

THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE IRAQI REVOLUTION – ‘ABDALKARĪM QĀSIM BETWEEN COMMUNISTS AND NATIONALISTS

Karol R. SORBY

Institute of Oriental Studies, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia
kaorkaso@savba.sk

During the first year after the Revolution the *Iraqi Communist Party* and its front organizations were gaining strength and popularity so that the party was able to command the streets of Baghdad. The *ICP* interpreted the events as a bourgeois democratic revolution and demanded the creation of bourgeois democratic institutions and a functioning parliamentary system. In this phase the nationalists lost the struggle to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis to the ideals of Arab unity. Since the *ICP* had captured substantial sections of progressive opinion not only in Baghdad but in most of southern Iraq and in many parts of Kurdistan, the nationalists and their associates decided to promote their cause partly by relying on anti-communist or religious elements, but more crucially on members of the armed forces who were unhappy with the existing regime. The peak of communist influence lasted approximately one year. The bloody events at Kirkuk on the first anniversary of the July Revolution marked the beginning of the end of this phase.

Key words: post-revolutionary Iraq, leadership of ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim, power struggle between communists and nationalists.

In the period of monarchy, the rulers of Iraq showed no keen interest in organizing political parties, although they admitted in principle the necessity of parties for the working of the parliamentary system. It did not help the party system that only the formation of relatively moderate parties was permitted. Unfortunately a socialist party, which might have attracted radical elements and reduced the influence of the communists, was not allowed to function. Thus, radical elements were bound to go underground and threaten the regime by violent actions. Even the moderate parties were often forced to restrict or stop their activities and were finally suppressed in 1953. During the span of five years before the Revolution, the moderate parties tried to resume their

activities, but were denied the right to operate by the ruling elite. As a result, Iraq was not able to develop a tradition of normal working of a party system, which might have strengthened parliamentary life.

Owing to the hostility of the *ancien régime* to the party system, the opposition leaders were bound to seek the co-operation of radical elements already engaged in underground activities. Although the political parties in Iraq had been formally abolished in 1954,¹ political groups remained in existence, gravitating around the leaders of the opposition parties. The leaders of the *Independence Party* and the *National Democratic Party* finally agreed to co-operate and formed the nucleus of a union. A common platform was drawn up which formed the basis for their possible merger in a single party, the *National Congress Party*, but when the platform was submitted to the Government for approval on 16 June 1956, it was rejected.² This negative attitude naturally prompted opposition groups to co-ordinate their activities against the regime.

Although the year before the July Revolution was fairly uneventful in comparison with the turbulence of the early 1950s and the violent response to the tripartite aggression against Egypt in 1956, the disfavour in which the regime was held made a profound impression on observers at the time.³ In 1957 the leaders of four political parties met secretly to form a *National Union Front* (*Jabhat al-ittihād al-waṭanī*).⁴ Since the leaders of the *Independence Party* and the *National Democratic Party* had already agreed in principle to merge, the leaders of other parties, especially the communists and the *Ba'th Party* (the *Socialist Party of Arab Resurrection*), though they had not been formally recognized as political parties, joined the union. A *Higher National Committee* (*al-Lajna al-waṭanīya al-‘ulyā*) was appointed, composed of representatives of the four parties, to act as a co-ordinating committee,⁵ but other committees to

¹ Decree No. 19, issued on 22 September 1954. In: AL-HASANĪ, as-Sayyid ‘Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-‘irāqīya*. (The History of Iraqi Governments), p. 150.

² AL-‘AKKĀM, ‘Abdalāmīr, Hādī. *Tārīkh hizb al-istiqlāl al-‘irāqī 1946 – 1958*. (The History of the Iraqi Independence Party), p. 315.

³ PENROSE, Edith & PENROSE, E. F. Iraq: International Relations and National Development, pp. 199 – 201.

⁴ The four parties were: the National Democratic Party, the Independence (al-Istiqlāl) Party, the Ba'th Party and the Iraqi Communist Party. In: AL-CHĀDIRCHĪ, Kāmil. *Mudhakkirāt Kāmil al-Chādirchī wa tārīkh al-hizb al-waṭanī al-‘irāqī ad-dīmuqrātī*. (The Memoirs of Kāmil al-Chādirchī and the History of the National Democratic Party), pp. 675 – 676.

⁵ The *Independence Party* was represented by Ṣiddīq Shanshal, the *National Democratic Party* by Muḥammad Ḥadīd, the left-wing groups by ‘Azīz Sharīf and the *Ba'th Party* by Fu’ād ar-Rikābī.

perform specific functions were also set up to work under the direction of the *Higher National Committee*. The principal function of the Front was to co-ordinate civil and military activities and to issue occasional proclamations to the public in order to prepare it for the Revolution.⁶ However, no agreement seems to have been reached on future co-operation should the *ancien régime* be replaced, although co-operation between the *Independence Party* and the *National Democratic Party* was expected to continue, since no fundamental differences had existed between them.⁷

The two parties that suddenly came to the fore after the Revolution and dominated the political scene were not the moderate parties that had existed before, but two relatively small groups whose activities were clandestine and confined to limited circles – the communists and the ba'athists. In Iraq the communist movement from the late thirties and during the war time remained confined to the intellectuals. After 1945 the Iraqi communists, denied official recognition, continued their clandestine activities with considerable success.⁸

Ba'athist ideas were first brought to Iraq after World War II by a few Syrian teachers and students. The *Ba'ath Party* advocated socialism, democracy and Arab nationalism. Arab union became the principal goal in the party's programme, and its aim was not only to establish political union, but the creation of an Arab society forming a single nation based on nationalism, freedom, and socialism. From 1948 to 1952, the span between two popular upheavals, young men who held diverse political opinions participated in strikes and street demonstrations, most of them having fallen under communist influence. The group which by 1951 had only about fifty members,⁹ appealed to young men in all Arab countries to work for the realization of ba'athist ideals. Since many young men who had fallen under the influence of the *Communist Party* had certain mental reservations about its aims, they found in the *Ba'ath Party* an attractive programme as it combined nationalism with socialism, and many of these young men became either ba'athists or ba'athist sympathizers and took an active part in the uprising of 1952. When some of them were arrested, the authorities took it for granted that, as in earlier demonstrations, they were communists, since they talked about socialism. But according to Michel 'Aflaq "communism is inherently related to everything that has entered Arab history

⁶ Az-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth 'Abdalḥasan. Thawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fī al-`Irāq. (The Revolution of 14 July 1958 in Iraq), p. 103.

⁷ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics since the Revolution of 1958, p. 114.

⁸ KHADDURI, Majid. Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958, pp. 358 – 361.

