On the Decline of the Leftist Intelligentsia in Iraq

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During the 1940s-1970s, the leftist intelligentsia played a prominent role in constructing a vibrant Iraqi culture, contributed greatly to the flourishing of literature and the arts, and exerted a great impact in the cultural and political spheres. This article focuses primarily on the 1960s, when, despite two Ba’thist coups, the cultural ambience was pronouncedly leftist. The second half of the decade was marked by a leftward momentum in oppositional politics, a spirit of rebellion among the intelligentsia, and innovation in cultural productions. The Ba’th control of culture after 1968 and its campaign against the ICP in the late 1970s, among other factors, led to the subsequent decline of the ICP and the diminished role of the leftist intelligentsia.

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“But while I possess history, it possesses me. I’m illuminated by it; but what’s the use of such light? I’m not speaking of the individual.”

Paolo Pasolini, “The Ashes of Gramsci”

The Left in Decline: This Is Now

Such are the wiles of history that in July 2003, some three months after the American occupation of Iraq, the American Pro-Consul L. Paul Bremer handpicked Hamid Majid Musa, Secretary General of the Iraqi Communist Party, to the 25-person appointed ethno-sectarian Iraqi Interim Governing Council. Mufid al-Jaza’iri, a Politbureau member and editor of the Party’s organ Tariq al-Sha’b (The Path of the People), was appointed Interim Minister of Culture and continued to serve in this capacity in Prime Minister Iyad Allawi’s so-called “sovereign” Provisional (Interim) Government (June 2004-March 2005). And such are the wiles of history that the assumption of a Communist into the Ministry of Culture, though long overdue, came late, and when it did come it came at a time when the Iraqi Communist Party had lost its cultural ascendancy and it no longer enjoyed the undisputed loyalty of the mass of Iraqi intelligentsia, nor its former popularity among the mass of Iraqis. The January 2005 elections, with the Communists not even winning one percent (1%) of the votes, only confirmed what had been suspected long before, that the ICP has become a mere shadow of its former self.
When after the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime the Communists returned to Baghdad and other major cities from their mountain holds in Iraqi Kurdistan and places of exile abroad or emerged from the underground, they experienced what turned out to be a false sense of euphoria, believing, as it were, that they would restore their popularity, with Musa stating, a little prematurely, it turned out, though undoubtedly carried away by some encouraging signs, that the masses were knocking at the ICP’s doors just as during the months immediately following the 1958 Revolution. In a move reflecting high hope and misplaced self-confidence, not to mention willful blindness to the negative impact of its stated policy of “realistic engagement with an occupying force recognized as such by the United Nations” (what its critics describe, perhaps unfairly, as collaboration with an occupying, imperialist power), the ICP put the full slate of 275 candidates for the January 2005 elections. It was in for the surprise of its lifetime: no more than two, Musa and Al-Jazairi, garnered enough votes to make it to the General Assembly.

The embarrassingly poor showing of the Communists sent shock waves among party members and supporters and took many an observer by surprise. The election results, however, are important on a more significant score, for they signaled the erosion of a sense of a nationalist Iraqi identity that the ICP and the intelligentsia identified with it used to stand for and promote (see Annex A, below). Historians of modern Iraq will no doubt examine the causes of the decline of communism in Iraq. The present study, however, draws attention mainly to one aspect/cause of that decline, namely the diminished role of Marxist intellectuals in Iraqi society and culture in contrast to their active role in the 1950s-1970s. For the political loss at the polls was preceded by a gradual erosion of the Marxist cultural formation and the flight of intellectuals from the ICP over the past two decades.

Like many another communist party, the ICP has been a party of the intelligentsia as much as of the working class. What distinguishes it, however, is the popularity it enjoyed among large sectors of Iraqis and the significant following it boasted among the intellectuals. Indeed, the ICP came to be identified as the party of intellectuals. Its enemies have always resented and envied its successes among the intelligentsia. To a large degree the word “muthaqqaq” (intellectual) came to be synonymous with “Marxist;” and the Party’s capital among poets, writers, dramatists, novelists, short story writers, thinkers, artists, journalists, university professors, and teachers and students was impressive indeed.

The narrative of the ICP’s evolution, heroic struggle, and history of successes and setbacks is rendered ably and eloquently by the late historian Hanna Batatu in his magisterial The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq (1978). One of Batatu’s main theses is that the ICP’s rhetoric, style of thinking, and categories of thought became so diffused that they affected even its opponents (465-66, and passim). In a previous article I contributed to a work dedicated to discussing Batatu’s book on Iraq, I tried to map out the rise of a Marxist intelligentsia and to delineate its contributions to constructing a vibrant Iraqi culture on the eve of and immediately after the 1958 Iraqi Revolution3. The current study, therefore, attempts to briefly map out the fortunes of the leftist intelligentsia in the 1960s, covering a period of intense cultural and political activity in Iraq’s modern history, a vibrant period which came to a close with the rise of the second Ba’thist regime. A brief background is in order.

The Left Ascendant: That Was Then

It could be claimed, without much exaggeration, that the Iraqi intelligentsia came out from under the “overcoat” of the Iraqi Communist Party. Since the 1930s the leftist, largely communist, intelligentsia has played a pivotal role in the cultural arena in Iraq: shaping opinion and introducing new categories of thought and new styles of writing and artistic expression, raising social and political consciousness, cultivating appreciation of national and international cultural productions, advocating the rights of women, workers, peasants and the dispossessed, and helping foster a distinct Iraqi nationality—an Iraqi identity that is cognizant of Iraq’s Arab character but also of the pluralism of its Kurdish and other minorities’ legitimate rights and aspirations. In Post-World War II Iraq a generation of leftist Iraqi intellectuals with modern, Western education came to prominence and exerted a great impact on the cultural, social, and political spheres. A partial list of these intellectuals includes the economists Ibrahim Kubba and Muhammad Salman Hasan, the historian Faisal al-Samir, the archeologist Taha Baqir; the
artists Jewad Selim, Faiq Hasan and Mahmoud Sabri, the poets Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Abdul-Wahhab al-Bayati, and Abdulla Goran, the fiction writers Dhunun Ayyub, Fuad al-Takarli, Abdul-Malek Nouri, and Gha’ib Tu’ma Farman, the linguists Ibrahim al-Samarrai and Mehdi al-Makhzumi, the literary critic Ali Jawad al-Tahir, the playwright and actor Yusuf al-Ani, the scientist Abdul-Jabbar Abdulla, and the writers/thinkers Aziz Sharif, Abdul-Fattah Ibrahim, Safa Khalis, and Safa al-Hafidh (see Annex B, below). These intellectuals contributed to the construction of an Iraqi cultural stratum, a cultural formation that was secular, cosmopolitan, largely leftist and oppositional in character and orientation—in sum, a cluster of organic intellectuals who provided intellectual and moral leadership and who, to some degree or another, identified or sympathized with the ICP. Moreover, they generated and inspired an unprecedented flourishing of literature and the arts as well as of critical thought, and, along with, but more than, their pan-Arabist counterparts, functioned as catalysts for change, paving the way for the 1958 Iraqi Revolution.

