JUSTICE INTERRUPTED

The Struggle for Constitutional Government
in the Middle East

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It was called “Al-Wathbah” by the thousands who witnessed it. The word is inadequately translated into English as “the Leap,” as in the leap of the Iraqi people into history. In 1948, ordinary citizens rudely interrupted their prime minister’s plan to prolong Britain’s presence in their country. At news of the secret Portsmouth Treaty, they flooded the streets of Baghdad. Through the month of January, crowds of 100,000 repeatedly gathered. As historian Hanna Batatu observed:

It was the social subsoil of Baghdad in revolt against hunger and unequal burdens. It was the students and the Schalchiyyah [railway] workers braving machine guns on the Ma’mun Bridge and dying for their ideas—or, as cynics would have it, for vain illusions. It was the political representatives of the various layers of the middle class—the National Democrats, the Liberals, the Independence party—resentful of constraints or plotting for political gain.  

And behind the scenes were the communists. Though illegal, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) was the largest grassroots organization in the country. Communists mobilized their networks to augment student demonstrations against the Portsmouth Treaty, which aimed to extend British use of air bases—and British political influence—for an extra fifteen years. Hundreds of people were shot and killed by police aiming at demonstrators from rooftops and even from minarets of mosques.
The Wathbah marked a line in the sand between the Iraqi people and the monarchy that Britain had created in 1921. By 1948, Iraq was already known as the most tyrannical state in the Middle East. Power was concentrated in the palace and particularly in the hands of Nuri al-Said, a minister infamous for throwing opponents into concentration camps and executing them. The political elite—which excluded nearly all but Sunni Arabs in a country of great ethnic diversity—monopolized Iraq’s wealth. Just 1 percent of landowners owned 55 percent of farmland, a far higher concentration of land wealth than in Turkey, Syria, or Egypt.

To repress dissent against such inequality, Iraqi political police worked closely with intelligence agents in the British embassy. Laborers on strike were routinely shot and killed. In 1948, protests by workers, students, communists, and middle-class nationalists continued through the spring. But in May, as Iraq sent 15,000 troops to Palestine, the government declared martial law. In December, as defeat in Palestine undermined the state’s prestige, Nuri rounded up hundreds of communists and ordered the execution of the party’s leaders. The Abu Ghraib prison was already notorious for torture. 3

The defeat of the Wathbah and the communists in 1948 only delayed the revolution for a decade. The party went deep underground and nurtured a new revolutionary generation. On July 14, 1958, sympathetic army officers overthrew the monarchy and proclaimed a republic. On the radio, they played “La Marseillaise,” the French song of revolution that Turks had sung in 1908. The streets filled with jubilant Iraqis. Communists rallied tens of thousands of new members in support of the new republic.

Nine months later, on April 17, 1959, the communists gathered a million citizens and marched again in Baghdad. (The capital had a population of just 795,000 residents out of 6.6 million Iraqis total.) Thousands from the countryside arrived the night before and slept in al-Kilani Square downtown. The next day, they marched peacefully through Baghdad for twelve hours, carrying pictures of their beloved leader, General Abd al-Karim Qasim (1914–1963), and placards that denounced “war mongers” and “imperialism.”

Ten years before Woodstock, the communist event was a virtual love-in. Marchers called for peace and for the army to hand power over to civilians. Religious leaders carried signs urging believers “to enter into peace.” Others sang folk songs to the tune of musical bands. Girls dressed in white like doves passed by on floats. A local paper reported:

All categories of people: the soldier, worker, peasant, wage-earner, intellectual, student, civil servant, merchants . . . Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians and others, who flocked from every corner of Iraq. . . . The procession was rained with flowers, sweets and bouquets from balconies along both sides of the streets. 4

That utopian day is an almost surreal memory to Baghdadis today. Their city has been nearly destroyed by decades of war, dictatorship, and sectarian conflict.

Fatefully, Qasim did not invite the communists into government. He consequently lacked a popular base, and so was overthrown in 1963 by the Baath Party, which eventually established the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein. Dominated by Sunni Arabs, the Baathists overturned Qasim’s inclusive republic. The multicultural, cross-class unity of Iraqis that the communists had fostered disappeared. The ICP was the only truly national party Iraq has ever had. 5

Through the mists of memory, the image of one man in particular has endured: Comrade Fand (1901–1949). He transformed the ICP from an intellectual club into a mass political party. From the deep obscurity of his headquarters, he led the illegal ICP in a campaign to establish a constitutional monarchy. Teachers, students and industrial workers were the party’s forward troops. Their marching orders were to oust the British, alleviate poverty, and advance democratic reforms. “[Fand] made communism attractive to a lot of people,” recalled a party leader. “He was able to dispel the image of communism as atheistic.” 6

Fand was also a martyr: he was hanged in 1949, two days after Hasan al-Banna was shot in Cairo. His story, retold in pamphlets and magazines, exemplified communists’ reputation in Iraq for patriotism, honesty, and justice in the struggle against poverty and tyranny. “We used to idolize Fand as if he was a god or a prophet,” recalled the party’s leader in the early 1950s. 7

The party’s failure to gain power under Qasim has agonized its followers ever since. Some blame a split among party leaders for not launching a worker’s revolution when Qasim refused to let the party
Comrade Fand (born Yusuf Salman Yusuf) built the Iraqi Communist Party into a popular, nationwide organization in the 1940s, before he was executed in 1949. The party still honors him annually on February 14, the date of his death, and with paintings like this one, from 2004.

(Iraqi Communist Party)

in government. Others blame the conditions of the Cold War. They believe that Qasim refused communist support because he feared the United States. Although the ICP had virtually no ties to the Soviet Union, Americans were not inclined to take chances in a region at the heart of world oil supplies.\(^8\)

From a longer perspective, we can see that the rise and fall of Iraqi communism was yet another response to the collapse of Ottoman justice after World War I. The thousands of workers who followed the ICP were part of a wave of movements for social justice—like the Muslim Brotherhood—that arose amid the privations of World War II to challenge the undemocratic regimes that Europeans had imposed after World War I.

But the ICP's tolerant pluralism contrasted sharply with the projects of homogeneity pursued by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, Banna in Egypt, and its opponents in Iraq, the Baath Party. Iraqi communists created a brief but important opening for a popular culture of democracy. They achieved this in part through the support of what

Antonio Gramsci might have called organic intellectuals. Fand's underground network of worker-teachers spread a new moral economy among Iraq's poor. Like the peasants in 1858 Lebanon, they coupled their demands for bread with demands for rights.

**The Roots of the ICP**

Iraqi communism had multiple roots, but its origin as a mass movement lay in the revolutionary spirit and bleak poverty of the southern provinces. To understand how a secular ideology imported from the Soviet Union captured the hearts of Iraqi Muslims, Christians, and Jews, we must begin in the humid marshlands and palm groves around the ancient city of Basra.

Comrade Fand was born Yusuf Salman Yusuf in 1901, in Baghdad. His parents were Christian Arabs from the north, and his father sold pastries from a street cart. For unknown reasons, he moved the family 300 miles south to Basra in 1908. The city of 40,000 was the region's gateway to the Persian Gulf. To the north lay vast salt marshes, where rice was grown. To the south, hot, flat desert stretched into the Arabian Peninsula. Basrawis were not yet Iraqis. They had more ties with neighboring tribal families in Kuwait and with merchants who sailed to India than with Baghdad. Most Arabs in the region were Shii Muslims. Their religious sympathies extended to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala and to Persians across the Shatt al-Arab waterway.

Yusuf's family presumably lived in the small Christian enclave of the city. He attended the Syrian Church school and, at age thirteen, the American mission school. Two years later, his father fell ill and he was forced to quit. Yusuf left behind a classmate, a wealthy boy named Bahjat Atiyyah, who snubbed him as low class. They would meet again thirty years later when Atiyyah, as chief of the political police, arrested Yusuf (by then Comrade Fand) and sent him to death row.

At age fifteen the young Yusuf was not yet a revolutionary. Family photos show him as a handsome young man with dark penetrating eyes and a strong chin. His brothers and sisters gathered around him, dressed in suits and flouncy country dresses. The Salman family was poor, but not desperately so.\(^9\) Yusuf worked in a small ice factory and then at the port, where he viewed the changes in Basra since the British occupation.
The British first came to Basra in the late nineteenth century, using the city as a link in steamship routes between the Suez Canal and India. Dates were a major export, representing 85 percent of dates on the world market. To meet demand, African slaves were imported and poor village women migrated to Basra every September to process and package the date harvest. While Basra’s merchants and landowners prospered, workers earned low wages. And weavers lost their livelihoods to imports of British cloth.10

In 1914, British troops occupied Basra as a wartime stronghold. The British navy depended on the Iranian oil fields at Abadan, thirty miles south of the city. When the British ousted the Ottomans from Baghdad in March 1917, General Stanley Maude famously proclaimed that they came as liberators, not conquerors. At war’s end, the British broke that promise, united the three provinces along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and ruled them as the mandate of Iraq.

Iraq’s three million inhabitants lived in what had been three neglected provinces of the Ottoman empire: Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra. The Ottomans had delegated power to local notables and expended few Tanzimat resources on improving roads, railways, or schools. The population was more sparsely distributed and poorer than in Syria, Egypt, or Palestine. In contrast to Egypt, it was quite diverse, with concentrations of Kurds in the northeast; Sunni Arabs north and west of Baghdad; and Shii Arabs in the south. The southern tribal chiefs were infamous for their resistance to any direct Ottoman intervention. Those who profited from British trade accepted the mandate, those north of Basra did not.11

The Iraqi Revolution of 1920, as it was later called, started when a leading cleric (ayatollah) issued a fatwa declaring the mandate illegal. Shii tribal leaders took up arms against British imperial troops.12 Rebellion soon spread to the Kurdish north, engulfing much of the country. After four months and 6,000 Iraqi deaths, the British put down the revolt.13

Yusuf claimed the 1920 revolution inspired his first feelings of Iraqi patriotism. He watched the revolution from Nasiriya, a center of revolt in the south. He and his brother had moved there to run a grain mill. Tribal leaders chased the British out of the province (called Muntasifiq) for several months.

After the revolt, the British built a regime of loyal elites to control the population. They chose Faysal ibn Husayn, recently ousted from Syria, as king. Faysal brought with him Iraqi soldiers, called Sharifians, who had fought against the Ottomans and helped rule in Damascus. Among them was Nuri al-Said, a former Ottoman officer who became a loyal friend to the British. He parceled out land, tax breaks, and later oil revenues to the tribal oligarchy that kept Iraq’s poor out of politics. Nuri and the British also excluded from the regime most Shii tribal shaykhs and Kurdish leaders as punishment for the 1920 revolution. They ensured that loyal Sunni shaykhs gained political power in Baghdad by rigging elections to parliament.

Yusuf witnessed the consequences of British rule in the southern countryside, as he shuttled between jobs in Nasiriya and Basra in the early 1920s. Poor farmers became sharecroppers for a new class of tribal landlords. Most were chained by debt and by new feudal laws. They lived in a world apart from the elites of Basra, who traded at the port and worked for the British colonial officials. The loyalty of Basra’s Shii elites to the Sunni rulers in Baghdad had limits, however. In 1927, they formed a political party opposed to military conscription.14

By then Yusuf had become immersed in radical politics. Communist ideas arrived in Basra on British steamers from India, in books and magazines, and in the mouths of Indian soldiers, servants, and employees of British firms. British police later claimed Yusuf learned his communism from a Russian agent, but that is disputed.15 In either case, Yusuf came to view the Iraqi state as an instrument of imperial exploitation. It was structured to serve the interests of Britain and its loyal oligarchy, not of common Iraqis. He also concluded that the neo-feudal basis of Iraq’s economy was an obstacle to economic development. Prosperity, in other words, would never trickle down.16

Socialist ideas had floated around the Arab world since the turn of the century, when Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi, a native of Aleppo, published his book The Attributes of Tyranny. “Human beings share the hardships of life in an unjust way,” he wrote. One percent of the population, he estimated, enjoys half of society’s wealth. “Justice requires other than that inequality,” Kawakibi argued. “The elevated should take the lowly by his hand and bring him close to his rank and mode of life.”17
Kawakibi and other Arabs saw communism as an Islam for the twentieth century. In the Prophet Muhammad's ideal city of Medina, Kawakibi wrote, Muslims lived under the same "conditions of a Communist existence" that contemporary socialists envisioned. "I am a Communist," declared the Iraqi poet Ma'ruf al-Rasafi in 1937 to parliament. "But my communism is Islamic for it is written in the Sacred Book: 'And in their wealth there is a right for the beggar and the deprived.' ... And it was the Prophet that said: 'Take it from their wealth and return it to their poor.' Was this not communism?" 18

Rasafi's views were likely shaped by Husain al-Rahhal, leader of a Baghdad Marxist circle in the 1920s. Rahhal and others learned of communism from copies of the Anglo-Indian communist journal, The Labour Monthly, sold at the city's famous Mackenzie's Bookshop. Rahhal was a strict secularist, but most Iraqi communists likely shared Rasafi's view of it as an expression of Islamic social justice.

Back in Nasiriya, Yusuf established a communist circle in late 1927. His communism was born not of intellectual debate, but of his life of labor. "Nothing made him happier than being called a 'worker,'" the historian Batatu remarked. Yusuf's communism was also inspired by his work with the Iraqi National Party. "Before Fand was a communist, he was a nationalist who struggled against imperialism," wrote Zaki Khairi, a fellow communist.

In the early 1930s, Yusuf's communist circle grew to sixty members. They were a mixture of manual laborers and the educated lower middle class. The leader in Basra, Ghali Zuwayyid, had been born a slave. He spoke easily with the sharecroppers in the palm groves. Membership rose as the world depression caused the price of Basra's dates to slump. Civil servants lost their jobs, and port workers and rail workers saw their wages slashed.

