The RISE and FALL of the COMMUNIST PARTY of IRAQ

Tareq Y. Ismael

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This is the first comprehensive work to examine the complex transformation of the Iraqi Communist Party from vanguard actor under Iraq's conservative monarchy to rearguard lackey under US occupation. Born in the interlude between two world wars, the Communist Party of Iraq was fostered by Iraq's embryonic intelligentsia as an approach to national liberation during the period of British domination. Driven underground or into exile by successive waves of Baᶜathist repression beginning in 1963, the Party's leadership became progressively dependent on and subservient to the Soviet Union. The efforts of reformers dissatisfied with the Party's irrelevance to Iraq's socio-political dynamics were thwarted by the old-guard leadership, and in the mid-1970s the Party fragmented. With the fall of the Hussein regime and the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, the remnants of the Party's old guard connected with the US-installed government and became part of the US project in Iraq.

Tareq Y. Ismael is Professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary, Canada. He also serves as President of the International Centre for Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies and as the co-editor of the *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*. Additionally, he is author or editor of numerous books on Iraq and the Middle East, including *Middle East Politics Today*: *Government and Civil Society* (2001); *Iraq*: *The Human Cost of History*, with William H. Haddad (2003); *The Iraqi Predicament*: *People in the Quagmire of Power Politics*, with Jacqueline S. Ismael (2004); and *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (2005).

The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq

TAREQ Y. ISMAEL
University of Calgary

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To my brother Khalid and to my wife, Jacqueline

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Preface

This book has a story for me. As a young boy in February 1949, in my first year of grammar school, on a sunny morning in Baghdad, I passed by some bodies of communists who had been hanged. Later, my father and I had the following conversation:

"Hanged. They must be criminals."
"Not quite."
"They were hanged; they must have done something."
"Well, they really didn't act, but they were contemplating."
"They did something, then."
"No, no, no, they didn't. They were thinking of, hoping for, an action."
"But you told me the law does not punish you until you do something."
"When you grow up, you will understand."

I went home and clipped the newspapers that day, and have done so every day since. And since that day, I have been trying to understand.

Though I have never joined any political party, nor been actively involved in one, from my undergraduate years on I have felt driven to understand, and eventually as an academician to explain, but never as an apologist, the communist movement in Iraq. I wanted to write my first book on this topic but had to wait a quarter of a century to see the conclusion of the Cold War. I felt that to understand a movement, one had to have the writings of the participants and their official literature and be able to study their experiences from their own perspectives. Thus, placing the literature and personal experiences of Iraqi communists within a historical, political, social, and international context became the basis for my often critical analysis, rather than any preconceived notions I may have had. This approach differs from that in Hanna Batatu's monumental work *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, which thirty years ago could not access this personal information, let alone document the last three decades of the story.

Acquiring the Iraqi communist movement's documents has been a difficult and time-consuming process. Keeping them has been a legal venture of some scale, and transporting them to safe places has been a risk with consequences of a decidedly physical nature.

The present time of conflict is an important period in history – Iraqi, Arab, and global – and if history is always written by the victors, then if it is not documented, it could be lost entirely. The importance of the Iraqi communists is not in any proportion to the power they attained for themselves. It lies, instead, in the agenda they set for others to follow, for they were frequently the only voice that spoke for the masses, the majority of the people. Because of the communists' energy and commitment, their one-sided solutions to the problems only they cared about were vigorously propagated. This forced those opposed to them to respond to the issues they raised, and to copy their party structures, programs, and activities. Because the communists formed the earliest political organizations in the Arab world (in Egypt in 1919 and in Syria in 1924), they left an indelible mark on its political structure, despite never actually ruling an Arab state.

This book is the second to last in my projected quintuple series on the communist movement in the Arab world, and it concludes the journey I began on that sunny Baghdad morning in February 1949. Previous books in this series are *The Communist Movement in Egypt* (Syracuse University Press, 1990), *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon* (University Press of Florida, 1998), and *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (Routledge Curzon Publishers, 2005).

The system of transliteration adopted in this study generally follows the format used by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the support given to me by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the University of Calgary Grants Committee; and the Killam Resident Fellowships Committee, which awarded me a fellowship to prepare this book for press.

As always, all research was done under my direct supervision, and I take full responsibility for all of the analysis and views expressed herein, as well as for any errors. All translations from Arabic are my own.

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The Communist Party of Iraq

Origins and Foundations

The introduction of Marxist thought in Iraq must be accredited to Ḥusain al-Raḥḥâl (1901–1981), who, though he never became a communist himself, was the first to introduce Marxist thought into intellectual circles in Baghdad. Al-Raḥḥâl was a high school student in Berlin in 1919 when the Spartacist uprising, an attempt by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) to seize control of Berlin, took place; this event left a deep impression on him, and kindled his interest in socialism and Marxism.[1] Returning to Iraq a year later, and profoundly affected by the unstable conditions of the country, under British occupation, he gradually started to teach Marxist and socialist thought. However, in his last days he expressed deep disappointment:

With the seeds I have sown and worked so hard to intellectually nurture . . . I wanted to create an intellectual environment where scientific socialism would be the base of inquiry to understand our backward conditions, but we ended up somewhere else. . . . The impoverishment of Marxist thought today [1973] is much more alarming because it is much more regressive than it was fifty years earlier.[2]

Iraq Before the First World War

The history of modern Iraq can be traced back to 1749 when the Ottoman Sultan appointed Sulimân Aghâ Abû-lailah, a Georgian Mamluk officer who was the governor of Basra (1749–1761), to the position of Wâlî (governor) of Baghdad. This appointment initiated the establishment of a semi-autonomous state in Iraq under Mamluk suzerainty. Although formally appointed by the Ottoman Sultan, a succession of Mamluks formed a dynasty that in effect ruled Iraq for the next eight decades. Even so, Mamluk control over Iraq was always incomplete because of overlapping jurisdictional rights in the

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[1] For an overview of al-Raḥḥâl's life, see Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 389–404.

[2] Interview by author with Ḥusain al-Raḥḥâl, Baghdad (19 October 1973).

empire.[3] An Ottoman focus on potential Persian incursions into the territory forced Mamluk officials and the Sublime Porte[4] into grudging cooperation, so that despite their efforts, Mamluk rule over Iraq was "restricted to fluctuating success over an 80 year period … and the downfall of the Mamluk regime in 1831 meant the unwelcome restoration of alien rule in [the city of] Baghdad."[5] The city's population had grown from twenty thousand inhabitants in the seventeenth century to one hundred thousand by 1800, and had reached some hundred fifty thousand in 1831,[6] at the time Mamluk rule ended.

Dâûd Pasha, the last of the Mamluk rulers (1817–1831), instituted political and economic policies that successfully united what was to constitute modern Iraq. By steering the country even further away from Istanbul's control, he was also able to reduce the influence of C. J. Rich, the British resident in Baghdad, and of representatives of the British East India Company. In a move that gained him popular support, particularly among Iraq's merchants, Dâûd Pasha also forced the British to pay duties on all imported goods, taxes from which they had previously been exempt.

Dâûd Pasha modelled his rule on that of Muḥammad ʿAlî in Egypt. Like Muḥammad ʿAlî, he strove to create a modern centralized governmental infrastructure. He initiated governmental reforms, restored law and order, and created judicial and educational institutions. He also modernized the army, enlarging it to approximately one hundred thousand men; built factories; established a newspaper; and organized irrigation works.[7] As noted by the scholar Tom Nieuwenhuis, "The previous [Mamluk] period of local rule becomes significant, marking an era … for local progress … [in which] schools, baths, mosques, khans [inns] … and *suqs* (markets) [were built or expanded]."[8] One distinguished Iraqi economist, Muḥammad Salmân Ḥasan, considers Dâûd and his reign to be a first attempt at independent economic development – however embryonic – in the modern history of Iraq. In 1831, at the instigation of the British, the Ottoman army marched into Baghdad and arrested Dâûd Pasha. Dâûd was imprisoned for the rest of his life and the Mamluk elite was removed from power, thus ending Iraq's first experiment in autonomy.[9]

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[3] Hala Fattah, *The Politics of Regional Trade in Iraq, Arabia and the Gulf: 1745–1900* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); Thabit Abdullah, *A Short History of Iraq* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); and Thabit Abdullah, *Merchants, Mamluks and Murder: The Political Economy of Commerce in Eighteenth Century Basra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

[4] An administrative department directly related to Istanbul and not under the Mamluk Pasha.

