

## Zuhdi Al-Dahoodi

### The Communist Movement in Iraq, 1924-1945

#### 1. The Political and Social Situation

Iraq is among those formerly dependent colonial countries which became independent states relatively early. Present-day Iraq appeared on the map shortly after the end of the First World War - initially as a British mandate. Before that Iraq formed part of the Ottoman Empire and consisted of three *vilayets* (provinces). When the British settled in Iraq in 1920 they found themselves in semi-desert country. By exploiting the natural conditions they succeeded in building up agriculture, which had been neglected for centuries. The work on irrigation during their mandate played a decisive role in the rise of a new agrarian feudal aristocracy. The British distributed 90% of the land to a thousand sheikhs, the heads of semi-nomadic tribes.

In Iraq thinking in terms of provinces was made easier not only by the potential natural resources but also by the intelligent way in which the British politicians proceeded. Iraq's political history from 1920 to 1958 was indeed very stormy, but only on the level of the ruling cliques' coalition, for none of the regimes up to 1958 questioned the internal and external status quo, i.e. the rule of the new feudal class and the clientele state status.<sup>1</sup> In the twenties, as the collaborating feudal bourgeoisie developed, the old Arab nationalism of the Ottoman epoch faded. The new opposition, which arose in the thirties, was limited to intellectual groups organized in the *Al-Ahali* (The People) circle. This circle was nothing more than a faction of a relatively isolated intelligentsia.

At the end of the twenties the Kurdish liberation movement was also filled with new impetus. After the 1919 rebellion, during which mention was first made of the creation of an independent Kurdish state, the Kurdish national movement had spread and deepened. Essentially, however, its development was isolated from the Arab population's struggle for liberation. The occupying British authorities, who did not succeed in completely subduing the Kurdish north, had to cede a certain degree of autonomy to a number of areas (Halabğa, Rawanduz, Amadia). In November 1922 Šaiħ Mahmud Barazanđi had himself declared king of Kurdistan and headed his state (with Sulaimanya as its centre) with a Kurdish government. He succeeded in defending it against the British troops until 1925. The settlement signed on 30 June 1930 continued to leave open the question of Kurdish autonomy. Both the British and Iraqi governments totally opposed a positive solution.

This settlement ensured Iraq's political, economic and military dependence on Great Britain, thus enabling the latter to relinquish its mandate without loss of substance. British rights to Iraqi oil were unaffected.

The settlement of 30 June 1930 gave rise to a new storm of protest. In November 1930 the parliamentary opposition founded the Party of Patriotic Brotherhood (*Ĥizb al-iħa' al-watani*; PPB) under the former leader of the Popular Party (*Ĥizb aš-šaab*), Yasin al-Ĥašimi, the then minister Rašid al-Kailani and others. On 16 January 1931 the Iraqi Patriotic Party (*Al-ħizb al-watani al-'iraqi*; IPP) under Gafar Abu Timman and Kamil Ġadirđi joined the new party which, during 1931/1932 became a rallying point for all opponents of Nuri as-Saids and the Settlement Party (*Ĥizb al-'ahd*), the party he founded in 1930.

The people's continuing protests against the settlement and the government's anti-popular pro-imperialistic policy strengthened the position of the PPB. Simultaneously the armed insurrection of the Kurds under Sheikh Ahmed al-Barzani threatened British colonial rule.<sup>2</sup>

On 5 July 1931 a general strike started in Baghdad, which soon spread throughout the entire Iraqi territory and developed into a powerful protest against British imperialism and the Iraqi government. The people demonstrated for the removal of the government and the annulment of the 1930 settlement. In the course of fierce clashes with armed police units the rebels gained control of the southern town Nāširiyya and held it for three days until defeated by government troops sent from Baghdad. One reason for the defeat of this uprising was that the leadership of the national civic opposition, consisting of the two parties, the PPB and the IPP, was prepared to compromise and was not consistent.

When the mandate ended in 1932 the Iraqi people's struggle for independence and democracy entered a new phase. As a result of the feudal aristocracy's attitude to the liberation movement after 1932, closer and closer ties developed between the anti-imperialistic and anti-feudal struggles. The peasantry continued to provide

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq 1932-1958* (London, 1960) and Abbas J. Ĥmaidı, *At-tataw'wurat al-siasia fil 'iraq, 1941-1953* (Nagaf, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> See "Neue britische Kriegsposition im Nahen Osten", *Inprekorr*, July 1932, p. 58.



the moving force behind the independence movement. However, the proletariat gradually began to take its place in the struggle for independence, even though, because of the country's extreme socio-economic backwardness, caused by colonial rule, it accounted for only some 2.2% of the population and was thus far less numerous than in Syria, Egypt or Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

In the following I have examined the time from the middle of the twenties to the end of the Second World War. A central position is occupied by the activities of Yussuf Salman Yussuf (Fahd), a true representative of the Communist International (CI) and follower of the teachings of Marxism-Leninism. The leading role played by political history is emphasized by the fact that for the time under examination the period divisions are borrowed from political history.