In December 1932, Yusuf printed the first communist proclamation in Iraq to be adorned with a hammer and sickle. He posted it in eighteen places in Nasiriya: "Workers of the World Unite! Long Live the Union of Workers' and Peasants' Republics of the Arab Countries!" it began. "The unemployed fill the streets. ... Their women and children have nothing to eat. Has the government contemplated helping them in this cold weather? Nothing of the kind has happened. ... Workers! The people have rights which they can only secure by force." 19

When Arabic translations of the communist manifesto started circulating in Nasiriya, the police arrested Yusuf. He made no apologies. According to the police report, "he admitted he is a communist, and gave a tirade about the capitalists and the toiling masses." 20

Meanwhile in Baghdad, Faysal obtained Iraqi independence in 1932, shortly before his death from heart failure. But all was not well. The young King Ghazi, Faysal's son, encouraged the palace elite's conspicuous consumption, even as shantytowns of peasant migrants sprouted at the city's edge.

British writer and photographer Freya Stark captured Baghdad's social contradictions in the early 1930s: "In early spring, before the first buds show on peach trees, a sort of luminous transparency envelops the distant city of Baghdad and its gardens," she wrote. "The blue domes melt into heaven of their own colour ... and everywhere there is the voice of doves." But as the traveler enters the city, she remarked, a "sordid" poverty appears in the streets, where "the crowd looks unhealthy and sallow, the children are pitiful." 21

Stark was shocked by the contempt of the British colony for the city's poor. British women told her proudly that "wogs" never crossed their doorstep. They expected Iraqis to be humbly grateful for the gifts of civilization that Britain gave them: bridges, police training, and education. 22

Iraqis were less and less grateful. Newspapers in Arabic wrote "rude things about the English," Stark noted. In 1931, Baghdad's first labor union called a general strike against an increase in taxes on artisans. For two weeks shops remained closed, buses stopped, streets filled with demonstrators and speakers. The strike spread to the southern cities of Kufa and Diwaniya, and Basra. 23

In 1934, the scattered cells of Iraqi communists gathered in the capital. Yusuf attended as a representative of Nasiriya. They formed the Committee against Imperialism and Exploitation and issued a manifesto proclaiming workers (not the monarchy) as the true basis of the nation. Their demands: cancellation of foreign debt and nationalization of oil, railways, and banks.

In 1935 the group became the ICP and published its first newspaper. A hammer and sickle with the slogan "Workers of the World Unite" adorned the masthead. The ICP joined the wave of unrest that swept across the Middle East in 1936. Kurds and Shiites staged tax
revolts. The ICP joined an Iraqi front to demand democratic freedoms, reduction of poverty, and equality. But by year’s end, the state suppressed their activity.

From 1936 to 1941, nationalist army officers staged a series of coups to challenge the power of the palace. Ubiquitous British advisors protected the king and defeated the officers. They tended to blame poverty on deficiencies in Iraqi culture, not on their own policies. The ICP criticized the British view, arguing that Iraq’s economic underdevelopment and poverty were products of British policy and the political regime they had built.

Out of shared feelings of humiliation, the political right and left united temporarily against imperialism. The ICP initially supported the coups, but eventually it condemned military rule. The officers tended to be Sunni Muslims who excluded non-Muslims and non-Arabs from their view of the nation.

Yusuf was largely absent from Iraq in these years. In 1935, the party had sent him on scholarship to Moscow, where he attended the Communist University of Toilers of the East (KUTV). The university trained promising leaders from the colonial world in Marxist-Leninist theory and in practical skills of underground organizing, espionage, and guerrilla warfare. We have little information on Yusuf’s experience at KUTV, except that he married a Russian woman named Irina Georgivna. They had met in the summer of 1935 and had a baby daughter named Susan. At graduation, however, students were told to write farewell letters releasing their wives from their wedding vows. They pledged to devote themselves to “selfless service of the Revolution.”

Yusuf broke that pledge to write a letter to Irina in November 1937 from Paris, where he had gone for further training. Written in Russian and English, it is one of the only personal documents we have from him. As a glimpse into the human side of the activist, it is worth quoting at length:

Paris 26/11/37

Irina Darling,

I hope you are in the best of health and happiness. I am very sorry that I could not write to you earlier. I congratulate you on your birthday. I bought something as a birthday present. I hope you will accept this humble present. I sent it to your address. You will find the receipt en-

closed and I hope that you will receive them. I am very anxious to know about your health and how you managed after I left you.

I trust you will forgive me. Write to tell me everything, and quickly.

I hope that Mamenska and Raphael and the rest are O.K. My salute and best wishes to them. I wish you were in Paris to see the exhibition. It was a grand thing. . . .

Two months after mailing the letter, Yusuf arrived back in Baghdad. He took on his new name and identity as Comrade Fahd. The lessons he had learned in Moscow and Paris equipped him to build Iraq’s first—and only—truly mass party.

COMRADE FAHD ESTABLISHES A MARXIST-LENINIST PARTY

Having left his family in Moscow, Comrade Fahd was believed to shun all relationships with women, outside of a few rare accounts of flirtation. He now found companionship in party comrades. Closest to him was Zaki Basim, codenamed “Comrade Hazim.” He would room with Fahd through much of the 1940s and accompany him to the gallows. A Sunni Arab, Hazim was twelve years younger than Fahd. He worked as an apprentice tanner and a clerk in the water department while earning a high school degree at night school. When he met Fahd in 1942, he instantly became his most loyal follower. “I found him a patriot who worked in the public interest with unwavering fidelity and conviction,” Hazim later told police. “He opened his heart to me and asked me to join him in the struggle.”

Fahd’s other close ally was Husain Muhammad al-Shabibi, codenamed “Comrade Sarim.” Sarim was a Shi’i schoolteacher from Najaf who shared Fahd’s view that the ICP must be founded on the recruitment of workers, not the bourgeois intellectuals in Baghdad. “The Iraqi working class is the basic pillar of building the party and its struggle,” Sarim wrote.

War conditions gave Fahd and the new ICP an opening for wider recruitment. Since the Soviet Union joined the Allies in 1941, police had eased up on repression of communists. Fahd would gain even more freedom in 1943, when the Soviets dissolved the Comintern, which had imposed Moscow’s policy on local parties. The ICP would
be free to determine its own political strategy. It would become not just a worker's party, but an Iraqi party.

Fahd’s battle with old-guard communists in Baghdad began in November 1941 at an ICP central committee meeting. The party’s secretary general had just been arrested and Fahd claimed leadership for himself. A member demanded to know if he had a mandate from the Comintern in Moscow. Fahd responded that he did. The meeting voted to confirm him, but with lingering doubt. “I had at that time some misgivings about a Christian leading the organization,” wrote another member at the meeting, himself a Christian. 31 Fahd’s challenger, a Sunni Arab teacher and novelist, recruited other intellectuals in a revolt against his leadership. In the summer of 1942, Fahd expelled them from the party.

By early 1944, Fahd was strong enough to eliminate the remaining rebels in the party. They opposed Fahd’s “dictatorship” and demanded a democratically elected leadership. Fahd’s response to the bourgeoise intellectuals, as he called them, was entitled “A Communist Party, Not Democratic Socialism.” His most-quoted and most-reproduced essay, it became a manifesto for the transition of the ICP into an underground workers’ party. Fahd argued that an illegal party cannot hold open elections because secrecy is the key to survival. Police would easily discover any system of publicizing candidates and any general meeting at which a vote would be held. Quoting Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Fahd also attacked the intellectuals’ dilettantism. He posed as the communist professional, trained in Moscow. Revolutionary theory is not just intellectual amusement, he said. Nor is it a dogma. It must be adapted to the real world of working people. “Marxism is a recipe to give everyone food for all situations,” he wrote. But elite Marxists are like “a young bride who opens her cookbook to read recipes for kibbeh and beans with oil,” he wrote. She follows the recipe literally, but with no experience or training in method. “The result, her husband finds at the dinner table, is an inedible disaster.” 32

The essay signaled clearly that Fahd intended to build a movement tailored to the needs of Iraqis, not an arm of Moscow. Nor did Fahd appear to impose a vanguard leadership upon the Iraqi membership. While he positioned himself as the expert and as the sole leader of the party, he also envisioned a party organically nurtured from the ground up.

In March 1944, Fahd convened the ICP’s first national conference. It was held, secretly, at the Baghdad home of Ali Shukur, a locomotive driver. Four central committee members met with fourteen representatives of provincial branches. The meeting consolidated the party under his undisputed leadership. Fahd’s “charisma and political commitment were increasingly unassailable,” wrote one observer. “However,” noted a member, “he was vainglorious.” 33

In his notorious monotone, Fahd reported on the growth of British influence and tyranny in Iraq. Hazim reported on workers, and Sarim reported on the party’s education program. Without debate, the fourteen representatives approved the party program. Called the “National Charter,” the program called for independence, constitutional democracy, economic development, lower taxes and more land for the poor, and rights for women and Kurds. The first step would be to recruit oil, port, and railroad workers. The meeting ended by adopting the party’s slogan, “A Free Homeland and a Happy People.” 34

The central committee that convened the ICP’s 1945 congress demonstrated its new social base. They met at the home of Yahuda Siddiq, a Jewish schoolteacher who would also join Fahd on the gallows in 1949. In addition to Fahd, Hazim, and Sarim, the committee included Fahd’s brother Daud, an electrician; an ex-railway worker; a “coffee man”; a shoemaker; a musician; five schoolteachers; and an employee of the irrigation ministry. Most were born outside of Baghdad, and most had joined the party after 1941. Five were Christians, two Jews, three Shiis, four Sunni Arabs, and one Sunni Kurd. They claimed to represent the working people of Iraq, who were 90 percent illiterate and mostly peasants. Iraqis’ average income was much lower than in Syria or Lebanon. 35

The meeting reaffirmed the ICP as a “working class” party united by “iron discipline” against the state’s “arbitrary and Nazi laws.” For security reasons, members swore to avoid contact with police and foreigners and agreed to meet only rarely. Fahd and Hazim would direct the party on a day-to-day basis. 36

The committee also agreed on a two-stage plan for revolution, which was announced in an April 1945 booklet entitled “A Free Homeland and a Happy People.” The first stage would establish a democratic regime in Iraq, which would restore political rights and permit the
party to organize publicly. The second stage would establish a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Most of the booklet detailed plans to promote democracy. It reproduced the party’s National Charter as a list of twelve immediate goals:
1) sovereignty; 2) democratic government; 3) end to food shortages;
4) economic expansion; 5) end to seizures of peasants’ lands; 6) unions and health insurance for peasants; 7) lower taxes for people of small incomes; 8) expansion of education; 9) equal political, social, and economic rights for women; 10) equal rights for Kurds; 11) humane treatment of prisoners and soldiers; 12) diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union.

The booklet also reproduced Fahd’s speech to the 1945 party congress, calling for a democratic fight against fascism and imperialism:

Comrades! Remember always that we live in an age and at a time when a handful of financial businesses houses in the colonized countries wish to impose their open class dictatorship. This barbarous gang which is impersonated in Nazi-Fascism, probed for a gap and launched its offensive against the weak and the disintegrated forces of democracy. 37

Fahd noted that Iraq’s government had dissolved ten political parties since achieving independence. Like others in the Middle East, he argued that justice would not prevail without sovereignty.

The biggest obstacle to democracy and prosperity was British imperialism, Fahd claimed. The British directly advised Iraq’s Ministry of the Interior on methods of repressing political opposition, he said. Worse than British agents were the Iraqi elites who cooperated with them: “Every minister in this Cabinet knows that he is serving the British rather than Iraqi interests.” Such collaboration is a crime, he continued. Prime Minister Nuri violated constitutional guarantees of sovereignty when he granted sugar and date monopolies to British companies, hired British officers into the Iraqi government, and permitted British spies to travel inside the country.

Fahd became a marked man after publishing that attack. Political police, led by their British advisors, launched a search for him and his printing press. British intelligence quickly led police to the printer who had reproduced copies of the National Charter. They soon arrested six men caught distributing it to Iraqi soldiers: under a 1937 law, communist recruitment in the army was a capital crime. 38

But the ICP’s propaganda machine kept running. Sami Michael, a Jewish party member, translated communist materials from English into Arabic. He and his team distributed their translations in handwritten pamphlets and gave lectures to neighbors in Baghdad. “The Iraqi people would come and listen to us with great respect,” Michael said. “We were their heroes who fought colonial rule. We were Iraqis, communists and patriots. Patriotism was very important for us.” 39

Inspired by the Atlantic Charter to wage a war for democratic ideas, the ICP opened a printing house in September 1945. Dar al-Hikma (the House of Wisdom) published books and pamphlets on politics, the economy, arts, and even science. 40 The party’s newspaper, Al-Qaeda (the Base), reached a daily circulation of 3,000 by 1947. It was distributed most widely in Baghdad, the Kurdish north, and the Shi’i south.

Financing was local. Contrary to the accusations of government officials and the British, the ICP received little support from the Soviets. The party raised 6,000 dinars to open the House of Wisdom. Daily expenses were funded primarily by members’ dues. Fahd and the others lived on pay from day jobs. 41

The party also established the League against Zionism. Led by young Baghdadi Jews like Michael, it opposed Zionists who tried to convince Jews to emigrate to Palestine. The Jewish community of Baghdad, numbering more than 110,000, had roots in Iraq going back more than 2,500 years. While Jews favored the intercommunal life of Baghdad, they worried that Arab nationalism threatened their future. In 1941 riots had broken out when the British defeated leaders of a pro-German military coup. During a brief interregnum, a mob hit the streets and looted Jewish homes and shops. An estimated 200 Jews were killed. A few mob leaders were fired by anti-Zionist ideology, but most were apparently poor people seeking instant gain. 42

The ICP’s League against Zionism addressed Jews’ fears of nationalism by promoting its vision of plural and democratic justice. “Minorities cannot have peace of mind until the Iraqi working class comes to power,” claimed a 1946 handbill of the Free Jewish Youth. The league’s newspaper published articles blaming British and American imperialism for the growth of nationalism and sectarian violence. The
paper reportedly reached an impressive circulation of 6,000 copies daily.  