The July 1958 Revolution, a momentous event in the history of Iraq, which overthrew the pro-Western monarchical regime and ushered in the first republic, not only saw the ascendancy of the left, but also triggered a polarization in Iraqi society between the Communist/Iraqist and pan-Arabist trends over the social and political course of the Revolution. In tandem with the ICP’s dominance of the street (the party-led associations of women, workers, peasants, and students were conspicuous in this regard), Communist and pro-Communist intellectuals dominated the ideological state apparatuses and most of civil society’s associations like the Writers’ Union and the Teachers’ Union. No longer banned, Marxist publications from Marx to Mao on philosophy, politics, and aesthetics circulated widely among an avid readership. Cultural journals such as Al-Muthaqqaf (The Intellectual) and Al-Adîb al-‘Irâqi ((The Iraqi Writer, featuring a supplement in Kurdish), promoted leftist writings, socialist realism, and Marxist literary criticism. Ittihad al-Sha’b (The Union of the People), the ICP’s organ, became the most widely read newspaper in Iraq at the time, with Abu Sa’id (pen name for Abdul-Jabbar Wahbi), one of its columnists, attaining popularity for his unique style of political commentary which was characterized by lucidity and penchant for satire. The Intelligentsia Branch of the ICP reached far and wide, with subcommittees and large followings among school teachers, university professors, engineers, physicians, lawyers, writers, journalists, and artists. This state of what Batatu aptly described as “sole leader, dual power” did not last long, for after a period of relative tolerance of the leftist cultural ascendancy, the populist “sole leader” Abdul-Karim Qasim (Iraq’s Prime Minister, 1958-63) began to curb the influence of the left in the cultural state apparatuses and ultimately banned Ittihad al-Sha’b and other Communist and pro-Communist organs. The intense polarization in Iraq between the Communists and pan-Arabists manifested itself in the cultural field as well, as can be gleaned from the pan-Arabists’ revival of the pejorative label “shu’biyya” as a code term for “shuyû’iyya” (Communism) to cast doubt on the Arab authenticity of the Communists.

The Crucible

The decisive moment in the struggle for power came in February 8, 1963, when the Ba’thists and other enemies of Qasim and the Communists staged a coup d’etat—more accurately a CIA-supported counter-revolution. When the Communists exhorted the Iraqi people to resist the coup and led some heroic but futile resistance, the putchists issued the infamous Proclamation No. 13, which called for the annihilation of Communists. Consequently, hundreds of Communists and their sympathizers were massacred or tortured to death and thousands were imprisoned. Sports clubs were turned into detention camps. The afore-mentioned journalist Abu Sa’id died under torture. Adnan al-Barrak, another prominent Communist journalist, was killed. The poets Mudhaffar al-Nawwab, Abdul-Razzaq Abdul-Wahid, Yusuf al-Saigh, Buland al-Haydari, and the “People’s Poet” Muhammad Salih Bahr Ul-Ulum, and the writers Ali al-Shouk and Shakir Khsibak, and many other cultural figures were put in prisons and detention camps like the “Intellectuals’ Detention House,” Khalf al-Sadda (East of the Flood Dyke), or Al-Qala’ al-Khamisa (the Fifth Castle). The President of Baghdad University, Abdul-Jabbar Abdulla, was detained, as were scores of university professors and instructors at institutions of higher education. Many artists, painters, and actors were imprisoned, including the actress Nahida al-Rammah, who was incarcerated in a prison ward for prostitutes. In sum, it seemed that the ICP, along with the leftist intelligentsia, had been dealt a deadly blow.
Prominent cultural figures who were abroad at the time formed a Committee for the Defense of the Iraqi People and mounted a sustained campaign in Europe to expose the reign of terror of the Ba’th. The Committee was headed by the famous poet Al-Jawahiri, and included the historian Faisal al-Samir (former Minister of Guidance under Qasim), Naziha al-Dulaimi (a former Minister under Qasim, the first woman Minister in Iraq, and head of the ICP’s Iraqi Women’s League mass organization), the painter Mahmoud Sabri, the novelist Dhunun Ayyub, the academic Salah Khalis, the Communist political analyst and journalist Aziz al-Haj, and a number of other Communist and leftist intellectuals such as Kamal Fuad and Nuri Shawis. The philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell and the British novelist Ethel Mannin, among other world cultural figures, lent their moral support to the campaign.

While many leftists broke down under interrogation and torture and signed the bara’a (a public recantation or statement of disavowal of the ICP and Communist principles), many others remained firm in their convictions and continued to identify with the Left. In the meantime, accounts and narratives of the brutal campaign of repression during what Batatu calls “the bitterest of years” began to acquire the force of legend not only among leftist circles but in the larger society as well, generating sympathy for the Communists and revulsion at the excesses of the Ba’th. Moreover, such narratives added new landmarks to the collective memory of the Left. To the rich heritage of the epochal annals of struggle which included, for example, the 1948 Wathba, the 1952 Intifada, the massacre of oil workers at Gavgabgh in Kirkuk, Communist-led worker strikes in Baghdad and Basrah and peasant uprisings against feudal aghas in Kurdistan in the north and feudal sheikhs in the south and other parts of the country, the hanging of party leaders in 1949, the massacres of Communist prisoners at the Kut and Baghdad prisons, and the Siba’ Square Student Conference, were now added narratives of the heroic resistance to the 1963 coup d’état in front of the Ministry of Defense and in the Baghdad quarters of Aqhd al-Akrad and Al-Kadhimiya and in the city of Basrah, the torture to death of Party Secretary Salam Adil and hundreds of Communists, resistance acts by Communist partisans in Kurdistan, prison lore (prison songs, feats of escape from prisons, prisoners’ refusal to confess or sign the bara’a even under torture, and stories about the notorious desert prison Nuqrat al-Salman), the July 1963 short-lived Communist uprising by the sergeant Hasan Sari’ and his fellow rank-and-file soldiers, and the “Death Train” episode (see Annex C, below).

These and similar narratives contributed widely to the formation of what might be called a leftist if not a bona fide Communist subculture of shared historical memory. Perhaps more than at any other moment in the past, Communism in the mid and late 1960s became more like a faith—hence the passion, the conviction, the readiness to sacrifice despite the suffering, and the unshakeable belief in the inevitable and ultimate triumph of the cause. Inscribed within this lived subculture were all the elements that gave it a character and a life of its own: the afore-mentioned narratives, a martyrrology catalogue, iconography, songs, prison folklore, social relationships (friendships and even instances of marriages within the subculture), a common history, a common utopian vision of the future, a common vocabulary, and common rituals (celebrations of the anniversary of the Party and of the October Revolution, for example). It needs to be added that this subculture was shared by a large number of supporters and sympathizers who identified with the left or with Qasim’s populist reign.

The diffusion of the ethos and narratives associated with the left was buttressed by literary and artistic texts. Writing in the colloquial dialect, the poet Mudhaffar al-Nawwab played a not insignificant role in lifting up the spirits of the Communists and their supporters following the 1963 coup. In these difficult times arose the voice of Al-Nawwab from prison, calling on the people to remain steadfast in the face of repression. Al-Nawwab imparted his message in one of the most memorable poems in the vernacular, the famous “Al-Barâ’a” (The Recantation). The poem presents two women, an aged mother and a sister, addressing their imprisoned son and exhorting him not to recant his commitment to the cause of the people. Deploying cultural codes, popular motifs, evocative allusions, and moving, homespun images which appeal to maternal bonds and to deep-rooted notions of dignity and honor, the poem’s powerful impact as a politicized discourse at that historical juncture can be gleaned from the fact that on its account the regime added three more years to the poet’s term in prison. Here’s how the mother concludes her plea to her imprisoned son:
My child, hold me as wide as your chest,
And count the grey hairs that I gained from raising you to this age.
Place your hand on this grey hair of mine,
And swear by my noble milk, drop by drop,
And by the little eyesight that is left me.
Tell me:
“I will not cave in; and you are my mother,
and this is my Party;
the pride of my father, neither he nor I let the other down.”
Tell me:
“I will not destroy a Party
which I built with my own hands.”

