

# 4 The Iraqi Communist Party

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Founded in 1934, the Iraqi Communist Party (*al-Hizb al-Shuyu'i al-'Iraqi*, ICP) played a significant political role in the 1940s and 1950s, especially following the revolution that overthrew the country's monarchy in 1958. Under the leadership of the iron-fisted 'Comrade Fahad' (1941–9), the ICP developed into a clandestine organization, firmly organized on Marxist-Leninist principles. For most of the monarchical period, the ICP was ferociously suppressed by the authorities, and much of its cadres ended up behind bars by the late 1940s. However, following the revolution, a brief honeymoon ensued, prompted by the conciliatory policy adopted by Iraq's new leader, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim. This interlude was brief, though, and when Qasim himself was toppled in 1963 by a constellation of Ba'thists and Arab nationalist army officers, repression was again the party's fate. Following a second spell in power by the Ba'th Party from 1968 onwards, a brief rapprochement developed – culminating with the signing of a National Progressive Front between the two parties in 1973 – only to deteriorate once more from the mid-1970s onwards. When Saddam Hussein seized ultimate power in 1979, he brought back outright repression, and the ICP returned to the clandestinity of its origins. The ICP spent the 1980s and 1990s in 'internal exile' in Iraqi Kurdistan, gradually being overshadowed by the Kurdish nationalist movement. Due to its long repression at the hands of Saddam, the party decided to support the United States invasion in 2003, following which it has re-emerged into the open and has campaigned in successive elections.

## 1 Capricious beginnings

The spread of Communist thought in Iraq during the early years of the twentieth century is a process largely veiled in mystery. Undoubtedly, dissemination of ideas is a fluctuating and incremental process, one not always caught by the annals of history. The full story of the movement that culminated with the establishment of the Communist Party in 1934 may therefore never be fully known. Yet, fragments have survived, which allow us to recreate some of the journey to shed light on the importance of personalities, organization and chance in the diffusion of a clandestine ideology in a traditional society.

The first stirrings of socialism in what was then the Ottoman Empire occurred in cosmopolitan cities like Cairo, Beirut and Istanbul. Indeed, due to the large community of European workers and ex-pats, Egypt became a hotbed of oppositional ideologies from the late nineteenth century onwards – ranging from reckless anarchism to radical socialism, and anything in between (e.g. the moderate socialist nationalism of Salamah Musa). Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and the subsequent establishment of the Communist International (Comintern), a more determined and methodological dissemination of communist ideas was undertaken throughout the region. Coupled with the efforts of Socialist Zionist Jews in Palestine, who had joined the waves of colonialist settlers in that country, the Comintern effort was producing results in neighbouring Lebanon and Syria as well.<sup>1</sup>

In Iraq, however, progress was slower. During the war, parts of northern Iraq had been under Russian occupation and, as is well known, revolutionary ideas were brewing within the ranks of the imperial army. When the Russian war effort collapsed in 1917, the revolution broke out at home, followed by years of civil war, which eventually led to the establishment of Soviet Socialist republics in nearby Armenia and Azerbaijan, and extensive communist influence in neighbouring Iran. Through travel, commerce and pilgrimage, the new radical ideas spread far afield, reaching Mosul, Baghdad and Iraq's other large cities.

Socialist ideas had been strong even prior to the Bolshevik Revolution amongst minority groups, especially Jews and Armenians. In fact, the *Hunchak* (Hentchak), an Armenian social democratic movement founded in the late nineteenth century by Armenian exiles in Europe, played a very important role in the early socialist movement in Eastern Anatolia. In 1914, the organization plotted with another oppositional party to carry out a coup d'état against the Ottoman government, ostensibly to prevent its genocidal plans to deport the Eastern Anatolian Armenians to another part of the empire. However, their plans were discovered and the party was forcibly broken up by the police. Twenty leading members were hanged, but one of the leaders, a young Iraqi by the name of Arsen Kidour, managed to escape. Kidour, a 26-year-old history teacher from Baghdad, would later play a significant role in the development of the Iraqi communist movement. Incidentally, Kidour was helped to escape from prison by Rashid °Ali al-Gilani, who at the time was his colleague at the Sultaniyyah School in Baghdad, and who would later become one of the most prominent figures in the Iraqi nationalist movement (Batatu, 2004: 373).

One of Kidour's students at the time was an 11-year-old boy by the name Husayn al-Rahhal, who a decade later would go on to sow the seeds of the political process that led to the formation of the ICP in 1934. While originally belonging to the wealthy class of *chalabis*, or merchants, Husayn's father had hit bad luck and his extensive commercial business that traded in the Gulf and with India had collapsed, forcing him to take up employment in the Ottoman army. He quickly emerged through its ranks, and as a senior officer,

he was dispatched to various places – always accompanied by his son. It was during one such *séjour*, in post-war Germany, that Husayn first encountered communist ideas in practice, as he witnessed first-hand the uprising led by the *Spartakusbund* in January 1919. Kidour himself went into hiding in Najaf and had in 1917 become a Russian interpreter for the British army that was making its way up the Tigris and Euphrates. From that position, he came into contact with the Russian troops stationed in Khanaqin and Ba<sup>q</sup>ubah, and ended up accompanying them to Armenia when they withdrew from Iraq. Following the establishment of the Independent Armenian Republic after the war, Kidour returned to Baghdad as its consul – a position he retained even after its collapse and the establishment of the Armenian Soviet Republic in 1920 (Batatu, 2004: 389–92).

