

Riad al-Turk's Lifelong Struggle for a Free and Democratic Syria

A writer and human rights activist who worked alongside the recently deceased 'Syrian Mandela' in Damascus reflects on the rich legacy he left behind

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If I were granted paradise
I would not wish to have it alone
May no clouds rain on me and my land
That do not cover the whole country

When Riad al-Turk, the veteran dissident known affectionately as “the old man of the Syrian opposition,” died on New Year’s Day 2024 in exile in France at the age of 93, his family took the unusual step of starting his death notice not with a religious quote but with the above lines by the 11th-century Syrian poet, philosopher and freethinker Abu al-Alaa al-Maarri. The egalitarian spirit of the verse captures much of the essence of Riad, who lived a life of great personal sacrifice in the struggle for a free and democratic Syria. He suffered immensely but was not broken. He leaves behind a rich legacy.

When I first met Riad, I had recently arrived in Damascus from Britain. It was the year 2000. It was a mild autumn, but all the talk was of a “Damascus Spring.” Hafez al-Assad had just died, after three decades of totalitarian dictatorship, and his son Bashar had inherited the presidency. The new president seemed to be an outward-looking modernizer. Many Syrians at home and abroad believed his presidency would usher in a new democratic age. My father was one of many political dissidents who seized the moment to return from exile. He took me with him.

Riad al-Turk was a close friend and former comrade of my father’s. He used to visit our house in Tiliani, behind the Italian Hospital from which the district takes its name. I saw my father truly come alive on those evenings when they sat with other friends in a smoke-filled room, a glass of arak or whisky in hand, voices raised, hands gesturing. During those visits my father relived the escapades of his youth. He could also engage in the animated political discussions he’d missed so much in exile.

I was young, and my interest in Syrian politics was limited. I had come to Damascus to spend time with family. I had recently graduated with a master’s degree in human rights and had dreams

of working in South Asia. Did I want to work on human rights in Syria? Riad asked me. A short while later, I found myself attending a meeting of a human rights monitoring center, one of the newly formed independent civil society organizations that had sprung up following Hafez al-Assad's death. The meeting was held in an old stone building in Damascus' Baramkeh neighborhood. I was introduced that day to a young lawyer called Razan Zaitouneh. We were the same age, both of us were passionate about human rights and social justice, and we quickly developed a strong friendship. At the time, I was largely oblivious to the risks such work entailed.

I never made it to South Asia, and I saw a great deal more of Riad.

Riad al-Turk was born in Homs in 1930. He grew up in an orphanage. Maybe it was his early childhood experience that imbued him with the strong sense of injustice and the determination to resist it that would define his life. He became politically active while in law school, and in 1952 he joined the Syrian Communist Party (SCP). His first short stint in prison was the same year. This was punishment for opposing the military coup led by Adib al-Shishakli, one of a series of coups that followed Syria's formal independence from France. Then he was imprisoned again in 1958 and held for 16 months for opposing the short-lived United Arab Republic, which brought the Syrian and Egyptian states together under Gamal Abdel Nasser's rule. Both the Shishakli coup and the Nasserist dictatorship significantly eroded Syrian democracy, giving the military and security services a central role in political life. It was this assault on democracy — and, specifically, Nasser's banning of the Syrian Communist Party — that provoked the opposition of Riad and his comrades. He was a democrat to his core. And by now he had suffered grievous torture, which didn't subdue his fervor for justice — on the contrary, it deepened and made it more visceral. He refused to back down.

He served as secretary general of the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) from its foundation in 1973 until 2005. The party was formed following a split in the SCP over several key disagreements. The breakaway Political Bureau wanted the Arabs to play a role independent of the Soviet Union and opposed the SCP's authoritarian leadership under Khaled Bakdash. In 1972, they rejected the SCP's decision to join the pro-regime National Progressive Front, which provided a facade of political pluralism while the reality was absolute subservience to the ruling Baath Party and the Hafez al-Assad cult. The Political Bureau was able to operate at first, although with restrictions. But the regime cracked down on the party after it strongly condemned Syria's intervention in Lebanon in 1976, in which Assad supported pro-Israel Falangist militias against the Palestinian-leftist alliance. All party activity was severely repressed. In October 1980, Riad was arrested.

On this occasion, he was imprisoned for almost 18 years, spending the whole time in solitary confinement. For the first 10 years he didn't have a bed to sleep on. As well as the psychological torment, he was subjected to extreme physical torture. He refused repeated attempts to co-opt him in return for his release.

He was isolated from the outside world entirely. It was only in the final months that he was allowed books, newspapers or mail. I once asked him how he managed not to lose his mind after such a long period in solitary confinement. He told me how he used to collect lentils from his meals to turn into artworks. This story became well known among Syrians, in part through two films made by Mohammad Ali Atassi about Riad's life: "Ibn al-Amm" (The Cousin, 2001) and "Ibn al-Amm Online" (The Cousin Online, 2012).

His long periods in prison, and his unwavering commitment to a free Syria, earned him comparisons to Nelson Mandela. I was often in awe not just of Riad, but of other former prisoners

who, despite years of incarceration and brutal treatment, resumed their political activism when they were released. I suppose they'd had everything else taken from them — the chance of a life lived with family, of raising children — and knew that once your eyes are opened to tyranny and injustice, remaining silent is also a political choice.