[5] Tom Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society in Early Modern Iraq: Mamluk Pashas, Tribal Shayks and Local Rule Between 1802 and 1831* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), p. 171.

[6] ʿAbd al-Aziz al-Duri, "Baghdad," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1960), p. 925.

[7] ʿUthmân Ibn Suʿûd al-Baṣrî al-Wâilî, *Khamsah wa Khamsûn ʿÂm min Târîkh al-ʿIrâq 1188–1242-Wa Mukhtaṣar Maṭâliʿ al-Suʿûd Biṭayyibî Akhbâr al-Wâlî Dâûd* (Cairo 1371H), p. 2; Zaki Saleh, *Mesopotamia (Iraq), 1600–1914* (Baghdad: al-Rabitah Press, 1957), p. 133; Sulaimân Fâʾiq, *Târîkh Baghdad*, trans. Mûsâ Kâdhim Nûras (Baghdad: al-Maʿârif Press, 1962), p. 61.

[8] Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society*, p. 173.

[9] Muḥammad Salmân Ḥasan, *Al-Taṭawwur al-Iqtiṣâdî fî al-ʿIrâq* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, 1965), pp. 30–33. See also Ḥalîm Aḥmad, *Mûjaz Târîkh al-ʿIrâq al-Ḥadîth* (Beirut:

The restoration of direct rule from Istanbul coincided with the "emergence of British influence in Iraq"; according to Nieuwenhuis, both the Turks and the British were largely responsible for the "retarded" development of Iraq.[10] Nevertheless, with its return to Ottoman control Iraq began to be feel the affects of the politics and enlightened reforms then taking place in Istanbul and which, in 1839, initiated the "Age of Tanzimat." In this environment, law, diplomacy, government administration, and education were all modernized, and secular ideas and democratic principles were introduced.

In 1868, Midḥat Pasha, a leading advocate of reform, became the first president of Council of State in Istanbul, one of the two most important institutions of the Tanzimat. The following year he was appointed Wâlî of Baghdad (1869–1872) and from this position put his reform ideas into practice. He centralized government rule, established law and order, surveyed the land, instituted land reforms that gave peasants some protection and reduced feudal control, reestablished modern education, and built factories, in essence reinstating the programme of Dâûd Pasha's government. He also established a newspaper, *Al-Zawrâ*, importing a special press for the purpose; the paper survived him by half a century. Most government revenue was spent on public projects, and little was sent to the treasury in Istanbul. Partly as a result of his success in Iraq, court jealousies and intrigue led to Midḥat Pasha's recall three years later, though he soon took over the prime ministership of the empire. According to one Iraqi educator and literary figure, writing in 1930:

As soon as Midḥat Pasha entered Baghdad . . . he began studying Iraqi conditions and its finances from the perspectives of security, administration, order, education, industry, agriculture, economics, and health, and [the creation of] a modern infrastructure. . . . he announced his intention of implementing his program, and soon worked to put this into action. Although he was gentle and respectful, he was serious about its implementation. In a few days, the signs of reform and prosperity began to appear [in the country] and the social conditions were on the verge of a dramatic transformation. People were happy, justice prevailed and rights were respected. Three years later, in 1873, in Government House, with a grim face, he declared, "This is what I promised you and God the day I met you in this place, and I would have fulfilled this but for the misfortune [of having to leave]. I bid you farewell, my dear Iraqi friends. . . . " With tearful eyes [his audience] responded.[11]

In 1876, Iraq entered a renewed constitutional experiment under the Ottoman Sultan ʿAbd-ul-Ḥamîd II, who was brought to power by the reformist Midḥat Pasha, now the Grand Vizier, and his liberal compatriots in Istanbul. The newly enthroned ʿAbd-ul-Ḥamîd II promulgated this constitutional experiment on 23 December 1876. However, it came to an abrupt end when ʿAbd-ul-Ḥamîd II reversed his views, sending Midḥat Pasha into exile in Mecca and

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Dâr Ibn Khaldûn, n.d.), pp. 31–33. For an excellent history of the Mamluk period in Iraq, see ʿAbbâs al-ʿAzzâwî, *Târîkh al-ʿIrâq Baina Iḥtilâlain*, vol. 6 (Baghdad: Sharikat al-Tijârah wa al-Ṭibâʿah, 1954).

[10] Nieuwenhuis, *Politics and Society*, p. 171.

[11] Fahmî al-Mudarris, *Alʿ Âlam al-ʿArabî*, no. 1965 (Baghdad, 9 August 1930).

initiating a period of despotic rule and corruption that ended with the revolution of the Young Turks in 1908. This powerful military Pan-Turkish nationalist clique, which led Turkey into World War I, practised a policy of Turkification that roused and angered many Ottoman Arabs, including the Iraqis, especially those making up the embryonic intelligentsia.

In their opposition to Turkification, Ottoman Arabs used secret societies and clandestine Arabic newspapers to advance the nationalist cause; as non-Turkish separatist movements in the empire (e.g., in Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Crete) became more vocal, they inspired Arab nationalists in Iraq and Syria. Arab officers in Istanbul, the most influential group in society to benefit from these developments and exposure to technical (often Western) training, assumed important roles within the growing underground movement. Iraqi officers, who were often the most prominent members of secret societies like *al-ʿAhd* that were formed among the Arab components of the Ottoman army, committed themselves to working for Arab independence. Similar in purpose to *al-ʿAhd* in Iraq, a branch of the Ottoman Decentralization Party – *al-ʿUṣbah al-Ḥamra* – was founded in Cairo for the purpose of winning equality and autonomy for the Arab provinces within the framework of the Ottoman Empire. Even though such efforts weakened the Ottoman Empire in the face of European encroachment, many Arabs regarded their demands for decentralization as necessary to protect their cultural and linguistic identity in the face of the reforms emanating from Istanbul. With the return of the constitution in 1908, and with branches of Arab nationalist societies beginning to appear, predominantly in Basra and Baghdad but also in Mosul and other Iraqi cities, the seeds of political and social awakening grew rapidly.

In addition, Arab newspapers and journals proliferated, with the number of dailies in Iraq rising from a single one between 1894 and 1904 to sixty-one between 1904 and 1914. Even though many existed only for a short period before Ottoman efforts to closed them, the flowering of a new intellectual expression took hold of the Arab population. Following the introduction of the modern printing press, Egyptian journals and newspapers became readily available to other Arabs and facilitated greater contact between the rising young intellectual class in Iraq and the rest of the Arab world. The increased availability of Arabic journals through the foreign postal services – bypassing Ottoman censorship – acted as a catalyst in the rapid development of socialist consciousness throughout Iraq. Journals such as *Al-Muqtaṭaf, Al-Hilâl, Al-Siyâsah*, and *Al-Muqaṭṭam* soon became part of the regular diet of discerning members of Iraq's emerging educated classes.[12]

Foreign Influences

In addition to Arabic journals, the publications of the Communist Party of Britain also began to circulate among a limited number of intellectuals in Iraq,

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[12] For more detail, see Philip Willard Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (London: Jonathan Cope, 1937), pp. 222–236.

including al-Raḥḥâl, who translated them into Arabic and held discussions about them with his friends in Baghdad. At the same time, the French Communist Party newspaper, *L'Humanité*, available to those Iraqis who spoke French, was also translated into Arabic and made available to Raḥḥâl's circle. The development of socialist thought among Iraqis was further influenced by the progressive foreign socialists who worked with the British in Iraq. Among these was a Scotsman, Donald M. McKenzie, who opened McKenzie's Bookshop in Baghdad in 1925 and operated it until his death in 1946. McKenzie made a number of foreign books, especially those examining socialist ideas, available at cost to young Iraqi socialists, while selling them at a profit to the British and to wealthy Iraqis.[13] His wife also played an important role in spreading socialist ideas among women's groups and was credited with connecting these groups through the first Eastern Women's Congress, held in Damascus in July 1930.[14] In addition, between 1919 and 1926 an Australian named Riley, who worked as a teacher in the British Department of Education in Mosul before becoming the director of education, gave lectures on social conditions, informed by socialist notions, to students and the Iraqi elite. Returning to Australia in 1926, he took up journalism and ended up in China, where he was killed. Finally, McKenzie's wife and an American woman by the name of Miss Kerr lectured in girls' clubs and schools in Baghdad, where socialist notions were also advanced.[15]

Russians and Iraqis had limited contact until World War I, when, as part of the Ottoman armies, Iraqi soldiers and officers met their Russian adversaries on the Russian front. Interaction between civilian Iraqis and Russians following Russia's October 1917 revolution was also limited, but the opinion of Iraqis who did encounter the revolutionaries was favourable to the Bolsheviks. When the Ottoman armies were retreating in early 1917, the Russian forces occupying the northern and western parts of Ottoman Iraq treated the population humanely, and in this environment, some of the Russian soldiers who were politically inclined towards Bolshevist notions spread the seeds of those ideas, which the Iraqis began to propagate.