⁹ SLUGLETT, Marion Farouk & Peter SLUGLETT. Iraq since 1958. From Revolution to Dictatorship, p. 90.

from the outside and distorted Arab thought".¹⁰

The *Ba'th Party* came into existence in Iraq in the summer of 1952. Its regional leader, Fu'ād ar-Rikābī, had just graduated from the Engineering College, but he had engaged in political activities ever since he entered the college four years before. Fu'ād ar-Rikābī was a *Shī'i* from an-Nāṣirīya, a town on the lower Euphrates, and had an aptitude for clandestine activities. Having informed Michel 'Aflaq, leader of the National Command, of the founding of an Iraqi *Ba'th Party*, the Iraqi group became the regional branch of the National Command, whose headquarters was in Damascus. Fu'ād ar-Rikābī's chief task from 1952 to the July Revolution was to consolidate the party and to attract to it young men in civil and military ranks. The *Ba'th* rejected participation in a national front in 1954 but two years later the party entered into the opposition *National Union Front*, and welcomed and supported the July Revolution along with other parties.¹¹ This step enabled the *Ba'th Party* to play a more active role in the internal politics of the country.

The *Ba'th* and *Communist Parties*, though they had certain characteristics in common, were opposed to one another in many other respects. Both believed in a single party system, designed to represent the Arab proletariat according to one, and an Arab classless society according to the other, although the *Ba'th Party* accepted the democratic principle that there should be more than one political party. The *Ba'th Party* demanded immediate unconditional unity with the UAR¹² while the communists, though accepting union in principle, opposed it in practice.

'Abdalkarīm Qāsim, who before the Revolution had left the dominant pan-Arab inclined segment of the Free Officers with the impression that he shared its feelings, did not after 14 July immediately take a position one way or the other. "Union" he declared on 27 July, "is something not for one individual but for the peoples of the Arab states to decide".¹³ Later he gave nationalist officers reason to think that he was not against union, but against a headlong rush into it. By end of the summer of 1958, however, no one could mistake, that he had thrown his weight on the side of particularism and become the centre of its hopes, even if he went on asserting that he was "above trends and inclinations".

The unabating ardour of 'Abdassalām 'Ārif for pan-Arabism produced a

¹⁰ 'AFLAQ, Michel. *Fī sabīl al-Ba'th*. (For the Cause of the Ba'th), p. 71 – 72.

¹¹ DEVLIN, John F. *The Ba'th Party. A History from Its Origins to 1966*, p. 109; ABU JABER, Kamal S. *The Arab Baath Socialist Party*. Syracuse 1966.

¹² AL-KHALIL, Samir. *Republic of Fear. The Politics of Modern Iraq*, p. 238.

¹³ Al-Hayat (Beirut), 27 July 1958. Cit. in: BATATU, Hanna. *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*, p. 818.

very tense atmosphere. It raised high hopes, excited widespread fears, and brought all latent differences between Iraqis into the open, deepening and envenoming them. The enthusiastic ^cAbdassalām ^cĀrif had, in all probability, no notion of the full meaning of the challenge he and the *Ba th |* Party threw down. A merger with the UAR implied a sharper turn in the life of Iraq and the Middle East than that involved in the Revolution of 14 July. It would have innovated upon many a condition, and threatened many a vested local and international interest. Every force with a stake in a fragmented Arab people was, sooner or later, bound to resist it.¹⁴ As it was, the founding of the UAR had caused no little misgiving among the big powers with a footing in the area. The prospect of its expansion rendered them even more uneasy. Israel, Iran, the oil interests, and all the Arab absolutist rulers felt, for their part, positively menaced.

The project of a merger also had strong opponents in Iraq itself. The *Shī'ī* majority did not, in its bulk, care to be integrated in what appeared in its eyes as a state of a predominantly *Sunnī* colouring, even though neither Jamāl ^cAbdannāṣir nor the *ba th |*ist leaders of Iraq – Fu'ad ar-Rikābī and Sa^cdūn Hammādī who both descended from *Shī'ī* families – ever thought in narrow sectarian terms. The important Kurdish community did not also relish the likelihood of a vindication of the Arab idea, fearing as it did its own decline into an ineffective minority. It is unlikely that ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim had thought through the question of Kurdish autonomy, but his own character disposed him to deny power to any other party or body.¹⁵ Even in the army, which was for long the stronghold of the most steadfast pan-Arabism, there had always been a distinct particularist trend. It embraced officers of Kurdish, Turkoman, or mixed ethnic origin, or Arab officers – *Shī'ī* or *Sunnī* – who, for one reason or another, desired no change in the existing distribution of social power.

After the Revolution, the conflict between the two leaders provided the occasion for *ba th |*ists and communists to come into sharp conflict with each other. When ^cAbdassalām ^cĀrif espoused the *ba th |*ist demand for Arab union and advocated immediate merging with the UAR, ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim – a patient and clever manipulator – sought the support of groups likely to oppose *ba th |*ists and at the same time began to encourage support for himself among the officers. He found opponents of unity also among the communists, long suppressed by the *ancien régime* and opposed in principle to *ba th |*ists.¹⁶ They saw their golden opportunity in supporting ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim and organized

¹⁴ BATATU, Hanna. The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq, p. 817.

¹⁵ McDOWALL, David. A Modern History of the Kurds, p. 303.

¹⁶ MARR, Phebe. The Modern History of Iraq, p. 159.

demonstrations in his favour and against the immediate union. 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim not only found the communists ready to counter pan-Arab propaganda, but also that they had greater influence over the masses, and they more often paraded the streets in support of the Sole Leader than did any moderate party. However, once committed to communist support, 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim was never able to reconcile the pan-Arabs, despite his rejection of communist ideology and his subsequent measures to curb their activities.

Under the *ancien régime* no political group suffered more persecution than the communists, and the principal leaders who had engaged in clandestine activities were either put to death or thrown into prison. This harsh treatment aroused the sympathy of the public, for the tenacity and endurance with which they defied authority appeared to many as a form of national struggle and personal heroism. No less significant was communist insistence that their political activities and personal endeavours were as patriotic as any others. However, to be a communist or communist sympathizer in Iraq, did not necessarily mean strict adherence to the Marxist doctrines. When combined with tactical considerations, this allowed and sometimes impelled the party to reach accommodation with other political forces.¹⁷ Their ideology, claiming to combine nationalism with socialism, inspired liberal nationalists to support them and co-operate in some of their activities. Small wonder, therefore, that communist activities after the Revolution received initial support from the public. The focus on the evils of social injustice, economic exploitation and questions of wages and conditions of work won the *ICP* a wide basis of support and made it the leading party of social reform. The *ICP*, despite its weak representation in the officer corps, had backed the Free Officers. With the new freedoms after the July Revolution it built up its civilian following, believing in the importance of control of the streets to give the impression of mass support and to deter further use of military force.¹⁸

Some observers consider the absence of the communist politicians in the first cabinet after the Revolution as the practical end of the *National Union Front* because the parties were reluctant to function within its framework.¹⁹ The *Front* might have provided leadership for the new generation after the Revolution if the political parties had been able to maintain solidarity and present to the military a common programme of action so as to transform the military Government established by the Revolution into a civil regime. The *Ba'th Party* issued a confidential internal document in which presented its assessment of the political situation, support for the Revolution and the line for

¹⁷ TRIPP, Charles. A History of Iraq, p. 154.