What the exact influence of Kidour on Husayn al-Rahhal was is difficult to ascertain, but it is beyond doubt that the combination of a socialist history teacher and first-hand experience of the revolutionary turmoil in Europe, along with a year-long stint in India where he came in contact with Indian revolutionaries, sufficiently influenced him to create the first ‘Marxist’ study circle in 1924. Together with a group of like-minded people, some of whom would go on to play significant political (and literary) roles (e.g. Mahmud Ahmad al-Sayyid, <sup>o</sup>Awni Bakr Sidqi, and Mustafa <sup>o</sup>Ali among others), Husayn published a journal called *al-Sahifah* (‘the newspaper’) in 1924–5 and again in 1927. This publication was the first of its kind in the country, as it was wholly devoted to the dissemination of new ideas, and, although the word Marxism was never mentioned, its substance was clearly of a Marxist nature. Some of these ideas, however, were too radical for Iraqi society of the 1920s – especially its critique of religion – and the journal was eventually shut down by the authorities. Husayn was also part of a group that founded the Solidarity Club (*Nadi al-Tadamun*) in 1926. This club was founded on a patriotic platform and attracted mostly young students. Though existing only a short while, the club’s significance is that it drew together many of the future leaders of the communist and nationalist movements, such as Zaki Khairi, <sup>o</sup>Asim Flayyeh, <sup>o</sup>Abd al-Qadir Isma<sup>o</sup>il, Husayn Jamil and <sup>o</sup>Abd al-Fattah Ibrahim. Thus, although Husayn soon tired of politics and withdrew to lead a life of comfort, his real contribution lay in having created the first platform from which communism grew (Batatu, 2004: 393–403).

At the same time, another communist movement was gradually building in the south of the country. This was largely the result of the efforts of one man: Petros Vasili (known by the Arabs as Butrus Abu Nasir), an Assyrian from Tiflis, Georgia. Petros was a professional revolutionary who travelled around Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s to spread the communist creed – until finally banished in 1934. According to his police file, Petros’ family stemmed originally from <sup>o</sup>Amadiyyah in northern Iraq, but the family had migrated to Georgia during the late Ottoman period. He spoke several regional languages, including Russian, Georgian, Syriac, Persian, Turkish and Arabic. During his time in Iraq, he moved about frequently, living for a while in

Basra, Baghdad, Ba<sup>c</sup>qubah and Sulaymaniyyah, before settling in Nasiriyyah in the south. It was there that he met Yusuf Salman Yusuf, a fellow Assyrian (albeit Arabized) who would later go on to lead the ICP in the 1940s under the nom-de-guerre 'Comrade Fahad'. It is unclear exactly when Petros came to Nasiriyyah. According to Batatu, the first southern circle was formed in Basra in 1927 – with or without Petros' help – and the following year another study circle was formed in Nasiriyyah by Yusuf Salman, his brother Da<sup>c</sup>ud and their friend Ghali Zuwayyed – with the assistance of Petros (Batatu, 2004: 404–6). However, in <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Jabbar Ayyub's account, who claims to have been a close friend of the Salman brothers, and to have rented out a magazine for Petros' tailoring business in Nasiriyyah, Petros did not arrive in the town until 1929 (Ayyub, 1958: 6). Both accounts cannot be correct.<sup>2</sup> The story is further complicated by <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Hamid al-Khatib's claim to have been the real founder of the Basra study circle, and that he was the person who introduced communism to the Salman brothers and Ghali Zuwayyed. Since al-Khatib later became a police informer and agent provocateur, his story is not entirely believable. Nevertheless, in a police statement, he claimed to have personally deposited photos of the above-named persons in the Soviet Consulate at Ahwaz – ostensibly to approve their admission to 'the Communist Party' (which did not yet exist) (Batatu, 2004: 405). It is, however, quite likely that al-Khatib's account is an attempt to enhance his own role. In 1930, al-Khatib was sent as the first Iraqi representative to receive training at the Communist University for the Toilers of the East (KUTV) in Moscow, but something clearly was not to his liking for upon his return in 1933 he became a police informer (al-Kharsan, 2001: 18–19).

