Communism in the Arab World and Iran

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Introduction

The Communist movement in the Arab World and Iran has been as complex and multifaceted as the region itself. Since the early modern period, the Ottoman and Qajar Empires had been pressured culturally, socially, militarily, and economically by an ever-expanding Europe. By the nineteenth century, the Sublime Porte was reduced to a pawn in a game of European chess. The 'Eastern Question' dominated European politics in the long nineteenth century, and was arguably one of the chief causes of the Great War. Persia, too, was at the mercy of Western powers, with Britain and Russia having carved up the empire into spheres of influence. The Ottomans, and to a lesser extent the Qajars, decided to modernise and Westernise their empires to try to close the gap that had opened up in the economic, scientific, and, not least, military, fields. Western experts were brought in to oversee the modernisation, and scores of Ottoman subjects were sent abroad to study the new ideas. As the interaction between East and West thus increased, new revolutionary ideas originating from the French Revolution and tested in the uprisings of 1848-49, and again during the Paris Commune, made their way into the Middle East. At first, these ideas were mainly diffused among the large European communities that had settled in such cities as Alexandria, Beirut, and Istanbul. In Persia, the new ideas began to spread in Azerbaijan, situated on the border with Russia. The spread of Socialist and Communist ideas to the Arab World and Iran was thus intimately linked to the modernisation process and the region's gradual subjugation to the West. This made for a peculiar situation, in which the social, economic, political, and military system that was responsible for the region's subjugation also had produced the ideology with which this system could be resisted. Communism, then, was viewed with suspicion as essentially being a European idea. Nationalism and religion acted as bulwarks against its diffusion. Nevertheless, throughout the twentieth century, Communism spread across the region and at times, it achieved great popularity. Ultimately, however, it was defeated as idea and movement by nationalism and the self-interests of the Soviet Union.

As essentially a European affair, socialist ideas were initially circulated amongst communities of French, Italian, Russian, or English workers. There were no translations into Arabic, Farsi, or other regional languages. This, naturally, prevented the spread of the ideas beyond this narrow group, as most indigenous people were not versed in European languages. There were, however, communities of non-Muslims that, for historical and religious reasons, did speak these languages. The many Christian sects scattered across the region, such as the Copts in Egypt, the Maronites in Lebanon, the Assyro-Chaldeans in Mesopotamia, the Armenians in Anatolia and throughout the region, and also Jews living in many of the main cities, had well-established links with the Western powers, for religious, cultural, or economic reasons. Like their ancestors during the Islamic conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries, who as learned men of the ancient world had translated and transmitted its knowledge, the region's minorities again played a crucial role in the dissemination of new ideas.

An early dilemma for those faced with transmitting the vast literature of Socialism, and later Communism, was translation of the terms themselves. How could ideas steeped in the philosophical tradition of Europe, and derived from its cultural language, Latin, be rendered into Arabic and other regional languages without losing their meaning? For a while, the problem was left unresolved. The early activists simply transliterated 'Socialism' into *sūsyālizm*. While this practice was continued in Iran and Turkey, in the Arabic-speaking areas the term *ishtirākiyyah* soon became the established translation of 'Socialism'. *Ishtirākiyyah* is derived from the root *shīn* (sh), *rāʾ* (r), *kāf* (k), which in its original denotation means 'to share', and in stem form VIII 'to cooperate', or 'to enter into partnership'. This may seem like a suitable translation, as sharing and cooperating could be said to be essential components of the Socialist creed. However, the problem with translation or transmittance of philosophical ideas from one socio-cultural context to another, and in this case from a completely different language family, is that the connotations are entirely different. In the case of *ishtirākiyyah*, as with most other philosophical terms in Arabic, these connotations are firmly rooted within an Islamic (and Christian) socio-cultural context. Thus, for instance, the word *shirkah* or *sharikah*, which is derived from the same root, could mean either a 'commercial business', or, in the Christian tradition, a 'communion'. Both connotations undoubtedly give off the wrong impression. Moreover, the term *shirk*, again derived from the same root, means 'polytheism' or 'idolatry', and is derived from stem form IV *ashraka*,[1] which arguably is the worst possible association any concept could have in a Middle Eastern context.

The same type of problem was encountered with the term 'Communism'. In Iran, it was again left untranslated as *kūmunizm*, whereas in the Arab World it was translated as *shuyūʿiyyah*. The latter derives from the root *shīn* (sh), *yāʾ* (y), *ʿayn* (ʿ), and its basic meaning is 'to spread'. The term is formed from the verbal noun *shuyūʿ*, which, depending on context, could mean 'spread', but also 'publicity' or 'circulation [of news]'. The political term 'collectivism' has also been constructed from the verbal noun of stem form IV, *ishāʿah*, on the same pattern as *shuyūʿiyyah*, namely *ishāʿiyyah*. The reason for this goes back to Islamic history, where *mushāʿ* was a particular form of joint or collective ownership, in accordance with Islamic Law, the *sharīʿah*. *Mushāʿ* lands were usually tribal

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[1] *Ashraka bil-lāhi*, to 'attribute associates to God', i.e. to be a Polytheist.

or village lands that were owned collectively. This practice undoubtedly bore some resemblance to Marx's notion of 'primitive Communism', which he, and Engels, envisaged as a distinct stage in the development of human societies, occurring before more advanced slave-owning societies.[2] However, the religious and tribal connotations of the concept were again something that created the wrong impression. Moreover, the root from which *shuyūᶜiyyah* is derived is also the root that form the term *shīᶜah* – the followers of ᶜAli. The fact that *shuyūᶜī*, 'a communist', dialectically is pronounced more like *shūᶜī* makes it almost a homonym of *shīᶜī*, 'a shiite'.[3] This linguistic link with the largest Muslim 'minority', coupled with the fact that Communism became very popular among some Shiᶜah communities in places like Iraq and Lebanon, added to the sense that communism was a 'minority ideology' challenging the dominant Sunni superiority of the region.[4]

Given the dominance of Islam on the political and philosophical planes at the beginning of the modern period, it was to be expected that any terms chosen as translations for 'communism' and 'socialism' would be problematic and laden with religious connotations. On the other hand, the path chosen in Iran, where the terms were left untranslated, was hardly more conducive to the acceptance of the terms amongst the population, but, at the very least, it avoided the added difficulty of association with religion and Islamic tradition.

Having established these fundamental linguistic, socio-historical, and philosophical differences, our focus now turns to the Communist movement itself as it evolved in the Middle East. As will be made clear in this chapter, this movement essentially had a dualist, almost schizophrenic, nature. On the one hand, there was the Communism of the October Revolution, the Communist International (Comintern), and the universal idea of the world revolution. On the other hand, there was the Middle Eastern reality, with imperialism, nationalism, and religion. The former insisted on ideological purity, on the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat', and on 'Proletarian Internationalism'. The latter was mired in tribalism, religious fanaticism, and the struggle for modernity. Nationalism, not internationalism, was the watchword of this world. There, it was not the 'proletariat' – which hardly even existed – but intellectuals and people from the professional classes, the so-called *effendiyyah*, that were the vanguard of Communism. The story of Communism in the Arab World and Iran is thus not a single story, but two stories of incompatible movements – one guided and steered from Moscow, seeking in vain to emulate the achievements of the Russian Communists, and another more intent on feeling which direction the winds of the Middle East were blowing, and looking not towards Moscow, but towards Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad for its leadership.