The most important sources are:

- the writings of Fahd<sup>4</sup> and the organs of the Iraqi Communist Party between 1941 and 1946,
- the minutes and documents of the world congresses and plenary sessions of the CI,
- CI press and periodicals and
- various party and non-party publications.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Socialist Thinking before the Foundation of the Iraqi CP

### a) Husain Ar-Rahhal and his group

In the conditions prevailing in the country under British colonial rule, with its social, economic and political backwardness, the events of the October Revolution and the rise of Soviet power were greeted by some intellectuals with enthusiasm. In 1924 they founded a Marxist circle, inspired by Ar-Rahhal, who had been a witness of the November Revolution while studying in Germany. Starting on 28 December 1924 the group published a fortnightly periodical called *As Şahifa* (The Journal) dealing with Iraq's social, economic and ideological problems, such as the emancipation of women or criticism of the feudal and reactionary conditions. Religious circles and the police authorities quickly became aware of these activities and opposed the group with all the means at their disposal. In Friday prayers at Baghdad's mosques and in people's letters to the authorities the group around Ar-Rahhal was condemned as "godless and immoral". In 1925 the censors closed *As Şahifa* and it was not allowed to appear again until 15 May 1927. It was unable to arouse great public interest. Obviously the chasm separating the group and its readers was too deep. A number of articles dealing, for instance, with the materialist view of history, apartheid and so on, were taken over word for word from *Labour Monthly* and *l'Humanité*, so it is unlikely that the readership could have understood their import.

Probably as a reaction to this Ar-Rahhal and his friend Yusuf Zeinal, a teacher at a Baghdad secondary school, founded the Club of Solidarity (*Nadi At-Taḍamun*), which organized some important political actions between 1926 and 1928. One was the 20,000-strong mass demonstration against the visit of the British Zionist Alfred Mond on 8 February 1928.<sup>6</sup> Arrested briefly on 8 February 1928, Ar-Rahhal and his comrades relinquished the political struggle, obviously to avoid further persecution.

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<sup>3</sup> See L. Rathmann, *Geschichte der Araber. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Vol. 3 (Berlin, 1974), p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> *Muallafat ar-rafiq Fahd* (Baghdad, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance: Su'ad Hairi, *Min Tariḥ al-Ḥaraka aṭ-ṭauria al-mu'asira fil 'iraq* (s.l., s.d.); *Aḡwa' 'ala al-ḥaraka al-ṣuyu'ia fil 'iraq*, 5 vols. (Beirut, s.l.). In 1949-50 the authorities compiled a secret dictionary of Iraqi communists: *Al-mausu'a al-sirria* (Baghdad, 1949-50). See also: Walter Z. Lacqueur, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East* (New York, 1968); Hana Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq. A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists, and Free Officers* (New Jersey, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> *Inprekorr* published numerous reports about important political actions in Iraq at that time, including "Die Entwicklung im Iraq", March 1926, p. 695; "Sturmzeichen in Iraq", November 1926, pp. 145s.; "Die Antibrutische Bewegung in Irak", March 1928, p. 478; "Revolutionärer Aufschwung im Nahen Osten", May 1928, p. 764 and so on.

In looking at the movement surrounding Ar-Raḥḥal in the context of Iraq's political development between the beginning of the twenties and the end of the thirties, it must be stressed that he was supported solely by a small circle of friends and had never contacted either the CI or the British CP. There is no evidence at all of any such approaches. Speaking of himself he said, "I was only a chance fighter, more of a theorist really. I was not open, but isolated myself."<sup>7</sup> Ar-Raḥḥal's activities are marked rather by patriotic enthusiasm than class consciousness. The political actions of the November Revolution had led him spontaneously to the ideas of Marxism, which were then limited to a small group of people belonging to the patriotic intelligentsia, looking for a way out of the prevailing medieval backwardness.

However, they soon disappeared into the state institutions. None of them had ever seriously considered becoming a professional revolutionary. One of the methods employed by the British colonial rulers to distract the intelligentsia from politics was to open the civil service to them. Nor had they ever considered distributing propaganda, such as leaflets, among the masses. They limited themselves to publishing the legal periodical, which could not reach the masses, for the majority of the population was illiterate. Officially a cultural magazine, a glance at the periodical's contents shows that no direct criticism of British rule and its Iraqi puppets was attempted.

Ar-Raḥḥal is primarily important for having been one of the first to propagate Marxist ideas in Iraq. He was one of the few people to speak German, English and French. This was important because in the twenties there was hardly any Marxist literature in Arabic. From the circle around him emerged a number of leaders of the Iraqi Communist Party such as Zaki Ḥairi, Asim Flayyeh and Amina Ar-Raḥḥal. Through his work he played an important role in preparing for the foundation of the Iraqi Communist Party.