In addition, because Kurds and Arabs who became Russian prisoners of war (POWs) after the Russian revolution were treated well, they began to spread vague revolutionary notions on their return to Iraq. Some become known in Iraq as Bolsheviks. One such Baghdadi, known as Bolshevik Ṣâliḥ (1892–1973), adopted his nom de guerre and used it for the rest of his life. In a 1968 interview he remarked:

My contact with the Bolsheviks was a humane one, and even when I was in captivity during the Tsarist period I could tell from the way our guards treated us who was a Bolshevik and who was not. As soon as the revolution took place I was freed, and

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[13] See Muḥsin Dizaya, *ʾAḫdâṯ ʿÂṣartuhâ* (Erbil, Kurdistan: Aras, 2001), p. 164.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Interviews by author with Ḥusain al-Raḥḥâl and Zakî Ḵhairî, Baghdad (18 January 1976).

became part of the comradeship, which is how I acquired my name – and I am proud of it. Although I have never been a communist, I thought the Bolsheviks were very caring, and thus, their ideology must also be of that nature.[16]

In Iraqi Kurdistan, returning Kurds were also dubbed Bolsheviks,[17] and in the religious centres of Shiʿism in Najaf and Karbala, the same appellation was applied simultaneously to many returnees. Some Shiʿi ʿUlama believed that the Bolsheviks were favourably inclined towards Islam, and soon after World War I, the Mosul branch of *al-ʿAhd* society, in a letter sent to the headquarters in Damascus, called for the formation of an Islamic-German and Bolshevik alliance to challenge the colonialist occupiers.[18]

When al-Raḥḥâl left Iraq around 1914, the country was one of the most remote and least developed provinces of the Ottoman Empire. According to Hanna Batatu, prior to the British military campaign during World War I "private property, in the sense of private appropriation of the means of production, was non-existent outside Iraq's towns and their immediate hinterland, and even in the towns had a precarious basis . . . exposed to recurring confiscation."[19] Some incipient economic classes existed in the towns, but only in a "rudimentary form and in parallel structures within the recognized religious communities," and nationwide social classes had yet to emerge.[20] Iraqi "society" still remained deeply divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, with Sunni Muslims in privileged positions and with very little interaction and few common interests among the various other segments of the population.

Around 75 per cent of Iraq's population was Arab, with Kurds, Persians, Turkomans, Armenians, and some smaller groups making up the remaining 25 per cent. The vast majority of the population were Muslim, divided between Shiʿi and Sunni. However, there were also some small Christian, Jewish, and Sabean minorities. Out of a total population of 2.25 million at the turn of the twentieth century, 59 per cent were rural peasants, 17 per cent were nomadic and seminomadic herders, and only 24 per cent were urban dwellers;[21] in total, only one per cent of the population was literate.[22]

Internal social stratification was based on a hierarchy of status that gave special privileges to the holders of religiously based positions, such as *sadah*, or descent from the Prophet, and to the leaders of the Ṣûfî orders, as well as to Sunni and Shiʿi ʿUlama (religious leaders) and to the *chalabis* (rich merchants) who were concentrated mainly in Baghdad, in addition to the small group of high Ottoman officials (mainly of non-Iraqi origin) who ruled the

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[16] Interview by author with Bolshevik Ṣâliḥ, Baghdad (18 March, 1968).
[17] Jalâl al-Ṭâlabânî, *Kurdistân wa al-Ḥarakah al-Kurdiyyah* (Beirut: Dâr al-Ṭalîʿah, 1969), p. 58.
[18] ʿÂmir Ḥasan Faiyyâḍ, "Judhûr al-Fikr al-ʾIshtirâkî fî al-ʿIrâq, 1920–1934" (MA thesis, College of Law and Politics, Baghdad, December 1978), pp. 233–240.
[19] Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 8.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ḥasan, *Al-Taṭawwur al-Iqtiṣâdî fî al-ʿIrâq*, p. 52.
[22] Hâshim Jawâd, *Muqaddimah fî Kiyân al-ʿIrâq al-Ijtimâʿî* (Baghdad: al-Maʿârif Press, 1946), p. 104.

country. The privileged strata together constituted a very small proportion of the population. A small middle class made up of professionals, artisans, and domestic merchants occupied another level, while the vast majority of the urban population consisted of poor service workers. An industrial working class was virtually non-existent until the late 1920s,[23] and in the countryside the tribal system, which had existed for centuries, was still largely intact. The _Shaikh al-Mashâyikh_ (chief of tribal confederations), the _shaikhs_ (leaders) of the tribes among the Arabs, and the tribal *begs* (community sub-leaders) or *aghas* (tribal chiefs) among the Kurds remained in firm control of the affairs of their tribal communities. All in all, Iraq was a mosaic of social groups, stratified along tribal, religious, class, and ethnic lines. Each community lived in accordance with its inherited traditional patterns, into which it assimilated foreign influences and modern practices. In other words, historic and inherited cultural norms were more complex in nature, and had been passed down from the time of the Sumerians, and more recently, from the Abbassid period in the eighth century. These values allowed communities to adapt to change and to adopt new ideas and ways of living, initially difficult for Westerners to comprehend.

British Ascendancy

Britain's penetration of the Persian Gulf in the seventeenth century, as a direct result of the merging of British government and British East India Company interests, led to its eventual control of the Iraqi Tigris and Euphrates valleys during the First World War. The British East India Company initiated commercial activity in Basra in 1635, and established its first factory there eight years later, making Basra an important outpost for the company in the region. Later, in 1764, Britain opened an official consulate in Basra to consolidate British political and economic influence and to replace the British East India Company representative. The British presence was expanded further in 1798, when a permanent residency opened in Baghdad. Eventually, Baghdad became the centre of British activities in Arabia, replacing Basra as a response to heightened French interest in Iraq, which was masked by Napoleon's challenge to British control of India at the end of the eighteenth century.[24] By 1834, the introduction of gunboats on the Tigris had created a safe environment for transport on the river, thus increasing British economic penetration. Thus during the mid-nineteenth century, Iraq became incorporated into the British imperial market system, and Ottoman Iraq was transformed into an area of vital British influence and interest. According to one student of British foreign policy in Iraq, the British viewed Iraq as the cornerstone of the survival of the British Indian Empire: "This conception, originating with the British about the year 1830, and developing during the ensuing four decades, was firmly established by

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[23] Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 11.
[24] ʿAbd-ul-Raḥmân al-Bazzâz, *Al-ʿIrâq min al-Iḥtilâl Ḥattâ al-Istiqlâl*, 3rd ed. (Baghdad: al-ʿÂnî Press, 1967), p. 46, and Aḥmad, *Mûjaz Târîkh al-ʿIrâq al-Ḥadîth*, p. 43.

the year 1878.... Mesopotamia was virtually turned into a British sphere of influence."[25]

By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, some changes started to become noticeable. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and the development of powered transportation on the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, made Iraq more accessible to penetration by products and ideas from the outside world, particularly those of British origin.[26] This caused a decline in indigenous commerce and production, reducing Iraq to the status of a dependent market for British goods and a source of cheap raw materials for British industry, and increasingly connecting Iraq to the international, imperial market. In contrast to the trend up to the late eighteenth century, when Iraqi trade had been predominantly with other Middle Eastern countries, Iraqi commerce now was mainly with industrial Europe in general, and with Britain in particular.[27] Indeed, the value of European imports coming into Iraq through Basra increased from £51,000 in 1868–1870 to £3,066,000 by 1907–1909.[28] A large part of these imports consisted of inexpensive British-made textiles, whose growing influx caused the gradual ruin of the domestic handloom industry in Iraq, as had previously occurred in both Lebanon and Syria. At the same time, however, Iraq's agricultural production rose rapidly. From the 1860s to the 1920s, grain production increased by around one per cent per annum, and the yield of dates increased by even greater margins. In addition, the area under cultivation expanded, from perhaps less than 100,000 *dunums* in the 1860s to about 1,613,000 *dunums* by 1913.[29] The character of crop production also underwent a transformation, from the peasant subsistence economy that had previously prevailed to an economy based on cash crops, mainly cereal grains, the export of which increased about twenty times over the periods 1867–1871 and 1912–1913.[30]

On the eve of the First World War, Great Britain's standing as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf was about to enter a new phase. Three centuries of Britain's efforts to expand and protect its trade, as well as to increase its diplomatic and strategic influence and to protect the land route to India from domination by other powers, were settled through negotiated agreements. Over

[25] Zaki Saleh, *Mesopotamia (Iraq), 1600–1914: A Study in British Foreign Affairs* (Baghdad: al-Maaref Press, 1957), p. 170. For details on the Gulf region and Iraq, see Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Kuwait: Social Change in Historical Perspective* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), pp. 37–53.