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[2] See, for instance, Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884.

[3] For the full derivations of these terms, see Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, ed. by J. Milton Cowan, Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1980.

[4] On this particular point, see Silvia Naef, 'Shīᶜī-Shuyūᶜī or: How to Become a Communist in a Holy City', in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political History*, Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 255-267.

The First World War had a cataclysmic effect on the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire, which had sided with Germany during the war, was defeated and the 'Eastern Question' was forcibly solved once and for all. The empire was dismantled and in its stead, the victorious parties (Britain, France, Italy, and the USA) created new states that were to be supervised by a mandate system, under the auspices of the newly established League of Nations. Britain became the mandatory power for the new states of Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine, and, in addition, a British protectorate was declared over Egypt – under British occupation since 1882. France took control over Syria and Lebanon. To the east, Iran managed to retain its empire, but British influence made it a semi-independent state at best. This was clearly illustrated when in 1925, the Qajar dynasty was ended by a British-supported military coup, carried out by Reza Khan, who later declared himself king (*shah*) and started the Pahlavi dynasty.[5]

In the Arabic-speaking countries, ideas of nationalism were beginning to take firm root.[6] During the war, Britain had instigated an Arab Revolt under the leadership of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, who had been promised an 'independent Arab kingdom' at the war's conclusion. However, other pledges to the French, and to the Zionist movement, resulted in a significantly reduced area of Arab control. A compromise solution, which satisfied no-one, was found whereby Sharif Husayn's sons, Faysal and ᶜAbdallah, became kings in Iraq and Transjordan, respectively, whereas Syria and Lebanon was handed over to the French, and Palestine set apart as a 'national home' for the Jews. These machinations created a post-war situation in which resentment towards Britain for the broken promises soon outweighed any goodwill that had been created by the overthrow of the Ottomans. Coupled with hatred of the French for having stolen Syria, which in many ways was the epicentre of Arab nationalism, and the Zionists for colonising Palestine, anti-imperialist nationalism soon emerged as the dominant idea amongst the politically conscious segments of the population.[7] In Iran, frustration with a struggling modernisation process, which had stalled since the days of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-7, and British meddling in internal affairs, as well as deep resentment against British attempts to secure favourable terms for its capitalist enterprises in the country, meant that the dominant sentiment there was hardly any less anti-British.

Resistance against the new order became legion. A 'revolution' broke out in Egypt when in 1919 Saᶜd Zaghlul and his followers were refused permission to form a delegation to the post-war peace negotiations at Versailles. The following year, anti-Jewish riots broke out in neighbouring Palestine, and when the Iraqi mandate had been confirmed by the San Remo Conference in April 1920, a widespread revolt rocked that country from the summer onwards. In Syria, disapproval of the mandate system, and especially the French insistence on 'divide and rule' tactics – as seen in the division of Syria along religious lines – kept unrest simmering until it finally broke out in full-scale rebellion between 1925-27. Iran, which had avoided being forcibly broken up, largely

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[5] See, Cyrus Ghani, *Iran and the Rise of Reza Shah: From Qajar Collapse to Pahlavi Power* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998.

[6] For a discussion of the development of Arab nationalism see, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Oxford University Press, 1962; republished by Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[7] See, Timothy J. Paris, *Britain, the Hashemites and Arab Rule: The Sherifian Solution* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

remained free of anti-western rebellions. However, in the far north of the country – where Russian influence was felt the strongest – turmoil followed the war. In the Iranian parts of Azerbaijan, which lie on the borders with Azerbaijan in Russia, an uprising under Shaykh Mohammed Khiyabani erupted in the aftermath of the war. In Gilan, another northern province, situated on the Caspian Sea, a further revolt took shape, the 'Jangali movement', led by Mirza Kuchuk Khan. Both of these uprisings were anti-Persian, anti-Russian, and essentially pan-Islamic in their outlook.

The Revolution of the East

With the eruption of these popular revolts across the Middle East, and with the emergence of the nationalist leader Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in Anatolia, who was gradually able to unite the Anatolian heartland and thwart Western imperialist plans for its dismemberment, the Russian Communists began to take notice of the region. Joseph Stalin himself assumed responsibility for Eastern Communists within the Russian Communist Party,[8] and a Department of International Propaganda for Eastern Peoples was set up in 1918. Persia was seen by the Russian Communists as having the greatest potential for revolution of all the eastern lands. The reason for this optimism was to be found in the wartime activities that had been taking place in Persian Azerbaijan. During the latter stages of the war, British troops occupied the western parts of Persia, and a military mission under General Lionel Dunsterville tried to press on towards Baku (in Russian Azerbaijan), and from there to Tiflis (in Russian Georgia). In Gilan, this was resisted by Mirza Kuchuk Khan, in what became known as the 'Jangali movement'. This movement was led by a pan-Islamic organisation calling itself *Etteḥād-e-Islām* (Islamic Unity), and received funds and arms from the Ottomans and Germans. At the same time, *soviets* were being formed in Enzeli by deserted Russian soldiers, and local Communists from Turkestan and the wider Caucasus region. In this endeavour, they were supported by a group of Persian and Azerbaijani workers, calling themselves ʿ*Adalat* (Justice), which had been formed in 1918. Eventually, the pan-Islamic 'Jangali movement' transformed itself into a patriotic movement and joined forces with the Communists.[9]

Meanwhile, on the Russian side of the border, revolutionary troops defeated General Anton Denikin's assault on Moscow in the summer of 1919, after his troops had captured much of the Caucasus earlier in the year. A short-lived Azerbaijani Republic, which had been declared in 1918, was overthrown two years later following an invasion by the Red Army. On 28 April 1920, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was declared by the Russian Communists. At the occasion, Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, a Tatar Muslim Communist who was the Muslim Commissar in the Commissariat for Nationalities, stated the following on the role of Azerbaijan:

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[8] Or, more correctly, the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), *Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Sovetskogo Soyuza,* henceforth abbreviated as CPSU.