Following the expulsion of Petros Vasili from Nasiriyyah in 1930, Yusuf Salman and Ghali Zuwayyed worked hard to spread communist ideas in the south, and to link up with other groups in Baghdad.<sup>3</sup> Their publications came from the communists in Baghdad by means of Jamil Tuma, a railway engineer who worked on the Baghdad–Nasiriyyah–Basra line. Thus, from 1930 until the founding of the ICP in 1934, cooperation and coordination between the different communist circles gradually improved (Ayyub, 1958: 11–12). By the end of 1933, the Nasiriyyah and Basra circles – the latter now led by Ghali Zuwayyed – counted some 60 members. In Baghdad, three loose groups had taken shape; one was led by the famous tailor <sup>c</sup>Asim Flayyeh, who had also received training at the KUTV between 1931 and 1934, together with Qasim Hasan and Mahdi Hashim. A second group was centred around Yusuf Isma<sup>c</sup>il, Nuri Rufa<sup>c</sup>il and Jamil Tuma. The third was led by Zaki Khairi, who as may be remembered had been one of Husayn al-Rahhal's disciples. Despite the varied and meandering routes that communist ideas had thus travelled, it is clear that their ultimate source was the Bolshevik Revolution and especially the creation of the Comintern. As we have seen, the influence of these two sources took either an indirect route, as in the case of Zaki Khairi – via the Tadamun Club, Husayn al-Rahhal, Arsen Kidour and the left wing of the Armenian Hunchak Party – or a more direct one through

Comintern propagandists such as Petros Vasili and through the influence of neighbouring communist parties in Syria and Lebanon, the training of select individuals at the KUTV in Moscow (Batatu, 2004: 411–12).

Eventually, all these currents came together to lay the foundations of a single communist organization. However, although the party later decided that 31 March 1934 was the founding date, no documentation has survived to prove this, and in the existing literature – both primary sources by activists involved with the party at the time and the secondary literature in Arabic and English – there is no consensus. Some even claim that the founding did not take place until 1935. Nevertheless, in the account of °Abd al-Fattah Ibrahim, a meeting took place at Qasim Hasan’s house in Bab al-Shaykh, a Baghdad neighbourhood, additionally attended by °Asim Flayyeh, Yusuf Isma°il, Nuri Rufa°il, Yusuf Matti, Hasan °Abbas al-Karbasi, °Abd al-Hamid Khatib and others. Whether or not this was the founding meeting, and Ibrahim provides no date for when it took place, it seems reasonable to assume that it was important – by virtue of bringing together people from the various groups – in forming the first nucleus of the ICP.<sup>4</sup> According to Batatu, another meeting took place in Ra°s al-Qarya, Baghdad, on 8 March 1935, led by °Asim Flayyeh, who, since his return from Moscow in August 1934, had assumed the leadership of the Baghdad communists. This meeting was attended by some of the above-mentioned persons and saw the foundation of a new organization – *Jam°iyyat Didd al-Isti°mar* (Association against Imperialism).<sup>5</sup> In his view, this was therefore the actual foundational meeting – although the name of the Communist Party was not mentioned at the meeting (Batatu, 2004: 431–2). What is undisputed, however, is that in July 1935, the first issue of *Kifah al-Sha°b* (*The People’s Struggle*) was issued, carrying under its heading the inscription ‘official organ of the Central Committee of the Iraqi Communist Party’ (al-Musawi, 2011: 53).

The new organization was, however, a far cry from the communist vanguard Lenin had envisaged in *What Is to Be Done?* – made up mostly of ill-disciplined ‘coffeehouse intellectuals’ whose favourite pastime seemed to be grand philosophical debates and rhetorical orations rather than the more mundane task of grassroots organization. With a few exceptions, their backgrounds and life experiences had been those of the relatively comfortable middle classes of Iraqi society; they were lawyers, teachers, civil servants, students and professionals. Thus, while they undoubtedly witnessed poverty, squalor and hardship surrounding them, this suffering had not been experienced first-hand. They were young men who liked to meet in cafés and debate and argue. Discipline, subordination and chains of command did not exist in the new organization. Consequently, arguments soon led to bickering; disagreements led to splits. Following the incorporation of Zaki Khairi’s group in March 1935, Yusuf Isma°il, Nuri Rufa°il and their supporters withdrew from the organization a month later. The remaining group, led by °Asim Flayyeh, Mahdi Hashim and Qasim Hasan, and joined by Khairi and Yusuf Matti, decided that the main task was to publish a paper, hence the

publication in July of *Kifah al-Sha'ib*. As a sign of the new party's close association with international communism, it was also decided to despatch Qasim Hasan to attend the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern that took place in Moscow during the late summer that year (Batatu, 2004: 434–5).

Although Yusuf Salman was not part of the Baghdad groups that founded the ICP, it is clear that he and the southern communists were in close contact with them. In fact, Yusuf himself travelled frequently to Baghdad in 1933, took part in their meetings and exchanged information and new publications (Habib & al-Da'udi, 2003: 131). Still, it is also evident that the founding of the party was largely the affair of the Baghdad communists, in particular 'Asim Flayyeh, who took control of the new party. Whether Yusuf was disgruntled by this is not clear, but he decided to leave Iraq and embark on a journey of exploration of the neighbouring Arab lands. He left Nasiriyyah for Basra in late August 1934, and from there he travelled to Kuwait. Later he visited the emirates of the Gulf, before eventually coming to Syria, where he met with the secretary of the Syrian Communist Party, Khaleid Bakdash. According to Ayyub's account, which is not entirely believable as he assumes a generally hostile attitude to the communists, Yusuf fell out with Bakdash – ostensibly because he wanted Bakdash to support him to become secretary of the ICP whereas Bakdash preferred 'Abd al-Qadir Isma'il (Ayyub, 1958: 20–2). Be that as it may, other sources suggest that the Central Committee of the ICP had actually decided to send Yusuf, or 'Sa'id', which was his party name at the time, to Moscow to study at the KUTV (Habib & al-Da'udi, 2003: 137). In late 1934 or early 1935, however, before reaching Moscow, he met in Beirut with Mahmud al-Atrash, who was the Arab representative on the executive committee of the Comintern. Yusuf reached Moscow sometime during 1935, and pursued studies there until 1937, before ultimately returning to Iraq in January 1938. Undoubtedly, the experience of studying at the KUTV had a profound impact on someone like Yusuf who was already a committed communist, but whose understanding of Marxism-Leninism, as well as the strategy and tactics of the popular struggle and the intricacies of organizing a party, was somewhat limited. In Iraq, very few Marxist books were available, and those that existed were mostly not translated into Arabic. In Moscow, however, Yusuf was exposed to the full library of Marxism-Leninism, and he was an eager student (Habib & al-Da'udi, 2003: 158–9).