[26] Ibid., p. 239. On the eve of World War I, Britain's share of the trade in Iraq and the Gulf area amounted to £9,600,000, about three-quarters of the total; Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: KPI, 1987), p. 7.

[27] Ḥasan, *Al-Taṭawwur al-Iqtiṣâdî fî al-ʿIrâq*, p. 87.

[28] Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, pp. 239–240.

[29] Ḥasan, "The Role of Foreign Trade in Economic Development in Iraq, 1864–1964: A Study in the Growth of a Dependent Economy," in M. A. Cook (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East from the Rise of Islam to the Present Day* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 350. See note 50 for the dimensions of the *dunum*.

[30] Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 3.

a series of meetings and exchanges dating from 1909 to 1913, Great Britain achieved recognition of its position from Germany, from France, and from the government of the Ottoman Empire. Under the terms of the Anglo-Turkish Agreement, signed on 29 July 1913, Britain completed its de facto annexation of the Persian Gulf and cemented its dominant position within the Mesopotamian *vilayets* (provinces) of the Ottoman Empire. Further, it secured recognition of its "special position" in the Persian Gulf and of the validity of its existing treaties with the sheikdoms of Kuwait and Bahrain; limited the terminus of the Baghdad railway to Basra (beyond which the rail line could not be extended without British consent); gained sole control over the development of the port of Basra and the city of Baghdad (thereby denying port facilities in the Gulf to Germany or any other power); and achieved Ottoman recognition of its right to buoy, to light, and to police the Shaṭ al-ʿArab and the Persian Gulf. These measures were seen as insurance for British claims on Mesopotamia in the event of the break-up of the Ottoman Empire.[31]

In attempting to extend its influence in the region further, Britain used the agreement to control access to water. In this way British authorities could promote economic growth through agriculture and control revenue assessment and collection despite the shared role it was to have with Germany in developing irrigation for the Cilician Plain in Asia Minor. Finally, the Ottoman oilfields were transferred to British control, and Germany was forced to recognize further oil exploration in southern Mesopotamia and in southern Persia as the exclusive domain of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. However, because of diplomatic concerns requiring Britain and Germany to heed deliberations by the French, Italian, and Russian representatives, the Anglo-German Agreement was not signed until 15 July 1914, and ratification was further delayed until separate Turko-German negotiations were concluded.

With the outbreak of World War I on 28 July 1914, the Anglo-German treaty and its considerations were, in effect, nullified, and in the ensuing conflict British arms were required to confirm what British commerce and diplomacy had established before the war. With Britain's occupation of Basra in 1914, then of Baghdad in 1917, and finally, of Mosul in 1918, as well as with treaty arrangements farther south in the Gulf proper, British hegemony became incontestable, and suzerainty passed – without the consent or involvement of the region's Arab population – from the Ottomans to the British Empire. The cost to Britain was immense, involving over two hundred million pounds and some hundred thousand casualties in the Mesopotamia campaign.

Commensurate with those developments was the population's growing tendency towards sedentarization, and the increase in the number of peasants who cultivated the land. Indeed, the percentage of nomads among the region's rural

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[31] For a discussion of British diplomacy in the treaty, see Jill Crystal (ed.), *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); see also Richard Schofield (ed.), *The Iran-Iraq Border: 1840–1958*, 11 vol. (Buckingham, UK: Archive Editions, 1989), for a copy of the 1929 Anglo-Turkish Agreement.

population fell from 35 per cent to 17 per cent between 1867 and 1905, while the percentage of cultivators increased from 41 per cent to 59 per cent. By using the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, tribal _shaikhs_, former tax farmers,[32] and rich city merchants began to acquire title deeds (*tapu sanads*) to previously state-owned or communally held properties.[33] On the eve of the war this process had not progressed all that far, and the Ottoman authorities attempted to repossess land that had already been registered as private property.[34] But with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the British occupation of Iraq, the pace of change accelerated rapidly, exaggerating social tensions, economic disparities, and political discord.[35] In the political settlements following the First World War, Britain and France carved the Middle East into spheres of influence, prearranged by the 1915 Sykes-Picot Agreement and implemented at the San Remo conference in April 1920.[36] Britain received mandates over both Iraq and Palestine. This was a transparent attempt to legalize the British occupation of Iraq, and Iraqi nationalists viewed it as "imperialism in a new guise and as colonization under a new name."[37]

Spearheaded by tribal _shaikhs_ in the Middle Euphrates and by the Shiʿi leadership of Najaf, Iraqi agitation against the British mandate was initiated in the summer of 1920, just six weeks after the formal announcement of the arrangement. This agitation soon grew into a popular insurrection, and on 4 July 1920, British garrisons and offices came under attack throughout Iraq in what one historian considers the first national 'war of liberation' against British imperialism, with "a chief feature of the movement being the unprecedented cooperation between the Sunni and the Shiʿi communities."[38] Significantly, the 1920 revolution was "the first manifestation of a form of Iraqi national identity."[39] Although the British were able to suppress the insurrection, the repression encountered heavy criticism at home for its human and financial costs, utilization of chemical weapons against the rebels, and overall heavy handedness.

Subsequently, the British Colonial Office set up a sub-department for the newly acquired Middle Eastern territories, and at a conference in Cairo in March 1921, chaired by Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill, new structures

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[32] In "tax farming" the central authority contracted with local businessmen or headmen to collect a specific sum as tax from an area by whatever means they saw fit; tax farmers would generally collect a much larger amount than required and keep the difference for themselves.

[33] Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 186.

[34] Interviews by author with Ḥusain al-Raḥḥâl; Zakî K̲h̲airî, Baghdad (18 January 1976).

[35] Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 4. During the whole period, the increase in privately registered land was still rather modest. The *miri* (state land) fell from about four-fifths in the 1860s to about 60 per cent in the 1933–1958 period, and the *topu* land rose from about 20 per cent in the 1860s to about 30 per cent on the eve of the 1958 Revolution. See Ḥasan, "The Role of Foreign Trade in Economic Development in Iraq, 1864–1964," p. 350.

[36] David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, 2nd ed. (London: Henry Holt, 2001).

[37] Philip W. Ireland, *Iraq: A Study in Political Development* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), p. 262.

[38] Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 33.

[39] Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, pp. 10–11.

were established for these territories. Iraq was to be ruled indirectly, nominally through a national cabinet and civil service headed by an Arab. Power would, however, continue to be held by British advisers, and Britain would have veto power over financial and military matters. In addition, Britain would administer Iraq's foreign relations.

Amîr Faiṣal, the son of S̲h̲arîf Ḥusain, leader of the Arab Revolt of 1916, was the British choice to rule Iraq as he had just been expelled by the French from his short tenure upon the throne as King of Syria and thus had only limited support among the local elites. He did, however, have some support in Iraq, especially among Iraqi officers who had served with him in the Arab Revolt of 1916 against the Ottomans and many of whom had been part of his short-lived administration in Syria. Other candidates, some of whom had been active in the 1920 revolution, were more popular, but they were either not trusted by or were seen as antagonistic to the British. Because of his limited local acceptance, Faiṣal was viewed by the British as dependent upon them, and therefore as amenable to British pressure. At the same time, he would further divide the leaders of the anti-British national movement since as a descendant of the prophet Muḥammad he commanded the loyalty of many Muslims. This accorded him some popular support and allowed him to transcend sectarian divisions, making an open challenge to his nomination virtually unthinkable. In the spring of 1921, the British stage-managed the election of Faiṣal as a constitutional monarch, crowning him Faiṣal I.