[9] See Sepehr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

Now Soviet Azarbayjan [sic] with its old and experienced revolutionary proletariat and its sufficiently consolidated Communist party will become a revolutionary beacon for Persia, Arabia, and Turkey... From there it is possible to disturb the British in Persia and stretch friendly hands to Arabia and to lead the revolutionary movement in Turkey until it assumes the form of a class struggle.[10]

Having secured the oil-rich Russian Azerbaijan, Soviet troops continued to advance into Persia. The official reason given was to eliminate the threat from White forces and British troops that were still present in Gilan, fighting the Jangali movement. Soviet troops and navy thus sailed across the Caspian Sea and landed in Enzeli on 18 May. Shortly thereafter, on 4 June, Gilan was declared a Republic. The foreign incursion was not accepted by the nationalists and patriots, and in July, Mirza Kuchuk Khan resigned from the government and took his supporters into the forest. The Persian and Azerbaijani Communists who were helping the Soviets became ever more isolated as local people turned away from the new republic. The gap widened further when Gilan was declared a Soviet Republic on 4 August. In the midst of this turmoil, the First Congress of the Persian Communist Party, which had been formed largely by members of the earlier *ᶜAdalat* group, was held in Enzeli on 23 June – at a time when the city was still occupied by the Red Army.[11]

The establishment of a Soviet Republic on Iranian soil, without proper local support, highlighted the basic problem of Communism in the East: what should the revolution be, and for whom was it to be carried out? These questions took on more urgency following the post-war failures of European Communism. Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders had been convinced that the revolution would triumph first in Western Europe – due to its advanced economic system – and then spread to Eastern lands. The success of the Russian Revolution modified this determinist outlook somewhat, and the defeat of the German Revolution in particular forced a change of view within the Bolshevik leadership. Thus, by 1920, the East seemed the only opportunity to spread the revolution. Having secured Russian Azerbaijan, and with inroads into Persia, the Comintern held its Second Congress between 19 July – 7 August. At the congress, a lively debate on the Revolution in the East took place between Lenin and M.N. Roy, an Indian Communist. Lenin saw the struggle in the East as mainly an anti-imperialist struggle that would weaken the colonial system and thus hasten the revolution in the European mother countries. The basic problem of the East was the lacking proletariat, and the backward economic systems. With an insufficient industrial base, a small capitalist class, and a large semi-feudal agricultural sector, Eastern countries were not suited for socialist revolution. Lenin therefore proposed that Eastern Communists should form alliances with the 'national revolutionary' sections of the 'national bourgeoisie'. Roy, who had extensive experience of the duplicitous nature of the Indian 'national bourgeoisie'

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[10] *Zhizn Nationalnostei* [organ of *Narkomindel*, the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs], XIII, May 1920, 7, quoted in Zabih, *Iran*, pp. 10-11.

[11] For an in-depth study of the Soviet adventure in Gilan see, Schapour Ravasani, *Sowjetrepublik Gilan: Die Sozialistische Bewegung im Iran seit Ende des 19. Jhdt. bis 1922* [The Gilan Soviet Republic: The Socialist movement in Iran since the end of the 19th cent. until 1922] (Berlin: Basis-Verlag, n.d.).

thought collaboration would be a recipe for disaster. Sultan Zadeh, a prominent Persian Communist who had co-founded the Persian Communist Party shortly before the Congress, put forward a compromise solution, arguing that the attitude towards the 'national bourgeoisie' needed to be flexible and adapted to local circumstances. Lenin accepted the compromise, and drafted a resolution that stated the following:

> ...the Communist International should support bourgeois-democratic national movements in colonial and backward countries only on condition that, in these countries, the elements of future proletarian parties, which will be communist not only in name, are brought together and trained to understand their special tasks, i.e., those of the struggle against the bourgeois-democratic movements within their own nations. The Communist International must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in the colonial and backward countries, but should not merge with it, and should under all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even if it is in its most embryonic form...[12]

To prepare for the Eastern revolution, the Comintern decided to organise a Congress of the Peoples of the East, to be held in the newly 'liberated' city of Baku, the capital of Russian Azerbaijan. Following the conclusion of the Comintern congress, the Baku Congress was thus held in September, and was attended by no less than 1,891 delegates from across Asia. The largest delegation was the Turkish, which counted 235 delegates, closely followed by the Persian at 192. However, these delegates were generally not Communists, but anti-imperialist nationalists of varying hue. The Congress was chaired by Gregory Zinoviev, the head of the Comintern, who in his opening address called for a Holy War against the British Empire. Many of the delegates gave essentially nationalist speeches, but using a vocabulary intended to please the Communists. This prompted Zinoviev, and other Comintern spokesmen, to stress that the core of socialist struggle was the class struggle, which was not confined by national borders. He did concede, however, that the Comintern would have to cooperate with nationalist groups in the current situation. The Congress passed two resolutions, one calling on the 'oppressed masses of the peasantry' to rely on support from the Comintern and to struggle for soviet power in the East. The other resolution called for the establishment of 'Soviet Government in the East' as the objective of the revolution. The Congress was important insofar as it showed a real intent on the part of the Comintern and Western Communists to help the revolution advance in the East, but in terms of real, concrete impact, the achievements were decidedly more meagre. In fact, in both Turkey and Persia the Congress arguably sowed dissension between Communists and nationalists. A year later, at the Third Comintern Congress, which was held in Moscow from 22 June – 12 July 1921, Javed Zadeh of the PCP reported that in Turkey, the Communist movement had split into three different parties and in Persia into two. 'If anything, then,' commented Zabih,

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[12] V.I. Lenin, 'Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions', 28 July 1920, in Alan Adler (ed.), *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*, transl. Alix Holt and Barbara Holland, London: Pluto Press, 1983, p. 80.

'the Baku Congress and its aftermath merely emphasized once again the Bolsheviks' dilemma in the handling of nationalism. The best they could hope for was the transformation of the revolutionary movements after their initial, strongly nationalistic stage.'[13]

Comintern and the Foundation of Arab Communism

While the Baku Congress failed to achieve an immediate revolutionary impulse in the Eastern lands, the long-term commitment by the Comintern to organise a Communist movement in the region was more successful. The spread of Communist ideology, and the eventual creation of Communist parties in the Arab World, was largely due to efforts by the Comintern. The earliest organisational attempts took place in Egypt and Palestine, almost exclusively by Eastern European Jews who had migrated to these countries. However, Communist ideas had existed amongst the large foreign community in Egypt well before the outbreak of World War I. An influx of revolutionary Jews from Eastern Europe, as well as radical Arab intellectuals fleeing the oppressive climate of Sultan ᶜAbd al-Hamid's Ottoman Empire, meant that Egypt was a dissident hotspot at the time. Among these refugees was Shibli Shumayyil, an Arab theoretician who was a staunch believer in science and socialism, and one of the first to proffer a 'scientific' critique of religion. One of his disciples was Niqula al-Haddad, another recent émigré from Syria, who became one of the pioneers of socialist thought in Egypt. He was influenced by the 1919 revolt, which he analysed 'scientifically' in a study called *ᶜIlm al-Ijtimāᶜ* (social sciences). He also published a book entitled *al-Ishtirākiyyah* (Socialism) in 1920. Another of Shumayyil's followers was Salamah Musa, who became one of the most important intellectuals of modern Egypt. There was also a smaller group of Bolshevik Jews, who had escaped to Egypt following the failed 1905 Revolution in Russia. Together they formed *Majmuᶜat al-Balshafik* (the Bolshevik Group), which was active until the 1917 October Revolution, following which most returned to Russia. Thus, on the eve of the war, there were many Communist and socialist groups in Egypt, although most of them were to be found in the large community of foreigners, which at its peak counted almost 237,000. With the outbreak of war, however, many foreigners left the country, which meant that the Communist movement suffered a heavy blow. Nevertheless, it also meant that the new movement that emerged after the war was dominated not by foreign elements, but by local Arabs and Jews.[14]

One such local Jew was Joseph Rosenthal, who became one of the most important persons in early Egyptian Communism. He was born in neighbouring Palestine in 1872 to Ukrainian immigrant parents. In his teens, Joseph moved to Beirut, where he eventually set up a jewellery shop, which became a place where political activist would congregate to discuss political affairs. At first, he was neither a Communist nor even a

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[13] Zabih, *Iran*, pp. 34-35.