#### b) Pyotr Vasili and the Communist cells in the south

In the pre-history of the Iraqi CP Pyotr Vasili played an important part in spreading Communist ideas across the country. The historian Hanna Batatu, originally from Iraq but now living in the USA, managed to find out about the activities of Pyotr or Petros Vasili, an Iraqi Assyrian, particularly by examining police files.<sup>8</sup>

During the time of the Ottoman Empire Vasili's father was banished from 'Amadiyya in Iraqi Kurdistan. Growing up in Tbilisi (Tiflis) Vasili spoke Russian, Georgian, Assyrian, Persian, Turkish and Arabic. Batatu describes him, in contrast to Ar-Raḥḥal, as a professional revolutionary. Round about 1922 he returned to Iraq through Persia. Until he was banished in 1934 he spent some of his time in Baṣra, Baghdad, Ba'quba, Sulaimanya, then went back to Baṣra and finally to Naṣiriyya, where Fahd lived. He earned his living as a tailor and it is said that he enjoyed passing on his skills.

His friends came from the ranks of the IPP,<sup>9</sup> which consistently opposed British imperialism. The police authorities did not learn about Vasili's Communist agitation until 1932. The report of a British Special Service agent reveals, among other things, that Vasili had contacts with an Assyrian lorry driver called Ya'qūb and a Professor Filiminov of the Oriental Propaganda Section of Baku University, who was then living in Kermānshāh (Persia). Later, it goes on to say, he was seen with Kirchin and other people from the Persian Soviet Trade Agency.<sup>10</sup>

It is not certain that Vasili participated in forming the first Communist circle and its attached Youth Club (*Nādi aš-šaba'b*) in Baṣra in 1927. It is, however, a fact that Fahd's first Communist schooling came from him.

Fahd was not the first person in southern Iraq to familiarize himself with Communist ideas. The renegade Abd-ul-Ḥamid al-Ḥatib, who taught physics in a Baṣra secondary school, was a member of the Communist cells and studied at the Communist University of the Workers of the East (CUWE) from 1930 to

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<sup>7</sup> See Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, p. 402.

<sup>8</sup> See Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*.

<sup>9</sup> The IPP under Ga'far abul Temman fought primarily against British imperialism and for national independence and democracy. It represented the interests of the middle bourgeoisie and the national trading classes. It also opposed the feudal rulers, who co-operated with imperialism. This put it on the side of the craftsmen, small businessmen and workers.

<sup>10</sup> See Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, p. 405.



1932, claimed to have received his Communist ideas from the revolutionaries of Muḥammara, a town to the north of Baṣra on the Persian side, and from meetings with Dr Tomaniantz, who had worked there as a medical practitioner since 1921.<sup>11</sup> According to the British Special Service, after Dr Tomaniantz took up the position of President of the Extraordinary Commission of the Soviet in Charkov, Al-Ḥatib contacted Palutkin, the Soviet consul in Ahwaz. In addition to this Al-Ḥatib was friendly with a Persian teacher in Muḥammara called Muḥammed Ghulum, who was known to support Bolshevism. Al-Ḥatib, who was himself a Persian, held both an Iraqi and a Persian passport.

Through his work on the police reports Bataru has come to the conclusion that in the twenties the CI directly influenced the development of Communist cells in southern Iraq.<sup>12</sup> This is supported by the fact that the Fourth Congress of the Comintern dealt in detail with the question of the Orient and at the Fifth Congress the demand was made that in colonial and semi-colonial countries "a core of Communist parties" should be created "to support the national revolutionary movement".<sup>13</sup>

Compared to Ar-Raḥḥal's group, the Communist cells in southern Iraq may be characterized thus:

- The members had direct contact to the masses - to the workers and the poor. (This was even provided by the ways they earned their living. For instance, Fahd was a book-keeper and later a mechanic in a Baṣra electricity works, Gāli Zuwayyid was a serf on the estate of Al-Sa'dun and Zakariyya Eliās Dūkā was a book-keeper in Baṣra harbour.)

- The members were professional revolutionaries right from the start. They started their activities in the southern towns. In 1927 Fahd went "globe trotting" to various Arab countries.

- At the same time as the foundation of the illegal Communist cells they also founded the legal Youth Club as a meeting place which also attracted a large number of young people.

- Their attacks were directed primarily against religion, as one of the prime causes of the country's backwardness. Sheltering under a civic-democratic banner they founded the Alliance of the Free (*Jam'iyat al-Aḥḥar*), which soon developed into the Anti-Religious Liberal Party (*Al-Ḥizb al-Hurr al-Lādini*; ALP). Among the demands on this party's programme were: Freedom of thought, speech and action for all (item 1), the separation of religion from politics, education, family life (item 2), religious freedom for all Arab countries (item 3), the freeing of Arab women from the chains of degradation and ignorance (item 7), support for the Arab national states, whereby all Arab countries were to be regarded as a single country (item 9).

