

## Jews, Assyrians and Communism in Iraq

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Mar 1, 2022

Many suggest that the history of the Marxist ideology and organization in Iraq could be traced to a single individual, Husain al-Rahhal who was a student at the Baghdad School of Law. In 1924 al-Rahhal formed what is now seen as the first "Marxist" group in Iraq. This group of young intellectuals began initially to meet in Baghdad's Haidarkhanah Mosque (a location also famous as a meeting place for revolutionaries in 1920) and discussing "new ideas" of the day. They eventually formed a small newspaper, al-Sahifah (*The Journal*), which detailed Marxist ideology. Membership in this circle of friends included such influential Iraqis as Mustafa Ali, Minister of Justice under Abd al-Kareem Qasim, and Mahmoud Ahmad Al-Sayyid, considered Iraq's first novelist. In 1929, a sharp decline in international commodity prices caused a more than 40 percent drop in the value of Iraqi exports. This led to a national economic depression and massive wage reductions for many of Iraq's workers. It was at this time that the Communist circles began growing among young men in al-Basra (led by Ghali Zuwayyid) and in al-Nasiriyyah (led by an Assyrian Yusuf Salman Yusuf, who is more commonly known as "Comrade Fahd"). Several circles were also growing in Baghdad, led by such notables as 'Asim Flayyeh, Mahdi Hashim, and Zaki Khairi.<sup>1</sup> We will hear more about Zaki Khairi later in this article.



Yusuf Salman Yusuf

An organized Communist party in Iraq was established in 1934. It played a prominent role in shaping the political history of Iraq between its inception and the 1970s. The Iraqi Communists were involved in many national uprisings and demonstrations that took place in 1940s and 1950s. The early 20<sup>th</sup> Century demonstrations and uprisings were organized on various pretexts such as religious differences and nationalism; however, they soon were influenced by the Communist due to the deplorable socio—economic conditions.<sup>2</sup>

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1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi\\_Communist\\_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_Communist_Party)

2 Khadduri, Majid. *Independent Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics since 1932*. Oxford University Press, 1951. p. 12

An example of such participation in demonstrations was that in 1936. The government had denied many groups to issue any daily paper, had a rigid control of the press and did not permit the reissue of suppressed papers.<sup>3</sup> The persistent fight by Iraqi groups, in addition to Prime Minister Yasin al-Hashimi's troubles in the parliament and with the young King Ghazi led to the fall of the Pan-Arab government of Yasin al-Hashimi/Rashid Ali regime.

The Communist were active in parliament. However, the work of the moderate nationalists was far-reaching since they were able not only to contribute to the fall of the Iraqi Reformists, but were also capable of infusing the reconstructed Hikmat Sulaiman Cabinet, after the resignation of its Reformist members, with the intensely pan-Arab outlook. Hikmat and the Kurdish strong army man Bakir Sidqi, who led the state-sponsored [genocide](#) of over 3,000 Assyrians in Simele, northern Iraq in 1933, realized that the nationalists could not be ignored and were a threat to them. Meanwhile, in Parliament the Communist bogey was exploited by the nationalists and newspapers such as the Istiqlal (Independence) and Bilad (Country) pushed articles on the danger of the Communists. On March 17, 1937 Sidqi made a public defiance of Communists; he declared: "The soil of Iraq is unsuitable for Communism ... those who would try to plant Communism in Iraq soil would be just as unsuccessful as those who would try to transplant the palm-trees of Basrah to the mountains of Norway!"<sup>4</sup>

Let's return to Khairi. During a TV program on Feb 12, 2022 on the Iraqi al-Sharqiya's "Limited Edition", the guest was Souad Sasson Khairi, an Iraqi Jew and wife of Zaki Khairi. In the program it was reported that with the Iraqi government crack of the Communists, many Communist reformers fled the cause in 1937 leaving the leadership of the party in the hands of Khairi, who was one of the Communist's party founders and a member of central committee 1935-1937.



Souad Khairi on Limited Edition TV program

Khairi sought new support for the party among the lower ranks of the military throughout the late 1930s. After his imprisonment he became member of the central committee 1958-1977. He later participated in the alliance between the Ba'ath and the Iraqi Communist (ICP) in 1973-1978.

3 Khadduri, Majid. Independent Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics since 1932. Oxford University Press, 1951. p. 66

4 Khadduri, Majid. Independent Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics since 1932. Oxford University Press, 1951. p. 112



Zaki Khairi, wife Souad and their children

Souad stated that she loved her hometown of al-Nasiriyyah<sup>5</sup> city, but the family had to move to Baghdad so that Souad could continue her education since there were no high schools in Nasiriyyah. She said that life in al-Nasiriyyah was beautiful where Jews, Christians and Muslims lived side by side in peace. She later said that she had refused to leave Iraq and go to Israel like many other Jews in the 1950s. She accepted to convert to Islam in order to stay in Iraq. She, like many other Communists, was imprisoned because of her Marxists beliefs, had escaped to Iran and from there to Russia, but later returned to Iraq.

Souad's sentiments regarding her love for Iraq were echoed by the then Iraq's chief Rabbi who stated "Iraqi Jews will be forever against Zionism". "Jews and Arabs have enjoyed the same rights and privileges for 1,000 years and do not regard themselves a distinctive separate part of this nation", stated the chief Rabbi.<sup>6</sup> However, the Zionists worked to change these feelings by covertly attacking Iraqi Jews so as to induce them to flee to Israel.<sup>7</sup> According to a former CIA operative Wilbur Crane Eveland, Zionists planted bombs in Iraqi synagogues to terrorize the Jews.<sup>8</sup> Soon leaflets began to appear urging Jews to flee to Israel.<sup>9</sup>

There were many Jews who followed the Marxists ideology in Iraq. Many of these Jews were against the principles of Zionism. In fact, those Jews created a pact under Yusuf Haron Zalkha named the Communist Jews to Combat Zionism.