[14] For a more in-depth discussion of the pre-war socialist scene in Egypt, see Rami Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011.

socialist, yet his activities were sufficient to attract the attention of the Ottoman authorities, which eventually compelled him to move to Alexandria in Egypt. There, he again took work as a jeweller, and he got involved with groups of Italian anarchists and socialists. He soon became disillusioned with these groups, as they were merely interested in conditions back in the homeland. For Joseph, the conditions of the Egyptian poor, especially the *fellaḥīn* (poor peasants), was the prime concern. He eventually moved to Cairo, where he got involved in the early workers' movement, helping to organise strikes at the turn of the century. To demonstrate his commitment to Egypt he took up Egyptian citizenship, and once more moved back to Alexandria, where he worked as a watchmaker. The outbreak of the 1919 revolt, and the accompanying strikes that were carried out by workers in the cities, convinced Rosenthal that Egypt was ripe for a general federation of workers, which he called for with some success. In 1921, he organised the first celebration of May Day in Egyptian history. In an interview given to the Egyptian Gazette on that day, he stated that the *fellaḥīn* and the 'millions of agricultural labourers' would be the force to change Egypt. At the same time, however, he expressed scepticism about the possibility of spreading Communist ideology to these vast masses: "…there is not the slightest chance of the Egyptian fellah ever becoming a communist, and Lenin's recent confession as to the complete failure of the Moscow Government to convert the Russian Moujik to communism is a good lesson for us in our future propaganda among the fellahin of Egypt."[15] This dilemma, it would turn out, was to become the crux of Communism in the Arab World, as the conditions of the Egyptian *fellaḥīn* were replicated throughout the region. In general, the *fellaḥīn* were the most wretched, uneducated, superstitious, and generally backward group in the Middle East. As Arab Communists were to find out, transforming the *fellaḥīn* into disciplined, class-conscious fighters for Communism would be a herculean task.

An Egyptian Communist Party (ECP) was founded in March 1920, following a joint meeting in Alexandria of various groups of Eastern European Jews. These activists were in contact with the Comintern, and although the new party was not recognised as a section of the Comintern, it was clear that it had support from Moscow. The ECP had a bureau in Vienna that was attached to the Austrian Communist Party. This bureau helped with the 'technical needs', such as bringing in printing material and literature. The Comintern connection could also be seen in the fact that the ECP sent a representative to the Third Comintern Congress in 1921, a certain Kari David Peler. Other prominent people involved in the ECP at the time included Samuel Zaslavsky, a Ukrainian Jew who had fled to Egypt, via Beirut, following arrest for Communist activity on numerous occasions in Ukraine. A Russian Jew, Avram Muisayvitch Katz and his sister Klara had come to Egypt following migration to Syria, then Palestine, and Greece. Another Russian Jew, Samuel Kirzon, had escaped via Odessa to Egypt, following involvement with the Socialist Revolutionary Party. A further Russian Jew with connection to Odessa was Edward Zaidman, who had served under the British in the war. Following the war, he settled down in Alexandria, where he met Rosenthal. They collaborated in their effort to spread communism in the city. Rosenthal, however, chose not to get involved directly in the ECP (possibly due to its 'foreign' character), instead he founded a study circle called

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[15] FO 371/6297. E6878/260/16, 'Letter P.F. 37617 M.I.5.A.', quoted in Ginat, *Egyptian Communism*, pp. 32-33.

La Clarté (*al-Wuḍūḥ*) in 1921 together with other activists. This study circle was inspired by the French journal with the same name that had been set up in 1919 by Henri Barbusse, and the Egyptian group corresponded frequently with it.[16]

The Comintern was also instrumental in introducing Communism into Palestine. As in Egypt, Palestine had seen a large influx of Eastern European Jews before and after the war. There, of course, the main driving force of migration had been the Zionist movement, and many of the Eastern European Jews belonged to Socialist Zionist or Labour Zionist schools of thought. One such group was *Mifleget Ha-Poᶜalim Ha-Sotsialistit* (MPS, the Socialist Workers' Party), which had broken away from the distinctly Zionist *Poᶜale Tsiyon* party in 1919. Contact between the MPS and the Comintern was established, possibly through Joseph Rosenthal's daughter, Charlotte, who toured Palestine in November 1920. She was also sent to Moscow to pursue revolutionary studies at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (*Kommunisticheskii Universitet Trudyashchikhsya Vostoka*, KUTV) from May 1922 to July 1923 – a path that many regional Communist leaders would later follow. The MPS applied for Comintern membership, but this was rejected due to the group's Zionist nature. A split into several factions followed, but eventually, following the unification of the two largest groups in 1923, the party was granted Comintern affiliation on condition that it changed its name to the Palestine Communist Party (*Palestiner Komunistishe Partei*, PKP) and rejected Zionism. This finally happened in March 1924, and the PKP became the official Comintern section in Palestine. A key organiser during this early phase was Yehiel Kossoy, a Ukrainian Jew who had arrived in Palestine with the Jewish Battalion during the war. Kossoy often travelled under the pseudonym 'Constantine Weiss', and wrote in the Comintern organ *Inprecor* (International Press Correspondence) under the name 'Avigdor'. In 1921, he travelled to Moscow to negotiate Comintern membership on behalf of the MPS. There, he received training and was later sent to Egypt to help organise the ECP. He married Charlotte Rosenthal, and worked with Joseph in *La Clarté*. The dominance of Jews in the PKP, in a country that was still overwhelmingly Arab, constituted a major obstacle to the spreading of Communist influence in Palestine, and so the Comintern instructed the PKP leaders to 'Arabise' the party. This directive created much resentment in the rank-and-file (and eventually a split along ethnic lines in the 1930s), but a few Arab nationalists whom were found to be sympathetic to the Communist cause were sent for training at the KUTV throughout the 1920s. Thus, by its Seventh Congress in 1930, the PKP could eventually present a Central Committee with an Arab majority.[17] Among the Palestinian Arabs that took to Communism, the Christian community, especially the Greek Orthodox, stands out.[18] This follows the minority pattern observed in most other Arab countries.