¹⁸ TRIPP, Charles. A History of Iraq, p. 155.

¹⁹ AZ-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth 'Abdalḥasan. Thawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fī al-'Irāq, p. 265.

further activities.²⁰ The attitude of the *ICP* toward other political parties ensued from its estimation of the political and social forces in post-Revolution Iraq.

Immediately after the Revolution 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim tried to enlist the support of the two moderate parties (the *Independence Party* and the *National Democratic Party*) in order to counter the ba'thist propaganda. But the moderate parties were unable to co-operate with radical groups, especially the communists, who preferred to support 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim directly. Nor could they arouse sufficient popular support, since their activities in the past had been relatively confined to literate groups, while the rank and file had fallen under radical influences. The leaders of the *National Democratic Party*, while protesting their eagerness for the entry of Iraq into a federation with the UAR upon a guarantee of a free party life and other democratic liberties, rallied in effect to 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim.²¹ Moreover, the leaders of moderate parties, especially the *National Democratic Party*, were unwilling to give 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim support without an assurance that his regime would be changed into a parliamentary system.

The majority of the military seemed at the outset to have been unhappy with right and left extremists, but very soon they had been won over by extremist propaganda. 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim tried to encourage moderate groups to form the backbone of his regime, but the moderates failed to respond partly because of personal differences on leadership and partly because the Prime Minister failed to meet some of their demands, especially to open the space for free political activities.²² His dependence on leftist groups alienated moderate elements whose representatives in his cabinet resigned early in 1959. He retorted by creating dissension among the moderate leaders, but this move led to his further dependence on the communists. Thus the country was essentially divided into two radical camps. 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim might have been able to keep a balance between the two had he not antagonized nationalist leaders through his execution in September 1959 of nationalist officers opposed to him.²³

'Abdalkarīm Qāsim could not and did not stand above the struggles of parties, and especially of the two main forces – the nationalists and the communists – nor did he attempt to mediate between them. He made things

²⁰ Takhīṭ ḥāmm li-mahāmm wa ḥām al-ḥizb fī hādhīhi al-marħala. (General Line for Tasks and Activities of the Party in this Phase). In: Niqāl al-Ba'th. (The Struggle of the Ba'th) /A collection of Ba'th Party statements and documents/. Vol. 7, pp. 14 – 17.

²¹ BATATU, Hanna. The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq, p. 818.

²² Az-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth 'Abdalħasan. Thawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fī al-`Irāq, p. 468.

²³ Al-`ALĪ, Hāzim Hasan. Intifādat al-Mawṣil. Thawrat ash-Shawwāf 7 ādhār 1959. (The Uprising in Mosul. The ash-Shawwāf Revolution of 7 April 1959), pp. 166 – 169.

worse and played them off one against the other. He could hardly act in any other way: for one thing the *National Democratic Party*, did not have a wide enough political base; for another, he did not command a solid backing among army officers. From this crucial weakness flowed his necessity of manoeuvring between the nationalists and the communists. His very survival depended upon his not allowing either of the two forces to become too strong or both to reach an accord. He managed to play the game mostly with considerable success, but in the first half of 1959 under given circumstances he had to yield to communist pressure.²⁴

When conflict with ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim developed, the moderate leaders resigned, but the public lost confidence in their judgement. No less significant were the differences among the moderate leaders themselves, especially Kāmil al-Chādirchī and Muḥammad Ḥadīd, concerning co-operation with ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim. Muḥammad Ḥadīd and Husayn Jamīl had represented the *National Democratic Party* in several governments in the past and were ready to resign when their party so decided. Under the Revolutionary regime Muḥammad Ḥadīd and Hudayb al-Hājj Hammūd had represented the party and twice tried to resign, on 7 and 12 February 1959, but ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim refused to accept their resignations.²⁵ Husayn Jamīl, who joined the Cabinet on 8 February that year, resigned two days later when his decision to suspend a newspaper was overruled by ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim. But Muḥammad Ḥadīd remained in the Cabinet on the ground that the Revolutionary regime needed his expert advice. Since the executive committee of the *National Democratic Party* made no formal decision to ask Muḥammad Ḥadīd to resign, Kāmil al-Chādirchī tendered his resignation from the leadership of the party on 20 September 1959. Muḥammad Ḥadīd was torn between the deference paid to him by ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim, and between his loyalty to Kāmil al-Chādirchī and the party. He may have also thought that Kāmil al-Chādirchī's personal opposition to ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim stemmed from personal differences, caused by ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim's neglect of his services, however, he had undermined the position of Kāmil al-Chādirchī by falling under the influence of ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim.²⁶

According to Uriel Dann, the fortunes of the ICP during the first year after the Revolution may be divided into three clearly define phases. 1. Adaptation to the new position, at a time when Arab nationalism was still the prevailing

²⁴ BATATU, Hanna. The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq, p. 847.

²⁵ ^cALĪ, Muḥammad Kāzim. Al-^cIrāq fī ^cahd ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim, 1958 – 1963. (Iraq in the Era of ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim), p. 145.

²⁶ Al-Ahālī, 24. November 1960. Cit. In: KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 133.

force to all appearances in Iraq. 2. An overt onslaught launched by the communists while the government seemed – if not actually allied to them – at least too weak and irresolute to offer effective opposition. This phase includes the nationalist conspiracy of Rashīd Ḥalī al-Kaylānī and the revolt of ‘Abdalwahhāb ash-Shawwāf. Both ended in disaster, thereby giving additional impetus to the communist surge forward which ended in May 1959. 3. Failure of the *ICP* in effective influencing of the development in Iraq.²⁷

No sooner had the July Revolution broken out that the communist leaders who had been abroad returned and those in prison were released, including Zakī Khayrī Sa‘īd, ‘Azīz al-Hājj, Ṣāliḥ ar-Rāziqī and Bāqir Ibrāhīm al-Mūsawī.²⁸ ‘Āmir ‘Abdallāh, Sharif ash-Shaykh, George Ḥannā Tallū, Muḥammad Husayn Abū-l-‘Īs, Yūsuf Ismā‘īl, ‘Abdalqādir Ismā‘īl, and others returned from exile.²⁹ Many sympathizers were ready to co-operate with the *ICP* and its numbers swiftly grew because the party threw admission open to every prospective member with little or no scrutiny of qualifications. The freedom given by the revolutionary regime to political activities enabled the *ICP* to rally round ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim, who got from it the most powerful and, in the event, conclusive support.³⁰

The party began to send memoranda to him declaring their support for the revolutionary regime and giving their opinions on questions of the day. It also quickly began to infiltrate into the civil and military bureaucracy and into such national organizations as trade unions and student associations, many of which they helped to organize.³¹ Moreover, ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim’s initial encouragement greatly helped the spread of communist propaganda. Communist influence reached its high-water mark a year after the Revolution, and the party came very near to achieving power, but the groups hostile to them began to reassert themselves and later the communist demise was as inglorious as its rise was sudden.