Meanwhile, Fahd's right-hand man Sarim founded the National Liberation Party (NLP). It promoted the “principles of rights and justice,” with emphasis on Kurdish rights, protection for children, and an end to hunger. The NLP and the league attracted thousands of students and teachers, turning the colleges of Baghdad into “revolutionary beehives.”

The ICP built its strongest popular base among urban workers. Communists headed fourteen of sixteen labor unions, including those at Baghdad's railroad yard, Kirkuk's oil fields, and Basra's port. Ali Shukur, the locomotive driver, headed the railway union and in April 1945 led its 1,700 members on a successful strike for pay raises.

In all, the unions gave the ICP the muscle of nearly 10,000 workers in addition to perhaps 10,000 students and civil servants who supported the party or its affiliates. The first peasants to join the ICP were migrants living in reed huts outside of Baghdad, mostly Shiis from the south. Full members of the party still numbered under 3,000, because Fahd remained strict about proper training. For security, members were organized in small cells of three to seven members each and linked to Baghdad through three regional committees: in the south, the north, and the central region around the capital.

The ICP was small compared to Banna's half-million members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. But its growth was impressive, given the constraints of being an illegal, underground movement. Banna had run a public party and was a well-known charismatic figure. “Fahd was unknown, not a Che [Guevara],” recalls a former party member. “He was more like Ho Chi Minh,” a strict and inspirational organizer known mainly to activists through his pamphlets and his underground newspaper. Only after his first trial in 1947 did Fahd become publicly known.

**Stage One of the Revolution**

In 1946, no other political organization in Iraq came close to the popular influence and power of the ICP. Its core idea—that tyranny was not natural or divinely sanctioned—was a revelation. Like Banna's Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the ICP convinced thousands of Iraqis that they could act collectively to establish justice in their lifetime.

Under continued economic stress, workers felt freer to rebel against their bosses. Also like the Muslim Brotherhood, the ICP was the sole party to address the immediate needs of common people, by staging protests against inflation and food shortages. The ICP promised to restore justice to the social order; Iraq's elite liberal parties merely called for honest elections.

Tribal shaykhs felt threatened enough to form an anticomunist bloc in parliament. By early 1946, urban elites felt anxiety too. “A creeping fear of Communism is spreading steadily among Iraq's princes of privilege and economic royalists,” reported an American diplomat. “The forceful and persistent propaganda which the Communist party is spreading among Iraqi workers is having effect.” Rumors flew in Baghdad about the “fabulous Fahd” who signed the “scurrilous” leaflets attacking imperialists, reactionaries, and thieving politicians.

The state initially responded with a concession, legalizing five elite parties (not the ICP) and proposing electoral reform. The ICP used the political opening to ally with liberals against the Sunni Arab ruling elite and to stage worker strikes. Fahd issued a flurry of leaflets and articles demanding Britain's evacuation as a first step toward economic reform. Most influential was his article “Necessities of Our National Struggle,” which called on politicians to end useless negotiations for independence. They should instead inspire courage among Iraqi citizens, for only mass mobilization will force the British to evacuate. Fahd wrote the article in June 1946, when Egyptians and Zionists also staged mass protests against British rule.

The great battles of the summer of 1946 were set when massive student protests to free Palestine brought down the liberal government in May. The parliament's anticomunist bloc maneuvered to install a hard-liner, Arshad al-Umari, as prime minister. Umari's violent response to protests that summer only heightened the ICP's prestige.

The first battle came on June 28, 1946, when communists organized 3,000 workers and students to march through Baghdad to protest British injustice in Palestine and call for Britain's evacuation from Iraq. “We wanted to escalate the situation,” recalled Michael. Police opened fire and killed a communist student named Shaul Tuwayyiq. His body fell on top of Michael, who jumped up, covered in blood, and began screaming at the policeman. Out of nowhere, a black wall rose up. “Women dressed in their traditional black threw themselves between
us, to keep him from shooting me,” Michael recalled. “And they beat him [the policeman] up severely.”

The second battle came on July 3, 1946, in Kirkuk, north of Baghdad. ICP member Hanna Ilyas led his union of 500 oil workers on a strike for higher pay. For ten days they held rallies in a park, reciting poems and giving speeches. Police then charged their horses into the crowd, killing ten workers. The union refused to call off the strike until it won a raise six days later.

The ICP accused the state of terrorism and of protecting British oil interests to the detriment of its own citizens’ rights. In league with liberal parties, they staged protests that brought Umari down in November. To their dismay, however, the dreaded Nuri replaced Umari. He ordered Fand’s childhood nemesis, Attiyah, now head of the political police, to find him.

Fand was on the run, never sleeping in the same place twice. He and Hazim (Zaki Basim) were finally arrested on January 18, 1947, at the Baghdad home of a Jewish pharmacist, Ibrahim Naji Shumayyil. All three were taken to the Investigation Department in central Baghdad, shackled, and “flung like dogs into a latrine overflowing with filth,” Hazim later reported. After repeated beatings, an interrogator informed Fand that spreading communist ideas was illegal. The law, Fand replied, “is out of accord with the Iraqi constitution, which has conceded the freedom of belief to every Iraqi citizen.”

Fand and Hazim were transferred to the infamous Abu Ghraib military prison in the desert west of Baghdad and confined to narrow, damp, airless cells. On June 13, 1947, they launched an eight-day hunger strike, until prison authorities finally brought them to Iraq’s High Criminal Court. They faced charges of treasonous ties to a foreign government (the Soviet Union) and to communists in Iran and Syria; of plotting armed insurrection; and of propagating communism in the military.

Fand used his trial to speak in public for the first time—in defense of democracy. He denied all charges and insisted that communists should not be prosecuted simply for their beliefs:

We stand before your respected court and we do not ask for mercy, because mercy is for the guilty. We don’t want to protect ourselves for the sake of our own interest. We want justice, because we want to protect the reputation of Iraqi law... A democracy that cannot tolerate activities of its most ardent and persistent activists, who understand the ways of the imperialists, cannot be a democracy in the eyes of liberal world public opinion.

On June 23, 1947, the court condemned Fand, Hazim, and the pharmacist Shumayyil to death by hanging for proselytizing in the military. The death sentences caused an uproar. At this point, historian Tareq Ismael recalls, Fand became a household name. Iraqis protested to foreign embassies and to the United Nations, forcing the Iraqi appeals court to reject the verdict. The government commuted their sentences to penal servitude at Kut prison, 100 miles south of Baghdad.

Fahd turned the prison into a school for communism. Prisoners due for early release were trained in better methods of underground organizing and taught to avoid mistakes that risked arrest. Fahd maintained links with the party leadership on the outside by writing notes of advice in invisible onion juice. Party networks were soon restored, and the party newspaper again published 3,000 copies a day.

In November 1947, Fahd sent a secret order to ICP cadres to restore the coalition with liberals: “Lead it and expand its activities, focusing on the issues of bread and democratic freedoms.”

Stage one of Iraq’s revolution, as in so many others, began at a time of economic crisis. “The issue of bread, especially in big cities, was devastating and it really worried the people,” recalled Aziz Sbahi, a teacher and party member. “There were long lines of women, men and children gathering in front of the bakeries in Baghdad beginning at four in the morning and even before four o’clock, they waited to get a few cold unappetizing loaves.”

As in Iran in 1906, the state showed little concern. It adhered to a balanced-budget policy and spent little on social welfare. Its total budget for 1947, corrected for inflation, was actually lower than its 1938 budget had been. State neglect and violence turned a student protest into the Wathbah.

The Wathbah started when news of the Portsmouth Treaty leaked to the public in late December 1947. College and high school students responded with a march on January 5, protesting the treaty’s extension
of Britain’s military presence in Iraq. Mounted police beat the demonstrators with clubs and shot into the crowd. To protest the violence, the law school shut down and students announced a general strike. While only six of the thirty-nine students arrested were communist, legend has it that a letter arrived from Fahd ordering the ICP to send all of its forces into the street. He appointed Kamil Qazanchi, a lawyer and great orator, to lead the demonstrations.

On January 16, the government sparked a new round of protests when it publicized the terms of the Portsmouth Treaty. Students marched again, now to demand the prime minister’s resignation. On the fourth day of protests, January 20, communist railroad workers joined the student march down Baghdad’s main avenue, Rashid Street. Police again fired into the crowd, killing several people. They fired again the next day, upon students carrying coffins to the Royal Hospital. Two more fell dead. This outrage provoked the middle class to join the protests.

“Crowds, thick with Communists and armed with huge canes, clashed with the police, who became much like flotsam in a wrathful sea. An atmosphere redolent of social revolution enveloped Baghdad,” Batatu wrote. The regent, Prince Abd al-Ilah, called an emergency meeting of the cabinet and parliament—and renounced the Portsmouth Treaty that night.

The Wathbah defeated the treaty, but it did not end there. Demonstrations spread to Basra, Mosul, and other cities. On January 23, the Prophet’s birthday, huge crowds flooded Baghdad’s main avenues shouting “Long Live the Unity of the Workers and Students!” and “Give Bread to the People!” They carried Kamil Qazanchi on their shoulders. He jumped atop the Wadi coffeehouse and shouted: “Let us declare it a great people’s revolution!” The crowd marched on, yelling, “Release the Leader Fahd!” and “Long Live the Republic!”

The Wathbah came to a climax on the night of January 26, when Prime Minister Salih Jabr made a radio broadcast that urged calm, in threatening language. Baghdadis poured from their homes in defiance. Police machinegun fire echoed in the midnight streets. The next morning, protesters flowed across the Marmun Bridge into the city center.

“On the 27th of January, the capital became a battlefield,” wrote historian Abd al-Razzak al-Husni. “The police blocked the side streets and armored cars moved into the main city squares and placed the machine guns on top of the high buildings and on top of the minarets of mosques.” When a group of demonstrators tried to cross the Tigris River, the police “started to shoot at them from the two minarets on top of the mosques at both sides of the bridge entrance.” Many were killed, but the people prevailed. The police retreated and the people crossed the bridge.

Party member Aziz al-Hajj joined another march to the royal palace. “The demonstration rushed from the medical college to face a stream of bullets,” he recalled. “The police met us with machine guns. I took refuge with others in a municipal grocery store.” The crowd then headed to the palace, where they protested to a spokesman. New waves of gunfire killed four.

Jabr made more threats, and protests surged again in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Basra. “This was like pouring oil on fire,” Husni recalled. “The people rushed to burn the British Iraq Times newspaper building and everything to do with the English. Orders were given to shoot at the chest [to kill] and they cut the people as a scythe cuts wheat, until the policemen were shivering from fear and anxiety themselves.”

Demonstrators claimed victory that day. They had shamed the government by forcing it to shoot its own citizens. Two cabinet ministers, the president of parliament, and twenty deputies resigned. At eight o’clock that evening, Prime Minister Jabr resigned as well. Along with Nuri, he fled Baghdad.

They left bloodstains and bodies spattered across what became known as Martyrs’ Bridge. Government estimates put the number of dead at around 100, but police and communist files suggest that more than 300 may have been killed. The brother of one of the eighteen ICP members killed on January 27 composed a poem entitled “My Brother Jaafar,” which he recited to Sunnis, Shiis, and Jews gathered at the Haydarkhana mosque. The verse “Do you know or do you not know/ That the wounds of victims are a mouth?” became one of the most famous in modern Iraqi Arabic poetry.

The communist imprint on the Wathbah was everywhere. The nationalist parties had tried to call off the protest after January 20, when the treaty was withdrawn. “Many youth demonstrated against their
Protests continued through the spring, with forty-day memorials for victims and strikes by municipal, textile, oil, railway, and port workers. In May, oil workers organized “The March,” in homage to Mao Tse-tung’s Long March in China. Some 2,000 started walking from Haditha to Baghdad, 145 miles away. Police trapped them at Falluja, thirty-five miles short of Baghdad, and arrested fifteen leaders for threatening state security.

Iraq was “on the verge of revolution,” warned local newspapers and British observers. On May 15, the day after the Haditha workers’ arrest, the government declared martial law and shut down the ICP’s newspaper and unions, on the pretext that communists were supporting Israel in the Palestine war. The Soviets’ recognition of Israel—and the Arabs’ defeat in Palestine—deeply compromised the ICP and led indirectly to Fand’s death.

In December 1948, police captured the holy grail, the small ICP printing press hidden in a member’s home that had printed the pamphlets of “fabulous Fand” three years before. They also caught the party’s interim leader, Malik Saif, who revealed that Fand had directed the Wathbah from his cell in Kut prison. Fand and his two closest comrades, Hazim and Sarim, were dragged to a military court at Abu Ghraib prison.

In the same atmosphere of anger and panic that led the Egyptian state to murder Banna, the Iraqi regime used this evidence to retry Fand on capital charges. Nuri, again prime minister, blamed Jews and communists for the Arabs’ defeat in Palestine and vowed to “settle accounts with the communists.” He ordered a secret trial for Fand and his comrades, which quickly issued a sentence of death.

Fand was hanged secretly, and the circumstances remain obscure. According to one account, he was hanged in al-Karkh, on the west bank of the Tigris, at dawn on February 14, 1949. His body was left for hours in an open square, with a placard listing his crimes. Comrade Hazim, Fand’s beloved aide, and Yahuda Siddiq, briefly party leader after Fand’s arrest, were hanged the following morning.

“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,” wrote historian Tareq Ismael. As a boy, he saw the bodies of communists hanging on a sunny February morning in 1949 as he walked to school.

While Banna was carried solemnly in public procession to his grave, Fand’s body was never returned to his family. A month later, in face of protest, the Iraqi police justified Fand’s execution by falsely linking the ICP to Zionism. The people were not convinced. They would avenge the state’s act of terror in the summer of 1958.

“Fahd dead proved more potent than Fahd living,” wrote the historian Batatu in 1978. “Far from dying out, communism became in the fifties a more powerful passion.” Communists became national martyrs, known for their willingness to stand up to injustice. They also inspired new artistic movements that expressed an Iraqi brand of modernity. Marxism became so dominant that even Jabr (the prime minister forced to resign by the Wathbah) named his new party the “Socialist Party of the Nation.”