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[16] Ginat, *Egyptian Communism*, pp. 41-45.

[17] For a fuller discussion of the problems caused by this set-up, see Johan Franzén, 'Communism versus Zionism: The Comintern, Yishuvism, and the Palestine Communist Party', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2007, pp. 6-24; for a wider discussion of the PKP, see Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism*, Haymarket Books, 2010.

[18] For a discussion of the historical link between orthodoxy and Communism, see Merav Mack, 'Orthodox and Communist: A History of a Christian Community in Mandate Palestine and Israel', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 384-400.

In Syria and Lebanon, too, the Comintern influence was marked. In 1924, Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak, a local activist, was visited by Joseph Berger-Barzilai of the PKP, who had been tasked with helping to establish a Communist movement in Lebanon and Syria. Later in the year, on 24 October, Yazbak, together with Fuʾad al-Shamali, Farid Touma, Ilyas Qashami, and Butrus Hishimah established the Lebanese People's Party (*Ḥizb al-Shaʿb*). As in Palestine, the early phase was dominated by Christian Arabs. However, in Lebanon and Syria, Armenian Christians also played an important role initially, and within this community a Communist organisation called the Spartacus League (modelled on the *Spartakusbund*), had been formed earlier. In 1925, the two groups came together and established the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party (SLCP, *al-Ḥizb al-Shuyūʿī al-Sūrī al-Lubnānī*). The new party, however, immediately became embroiled in the fractious politics of the era. In the summer, the great Syrian revolt broke out, and when the SLCP openly supported it, the entire leadership was arrested, and remained locked up until a general amnesty in 1928. The Comintern ordered the PKP to take temporary control of the SLCP's affairs. Upon release, the SLCP was able to send a representative to the Sixth Comintern Congress, held from 17 July – 1 September 1928. There, the party received official recognition as a Comintern section, and was released from the PKP guardianship. In the early 1930s, the party was able to expand its activities considerably, and a number of promising young activists joined the party. Among them was Khaled Bakdash, a fierce Kurd who would emerge as the strongman of the party in the 1940s and 50s. Others included Niqula Shawi and Farjallah al-Hilu, who were also destined to play important roles. As had happened in Palestine, the SLCP was instructed to 'Arabise' to move away from its reliance on minorities, primarily Armenians. As with other Arab Communist parties, a select number of recruits were sent to Moscow for training, most notably Bakdash who stayed in Moscow from 1933 until 1937. There, he was appointed by the Comintern as the representative of Arab Communist parties.[19]

In Iraq, Communist ideas had first been introduced by Russian soldiers stationed in the northern parts of the country during the war. These early encounters, however, were not of a lasting nature. Instead, it was Husayn al-Rahhal, a Shiʿi of mixed Arab-Turkoman descent, who first started a Marxist study circle in the early 1920s. Husayn had earlier been living in Germany with his father, an Ottoman officer, who had been stationed there following the war. In 1919, Husayn witnessed the failed German Revolution, led by the *Spartakusbund*, which made an indelible impression on him. In 1926, he formed *Nādi al-Taḍāmun* (The Solidarity Club) together with other young activists. While only lasting two years, this club brought together many of the future Communist leaders. In southern Iraq, Communist ideas were first introduced by Petros Vasili, an Assyrian who had grown up in Tiflis, Georgia, but who originally stemmed from ʿAmadiyyah in northern Iraq, whence his father had emigrated. Vasili entered the country in 1922 as a professional revolutionary. In the south, he met fellow Assyrian Yusuf Salman Yusuf – soon to be known under his party name, Comrade Fahad – and his brother Daʾud. The two brothers, together with Ghali Zuwayyid, a slave of the wealthy Saʿdun family, set up a Communist study circle in al-Nasiriyyah in 1928. Eventually, the two strands came together, and in 1934, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP, *al-Ḥizb al-Shuyūʿī al-ʿIrāqī*) was

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[19] For a fuller discussion of the SLCP, see Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*, University Press of Florida, 1998.

formed. Similarly to the ECP, PKP, and SLCP, the Iraqis also sent a number of committed activists for training at the KUTV, most notably Fahad himself, who trained there from 1935-1937. He returned to Iraq in early 1938, and, following a period of turmoil in the party – brought about by a failed attempt to organise cells in the army, something that resulted in many arrests of party members and the promulgation of an anti-Communist law – he eventually took over the leadership in 1941.[20]

Nationalism and Populism

The Second World War marked a turning point for the Middle Eastern Communist parties. The alliance between the Soviet Union and Britain during the war meant that the repression of Communists was considerably relaxed. The Soviets responded by closing down the Comintern in 1943. On the one hand, this decision deprived the local Communists of an organisational framework for their activities, but on the other, it also removed some of the British and French suspicion that Middle Eastern Communists were merely Soviet agents. Following the Seventh, and final, Comintern Congress, which had been held from 25 July – 20 August 1935, and which had endorsed the popular front against fascism line, the Middle Eastern Communist parties entered into what might be called a 'populist' phase. The Comintern resolution had also established that in the colonised world, the Communists should struggle to achieve 'national', rather than 'popular' fronts, that is, to seek alliances with the 'national bourgeoisie' against imperialism. In Iran, this populism was particularly noticeable. There, the earlier Soviet-led Communist movement had largely crumbled following the ascent to the throne of Reza Shah, who went on to ban Communist activity in 1931. Yet, in the late 1930s, a more indigenous movement took shape. A group of Iranian Communists, most of whom were from a middle class background, had formed around Dr. Taghi Erani, an Azerbaijani physicist who had been educated in Berlin. In 1937, the group was arrested, which helped their radicalisation. Dr. Erani died inside prison in 1940, but when the group's members were released the following year, they went on to set up a new Communist organisation – *Ḥezb-e Tūdeh Īrān* (the Party of the Masses of Iran). The new party was able to exploit the relative freedom caused by Reza Shah's removal by the allies the same year, and the fact that the Red Army was once more stationed in the northern parts of the country because of the war. Tudeh was not openly Communist, instead stressing that it supported the Iranian constitution and was fighting for its full implementation.[21] The same wartime strategy could be noticed also in neighbouring Iraq, where the ICP in 1944 convened its First Conference, which also called for the revival of the constitution and in general put forward a populist programme.[22] The SLCP, too, held a Congress from December 1943 – January 1944, which put forward a similarly moderate programme. In fact, such was the

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[20] For an exhaustive discussion of the ICP's early phase, see Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers*, London: Saqi, 2004 (orig. publ. by Princeton Univ. Press, 1978); see also Johan Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq: Iraqi Communism Before Saddam*, London: Hurst & Co., 2011.
[21] Zabih, *Iran*, pp. 65-70.
[22] Franzén, *Red Star*, p. 41.

level of its moderation, that the programme did not even mention the word 'socialism'.[23] As part of the populist drive, an effort to set up or expand trade unions was also a feature of the wartime and immediate postwar period.