One of the factors which contributed to the sudden rise of communist influence was the swiftness with which communist leaders, known for discipline, resumed their activities and reorganized themselves. A central committee of some fifteen members began soon after the Revolution to organize provincial

²⁷ DANN, Uriel. *Iraq Under Qassem. A Political History, 1958 – 1963*, p. 93.

²⁸ ‘ULAYWĪ, Hādī Hasan. ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim. Al-ḥaqīqa. (*‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim. The Truth*), p. 139.

²⁹ HUSAYN, Khalīl Ibrāhīm. Thawrat ash-Shawwāf fī al-Mawṣil 1959. (*The ash-Shawwāf Revolution in Mosul 1959*), p. 259.

³⁰ BATATU, Hanna. *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, p. 818.

³¹ ‘ABDALKARĪM, Samīr. Aqwā’ ‘alā al-ḥaraka ash-shuyū‘īya fī al-‘Irāq. (*Light on the Communist Movement in Iraq*). Vol. II /1958 – 1963/, pp. 14 – 16.

committees all over the country charged with carrying out the official orders of the party. The members of the Central Committee after the Revolution were: Husayn Aḥmad ar-Raḍī, Secretary-General of the party, Ḥamīd ‘Abdallāh, Jamāl al-Ḥaydarī, Hādī Hāshim, Nāṣir ‘Abbūd, Azīz ash-Shaykh, Muḥammad Ṣalīḥ al-‘Aballī, Sharīf ash-Shaykh, Karīm Ahmad ad-Dāwud, Ṣalīḥ ar-Rāziqī, Ḥabīb Sharīf and George Ḥannā Tallū.³²

The first three men stood at the head of the new unified Central Committee in a form of a political bureau.³³ Husayn Aḥmad ar-Raḍī whose party name was Salām Ḥadīl, was a *Shī‘ī* born in 1923 in an-Najaf, the chief *Shī‘ī* centre of Iraq. He moved to Baghdad during World War II. His formal education scarcely went beyond the high school level, but he was eager to learn and acquired his knowledge of communism from personal reading and from contacts with local communist leaders. His humble family background and his membership of a community deprived of privilege must have prompted him to seek satisfaction through clandestine activities familiar in his social environment. Yūsuf Salmān Yūsuf (Fahd), the founder of the party,³⁴ seems to have been impressed by Husayn Aḥmad ar-Raḍī and prepared him for future leadership of the party. In 1953 he rose to membership of the Central Committee and represented Iraq at the Second London Conference of the Communist Parties within the sphere of the British Commonwealth where he met a number of communist leaders. He made acquaintance with Tawfiq Ṭubī, an Arab member of the Central Committee of the *Israeli Communist Party*, who introduced him to Samuel Mikunis, Secretary General of that party.³⁵

Husayn Aḥmad ar-Raḍī felt most at home in matters of practice. In issues of ideology he yielded to Ḥamīd ‘Abdallāh, his closest associate, born in 1924 or 1925. The latter, a more sophisticated thinker who seemed to have gained a deeper understanding of the communist creed, came from a semi-desert area and was apparently of Arab descent. He was born in 1925, grew up at ‘Āna, a town on the Euphrates, and studied law in Baghdad and Cairo. He travelled extensively abroad, especially in Eastern Europe after World War II. He rose quickly in the party hierarchy and early in 1955 was coopted into the Central

³² ḤABĪB ABDALKARĪM, Samīr. *Aḍwā’ ‘alā al-ḥaraka ash-shuyū‘īya fī al-‘Irāq*. (Light on the Communist Movement in Iraq). Vol. II /1958 – 1963/, pp. 11; HUSAYN, Khalīl Ibrāhīm. *Suqūt Ḥabīb ABDALKARĪM Qāsim*. (The Fall of Ḥabīb ABDALKARĪM Qāsim), pp. 109 – 113.

³³ ḤABĪB ABDALKARĪM, Samīr. *Aḍwā’ ‘alā al-ḥaraka ash-shuyū‘īya fī al-‘Irāq*. (Light on the Communist Movement in Iraq). Vol. I /1934 – 1958/, p. 155.

³⁴ KHADDURI, Majid. *Independent Iraq*, p. 360.

³⁵ ḤABĪB ABDALKARĪM, Samīr. *Aḍwā’ ‘alā al-ḥaraka ash-shuyū‘īya fī al-‘Irāq*. (Light on the Communist Movement in Iraq). Vol. I /1934 – 1958/, p. 142.

Committee.³⁶

The renowned historian Majīd Khaddūrī gives a vivid picture of some of the leading members of the *ICP* in that period. Zakī Khayrī Sa‘īd, a *Sunnī* Arab born in 1912, who came from southern Iraq, was one of the old members of the *ICP* and was acknowledged as its nominal leader. Bahā’addīn Nūrī was a Kurd from a poor family who found satisfaction in joining a protest movement against the Arab ruling class. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Abū-l-‘Īs, born 1917, and Jamāl al-Ḥaydarī, though they grew up in relatively better social *milieux*, seem to have been fascinated by the communist creed and interested in the press. ‘Abdalqādir Ismā‘īl, though an old communist, played a relatively less influential role owing to his long absence from the country.³⁷ ‘Azīz Sharīf and ‘Azīz al-Ḥājj, though not members of the Central Committee, were highly thought of in communist circles. The first led the Partisans of Peace in Iraq and was active as a former leader of a leftist political party, and the other distinguished himself as a writer and became editor of *Ittiḥād ash-sha‘b*, an organ of the *Communist Party*.³⁸

Since daily events moved too fast during the first year of the Revolution, the Central Committee never met regularly and decisions concerning specific issues were often made by the Secretary-General in consultation with a few influential members. There was always an air of urgency and some members of the party often complained that many mistakes had been made simply because the decisions were not carefully studied before they were adopted by the Central Committee. The Committee quickly began to work after the July Revolution and laid down a general policy concerning the attitude of the *Communist Party* towards the new regime.³⁹ Since the party proclaimed democracy as one of its goals, it seemed ironic to many followers that little or no trace of democracy was ever displayed in the conduct of their leaders. This was one of the reasons that prompted many members to desert the party.

Early in September 1958 the Central Committee held meetings at which a number of far-reaching decisions were taken. These seem to have included the formulation of a general policy towards the regime of ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim as well as decisions concerning the consolidation of the party. With regard to the regime, the Committee adopted the following decision: “The regime established by the July Revolution is a revolutionary, national, and bourgeois regime in

³⁶ BATATU, Hanna. The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq, p. 719.