The 1950s were also a grim era of grinding poverty and dictatorship. Oil revenues soared, noted historian Walter Laqueur in 1956. “Yet there is no prospect in the near future of an increase in the standard of living of either the peasants or the majority of the urban population.” He compared conditions in Iraq to Russia in 1917, when Bolsheviks rose against the tsar. Even the British diplomats began to worry about the “slums of mud huts” circling Baghdad and the “hideous squalor and poverty” in the southern provinces. Peasants were starving.

Communist writers drew dark portraits of state terror in their country. Novelist Gha’ib Farman, exiled in Egypt, wrote in The Black Regime in Iraq that “every Iraqi family has a shahid [martyr], prisoner, or deportee.”

Despite repression, the ICP revived under the leadership of Kurds. Iraq’s Kurdish northeast was as underprivileged as the Shii south. Power shifted from students to workers and from revolutionaries to
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moderates. Although we have no data on total membership, the ICP appears to have remained strongest in Baghdad and the south. Perhaps one-fifth of party members were still drawn from the army's rank and file. After a period of factionalism, a unified command emerged in 1956 that included a Kurd, a Sunni, and a Shii. The last was Hussein al-Radi, a quiet former schoolteacher who became Fahd's successor as the ICP's secretary-general. He took the codename Salaam Adil (A Just Peace). The trio agreed on a program of gradual change and in early 1957 entered a national front in opposition to Nuri's regime—which grew more authoritarian as new oil fields funneled new profits into state coffers.

Not all Iraqis were so patient. On July 14, 1958, a dissident group of military officers engineered a coup against the monarchy. They proclaimed Iraq a republic:

Noble People of Iraq,

Trusting in God and with the aid of the loyal sons of the people and the national armed forces, we have undertaken to liberate the beloved homeland from the corrupt crew that imperialism installed. . . . Power shall be entrusted to a government emanating from you and inspired by you . . . realized by the creation of a people's republic . . .

(Signed) The Commander-in-Chief of the National Armed Forces

The Free Officers' proclamation echoed the language of Fahd and the ICP, with its appeal to anti-imperialism, popular sovereignty, and democracy. Their leader, General Abd al-Karim Qasim, became prime minister.

While many Iraqis danced in the street, others took revenge. According to a soldier's memoir, the young King Faysal II and Crown Prince Abd al-Ilah were gunned down senselessly in their palace courtyard, after having surrendered. A mob mutilated the body of Abd al-Ilah and dumped it into the Tigris River. Nuri's body, too, was dismembered and dragged in the street. These vicious acts echoed the brutal killings of the Wathbah, the terror and torture of Nuri's prisons, and the dishonor done to Fahd's body. Revenge haunted the days of revolutionary joy in July 1958.

Freedom soon became the byword of the revolution. Prisoners were freed, exiles returned, the arts flourished anew. The King Faysal Bridge that the army crossed to reach the royal palace on the morning of July 14 was renamed Jisr al-Ahrar (The Bridge of the Free). Crowds pulled down the statues of General Maude and King Faysal I. Qasim commissioned a Freedom Monument to replace them.

The Freedom Monument, a 150-meter limestone wall symbolizing a banner carried in a demonstration, still stands in Baghdad's Tahrir (Liberation) Square. Its fourteen bronze, bas-relief panels tell the story of the 1958 revolution in modernist style, combining Picasso's cubism with ancient Assyrian and Sumerian motifs. The story begins on the right with a powerful horse, symbolizing the vitality of the people, then moves to a mother weeping for her martyred son and an intellectual sitting in a prison cell. A soldier liberates them, in the central panel of the frieze. The figure of freedom follows, depicted as a woman holding a torch, and on the left end, final panels show Kurdish and Arab peasant women carrying palm fronds, an unborn child, and a spade; a freed bull; and a worker.
July 14, 1958, Batatu argued, was “the climax of the struggle of a whole generation.” While the ICP had not directly organized the coup, the party had done much to educate and encourage the 100,000 people who poured into the streets and turned the coup into a revolution. The ICP’s leader Hussein al-Radi embraced the revolution as the first, democratic step in the two-stage revolution. He and other communists organized a “monster” demonstration in August to show support. In coming weeks, tens of thousands of Iraqis joined communist organizations like popular militias, the Peace Partisans, the Women’s League, labor unions, and peasant unions.

The relationship between the ICP and Qasim was so close that most Iraqis believed Qasim was a communist. He was not. Qasim supported the liberal National Democratic Party, but he encouraged ICP support because he believed that 70 percent of Iraqis sympathized with the communists. Qasim also defined the revolution’s primary mission as the restoration of social justice. He redistributed the land of royalist elites to 35,000 families, raised taxes on the landed rich, reduced housing rents and bread prices, issued labor regulations to improve workers’ conditions, and built homes and schools for 10,000 families living in the slums around Baghdad.

The ICP’s ideological hegemony did not, however, lead to political hegemony. Although the communists became the popular vanguard of the 1958 revolution, they never captured the government. Three factors—the military, oil revenues, and the Cold War—tilted politics in the new republic against the left and toward dictatorship. The Free Officers were weakened by a split in leadership. While Qasim favored the secular, Iraq-centered, National Democratic Party, his partner, Abd al-Salam Arif, leaned toward Islam and the pan-Arabist Baath Party. While Qasim rallied communist crowds to the regime, Arif organized an armed revolt. In March 1959, Baathists ambushed communists on the streets of Mosul after a Peace Partisans rally, killing hundreds. Qasim’s troops and communist militias fought back, and after much bloodshed, prevailed. Arif’s supporters were purged from government and several were executed, including Fand’s nemesis, Attiyah.

Success at Mosul inspired the ICP to demand that Qasim appoint communists to his cabinet. That was the reason for the million-strong peace march in April 1959 and for another monster march on May Day. Qasim, however, rejected the communists’ bid to share political power. In late 1959, he openly turned against the ICP. He ordered the arrest of hundreds of communists, shut down their public branches, demobilized their popular militias, and removed communists from control of the peasant unions and the press.

ICP leaders convened an emergency meeting in late May 1959 to consider their options. Rival factions argued whether to overthrow the government in favor of the workers’ revolution or to adhere to their two-stage plan and so cooperate with Qasim first to establish a democracy. The faction advocating the latter won the fight. They published a pledge of loyalty to Qasim, admitting error in pushing too hard for government posts and praising his promise to legalize political parties and hold parliamentary elections. But the damage was done. Public support for the communists ebbed as Qasim pursued a campaign to discredit them as violent anarchists.

Why had the communists so sheepishly submitted to Qasim’s dictatorship, when the party enjoyed a preponderance of public support? Historians have debated this question for decades. Many agree that Qasim was so personally popular that it would have been political suicide for the party to defy him. Some argue that the decision to cooperate with Qasim reflected the party’s true, constitutional nature. Tens of thousands of Iraqis who joined the party after July 1958 viewed it as a democratic organization. They had little training or indoctrination in revolutionary ideology.

“The ICP now found itself hoist on the petard of its own moderation,” wrote historians Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett. In the absence of a true democratic system, they argued, the ICP should not have tried to behave like a political party. If the ICP had mobilized workers and peasants, the poor majority of Iraq, it might have succeeded, agreed historian Samira Haj.

Aziz al-Hajj, one of ICP’s leaders who had signed the loyalty pledge in the summer of 1959, argued that revolution was simply not an option—because of the international situation. Qasim faced threats from both pan-Arab Baathists and Nasserists who wanted to dissolve Iraq into the United Arab Republic. “In such circumstances, the launching of an armed movement would have played into the hands of the enemies of our independence,” al-Hajj argued.

Qasim also faced threats from the United States, some argue. Although the ICP had no substantive links to Moscow (the Soviets were more interested in Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser), the American Central
Intelligence Agency (CIA) was in a frenzy over the apparent spread of communism to Iraq. The 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine promised aid to anti-Soviet forces in the Middle East. In April 1959, at the time of the million-strong peace march, American newspapers quoted CIA director Allen Dulles as saying the situation in Iraq was “the most dangerous in the world today.”

Dulles—and the British before him—ignored the indigenous and democratic quality of Iraqi communism. The ICP’s membership was inspired by the same political values as other Arab liberation movements: national sovereignty, constitutionalism, and social egalitarianism. Only a defeated minority advocated an immediate workers’ revolution. Dulles also neglected State Department reports on the local social conditions that had made the ICP popular: the domination of a landowning class, the flight of sharecroppers to the city, and the denial of freedoms by the British-backed monarchy.

The Qasim dream ended quickly. The Iraqi Baath Party rebuilt itself in exile, infiltrated the Iraqi army, and prepared a better plot than it had in March 1959. In February 1963, key targets around Baghdad were relatively undefended while the Iraqi army battled a revolt in the Kurdish north. On the morning of February 8, the Baathists bombed the airport, took the radio station, and broadcast another revolutionary call on the radio, echoing that of July 14, 1958.

But this time, demonstrations broke out to defend the regime from the coup. Communists and workers poured into Rashid Street and surrounded the Defense Ministry, calling “There is no leader but Karim (Qasim)!” Shortly after ten o’clock, communist placards appeared on city walls: “To Arms! Crush the Reactionary Imperialist Conspiracy!” Thousands flooded the central city, fighting Baathist tanks with sticks and pistols. Qasim, however, refused to release weapons to the communist-led crowds. He remained besieged in the Defense Ministry, where he was killed.

The communists’ turn came next. Their former strength within the military had weakened and they were left virtually defenseless. Hundreds of communists were killed in fighting between February 8 and 10. The poorest districts of Baghdad, dominated by Shiis, held out the longest, as did communists in Basra. Claiming revenge, Baathist leaders then waged a campaign to annihilate the ICP that surpassed in terror and brutality that of Nuri. They conducted door-to-door searches and threw thousands of communists into sports stadiums as makeshift prisons. By November, 7,000 communists were in prison and at least 150 had been executed.

The ICP was crushed in 1963 as it had been in 1949; this time, however, it would not regain the mass power it had previously wielded. The failure of communism in Iraq cannot be blamed solely on the errors of poor leadership. External factors played an important role. The Baath Party had found an important ally in Nasser. These regional forces, in turn, were stoked by the Cold War rivalry of the Americans and the Soviets.

The destruction of the ICP marked the end of an era in the Middle East. Since 1900 labor unions and communist parties had organized new urban working classes throughout the region. Labor movements had played pivotal roles in Egypt’s 1919 and 1952 revolutions and in winning important social protections in Syria and Lebanon. Most of all, they had provided the muscle in popular challenges to dictatorship.

In the Middle East, the world wars played a role opposite to the one they played in Western Europe. Historian Geoff Eley has argued that the wars created “transnational conjunctions” in Western Europe that broke down obstacles to democracy. Paradoxically, it had been Europe’s socialists who played the democratic vanguard. In the Middle East, by contrast, the world wars had only raised false expectations of a Wilsonian Moment or the Atlantic Charter. World War I ushered in an expansion of European colonial rule, which in turn enriched and empowered a new landowning elite in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. After World War II, the new colonial elites blocked democratization with the aid of rival superpowers in the Cold War.

Britain’s dogged support of Nuri and the Eisenhower administration’s fear of communism combined to defeat popular democratic forces. The Baath Party established a dictatorship that made use of the same Abu Ghraib prison and even more terrifying methods of repression. Arab socialist regimes—Baathist and Nasserist—took their cues from Turkey’s Kemal, not Fahd. They transmuted the socialism of grassroots movements into a state machinery of reform from above.

The Cold War’s unliberating effect on poor people’s movements for justice was dramatized in finer detail in the story of a peasant movement in Syria, Iraq’s neighbor to the west. In contrast to the ICP, that movement’s leader, Akram al-Hourani, actually gained access to
high office in government, following the democratic measures that Iraqi communists advocated. Hourani faced similar pressures as the Cold War heated up on the 1950s. In response, he made fateful strategic alliances with the military and the Baath Party that triggered a coup in Syria at precisely the same moment as in Iraq, in February 1963.

On a September evening in 1951 a small, wiry man stood before more than 10,000 cheering peasants in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo. Akram al-Hourani, leader of the Arab Socialist Party (ASP), looked out at the banners praising him and declared:

My friends! We are weak when we are alone, but stronger than iron and fire when united! With the blood of our ancestors flowing through our hearts, we can rebel against tyranny and injustice!

The 1951 Syrian peasant congress “opened a new chapter in the life of the country and its future,” according to a local paper. The congress brazenly called on the poorest of citizens to challenge wealthy landowners’ control of Syrian politics. Hourani demanded full inclusion of all citizens in the political arena, on the basis of equal rights. He grounded his vision of justice in the belief that Arab society had been strongest when it was egalitarian. Colonial rule had deepened class divisions and weakened Arabs. Peasants, Hourani preached, would rescue the nation from colonial corruption.

The congress was unprecedented in the Arab world. Since the 1858 Lebanese peasant republic, Middle Eastern peasants had not mounted a sustained political movement. Iran saw a wave of peasant and tribal revolts in 1929, followed by Palestinian peasants’ armed revolt in
A new wave of unrest rolled across the region's farmlands after World War II. Even as Hourani spoke, Egyptian peasants were staging revolts against the country's largest landowners. And as we saw earlier, Iraqi communists had begun recruiting rural migrants in Baghdad who had fled the poorest provinces in the south.

Hourani's peasant congress reflected not just peasant discontent, but also the growing interest of political leaders in rural conditions. Since the turn of the century, Arabic novels and movies had featured romanticized portraits of the peasant as the bedrock of the nation, unmoved and uncorrupted by foreign rule. In the 1940s, the new Arab middle class began to take notice of peasants' actual condition. In Egypt, 60 percent of rural families were landless. In Syria, few villages had electricity, water, schools, or clinics. Politicians like Hourani awoke to the reality that the future prosperity of their nation hinged on improving conditions for the majority of citizens who still lived in the countryside. In contrast to the urban-based politics of the early twentieth century, the new political movements built a following by proposing to redistribute land from large estates to the rural poor. Peasants would become the moral—and economic—backbone of a new, just society.