This national-democratic, anti-religious movement from 1929 to 1930 has distinct parallels to the Young Turks' 1908 revolution, particularly where the religious question is concerned. Their critical attitude to religion brought them into direct conflict with the masses, who were cleverly activated by the religious authorities and the police, supported by the British administration, thus quickly putting an end to their movement. This defeat is obviously one of the reasons why Fahd and the party leadership later failed to develop a conception to deal with the religious question.

The contents of the programme indicate that the CI's representatives paid little attention to this small movement in southern Iraq. In 1930 Abd-al-Ḥamid al-Ḥatib and in 1931 'Asim Flayyeḥ were sent to the Soviet Union to study at the CUWE, obviously an attempt to make up for this negligence.

### 3. The CI and the Communist Movement in Iraq

In the organs of the CI the Communist movement in Iraq is not mentioned until the beginning of the thirties. Probably interest in Iraq was not aroused until the Sixth Congress, whose central theme was the CI's programme on "ways in which the revolutionary movement can fight in the colonies and semi-colonies".

At this point I shall refer briefly to reports and articles in the Comintern's organs on the political, economic and social situation in Iraq, in order to answer the question of the extent to which the CI correctly judged the situation in Iraq and of whether the demand that a CP should be formed under strict adherence to the CI's 21 conditions was the result of a corresponding analysis. Although the articles in *Inprekorr* and *Rundschau* cannot be considered CI documents, they formed a basis for the Congresses' conclusions and resolutions. In our

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>13</sup> See *Die Ereignisse des V. Weltkongresses der Komintern* (Hamburg, 1924), pp. 16s.

opinion the following problems were insufficiently or wrongly interpreted:

- British imperialism's preparations on Iraqi territory for war against the Soviet Union,<sup>14</sup>
- the question of the Kurdish liberation movement,<sup>15</sup>
- the social structure, relative power and tasks of the "Communists" in Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

Concerning the first point, insufficient knowledge about the actual situation in Iraq led to miscalculations. Heidar, First Secretary of the Palestinian CP, speaking at the Sixth Congress about the situation in the Middle East, said that the British imperialists wanted to conquer Iraq and other Middle Eastern areas in order to prepare for a war against the Soviet Union, but that otherwise these areas were poor in natural resources.<sup>17</sup> The Comintern press also interpreted the British presence in Iraq wrongly. Some of the CI correspondents also looked at the settlement of 30 June 1930 only in the light of preparations for war,<sup>18</sup> whereas, since the end of the nineteenth century, British imperialism had been interested primarily in the natural resources, including oil,<sup>19</sup> and in the above mentioned settlement aimed at:

- legitimizing its imperialistic interests in Iraq for 25 years as a precondition for Iraq's becoming a member of the League of Nations on 3 October 1932;
- securing the routes between Europe and India;
- maintaining the status quo by supporting the ruling classes (compradors and feudal rulers) in their ruthless fight against democracy and social progress.

The uprising in the Kurdish areas of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria were regarded either as a reactionary movement<sup>20</sup> or as a British instrument to create a "buffer state" between Turkey, Persia, Iraq and the Soviet Union, "to be completely under British influence, acting as a military base against the Soviet Union".<sup>21</sup> No CI correspondent looked at the Kurdish question under the aspect of the "Marxist-Leninist" principle of popular self-determination. The borders of the Arab states then in force had been determined by Great Britain and France, so that talk of the creation of a "buffer state" was absurd. The signing of the secret Anglo-French Sykes-Picot agreement on 16 May 1916 represented a turning point in the Kurdish question.<sup>22</sup> In it the Kurds were distributed among four countries. The CI correspondents dealing with the Kurdish question were influenced by exaggeratedly pro-Soviet propaganda from Turkey (which was committing mass murder against the Kurds) and

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<sup>14</sup> See C. Chattopadhyaya, "Der Irak als Kriegsbasis gegen die Sowjetunion", *Inprekorr*, 22 July 1930, pp. 1438s. and M.L., "Die Vorbereitung des imperialistischen Krieges", *ibid.*, 5 August 1930, pp. 1595s.

<sup>15</sup> See C. Chattopadhyaya, "Der Irak als Kriegsbasis [...]", and J.B., "Die Hintergründe des Kurdenaufstandes", *ibid.*, 22 August 1930, p. 1736 and M.L., "Die Vorbereitung des imperialistischen Krieges".

<sup>16</sup> See S. Mustapha, "Der Assyrer'aufstand' und die Machinationen der britischen und französischen Imperialisten", *Rundschau*, 15 September 1933, pp. 1310-1313.

<sup>17</sup> See *Protokoll des 6. Weltkongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Vol. 1 (Erlangen, 1972), p. 739.

<sup>18</sup> See J.B., "Der Kampf der irakischen Massen gegen den Vertrag mit Großbritannien", *Inprekorr*, 19 August 1930, pp. 1702s. and M.L., "Die Vorbereitung des imperialistischen Krieges".