## **2 Iron-fist discipline, setbacks and revolution**

Back in Iraq, the new party was showing signs of progress, despite the bickering. When in October 1936 a military coup led by General Bakr Sidqi overthrew the government (the first such incident in the Arab world), the ICP reacted swiftly. Since the coup had the support of the leftist *al-Ahali* group, and because Sidqi formed a new government of mostly left-leaning civilians, the ICP decided to support the move. The party took its followers to the streets and joined in the popular demonstrations in support of the new

government, and urged its members to join the newly created Association of People's Reform (*Jam'iyat al-Islah al-Sha'bi*). Despite some limited reform and elections during the winter of 1936–7 that saw the election of two people, 'Abd al-Qadir Isma'il and 'Aziz Sharif, who were close to the party, things soon took a turn for the worse. In the spring of 1937, Bakr Sidqi suddenly attacked communism as a creed and declared that his government would 'crush any movement' that was against the monarchy. Eventually, the progressive elements in the government resigned, and Sidqi himself was later assassinated – thus ending this first experiment of 'people's power' (Batatu, 2004: 439–44).

Soon, however, new disagreements led to further splits. Zaki Khairi, who by now had taken over the leadership, left the party along with his followers. At the same time, the communists, impressed by the swiftness with which the army had taken power the previous year, now began to work actively to spread communist ideas within the army. A struggle between Khairi's group and the remainder of the ICP now ensued, especially in the Radiomen Regiment (*Fawj al-Mukhabarah*). In that regiment, the split was most plain to see; on one side was Corporal Isma'il, supported by Khairi and his followers, and on the other was Corporal 'Ali 'Amer, supported by the rest of the party. Due to the open rivalry between the two groups, the clandestine activity was discovered, and the cells, which numbered some 400 soldiers and non-commissioned officers throughout the army, were broken up. 'Ali 'Amer along with sergeants 'Abd al-Rahman Da'ud and Dahi Fajr, were sentenced to death for their involvement (although this was later commuted). Khairi himself received two and a half years in prison (Ayyub, 1958: 13; Batatu, 2004: 445–6).

The remnants of the two groups eventually came together under the leadership of 'Abdallah Mas'ud, a Shi'i from the south. Although Yusuf Salman returned to Iraq in early 1938, he never remained in one place for very long, and what was left of the party continued under Mas'ud's helm for some time. In 1940, however, a deal was struck to pay Yusuf a monthly allowance in return for him settling permanently in Baghdad and actively helping the party. This allowed Yusuf to become a professional revolutionary who devoted himself wholeheartedly to the life and death of the party (Batatu, 2004: 447–9). When Mas'ud was arrested the following year, the leadership of the ICP naturally landed in Yusuf's lap (Batatu, 2004: 492). From then to his death on the gallows in 1949, he would lead the party with an iron fist under the nom-de-guerre 'Comrade Fahad'. Over the coming years, Fahad painstakingly carried out a complete overhaul of the party organization. He weeded out those he deemed to be mere 'coffeehouse communists' and replaced them with loyalists – even if they had no previous association with the party. This caused much resentment and resistance within the ranks, but through sheer determination (and indirectly aided by the occasional arrest of dissidents by the police) he created an organization with strict discipline, subordination and a chain of command. By the time of the party's First Conference in 1944, the process had been largely completed. This could additionally be seen at the party's First Congress, held in February 1945,

which attested to the strength of his leadership (Franzén, 2011: 39–41). Around him, Fahad gathered a close-knit group of people he trusted: Zaki Basim, a Sunni from a humble background who became Fahad's protégé; Muhammad al-Shabibi, the son of a Najaf *ʿalim* (religious scholar) who between 1944 and 1946 was in charge of the whole southern party administrative area; ʿAli Shukur, a Sunni proletarian from Baghdad; and Ahmad ʿAbbas, the son of a Sunni *fellah* (poor peasant) (Batatu, 2004: 509–10). What made these men stand out were not just their comparatively modest backgrounds – with the exception of Muhammad al-Shabibi – but the fact they had not previously held important positions in the party. They therefore owed their positions to Fahad, and showed an absolute devotion to his leadership.