In Turkey, just a year before the Aleppo congress, the Democrat Party had won elections by recruiting peasants who had been left out of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's economic plans. Turkey's 1950 election was the first democratic turnover of power to an opposition party in the Middle East. Like Hourani, President Adnan Menderes and Halide Edib believed that enfranchising peasants would make politics more democratic and unleash forces of progress and prosperity. Unlike Turkish Democrats, however, Hourani's party faced a hostile and powerful landed elite in parliament. He therefore turned to socialist ideas to justify more forceful means of bringing pressure on the landlords. His ASP united urban workers with rural peasants in northern Syria. Increasingly, the party allied with the Damascus-based Baath Party to become the dominant force in Syrian politics. However, throughout the Arab world, landowning elites empowered under colonial rule had so far succeeded in defeating rural challenges.

In another time and place, Hourani's effort might have produced a Scandinavian-style social welfare state. But conditions inside and outside of 1950s Syria did not favor such a democratic transition. While Turkish Democrats received agricultural aid from the United States in the 1950s, Hourani and Syrian socialists earned American suspicion and hostility. Hourani was (wrongly) labeled a communist and his opponents sought political leverage against him from the Americans and their allies in the region. Foreign intervention in Syria further undermined democratic politics.

Even without the pressures of the Cold War, Hourani would have had a very hard row to hoe. Had he been able to read the histories of democratic movements that we have today, notes political scientist David Waldner, Hourani might not have been so optimistic. Landowning classes in countries around the world have blocked transitions to democracy and harnessed the state and urban businessmen to protect their interests. Rarely have peasants succeeded in undermining landlords' power through parliamentary means. This has been especially true among developing countries emerging from colonial rule.

From today's perspective, it is not surprising that Hourani fought a losing battle—to the point that he betrayed his own principles. From at least 1949, he cultivated a loyal faction of left-leaning officers in the army in order to shield his movement from landowners. In late 1957, his leftist-front government faced a coup organized by landowners with American help. As North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops gathered on the Syrian-Turkish border, Hourani betrayed his communist allies. He canceled elections when he feared a communist victory would trigger a NATO invasion. The Syrian political arena collapsed and the military took the reins of power. Circumventing Hourani and the parliament, the military elite merged Syria with Egypt to create the United Arab Republic. Under Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's dictatorship, democracy died in Syria.

Hourani's peasants never entered a democratically elected parliament. Instead, they would be recruited into a new, military-based Baath Party that took power by coup in 1963 and that still rules Syria today. Hourani fell from the pinnacle of Syrian politics into prison. In a final twist of fate, the very same peasants he had inspired to join the Baath Party sent him into permanent exile in 1965.

Hourani is an example of how Arab social democrats paradoxically laid the foundations of the military dictatorships that have dominated the Arab world since the 1960s. His story is unknown even to many Syrians, because the military's neo-Baath Party erased
him from history and never allowed him to return. In the late 1980s, Hourani gave up on efforts to reenter Syrian politics. He sat in an apartment outside of Paris, with a shotgun by the door, and instead wrote himself back into history. Thanks to his 3,500-page memoir, we can gain insight into how the 1951 peasant congress's demands for justice were denied.

A SWASHBUCKLER AND A POET

Hasan Akram Rashid al-Hourani opened his memoir with his birth on a snowy day in November 1911. His family lived in Hama, seventy-five miles south of Aleppo. It was an ancient city nestled against a rocky bluff along the Orontes River. Giant medieval waterwheels still lifted water from the river into aqueducts that served many of Hama's 50,000 inhabitants. Rashid al-Hourani, Akram's father, was a textile weaver by trade and a shaykh of the Rifa'i Sufi order. The Houranis had introduced the order to Hama in the sixteenth century when they migrated from the Hawran, in southern Syria. The religious fraternity taught members to care for the poor and attracted a large peasant following.

By the time of Akram's birth, Rashid al-Hourani had assembled a modest landed estate and entered city politics. He became a census taker and a member of the Hama city council, which included representatives of the city's wealthiest families: the Barazis, the Azms, the Kaylanis. These landowners controlled the city's mosques and schools and owned 100 villages outright. Their arrogance was brutal. According to family legend, a particularly snobbish council member loudly remarked one day that the chamber's drapes appeared to come from Hourani looms. (This was an insult, because aristocrats did not work with their hands.) Quick with his wit, Rashid al-Hourani retorted that the only reason the councilman recognized their provenance was that the drapes were so exquisitely well made.

The Azms, Kaylanis, and Barazis owned the best lands along the river, where a literate elite of peasants tended fragrant gardens of fruit trees and vegetables. Peasant sharecroppers tended grain fields and sheep pastures in hundreds of nearby villages. Not unlike 1858 Lebanon, the feudal landlords lived in city villas and sent brutal henchmen to keep order on their estates.

Rashid al-Hourani resented the feudal lords because they overtaxed the poor. The Azm family earned £6,000 per year from its villages, while a typical sharecropper annually earned just £10. Hourani's father also resented the Ottomans. Sultan Abdulhamid supported Hama's elites despite their injustice, and even appointed one as shaykh of the Rifa'i order. After the 1908 Revolution, Rashid al-Hourani joined an opposition party that favored autonomy for Arab provinces against the Young Turks' centralization. But he did not live to see the Arab revolt or the establishment of Faysal's Arab kingdom in Damascus. He died of cholera early in the war, in 1915.

Akram al-Hourani came of age in the post-Ottoman world, under the French mandate in Syria. He was just nine years old in 1920, when French troops marched into Damascus and crushed Faysal's Syrian Arab Kingdom. Hourani and his brothers attended the Arab school that King Faysal had built in Hama. Teachers encouraged him to write patriotic Arabic poetry, read newspapers, and listen to political speeches. Hourani did not learn Turkish as his father had, but he followed events in the new Republic of Turkey with interest. Later in life, when his democratic struggle stalled, Hourani despairingly considered the "the Ataturk option" of dictatorial, top-down reform. As one historian put it, "Like Huey Long of Louisiana, Hourani can be described as a populist."

Hourani's Arab nationalism also sprang from his idealism. "Hourani was a romantic, attracted to poetry and novels," wrote Sami al-Jundi, a future Baath Party comrade from Hama. Like Hasan al-Banna, Hourani loved stories of ancient Arab heroes. In 1925, when Hourani was fourteen years old, Syrians mounted a national revolt against the French. He kept a scrapbook of articles about the battles and called the failed revolt "the most beautiful memory" of his life. Hourani attended Syria's finest Arab high school, the Maktab Anbar in Damascus, and then the Syrian University law school. In 1935, he organized the one-thousandth anniversary celebration for the classical Arab poet al-Mutanabbi.

After earning his law degree in 1936 Hourani returned to Hama and joined a branch of the Syrian Social National Party (SSNP). The SSNP opposed foreign rule with a program to unify Greater Syria, now split into the mandates of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Transjordan. The SSNP's militant tactics likely appealed to Hourani's
combative nature. The party’s platform certainly matched his political goals: 1) full national sovereignty, 2) abolition of feudalism, and 3) unity and tolerance among Muslims and Christians under a secular state.

These goals inspired Hourani’s career for the next thirty years. But Hourani grew impatient with the SSNP’s methods. Party members were afraid of common people and so remained an elitist faction. An effective political movement cannot rely solely on high school and college students, he realized. He aimed to build a mass, popular movement.¹¹

Economic injustice, more than colonialism, motivated Hourani. In 1938 he and his cousin Uthman al-Hourani organized the Youth Party of Hama to build an urban-rural coalition strong enough to challenge Hama’s feudal establishment. Hourani quickly attracted a mixed following of young men from popular quarters. He was street-smart, full of bravado, and willing to take on gang leaders and imitate neighborhood strongmen. He used the tough methods of traditional city leaders (zuama) in order to beat them at their own game.

The Youth Party also succeeded because Hourani liked people. His greatest pleasure, he recalled in his memoir, was to sit with farmers and discuss the year’s crop. He also owed success to his silver tongue. His swashbuckling image masked an acute political intelligence. In simple language he conveyed basic political principles. With a “call for equality and justice” he urged neighborhoods and villages to form “a popular mass against the large landowners’ oppression.”¹²

People began to hang pictures of Hourani in their houses. They wore badges with his picture and the slogan “There Is No More Fear,” recalled Izz al-Din Diyab, a schoolboy in Hama at the time. “I knew him from stories that were told about him, like legends about heroes and knights,” Diyab said. “The peasants felt there was someone standing beside them if someone attacked them.”¹³

**Hourani’s Democratic Campaign in Parliament**

This was an outrageous act of murder in late 1942 that brought Hourani into national politics. The victim was the daughter of Tawfik al-Barazi, who lived across the street from the Hourani home in Hama. “Her cousin, Salih bin Khalid al-Darwish al-Barazi, surprised her. He shot her and let her drop dead,” Hourani recalled. “When I returned home, I found my mother weeping.”

The girl belonged to a lesser branch of the prominent Barazi family, which tried to cover up the murder as an honor crime. They claimed the girl was having an illicit affair and was punished for dishonoring the family. Their ruse was discredited, however, when an autopsy showed that she was a virgin. Hourani discovered the real motive: inheritance. If Tawfik al-Barazi died without an heir, Salih would inherit his land. One branch of the family was murdering the other branch for its land.

“The crime of Salih al-Barazi was just one of a chain of crimes that represented the cruelty that targeted women and girls on the pretense of defending their honor,” Hourani wrote.

Hourani was appointed to represent the girl’s father. The case was politically explosive because it exposed to the public the hidden crimes of the feudal elite. “It motivated the people of Hama to act against them.”¹⁴ The local court, however, found Salih innocent: in Hama, law was subordinate to feudal privilege.

Hourani’s co-counsel, Raif al-Mulqi, was the local leader for the Damascus-based National Party. Mulqi recruited Hourani to run for parliament in 1943. As middle-class professionals, party leaders hoped that Hourani might break the feudal elite’s monopoly on the city’s seven parliamentary seats.

“The Hama campaign was one of the most violent in Syrian elections,” Hourani wrote. He ran as a youth candidate against the “feudal old men.” He also appealed to workers who had lost their industrial jobs during the Great Depression. As he told his first campaign rally: “This World War has opened great opportunities for our people to realize our national goals. So we must choose qualified, trustworthy men, lest we lose this opportunity.”¹⁵

Hourani’s campaign slogan was coined at the last nightly rally, held in a tent, west of the city. People played drums and sang songs and then, after his speech, began to chant: “Fetch the Basket and the Shovel to Bury the Agha and the Bey!” (Agha was a title like “Lord” used by the Barazis; Bey was the title used by the Azms.)

The slogan “spread like fire in straw,” Hourani recalled. And it shocked Hama’s elite. Rarely did people dare to voice such anger in public. Hourani’s campaign had emboldened people who normally
kept their resentments hidden. Riots broke out in the city, damaging the Azm family's houses.

National Party leaders panicked and apologized to the Azms. But Hourani refused their plea to withdraw from the race. Finally, the National Party leader in Damascus, Shukri al-Quwwatli, conceded and let Hourani run.

On July 26, 1943, Hourani won a parliamentary seat. He had cracked the feudal monopoly by drawing new voters to the polls: turnout in Hama was double that of other cities. Shop owners, artisans, and literate peasants had cast their first ballots ever, and they had chosen Hourani.

For Hourani, the campaign was also a personal turning point:

The campaign rallies were an astonishing discovery—like a hurricane—that would affect my conduct in national service for the rest of my life... I discovered the great misery of these good citizens at the rallies. I saw the lame, the paralyzed, people with faces pale from anemia, people wearing tattered rags, and people of terrifying thinness and weakness. People who could buy a kilo of rice for their family only once a year, to celebrate Eid al-Fitr.  

He took his shock and anger with him to Damascus, 100 miles to the south.

As Hourani entered parliament on opening day in late 1943, he must have felt as out of place as his father had on Hama's city council. At age thirty-one, he was the youngest deputy and the only one from a modest background. Most deputies wore fezzes, Ottoman-style morning coats, or the black robes of tribal chiefs. The victors of the National Party, led by the new president, Quwwatli, staged their challenge to the old guard by wearing expensive white suits. Hourani became the butt of jokes: "Journalists wrote articles about me that I was 'The Za'im [political leader] who Entered Parliament in Short Pants.'" 17

Hourani learned his lessons for two years, and then made his move in 1946 with an attack on tribal shaykhs' privileges. As the last French troops departed from Syria, he proposed to strip tribal shaykhs of the subsidies France gave them for their loyalty. Neither should tribes live under a separate set of laws, he declared. The constitution declared all citizens equal under the law. Political equality was just one of Hourani's goals: he also aimed to weaken tribal chiefs' support for landowners in parliament.

"No sooner had Hourani made these points than Sheikh Trad and other tribal representatives leaped to their feet, pulled out pistols, and began shouting raiding cries," notes historian Jonathan Owen. "Most people in the Chamber, including the Speaker and the Government, had hurried to the exits upon seeing the extent of the Bedouins’ firepower. But Hourani stood his ground. Parliament abolished the Tribal Authority shortly thereafter. 18

Hourani's victory was the first step on the road to breaking the feudal hold in Hama, which he now understood ran through Damascus. He soon built alliances with like-minded opposition leaders, including Khalid Bakdash of the Syrian communist party, Mustafa al-Sibai of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and especially the leaders of the Baath (Renaissance) Party, Michel Aflaq and Salah Bitar.

Baathists recruited students in Damascus with a vision of a new Arab golden age, which would come if Arabs renounced colonial-era boundaries and united into a single nation. Soon after the party held
its first formal congress—at a Damascus café in April 1947—hundreds of followers rallied to its slogan, “Unity, Liberty, Socialism.”