Under Faiṣal, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of October 1922 replaced the mandate and formalized British control for a twenty-year period. It gave Britain the right to oversee Iraq's financial and international affairs and to station armed forces on Iraqi soil; it also stipulated that "the king would heed Britain's advice on all matters affecting British interests."[40] In return, Britain agreed to provide military and civilian aid to Iraq and to support its application for membership in the League of Nations. Within two months of the public announcement of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, two major political parties – *Ḥizb al-Nahḍah al-ʿIrâqiyyah* (the Iraqi Renaissance Party), headed by Muḥammad al-Ṣadr, and *al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanî* (the National Party), headed by Jaʿfar Abu-l-Timmân (both men were prominent Shiʿi leaders) – were formed, largely in protest against the treaty. A pro-British party – *al-Ḥizb al-Ḥurr al-ʿIrâqî* (the Liberal Party of Iraq), headed by Maḥmûd al-Naqîb – was also formed.

On 23 August 1922, spontaneous mass demonstrations protesting the treaty broke out. Because of the strong opposition, King Faiṣal and his government refused to ratify the agreement, and, on 29 August, the government resigned. In response, the British High Commission banned political parties, dissolved the parliament, and ruled directly. Through the Anglo-Iraq Treaty, which was finally ratified in January 1926, and the constitution, which had been passed by a constituent assembly in 1924, the mandate was replaced with indirect British rule. The constitution vested considerable power in the monarch (whom the British nevertheless controlled) and provided only a facade of democratic

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[40] Marr, *Modern History of Iraq*, p. 38.

TABLE 1.1. *The Population of Iraq (in thousands)*

Type	1905	% of Total	1930	% of Total	1947	% of Total
Bedouin	393	17	234	7	250	5
Rural	1,324	59	2,346	68	2,703	57
Urban	533	34	808	35	1,864	38
Total	2,350		3,388		4,817	

Source: Muḥammad Salmân Ḥasan, *Al-Taṭawwur al-Iqtiṣâdî fî al-ʿIrâq* (Beirut: al-Mattabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, 1965), p. 53.

representation in parliament.[41] In response to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930, Nûrî al-Saʿîd formed the *al-ʿAhd* (Allegiance Party) to offset agitation by anti-British parties, particularly from the new *al-Ikhâ’ al-Waṭanî* (National Fraternity), which was created by Yâsîn al-Hâshimî to challenge British rule and the treaty that entrenched it. Two of *al-Ikhâ’ al-Waṭanî*'s active personalities, who later became major figures in Iraqi political life, were Rashîd ʿAlî al-Gailânî and Ḥikmat Sulaimân.

Under the rule of the British authorities and the Iraqi constitutional monarchy created by the British in 1921, Iraq was recognized as an independent state in 1932. The country then began a process of rapid social transformation, the scope of which was reflected in its changing demographic composition. Between 1930 and 1947 Iraq experienced rapid population growth, primarily as a result of lower infant mortality rates (Table 1.1). The trend towards settlement of the Bedouin population, which had contributed to the substantial increase in rural population between 1905 and 1930, continued because of the rapid expansion of arable land. Between 1918 and 1943, the total cultivated area in the irrigation zone increased from 936,500 acres to 4,241,718 acres.[42]

Iraq's urban population also increased dramatically between 1930 and 1947, reflecting the economic changes that were occurring in the country. These included the development of oil production, the beginnings of industrialization, and the organization of the modern centralized bureaucratic state. Regarding the condition of labour in Iraq in the mid-1920s, a British Colonial Office report to the Council of the League of Nations observed:

In Iraq there are hardly any organized industries worth mentioning. Local industries are mostly of the cottage variety, namely tanning, weaving, copper and iron smithing, and a few others of less importance. Families in their homes carry on these industries. There are no factories in the ordinary sense of the word and the problems associated with factory conditions do not exist.[43]

[41] Ibid., pp. 38–39.

[42] Doreen Warriner, *Land and Poverty in the Middle East* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1948), p. 99.

[43] His Britannic Majesty's Government, *Report on the Administration of Iraq for the Year 1926* (London: HMSO, 1927), p. 28.

The British observations herein accurately captured the primitive nature of Iraq's labour conditions.

The British, having little legitimacy in the eyes of the local population and, at the same time, trying to limit their expenditures, attempted to establish an internal social basis for their continued rule by creating a bureaucratic bourgeoisie, composed mainly of high officials and military officers to whom they gave large salaries and many privileges. The British also supported the class of intermediary middlemen whose interests were closely interwoven with those of foreign companies, by either marketing their products or providing them with cheap raw material and labour.

In addition to those classes, the British strengthened the semi-feudal authorities in rural areas.[44] The Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulation, enacted in 1916 and formally incorporated into the Iraqi Constitution in 1925, secured substantial judicial and tax-levying powers for the monarchy.[45] More important, perhaps, those *shaikh*s in the south and *aghas* in the north who were loyal to the British mandatory power, were generously rewarded with huge tracts of land that had previously been state property and that historically had been enjoyed by all tribal members, a practice known as Lazmah. Until 1927, *shaikh*s and *aghas* had had total immunity from property taxes,[46] and even later, their tax burden remained relatively light. The Lazmah custom (land tenure law), and the Settlement of Land Rights Law of 1932, provided justification for land-grabbing by tribal chiefs and other members of the emerging landowner class, such as high government officials and rich town merchants, as well as giving them legal title to the land they seized. These laws allowed the new landowners to deprive the peasants of their communal land rights and, concurrently, their means of living.

As a result, enormous private estates were created, and land ownership became concentrated in a few hands. By 1952 over half a million acres of former state land in the province of Kut were owned by only two families, and in the province of ʿAmara, eight families held 53 per cent of all the land.[47] Iraq resembled a patchwork quilt, as forty-nine families held some 1,145,000 acres.[48] In 1958, in the country as a whole, 2,480 landowners, or one per cent of the population, held 55 per cent of all agricultural lands, whereas about six hundred thousand peasant families were completely landless, and 64 per cent of the rural population owned only 3.6 per cent of all cultivated land.[49] Although this period witnessed extensive growth in agricultural production, increasing numbers of peasants were now forced by poverty to leave their villages and

44 Zakî Khairî and Suʿâd Khairî, *Dirâsât fî Târîkh al-Ḥizb a- Shiyûʿî al-ʿIrâqî*, vol. 1 (n.p., 1984), pp. 18–19.

45 Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 30.

46 Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 98.

47 Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 32.

48 Ibid., p. 56.

49 Yousif Sayigh, *The Economies of the Arab World: Development Since 1945* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 28.

migrate to overcrowded Ṣarîfas (shanty towns) on the outskirts of Iraq's major cities, particularly Baghdad and Basra. By 1958, "no fewer than 32 million *dunums* of land were in private hands,[50] and . . . of the area ploughed in that year less than one-fourth was in cultivation before the First World War, and a far smaller proportion privately owned."[51]

Nevertheless, productivity declined from 225 kilos per *dunum* during the 1920s to 187 kilos in the 1930s, and even further, to 143 kilos, prior to 1958. The standard of living for the majority of the population declined dramatically. In addition to the appalling conditions in which the peasants now lived as a result of their mass migration to the towns and the worldwide economic crisis of the early 1930s,[52] the situation of the majority of the urban population also deteriorated sharply.[53] Despite the inflation of the 1930s, the daily wage of unskilled labour declined steeply, from 75 fils in 1926 to 56 fils in 1930,[54] and to 50 fils annually from 1935 to 1937.[55] This trend continued through the 1940s and into the 1950s; in 1953 a report prepared by the International Labour Office expressed the opinion that "taking into account the cost of living, numbers of wage earners must be living at or near subsistence if not below."[56] In the meantime, the size of the national bourgeoisie was slowly growing. Iraq's industry was likewise in an embryonic state; the first law to protect national industry was enacted in 1929, it provided tax exemption only to mechanized industry using Iraqi raw materials and whose products were needed by the country.[57]

Although some merchants and financiers made large fortunes [at that time,] the salaried but small middle class made up of civil servants, teachers, clerks in commercial houses, and writers and journalists was excluded from political power and its members found themselves in a very precarious and unstable economic situation.[58] Although their numbers grew with the development of the public school system and availability of government scholarships,[59] their economic distress made them increasingly attracted to anti-establishment ideologies in the period between the two world wars.