Committed to memory by the “faithful” and their supporters and often recited because of its message of defiance and resistance, and cast in evocative language and imagery, “Al-Barâ’a” circulated widely in and out of prisons and acquired an iconic status among the left, a prominent place in its cultural memory.

In addition to the topos of the recantation (Kadhim Ismael al-Gati’, for example, wrote a poem in the colloquial modeled after Al-Nawwab’s), poets and other creative writers tapped into the cultural memory for topics and motifs. This is especially true of the two prominent Iraqi poets Saadi Yusuf and Abdul-Karim al-Gasid, who a few years later wrote poems on the afore-mentioned notorious desert prison Nuqrat al-Salman and on the Death Train. In the same vein, fiction writers rendered their prison experience in short stories and novels: for example, Shakir Khisbak’s novel Al-Hiqd al-Aswad (Black Malice, 1966), and Fadhil Al-Azzawi’s Al-Qal’a al-Khâmisâ (The Fifth Castle, 1971), a chronicle of the writer’s imprisonment in the aftermath of the 1963 coup. It is worth noting that a Syrian movie adaptation of Al-Qal’a al-Khamisa was produced in the late 1970s, retaining the same title. As late as 2005, Salam Abboud published a novel, Zahrat al-Razqi (The Arabian Jasmine Flower), which chronicles the atrocities of the Ba’thist National Guard in 1963.

If the ICP succeeded in attracting the intelligentsia and developing what might be termed Party Ideological and Cultural Apparatuses, the Ba’th Party of the 1960s, in contrast, lacked a coherent ideology, noteworthy cultural expression, and credit among intellectuals. Nowhere could the Ba’th boast political analysts like the Communists Amer Abdulla and Aziz al-Haj, or economist scholars like the Marxist Ibrahim Kubba, or a poet like the left-oriented Muhammed Mahdi al-Jawahiri, or journalists like Abu Sa’id, Adnan al-Barrak, or Abdul-Majid al-Wandawi. Unlike the ICP, the Ba’th Party of 1963 was characterized by poverty of thought. “A Ba’thi would have looked in vain through the whole literature of his party for a single objective analysis of any of the serious problems besetting Iraq,” affirms Hanna Batatu. “Instead of thought, he could find only wide and vague slogans. No one around seemed able to produce ideas, at least in a language that was comprehensible to a semiplebian like Ali Saleh as-Sa’di. ‘We searched till we wearied,’ he complained after the Ba’thi debacle, ‘for socialist thinkers who might help us, but could find none(...) Poorly nourished on the intellectual side,” continues Batatu, Al-Sa’di and his comrades “put too much trust in their physical powers. It was much simpler to govern this way.” (Batatu 1978: 1014)

Soon infighting within the pan-Arabist camp between the Ba’th Party and pro-Nasser elements as well as an internal split within the Ba’th itself between a right-wing and a left-wing faction led in November 1963
to the toppling of the first Ba’thist regime by the conservative pan-Arabist Abdul-Salam Aref. With the Ba’thists no longer in power, repressive measures against the Communists were moderately relaxed, though not totally abandoned. Improved relations between the Aref regime and the Soviet Union, as well as Aref’s enactment of some nationalization laws in the mid 1960s, led to a softening of the ICP’s assessment of the regime and to the regime’s relaxation of repressive measures against Communists, a relaxation which accorded with the popular sentiment which was put off by the bloody practices of the Ba’th regime of 1963. It should be noted that although successive pan-Arabist regimes, whether Ba’thist or pro-Nasserite, persecuted the Communists to one degree or another, they all tried to appropriate the term socialism. In the mid-1960s, for example, the pro-Nasser regime embraced what was called Arab Socialism at the time, following the new orientation of Egypt; shortly thereafter Prime Minister Abdul-Rahman al-Bazzaz, a liberal-oriented pan-Arabist, coined the term “Al-Ishtirâkiyya al-Rashîda” (Rightly-Regulated Socialism). Be that as it may, with the relative easing of repression, the Communist Party, slowly but steadily, began to recuperate, and leftist intellectuals began to venture back into the public sphere.

The Left Resurgent

Slowly but steadily, as Communist and leftist intellectuals were selectively and gradually released from prisons and others began returning from exile, they resumed their artistic and literary activities. However, the bitterness occasioned by the debacle of 1963, along with the experience of persecution, prison, or exile, left an indelible mark on many an intellectual and led quite a few to become disenchanted with the ICP to some measure. As will be demonstrated later on in this article, ideological discontent would lead to a split in the party. On the cultural plane, this disenchangement manifested itself as a spirit of rebellion against prevailing conditions, a spirit which pervaded the thought and work of some artists and creative writers who continued to identify with the ICP—and more so with Marxist thought in general—yet strove to experiment with avantgardist styles and to explore the human condition in novel ways. In this regard, it must be noted that the ICP, despite its record as champion of innovation and experimentation in arts and letters, was not devoid of a Zhdanovian streak which looked with disfavor upon any literary and artistic texts that deviated from the socialist realism straightjacket, often branding such texts as “bourgeois.”

One particular group of creative talents, the Kirkuk Group (so called because its members hailed from the city of Kirkuk), became conspicuous for its innovations in arts and letters, particularly poetry and fiction, and for its openness to integrate elements from existentialism and surrealism. Shortly after their release from prison in the mid 1960s, Kirkuk Group members Fadhil al-Azzawi, Anwar al-Ghassani, and Mouayad al-Rawi burst upon the cultural scene in Baghdad, and in no time established themselves as editors of the cultural section in newspapers where they found employment. Sargon Boulous, another Kirkuk Group member, likewise became known for his modernist poems. The group’s hangout in Majid Coffeehouse (dubbed the Cofeehouse of the Complicated) became one of the landmarks of the literary and cultural landscape in the 1960s Baghdad. Fadhi al-Azzawi in particular caused a literary sensation when he published a number of “mechanical poems,” innovative and modernist. However, despite the attraction of the new trends, “realism” continued to assert itself as the predominant mode of literary expression. In the mid 1960s Ghai‘ Tu ma Farman’s novels Al-Nakhla wa-l-Jîrân (The Palmtree and the Neighbors) and Khamsat Aswât (Five Voices), were published to critical acclaim. Still living in exile in Moscow, Farman quickly sealed his fame as Iraq’s foremost novelist, the Naguib Mahfouz of Iraq. In the theater, social plays, particularly plays by Iraq’s foremost dramatist Yusuf al-Ani, continued to embody naturalistic and realistic elements. In sum, whether they adhered to the realist or the new modernist trend in their literary and artistic expression, and despite a spirit of discontent, writers on the left continued to identify with Marxist ideology and to lend their moral authority to the cause.

The test of the revival of the ICP came in March 1967, when the Government (after the death of Abdul-Salaam Aref in a plane crash in 1966, his brother Abdul-Rahman succeeded him as President of Iraq) allowed the university students to conduct student elections. Coming only some four years after the devastating blow of 1963, the election results demonstrated the continued and unswerving support the Communist Party enjoyed among the educated youth. The candidates representing the communist General
Union of Iraqi Students won 80% of the votes. The College of Education, the producer of high and middle school teachers, had the Communist candidates win all the seats. In the majority of colleges the Communists won, and won overwhelmingly. Even at the Islamic Shari’a College, the Communist candidates won more than 20% of the votes. As would be expected, the Government cancelled the election results. Be that as it may, the university students provided a barometer of the continued hold of Marxist ideas on the educated youth, the nascent intelligentsia. About a year later, in January 1968, a strike called on by the underground communist General Union of Iraqi Students paralyzed the University of Baghdad and led to the Military Police’s storming of the College of Education. To all intents and purposes, the Left seemed to have recovered from the blow of 1963. It should be noted that these students were mere teenagers during the reign of Qasim and the 1963 bloodletting. They grew up nourished on the cultural narrative of the ICP. In a couple of years this generation of students, what may be described as the 1958 Revolution generation, would supply the ranks of the intelligentsia that would carry on the tradition of the Left in the cultural field.