The establishment of a strong ICP under Fahad coincided with a brief period of political liberalization during and immediately after World War II. Anti-communist police repression had been somewhat relaxed during the war to appease the Soviet Union, and after the war, the liberalization was extended to the political system in an attempt to stave off revolution. Inflation, profiteering and smuggling during the war had led to a post-war situation where a small group of wealthy shaykhs who controlled most of the agricultural lands that grew crops, and the merchants producing consumer goods for the British army had grown enormously rich, whereas the rest of the population was considerably poorer than before the war. Since the arrival of the British during the First World War some economic changes had started to happen, although in general the country remained undeveloped and poor. British policy had empowered tribal shaykhs who, coupled with legislation brought in by the Ottomans in the nineteenth century to protect private property, had become wealthy landowners as they took over previously collectively owned tribal lands. There existed in Iraq little in terms of a national industry, although the country had been gradually incorporated into the global capitalist market as an exporter of grain, and from the 1930s onward, of oil. Revenues from oil soon became Iraq's main source of income, although the production and sale of oil was controlled by the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), owned by foreign interests. A small indigenous working class eventually developed, mostly employed in the oil sector and a few other industries. However, in 1951 only about 8 percent of Iraq's production came from the industrial sector, and the vast majority of Iraqis still depended for their livelihoods on the agricultural sector (Farouk-Sluglett & Sluglett, 2003: 35).

Under the brief premiership of Tawfiq al-Suwaydi (February to May 1946), a liberal experiment took place with free elections, lifted press censorship and licensing of political parties and trade unions. This created an unprecedented outburst of political activity. The communists were quick to utilize the situation and soon the ICP was involved in demonstrations and trade union activity throughout the country. Much of the communist activity focused on the large-scale enterprises that were foreign-owned, such as the IPC, or foreign-managed, such as the railways and the port of Basra, which were operated and controlled by the British. Following much work to organize the



railway workers, especially at the railway workshop at Schalchiyyah, a license for a railway union was eventually granted on 7 September 1944. Soon, a third of all railway workers had become members of the new union – almost entirely due to the efforts of the ICP. To try to improve the poor conditions of its members, the union's president, °Ali Shukur (Fahad's right-hand man), ordered a national strike on 15 April 1945, which was met with all-out repression by the authorities. Eventually, the pressure on the workers became too great and they reluctantly returned to work, with the result that the union split into factions and was not revived until after the 1958 revolution. A similar story happened in Basra, where the party had campaigned for a Port Workers' Union, which was finally licensed on 15 August 1945. That union quickly drew ca. 60 percent of the port workers as members, but following a major strike in May 1947, and others in April and May of the following year – met with fierce repression as well – the union eventually petered out. It was in the oil sector, however, that the communists focused most of their attention (and met the greatest resistance by the authorities). They gradually built cells of communist workers and sympathizers at oil installations throughout the country, but due to the opposition of the all-powerful IPC, they were never able to obtain a license for a union. In July 1946, the communists ordered a national strike, which was heeded by some 5,000 oil workers. On 12 July, in Gawurpoghi outside Kirkuk, demonstrating oil workers were set upon by mounted police, who killed at least ten and injured a further 27 workers. Following the incident, the oil company announced it would increase wages for the workers and generally improve conditions, but the killings had forever changed labour relations in the country (Batatu, 2004: 616–24). Terrified by the strength demonstrated by the ICP, the regent, °Abd al-Ilah, eventually ended the liberalization experiment and appointed the hardliner Arshad al-°Umari as the new prime minister. He promptly brought back martial law and severe repression of the political parties (Franzén, 2009: 83).

During the new suppression drive, Fahad and his disciple Zaki Basim, along with other leaders and members, were arrested in January 1947. In June, they were brought to trial – accused of having 'foreign sources of income', contacts with 'a foreign state' (the Soviet Union), incitement to armed insurrection and propagation of communism among the armed forces (which since 1938 had been punishable by death). A few days later, following a shambolic pretence of due process where one of the defence lawyers, Kamil Qazanchi, was arrested after pleading on behalf of the accused, Fahad and Zaki Basim were sentenced to death. Ibrahim Naji Shumayyel, the Jewish apothecary in whose house they had been apprehended, also received the same verdict. Eventually, however, the death sentences were commuted (Batatu, 2004: 537–41).

When a major outburst of popular protests broke out in early 1948 – known as *al-Wathbah* ('the leap') – the ICP therefore missed its leader and most capable cadres. As a result, the demonstrations that protested the signing of a new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty at Portsmouth in January were initially dominated by other political parties. Soon, however, the Communists could