The end of the 1930s and the outbreak of the Second World War opened a new chapter in the history of pre-revolutionary Iraqi society. Several different and yet interrelated factors contributed to the socio-economic transformation

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[50] One *dunum* is roughly equal to 0.25 acres.
[51] Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 110.
[52] Ibid., pp. 139–147.
[53] Ibid., pp. 136–139.
[54] One *fils* equals three-tenths of a cent U.S.
[55] Batau, *Old Social Classes*, p. 137.
[56] Ibid., pp. 137–138.
[57] Khaîrî and Khaîrî, *Dirâsât fî Târîkh al-Ḥizb a-Shiyû ʿî al-ʿIrâqî*, p. 19.
[58] Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 473.
[59] For relevant data on the development of schools and intelligentsia in Iraq during that period, see *Muʿjam-al-ʿIrâq*, vol. 1 (Baghdad: al Najâḥ Press, 1953), pp. 166, 267; See also Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, pp. 34–35.

and had a major impact on the development of the Iraqi political environment. First, and probably most decisively, was the war itself, which returned allied armies of occupation and a great number of foreigners to Iraq. The British war effort stimulated both local industry and oil extraction. Under wartime conditions, and with the need for import substitution, local firms found an obvious incentive to expand production or to initiate new ventures. The boom continued in the early post-war period, and by 1957, fixed investment in industrial capital had already eclipsed commercial capital (ID 27.25 millon versus ID 20.80 million).[60] As a result of the accelerated rate of capital accumulation from economic growth in the 1940s and 1950s, by 1958, of the seventeen Baghdad families listed for that year as worth one million or more dinars, only one, the Lâwî family, "had two decades earlier ranked as 'first class' members whose 'financial consideration' (in the Chamber of Commerce) ranged between 22,500 and 75,000 *dinars*."[61] The urban working class – those Iraqis employed in industry, transport, communications, and services – also increased and by 1958 numbered 442,000 persons, which represented about 20 per cent of the country's 2.6 million urban residents.[62] Because of this economic development, Iraqi society was divided between a rich and powerful petite bourgeoisie, in which "23 families held, on a conservative estimate, 30 to 35 million dinars in assets of all sorts . . . an amount equalling, in rough terms, 56 to 65 per cent of the entire private corporate, commercial and industrial capital [of the country],"[63] and a large and still growing mass of dispossessed labourers, who had no access to political power and were barely able to eke out an existence. Nevertheless, such socio-economic cleavages had not yet created a marked popular polarization.

According to Hanna Batatu, "Common pauperism had not, by 1958, created any enduring common feeling between the *Ṣarîfa* dwellers and the city workers."[64] However, the poverty and new social challenges could not remain without any reaction. Workers' unions, strikes, and other forms of political mobilization emerged and started to have an impact on the political situation in the country. As early as July 1931 the first labour union in Iraq, *Jamʿiyyat Aṣḥâb al-Sanâiʿ* (the Artisans' Association), led by Muḥammad Ṣâliḥ al-Qazzâz, organized a massive strike in Baghdad, which soon spread to the provincial towns and took on a political dimension.[65] Despite the authorities' subsequent closure of this union, similar outbreaks of popular discontent were repeated in the 1930s and early 1940s, and at the end of the Second World War, at the

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[60] Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 35.

[61] Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 274.

[62] Ḥasan, "The Role of Foreign Trade in Economic Development in Iraq, 1864–1964," pp. 363–364.

[63] Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 274.

[64] Ibid., p. 136.

[65] Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, "Labour and National Liberation: The Trade Union Movement in Iraq, 1920–1958," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 1983), pp. 148–149.

time of the British and American alliance with the Soviet Union, when domestic repression was consequently more relaxed, Iraqi authorities granted permission for the establishment of sixteen new labour unions. Members of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) quickly took over, the leadership of twelve of these unions, and all of them came to play an important role in the social and political events of the late 1940s and early 1950s.[66] As was typical for Iraq, the largely class-determined socio-economic struggle and the national political struggle were frequently interwoven. Thus during the great upheaval of *al-Wathbah* (the Leap) of 1948, the masses protested against both increased food prices and the abortive Portsmouth Agreement with Britain, which was perceived to be similar to the hated Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930.[67] In this protest the population was also turning against the government and the state apparatus that it controlled, which were ready to accept and enforce both the economic conditions that the majority found unacceptable and the humiliating treaty.

From its inception in 1921 until the 1958 revolution, the Iraqi state apparatus remained largely, if not completely, alienated from its own population, and there was often no close correlation even between the new upper classes and the nation's rulers. As Batatu notes, "The crucial political decisions were made by non-Iraqis, or outside the country's frontiers ... and there was often no close correspondence between the local distribution of wealth and local distribution of power."[68] In addition, as a result of the influx of revenue from the oil companies "the state became, in large measure, economically autonomous from society,"[69] and this dislocation heightened its potential for despotism. At the same time, however, the state became even more connected to, and dependent on, external financial and political powers, and was increasingly ready to serve their interests.[70] As economic growth was not associated with any meaningful social or democratic progress, legal channels for the expression of discontent and calls for social reforms were barred. There was a huge political void beneath the Iraqi state structures and, below this, a vast undercurrent of popular dissatisfaction with, and a questioning of, a socio-economic and political system that was failing to meet the needs of the majority of the population. No formulated ideology or organization, however, yet existed through which this dissatisfaction could be expressed. Nevertheless, the potential for a truly revolutionary situation existed and provided many opportunities for radical movements. This inchoate situation ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, culminated in the dramatic violence of a military coup in July 1958.

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[66] Farouk Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, pp. 38–39.
[67] Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, "Labour and National Liberation," pp. 153–154.
[68] Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, pp. 274–275.
[69] Ibid, pp. 283 and 353. See also Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958*, p. 35.
[70] According to Suʿâd Khairî, brutal repression of the Kirkuk oilfield workers in 1946 proved to many Iraqis that the government was perfectly prepared to oppress them in defence of British economic interests. *Min Târîkh al-Ḥarakah al-Thawriyyah al-Muʿâṣirah fî al-ʿIrâq, 1920–1958*, vol 1.1 (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿit al-Adîb al-ʿArabî, 1974), pp. 150–152.

Radical movements had a significant impact on Iraqi socity even before the coup. One direct result of the activities of al-Raḥḥâl and his associates was the creation, in mid-1926, of the *Nâdî al-Taḍâmun* (Solidarity Club); its basic declared aims were the unity of youth, the propagation of knowledge, the progress of national industry, and the fulfillment of all "principles leading to the improvement of the life of the society."[71] Many young people who joined the club, such as ʿAzîz Sharîf, ʿÂṣim Flayyiḥ, Ḥusain Jamîl, Zakî Khairî and Jamîl Tûmâ, later became leading leftists and communists.[72] In April 1926, to counteract this tendency, the Iraqi government joined in a regional agreement, sponsored by Britain, to combat communism,[73] and as a result, political activism became more difficult. Nevertheless, the *Nâdî al-Taḍâmun* expanded its activities, and on 1 January 1927 it organized its first public demonstration, calling for freedom of the press. In response, the government closed the main high school in Baghdad for ten days, and a number of students and teachers were arrested or expelled, later to be released and reinstated as a result of pressure from a number of public protests. On 8 February 1928, the club again organized a mass demonstration, this time to protest against the visit to Baghdad of the well-known British Zionist Sir Alfred Mond; the demonstration, in which over twenty thousand people took part, ended in a violent scuffle with the police.[74]

The significance of these demonstrations transcended the specific events; in effect, they signalled the birth of mass politics and mass political mobilization in Iraq. Furthermore, they heralded the issues (British imperialism and Zionism) and the processes (oppression and human rights abuses) that would come to dominate modern Iraqi politics. Until this point, politics and government had been the monopoly of the elite, and the masses had had little input and, perhaps more significantly, did not expect to have any input. Though both *Ḥizb al-Nahḍah al-ʿIrâqiyyah* and *al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanî* had spearheaded the 1922 demonstrations, they had not organized them, and despite the wide popular support they enjoyed, their legitimacy derived from the institutional underpinnings of elite politics rather than from the democratic foundations of mass politics. Indeed, the political process they engaged in was unabashedly elitist, and not participatory.

Al-Raḥḥâl and the First Challenge

In the context of this volatile political environment, Ḥusain al-Raḥḥâl began translating and disseminating the works of European socialists for a circle of young Iraqi intellectuals, gathering around himself a number of young

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[71] Khairî and Khairî, *Dirâsât fî Târîkh al-Ḥizb a-Shiyûʿî al-ʿIrâqî*, p. 29.

[72] Ibid.

[73] ʿAbd-ul Razzâq al-Ḥasanî, *Târîkh al-Wizârât al-ʿIrâqiyyah*, vol. 2, 7th ed. (Baghdad: Afâq ʿArabiyyah, 1988), p. 59.