Riad was released in May 1998. Hafez al-Assad died in 2000.

When I arrived in Syria in the fall of 2000, the “Damascus Spring” was in full swing. In the supposed political opening of Bashar’s nascent reign, a number of forums were being set up, primarily in Damascus but also in other towns. In these forums, dissidents gathered to discuss ideas of political reform. It was by no means a radical movement — its demands were modest — yet it represented a significant change in a polity where, for decades, all criticism was forbidden and brutally suppressed. Once more, Riad became a prominent critic of the regime. In an interview on Al Jazeera in August 2001, he declared, “the dictator has died.” The regime was angered. Riad was arrested and tried by the State Security Court and spent another 15 months in prison.

At the human rights organization where I worked, one of our main areas of focus was political prisoners and prisoners of conscience — those from a wide variety of backgrounds and political beliefs who were imprisoned because they opposed the regime and advocated for a free and democratic Syria. As the “Damascus Spring” turned to winter, we were increasingly advocating for friends and colleagues who had been incarcerated by the regime. Riad was one of them. It had now become apparent that Bashar al-Assad would continue his father’s authoritarian rule.

In 2005, the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) moved away from its Marxist-Leninist roots. Adopting a social democratic orientation, it became the Syrian Democratic People’s Party. Riad stepped down as party secretary, but remained an active and influential member. In October of that year, he was one of the signatories to the Damascus Declaration. This attempt to unify the political opposition called for a multiparty democracy based on free periodic elections, respect for the rule of law, equality and human rights. (In 2011, the Syrian Democratic People’s Party joined the Syrian National Council through its participation in the Damascus Declaration.)

But Riad was aware that a lack of political freedoms was not the only challenge people faced. The neoliberal economic reforms introduced by Bashar al-Assad and his regime’s rampant corruption and crony capitalism were impoverishing large sections of the population. In a 2005 interview, Riad observed:

The issues that concern people are the issues that affect their daily lives. The average salary, for example, is less than 6,000 lira (about \$115) per month. It’s not enough; they need to pay rent and put food on the table and most families have at least five people. ... The average citizen may work two or three jobs and there is no time for anything else. How is he supposed to get active in politics? It’s not possible because the mafia-like rulers have continuously impoverished the people of this country.

Riad al-Turk was a man of quiet and unassuming dignity. He was a profoundly intelligent man and one of considered words. He exuded warmth despite the sadness in his eyes that hinted at the ocean of pain he must have carried within.

At our office in Baramkeh, a delicious cooked lunch was prepared every afternoon. We were often joined by various figures of the Syrian opposition — human rights defenders, political activists and journalists. As Razan Zaitouneh and I were the two young women in a group of older men, the task of clearing away the dishes often fell to us. The exception was Riad. This elderly, frail gentleman, whose iconic status and history of hardship should have exempted him from any mundane tasks, always got up to help us.

He was also generous in spirit. I still have two gifts from Riad, one a beautiful simple silver box for tobacco (he found my smoking roll-ups amusing) and the other a set of beads strung by political prisoners during their incarceration.

When the Syrian revolution erupted in 2011, of course Riad openly supported it. He believed the revolution belonged to the youth, and he was critical of the traditional opposition from which he himself came. In a 2011 interview, he told the filmmaker Atassi:

Revolutions are not made by statements and television interviews but by action on the ground. ... Today, we face a people emerging from their silence, developing their own language, inventing their slogans and forms of action. Let us listen to them carefully, walk with them and not ahead of them and refrain from hijacking their voices to our benefit.

In the early days of the revolution, he went into hiding, at first staying in Damascus to avoid arrest as the regime was rounding up thousands of pro-democracy protesters and opposition activists. He was close to the young activists of the local coordination committees co-founded by Razan Zaitouneh that organized the protest movement and engaged in media work. He moved throughout the liberated areas encouraging the youth to join the rebellion against the regime's tyranny. Although not himself a member, he was influential in the Syrian National Council (the opposition body in exile) when it was formed in Istanbul in August 2011. In 2018, in deteriorating health, he left his beloved Syria and fled via Turkey to France, to be with his daughters following his wife's death.

Some rare people who enter your life are teachers — people who, through their friendship, change you forever. Riad al-Turk was such a person for me. So was Razan Zaitouneh, the young woman he introduced me to all those years ago. (Razan was kidnapped in the Syrian city of Douma in 2013, most likely by the Islamist militia Jaish al-Islam, along with three other activists — Samira al-Khalil, Wael Hammadeh and Nazem Hammadi — collectively known since their disappearance as the Douma Four.) Riad and Razan taught me the same lesson: that political struggle is not an abstract, elite or intellectual endeavor. Political struggle starts and ends with people — it stands by them, and walks together with them. Riad al-Turk liked to be called by the affectionate term “Ibn al-Amm” (cousin) by his friends and comrades. But to me he was always “Ammo” (uncle). The best way we can honor his legacy is by continuing to strive for the Syria he gave his life to achieve.

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