Baathists’ call for an Arab renaissance was another jeremiad, a call to restore ancient glory much like the calls of Mustafa Ali and Rashid Pasha to revive Suleyman the Magnificent’s glory to justify Ottoman reform, or Banna’s call to revive the ideals of the Prophet’s Medina. Baathism was a secular mirror to Banna’s belief that spiritual revival would lead to political justice.

The Baath Party’s vision was more inclusive. It aimed to unite all Arabic speakers as equal members of the Arab nation: the majority Sunni Muslim Arabs, Greek Orthodox Christians, Alawis, Druze, and Kurds. In a controversial speech at Syrian University, Aflaq (a Christian) declared Islam the sublime expression of Arab culture. Arab Christians, he said, therefore share in the cultural heritage of Islam. “The power of Islam,” he said, “has revived to appear in our days under a new form, Arab nationalism.”

In 1947 Hourani and the Baath Party allied to gain parliament’s approval for single-stage, direct elections. As they staged street demonstrations, Hourani publicized the issue in his newspaper, The Awakening (Al-Yagitha). The old voting system, where voters chose deputies through a two-stage nomination system, he wrote, was notoriously open to corruption, favoring wealthy incumbents. The paper’s circulation reached 8,000 copies daily.

The impact of electoral reform was immediate. Hourani ran as an independent candidate in the 1947 election on a program to reclaim farmland from the Ghab marsh near Hama and to distribute the land to poor peasants. He won easily. Across Syria, opposition parties won a total of thirty-three new seats, giving them command of fifty-three seats in parliament against the National Party’s twenty-four. Landowners managed to maintain their dominance, however, by violating electoral laws, falsifying the ballots of illiterate voters, and confiscating peasants’ identity cards.

The lingering corruption in the 1947 elections triggered a political crisis. Quwwatli’s National Party, once a force of change, now cultivated the support of reactionary landowners and tribal leaders. Quwwatli “sat on top of an edifice of nepotism and mismanagement eroded at the base by price inflation, by crop failures due to drought, and by rumblings of discontent from the emerging labor unions.”

When Quwwatli forced through parliament a constitutional amendment allowing him to run for—and eventually win—a second term as president in 1948, a new opposition front formed. The People’s Party, founded by businessmen in Aleppo, joined Hourani’s Youth Party, the Baath Party, and the communists in protests. Michel Aflaq was arrested for circulating a leaflet that called Quwwatli a feudalist who enslaved the people.

Hourani took the parliament floor to defend Aflaq and the constitution. Now that Syria is independent, he declared, it must be free: “Newspapers must enjoy full freedom, and especially under government officials who had tasted repression under the French and the Turks.” When a Quwwatli supporter tried to steal the microphone, a fistfight broke out. “Chairs flew in the air, as did insults and curses.”

Aflaq was released a few days later, but Hourani’s fears for the republic did not subside. Even as he joined the leftist front, Hourani maintained contact with an old friend from Hama, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli. Their friendship grew warmer as they fought together in Palestine in the winter of 1947–1948. They bonded around Hourani’s old flame, Arab nationalism. Hourani also began to see the army as the “Ataturk option” in his back pocket. He encouraged Youth Party recruits to attend the new national military academy. If peasants replaced the elitist officers of the French era, Hourani reasoned, the army could become an instrument of social change.

**Hourani and the Military Coups of 1949**

In November 1948, Quwwatli’s regime teetered on collapse when demonstrations by Baathist students, Hourani’s party, and the Muslim Brotherhood blamed him for defeat in Palestine. Quwwatli declared martial law and called in the army to enforce a curfew. This was the first explicit use of the army in politics since the French withdrew in 1946. Syrians had much to fear from those troops on the streets. Regimes in Egypt and Iraq responded to defeat in Palestine by destroying Banna’s Muslim Brotherhood and Comrade Fahd’s communists, respectively.

That winter, Colonel Husni al-Zaim, the army chief, planned a coup with advice from the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA encouraged the coup because it feared instability would open the
gates to Soviet influence in Syria. Following the American script, Zaim ordered Colonel Shishakli to march on the capital in the early hours of March 30, 1949. While the leftist opposition welcomed Quwwatli's demise, the elderly Speaker of parliament, Faris al-Khuri, called Zaim's coup the worst disaster since the Young Turk dictatorship of World War I. By summer Za'im alienated all of his supporters and Colonel Sami Hinnawi deposed him. Four months later, Hourani's friend Shishakli staged the third coup of 1949. His military dictatorship would last four years.29

The coups reflected the deep split between old landed elites and a new middle class of technocrats, both civilian and military. Many Syrians, however, blamed Hourani personally for bringing the military into politics. His memoir devotes many pages to denying the accusations. Scholars agree he didn't plan the coups. However, Hourani admitted that he cooperated with military rulers because they promised to return to constitutional government—and because they supported land reform. Hourani was typical of many 1950s politicians—in the Middle East and the United States—who believed a short period of revolutionary dictatorship could sweep away obstacles to democracy and economic development.30

Hourani used the first three years of military rule to advance agricultural reform free of interference from the landowner-dominated parliament. “My passion for the issues of planting, forestry, and the protection of woodlands was one of the reasons I accepted the post of Minister of Agriculture after the coup by Sami al-Hinnawi,” he explained. “I could not let an exceptional opportunity pass.”31

He was virtually the only government official who understood the problem and importance of agriculture. He knew, as most elites did not in 1949, that Alawi peasants living near Homs and Hama barely grew enough to eat. They lived in hopeless villages handicapped by high rates of illiteracy and infant mortality. The reason for such poverty, in Hourani’s view, was the unjust distribution of land: About 97 percent of Syrian farmers owned small plots of less than twenty-five acres, while an elite of 8,000 landowners owned 37 percent of the farmland. Only one in five villages had a tractor; some didn’t even have a single truck.32

From a dusty drawer, Hourani retrieved an economic development report that he had commissioned in 1946. Quwwatli had ignored it. He ordered agriculture ministry staff to draft economic development plans based on it. He also started a program to send Syrian students to agricultural institutes abroad. The program’s graduates returned to start agricultural schools in Syria that significantly boosted Syria’s farm yields. Hourani also launched a pilot land reform plan: in a chosen village, forced labor and sharecropping were abolished and state lands were redistributed to poor peasants.33

Landlords fought back in the November 1949 parliamentary election, which Colonel Hinnawi conducted as promised. Hourani carried land reform to the people with a pamphlet titled “Feudalism in Hama Must Be Attacked.” Landlords terrorized villages and sent their henchmen to block Hourani’s entry. In a show of force, Hourani drove straight into a village where a death warrant was issued on him. “I couldn’t back off from this threat,” he wrote later. When he arrived, just one family dared to greet him. “The main goal,” Hourani wrote, “was to encourage the peasants and free them from the nightmare of fear.”

Landlords also mobilized religious leaders to condemn Hourani as an atheist. He reminded voters of his ancestors’ tolerant Sufi traditions against the Sunni sectarianism of Hama’s religious elite. “We serve religion but we don’t serve the oppressive feudalists,” he said.34

Once again, however, the landowners trumped the elections. Hourani was one of only two socialists to win a seat in the 1949 parliament. Corruption under Hinnawi had been as bad as it had been under Quwwatli. In protest, Hourani resigned as agriculture minister.

Hope for a return to parliamentary government disappeared completely the next month, when the People’s Party proposed that Syria merge with Iraq. While the party claimed to act in the spirit of Arab unity, it also acted in the interest of Aleppo businessmen with interests in the city of Mosul and in a British petroleum company that wanted to build a pipeline from Iraq to the Mediterranean.

Conservative landowners also saw little problem in uniting with a monarchy (this was before Iraq’s 1958 revolution). Hourani and his opposition bloc saw a threat to the republic. Even the head of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood joined Hourani.35 “Colleagues!” Hourani addressed the Chamber, “I absolutely believe that preserving the republican system is as urgent as preserving the independence and full sovereignty of the country.”36
It was army officers, not fellow deputies, who answered his call. On the morning of December 19, Colonel Shishakli arrested Hinnawi and promised the Syrian people by radio that the army would assure “the continued existence of the country and its republican system.” Whether or not Hourani collaborated with Shishakli, he once again chose to cooperate with a military regime. He accepted the post of defense minister, because the rising cohort of graduates would accept no one else.

Amidst the political whirlwind, Hourani met his future wife, Naziha al-Homsi, a twenty-four-year-old graduate of Syrian University and a social science teacher. A former member of the Syrian communist party, Homsi had first heard of Hourani when his electoral reform committee awarded women the right to vote. They became a celebrity couple, with their engagement announced on the front page of newspapers.

By April 1950, Hourani had grown disenchanted with Shishakli’s regime. He resigned as defense minister amid protests against a proposal to make Islam the state religion. In his memoir, Hourani described his horror when Shishakli told him, over dinner, that an army officer would succeed him as defense minister: “This sin opened the door to the army, which began to covet power in government.”

Hourani refrained from public criticism of Shishakli, however, because he needed the dictator’s good will to support agricultural reform. In order to pressure Shishakli, Hourani devoted the next eighteen months to building the peasant movement.

**THE PEASANT REVOLT OF 1950**

Hourani established the ASP as the nationwide successor to his Youth Party of Hama. The party called for land reform, agricultural development, republican government, religious tolerance, and women’s rights. In the spring of 1950, it launched a campaign to recruit peasants to its vision of justice.

“From the first day, the ASP went into the countryside and distributed membership cards,” recalled Izz al-Din Diyab, who joined the ASP in his village outside Hama. ASP recruiters sat down with peasants and talked about how their landlords should have built schools, roads, and clinics for them. They gained the peasants’ trust by then helping them build a road, clinic, or school. Then they explained how landlords became wealthy by exploiting peasant labor.

“When we told the people ‘This land can be yours,’ there was a kind of explosion,” recalled Dr. Aziz al-Saqr, an Alawi peasant who joined the party.

The ASP opened its Hama headquarters with a big party. “Delegations came from all parts of the city, by foot, by car, by bus. When Akram al-Hourani gave his speech, the crowd chanted his name and women whistled. He got the greatest applause of his life,” recalled Diyab. Literate peasant-gardeners rubbed shoulders with wage workers, soldiers, civil servants, shop owners, students, and professionals. A crew of *gabadayat* (neighborhood strongmen) stood on call at a coffeehouse nearby. At the first report of abuse in a village, they would rush out to defend the peasants.

In June 1950, the ASP began organizing peasant revolts. Hourani toured villages near Hama, where even women and children came to cheer him and beat drums. Peasants staged rent strikes, refusing to pay their landlords. In some villages, peasants scared landowner families off the land. Henchmen arrived and violence broke out. Several peasants were killed.

A hostile newspaper scolded Hourani: “Ever since your youth, you have been feeding on spite, malice and dissension. You love to play with fire, even at the risk of burning yourself, your people, and your country.” Some newspapers hinted at the need to assassinate Hourani.

Hourani was careful to couch the revolt in religious terms, in order to fend off criticism from elite clerics. He enjoyed a unique appeal among peasants because of his association with the Rifa’i Sufi order. Among urban followers, he rooted the revolts in the Islamic reformism of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh and in the example of Abu Zarr, who had called for social revolution in the time of the Prophet.

Slowly, a powerful peasant leadership emerged northwest of Hama, altering the balance of power in the city’s rural hinterland. Christians, Alawis, Druze, and Sunni Muslims joined the movement. No other party in Syria could claim such a grassroots following; no other single personality wielded more power in politics.
Hourani used the momentum of the peasant revolts to achieve a second victory: a new constitution. Syria’s September 1950 constitution stands as one of the most democratic ever adopted in the Arab world. It included a twenty-eight-article bill of rights that guaranteed freedoms of speech and assembly as well as economic and social rights. Articles promised to distribute state land to poor farmers, limit the size of landholdings, and establish a code of regulations on landlord-peasant relations.

The 1950 constitution represented a political pact between socialists and progressive business, against the old economic order. Even businessmen of the People’s Party, who had opposed Hourani over the proposed Iraq merger, supported it. They shared Hourani’s belief that state investment and regulation would promote economic development. Despite its support for constitutionalism, the People’s Party was not willing to give up the power it had won in parliament in the corrupt elections of 1949. When the party refused to hold new elections, Hourani briefly resigned his parliamentary seat in protest.

Hourani’s intense frustration with parliament was evident in the ASP manifesto he issued in October 1950. It bluntly proclaimed revolution: “I am sure there is no life for the Arab people except through the destruction of feudal conditions in Arab countries and the building of a just socialist system on the basis of cooperation, love, and harmony among members of society.”

He launched the “The Land Belongs to the Peasant” campaign the following spring. The ASP hailed workers as the source of national sovereignty and wealth and pledged to defend peasants from exploitation. Hourani held parliamentary hearings on peasant demands for legal protection from expulsion, a fair share of profits, and a just distribution of land. And ASP-Baath Party demonstrations forced the government to nationalize the French tobacco company which virtually owned many poor villages in northern Syria.

By the summer of 1951, nearly 10,000 peasants, workers, and small shopkeepers had joined the movement. “It was like a flood tide coming in and we never had the time to keep count,” Hourani wrote. Northern Syria exploded in another round of peasant revolt, partly because worms had decimated the cotton harvest. Peasants attacked a Barazi family estate, refused to give landowners shares of their crops, and drove their agents from their fields. When landlords tried to occupy land newly reclaimed from the Ghab marsh, peasants drove them out.

Large landowners grew so concerned that in August 1951 they convened an emergency meeting in Aleppo. They sent a telegram to Shishakli’s government in Damascus, condemning efforts to limit the size of their estates, calling Hourani a communist, and accusing the ASP of “sowing dissension among landlords and peasants.”

In fear and exuberance, ASP leaders responded with a vote to hold a peasant congress in Aleppo—right in the feudalists’ lion’s den. They scheduled it on the fourth day of the biggest holiday of the year, Eid al-Adha, when peasants would have the day off.