³⁷ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 119.

³⁸ KHADDURI, Majid. Independent Iraq, p. 300.

³⁹ Az-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth ‘Abdalḥasan. Thawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fī al-‘Irāq, pp. 229 – 233.

which various levels of the bourgeois class are represented – the small, middle, and upper bourgeoisie. Thus, this regime does not represent all the national (popular) forces. In it we find the very basis of anachronism. This anachronism should provide the source for a conflict among the national forces – national groups and parties – a conflict which might deepen. It would be a great mistake to regard this situation – the existence of anachronism – as a natural order. Nor should we let the situation continue and resign ourselves to it, for it might have (an adverse) effect on the national and popular regime of our Republic. It is possible to reduce this inherent anachronism through the mobilization of popular forces and then eventually to eliminate it".⁴⁰

The revolutionary regime was bourgeois according to the communists, but they held that it was possible to exploit internal conflicts and transform it into a proletarian one. This end, they maintained, might be accomplished by bringing pressure to bear on the authorities to include popular representatives in the regime until it was eventually fully made up of communist elements.⁴¹ Since ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim was in need of popular support, and the communists were inherently opposed to his opponents – the pan-Arabs – they perceived that he was bound to allow communists to mobilize popular forces to support his regime. The communists hoped to persuade ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim to take communists into the Cabinet, so that if their number sufficiently increased, the Cabinet would be dominated by communists. They hoped that step by step the country might fall under their influence.⁴²

To achieve that end, the communist leaders kept direct contact with ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim, who admitted some of them, especially ^cĀmir ^cAbdallāh, to his counsel, and exchanged ideas with them.⁴³ ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim's readiness to consult communist leaders encouraged a few civil and military in high ranks to assist the communists in spreading their creed and even to go so far as to help the communists infiltrate their departments. In three of these departments, Defence, Education, and Guidance, the communists held key positions. ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim as minister of defence, permitted the communists to spread propaganda in the army, despite the opposition of a number of high-ranking

⁴⁰ ^cABDALKARĪM, Samīr. Aqwā' ^calā al-haraka ash-shuyū'īya fī al-^cIrāq. Vol. II /1958 – 1963/, pp. 13 – 14.

⁴¹ ^cALĪ, Muḥammad Kāzim. Al-^cIrāq fī ^cahd ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim, 1958 – 1963. (Iraq in the Era of ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim), p. 135.

⁴² ^cULAYWĪ, Hādī Ḥasan. ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim. Al-ḥaqīqa. (^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim. The Truth), p. 145.

⁴³ BATATU, Hanna. The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq, p. 719.

officers.⁴⁴ Colonel Fādil Ḩabbās al-Mahdāwī and the Prosecutor-General of his court showed undisguised sympathy with communist activities and participated in some of their rallies.

The militia or the Popular Resistance Force (*al-Muqāwama ash-sha‘biya*), under communist influence, organized to defend the Revolutionary regime, and persecute pan-Arabs. Some, like trade unions and professional associations, had already in the past fallen under the influence of one ideological group or another; but after the Revolution the Communists were able to infiltrate them and gain control.⁴⁵ But as the provocative behaviour of many members of the Resistance was widely identified with the *ICP*, there was a general impression that a major communist advance through the state institutions was taking place. Communist infiltration was even greater in the Department of Education, for the youth of the country proved easier to win over, and they often participated in street demonstrations and processions. One of the most helpful media for the diffusion of leftist ideas was front organizations (like the Students' Union, the Youth Union, the Writers' Association and Women's Association), organized after the Revolution. The communist leaders inspired or helped their establishment throughout the country, and they also came under communist influence.⁴⁶

The communists had an interest in gaining access to publicity and influencing mass media and they succeeded when Staff Major Sālim al-Fakhrī, a full member of the *ICP*, was appointed as director of broadcasting.⁴⁷ The television and radio stations, under the control of a communist sympathizer, became instruments in their hands. The press, under Government control (the Ministry of Guidance), was bound to publish accounts of communist activities because they included statements favourable to Ḩabdālkarīm Qāsim and the Revolutionary regime. Moreover, the Communists published their own newspapers and propaganda material.⁴⁸

The *ICP* so overshadowed its rivals, and developed such self-confidence, that on 14 January 1959 Ḩabdālkarīm Qāsim, feeling uncomfortable, suddenly drew in the reins. He declared that Popular Resistance and the Student Union were not in the future to perform any policing duties without a clear order from

⁴⁴ Ad-DURRA, Maḥmūd. *Thawrat al-Mawṣil al-qawmīya* 1959. Faṣl fī tārīkh al-‘Irāq al-mu‘āṣir. (The National Revolution of 1959 in Mosul. Chapter of the Contemporary Iraqi History), p. 92.

⁴⁵ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 122.

⁴⁶ SLUGLETT, Marion Farouk & Peter SLUGLETT. Iraq since 1958. From Revolution to Dictatorship, p. 63.

⁴⁷ HUSAYN, Khalīl Ibrāhīm. *Thawrat ash-Shawwāf fī al-Mawṣil* 1959. (The ash-Shawwāf Revolution in Mosul 1959), Vol. I, pp. 296 – 298; BATATU, Hanna. The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq, p. 858.

⁴⁸ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 121.

the supreme command of the armed forces or from the military governor general. By thus curbing the communists the Prime Minister hoped to propitiate the nationalist members of the cabinet and the nationalist officers in the army. However, only a short time later ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim veered again toward the communists. It was because reports began coming in that a new conspiracy was hatching against him: such an eventuality could best be fended off by massive popular intervention, which only the communists could secure for him.⁴⁹

In the wake of the collapse of the Mosul revolt, huge demonstrations and processions, the like of which the people have never known before, surged along Baghdad's streets calling upon the Prime Minister to adopt strong measures. In the past, street demonstrations in which communists participated were directed against the authorities, but after the July Revolution the communists demonstrated in support of authority and shouted slogans either expressing their specific demands or to impress ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim with popular support for his regime. The communists could not disguise their pleasure when ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim issued orders to execute former military supporters. In the procession on 27 March 1959 the communists demanded the execution of death sentences passed by the Special Supreme Military Court (al-Mahkama al-^caskariya al-^culyā al-khāṣṣa), the notorious Mahdāwī Court.⁵⁰ Consequently, they themselves began to terrorize the nationalists and demanded the execution of all whom the Court had condemned to death but whose orders of execution remained on ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim's desk. In the procession on 28 and 29 May the communists' slogan appeared, demanding official representation in the Cabinet. Although no official representative of the *Communist Party* existed in the Cabinet, Ibrāhīm Kubba, Minister of Economics, displayed pronounced leftist views and was regarded as the party's spokesman; the communist press often referred to him as the representative of the popular forces. On 13 July, in honour of the first anniversary of the Revolution, ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim added another leftist member, Dr. Naziha ad-Dulaymī, chairwoman of the Women's League, the first woman to hold cabinet rank, as Minister of Municipalities.⁵¹ The communists, regarding her appointment as a victory for the party, demonstrated in the streets to celebrate the occasion, even though she was not a member of the party.