The June 1967 Israeli routing of the Arab armies sent shock waves through the Arab world and highlighted the crisis of the pan-Arab regimes and political movements. In a historical era characterized by revolutionary wars of liberation and the gaining of independence by several Third World nations, the Arab defeat cast a dark shadow on the legitimacy of the Arab regimes and led to agonized questioning and to a general mood in the Arab street in favor of the left, especially with the rise of the Che Guevara cult worldwide and the growth of a Palestinian resistance movement which counted a Marxist cluster among its ranks. In Iraq, not only did the Left Ba’th (the mainly Syrian wing of the mainstream Ba’th Party, now dubbed the Right Ba’th) adopt some Marxist doctrines and rhetoric, but the larger pro-Nasserite trend, following the disintegration of the state-sponsored Arab Socialist Union, metamorphosed into Al-Harakiyyun (The Arab Socialist Movement) and smaller splinter groups which embraced socialism to one degree or another: the moderately socialist faction of Khair al-Deen Haseeb and Adeeub al-Jadir, the similarly moderate faction, advocating socialism and democracy, of Fuad al-Rikabi, and the more radical faction of Abdul-Illah al-Nasrawi, who advocated an out-and-out Marxist line11. Indeed, it was rumored at the time that even Abdul-Khaliq al-Samarrai, a Ba’th ideologue affiliated with the mainstream party, came close to Marxism in his thinking. In sum, in this post-1967 ambiance no longer was Marxism taboo in the political and cultural discourse.

The relative easing of repression during the reign of the Second Aref (1966-68)—especially during the premiership of Abdul-Rahman al-Bazzaz, the doggedness and resurgence of the Iraqi left despite the 1963 onslaught, and the post-1967 political climate, all converged to revitalize Iraqi culture. Once again the leftist intelligentsia became visibly active in the cultural sphere, its cultural output reaching a wide public in art and poster exhibits, journalism, the theater, literary criticism, creative writing, and publications. Writings by Marxist journalists, literary critics, poets, and short story writers began to appear in Al-Taakhi and Al-Nûr newspapers of the Kurdish nationalist movement12, and in other journals at the time. In reality, Al-Nûr appointed the leftist poet and journalist Kadhim al-Samawi and later the Communist Faiq Butti, a prominent journalist, as its editor. When Al-Nûr ceased publication in 1970, Al-Taakhi then appointed Butti as its editor. Communist journalists like Aziz Sbahi (translator, author, and currently historian of the ICP), Salwa Zakku (a leader in the ICP’s League of Iraqi Women), and Rushdie al-A’mil (a well-known poet) contributed columns to these Kurdish journals, coloring them with a Marxist brush.

In the second half of the 1960s the cultural/literary sections of Iraqi newspapers and magazines, including the weekly Kullu Shay’ and the state-owned Al-Jumhûriyya, were predominantly showcases for leftist writers, who likewise contributed to the few independent journals at the time. These were also the years when a new type of colloquial poem written in the dialect of southern Iraq became very popular among the educated urbanites. The new trend of colloquial poetry was largely the legacy of Mudhaffar al-Nawwab, who renovated the traditional colloquial poem and modernized it, just as a decade earlier his (mainly leftist) Iraqi colleagues pioneered a radical break from the conventions of the classical qasida and inaugurated the free verse movement, the dominant norm for the qasida in the Arab world today. The new colloquial qasida was overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, written by Communist and leftist poets like Aryan al-Sayyid Khalaf, Kadhim Ismael al-Gati’, Abu Sarhan, and the brothers Shakir and Aziz al-Simawe. Their poems made it abundantly clear where their political sympathies rested, for they often explored
“revolutionary” themes and motifs: the political prisoner, Che Guevara, the revolution, and the tragedy of Hussein (grandson of the prophet Muhammed who was killed in Kerbala in the 7th century and who was often invoked by leftist poets as a symbol of resistance and sacrifice).

In the theater, almost an exclusive province of the left, Sami Abdul-Hamid, Ibrahim Jalal, and Yusuf al-Ani resumed their work as directors, actors, and teachers of dramatic arts, and their Modern Artistic Theater Troupe was revived, putting on stage Iraqi and international plays, with Iraq’s premiere women actresses, the leftist Zainab and Nahida al-Rammah, appearing in these plays. Treating topics of regeneration and the need for change and commitment, plays by the playwrights Adil Kadhim (The Flood, 1966, Tammuz Rings the Bell, 1968, and Death and The Cause, 1969) and Nur al-Din Faris (The Trees of Plague and The New Home, both in the late 1960s) were performed to full houses, the audience largely composed of young people who were avid consumers of culture. Many plays at the time invoked motifs from Mesopotamian mythology, a favorite topos of the leftist and Iraqi cultural formation whether in drama, art, or poetry. The revival of the turath (cultural heritage or tradition, dating back to the Abbasid period) formed another strong trend in Iraqi theater at the time, whereby dramatists sought to activate the cultural heritage in subversive ways, presenting it as people’s history and laying bare the web of social relationships underlying such historical narratives. This demystification of the legendary past often utilized techniques borrowed from Brecht’s Epic Theater, with the result that such terms like “estrangement” and “episodic structure” becoming the buzzwords of the day. In the still fledgling Iraqi cinema, the leftist Khalil Shawqi directed a low-budget movie entitled Al-Hâris (the Night Guard, 1967) to popular and critical acclaim. The film was a perceptive exploration in a realist mode of social relationships in a lower-class neighborhood. It featured as one of the actors the leftist Qasim Hawl, whose career took off thereafter to become one of Iraq’s premier filmmakers.

In the dozen or so years from the mid 1960s till the late 1970s, coffee houses along Abu Nawwas and Al-Rashid streets in Baghdad or those in the poor neighborhoods of Al-Thawra City (now called Al-Sadr City) and other Baghdad townships, as well as bars along Abu Nawwas and Al-Sa‘dun streets, looked more like centers for leftist intellectual and cultural activity than coffeehouses or bars, their function becoming more political and cultural than social. Baghdad, of course, was a magnet for literary and artistic young talents from other Iraqi towns and cities. The coffeehouses and bars provided cultural space for the circulation and dissemination of Marxist ideas and literary productions. A young poet, short story writer, or journalist often would test his newest piece at a bar or a coffeehouse to get feedback from his friends. Sipping countless cups of tea at a coffeehouse or drinking beer or araq in a bar, groups of young intellectuals would engage in a passionate discussion of a literary text, a translated work that just hit the bookshops (e.g., Roger Garaudy’s D’un réalisme sans rivages, Franz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, or Regis Debray’s Revolution in the Revolution), the May 1968 student revolution in France, the Vietnam War, or Che Guevara’s strategy of armed struggle. More often than not the topic would turn into a heated discussion of why the ICP did not act to seize political power during the Qasim years, why it failed to translate its moment of cultural hegemony into a moment of political domination. Suddenly, someone would start reciting “Al-Bara’a” and another would continue with one other of Al-Nawwab’s poems like “Asha’ir Sa‘ûd” or the epic poem “Hasan Al-Shamûs”. Social gatherings of young women on the left were no less intellectually charged. Young women strove to break away from social customs which inhibited their freedom. To some extent university premises and cultural events provided space for joint meetings of both sexes. More interaction was possible within the social and cultural activities of the Marxist cultural formation.