At daybreak on September 15, convoys of cars, buses, and trains rolled out of Syria’s villages and towns toward Aleppo. Hourani’s car headed north from Damascus, packed with activists and journalists. “Party members stopped us in every village and asked: ‘When will the Chief arrive?’” Few yet recognized their leader’s face. Thousands waited to greet Hourani in Hama. “I never heard voices yell so loud,” he recalled.

The peasant convoy stretched ten kilometers long when it finally pulled into Aleppo. “How many of them had not eaten that day, so they could afford to rent a car?” asked Hussein Shabani, editor of an Aleppo newspaper. “How many left their villages under the wings of darkness, knowing that they would return to meet the whip of the landowner?”

Spectators jammed streets and balconies as the peasants paraded through the city into a public park. The crowd—estimated between 10,000 and 40,000—overflowed into the streets. People carried Hourani on their shoulders to a speaker’s platform draped with banners declaring “Long Live the Father of Arab Socialism, Akram al-Hourani!” “The People Are the Source of All Power!” “Ownership Is a Social Duty!” and “No Sectarianism, No Racism, No Classism in Our Socialist System!”

After speeches by workers, poets and lawyers, Hourani finally spoke: Arab Socialists! Comrades in the struggle! We have waged many years of mortal battle on many fronts: against foreigners, against feudal lords, against imperialism, against capitalism. There were times when I sat by
myself and worried about our ability to achieve what is the best for our people. But whenever I find myself among you, I feel a great power, an awesome power, that makes all obstacles small and all difficulties simple. This is the power of the Arab people!54

The speech crystallized a political vision long in the making. In his 1943 campaign, Hourani had believed civic virtue sprang simply from youth; now, he believed it flowed from labor. Hourani was no Comrade Fahd. His socialism was rooted not in Marxist theory but rather in personal experience, Arab culture, and Islamic morals. His ideas about feudalism were distilled from the brief lessons he had learned in the SSNP: feudalism was foreign, a product of colonial rule; it caused a moral inversion in Arab society; and it doomed Arabs to poverty and parochialism.

To restore justice, Hourani told the crowd, we must begin by “placing our economic system on the basis of cooperation and justice.” Capitalism and colonialism had created a false and tyrannical elite that rules. Only by destroying the economic base of their tyranny will Arabs regain their freedom and resume their historical, humane mission as a people. In other words, Hourani argued, land reform was the first priority.

He then warned the peasants of the danger they faced:

Those who exploit the people and whip them, they are now organizing themselves and they are using every means possible—sometimes power, sometimes manipulation and immorality—to keep their privileges. They depend on foreign apparatus to support them.

He reassured his audience that they acted in the right. The ASP is not an anarchic movement, he said. It upholds rule of law and the constitution. It is the landowners who resort to violence and illegal land seizure. In conclusion, Hourani thundered:

Isn’t the worker a human being? Isn’t the peasant a human being? We are the builders and they are the attackers. We are ready to judge them before the laws of heaven and earth!

The congress ended in a spirit of victory. Hourani had done the unthinkable. He had publicly accused Syria’s wealthiest elite of being criminals. And he was able to do it only because his hometown friend, Shishakli, ruled as a dictator.

Hourani also crafted his message, as reformers since the nineteenth century had, in familiar language of honor and restoration. He preached in the form of jeremiad just as Reshid Pasha had done in 1839, and as Banna did in his pamphlets. Like them, he combined a new language of rights with a vision of justice as a return to forgotten values, to the indigenous virtue of Arabs that had been stolen by colonial powers.

The congress was so powerful that four months later, in January 1952, Shishakli issued Decree No. 96 on land reform. It canceled feudal lords’ claims to unregistered state lands and set a ceiling on the size of their estates. Land exceeding the limit was to be distributed to “needy peasants.”55

Akram al-Hourani debating in Syrian parliament, 1956. Hourani had by then merged his Arab Socialist Party with the Baath Party. They formed a leftist reform front with communists and independents to assert brief control in Syrian politics in the mid-1950s.

(Syrianhistory.com)
Shortly after issuing the decree, however, Shishakli turned against the peasant movement, calling it a threat to order. His reversal echoed a similar move by Kemal (whom he also admired). In the 1930s the Turkish dictator had granted women suffrage and then outlawed the Turkish women’s movement on the pretext that its work was done. Within months, Shishakli outlawed parties and shut down newspapers and eventually took full control of the state away from civilians.

In January 1953, Hourani and the Baathists escaped to exile over the snowy mountains of Lebanon. He wrote a letter to his wife from Beirut in which he compared himself to another martyr for constitutional justice. The thought had come to him that morning, upon waking from a nightmare. “I turned on the radio and listened to the Holy Qur’an,” he wrote. The verse calmed his fears: Allah “urged the faithful to be patient, and vowed that tyrants will come to a bad end,” he wrote. “I will keep my promise to myself, whatever comes my way, just as the hero Ahmad Urabi did in his exile.”

FROM PARLIAMENTARY RESTORATION TO THE UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC

Like a political phoenix, Hourani returned to Syria under an amnesty in late 1953. In his last months before exile, Hourani had united the ASP with the Baath Party in their common battle against Shishakli’s dictatorship. It was the military, however, that finally ousted Shishakli in a February 1954 coup. The coalition triumphed in the elections that followed.

Between 1954 and 1958 Syria returned to civilian rule, what later generations would call a golden era. Hourani rose to become Speaker of parliament in this period, when he worked closely with other leftist parties in a national front. Newspapers flourished and labor unions organized to claim rights for workers. The moment seemed auspicious for Hourani’s revolution.

His peasant movement would never, however, launch the grassroots revolution he envisioned. Landowners proved too powerful and Hourani was unable to extend the movement into Syria’s south and east, where conditions were quite different. Two other factors also interfered with Hourani’s plan: the military’s meddling in politics and foreign intervention. They gained influence because Shishakli had left political society so weak: in less than five years of rule he had thoroughly subverted civilian government, decimated civil society, and gutted instruments of republican politics.

In late 1957 these factors drove Hourani to make the greatest mistake of his career. He canceled municipal elections and jump-started negotiations to merge Syria and Egypt into the United Arab Republic. Hourani effectively ended his political career and his lifelong dream of constitutional reform. Nasser dissolved the Baath Party and imposed a dictatorship harsher than Shishakli’s. A neo-Baath Party arose within the military, unbeknownst to Hourani, and helped to end the United Arab Republic. In a 1963 coup it established its own military dictatorship. After years of house arrest, Hourani was forced again into exile in 1965—this time never to return.

Hourani’s rise and fall in the 1950s is an astonishing story. How could a savvy political player, at the top of his game in 1951, make mistakes so huge? Examining the choices he made during this crucial decade reveals how difficult it was for democratic socialists to conduct politics openly in so stressed a political atmosphere. It offers insight into how Arab socialists not only failed to install democratic regimes but also spawned military dictatorships across the Arab world.

Hourani’s first strategic choice was to join forces with his longtime allies, Bitar and Aflaq. Their Baath Party offered a wider base in cities beyond Hama. The merged party, called the Arab Socialist Baath Party (ASBP), united Baathist strength among students, especially in Damascus, with the ASP’s rural base in northern Syria. By late 1953 it claimed 6,000 registered members and the sympathy of tens of thousands more.

Like the Iraqi Communist Party, the ASBP was an integrative movement. It united Druze, Alawi, Ismaili, and Christian minorities under a common Arab national identity. Sons of peasants from these minority groups joined the ASBP as a means of entering a political system long dominated by the Sunni Muslim elite. To them, the ASBP offered an egalitarian model of justice that Ottomanism never had, by building using Arab nationalism as a bridge between the dominant urban elite of Sunni Muslims and non-Sunni peasants.

The new party also emphasized democracy as the best guarantee of national security. Hourani’s first party publication, written from exile in May 1953, argued against the military’s claim that its control
of politics was necessary for defense against communist, Zionist, or American threats: "It is up to you, activists, to liberate yourselves from fear . . . to welcome the leadership of the popular masses as the best defense and a challenge to military conditions, dictatorship, and reactionary politics." At parliament’s first meeting on March 7, 1954, he repeated that argument, in calling for the full enfranchisement of peasants and workers: "We think that if free and neutral elections are not guaranteed, the country could become a stage for foreign conspiracy." 61

After a summer of demonstrations by women, peasants, workers, and students, an interim government organized Syria’s freest elections to date. For the first time, secret ballots were used. And to discourage corruption, local election officials were transferred to different districts. 62

The ASBP rallied workers and peasants by organizing unions, hiring lawyers to prosecute abusive landowners, and sending campaign trucks into villages. Landowners and Islamists fought back, with violence. In Hama, landowners’ henchmen beat up any suspected Baath Party supporter. Bombs exploded on the streets, at times near Hourani’s home. 63

Hourani compared the 1954 election to Egypt’s 1882 constitutional revolution, when the “Arab hero Ahmad Urabi battled the British occupation of Egypt.” It appears that he had read the biographies of Urabi published on the eve of Egypt’s 1952 revolution. He reminded voters that British-backed clerics had issued a fatwa accusing Urabi of apostasy, to delegitimize the constitutional movement. Syria’s elite was using the same tactic today. “If they accuse the Baath [of atheism], then they are condemning tens of thousands of citizens for apostasy,” he declared. “Islam is a message of love and tolerance and peace. It was spread on Earth because it carried a message of justice and freedom and equality." 64

The September 1954 election was a landmark. The socialists won a landslide victory in Hama: Hourani’s list swept five seats, winning more than 90,000 votes in the district, compared to landowners’ 50,000 total. Across Syria, socialists defeated the People’s Party in numerous districts, winning twenty-two seats against the People’s Party’s thirty. Khalid Bakdash became the first communist elected to parliament. 65

And yet, reformers still held only a minority of seats in parliament (at most fifty-five of 142). Hourani battled against a conservative bloc of deputies from the National and People’s parties. These latter wielded enough influence among independents to block reform bills and the incorporation of peasants and workers into politics. 66

Hourani’s grandstanding in parliament popularized the ASBP as the champion of the poor. When conservatives defeated his land reform proposal, for example, the sixteen Baathist deputies threatened to resign and return to the ranks of the people. Hourani then accused dissenting deputies of accepting bribes. Hourani’s attacks were, according to historian Nabil Kaylani, “largely opportunist, occasionally demagogic, but always characterized by deftness and acumen.” 67

The ASBP suffered another blow in August 1955, when its favored candidate for president, Khalid al-Azm, lost to its nemesis, Quwwatli. Historians support Hourani’s contention Quwwatli owed his victory to Saudi money, which swayed many votes—especially from the People’s Party. 68

“Does anyone not know that our society is moving toward your justice?” Hourani asked defiantly, at a second peasant congress in the city of Homs. “The socialist mission has entered citizens’ souls and empowered the Syrian countryside." 69

Cold War politics, however, deepened the rift in Syrian politics. In early 1955, Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan signed the Baghdad Pact with Britain. The Syrian government rejected the anti-Soviet pact in favor of neutralism. In April, Azm, the foreign minister, attended the legendary Bandung Conference of newly independent Asian and African nations, held in Indonesia. Nehru of India, Tito of Yugoslavia, and Nasser of Egypt also attended and condemned the Cold War alliances as a new form of imperialism. But neutralism was difficult to maintain, especially after Azm made a deal to buy weapons from the Soviets. 70

The People’s Party exploited Azm’s deal to cultivate support from Iraq and the United States. In mid-1956, the Iraqi monarchy approached Shishakli to plan a coup. They intended to assassinate Hourani, Bakdash, and the chief of military intelligence, Colonel Abd al-Hamid Sarraj. Sarraj exposed the plot, however, in October 1956.

The highly publicized trial of forty-seven conspirators tilted the balance of power in Syria farther to the Left. Hourani, Azm, and Bakdash gained parliament’s approval for a new National Front Charter. It committed Syria to fight against imperialism and atheism, defend Arab national movements, and pass laws to protect workers and
The year 1956 ended with Hourani’s parliamentary bloc in the driver’s seat of Syrian politics.

At the same time, however, the Suez War made Nasser, Egypt’s revolutionary president, the most popular leader in the Arab world. Washington looked on with concern. And while external threats mounted, internal divisions deepened. Disagreements about priorities—Arab unity or socialism—threatened to split apart the National Front.

It is not clear when Hourani realized that his movement was on a collision course with the United States. His memoir makes little reference to American involvement in Syria before 1957. Yet, even as he staged the ASP’s peasant congress in 1951, the Korean War intensified, Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communist campaign peaked, and Iran’s prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddeq, expelled the British in a dispute over oil rights.

As 1957 opened, Americans sounded alarm bells about Syria. The New York Times reported that “the extreme Left in Syria had alarming strength” and warned that the Syrian “vacuum” might be filled by the Soviet Union. In March, the United States issued the Eisenhower Doctrine, promising aid to any political group that battled communism. In April, Syrian socialists watched nervously as King Hussein of Jordan staged a coup against a left-leaning cabinet elected six months earlier. As the king violently purged communists and Baathists, American warships stood guard in the Mediterranean while Iraqi and Saudi troops stood ready at the border.

Hourani’s fears of American intervention were well founded. In the summer of 1957, the CIA hatched another plan for a coup in Syria. Sarraj, the Baathist chief of military intelligence, nipped it in the bud and expelled three Americans. In September, Turkish NATO troops appeared on Syria’s northern border. The public panicked. Women joined men in forming self-defense militias. Hourani welcomed 3,000 Egyptian troops who landed at the northern port city of Latakia. Fearing assassination by American agents, Hourani cancelled his appearance at a third peasant congress. Then American envoy Loy Henderson appeared in the region. Henderson was widely known to have planned Mosaddeq’s overthrow in Iran in 1953.

As tension mounted, Hourani reached the pinnacle of his parliamentary career. In October 1957 he narrowly defeated a conservative opponent to become Speaker of parliament. He made plans for Syria’s first-ever municipal elections. But in November, he canceled them, claiming that the siege atmosphere undermined democratic process. His true motive was more complex. The ASBP had not prepared well for the election, and it feared that the communists would win. A communist victory might trigger a NATO-led invasion from Turkey.