⁴⁹ Al-^cAZZĀWĪ, Jāsim Kāzim. Mudhakkirāt al-^camīd ar-ruqn Jāsim Kāzim al-^cAzzāwī. Thawrat 14 tammūz. Asrāruha, ahḍāthuha, rijāluha ḥattā nihāyat ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim. (Memoirs of Staff Brigadier Jāsim Kāzim al-^cAzzāwī. The Revolution of 14 July. Its Secrets, its Events, its Men until the End of ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim), p. 228.

⁵⁰ Al-JA^cFARĪ, Muḥammad Ḥamdī. Maḥkamat al-Mahdāwī. Agrab al-muḥākamāt as-siyāṣīya fī tārīkh al-^cIrāq al-ḥadīth. (Al-Mahdāwī Court. The Most unusual Trials in the Modern Iraqi History), 1990.

⁵¹ Az-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth ^cAbdalḥasan. Thawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fī al-^cIrāq, p. 487.

The period from mid-March to the end of April 1959 marked the high tide of communism under the regime of 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim. The non-communist newspapers were stopped and the remaining ones were all communist or fellow-travelling. The *ICP* organ *Ittiḥād ash-sha'b* became the most important daily in Iraq and all traces of nationalist opposition vanished from the streets.⁵² Although freedom was given to all parties after the Revolution, it was denied to pan-Arabs when they came into conflict with the new regime. Communist complicity with 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim to restrict pan-Arab activities as well as their resort to violence against their opponents negated the very principles which their leaders had been preaching and they encouraged the Prime Minister to apply the same methods to all political groups, eventually including the communists themselves, whenever he met with opposition.

Most repugnant were the purges of centres known to have been opposed to communism. The Mosul purge, as has been noted, was the first in which the communists committed outrages after the suppression of the uprising of 'Abd-alwahhāb ash-Shawwāf. In Baghdad the communists raided nationalist centres, resulting in the destruction of property and life.⁵³ The riots which broke out at Kirkuk on the Revolution Day lasted for three days and the brutality of the acts exceeded even Mosul, and was perhaps the climax of the communist onslaught on their opponents. It also proved to be the beginning of the recession of the communist tide. The communists sought to bring Kirkuk, regarded as stronghold of anti-communist feeling, under their influence. As in the case of Mosul, they sent to Kirkuk bands to reinforce those already in the city to intimidate anti-communist elements, and the bloody battle that ensued resulted in the death of about one hundred persons, with many more men and women mutilated or injured. The plan of the *ICP* was to terrorize the nation into submission and clear the way to a final takeover. So outrageous was the purge that 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim denounced the action as barbaric first in a speech on 19 July in the Chaldean Church of St. Joseph at Baghdad and then in a press conference on 29 July he condemned the "cruelty and blind fanaticism".⁵⁴ Afterwards, the communist leaders tried to dissociate themselves from criminal acts and condemned those who had taken part in them.⁵⁵

As in Mosul, the social structure of Kirkuk was in no small measure a contributing factor to the communist purge. The communist leaders may have

⁵² DANN, Uriel. Iraq Under Qassem. A Political History, 1958 – 1963, pp. 179.

⁵³ Al-'AZZĀWĪ, Jāsim Kāzim. *Mudhakkirāt al-'amīd ar-ruqn Jāsim Kāzim al-'Azzāwī*, pp. 229 – 230.

⁵⁴ 'ABDALKARĪM, Samīr. *Aḍwā' 'alā al-ḥaraka ash-shuyū'īya fī al-'Irāq*. Vol. II /1958 – 1963/, pp. 122 – 123; 'ULAYWĪ, Hādī Ḥasan. 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim, p. 148.

⁵⁵ HUSAYN, Khalil Ibrāhīm. *Suqūṭ 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim*, pp. 102 – 104.

been right in their public declarations that they were not responsible for mass murder, although they had inspired the purge and encouraged the attack on anti-communist elements. The heart of the city was inhabited by Turkish-speaking people, most of them probably descended from Turkomans who had been settled there for centuries. They formed an exclusive community which refused to be assimilated. In recent times, especially after the Iraq Petroleum Company began to employ large numbers of local workers, Kurds from neighbouring villages and towns flocked into the city and began to reside in its suburbs. Socially and culturally more advanced than the Kurds, the Turkomans were employed in senior posts, and the members of their leading families enjoyed prestige and high respect. Cheap labour was supplied by Kurds. These differentials created latent animosity between Kurds and Turkomans. Moreover the *Democratic Party of Iraqi Kurdistan* (al-Ḥizb ad-dīmuqrāṭī li-Kurdistān al-‘Irāq), organized shortly before the Revolution, was affiliated to the *Iraqi Communist Party*. Thus the Kurds in Kirkuk, incensed by social grievances and incited by communist propaganda, began to attack the Turkomans, who displayed an undisguised feeling of aversion to communist propaganda.⁵⁶

Never before had the communists committed such excesses; the consequences, as a foreign observer sympathetic to communism once remarked, were that the communist movement in Iraq suffered a setback from which it would not recover for over fifty years because of the blunders which its leaders committed under the revolutionary regime.⁵⁷ As was expected, communist excesses incited pan-Arab retaliation and aroused public hostility, which gave ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim ample excuses to restrict their activities when he began to find that the pan-Arab nationalism no longer presented a serious threat to his regime. It is not quite clear why the communists decided on a policy which was not really in their best interests. In fact, it was the pan-Arabs who were determined to win the ideological battle when Colonel ‘Abdassalām ‘Ārif championed the cause of Arab unity. The *ICP*, small at first, found itself outnumbered by pan-Arabs and was afraid of them. It was this fear that prompted the party to follow a liberal policy in admitting new members, giving their ready support to ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim and resorting to terrorist measures. The attitude of the *ICP* could have stemmed from the assumption that the regime was firstly, anti-imperialist in origin and committed to stay out of Western defence systems, secondly, determined to stay independent of the UAR – a vital consideration of communist party policy in the Arab Middle East, and thirdly, was the least of all evils if the possibility of communist government was excepted, and this the

⁵⁶ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 125.