The many bookshops which line up Al-Mutanbi street, the bookstalls on the walkways around Tahrir Square under the gaze of Jewad Selim’s Freedom Monument in Baghdad, and the kiosks on the sidewalks in Baghdad’s main arteries and other Iraqi cities made a brisk business selling Marx’s and Lenin’s works and other communist literature. As a matter of fact, Marxist publications (Progress Publishers in Moscow was the main source for such books and magazines) flooded the book market, Soviet movies, however scarce the number allowed, drew full-house enthusiastic audiences, and the Soviet Cultural Center in Baghdad became the haunt of intellectuals, including literary, theater, and artistic figures who staged plays or held exhibitions on its premises. The leftist Egyptian monthly journals Al-Tali’a and Al-Kâtib were probably read more in Iraq than in Egypt. So were other Egyptian leftist texts like Ahmad Abbas Salih’s
The period also witnessed the rise of the political poster and innovative trends in the plastic arts. An overwhelming number of artists such as Faiq Hasan and Qutaiba al-Shaikh Nuri, and especially younger talents such as Dhin al-Azzawi, Rafi’ al-Nasiri, Kadhim Haydar, Yahya al-Sheikh, and many others were affiliated with or close to the Communist Party. As a matter of fact, the political activism among artists and art students was such that both the Academy of Fine Arts and the Institute of Fine Arts acquired the character of leftist strongholds. New art groups, theater troupes, and literary journals were set up as vehicles for the new energy that pervaded the cultural scene. The literary journal Al-Kalima (The Word), edited by Musa Kredi and Hamid al-Matba’i, reflected the malaise and energy that young creative writers, whether Marxists or pan-Arabists, experienced at the time. Even Ba’thist poets like Sami Mahdi and Hamid Saeed were caught up in the cultural florescence and fervor of the time. Still reeling from the experience of the 1963 coup, some leftist intellectuals resorted to existential writings like those of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, while others sought refuge in Colin Wilson’s The Outsider. It is interesting to note that the liberal sociologist Ali al-Wardi’s books on Iraqi society were anxiously awaited, though leftist readers did not always agree with his analytical insights. Finally, poets maudits like Hussein Murdan, Abdul-Amir al-Husairi, and Jan Dammou, though they abandoned ideology altogether for a bohemian lifestyle, continued to sympathize with the left.

Perhaps the typical leftist intellectual at the time can best be described as a blending of the two Russian literary characters Bazarov (Turgenev, Fathers and Sons), and Trofimov (Chekhov, The Cherry Orchard), that is, a clinical analyst of reality with a touch of nihilism, combined with idealistic, revolutionary fervor. And this young intellectual, this contradictory bundle of rebellion and conformity, frustration and enthusiasm, egalitarianism and elitism, surrealism and socialist realism, existentialism and engagement, atheism and Sufism, anarchism and the engineering of society and the human soul—this intellectual was decidedly to the left of the Communist Party leadership. For the period was marked by a spirit of rebellion which did not spare the Communist Party for what some leftist intellectuals perceived as its “pacifism,” and others as its “ideological rigidity.” It is worth noting that the Marxist intellectual was such a presence in Iraqi life that not only did the character type appear in fiction written by left-oriented writers but was even depicted in the novels of the prominent writer, critic, and artist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (e.g., Hunters in A Narrow Street, 1960; The Ship, 1970), whose liberal thought and aesthetics were considered “bourgeois” by the leftist intellectuals, yet he was grudgingly respected as an accomplished writer and literary and art critic. And this intellectual who was passionate about socialism, whose talk was peppered with “the dialectic,” “class struggle,” “contradictions,” “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” and “How the Steel was Tempered”13—this intellectual was equally versed in Western culture, having read Kafka, Hemingway, Faulkner, Stendhal, Hugo, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, T. S. Eliot, Whitman, Shaw, Brecht, Lorca, Hegel, Nietzsche, and certainly Camus if not Sartre, to name just a few writers. This intellectual would go to the movies to watch an American or a French film before heading to the favorite coffeehouse or bar to dissect the film among friends and then plunge into a heated literary or political discussion. It goes without saying that this intellectual was likewise an avid reader of the best in Iraqi and Arabic literature and thought, both classical and contemporary. In a word, the typical leftist intellectual at the time was well entrenched in a tradition of encyclopedic knowledge and culture, a tradition which was bequeathed as the legacy of the prominent leftist intellectuals of the 1950s, many of whom trained in Western universities or at the American University in Beirut. Finally, the typical leftist intellectual at the time was not satisfied with merely interpreting the world—nothing short of changing the world was his/her aim. And this intellectual felt it his/her mission to spearhead the change, to be at the vanguard of that change.

The Guevarist Turn

In this cultural climate of the 1960s which was pronouncedly leftist and rebellious, the leadership of the ICP adhered to the Soviet theory of the Non-Capitalist Path of Development, a theory which did not garner
much support among the leftist intelligentsia, nor among large sectors of the Communists, whose bitter 1963 experience drove them to advocate the seizure of power. Although the ICP had sided with Moscow, the Marxist intelligentsia as well as the rank-and-file Communists were on the whole more inclined towards Mao’s theory of People’s War and the more so towards Guevara’s tactics of guerilla warfare. Indeed, the lure of the Guevarist model appealed not only to the Party’s base but also to some middling cadres. In the mid 1960s pressure from the party base forced the ICP leadership to swerve sharply from a “right-wing” inclination to support the regime of Abdul-Salam Aref, and even to flirt with the idea of dissolving the Party into the state-sponsored Arab Socialist Union, into a “leftist” turn which advocated decisive action (i.e., a military coup) to seize power, which policy nonetheless was contested by leading members of the Party’s Baghdad Organization, who called for an armed popular uprising instead. Yet a small group of middling party members called the Cadre, under the leadership of Ibrahim Allawi, advocated guerilla warfare as the beginning phase of a people’s war of liberation.

Into this state of internal struggle stepped Aziz al-Haj. A veteran Communist who spent ten years in jail before the 1958 Revolution, Al-Haj gained renown as one of the Party’s main political writers and exponents after the Revolution. Moreover, he was regarded by the party base as representing the “leftist” stance among the party leadership. In 1967 Al-Haj returned to Baghdad from Prague, where he was serving as the ICP’s representative on The World Marxist Review. Upon his return he was elected to the Politbureau and became comrade-in-charge of the Baghdad organization, some of whose advanced cadres harbored misgivings about the Party leadership and its “revisionist” line. Soon Al-Haj teamed up with disenchanted “left-wingers” within the ICP to stage an internal “coup” against the ICP leadership. As the attempt to wrest control of the Party foundered miserably, Al-Haj ended up splitting the Party, naming his own faction the ICP-Central Command, to distinguish it from the mainstream ICP-Central Committee. Shortly thereafter, according to Najm Mahmoud (1980: 113-130), the Cadre group joined Al-Haj’s organization and prevailed upon it to embrace the strategy of popular armed struggle. In what is considered the most serious split in the Party’s history, Al-Haj’s Central Command came to be viewed at the time as more “leftist” and action-oriented than the mainstream ICP-Central Committee.