<sup>19</sup> See Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East. Its discovery and development* (London, etc., 1968), pp. 12-15, 41-47.

<sup>20</sup> See J.B., "Die Hintergründe des Kurdenaufstandes".

<sup>21</sup> See M.L., "Zu den Ereignissen in Kurdistan", *Inprekorr*, 5 August 1930, pp. 1595s., and C. Chattopadhyaya, "Der Irak als Kriegsbasis [...]".

<sup>22</sup> See Zuhdi Al-Dahoodi, *Die Kurden. Geschichte, Kultur und Überlebenskampf* (Frankfurt/M., 1987), pp. 107-111.



pan-Arab ambitions, which were directed against the Kurdish movement.<sup>23</sup>

The correspondents' comments on questions of the social structure, the balance of power and the national peculiarities in Iraq are very much influenced by the line emerging from the Sixth Congress: to press on with the creation of Communist parties, without, however, in every case taking sufficient account of concrete national conditions. The article on Iraq by S. Mustapha (Baghdad) in the September 1933 *Rundschau* contains a ten point programme on the duties of "Communist groups", which we consider so important that we shall reproduce it in detail:

"The time has come for the Communist groups in Iraq to abandon their passivity and to grasp the revolutionary tasks that fall to their lot at this moment. They must run a grand campaign, guided by the following points:

1. Explain to the Arab masses that Iraq is a British colony which British imperialism will never quit voluntarily, any more than it will leave Egypt or India.

2. Government in Iraq is currently in the hands of the British High Commissioner and the presence of a king and ministers is only the means by which, based on a treaty, imperialism maintains its rule with the help of the native bourgeoisie and feudal aristocracy.

3. Iraq's present government is a reactionary government representing the interest of the ruling classes and never the interests of the oppressed Arab masses.

4. The establishment of the mandate through a treaty and the admission of Iraq to the League of Nations are imperialistic manoeuvres, on the one hand to make sure of the most important routes to India and on the other hand to provide safety in case of war against the Soviet Union and to make possible the colonialisation of the semi-colonial countries (Persia, Turkey).

5. Every newspaper or political group in Iraq which participates in or supports the Iraqi government, which propagates the idea that Iraq is independent and not a colony, is, consciously or unconsciously, an agent of British imperialism, the executioner of Iraqi workers.

6. All propaganda which urges the combating of national minorities instead of calling for the real fight, that against the imperialists, is criminal propaganda.

7. In fact imperialism tries to set the national minorities against the liberation movement in Iraq and it is the duty of the Communist groups in Iraq to point out to the workers of these minorities that the workers of all nations are exploited by imperialism and that liberation can be achieved only by making common cause against imperialism.

8. The "Society for National Defence" is a counter-revolutionary society for supporting the country's reactionary forces, attacking Iraq's working masses and setting nation against nation. The Communists of Iraq must combat this organization ruthlessly.

9. There are national revolutionary elements in Iraq who want to free the country from the imperialist yoke. They are prepared to fight in the ranks of the revolutionary Arab masses. It is the duty of our comrades to make sure these elements join the anti-imperialist struggle.

10. The Party must combine under its leadership all the forces of the workers, peasants and soldiers. It must make the workers realize that they are the vanguard of the national liberation movement. It must make sure the peasants grasp the fact that they will only be able to solve the agrarian question by fighting shoulder to shoulder with the workers to take over the land from the feudal rulers and the state.

By putting itself at the head of the national liberation movement of the masses the Party will show that it is the only true leader of the fight against imperialism, for national liberation and against social exploitation and that it will lead the working masses in the setting up of a democratic workers' and peasants' government, which is the only way to ensure the complete liberty and equality of the national minorities."

These ten points, set down a year before the foundation of the Iraqi Communist Party, were certainly worked out by the CI, which we know had set itself the task of "furthering in every way the building up and establishing of Communist parties for the masses in the colonies as proletarian parties, avant-garde and leading forces in the coming revolutionary struggle."<sup>24</sup>

With reference to the then prevailing conditions in Iraq the following should be noted:

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<sup>23</sup> This was also referred to by M.M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, Scheich und Staat. Politik und Gesellschaft Kurdistans*, (Berlin, 1989), p. 422. Cf. M.L., "Zu den Ereignissen in Kurdistan".

