting cardiologist asked him at one point. “The crisis in Syria,” he replied, in a faint voice.

My father, who was almost 90 years old, was one of the last survivors of a Syrian generation that witnessed independence but never managed to complete the project of state-building. He was born in Damascus in 1924 to a mercantile family whose origin was in the silk trade, four years after the French occupied the country, and grew up under colonial rule. In his teens, as a tall, well built, and exceedingly daring young man, he often participated in demonstrations against the French and sometimes did more than protest. In our attic back home, there used to be an old, rusty helmet with a hole on its side. When I asked him about it, he told me that he had taken it from a French soldier in a demonstration in the late 1930s, when he wasn’t yet 15 years old. But he never elaborated on how he grabbed it and what happened to its owner. He always spoke about the struggle against colonial rule as the harbinger of national aspirations for those who inherited a truncated Syria after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. He also recalled the enthusiasm with which he and his friends at al-Tajhiz, his high school in Damascus, shared in and worked toward these national goals.

Independence came in 1946, when my father was about to enter the University of Damascus. The new government began building the administration and the army as the two bastions of national sovereignty. But the 1948 war in Palestine, which Syria participated in, interrupted the project and uncovered its structural and ideological weaknesses. The university students nonetheless rushed to defend Palestine. My father and his comrades, who were known for their crew cuts, which earned them the sobriquet al-mahaliq (“the crew-cut men”), joined the Arab Liberation Army led by Fawzi al-Qawuqji, the Lebanese Arab-nationalist and military organizer. They ultimately witnessed the stunning defeat of the combined Arab armies in Palestine against the so-called “Zionist gangs” and their humiliating retreat beyond the borders of the United-Nations partition map. The mahaliq returned from Palestine as transformed young men, convinced that Arab regimes had to change after their shameful failure to defend Palestine. What they and countless other young Arabs concluded is that salvation would only come from the unification of the great Arab nation, fragmented as it was into small and powerless states by the colonial scheming of Britain and France.

The fifties were the decade of political activism for my father’s generation. Many of the young and educated joined the parties teeming on the national stage: established and bourgeois parties such as the People’s Party and the National Bloc, along with new and ideological parties such as the Baath Party, the Communist Party, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. The mahaliq chose not to belong to any of these parties, even though their pan-Arab beliefs made them lean toward the budding Arab Nationalist Movement. But they practiced politics on the ground by, for instance, rejecting attempts by the country’s military rulers to threaten the autonomy of their college. They once closed the University of Damascus by blocking its access routes in protest over the arrest of Baathist students, chief among them Nureddin al-Atassi, a future mediocre Syrian president, even though the mahaliq were not particularly fond of the
Baathists. They did not lift their blockade until the president of the university, the great thinker Constantin Zureiq, promised to pressure the government to release the detainees. At the end of 1953, the mahaliq attended a graduation ceremony presided over by the president of the republic, the newly minted dictator Adib al-Shishakli, and stood in front of him on the podium with their hands clasped behind their backs, declaring, “I refuse to accept a degree in law in a country that does not respect the rule of law.” They managed to embarrass the Syrian leader in front of the august audience—an audacious act that landed some of them in prison, though my father escaped by hiding in an acquaintance’s office. In any event, his friends were released after only a few days. Arab dictators at that time still had some political wisdom, and some sense of humor.

These two traits distinguished the handsome and charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was then enchanting the despont Arab street with his pan-Arab vision. My father and his mahaliq joined the throngs of Syrians who demanded immediate unity with Egypt under Nasser’s leadership, and worked openly and underground to achieve it. Heck my mother and father named me after Nasser, when I was born right before his nationalization of the Suez Canal, which led to a war with Britain, France, and Israel. Finally, in 1958, the Syrian government yielded to the pressure. Shukri al-Quwatli, Syria’s aging and astute president, offered the presidency of the United Arab Republic to an eager Nasser. Syria became the little “northern province” to a larger and domineering “southern province.” In the beginning, the euphoria of political union obscured this reality; millions of Syrians joined Abdel Halim Hafez in singing, Watani habibi, al-watan al-akbar (“My beloved country, the great country”). But Nasser’s acquisitive tendencies soon became apparent. I don’t think we should. Within three years, disgruntled Syrian officers led a coup that scuttled the union. The new regime, backed by the bourgeois class to which the mahaliq belonged, attempted to establish an independent, Arab, and democratic Syria with a whiff of liberalism. But the government did not last long. It collapsed as a result of its inability to pacify the various ideologically motivated officers groups within the military and the regional convulsions brought about by the Cold War and the legacies of the old colonial order.