Aziz al-Haj acquired quite a following among the worker and student organizations of the ICP and among intellectuals such as the poets Mudhaffar al-Nawwab (who shortly thereafter with some other Communist prisoners pulled off a daring escape from Hilla prison by digging a tunnel), Yusuf al-Saigh, who was still in prison, Abdul-Rahman Tahmazi, a young poet, Ibrahim Zayer, a young artist, and Khaleed Ahmed Zaki, a leading member of the Cadre group who left his affiliation in London in Bertrand Russell’s Peace Foundation (or the International War Crimes Tribunal, according to other accounts) to spearhead a mid 1968 a guerilla campaign in Iraq’s southern marshes. The history of the Ahwar (marshes) guerilla campaign still awaits documentation, as there are variations in the extant accounts, including the exact date of the start of the guerilla war, and the three or four foci that launched the struggle. What follows, therefore, is a brief but incomplete account.

Following the Cuban model, Zaki’s group consisted of twelve romantic and idealist revolutionary guerillas in what turned out to be a complete debacle. After an initial success attacking a police post and seizing their weapons, the group ran into difficult times. Losing their way in the primeval and mystical world of the marshes among the labyrinthine waterways and the walls of reeds, not getting the support they thought would be forthcoming from the marsh Arabs (the inhabitants of the marshes were threatened by the Government against providing any help to the guerilla fighters), running out of food and drinking water, betrayed by one of their own comrades and deeply exhausted and on the run from the police and the army who were hot in their pursuit, with a number of comrades wounded and one shot mistakenly by their own friendly fire, they were reduced to primitive existence for a number of days till they made their final stand on an islet which soon was besieged by the army. In their final battle they fought bravely against enormous odds and even shot down a helicopter, but their fate was sealed. When the dust settled, a number of fighters, including the leader Zaki, had fallen, and the few remaining survivors, including the wounded, were captured by the army—(among the survivors is the writer and activist Abdul-Amir al-Rikabi, currently based in Paris where he heads a political grouping, the Patriotic Democratic Movement, which is opposed to the American occupation of Iraq). Their adventure and ordeal in the primordial terrain of the marshes is captured vividly, and one suspects with a large measure of accuracy, by the
Syrian novelist Haydar Haydar in his semi-documentary novel A Banquet for Seaweeds—(it is believed that the novel is based on Abdul-Amir al-Rikabi’s account to the author). Originally published in Cyprus in 1983, the novel’s republication in Cairo in 1999 led a few months later in 2000 to polemics that gripped the cultural and political scene in Egypt. Violent demonstrations by students in (the religious) Al-Azhar University denouncing the novel as offensive to Islam resulted in the police wounding and arresting scores of protesting students.

The Iraqi artist Kadhim Haydar commemorated Khalid Ahmed Zaki in a painting called “A Messiah from the South.” In the late 1960s several poems in the colloquial dialect celebrating the Ahwar Commune or uprising circulated widely in the south of Iraq, and the poet Shakir al-Simawe dedicated a 1972 long poem in the colloquial dialect, “A Southern Knight,” to Zaki (al-Simawe 1984: 67-83). Perhaps the most memorable poem in this vein is a long one by Mudhaffar al-Nawwab entitled “Hajjam Al-Burais”, dedicated to the militant by the same name, who, after the tragic end of Zaki’s group, resumed the armed struggle in the marshes, and likewise met a tragic but heroic death. Other aspects of the failed revolutionary ordeal were taken up in literature. In her autobiographical novel Through the Vast Halls of Memory (1990), the Iraqi expatriate activist and writer Haifa Zangana renders her experience as a young militant in the ICP-Central Command and her subsequent imprisonment and brutal torture16. As recently as 1999, a young Iraqi novelist by the name Faisal Abdul-Hasan, who had left Iraq during the sanctions years, published 'Iraqiyûn Ajânib (Stranger Iraqis) in Morocco, a novel which depicts the Ahwar armed struggle episode. In his book The Culture of Violence in Iraq, the Iraqi critic and novelist Salam Abboud dismisses this novel as a superficial and even distorted treatment of the Ahwar uprising. Abboud cites the novel as an example of how some creative writers who were used to writing under Saddam Hussein’s heavy-handed censorship could not express themselves freely even after leaving the country (Abboud 2002: 298-99).

Aziz al-Haj relates that following the death of Khalid Ahmed Zaki, all militants subsequently sent to resume guerilla activity in the marshes were either killed or captured (1994: 169). Nor was the fate of the ICP-Central Command in Baghdad any better than that of the guerillas in the marshes. Its sporadic assassination of some intelligence officers known for their torture of Communists, its rejection of any dialogue with the new Ba’thist regime (which assumed power in July 1968), as well as its unsavory tactics against its rivals in the mainstream ICP-Central Committee, all worked against it. Soon in February 1969 the authorities succeeded in rounding up the leadership, including Aziz al-Haj himself. Already in a dejected state of mind, Al-Haj, unlike some other members of the leadership who endured harrowing torture till death, was in no mood to resist and hence cooperated fully with his captors. Even worse, on April 3, 1969 Aziz al-Haj appeared on T.V., interviewed by Muhammad Said al-Sahhaf (Minister of Information during the 2003 war), where he repudiated his communist position, denouncing both the Central Committee and his own Central Command and calling on his followers to give up the armed struggle.

To describe Aziz al-Haj’s televised confession as a stunning blow to all Iraqi Communists and Marxists no matter what their affiliation or sympathies would be an understatement. Here was a leading communist with glowing credentials as a veteran of prisons, a valiant militant who even in his early twenties was at the helm of the Party, an astute political analyst, a creative writer, and a legendary leader, here was one whom many had identified with as the antidote to the ICP’s inaction and lack of resolve, here was one who symbolized the best hope for a revitalized and action-oriented Communist movement, here he was spilling the beans, with his halo completely shattered. For the Ba’th Party, the TV stunt that was the televised confession served to discredit the ICP-Central Command and its leadership in particular and communist ideology in general. Iraqis huddling around their TV sets expecting a defiant Al-Haj putting up at least some eloquent defense had their hopes dashed completely. By all accounts Al-Haj’s performance was disappointing and demoralizing for the left. A sense of abandonment, sadness, humiliation, resentment, and even despair set in particularly among members and supporters of the ICP-Central Command. One by one the cells were dismantled, the militants arrested, and many of them “recanted.” Those militants who managed to flee to Iraqi Kurdistan regrouped in the Popular Army under the leadership of Mu’een al-Nahr—this minuscule party would further diminish and decline. The ICP-Central Command underwent further splits and defections but has survived as a small party till the present. Today the party, which
condemned the war option, is opposed to the American occupation of Iraq. As for Aziz al-Haj, he was released from prison and appointed as Iraq’s representative to the UNESCO in Paris. He continued to support the Ba’th regime till the mid 1990s, when he turned against it. Nowadays he is counted among a group of ex-communist intellectuals-turned neo-liberals who support the American mission in Iraq. It should be noted that following Al-Haj’s breakdown, many ICP-Central Command militants rejoined the mainstream Communist Party. Some “repented” and ended up in the Ba’th Party, while still others lost faith in any and all political parties.

The sense of bitterness and betrayal at the “treason” of Aziz al-Haj and some of his comrades ran deep among the leftist intelligentsia in particular. Mudhafar al-Nawwab captured the mood of dejection in a moving, eloquent poem, “A Reading in the Book of Rain,” which was published in the Lebanese literary journal Mawâqif after the poet left the country in 1969 for Beirut. Composed in fusha (standard Arabic), the poem was also the poet’s first introduction to the larger Arab audience. In it Al-Nawwab says:

I fought with a defeated army,

In my heart there was the cry of an owl.

Finally, our leaders shook hands with the enemy while we were still fighting,

And we saw them in the other camp, while our army was still fighting.