<sup>24</sup> See *Protokoll des 10. Plenum des Exekutivkomitees der KI, Moskau, 3.-19. Juli 1929* (Hamburg-Berlin, s.d.), pp. 897-902.

a) The criticism of the passivity of the "Communist groups in Iraq" in the preamble to the ten points is unfair, since this "passivity" reflected the objective situation of the "Communist groups". There was an obvious contradiction between the CI's demand that a Bolshevistic party be founded and the subjectively available possibilities.

b) Although there were frequent references to the "Arab masses", there was no mention of the second largest national group, the Kurds, who had already staged a number of uprisings, or of the other national minorities. This ignored an important national problem.

c) The characterization of the government was incorrect. The king could have been left aside. A "bourgeoisie" did not exist. This undoubtedly stood for the municipal landlords, the trading aristocracy and compradors. There were pro-British elements and others who were discontented with British colonial rule, but the cast majority was on the side of Rašid 'Ali Al-Kaylani, well-known as an anti-British national patriot.

d) The following factors were ignored: the question of a national front, the struggle for democracy and social achievements and the agrarian question.

e) One year before the foundation of the Communist Party references to "the vanguard of the national liberation movement", "Party at the head of the national liberation movement" or "the setting up of a democratic workers' and peasants' government" smack of pipe dreams and were simply taken over from the resolutions of the Sixth Congress. This swelled the ranks of the anti-communists, who could now be found not only among the reactionary groups but also among the young national bourgeoisie, the traders and landlords, who played an important role in the anti-imperialist struggle at that time.

In answer to the initial questions we can say that the CI correspondents misunderstood the political and social situation in Iraq: in Iraq at that time it was unrealistic to try and create a typical Bolshevistic party in accordance with the 21 conditions of admission.

#### 4. The Founding of the Iraqi Communist Party

There was a meeting in Baghdad in 1933 of representatives of Marxist circles which had existed in Bašra since 1927, Nāširiyya since 1928 and Baghdad itself since 1928. The Bašra group was represented by Gāli Zuwayyid (serf), Sāmi Nāder (primary school teacher) and 'Abd-ul Ḥamid al Ḥaṭīb (secondary school teacher). The group from Nāširiyya was represented by Yusuf Salman Yusuf (later Fahd, a mechanic by profession). Three groups from Baghdad took part. The first was represented by 'Ašim Flayyeh (tailor), Qāsim Ḥassan (former book-keeper, law student) and Mahdi-Ḥašim (mechanic), the second by Yusuf Ismāil (law student), Nūri Rūfāil (middle school teacher), and Jamil Tūma (railway engineer), and the third by Zaki Ḥairi (civil servant and follower of Ar-Raḥḥal).

These groups represented a total of 60 members, who called themselves Communists. The founding members were aged between 25 and 28. As a result of this meeting the Committee for the Struggle against Imperialism (*Jamī'at did al-istī'mar*) was founded on 31 March 1934, which, in July 1935, received the name "Iraqi Communist Party" (*Al-Hizb al-Šuju'i al-'iraqi*; ICP).

Not until 21 March 1935, shortly after a peasant uprising in the south, did the committee publish its first appeal to the people of Iraq.<sup>25</sup> In this document, entitled "What do we want?" and signed "Central Committee of the Committee against Imperialism", the following eleven demands were set out:

- liquidation of the British military bases;
- a fundamental alteration of the 1930 settlement with Great Britain, with regard to equal relations;
- objection by the Iraqi government to the projected Haifa-Baghdad railway;
- alteration of the oil treaty to take account of the people's interests;
- substantial reductions in civil servants' and ministers' salaries;
- distribution of state land to poor peasants;
- remission of peasants' debts and lowering of taxes, to be replaced by raising the state's share of oil profits;
- creation of a law to protect the workers;
- measures against newspapers drawing their money directly from foreign circles for openly spreading pro-imperialistic propaganda;
- direct and free elections without imperialistic interference;
- expulsion abroad of all elements trying to split the people.

<sup>25</sup> See "Waṭaiq 'an ar-rafiq Fahd", *Al-ṭakafa al-ḡadida*, July 1981, p. 69.



Although these demands still had room for improvement in the methods to be used in the struggle against imperialism and for political independence, the question of the national front, the struggle for social improvements, the question of Kurdish nationality, the struggle for democracy, literacy etc., it is clear that, compared with the CI's demands quoted above, they were far more realistic, because they differentiated between national and imperialistic interests, did not use such terms as "bourgeoisie", "proletariat" etc., which frightened not only government circles but also the petit-bourgeois opposition, and they appealed to all Iraqis and not just the "Arab masses".

The ICP was not founded until July 1935, at the time of the Seventh Congress. Obviously it was founded on the recommendation of the Comintern, as a glance at the latter's conditions for admission shows. Thus the Iraqi "Communists" bound themselves to create a party founded on the principles of "democratic centralism", with "iron discipline" and "completely subject to the authority" of its "Party Central Committee".

This included recognizing the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and being prepared to struggle for it consistently, a "complete break with social reformists and centrists", combining legal and illegal fighting methods, systematic work in the countryside, in trade unions, the army and parliaments and helping and supporting all existing Soviet republics. Apparently the Committee against Imperialism did not yet bear the character of a Communist organization.

What practical steps did the Iraqi "Communists" take to bring about this change? A leading part in bringing about the toeing of the Comintern line was played by Y.S.Y. Fahd, who was then studying at the University of the Workers of the East and had taken part in the Seventh Congress as an observer.