⁵⁷ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 123.

communists never anticipated in the immediate future.⁵⁸

The developments in Iraq from late summer of 1959 indicate that 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim came to the conclusion that the vaunted communist menace had proved to be a paper tiger. He also understood a further point that the communists had not grasped: the ferocious hatred born of fear, which the communists had engendered in the mind of the public would not simply disappear. He had to consider public opinion, and chiefly the attitude of the army and senior officials, who would exact revenge, and he would have difficulty preventing excesses. His first task was to frustrate the expectations of the still powerful *ICP* that the licensing of parties would bring it recognition, freedom of action and ultimately power.⁵⁹

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The failure of the Mosul revolt of 'Abdalwahhāb ash-Shawwāf, had led the Ba'thists and the nationalists to the conclusion that their principal enemy was 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim himself, as he had given tacit consent to communists to attack the Arab nationalists. Already before the uprising, some of 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim's military opponents encouraged Fu'ād ar-Rikābī and other leaders of the *Ba'th* to think that the only way out was to get rid of 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim, but the *Ba'th party* was not yet ready to act. The plan was also discussed with Ṣiddīq Shanshal of the *Independence Party* who approved it and General Najīb ar-Rubayṭī, President of the Sovereignty Council, who also agreed to play an important role indirectly and promised to be ready to exercise supreme authority as head of the state and organizer of a Revolutionary Council after the assassination.⁶⁰ However, the rising tide of communist influence after the collapse of the uprising made the Ba'thist leaders restless, since their forces in the army had been removed or arrested, and a new coup was no longer feasible.⁶¹ Therefore they began to consider the possibility of eliminating 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim by assassination, and then to assume power themselves.

The executive committee of the *Ba'th Party*, presided over by Fu'ād ar-Rikābī, returned to the plan in March and April 1959, and began to hold meetings in which it was decided that the only way to put an end to communist influence was to assassinate 'Abdalkarīm Qāsim, as ultimately responsible for the spread of communism in the country. He therefore had to be killed if the communist tide were ever to be stopped. Assassination was opposed by some ba'thists, but it seemed to others to be a patriotic act and the only way to

⁵⁸ DANN, Uriel. *Iraq Under Qassem. A Political History, 1958 – 1963*, pp. 93 – 94.

⁵⁹ DANN, Uriel. *Iraq Under Qassem. A Political History, 1958 – 1963*, p. 234.

⁶⁰ AZ-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth 'Abdalḥasan. *Thawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fī al-'Irāq*, p. 499; MARR, Phebe. *The Modern History of Iraq*, p. 163.

⁶¹ KHADDURI, Majid. *Republican Iraq*, p. 127.

eliminate ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim, since an attempted military uprising had failed.⁶²

The Ba^cthist leaders began to study possible plans and came to the conclusion that a direct attack was the only way to kill him. They reviewed the situation and decided to carry out the assassination plan. A number of volunteers from among members of the party were therefore selected to carry out the plan. The executive committee appointed two members – Ayyād Sa^cid Thābit and Khālid ad-Dulaymī – to execute it. These two selected ten members to form a commando to be trained in the use of weapons and instructed in the ways and means of carrying out the plan.⁶³

The plan was to attack ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim during one of his daily journeys through ar-Rashīd Street from his house to his office at the Defence Department or when returning. The members of the commando were to stage their attack at a narrow point of the street, where one of the cars would intercept the car of ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim and stop the traffic, and the rest of the assailants would then open fire with machine-guns on the premier and his aide-de-camp. The members of the commando were ordered to wait in disguise in a rented apartment for a telephone call to report that the premier's car was approaching the fixed place.⁶⁴ All preparation had been completed by the end of June and the commando was ready to act.

However, in July the action was postponed when ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim criticized communist excesses and had given instructions to restrict their activities. Some of the pan-Arab politicians who had been interned were released and a number of nationalist officers who had been dismissed after the Mosul revolt were reinstated into the army at the beginning of August.⁶⁵ One of them, Major Ṣāliḥ Mahdī ^cAmmāsh, a member of the *Ba^cth Party* who had recently been released from detention and reinstated in the army, became their liaison officer.

The political situation had changed profoundly in the aftermath of the Kirkuk atrocities. The nationalists were gaining rapidly in confidence and also attracted a measure of public sympathy for their cause during the trial of the leaders of the Mosul revolt.⁶⁶ Matters came to a head when ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim

⁶² MARR, Phebe. The Modern History of Iraq, p. 164.

⁶³ Within this group of young Ba^cthists, trained for the assignment, were also Ṣaddām Husayn, ^cAbdalkarīm ash-Shaykhī, ^cAbdalwahhāb al-Ğarībī, Tāhā Yāsīn and Hātim Hamdān al-^cAzzāwī. In: ^cALĪ, Muḥammad Kāzīm. Al-^cIrāq fī ^cahd ^cAbdalkarīm Qāsim, 1958 – 1963, p. 148; Az-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth ^cAbdalḥasan. Thawrat 14 tammuz 1958 fī al-^cIrāq, p. 500.

⁶⁴ Al-^cAZZĀWĪ, Jāsim Kāzīm. Mudhakkirāt al-^camīd ar-ruqn Jāsim Kāzīm al-^cAzzāwī, p. 240.

⁶⁵ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 128.

⁶⁶ SLUGLETT, Marion Farouk & Peter SLUGLETT. Iraq since 1958, p. 73.

decided to execute the officers who had taken part in the initial planning of the ‘Abdalwahhāb ash-Shawwāf uprising, especially Nāzim aṭ-Ṭabaqchalī and Rif‘at al-Hājj Sirrī, although they had declared their dissociation with it. Despite pleading to spare their lives, the execution was carried out on 20 September 1959. A pan-Arab demonstration in protest against the execution was staged in the al-Aṣzamīya and al-Karkh quarters, the principal pan-Arab centres in the nation’s capital, on the eve of the execution, but ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim paid no attention to the protests and issued orders for the arrest of pan-Arab leaders who had inspired the demonstrations.⁶⁷ Fu‘ād ar-Rikābī, who was involved in these activities, went into hiding in al-Aṣzamīya, in an old house not far from the residence of the Prosecutor General of the Mahdāwī Court, and from there he directed the execution of the assassination plan. On 1 October 1959 the commando was directed to carry out the action in the following week. The date was fixed several times but it was called off either because ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim failed to appear on that day or changed his route.⁶⁸

On Wednesday, 7 October preparations for the action were again complete and Ṣāliḥ Mahdī ‘Ammāsh at the Ministry of Defence signalled a green light. ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim left his office at 6.30 p.m. to attend the celebration of a national day at the Embassy of the German Democratic Republic, and had to pass through ar-Rashīd Street. Telephone calls were sent to the commando’s secret hiding place and the members immediately rushed to the street carrying their guns under their coats. Salīm az-Zi’baq, whose car was parked opposite the point of action, was unable to move it to intercept the Premier’s car when it arrived because he had left the keys inside the car and could not open the doors.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the Prime Minister’s car arrived in time at the fixed point of attack and ‘Abdalwahhāb al-Gharīrī, immediately opened fire on the car and killed its driver and seriously wounded Major Qāsim al-Janābī, the aide-de-camp. The other members, on both sides of the street, also fired and threw hand-grenades. ‘Abdalwahhāb al-Gharīrī tried to rush to the car to kill the Premier, but was hit by one of the commando member’s shots from the other side of the street and fell dead.⁷⁰ Ṣaddām Ḥusayn at-Tikrītī and Samīr ‘Abdal‘azīz Najm were also hit. The commando members were thrown into confusion, since all were experiencing for the first times a bloody battle, and thought that the Premier had been killed, for he fell inside the car. The street was quickly deserted by almost all pedestrians. Believing that it had completed its task, the commando began to withdraw and hide before ascertaining whether

⁶⁷ Az-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth ‘Abdalḥasan. Thawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fi al-‘Irāq, p. 500.