[74] Khairî and Khairî, *Dirâsât fî Târîkh al-Ḥizb a-Shiyûʿî al-ʿIrâqî*, p. 30; see also, Khairî al-ʿUmarî, *Ḥikâyât Siyâsiyyah min Târîkh al-ʿIrâq al-Ḥadîth* (Cairo: Dâr al-Hilâl, 1969), pp. 173–194.

nationalists and socially concerned students such as Muḥammad Salîm Fattâḥ, Muṣṭafâ ʿAlî, ʿAbd-ul-lah Jaddûʿ, ʿAwnî Bakr Ṣidqî, and Maḥmûd Aḥmad al-Saiyyid. Saiyyid (1903–1937), the most prominent among these intellectuals, was pioneer Iraqi realist short story writer. In a 1923 letter to the well-known Egyptian socialist Nicola Ḥaddâd, al-Saiyyid described a major obstacle to the dissemination of socialist thought among the young Iraqi intelligentsia:

In our isolation from the intellectual heritage of the civilized world, our only contact is "Reuters" news wires. . . . The extent of our understanding of socialism does not go beyond your book. . . . The socialists in France sent us only French publications, which only Iraqis with a knowledge of French can read. [The Iraqi majority] is still thirsty for reading more about socialism in our own language. Did you ever think of writing or translating to Arabic books on contemporary socialism that deal with socialist systems, administration, governance, and historical background?[75]

In 1929, al-Raḥḥâl, with al-Saiyyid's cooperation, established the bi-monthly *Al-Ṣaḥîfah* (The Journal), which became the realization of al-Raḥḥâl's efforts to introduce scientific socialist thought into the intellectual circles of Iraq. As al-Raḥḥâl later stated:

After the initial five years of thinking out loud in Baghdad's coffee shops, discussing and learning through the translation of foreign socialist journals and magazines – as I spoke English, French, German, and Turkish and thus had more access to socialist thought – I gathered around me a number of eager, thirsty young critical minds looking for answers to their country's problems. I felt like Aristotle, and these were my disciples. Our circles became wider, so we decided on 28 December 1924 to start the journal in order to publish mature analyses of a scientific socialist approach.[76]

As described by al-Saiyyid, the journal's aim was to "disseminat[e] the ideas of revolution and Marxism."[77] Al-Saiyyid was in touch with many Arab social-ists, such as Yûsuf Ibrâhîm Yazbak in Lebanon and Shiblî Shumaiyyil and Nicola Ḥaddâd in Egypt, and he soon developed a strong following through his own writings. In a personal letter to Yazbak, dated 19 April 1929, al-Saiyyid, who served as director of correspondence for the Baghdad municipal-ity, described the journal as

dedicated . . . to the spread of revolutionary thought and Marxism. . . . In Baghdad these days there is a labour movement [1929] as workers have petitioned the Ministry of the Interior, to form a union in the footsteps of the Barbers' Union and other [nascent] labour organizations. . . . There is no foundation to the recent scurrilous article in the *Shûrâ* newspaper attributed to their correspondents in Baghdad, the gist of which suggested that these movements have the smell of Bolshevism. I believe these people want nothing more than to discourage our workers. I also enclose, herewith, the appeal I issued to

[75] Quoted in ʿAzîz Sibâhî, *ʿUqûd min Târîkh al-Ḥizb al-Shiyûʿî al-ʿIrâqî*, vol. 1 (Damascus: Thaqâfah al-Jadîdah Publications, 2002), p. 19.
[76] Interview by author with Ḥusain al-Raḥḥâl, Baghdad (18 October 1973).
[77] Personal letter from al-Saiyyid to Yûsuf Ibrâhîm Yazbak (19 April 1929). Copy of letter supplied to author by Professor Majid Khadduri.

workers in the capital [Baghdad]. The tone of this call is the most you can aspire to in the world of journalism here.[78]

Al-Raḥḥâl continued:

In 1922, we tried to form the first socialist circle. It had no name and our group was basically for intellectual debate. We held Marxist meetings in a mosque maintained by al-Saiyyid's father. We were basically personal friends, and we produced one serious report on the social, political, and economic conditions of Iraq in 1923. To impress Lenin we translated it into Russian and had it delivered to the Russian Embassy in Tehran to send to him. The embassy later advised us to join the Iraqi Nationalist Party, though we did not do this. Thus, when we established *al-Ṣaḥîfah* with its title in red, we hoped it would become the intellectual socialist articulator of all revolutionaries [in Iraq].[79]

The articles in *Al-Ṣaḥîfah* were very radical and focused on three main issues. First, they openly approached sensitive social subjects related to social justice and human rights against state and class-based oppression. Within this context, they emphasized women's rights, describing the current situation as

the remnants of the feudal ages; the *Ḥarîm* and the *Ḥijâb* [veil] continue the features of the feudal system. The aristocracy of that period was able, through the exploitation of the work of the *fallâḥ* [peasants], to build the *Ḥarîm* system to keep women captive. The *Ḥarîm* and *Ḥijâb* were up to that time unknown [in Iraq] and will wither away once again when the people's classes establish their state.[80]

This call for women's rights produced a public outcry from Iraq's conservative elements and religious leadership. Second, *Al-Ṣaḥîfah* called for the creation of a regime that championed social justice and defended the underprivileged classes. It propagated the theoretical principles of socialism and Marxism, which made the paper an intellectual centre for progressive elements of the society and channelled them toward socialism. Third, the journal called for more public participation in politics and took a staunchly anti-British attitude. Largely because of government reaction to this third focus, *Al-Ṣaḥîfah* was able to publish only six issues before it was suspended by the authorities.[81]

In 1925, al-Raḥḥâl established another journal, *Sînamâ al-Ḥayât* (Theatre of Life), which published its first weekly issue on 17 December 1926. An editorial in this issue described the journal as a forum for "popular socialism from the people to the people."[82] In 1928 publication of this journal also ended, not because of government pressure, but as the result of a split that occurred between al-Raḥḥâl and al-Saiyyid. Both men subsequently entered the Iraqi civil service and, in effect, ceased their activist efforts. However, leftist groups of the 1930s, particularly the *Ahâlî* group, organized in 1932, and the communist

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[78] Ibid.
[79] Interview by author with Ḥusain al-Raḥḥâl, Baghdad (18 October 1973).
[80] Khairî and Khairî, *Dirâsât fî Târîkh al-Ḥizb a-Shiyûᶜî al-ᶜIrâqî*, p. 29.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Râfaᶜîl Buṭṭî, *Al-Ṣaḥâfah fî al-ᶜIrâq* (Cairo: Institute of Higher Arab Studies, 1955), p. 124.

group *Lajnat Mukâfaḥat al-Istiᶜmâr wa al-Istithmâr*, organized in 1934, emerged from among al-Raḥḥâl's disciples. These followers included Yûsuf and ᶜAbd-ul-Qâdir Ismâᶜîl al-Bustânî (al-Saiyyid's cousins), Zakî Khairî, ᶜÂṣim Flayyiḥ, ᶜAbd-ul-lah Jaddûᶜ, Faḍîl Muḥammad, Muṣṭafâ ᶜAlî, ᶜAwnî Bakr Ṣidqî (al-Raḥḥâl's brother-in-law), Salîm Fattâḥ, Muḥammad Ṣâliḥ al-Qazzâz, Ḥusain Jamîl, and Rashîd Muṭlaq, all of whom subsequently became prominent members of the communist movement.

Early Communist Organization

Whereas al-Raḥḥâl's efforts to introduce Marxist thought into Iraq in the early 1920s were successful, the origins of Iraq's communist organizations are less clear. As early as January 1925, a pro-British newspaper warned that communism was spreading in Iraq and warned the government and religious leadership to be wary of it.[83] There are several versions of how communism developed, reflecting both the diversity and the interconnectedness of influences operating on leftist political mobilization in this period. Some historians contend that in 1929 the chairman of the Palestine Communist Party, Haim Auerbach (alias ᶜAbbûd), corresponded with a young Iraqi political activist, Yûsuf Salmân Yûsuf (alias Fahd) (1901–1949), leading to the creation of the *al-Nasiriyah* Marxist circle.[84] Shortly thereafter, Yûsuf Salmân Yûsuf, Ḥamîd Majîd (from Nasiriyah), Sâmî Nâdir, and Dhâfir Ṣâliḥ (from Basra) formed the short-lived *Jamᶜiyyat al-Aḥrâr al-lâ-Dîniyyah* (Secular Liberal Society) according to Marxist principles. The group kept in touch with ᶜAbbûd, who sent them the Beirut periodical *Al-Shams*.