The period of legality during the war and the first few years thereafter provided the Communist parties with an opportunity to expand their operations, and in general this short space of time constituted the only moment in their history when, however briefly, they were able to operate freely. The Tudeh in particular seized the opportunity, and within a few years of its foundation, it had emerged as a countrywide mass party, largely due to its focused attention to labour questions and support for trade unions. At the time of its First Congress in 1944, the Tudeh counted a membership of some 25,000 people. Bolstered by the Soviet presence (Britain and the Soviet Union effectively occupied the country throughout the war), the party organised large demonstrations to put pressure on the government at a time when central government was at its weakest. A young Mohammed Reza Shah had been installed to replace his father in 1941, and throughout the war, he remained a puppet of the Allies. However, before the Tudeh was able to threaten the regime seriously, a reversal of fortunes occurred. In 1949, a failed attempt on the Shah's life prompted the regime to clamp down on leftist organisations, banning Tudeh, and generally restrict liberties that had been granted during the previous period. The young Shah followed his father's example and turned his rule absolutist. To undermine the parliamentary system he introduced a senate, whose members would be partially appointed by him. He also strengthened the intelligence apparatus to prevent any further attempts on his life. All of these measures meant that the honeymoon period was over for the Tudeh, and once more Communism was an outlawed activity in Iran.[24]

A similar trajectory was followed by the Arab Communist parties, but their postwar experience was overshadowed by the Palestine Question. The temporary boost of Communist popularity in the Arab World that followed the Soviet defeat of Nazism, was quickly undone when in November 1947, the Soviet Union voted for partition of Palestine in the newly established United Nations. The Soviet U-turn, and a U-turn it was for Communists had denounced Zionism and its objectives in Palestine for as long as the movement had existed, caused shock and consternation among Arab Communists, including the Jews within their ranks (whose numbers at the time were considerable). At first, the ICP and the SLCP, which had separated into a Syrian (SCP) and a Lebanese (LCP) branch in 1943, went against the Soviet position. In Palestine, ethnic tensions had already caused a split of the party in 1943 when the Arab Communists had broken away to form *ʿUṣbat al-Taḥarrur al-Waṭanī* (the National Liberation League, NLL). The remaining Jewish Communists hailed the partition and changed the name of their party to *HaMiflagah HaKomunistit HaʾEretz Yisraʾelit* (MAKEI, the Communist Party of the Land of Israel) in 1947. The NLL was decidedly against partition, as was the ICP, LCP, and SCP. In Egypt, the problem was less straightforward. There, the Communist movement had developed into a kaleidoscope of different groups of varying size and composition, some of which were less antagonistic to partition. Nevertheless, despite the initial opposition, both the ICP and the Syrian-Lebanese parties eventually toed the Soviet line, and by the

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[23] Ismael and Ismael, *Syria & Lebanon*, pp. 36-37.
[24] Zabih, *Iran*, pp. 80-165.

summer of 1948, they began advocating an 'independent democratic Arab state in the Arab part of Palestine'.[25] The NLL, too, came around to the Soviet position, and despite the earlier tension with the Jewish Communists, a merger between the NLL and MAKEI eventually took place following the Arab-Israeli War, producing the new Israeli Communist Party (*HaMiflagah HaKomunistit HaYisraʾelit*).

The Communist support for partition (and indirectly for Zionism) caused a wave of state repression against the Arab Communist parties, and hostile animosity from Arab nationalists in general. Overnight, the Communists went from respected anti-imperialist activists within the general fold of Arab nationalism to treasonous pariahs that were beyond the pale. The headquarters of the SCP in Damascus was torched by an angry mob in late November 1947, and at the same time the party's organ, *Ṣawt al-Shaʿb* (the Voice of the People), was banned. In Iraq, a general crackdown on Communists that predated the partition vote had resulted in the arrest of much of the party leadership, including the First Secretary, 'Comrade Fahad'. He and other leaders were sentenced to death, but following international pressure, the death sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. However, following a wave of demonstrations in early 1948, later remembered as *al-Wathbah* (the Leap), which had been caused by the signing of a new Anglo-Iraqi treaty at Portsmouth, Fahad was re-tried and once more sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out in February 1949, when he and three other Communists were hanged in four different Baghdad squares.[26] In Lebanon, too, repression was relentless and the LCP was banned in the summer of 1948. The SCP was forced underground and a decision to move its headquarters from Damascus to Beirut was taken.

Whether because of this repression or perhaps because of an influx of a younger generation of Communists in the early 1950s, the Communist parties in the Middle East radicalised their positions considerably, and up until the mid-50s a 'revolutionist phase' is clearly noticeable. In Iran, the Communists joined nationalists and other activists during the widespread protests in 1952 that ultimately helped to reinstate Mohammed Mossadegh to power. Although the Tudeh played a crucial role during this episode, they were eventually betrayed by the nationalists once their common objective had been met. After Mossadegh's ousting in a CIA-sponsored coup the following year, all-out repression of the party and its auxiliary organisations ensued.[27] The Party leadership concluded that had they possessed a trained military apparatus at the peak of the protests they would have been in a good position to seize power. A decision to militarise the party and prepare it for violent revolution was thus taken. However, the next year much of the work was undone when the authorities discovered a vast network of Tudeh supporters in the army – some 600 officers, ranging from non-commissioned officers to colonels.[28] In Iraq, too, radicalism was brewing. Despite the repression of 1947-49, which had almost broken the back of the party, the ICP had regrouped and recruited new members by the early 1950s. In 1952, it played a key role in the *Intifāḍah* that rocked the country in a similar way as

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[25] Statement of the ICP Central Committee, 6 July 1948, quoted in Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, p. 599.
[26] See, Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, ch. 22 'al-Wathbah'.
[27] For an in-depth study of this crucial period in Iranian history see, Sepehr Zabih, *The Mossadegh Era: Roots of the Iranian Revolution* (Academy Chicago Publications, 1982).
[28] Zabih, *Iran*, pp. 177-209.

the 1948 *Wathbah* had done. Revolutionism was evidenced within its ranks as well when in 1954 it created a military organisation, *al-Lajnah al-Waṭaniyyah li-Ittiḥād al-Junūd wa l-Ḍubbāṭ* (The National Committee for Unity of Soldiers and Officers).[29]