Had you known why we cherish silence and the sad persistence,

Had you known our camp, the water graves, and the sound of the night,

And seen the faces of my nine comrades before the fire,

Had you known why hunger dwells in the marshes,

Hunger, despite the three rivers!

Had you known the bitter shame on the forehead of a revolutionary as he breaks down,

You would have known the Revolution,

You would have known why the Revolution.

Iron Fist, Velvet Glove

To retract just a little. It is not far-fetched to assume that the recuperation of the Communist Party, the rise of a splinter communist party with a dedicated following and readiness to use violence, the perceived weakness of the regime, and the general “revolutionary” mood following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, all factors that precipitated the rival Ba’th Party, not without a nod or prompting from Western powers, to go into “pre-emptive” action. Two successive coups in July 17-30, 1968 toppled the regime of Abdul-Rahman Aref and brought the Ba’th Party to power, thus closing a liberal phase in Iraqi politics and signaling a forceful approach to the control of the political and cultural arena, an approach which became the hallmark of the second Ba’th regime. Into the vibrant cultural and political ambiance that was dominated by the left the 1968 Ba’thist coup came with a whimper, greeted by the unconcern of the masses. Instead of the leftward momentum in Iraqi culture resulting in a left turn in Iraqi politics, a Ba’thist regime now entrenched itself tenaciously in power, thus stifling the revolutionary dream. But the leftist wave that flourished in the cultural arena in the mid 1960s would not crest until the late 1970s.

Because of its narrow base and the realization that brute force alone would not gain it legitimacy, the Ba’th now tried to cultivate a progressive image of itself, an image that was different from the bloody
1963 one that still lingered in the minds of Iraqis. The Ba’th adopted a two-pronged policy, a foreign policy projecting a “progressive” stance, and an internal one buying off loyalty and persecuting opposition. In all its policies the Ba’th regime combined brute force and determination with pragmatism. At the internal level, it tightened its grip on the army and security forces, purging them of “undesirable” elements and assiduously turning them into Ba’thist ideological entities. The Ba’th first sought to eliminate all rivals in the pan-Arabist backyard, the Left Ba’th and the various pro-Nasserite groups. Fuad al-Rikabi, former Secretary of the Ba’th (Iraqi) Regional Command (1952-1959), who in the early 1960s became disillusioned with the Ba’th Party and joined the Nasserite camp, was arrested and then stabbed to death in prison under dubious circumstances. The Ba’th also waged a campaign against the rather weak liberal trend, conveying the fact that it would not tolerate any independent thinking no matter the status, family, tribe, or prestige of the individual. Abdul-Rahman al-Bazzaz, a moderate pan-Arabist of the liberal school and a former Prime Minister, was put in prison. Tahir Yahya, a former Ba’thist officer and Prime Minister was tortured, his Takriti identity not helping him at all. Nasir al-Hani (ambassador of Iraq to Lebanon before the coup, then Minister of Foreign Affairs for a brief period thereafter) was butchered, his body dumped on the highway.

The Ba’th inaugurated a reign of terror designed to instill fear in the population with a policy of public spectacle, as in its public hanging of alleged spies. While it started releasing Communist and leftist political prisoners, reinstated some into the civil service, and opened a dialogue of sorts with the ICP-Central Committee, its security forces in November 1968 fired at communists celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution in Siba’ Square. In the same month a strike by some one thousand workers at the Baghdad Vegetable Oil factory was met with the security forces storming the factory, whose gates were barricaded by militant workers of the ICP-Central Command. In each instance two or three communists were killed. The strike at the Vegetable Oil Factory had so far proven to be the last strike by the working class in Iraq’s history. In 1969-70 the Ba’th security apparatus murdered several communist leading cadres. On the other hand, in December 1969 the Ba’thist regime appointed Aziz Sharif, ex-secretary general of the Peace Partisans, a Communist front organization, as Minister of Justice. It also courted the working class and the peasantry by issuing a progressive Labor law and revising the Agrarian Reform Law, in both cases implementing articles favorable to the workers and peasants. Similar policies characterized the dealings of the Ba’th with the Kurdish nationalist movement: it liquidated, later on, the two well-known Kurdish journalists and politicians Dara Tawfiq and Salih al-Yusifi; it maneuvered to play on the divisions among the Kurdish parties by courting one or the other; but it also reached an agreement with the Kurdish movement, the March 11, 1970 Accord, which was far advanced in recognizing Kurdish rights than hitherto done by any Iraqi or regional government.

Despite some misgivings about Ba’thist long-term intentions, its “reconciliatory” moves were on the whole welcomed by the ICP and the Kurdish nationalist movement. Encouraged by the release of political prisoners and the “progressive” foreign policy of the regime, Marxist intellectuals who were still in exile began the return journey home. Upon his return from Prague, the famous poet Al-Jawahiri was feted by the government and was allotted a monthly pension. The poet Abdul-Wahhab al-Bayati was appointed as cultural attaché at the Iraqi embassy in Spain, and the poet Saadi Yusuf, who returned from a seven-year exile in Algeria, was appointed editor of Al-Thawra (The Revolution). The Ba’th tolerated the sale of Marxist classics, progressive literature from Egypt and Lebanon, as well as publications by Iraqi leftists. It permitted, for example, the Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalal Al-Adham’s Critique of Religious Thought. For a while even the Ba’th Party organ Al-Thawra (The Revolution) featured a series of translations from Soviet theoretical and analytical tracts translated by Muhsin Jasim al-Musawi—the series was later halted when Tariq Aziz, who was beginning to emerge as a rising Ba’thist cultural czar, assumed editorship of the newspaper.

Leftist intellectuals were allowed to work in state-sponsored journals and newspapers. Thus, the poets and writers Hussein Mardan, Fadhil al-Azzawi, and Yusuf al-Saigh worked in the weekly Alif Ba and to no small measure contributed to its success. Yusuf al-Saigh, recently released from prison, contributed a regular popular feature under the title “Thoughts in a Loud Voice.” In the same magazine (in October 1969) Al-Saigh published a long article entitled “The Enchanted World of Mudhaffar al-Nawwab.” It seemed that official culture no longer considered taboo Al-Nawwab’s name. Indeed, Al-Nawwab’s lyrical poems were
sung by Yas Kidhr and were aired by the Iraqi Broadcast Station. The leftist audience read the lyrics’ words at two levels, love as well as a coded address to the Communist Party, as in the following example: “You are a notebook and I am a mere page.” It should be noted that Al-Nawwab, who had escaped from prison just before the Ba’th takeover, was among the first to mistrust the Ba’th’s “progressive” shell. When Saddam Hussein called him for a meeting in 1969 and offered to accommodate him, all Al-Nawwab requested was a passport and that he be allowed to leave the country. He left for Beirut where he published his collection of poems in the vernacular, Li-l-Rail wa-Hamad (For the Train and Hamad), which was allowed into Iraq and was sold out in no time at all.