Another version suggests that the Comintern agent Buṭrus Abu Nâṣir (also known as Pyotr Vasili, or Petros), posing as a tailor, arrived in Nasiriyah in 1929 and converted Yûsuf Salmân Yûsuf to Marxism.[85] He enabled Yûsuf to travel to Moscow in 1935 to study Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism in the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV). Returning home in 1938 to lead the Iraqi Communist Party, Yûsuf adopted the pseudonym "Fahd," and Petros, his mission accomplished, returned to Moscow. Yet another version of the story asserts that Iraqi Marxists tried to establish a communist organization in the 1920s, even before the creation of trade unions. The pioneers were Ḥusain al-Raḥḥâl, ᶜAwnî Bakr Ṣidqî, Maḥmûd Aḥmad al-Saiyyid, ᶜAbd-ul-lah Jaddûᶜ, Muṣṭafâ ᶜAlî, and Fâḍil Muḥammad. This account also acknowledges Fahd's adoption of Marxism in Nasiriyah in 1929.[86] In a further version, an

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[83] *Al-ᶜÂlam al-ᶜArabî*, no. 243 (Baghdad, 7 January 1925).
[84] ᶜAbd-ul-lah Amîn, *Al-Shiyûᶜiyyah ᶜAlâ al-Ṣuʿûd* (Baghdad: Shafîq Press, 1974), p. 81; and ᶜAbd-ul-Jabbâr al-Jubûrî, *Al-Aḥzâb wa al-jamᶜiyyât al-Siyâsiyyah fî al-Quṭr al-ᶜIrâqî, 1908–1958* (Baghdad: Dâr al-Ḥuriyyah, 1977), pp. 108–109.
[85] Qadrî Qalᶜajî, *Tajrubat ᶜArabî fî al-Ḥizb al-shiyûᶜî* (Beirut: Dar al-Kâtib al-ᶜArabî, 1959), p. 23.
[86] Suᶜâd Khairî, *Min Târîkh al-Ḥarakah al-Thawriyyah al-Muᶜâṣirah fî al-ᶜIrâq*, p. 55.

active communist circle, led by Mullah S̲h̲arîf ʿUt̲h̲mân, known locally as the "Red Mullah," was established in Irbil in the early 1930s, and this group amalgamated with Fahd's to form the Communist Party of Iraq.[87] An even more detailed version credits Fahd with spreading Marxism-Leninism in 1932, and even with propagating those ideas under the name of the Communist Party of Iraq, issuing pronouncements titled "Workers and Peasants of the Arab World Unite."[88] Fahd was arrested in 1933; during his trial, he admitted that he was a communist, making him the first person to accept the communist label and defend communism in such a public forum.[89]

Whatever the truth of the origins of communism in Iraq, a meeting of Iraqi communists held on 31 March 1934 was of primary significance in the development of the country's Communist Party. Those present agreed to organize *Lajnat Mukâfaḥat al-Istiʿmâr wa al-Istit̲h̲mâr* (the Committee for Combating Imperialism and Exploitation), to be led by ʿÂṣim Flayyiḥ. Other notable participants were ʿAbd-ul-Qâdir Ismâʿîl al-Bustânî, Yûnân Frankûl, Zakî K̲h̲airî, ʿAbd-ul-Wahâb Maḥmûd, Mûsâ Ḥabîb, Mahdî Hâs̲h̲im, Wadîʿ Ṭalyah, Yûsuf Mattî, Nûrî Rufâʿîl (Baghdad), Fahd and Ḥamîd Majîd (Nasiriyah), and Sâmî Nâdir and D̲h̲âfir Ṣâliḥ (Basra). The committee called for the annulment of all debts and mortgages; national control of oil plants, railways, and banks; the protection of motherhood; and the dictatorship of workers and peasants. According to ʿÂṣim Flayyiḥ:

This committee was the first formal organization of any communist group in Iraq. Previous groups were basically pseudo-intellectual exercises that did not include in their ranks any workers or peasants. We created a formal national organization that included workers (although there were no peasants). My selection as the secretary was based solely on the fact that I was an artisan, the closest of the group to being a worker. The intention in organizing the committee was to begin serious communist action in the country. We selected as members, action-oriented people. Thus, I was the first general secretary of the Communist Party of Iraq and our committee was the first Central Committee.[90]

At the end of 1935 the committee decided to adopt as its name the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), and to collaborate with the *al-Ahâlî* group, progressive liberal intellectuals who agitated for social reform, cultural emancipation, and national liberation. The group was also committed to reform through raising public awareness, and as its primary activity published a daily paper in Baghdad, *Al-Ahâlî*; the first issue appeared on 2 January 1932. Most of Iraq's progressive activists started with the *al-Ahâlî* group, which remained a public

[87] Sâmî S̲h̲ûrs̲h̲, "Ṣafaḥât min Târîk̲h̲ al-Yasâr al-Kurdî (al-ʿIrâqî)," *Abwâb*, no. 8 (London, 1996), p. 73.
[88] ʿAbd-ul-Karîm Ḥasan al-Jârâllah, *Taṣadduʿ al-Bas̲h̲ariyyah min K̲h̲ilâl Wailât al-Istibdâd wa al-ʿUbûdiyyah* (Saidon, Lebanon: al-Maktabah al-ʿAṣriyyah, 1969), pp. 77–80.
[89] Suʿâd K̲h̲airî, "Short Study of the Iraqi Revolutionary Movement, Pt. 2," *Al-T̲h̲aqâfa al-Jadîdah* (October 1972), p. 32.
[90] Interview by author with ʿÂṣim Flayyiḥ, Baghdad (18 February 1959).

social conscience for several decades.[91] Notable affiliates and alumni of *al-Ahâlî* include ʿAbd-ul-Fattâḥ Ibrâhîm, Kâmil al-Châdirchî, Ḥusain Jamîl, ʿAbd-ul-Qâdir Ismâʿîl al-Bustânî, Yûsuf Ismâʿîl al-Bustânî, and Muḥammad Ḥadîd.

Al-Ahâlî's ideas were initially rather vague and incoherent. In an editorial in its paper's first issue, under the title "Interests of the People Above All Other Interests," the group declared that it aimed to work for the benefit of the majority of the country's inhabitants by raising their standard of living. It wanted to create "a sound political and economic order and make the best use of the country's intellectual talents and material resources." As its ideology became more explicit, the group identified itself with a reformist and liberal democratic version of socialism called *al-Shaʿbiyyah* (populism), whose meaning was explained best in one of the group's leaflets, *Muṭâlaʿât fî al-Shaʿbiyyah* (Studies in Populism).[92] The group understood the word "people" to mean the majority of people – not one special class among them[93] – and it called for a government that would be able to combine its authority with the preservation of the rights of the population.[94] Consequently, the rights of individuals had to be protected by an independent judicial system,[95] and the government's primary duties would be to serve the majority, to ensure security, to supervise certain economic matters,[96] and to see to the abolition of economic disparities and inequalities.[97]

The *Ahâlî* group insisted, however, that they differed from the communists since (1) they did not believe in the decisive role of class conflict and the special leading role of the working class; (2) they were not against family and religion;[98] (3) they emphasized anti-imperialism but did not subscribe to the communist concept of social and political revolution;[99] (4) they cautioned against nationalist chauvinism while espousing patriotism;[100] and (5) they perceived a need for cooperation to create a progressive Arab society based on the principles of *al-Shaʿbiyyah*. Reflecting the group's reformist tone, they began discussions in the summer of 1935 about transforming *al-Shaʿbiyyah* into a formal party; ʿAbd-ul-Fattâḥ Ibrâhîm rejected this direction, preferring the movement to remain underground.[101]

A rift emerged between the two groups, with the communists characterizing *al-Ahâlî*'s ideas as naïve and not much more radical than various official

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[91] For a history of *al-Ahâlî* group, see Fûʾâd Ḥusain al-Wakîl, *Jamâʿât al-Ahâlî fî al-ʿIrâq* (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture, Rashid Publishing House, 1979).

[92] *Muṭâlaʿât fî al-Shaʿbiyyah* [Studies in Populism] (Baghdad: Ahali Press, 1935).

[93] Ibid., p. 7

[94] Ibid., p. 10.

[95] Ibid., p. 12.

[96] Ibid., p. 13.

[97] Ibid., p. 23.

[98] Ibid., p. 35.

[99] Ibid., pp. 35–36.

[100] Ibid., p. 45.

[101] Muḥammad Ḥadîd, *Mudhakkarâtî: Al-Ṣirâʿ min ajl al-Dîmûqrâtiyyah fî al-ʿIrâq* (London: Dar al-Saqi, 2000), pp. 144–149.