#### 5. Yusuf Salman Yusuf (Fahd): Short Biography

Yusuf Salman Yusuf - aka Fahd (Panther) - was born on 19 June 1901 in Baghdad.<sup>26</sup> When he was seven years old his family moved to Basra in search of work. His father supported the family by selling sweets. In his youth he had come into contact with "social democratic ideas of a bolshevistic direction".

In 1908 Fahd was attending the Old-Syrian church school in Basra at a time when the Iraqis were following events in the Young Turks' revolution. A few months after the beginning of the First World War his father sent the thirteen-year-old to the American missionary school. The state of the family's finances - for health reasons his father had to stop working and died when Fahd was 17 - obliged Fahd to leave school. At the end of 1916 he started work as a book-keeper for a British unit in Basra, which had been stationed there for two years. In 1919 he moved to Naşiriyya, to help his brother in his small mill.

Between 1927 and 1928 - a period at which the situation in the country was building up to a dangerous political crisis for British imperialism, while in 1928 armed uprisings once more broke out in the mid-Euphrates region - Fahd and some other Iraqis founded small illegal "Communist cells".

In 1929 he quitted his job as an electrician (he earned 120 rupees, about £ 9-50 p) in order to become a full-time professional revolutionary. He intended to be a "globe trotter", who would get to know the life of the people. He supported himself by selling photographs, while he walked through Khuzistan, Kuwait, Transjordan, Syria and Palestine. Because of illness and the news of the settlement of 30 June 1930 he interrupted his journey and returned to Iraq before, as originally planned, he could reach Egypt.

On arriving in Naşiriyya Fahd immediately contacted friends and comrades and drew up a declaration on the political situation in the country in which he called upon the people to take up the fight against British imperialism and the servile Iraqi government and to struggle for Iraq's independence. This handwritten leaflet was printed on red paper decorated with a hammer and sickle and signed "a Communist worker".<sup>27</sup>

A decisive factor in Fahd's life was his contact with Pyotr Vasili in 1927 in Basra, where he attended several courses in which he was taught the basic tenets of Communism. Fahd continued to devote himself to the struggle for the furtherance of his ideals by working as an IPP party member. He increased his theoretical knowledge by studying the works of Adam Smith and Ricardo and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. As a correspondent of the paper *Al-Ahāli* (The People) he published reports on the social situation of the workers and the feudal

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<sup>26</sup> Some of Fahd's contemporaries claim that he was not born in Baghdad, but in an Assyrian village near Mosul.

<sup>27</sup> See Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, p. 428.



exploitation of the peasants. He also made contact with Marxist groups in Baghdad.<sup>28</sup>

He enlisted workers and members of the poorest classes for the Communist cells. Although the working class still did not play a leading role, most of the members were workers and peasants and the top positions were filled by workers. Fahd's work for the party was concentrated on working-class centres such as Baṣra harbour, the railway and oil companies and in Baghdad on Bab al-ṣeḥ, a working-class area housing numerous weavers. Apart from this he also co-operated with representatives of the national intelligentsia, for instance with Zaki Besim and Hussain al-Ṣabibi, who later became members of the Politbureau. Both had relinquished their government employment in order to work as party functionaries. Besides his illegal activity in the Communist cells Fahd was also First Secretary of the regional headquarters of the IPP in Naṣiriyya.

In his memoirs a contemporary of Fahd's has this to say about his agitation and propaganda methods: "At Fahd's suggestion we went along to popular tea houses, where we divided into two groups. While one group attacked communism with the usual arguments, the other group defended it. In this way the costumers were split into two groups and a lively discussion started. Fahd, who had observed the discussion, afterwards selected some of the defenders of communism, who frequently became the next party cell candidates."<sup>29</sup>

Fahd's cells spread throughout Dīwāniyya, Amara and other parts of the south. A Palestine police report to the Iraqi authorities dated August 1931 says that during his stay in Palestine Fahd contacted the Palestinian Communist Party. He was trying to raise money for the Communist cadres in Iraq. Bataṭu concludes that even before January 1929 Fahd had contacts with Arab communists through the League for Arab Co-operation (*Jamiyyat-ul-wifaq-il-ʿArabi*), in other words, during the time of the above-mentioned Anti-Religious Liberal Party.

At the end of 1934 the young party was attacked by a rash of arrests, to which more than 60 members fell victim. At this point the Central Committee of Fahd's party delegated him to go to Moscow and study Marxism-Leninism. He arrived in Moscow in July 1935, via Italy and France. On the conclusion of his studies at the CUWE he left the USSR in summer 1937 and arrived back in Iraq on 30 January 1935. At this time another wave of arrests had almost destroyed the Party. The First Secretary, Aṣim Flayyeh, and Kasim Hassan - both had also studied at the CUWE and the latter had been an observer at the CI's Seventh Congress - had given up the fight. Probably they could not put up with the hard battle conditions. The active members were under arrest, the Party's organizations destroyed. The reason was to be found in the bad organization of these groups, who were nearly all known to each other, in their lack of the most elementary theoretical rudiments, the lack of central leadership and in power struggles and intrigues among the leading groups. This was why the authorities had managed to destroy the organization at a blow. So, on his return, Fahd had to start again from nothing.