Violent Revolution, 'Arab Socialism', and the End of the Movement

The year 1956 marked a watershed moment for Middle Eastern Communists. Three major events took place during this year: the thwarting of the Hungarian uprising, the Suez Crisis, and the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU. The first of these events did not have much impact on Middle Eastern affairs, but it showed the extent to which the Soviet Union was willing to use force to protect its sphere of influence. The Suez Crisis, on the other hand, had immense impact as it essentially transformed Gamal ᶜAbd al-Nasir into an 'Arab Hero' throughout the region, and generally made his strand of pan-Arabist ideology dominant. However, it was the Twentieth Congress and the changes in ideology it brought with it that most transformed Middle Eastern Communist parties. The Twentieth Congress, which is perhaps best known for Khrushchev's 'secret speech', introduced significant changes in Soviet ideology. A theory of 'peaceful co-existence' in international relations, and a theory of a 'peaceful road to socialism' were the most radical changes. Undoubtedly, these changes were linked to the Cold War, which ever more was becoming the dominant feature of the era. The 'peaceful road' proposed a theory that essentially rendered the Communist party superfluous as it proclaimed that the socialist stage could be reached by relying on the 'national bourgeoisie' alone. The role of the Communists was therefore not to seize power, but to support 'national-democratic' movements and help turn them pro-Soviet. Later, this was further developed in the 'non-capitalist path to socialism' theory, which argued that the capitalist stage could be by-passed altogether so that regimes in the 'Third World' could move straight from a semi-colonial, semi-feudal stage to socialism. In reality, what these theories argued, was that political, rather than economic, liberation was what mattered. It was good enough if a country achieved political independence from imperialism, as with the help and assistance of the Soviet Union, it could now avoid remaining in economic dependence. The irony, of course, was that it created a new type of economic dependence – on the Soviet Union.[30]

Did Cold War logic force these changes in the Soviet outlook? Did Stalin's death and Khrushchev's ambitions play a part? Did the war and its consequences impel Soviet leaders to view international relations through a more Realist lens? Did bureaucratisation and routinisation of Soviet society and the CPSU leadership kill the original revolutionary idea? Alternatively, had Stalin's notion of 'Socialism in one country' already done that? These are all important questions, albeit very difficult to answer. What is indisputable, though, is that from the outbreak of the Cold War, Soviet foreign policy became dominated by concerns of 'national interest' rather than 'world revolution'. From

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[29] Franzén, *Red Star*, pp. 61-68.

[30] For a thorough discussion, and rejection, of the non-capitalist theory in the case of Egypt, see Esmael Hosseinzadeh, *Soviet Non-Capitalist Development: The Case of Nasser's Egypt* (Praeger, 1989).

the point of view of Middle Eastern Communists, this development was disastrous. The new Soviet policy was put into practice with the Egyptian revolution in 1952 and the subsequent rise of Nasir from the mid-fifties onwards, followed by the Iraqi revolution in 1958, and other so-called 'Arab Socialist' revolutions in places like Yemen, Algeria, and Syria. The battle for Nasir's loyalty was the standout feature of the early Cold War in the Middle East. As the leader of the largest Arab country, attracting him to one's side was seen as crucial by both Superpowers. Egypt had also long been a pillar of British imperial strategy, with a large British base guarding the Suez Canal. Thus, Nasir's switch from the American sphere to the Soviet, following broken American promises to fund the building of the Aswan dam was a great victory for the Soviets – at least symbolically. However, for the Egyptian Communists it was catastrophic. Nasir was an anti-Communist and clamped down on the Egyptian Left with menace, banning all political parties except his own officially approved Arab Socialist Union. The Baᶜth Party in Syria and Iraq were equally hostile to Communism, if not more. In February 1963, the Iraqi Baᶜthists joined ᶜAbd al-Salam ᶜAref in a coup to overthrow ᶜAbd al-Karim Qasim, who had led the country since the 1958 Revolution. As a counterweight to Nasir's pan-Arabism, the ICP had put their full support behind Qasim in the early stages of the new regime – only to be betrayed by him later. The 1963 coup saw thousands of ICP-members and sympathisers, and general Qasim-loyalists, killed by Baᶜthist 'National Guards'. The Baᶜthists were themselves betrayed by ᶜAref later in the year, and he and his brother, ᶜAbd al-Rahman, ruled Iraq until 1968, when the Baᶜthists once more took power.[31]

The Baᶜthist takeover in Iraq in February 1963, and a month later also in Syria marked the beginning of the end for Arab Communists. 'Arab Socialism', the ideology espoused by the Baᶜhist regimes and by Nasir proved to be the final undoing of Communist ideology. The reason for this was two-fold. Firstly, 'Arab Socialism' took those elements of Communist ideology – social justice, land reform, anti-imperialism, etc. – that had made it popular in the first place, and combined these with Arab nationalism, which was already immensely popular at the time. Secondly, the Baᶜth Party emulated Communist organisational practices, establishing country-wide branches and cells that were secret and clandestine. While the physical threat of Baᶜthism was indeed very real in Iraq, it was in the ideational sphere in which the battle for the masses was lost. By portraying themselves as socialists and nationalists, the Baᶜthists were always at an advantage compared to the Communists, who risked being attacked for lacking patriotism. Thus, despite the fact that the Baᶜth Party had attempted to physically eliminate the Iraqi Communist movement, and Nasir's increasing authoritarianism, Arab Communists thought the spread of 'Arab Socialism' was working to their advantage:

> As a result of the successes won by world socialism, socialist ideas are becoming increasingly popular among the masses, a fact which is compelling statesmen and public personalities in the Arab countries to speak of

[31] For good overviews of Soviet relations with the 'radical' Arab regimes, see Oles M. Smolansky, *The Soviet Union and the Arab East Under Khrushchev* (Associated University Press, 1974); and Oles M. Smolansky and Bettie Moretz Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq: The Soviet Quest for Influence* (Duke University Press, 1991).

socialism as a perspective in the national and social advance of the young sovereign states. [...] There is no denying that the ideas of so-called "Arab socialism" have exerted their influence on students, intellectuals and also a large section of the peasantry. [...] Another positive feature of "Arab socialism" is that the word "socialism" has gained currency in the Arab East.[32]

In other words, the lip service being paid to 'socialism' by Arab leaders was taken as an indication of Communist progression and influence.[33]

Arguably, however, the battle had already been lost at an earlier stage when the Communists had attempted to infuse a revolutionary Marxist understanding of Arab nationalism and the Pan-Arabist objective to unify the Arabic-speaking world into a unitary state. Such was the dominance of nationalist thought that no political organisation could survive without declaring its unwavering support for it. For the Iraqi Communists, and to a lesser extent the Syrian Communists, the clash came to a head in 1959 when attempts by Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasir to undermine the rule of ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim by sponsoring a nationalist rebellion in Mosul came to nought. The fact that the Iraqi Communists had sided with Qasim in his falling out with Nasir in the aftermath of the Iraqi Revolution of 14 July 1958, meant that the Qasim regime was branded 'pro-Communist' by Nasir (and by the West). At the height of this battle, ʿAziz al-Hajj, himself ironically a Kurd, but also a prominent member of the ICP, outlined the Communist position on Arab nationalism in the following manner:

Arab nationalism is an evident reality that even its enemies cannot disregard. Arab nationalism is a tangible fact that crystallises and develops, and is being embodied in a stormy revolutionary movement reflecting the hopes and wishes of eighty million people, and their intense yearning for the return of their usurped rights, and the building of a new Arab life that contributes to the building of a new human civilisation. [...]