regroup and gradually took charge of the protests. The *Wathbah* culminated in late January with the regent's refusal to approve the new treaty. Protests did not subside, however, and the police proceeded to massacre hundreds of unarmed protesters in cold blood. The prime minister, Saleh Jabr, fled for his life to escape the angry masses. The regent appointed a Shi'i *sayyid* and veteran nationalist leader, Muhammad al-Sadr, as the new prime minister to appease the crowds. Eventually this calmed the situation and over the coming weeks and months protests petered out. For the ICP, the *Wathbah* was a stern test. On the one hand, it had demonstrated that the communists, by virtue of their superior organization, easily could take over and lead popular protests. On the other hand, it created a new radicalism that stretched the already depleted organization to its limits. Following the arrest of Fahad and most of the leading cadres, the party simply was not in a position to lead an all-out assault on the monarchy.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of 1948, the party's radical adventure almost caused it to be completely crushed by the authorities. The leading cadres and organizers were captured by the police. When new cells were established, they too were broken up before they could achieve anything. The clandestine printing press was found and destroyed. Party registers and correspondence were discovered, leading to new arrests. Breakdown of individual communists through severe torture eventually revealed all the party secrets. Hundreds of communists, including almost every senior leader, were captured. Those that avoided arrest fled the country or gave up political activity altogether. With the new evidence that was uncovered, Fahad and Zaki Basim – along with another Politburo member, Muhammad al-Shabibi – were brought before a court martial. The accusation this time was that they had led the party, and therefore the protests during the *Wathbah*, from inside the prison. Once more, they were sentenced to death, and this time there was no commutation. On 14 and 15 February 1949, they were hanged in different Baghdad squares and were left hanging for hours to deter future would-be communists (Batatu, 2004: 567–8). It now looked as if the communist movement in Iraq had been defeated once and for all.

Nevertheless, over the coming decade the ICP bounced back. The few remaining communists who were not behind bars gradually rebuilt the battered party. To begin with, they were only a handful of youngsters – minors even – but through determination and riding on the general revolutionary wave sweeping the country the party's fortunes soon changed for the better. To no small degree was this achievement down to the leadership of a young Kurdish communist by the name Baha<sup>c</sup> al-Din Nuri, who led the ICP from mid-1949 until he was arrested in 1953. The revolutionary turmoil of the *Wathbah* was repeated in late 1952 when an *Intifadah* broke out following the regent's refusal to reform the political system, and also inspired by the revolution in Egypt during the summer that year. The ICP took a leading role during the protests that erupted, and when leaders of other political parties were arrested in government clampdowns, the party's clandestine nature proved its worth, as most of the communists were able to avoid arrest. As

during the *Wathbah*, the authorities responded heavy-handedly to the protests, killing several protesters. Eventually the *Intifadah* was defeated when the regent appointed the Kurdish chief of staff, General Nur al-Din Mahmud, as the new prime minister. He declared martial law and deployed the army to clamp down on the protests and carried out mass arrests (Franzén, 2011: 61–3). Almost 3,000 were arrested, and 958 persons were sentenced to prison and two to death (Sibahi, 2003: 70).

A few years later, another *Intifadah* broke out. Again, Egypt was the inspiration when during the so-called Suez Crisis in 1956 it was invaded by Israeli, British and French forces. This ‘tripartite aggression’, as it became known in the Arab world, caused much consternation throughout the region. Iraqis, along with Arabs everywhere, rallied around Egyptian president Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser’s leadership to resist the invasion. For the ICP, the attack came at a crucial time. Earlier in the year, the pivotal Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had adopted the ‘peaceful road to socialism’ thesis that theoretically had opened up the possibility of a non-violent revolution and a gradual transition to socialism. In September, the ICP held its own conference. This took place after a successful reunification of the party’s ranks, following a split a few years earlier. The party was now led by a troika consisting of the new first secretary Husayn Ahmad al-Radi (known by his party name, ‘Salam ‘Adel’ – ‘just peace’), Jamal al-Haydari and ‘Amer ‘Abdallah.<sup>7</sup> At this Second Conference, the new Soviet line was unanimously adopted. Despite the violent nature of recent popular protests, the ICP now thought that peaceful revolution was possible in Iraq. Within a few weeks of the conclusion of the conference, the Suez Crisis broke out, however, showing how erroneous that assumption had been. The party leadership now made a U-turn, and wholeheartedly supported Egypt’s resistance of the invasion forces. Off the back of the popular demonstrations in support of Egypt, the Iraqi communists went on to organize a popular uprising in the small town of al-Hayy, managing to hold it throughout December. Following the brutal suppression of the uprising by the army, and the execution of two local communists, ‘Ali al-Shaykh Hamud and ‘Ata Mahdi al-Dabbas, the party issued a self-criticism to acknowledge that its stance supporting peaceful revolution had partially been wrong in light of the Suez Crisis (Franzén, 2011: 70–7).

In general terms, though, the ‘peaceful road’ line was not abandoned, but rather became a central tenet of ICP’s new outlook. At the centre of the new theory was its reassessment of the so-called ‘national bourgeoisie’, which now was seen as an essentially progressive force. The role of the communist party in the colonial world would henceforth be to support this class in ‘democratic revolutions’ against colonialism/imperialism. When Iraq erupted in revolution on 14 July 1958<sup>8</sup> – following a coup carried out by a group of military men calling themselves the ‘Free Officers’ (emulating the Egyptian ‘Free Officers’ that took power in 1952) – the new line was slavishly followed. The ICP leadership quickly identified the leader of the coup, Brigadier ‘Abd al-Karim

Qasim, as a representative of said 'national bourgeoisie' – and the coup was construed as a 'democratic revolution' (despite a conspicuous lack of actual democracy). During the next few years, the ICP – by virtue of the support it rendered to the new regime – would play a pivotal role on the Iraqi political scene.