A police report says that the reorganization of the Communist Party in Baṣra, Naṣiriyya, Dīwāniyya, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Amarah, Kut and other places began after the return of a "leading Communist from Moscow". "The Communist in question", it went on, "is Yusuf Salman from Naṣiriyya."<sup>30</sup>

## 6. The Attempt to Form a "New Type" Party in Iraq

In accordance with the times, especially during his studies at the CUWE (1935-1937), it was Stalinism that dominated Fahd's understanding of and attitude to his work. The period 1937-1938, during which Fahd concluded his studies in the USSR and returned home, was an extremely complicated one in which to take up the illegal Communist struggle in a country like Iraq. It was marked by the following:

- the Stalinist personality cult reached its climax with the destruction of masses of honest comrades;
- the Communist Party of the Soviet Union became Stalin's instrument;
- the Comintern lost its independence and became an instrument of the Stalinist leadership;
- the rise of Fascism in Germany and preparations for the World War.

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<sup>28</sup> See Z. Ḥairi, "Albu dur aṣ-ṣuyuiya al-ʿula fil-ʿiraq", *It tihad aṣ-ṣaʿb* (Popular Unity [central organ of the ICP]), 2 January 1960.

<sup>29</sup> See Z. al-Ġazaʿiri, "Ṣabab Fahd wal-ḥaraka aṣ-ṣuyuʿiya fil ʿiraq", *Al-ṭakafa al-ġadida*, July 1981, p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> See Bataṭu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, p. 492.



Concerned as he was to take account of concrete national conditions,<sup>31</sup> Fahd was unable to avoid taking over the stereotype Bolshevik party principles of that time.<sup>32</sup> These problems constitute a blank spot in the history of the ICP. In the same way criticism of Fahd was, and is, taboo, because primarily he has his place in the history of Iraq as the founder of the Party and as a martyr.

The beginning of Fahd's activity within the Party can be traced to 1941. No evidence exists for the years 1938 to 1940. Probably in those years work for the Party was confined to a few little scattered Party cells and a small Central Committee with a First Secretary called 'Abdalla Masu'd.

The urgent task during the forties was to build up the Party politically, ideologically and organizationally and, above all, to create a wide mass basis. The Party still had neither statutes nor a programme. People had different ideas about what Marxism-Leninism was. Fahd realized that most of the comrades had little or no idea of the most elementary theoretical rudiments, and so he published a series of articles in the party organs *Al-Šarara* (1941-1942) and *Al-Qua'ida* (1943-1946). In these he dealt with topical questions of the early forties such as the struggle to improve living conditions and the fight for democracy, also cultural questions, public health problems, the fight against fascism and imperialism, freedom of the press, youth questions, women's emancipation, the rights of the Kurdish people, questions concerning the national front, the nature of Zionism, the Arab liberation movement and so on.

From 1945 to 1947, under a liberal government, the ICP was able to work actively among the masses. During this time it published a brochure on the National Unity Front by Hussain al-Šabibi. Fahd wrote a brochure on unemployment, in which he unmasked the nature of capitalism.<sup>33</sup>

In May 1946 the liberal movement, which had demanded a revision of the 1930 settlement, was overthrown by reactionary forces. During the wave of arrests in 1947 Fahd and, among others, the Politbureau members Zaki Sesim and Hussain al-Šabibi were thrown into jail and condemned to death. Because of numerous demonstrations of international solidarity, in which the Soviet Union played a leading role, the sentences were commuted to life imprisonment.

Fearful of the popular uprising in January 1948, which prevented the ratification of a treaty of alliance aimed at reconfirming British domination, the reactionary Iraqi government then in office declared a state of emergency. In order to counter any further democratic popular movement, Fahd and his two comrades were taken before a court of summary jurisdiction on 14 February 1949 and murdered by the reactionaries.

Translated by Delia Grözinger

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Muallafat ar-rafiq Fahd*, p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> See "Hizbun Šuju'ii la istirakia dimuqratia", in *Muallafat ar-rafiq Fahd*, pp. 5-83.

<sup>33</sup> Muhammed Hussain Aš-Šabibi, "Al-ğabha al-watania al-muwahħada. Tariquna we wağibuna al-ta 'rihi", in *Muallafat ar-rafiq aš-Šabibi* (Baghdad, 1974), pp. 7-73; Y.S.Y. Fahd, "Al-batāle: asbabuha we ħululuha", in *Muallafat ar-rafiq Fahd*, pp. 213-229.