...today, it is not an issue of a number of parties or leaders, but a giant mass movement of all the Arab peoples, it is the reflection of a nation existing in reality, firmly rooted in the Arab land, whether the enemy recognises it or not and whether this or that is aware of it. This nation possesses all the national characteristics of [being] one nation. That is because its being [is] a firm group of people that was formed historically, and lives on a common land (despite the existing invented borders) and speaks a common language, and it has increasing economic assets that complete each other, and it has a shared psychological basis that finds an expression in the shared Arab culture,

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[32] 'The Present Stage of the National-Liberation Movement of the Arab Peoples', *World Marxist Review*, vol. 6, no. 10, Oct. 1963, pp. 72-73.

[33] For numerous other examples of the Communist position on 'Arab Socialism', see Johan Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq: Iraqi Communism Before Saddam* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011).

traditions, and in the mutual national aspirations towards complete liberation, and a happy life and towards the eradication of the manufactured division.

The Sultans of the House of ᶜUthman [the Ottomans] and their racist Turkish allies, and after them the new Imperialism in particular, all of these have tried for tens of years to erase these national traits in order to keep the Arab nation fragmented to facilitate its enslavement and exploitation, but these features were able to resist and preserve their bond because they were original ones.[34]

This passage epitomises the Communist ambivalence on nationalism. While trying to couch their analyses with Marxist-Leninist phraseology, and insisting on the revolutionary nature of the 'Arab nation' as justification for their position, even the most cursory glance on the vast Arab Communist literature on nationalism gives an indelible impression that in fact there was very little, if anything, to distinguish between the ostensibly 'scientific' Marxist interpretation and the highly Metaphysical understanding of nationalism put forward by non-Communists.

For obvious reasons, Communist views on the Baᶜth Party were initially hostile, especially in Iraq. The Baᶜthists were dismissed as 'fascists' that could not be trusted. However, soon after the Baᶜthist takeover in Iraq and Syria this assessment began to be amended, prompted by a changing Soviet evaluation of the Baᶜthist movement. Soviet experts distinguished between an 'extremist right-wing' and the 'healthy forces of the party'. Soon, similar positions were echoed by the Arab Communists. Despite the fact that thousands of Iraqi Communists had been killed and arrested, and Communists were banned in Egypt and Syria, the Soviet Union continued to offer unconditional support for Nasir, the Baᶜthist regimes, and for Arab nationalist military regimes in general. This could be seen in Khrushchev's important visit to Egypt in 1964, officially to inaugurate the High Dam at Aswan, when he held meetings with Nasir, Iraq's ᶜAref, and Yemen's ᶜAbdallah al-Sallal. In fact, following that visit, the view of 'Arab Socialism', and of Nasir in particular, changed considerably. The Iraqi Communists especially, who had fallen out with Nasir during the Qasim regime, now made a U-turn, following the Soviet endorsement of the Egyptian regime.[35]

In Iran, the absurdity of the Soviet position was even plainer to see. The Shah's Iran was an important US ally against the Soviets, but, despite this, the Soviet Union maintained amicable relations with the country – even when in 1955, Iran (along with Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, and Britain) formed the so-called Baghdad Pact, a NATO-style military organisation tasked with containing the Soviets. In 1962, following a period of worsening Soviet-Iranian relations, the situation again improved when the Shah promised that he would not allow American military bases on Iranian soil. This promise, along with the Shah's 'White Revolution' in the 1960s, was enough to create a positive Soviet image of Iran, which the Iranian Communists, despite their misgivings, had to

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[34] ᶜAzīz al-Ḥajj, *al-Qawmiyyah al-ᶜArabiyyah wa l-Dīmūqrāṭiyyah* [Arab nationalism and Democracy] (Dār Baghdād li l-Ṭabāᶜah wa l-Tarjamah, [1959])

[35] For a closer look at Khrushchev's crucial Egypt visit, see Smolansky, *Arab East*.

follow. Writing on the topic in the mid-1960s, Zabih commented that while the Tudeh leadership mostly accepted the situation, particularly as many within that leadership had sought refuge in the Soviet Union, 'the lower echelons of the party and the membership at large will probably not remain impervious to the growing Soviet accommodation with the Iranian regime.'[36]

That this was the case could be seen in the late 1960s when, following the Soviet-Chinese split on the international level, many Communists throughout the region questioned the leaderships of their parties. In 1965-66, some senior Tudeh leaders whose sympathies lay with the Chinese argued that 'violent revolution' was 'the only way to the liberation of the Iranian masses'. As a result, they were thrown out of the Central Committee. Later, in the summer of 1966, a split of the party along these lines occurred.[37] In Iraq, too, the ICP was threatened by a revolutionary base. There, a full split of the party occurred when ᶜAziz al-Hajj broke away to form the 'Central Command' group (*al-Qiyādah al-Markaziyyah*) in 1967-68. In 1968, this group declared a revolution and began armed struggle in the southern marshes. However, the attempt was quickly crushed by the Baᶜth Party, following their coup in July 1968. The remainder of the ICP came out in full support of the Soviet Union, denouncing the renegades – as did the Tudeh leadership.[38]

In Egypt, Nasir co-opted some Communists, who received well-paid jobs in the civil service in exchange for abandoning their struggle. Those that refused were thrown in jail along with other opposition groups. In Syria, following the Baᶜthist coup of 1966, carried out by Salah Jadid, Khaled Bakdash, the SCP leader, changed his earlier negative assessment of the Baᶜthists – something that was prompted by the new regime allowing him to return from his exile in Beirut.[39] In Iraq, the ICP eventually signed a 'National Front' agreement with the Baᶜthist regime in 1973, following the Baᶜthist nationalisation of the oil industry the previous year, and general social reforms. This move was unpopular by the party base, but supported by the Soviet Union, which had formed ever-closer ties with the regime since its seizure of power in 1968. The 'alliance' ended in 1979, when Saddam Husayn usurped all powers and declared himself President, following which an all-out crackdown of Communists began – forcing members to either flee or go underground.[40]

Conclusion

By the 1970s, the Communist movement in the Arab World and Iran was as good as dead. However, it could be argued that it had died much earlier, during the years of dramatic change in the mid-fifties when Soviet 'national interests' finally trumped the 'proletarian internationalism' of the early Communist movement. Seen from this perspective, we may

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[36] Zabih, *Iran*, p. 241.
[37] Zabih, *Iran*, pp. 241-245.
[38] Franzén, *Red Star*, pp. 173-183.
[39] Ismael and Ismael, *Syria & Lebanon*, pp. 63-65.
[40] Franzén, *Red Star*, pp. 233-243.

conclude that the Middle Eastern Communist movement, although achieving notable success in some areas such as trade unionism, and mass support in countries such as Iran and Iraq, was ultimately a failure. The movement was caught between two major forces that dominated the era – Soviet Communism and nationalism. When the Communists sought alliances with the nationalists they were dismissed as Soviet agents; when they sought the support of the Soviet Union, they were sacrificed in the interest of spreading Soviet influence in the area. In other words, theirs was an impossible situation, and this proved to be their ultimate undoing.