### **3 'Arab socialism', authoritarianism and the 'non-capitalist road' to disaster**

The Qasim years (1958–63) marked a watershed moment in Iraqi history. For the first time, the country had broken free from imperialism and foreign control and embarked on its own national path. The year following the revolution was arguably the most politically exuberant in Iraq's modern history. Political parties and groups – communists, leftists, liberals, Kurdish nationalists, Iraqi nationalists, pan-Arabists, Nasserists and Ba<sup>c</sup>thists – fought in the new political space that had opened up with the revolution. Iraq's future was at stake; in which direction should it head? Two broad strands gradually consolidated; those who rallied around Qasim and his generally progressive ideology of social justice, sovereignty and Iraqist nationalism. On the other side stood those who favoured a pan-Arabist future – whether as part of a wider Arab union under the leadership of Nasser or with Iraq at the helm. The ICP very quickly came down on Qasim's side, and during the first year of the revolution provided a valuable support to his regime – arguably helping it to survive.

Tensions developed, and soon differing political visions gave birth to violence. 'Abd al-Salam 'Aref, Qasim's brother-in-arms, broke away and became a rallying point for the pan-Arabist forces. Following a plot to overthrow Qasim in December, 'Aref and other officers were arrested and sentenced to death (albeit eventually commuted). In March 1959, a big showdown took place in the city of Mosul. There a planned coup – supported by Nasser – was set to take place. The ICP, however, sniffed out the plans and brought their supporters to the city, and all-out street fighting ensued in which the communists were triumphant.<sup>9</sup> Following Mosul, Qasim clamped down in earnest on the nationalists and created an irreparable chasm between himself and the pan-Arabists, and an impossible position for the communists who from then on were branded anti-nationalists, or *Shu'ubis*.

For the ICP, the choice to support Qasim was natural following the revolution. Adhering to the theory of 'democratic revolution' under the leadership of the 'national bourgeoisie', he seemed to fit the bill. The problem, though, was that the party, due to its countrywide and cross-sectarian support – which had been augmented manifold since the release of political prisoners following the revolution – was the strongest political force in the country, and yet it deliberately chose to play second fiddle to Qasim. Moreover, when the ICP demanded political representation in the government, following its invaluable support at Mosul, Qasim responded by turning on the party. From mid-1959

onwards, Qasim deliberately targeted the communists, and eventually he began releasing nationalists from prison to achieve a power balance. Despite this dramatic change, which by the latter stages of Qasim's rule amounted to outright persecution of communists, the ICP stuck to defending the regime to its end – at least theoretically. This meant that when Qasim was finally overthrown in a Ba'thist coup in February 1963 (carried out together with 'Abd al-Salam 'Aref whom Qasim had released in line with the above policy), the communists were virtually defenceless against the nationalist onslaught. In the months following the coup, thousands of communists and Qasim supporters were rounded up, tortured and killed by Ba'thist 'National Guards' – as revenge for Mosul.<sup>10</sup> Once more, the ICP was on the verge of being crushed. Many of its senior cadres – including the first secretary, Salam 'Adel – were captured and killed. The rest fled to Kurdistan in the north, or abroad to Eastern Europe (Franzén, 2011: 126–31).

In November 1963, the Ba'thists themselves were overthrown by 'Aref and his supporters. Over the coming years, 'Aref proceeded to resume some sort of normality in Iraqi politics. Despite earlier being an avid Nasserist, negotiations with Egypt to form a federated state came to nought. 'Abd al-Salam 'Aref died suddenly in a helicopter crash in 1966, but was succeeded by his brother, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Aref. The ICP, whose leadership by now mostly resided abroad, cautiously decided to support the 'Aref regime – largely because it had ended the Ba'thist terror.<sup>11</sup> The key to this support was the Soviet theory of 'non-capitalist development'. In short, this theory argued that Third World countries might bypass the capitalist stage on their route to socialism – due to the influence of the 'socialist camp'. In the Middle East, the pivot of this way of thinking was the changing role of Egypt under Nasser. With increasingly close relations between the Soviet Union and Egypt, Nasser was re-envisioned as representing a particular brand of Middle Eastern socialism – 'Arab socialism'. Thus, despite falling out with Nasser back in 1959 when he had tried to overthrow Qasim, the ICP now made a U-turn and came out in support of him, declaring that Egypt had embarked on a 'non-capitalist path' to socialism. Iraq under 'Aref also had the potential of 'non-capitalist' development – as argued in the seminal pamphlet *Hawla al-Tatawwur Ghayr al-Ra'smali fi l-'Iraq* (On Non-Capitalist Development in Iraq), written by the Central Committee member 'Aziz al-Hajj in February 1965 (al-Hajj, 1965). This assessment, however, created a deepening division within the party. The rank-and-file who continued to live and operate inside Iraq resented the new line. In their view, 'Aref was just as bad as the Ba'thists. Eventually, these disagreements came to a head, and by 1967 led to a full-scale split in the party, and the formation of the central command group (*al-Qiyadah al-Markaziyyah*), which launched an armed rebellion in 1968 (Franzén, 2011: 147–83).