My father became a lawyer during this period because he believed that politics required a commitment to the rule of law. He joined a group comprised mostly of lawyers that met every Wednesday evening to discuss current events. They still hoped to build a democratic Arab republic in Syria despite the failure of the United Arab Republic, and they continued their weekly meetings even after the Baath Party came to power in 1963 through a military coup. For the rest of the 1960s, Syria was rocked by a series of violent coups and counter-coups led by military officers belonging to the various factions of the Baath Party. The constant jockeying for power, the suppression of liberties, and the chaotic pseudo-socialist economies policies adopted by the regime ruined the country, culminating in the disastrous war of 1967 with Israel, which destroyed the aspirations of generations of Arabs. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad mounted his so-called “Corrective Movement,” which in reality was a military coup against his old comrades, and ruled Syria with an iron fist until his death in 2000, at which point power passed to his son, Bashar.

As Assad concentrated his power, making disappearances, extrajudicial imprisonment, and interference with all aspects of public life hallmarks of his regime, my father and his mahaliq withdrew from politics. But my dad had already turned to another form of public engagement, becoming an active secretary of the Damascus Lawyers Order, the professional association of the city’s lawyers. In this role, he defended many colleagues who were jailed for their political activities or critical stances toward the regime. Once, in 1966, long before Assad’s ascent, my father came home disgusted and exhausted from a long meeting with Abdul-Karim al-Jundi, the feared head of the National Security Office, where he had pleaded unsuccessfully for the release of a dear colleague. But he was not deterred. In fact, he detected in Jundi’s apparent toughness a
willingness to negotiate, and vowed to continue his effort. The friend was ultimately released, and I went with my father to visit him as he lay in bed at home with a double fracture of his spine caused by torture. It was during that time that I began to grasp my father’s anguish at what was happening to Syria. We used to frequently go by car to neighboring Lebanon as my father had the privilege to leave the country at a time of severe travel restrictions. Whenever we crossed the border and drove into the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, my father would roll down his window and ask us to do the same, then he would exclaim: breathe the air of freedom.

My father’s advocacy work abruptly came to an end in 1980, when Assad put the country’s professional organizations under the direct supervision of the Baath Party. My father quit public life and retreated to his private law practice and family. His decision coincided with Assad’s increasingly violent reaction to the Muslim Brotherhood’s open military challenge to his rule. In 1982, Assad massacred as many as 30,000 people in the city of Hama, plunging the country into total dictatorship. Syria became Suriya al-Assad: a fiefdom ruled by members of Assad’s family and clan, and, since the beginning of the protests in 2011, violently repressed by them. Meanwhile, my father and his generation became relics of an earlier Syria—an aspiring republic with a project of nation-building that, while weak, romantic, and hurried, was nonetheless still achievable throughout my father’s adulthood. That project was ultimately dismantled by Hafez al-Assad’s security regime, as Syrians became prisoners in their own country. The Assads’ slogans have changed over the years—first “Unity, Freedom, and Socialism,” then “Resistance” against Israel (supposedly to the colonial conspiracy of Israel and/or the West), and now the “fight against terrorism and extremism”—but the stark reality of their tyranny has not.

My father ended up leaving his beloved Damascus at the insistence of my mother and sister in late 2012 as they could no longer bear the continuous thud of bombs flying over their neighborhood to land on the revolting and poor districts south of the capital. Broken-hearted and chronically ill, he spent his days in my mother’s village in Lebanon dreaming of going back home and openly though halfheartedly scheming to do just that. To him, it was unimaginable to die and be buried away from the city he loved and in which he spent his life. But that was exactly what happened.

That pioneering Syrians who grew up with their nation die outside their country is a tragedy. That they die without hope of a real nation-state rising from the detritus of a savage civil war is an even greater tragedy. Their consolation is that they were sincere in their pursuits even if, in hindsight, they failed. Our consolation? I don’t know if we have any.

Nasser Rabbat is the Aga Khan professor of Islamic architecture at MIT. His most recent books are: Mamluk History Through Architecture: Building, Culture, and Politics in Mamluk Egypt and Syria (London, 2010), and al-Mudun al-Mayyita: Durus min Madhih wa-Ru’an li-Mustaqbalih (The Dead Cities: Lessons from its History and Views on its Future) (Damascus, 2010). This article was previously published in the Atlantic and is reproduced with permission: http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/the-death-of-a-syrian-dream/284315/