⁶⁸ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 129.

⁶⁹ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 129.

⁷⁰ Ad-DURRA, Maḥmūd. Thawrat al-Mawṣil al-qawmīya 1959, p. 369.

the Premier had been killed, although two members had been commissioned to shoot him in the head after he had fallen to ensure that he had been killed. Since no one remained in the street to identify the assassins, the commando members seized the opportunity to disappear before the arrival of the police, and returned to their hiding place.⁷¹

‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim was seriously wounded but still alive. If one of the commando members had fired a last shot at him, no one would have dared to stop him. Soon afterwards, one of the passers-by approached Qāsim’s car and to his surprise found Qāsim alive. He was rushed by a taxi driver to the near by Dār as-Salām hospital for treatment. News spread that the Sole Leader by a miracle had escaped the assassin’s bullet. The rest of the action fell flat. Ṣāliḥ Aḥmad al-‘Abdī, Chief of the General Staff and Military Governor of Baghdad, proved loyal to ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim and was able to hold the country under control. Some of the Free Officers asked him to join them in taking over the government, but Ṣāliḥ Aḥmad al-‘Abdī flatly refused.⁷² He broadcast a proclamation, in which he assured the nation that ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim was alive, and said: “To the honourable Iraqi people, while His Excellency the Sole Leader of the country, Maj.-Gen. ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim, was passing by car through Rashid Street about 18.30 today, a sinful hand opened fire at his car. He received a very slight wound in the shoulder. His condition is very good and does not give cause for worry. We call on the honourable people to rest assured that our saviour is in excellent good health. We call on them to remain calm and pass on the news to the people thronging around the hospital to inquire about his health he went out and greeted them in order to give them peace of mind.”⁷³

For the first few days after the action the *Ba‘th* regional command intended to sit out the storm in order to maintain its underground organization intact. However, a special committee of investigation was appointed, and within two weeks all culprits, save those who fled the country, were arrested. As was to be expected, they were referred to the Mahdawī Court for trial. Fu’ād ar-Rikābī, hiding in a separate place, secretly fled the country on 13 November and arrived in Damascus on the following day disguised as a tribesman. From there he went to Cairo, where he remained for the next four years. But it was an abdication all the same; he had evacuated his place at the top, never to recover it.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ad-DURRA, Maḥmūd. Thawrat al-Mawṣil al-qawmīya 1959, p. 369.

⁷² DANN, Uriel. Iraq Under Qassem, p. 255.

⁷³ Az-ZUBAYDĪ, Layth ‘Abdalḥasan. Thawrat 14 tammūz 1958 fī al-‘Irāq, pp. 501 – 502.

⁷⁴ DANN, Uriel. Iraq Under Qassem, p. 257.

On 26 December 1959 the trial of the plotters began. There were seventy-eight accused, twenty-one of whom were fugitives. Extensive cross-examination was conducted and most of those who took part in the plot admitted their guilt but defended their stand with courage. Very few denied that they had anything to do with the plot. Some, like Iyād Sa‘īd Thābit, Salīm az-Zi‘baq, and Aḥmad Ṭāhā al-‘Azūz, defended their convictions in strong terms and declared that they were not sorry for taking part in what they regarded as a national duty. Colonel Fāḍil ‘Abbās al-Mahdāwī had never faced a group of accused like these courageous young men, who compelled him to listen with respect and patience. This time he failed to utter the rhetorical abuse for which his court had become renowned.⁷⁵ The police, however, did not spare torture while the accused were under investigation. The court passed death sentences on those directly connected with the plot, but ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim, as in earlier cases, preferred to postpone action.⁷⁶ He was still in the hospital when the verdicts reached him and there were rumours that a pan-Arab inspired revolt would take place in Baghdad if the executions were carried out. Although the death sentences had not been commuted, these guilty remained in prison until they were released after the fall of ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim in 1963.⁷⁷

Failure to end ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim’s rule by assassination raised doubt among the ba‘thist leaders about the wisdom of the decision to involve their party in criminal acts. Some who repudiated the decision left the party on the ground that they did not believe in killing. Fu’ād ar-Rikābī, however, tried to justify the action of his party’s executive committee, over which he presided when the assassination decision was taken, on the ground that assassination was one of the revolutionary methods which the party accepted not merely as an act to get rid of one individual opposed to the party. ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim had proved to be a traitor to Arab nationalism in pan-Arab eyes, and the only way to end a regime that had fallen under communist influence was by taking his life. This act, pan-Arab leaders argued, was tacitly approved by the nation, and therefore was no ordinary criminal act: it was a national duty undertaken by the nation’s sons.

The narrow escape from the attempt on his life served to restore ‘Abdalkarīm Qāsim’s aura as Sole Leader and the tendency of self-immolation became weirdly intense. He himself came round to the belief that divine providence had stayed the hands of the assassins, and the massive and spontaneous demonstrations of crowds calling his name must also have encouraged his sense of

⁷⁵ KHADDURI, Majid. Republican Iraq, p. 131.

⁷⁶ Al-‘AZZĀWĪ, Jāsim Kāzim. Mudhakkirāt al-‘amīd ar-ruqn Jāsim Kāzim al-‘Azzāwī, p. 244.

⁷⁷ Ad-DURRA, Maḥmūd. Thawrat al-Mawṣil al-qawmīya 1959, p. 370 – 373.

having been "chosen". Furthermore, the mass support he was still able to rally as the incarnation of the July Revolution made him underestimate the real vulnerability of his position and perhaps also to overestimate his ability to act as an arbitrator between the opposing political forces. However, these demonstrations could not conceal the fact that his political survival depended upon his ability to ensure that the bulk of the officer corps remained supportive and that he and the intelligence services which he had inherited from the monarchical regime stayed one step ahead of potential conspirators.⁷⁸

To this end he continued to pursue a conciliatory policy towards the nationalists and to reinstate many of them into the armed forces and the civil service, while simultaneously cutting the *ICP* down to size. Unfortunately it was already too late for him to win over the sympathies of the nationalists. Too much blood had been spilled, and the political polarization had gone too far, with the result that his attempts to conciliate the moderate forces by clamping down on the communists merely served to undermine his only secure source of support.

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