By canceling the elections, Hourani betrayed his May 1953 message from exile, that democratic politics is the best guarantee of sovereignty. Worse, he again chose alliance with a dictator. Two days after the elections were to have been held, Hourani staged a joint session of parliament with an Egyptian delegation headed by Anwar Sadat. Sadat hailed Syrians as “brothers in arms” in the defense of the Arab world from imperialist aggression. They convinced the joint parliament to vote for “a federal union” between Syria and Egypt. Hourani later boasted that the session had successfully marginalized Syrian communists.

But he quickly recognized his miscalculation. As mass demonstrations broke out cheering for Nasser, he lost the reins of political authority. Angry communists in the military used public zeal to plot their revenge. In January, without consulting Hourani or any other civilian leaders, the communist-leaning army chief, General Affif Bizri, flew to Cairo to propose an immediate and full union to Nasser. Hourani was furious.

Hourani and the other ASBP leaders had no choice but to accept a fait accompli. Syrians danced in the streets for several days in February, when voters in both countries formally approved the establishment of the United Arab Republic. It was Hourani’s nemesis, President Quwatli, who signed the union agreement in Cairo.

Publicly, Hourani played the union with Egypt as a victory. “The union of Syria and Egypt is a turning point of history and one of the greatest victories of this age,” Hourani told the crowd gathered on February 2, 1958. “It is the road leading to a comprehensive Arab unity and the liberation of Palestine and Algeria and all Arab lands from the claws of Western imperialism.”

Behind the scenes, however, there was doubt and dissent. The ASBP had long recognized Nasser as a dictator. They had hoped to preserve Syria’s parliamentary system by negotiating a federal system of government within the union. But the rush to union had left no room for negotiating conditions.
Nasser regarded Hourani as the single most powerful politician in Syria and so appointed him vice-president for the Syrian sector of the United Arab Republic. But Nasser’s real intent was to isolate Syria’s left and destroy it. In January he demanded the dissolution of all parties, except his own. Nasser then ordered Hourani to Cairo, where he was cut off from his political base. After the Nasser regime destroyed the Syrian communist party (Bakdash fled to exile), it rigged elections to assure defeat of candidates who had formerly belonged to the ASBP. Then Nasser posted his right-hand man, Abdel Hakim Amer, as a virtual dictator in Syria.

In December 1959, Hourani openly broke with Nasser over the president’s refusal to protest at the United Nations against Israeli plans to divert water from the Jordan River. That effectively ended his political career. He lived under house arrest until September 1961, when an army coup brought the United Arab Republic to an end. Aflaq and the Baath Party leaders then expelled Hourani from the party. They still dreamed of Arab unity and of restoring the United Arab Republic. Hourani staunchly opposed any return to union with Egypt.

Hourani devoted his last months of freedom in Syria to reviving civilian government. He revived his old ASP, which still commanded tremendous loyalty among peasants. And in 1962 he partnered with his old rival, Azm, to expand land reform and restore the 1950 constitution.

But on March 8, 1963, a secret military wing of the Baath Party overthrew the government. It had been formed by disenchanted officers during the United Arab Republic. Hourani was arrested “for socialist activities” in October 1965 and sent to the Mezza prison outside of Damascus. When he fell ill with stomach cancer, friends won his release on condition that he seek treatment in exile.

Hourani flew to Paris on a rainy day in December 1965. After his recovery, he lived for years in Lebanon and Iraq, organizing opposition movements that failed to depose the Baathist regime in Damascus. In the 1980s, he fell ill again and returned to France. That was where he wrote his memoir. It is said that in 1996, at age 85, Hourani requested permission to die in his homeland. Permission never came. He died in Jordan on February 24, 1996. One of his obituaries invoked this verse (33:23) from the Quran: “Among the believers are men true to what they promised Allah. Among them is he who has fulfilled his vow [to the death], and among them is he who awaits [his chance]. And they did not alter [the terms of their commitment] by any alteration.”

Hourani was thrown out of Syria by the very peasants he had brought into politics. Among them was Hafiz al-Asad, ruler of Syria from 1970 to 2000. As a high school student in Latakia, not far from Hama, Asad had admired Hourani for his defense of peasant dignity and rights. He also followed Hourani’s advice to poor peasant boys to attend the free Homs Military Academy.

Hourani’s dream of democracy was denied, but not his dream of redemption for the poor: when Asad became president, he was hailed as the first peasant ruler of Syria and he enacted many of the agricultural reforms that Hourani had fought for. “Hourani was the agent of change, a midwife of the new Syria over which Asad was to preside,” wrote Patrick Seale. “He roused the peasants, politicized the army, and gave the theorists of the Baath a cutting edge.”

To the end of the twentieth century, “Houranist” peasants preserved his memory and proudly displayed their crumpled ASP membership cards. And Syrian landowners continued to demonize him for destroying the idyllic Old Syria of their memories and for masterminding a vengeful peasant dictatorship. “If he could have drunk our blood and eaten our flesh he would have done so,” said a prominent landowner.

While living in Beirut in the 1970s, Hourani still believed that landowners plotted to murder him. The shotgun at his door in Paris bespeaks his continued fear.

Hourani blamed the failure of his movement and the triumph of military dictatorship on the Syrian public’s foolish embrace of Nasser and on the landlords of the People’s Party, who destroyed popular faith in democracy.

Posthumously, his memoirs were criticized for downplaying his own important role in politicizing the military. The memoirs may self-aggrandize in their effort to correct the historical record, but they also leave the impression that Hourani was naïve about the wolf he
had let in the door. It is difficult to understand how Hourani thought he would restore civilian politics in 1962. The military had plunged Syria into the United Arab Republic, pulled it out again, and plotted to rule Syria directly.

Critics also argue that Hourani had never been a true democrat or that he was simply a power-hungry “opportunist.” The latter label, used by American diplomats, was taken up by Aflaq and other bitter rivals. It is difficult to believe that Hourani was so cynical, given the copious evidence he presented in the memoir of his efforts to build and defend a constitutional republic. One critic called Hourani the Lenin of Baathism: he transformed ideals into political action and in the process destroyed the ideals. That charge may, sadly, be more on the mark.

Hourani’s is a story not of Arabs’ weak democratic values, nor of ancient “Eastern” preferences for dictatorship, but of a struggle for social democracy against long odds—against the legacy of colonial rule that left a powerful landed oligarchy and against the interventions of Cold War superpowers and their satellites in the region. Hourani drew on a deep and rich reservoir of constitutional politics in Syria, dating to the 1908 Ottoman revolution and Faysal’s Syrian Congress of 1920. He was a lawyer, not a soldier, and generally reluctant to sacrifice rule of law in his pursuit of social justice. Hourani was also a homegrown pioneer of Arab socialism, rooted in his lived experience in Hama.

Hourani’s story also illustrates how peasant mobilization and populist politics produced military dictatorship. The military dictatorships of late twentieth-century Syria, Egypt, and Iraq must be understood as the product of social factors and political contingencies. As Comrade Fahd understood in Iraq, the neofeudal landowning elites would not willingly give up the political control that colonial powers had granted them. The growth of the rural population, migration to cities, and greater education enabled peasants and workers to mount their first collective challenges to feudal power—as in Syria in 1951 and Iraq in 1958. However, the conditions of the Cold War bolstered the power of conservative elites. The United States and Britain did just that in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

It was in this perilous climate of embattled sovereignty that Syria’s country boys commandeered Arab socialist ideas and the military to build what some call the first true peasant state. Like Fidel Castro’s rule in Cuba, Syrian Baathists suppressed civil liberties but raised the standard of living of peasants. As in Iraq and Egypt, Arab socialists destroyed constitutional government that had been planted in the late Ottoman era in order to defeat landed elites. They also built a wall of military rule against outside intervention, which seemed always to favor elites.

By the mid-1960s, they helped to end the era of mass mobilization that had begun after World War I. It passed into history under new technologies of military power and the external pressure of the Cold War. In the political vacuum of dictatorship, the moral high ground and the organizational space to resist dictatorship and foreign influence would be found in mosques and religious communities. It would also be found in the camps of refugees, like those of Palestinians exiled after 1948.


7. **Comrade Fahd**

1. According to historian Aziz Sbahi, who participated in the Wathbah, journalists chose the term to signify an important political event that fell short of a revolution. Telephone interview at his Ontario, Canada, home, April 3, 2009.


4. “1,000,000 Take Part in Procession,” *Iraq Times*, April 19, 1959, p. 3.


7. Baha ud-Din Nuri, known as Basim, was a Kurd who led the party until his arrest in 1953. The quote is from his 1992 memoir, translated in Ismael, *The Rise and Fall*, 44.

11. Gökhan Çetinsaya, Ottoman Administration of Iraq, 1890-1908 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-3, 147-151. Of the 3 million Iraqis in 1920, more than half were Shii Arabs. See Charles Tripp, A History of Iraq, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31; the 1947 census counted 4.5 million total population: 51 percent Shi’i Arabs; 20 percent Sunni Arabs; 18 percent Sunni Kurds; 7 percent non-Muslims. See Batatu, Old Social Classes, 40.
12. Reidar Visser, Basra, the Failed Gulf State (Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag, 2005), 66-69.
15. Written communication from Aziz Sbaiti, June 26, 2009. Sbaiti argued that Batatu’s description of the meetings with Pyotr Vasili are drawn from unreliable British intelligence records.
17. Quoted in Batatu, Old Social Classes, 368, quote from Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Tabai al-Istibdad [The Attributes of Tyranny] (Cairo, 1900), 71-72.
18. Quoted in Batatu, Old Social Classes, 370.
19. Ibid., 428-429.
20. Ibid., 429.
27. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 492.
28. Yusuf, Kitabat al-Rafiq Fahd, 466. Irina had saved two letters and a watch from Yusuf. In a 1973 photo (ibid., 471) of Irina with her daughter Susan, and two grandchildren, Susan bears a striking resemblance to her father (ibid., 468).
30. al-Rafiq Sarim, introduction to Fahd’s “Hizb Shuyui, Laa Ishtriraqya Dimuqratiya” [A communist party, not democratic socialism], in Yusuf, Kitabat al-Rafiq Fahd, 23, 28, 30.
31. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 496.
32. Yusuf, Kitabat al-Rafiq Fahd, 37, 55, 65, 66.
33. Ismael, Rise and Fall, 31.
Ismael dates this meeting to February 1944.
38. Loy W. Henderson to Secretary of State, January 31, 1945 (890G.00/1-3145). Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files, Iraq, 1945-1949, Mi 788, box 1.
39. Sami Michael, interviewed in Forget Baghdad, documentary film by Samir (Arab Film Distribution, 2002). Michael was forced to flee Iraq in 1946 and became a well-known writer in Israel.
41. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 608, 653-656.
43. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 651; Shiblak, Iraqi Jews, 36, 61, 79-84.
44. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 481-482, 645-646; quote is on p. 645.
45. Ibid., 616-622.
47. Tareq Ismael, telephone interview, February 5, 2009.
48. Schoenrich to Secretary of State, January 21, 1946 (890G.00B/1-2146); Moose to Secretary of State, January 23, 1947 (890G.00B/1-2347); Moreland to Secretary of State, June 21, 1945 (890G.00/6-2145). Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files, Iraq, 1945-1949, Mi 788, box 1.


51. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 533, 624.

52. Ibid., 533–536; Sbahi, Uqad min Tarikh al-Hizb, 311–315.


55. Sbahi, Uqad min Tarikh al-Hizb, 318.

56. Ibid., 318–319; Tareq Ismael, telephone interview, February 5, 2009.

57. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 608.


60. Sassoon, Economic Policy in Iraq, 14, 70–73.


62. Ismael, Rise and Fall, 39; Batatu, Old Social Classes, 553.

63. The foregoing descriptions of January 27 events by Husni and al-Hajj are found in al-Hajj, Al-Shahada lil-Tarikh, 99–103.

64. Sbahi, Uqad min Tarikh al-Hizb, 341.


67. Sbahi, Uqad min Tarikh al-Hizb, 338.

68. Ibid., 342–361.

69. In addition to Sbahi cited above, this account draws on Batatu, Old Social Classes, 625–627; Haj, Making of Iraq, 94–96, 99–103.


74. Ismael, Rise and Fall, ix–x.


77. Laqueur, Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East, 202; Fernea and Louis, Iraqi Revolution of 1958, 48, 54, 142.

78. Bashkin, The Other Iraq, 103–111.

79. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 802.


88. Ibid., 225–233, 250; Batatu, Old Social Classes, 866–909, 951, 958; Haj, Making of Iraq, 111–139.

89. Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, Iraq since 1958, 54–56, 63–64.
90. Haj, Making of Iraq, 111–127; Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, Iraq since 1958, 74–75.


94. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 974–982; Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, Iraq since 1958, 84.

95. Batatu, Old Social Classes, 983–989; Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, Iraq since 1958, 85–86.


8. Akram al-Hourani and the Baath Party in Syria


15. Eid al-Fitr is the Muslim holiday ending the fasting month of Ramadan. On the campaign and election see Hourani, Mudhakkirat, 1:255–267.


25. Ibid., 1:809.  
35. Sibai, like Hasan al-Banna in Egypt, favored republicanism. Unlike Banna, he was attracted to socialist ideas. He renamed the Syrian Brotherhood the Islamic Socialist Front.
42. Ibid., 58–60.
44. Batatu emphasizes this point in *Syria’s Peasantry*, 126.  
53. Batatu (*Syria’s Peasantry*, 128) estimated the crowd at 40,000; the editor of *Al-Hawadith* estimated it at 10,000. See Hourani, *Mudhakkirat*, 2:1423.
56. al-Homsi, al-*Janna al-Daiya*, 61, 75.
68. Petran, *Syria*, 113.
71. Ibid., 263-282.
76. Ibid., 3:2526, 2543.
77. Ibid., 3:2532.
78. Ibid., 4:2802-2817, 2845-2853.

9. Abu Iyad