In July 1968, the Ba'thists once more seized power, and this time they would hold on to it. Over the period 1968–73, the Ba'thists pursued a stick-and-carrot tactic against the ICP. At times, there would be relentless persecution with communists being murdered in the streets, and at other times

there were reconciliation attempts. Eventually, these attempts resulted in the signing of a 'National Front' between the ICP and the Ba'th Party in 1973. This came after improved Soviet–Iraqi relations – with Saddam Husayn heading a delegation to the Soviet Union in 1972 that led to a 'Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation' being signed in April. The Ba'thists also nationalized the Iraqi oil industry in the same year, again with Soviet assistance. Thus, despite the fractious relationship between the Ba'th Party and the ICP, the Iraqi communists eventually re-evaluated the regime and entered a period of cooperation that would last between 1973 and 1979 (Franzén, 2011: 206–15).

Gradually, however, this relationship crumbled, and when Saddam Husayn in 1979 became president, following the resignation of Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, all-out repression and terrorization of the communists resumed – on the same lines as the dark days of 1963. Once more, the communists were forced to go into hiding – either in exile abroad or in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The party continued to offer resistance to the regime throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but since political activity in the Arab parts of Iraq was virtually impossible, this resistance was inconsequential. When the United States and Britain invaded Iraq in 2003, the ICP joined the group of exile parties supporting the invasion and the removal of Saddam's regime. Since then, the ICP has tried to re-establish itself on the Iraqi political scene and has taken part in elections. However, in the increasingly sectarian climate of Iraqi politics, and the irrelevance of communism following the end of the Cold War, its support base is miniscule.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The ICP played a pivotal role in modern Iraqi history. Not only did it draw support from all corners of society and channelled this support through a cross-sectarian ideology of resistance to outside influence in the country and notions of a better future, but it was also able to organize people of different backgrounds and classes into political activity in a country that was said to be perennially dominated by tribal strife and sectarian infighting. While the ICP's origins undoubtedly can be traced back to the attempts by the international communist movement (the Comintern in particular) to spread communism across the Middle East, it is also indisputable that the party developed far beyond being simply a Moscow-led organization. Due to circumstances of geography and strategic importance, Iraq was never at the fore of Soviet thinking, and so the Iraqi communists were left to fend for themselves most of the time. This was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it allowed the Iraqi communists to develop their own organization as they saw fit, becoming a significant political force in the process by interacting with the people and reflecting their ideas and responding to them. On the other hand, the lack of international support meant the ICP was on its own in times of crisis. Thus, for instance, when the Ba'thists massacred thousands of its members and supporters in 1963, the Soviets only cursorily censured them,

and again, in 1979, when Saddam clamped down on the party, this resulted in very little Soviet action. Still, the ICP was ideologically in the thrall of the Soviet Union, as seen in its decision to back the various military leaders that seized power after the 1958 revolution, and ultimately this dependency became its downfall as it was unable to steer an independent course that might have enabled the party to play a more significant role and/or save itself. This ideological shackle, more than the brutal suppression the party faced, was the ultimate cause of the party's demise and journey into obscurity.

## Notes

- 1 For a more extensive account of this process, see Franzén, 2017.
- 2 Batatu claims Yusuf Salman first met Petros Vasili in Basra in 1927, but provides no evidence to support it (Batatu, 2004: 489–90).
- 3 According to the police files perused by Batatu, Yusuf spent the summer of 1930 travelling on foot to neighbouring Arab countries to acquaint himself with 'the life of the peoples', including visits to Khuzestan (in Iran), Kuwait, Transjordan, Syria and Palestine (Batatu, 2004: 490).
- 4 As quoted in al-Musawi, 2011: 53.
- 5 No doubt inspired by the Comintern front organization the League against Imperialism (*Ligue contre l'impérialisme et l'oppression coloniale*), founded in Belgium on 10 February 1927. It should also be noted that in some accounts the new organization was called *Lajnat* (or '*Usbat*') *Mukafahat al-Isti'mar wa l-Istithmar* – Committee (or League) for Combatting Imperialism and Exploitation (al-Musawi, 2011: 51).
- 6 For an in-depth account of the *Wathbah*, see Batatu, 2004: ch. 22.
- 7 Remarkably, all three came from religious backgrounds. Husayn al-Radi hailed from a family of Najafi Shi'i *sayyids*. Jamal al-Haydari, a Kurd, also stemmed from a religious background. His uncle was 'Asim al-Haydari, a former Minister of *Awqaf* (religious endowments). 'Amer 'Abdallah, like al-Radi, came from a family of *sayyids*, albeit *Sunnis*. Moreover, his father was a *mu'azzin* (caller to prayer) (Batatu, 2004: 672–4).
- 8 That it was a revolution and not merely a coup could be seen in the changes it prompted – most notably the overthrow of the monarchy, the killing of the royal family, the end of British influence and the establishment of a republic.
- 9 For an in-depth analysis of the Mosul events, see Batatu, 2004: ch. 44.
- 10 For a fuller account of the Ba'thist measures against the communists, see Sibahi, 2003: 552–8.
- 11 The policy became known within the party as the 'August Line' (as it had been decided at a Central Committee meeting in August 1964), see al-Kharsan, 2001: 124–5.

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