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978-0-521-87394-9 - The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq

Tareq Y. Ismael

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## The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Iraq

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

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

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*University of Calgary*



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*To my brother Khalid and to my wife, Jacqueline*

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## Preface

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

“Hanged. They must be criminals.”

“Not quite.”

“They were hanged; they must have done something.”

“Well, they really didn’t act, but they were contemplating.”

“They did something, then.”

“No, no, no, they didn’t. They were thinking of, hoping for, an action.”

“But you told me the law does not punish you until you do something.”

“When you grow up, you will understand.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that this endeavour would not even have been possible without direct and indirect input from many others: those who made documents available or arranged for contacts with principal participants in the movement, as well as those who offered formal and informal suggestions and joined in discussions over the last thirty-five years. In addition, a number of my students and friends contributed in many different ways, helping to gather information and locate important documents all over the world. I dare not attempt to name them all for fear that I would miss some.

However, my special thanks go to my research assistants: Mark Bizek, who chased down all of the available English documents related to the updating of the last part of Chapter 6; Gamal Selim, who laboured over the transliterations; Christopher Langille and Candice M. Juby, who worked hard to finalise the manuscript and coordinate all of the numerous changes and revisions. I must also express my gratitude to Lindy Ayubi, who aided in style adaptation for Cambridge University Press. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank Lewis Bateman, the senior editor for political science and history at Cambridge University Press, New York, who shepherded the writing of this book with patience and understanding.



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

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Calgary, Alberta, Canada