Ezekiel Qochman (b. 1929) was a Jew as well, another member of the Communist Party in Iraq and a member of the League to Combat Zionism as well. He married Habiba Sasson (Souad's sister) imprisoned several times in 1950s. Died in October 27, 2018 in London.

5 Al-Nasiriyyah is a city on the Euphrates River in southern Iraq, northwest of al-Basrah.

6 Lilienthal, *What Price Israel*, p. 151

7 Weir, Alison, [Against Our Better Judgment](#), p. 32-33.

8 Eveland, Wilbur, *Ropes of Sand: America's Failure in the Middle East* (London: W.W. Norton, 1980), p. 48

9 Eveland, Wilbur, *Ropes of Sand: America's Failure in the Middle East* (London: W.W. Norton, 1980), p. 48-49



Ezekiel Qochman, wife Habiba and their child

Hikmat Sulaiman and Bakir Sidqi continued to suppress the Communist leaders. In 1938, they succeeded to have the parliament pass a resolution outlawing Communism in Iraq and punishing any person engaged in Communist activities with penal servitude or death.<sup>10</sup> However, when the Soviet Union signed the Non-Aggression Pact on August 26, 1939, the Communists in Iraq were ready to cooperate with the pan-Arab group and when Rashid Ali seized power in 1941, they actively supported his regime. But by the end of 1941 various Communist groups were organized, but failed to create a unified front owing to their disagreement both on personal and procedural grounds. The most important group, led by Yusuf Salman Yusuf, an Assyrian ethnically, born on July 19, 1901 in Bartella, near Mosul. He moved to Basrah and then in 1919 to al-Nasiriyyah to help his brother run a mill. In 1927, Yusuf met Piotr Vasili, a fellow Assyrian and an undercover emissary of the *Communist International*, who introduced him to socialism and communism. Yusuf took part in the first communist circle established that year in al-Nasiriyya. He organized the secret Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and issued a secret paper called the Qa'ida (Foundation).<sup>11</sup> He is generally credited with a vital role in the party's rapid organizational growth in the 1940s. For the last two years of his life he directed the party from his prison cell.

When the Iraqi government licensed 5 parties to be recognized in 1945, it denied the Communists permission to organize the al-Taharur al-Watani (National Liberation) party, the Communists resorted to clandestine activities to circulate their unlicensed papers secretly. They incited workers and students to start demonstrations, one such strike took place in Kirkuk in July 1946 and an uprising in January 1948. The Iraqi police opened fire on some 400 workers demonstrating in Kirkuk for fair wages killing 5-8 persons. Such activities led the Iraqi Government to issue an order to the Police to investigate the Communists. Many Communist leaders were imprisoned and then put on trial. Yusuf Salman was sentenced to death and hanged on February 14, 1949.

Many Assyrians joined the ICP in the absence of a known and well-organized Assyrian political group in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. One of the most well-known was Toma Tomas, who was born in 1924 in the Assyrian town of Alqosh, northern Iraq. Tomas witnessed firsthand the Simele massacre as Assyrians

<sup>10</sup> Articles 89 and 89A of the Baghdad Penal Code at the time.

<sup>11</sup> Khadduri, Majid. *Independent Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics since 1932*. Oxford University Press, 1951. p. 274

escaped the genocide to his hometown of Alqosh. The Assyrian massacre was crucial in shaping his political ideas in the future. After the completion of his schooling, he traveled to Kirkuk seeking employment at the oil company there. In Kirkuk, he joined the ICP in early 1950s. Tomas moved back to his home town again after the July 14, 1958 as the Communists came to power.<sup>12</sup>



Toma Tomas

The 1958 revolution ended the British backed monarchy rule that was established in 1921 as Iraq was officially created. The British had brought Faisal, the third son of Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi, the Grand Emir and Sharif of Mecca, and crowned him king of Iraq after he was expelled from Syria where he was crowned king for few months.<sup>13</sup> However, the brief stability in Iraq under Abd al-Karim Qasim did not last long. On February 8, 1963, a military coup d'état overthrew Qasim and brought Arab nationalists to power. Many of the Communists were rounded up and executed. Others, headed by Tomas, fled to the northern Iraq's mountains where they formed armed guerrilla's known as the *Ansar* to fight against the central government. The *Ansar* stretched their 30 years struggle from the Turkish borders in the north to the Assyrian town of Telkepe to the south. They did join the Kurds in their own struggle. Tomas died in Syria on October 15, 1996 and was buried in a cemetery in Nohadra (Dohuk). His remains were reburied in his home town of Alqosh in 2010.<sup>14</sup>

While the ICP opposed the 2003 US occupation of Iraq, it participated in the 2005, 2014 and 2018 Iraqi elections. In those elections, it joined and collaborated with other socialist, secular, and moderate parties. It did not participate in the 2010 and boycotted the 2021 elections. Some analysts argue that the ICP deviated from its national path when Aziz Muhammad, a Kurd, assumed its leadership between 1964 and 1993. The ICP publishes the magazine *Al-Thakafa Al-Jedida* (The New Culture). The motto of the party is "a free homeland and a happy people".

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12 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toma\\_Tomas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toma_Tomas)

13 [https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Faisal\\_I\\_of\\_Iraq](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/Faisal_I_of_Iraq)

14 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toma\\_Tomas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toma_Tomas)