Fadhi al-Azzawi caused a literary storm when he launched, along with a few other poets, the journal Al-Shi’r 69 (Poetry 69), with the famous “Poetry Manifesto,” sending shock waves in the literary circles. Al-Shi’r 69 promoted innovative and modernist trends in the form and content of the poem. Although the journal ceased publication after its fourth issue, the heated debate it generated attests to the cultural vitality at the time and to no small measure to the 1960s generation’s disenchantment with ideological recipes on creativity despite the generation’s overall identification with Marxist thought. In addition to poetry, the spirit of protest and innovation manifested itself in the artistic plane as well, with a number of art groups forming and issuing manifestos declaring their new styles, the most famous of which were “the Innovators” of Faqi Hasan and Salih al-Juma’i, and the “New Vision” of Ismael Fattah, Rafi’ al-Nasiri, and Dhia al-Azzawi. “New” and “Innovative” also characterized the theater, which, like the arts in general, was an almost exclusive domain of the left. Plays in the realist mode, however, continued to draw large audiences. In 1968, for example, “The Palmtree and the Neighbors,” a dramatization of Farman’s novel by the same title, was performed to popular and critical acclaim and also shown several times on Iraqi television. The play’s director, cast of actors, and crew were all Marxists. However, as troupes were formed or re-formed (the Popular Theater Troupe, the Modern Artistic Troupe, and the 60 Chairs Experimental Troupe, for example), new styles took hold—the turath and Brechtian trends mentioned earlier. Yusuf al-Ani’s play Al-Miftâh (The Key) exemplifies the blending of both trends and provides a good example of the new political theater. It is interesting to note that this 1968 play made laudatory references to Guevara when the government was trying vigorously to liquidate the Guevarist trend.

All this goes to say that in the cultural arena the Ba’th capital was insignificant indeed, in contrast to the Communists’. One could mention a handful Ba’thist cultural figures like Abdul-Khaliq al-Samirrai and Sa’doun Hammadi, and the poets Shafiq al-Kamali, Shadhil Taqa, Muhammed Jamil Shalash, Sami Mahdi, and Hamid Saeed. Despite the deep-rooted anti-Communist orientation of the Iraqi Ba’thists, a few Ba’thist intellectuals like Al-Samirrai and Al-Kamali and some lesser figures were not averse to Marxism (in a decade or so both Al-Samirrai and Al-Kamali would be liquidated under the reign of Saddam Hussein). The cultural field, as should be clear by now, was predominantly the province of the Marxist and Iraqi trend. The Ba’th leadership had to swallow this bitter pill and bide its time in order to control cultural expression. Its tenuous grip on power, its desire to project a progressive image, and the quasi-hegemony of the left in the cultural field, all these factors led it to compromise and negotiate its way till it became well-entrenched and till it cultivated its own cultural cadres.

The Ba’th Party implemented a vigorous Ba’thification campaign to win over Marxist intellectuals. In this connection, the thinker Aziz al-Sayyid Jasim was a major prize. Al-Sayyid Jasim defected first to Harakat al-Ishtirâkyyûn al-‘Arab (the Arab Socialist Movement) before joining the Ba’th. Soon after, he started writing polemics, first against the Communist Party-Central Command, chiding it for its “infantilism” and violent tactics, and then against the Communist Party-Central Committee, contesting the idea that the working class can have only one party representing it and defending its interests—implying thus that the Ba’th Party did represent the interests of the working class. A few years later Al-Sayyid Jasim published the semi-autobiographical novel Al-Munadil (the Militant, 1972), which recounts his experience in the Communist Party. (Al-Sayyid Jasim had a tragic end: he was imprisoned in the mid 1980s, released in the late 1980s, then liquidated in the early 1990s). Al-Sayyid Jasim was followed by others who likewise defected to the Ba’thist camp or recanted their communist past. In the early 1970s, Malik Mansour and Peter Yusuf, both of the ICP-Central Command, recently released from prison following Aziz al-Haj’s televised debacle, started writing in the Ba’thist organ Al-Thawra; so did Yusuf Matti, an old veteran communist journalist. Soon after, the people’s poet Muhammed Salih Bahr al-Ulum began, in his old age,
singing the praises of the regime. Another leftist poet, Abdul-Razzaq Abdul-Wahid, followed suit. (Abdul-Wahid became Saddam Hussein’s favorite poet, writing panegyrics dedicated to Hussein. Following the collapse of the regime in 2003, Abdul-Wahid left for Tunisia and currently lives in exile in Paris, courtesy of the French Government). Even the great poet Al-Jawahiri was not above contributing a poem commemorating the anniversary of the Ba’th Party.

The Ba’th Party aspired to be what the Iraqi Communist Party has always been, the Party of the intellectuals. For a few more years yet, till 1978-79 to be exact, the Marxist intelligentsia continued to flourish despite the Ba’th’s covert and overt persecution of the Left and the defection of some cadres to the Ba’th. Then came the blow of 1978, a systematic campaign launched by Saddam Hussein to eradicate communism in Iraq once and for all. Thus began the years of relentless persecution, the torture and death of hundreds of Marxist intellectuals, the flight into exile of a thousand creative writers (poets, novelists, and dramatists), artists, academics, and thinkers, and the emasculation of those who remained behind. During those long and bitter years that were punctuated by momentous events in Iraq and the world at large, time has exercised its toll and many a leftist intellectual has grown disenchanted with the ICP. Although even today the ICP still commands the loyalty of more intellectuals than any other Iraqi political entity, the Iraqi Marxist intelligentsia is no longer the glory that it once was. It is perhaps premature to read the current Bremerian phase as the epitaph of the ICP and the Marxist intelligentsia. For time and again Marxism in Iraq has shown its resilience and ability, phoenix-like, to rise again, with the intellectuals forging a new vision and new styles of cultural expression. But the odds are enormous this time, and the utopian vision has lost its enchantment and lyricism.

What form Iraqi Marxism will assume in future is hard to predict. But if one were to judge Marxism’s inroads among the Iraqi intelligentsia during the 1950s-1970s and its subsequent decline, one would agree with Saadi Yusuf (also Yussef or Yussuf), Iraq’s foremost poet today, who early in 1983 saw the writing on the wall. In a stunning poem in the epic vein (“Cities in Sorrow”), the communist Yusuf celebrates the diversity of Iraqis and lays bare their blood-ridden history, a history of heroic and tragic struggles, of uprisings, and of invasions. It is therefore fitting to end with the poem’s concluding lines:

All our modern ammunition

Is not worth one bullet
From our old gun.

Let us, then, rise in soul
Beyond our bloody Present
And recognize, for once,
Our bitter predicament
And let the journey start
From the darkness of this very night!

Annexe A. The January 2005 Elections and the Decline of the PCI

Very intriguing was the PCI’s two-day deafening silence following the announcement of the January 2005 elections’ results. When the PCI finally broke its silence, it was not to offer its own analysis of the results but to post on its website the Kurdish Democratic Party’s analysis To the demoralized members and supporters of the PCI as well as to the general observer, this act signaled the PCI’s endorsement of this analysis—which maintained that the unexpected poor results of the Communists were due to the fact that Kurdish Communists voted as Kurds rather than as Communists, and Shi’ite Communists voted as Shi’a
It is interesting in this respect that the late historian Hanna Batatu, who wrote the most comprehensive study of the Iraqi Communist Party (Batatu 1978), also published a brief seven-page study entitled “Some Reflections on the Decline of the Arab Left and of Iraq’s Communists” (1983). In this paper Batatu makes two important observations to explain the decline of the PCI: the harm done to the Party’s reputation as a result of the Kirkuk bloodletting of 1959, when “the Kurdish Communists acted as Kurds rather than as Communists,” and second, the PCI’s subordination to Soviet policy. Although this assessment is generally sound, Batatu seems to overstate the case a little, not taking the nuances and complexities into full consideration. In any case, in addition to these two factors mentioned by Batatu, one may now add the collapse of “real existing socialism” and its profound impact on Iraqi Communists, and, of course, the bloody repression the Communists were subjected to under successive Iraqi governments, particularly under the Ba'ath. Finally, other factors contributed to the decline of the PCI: a series of Faustian pacts, the rise of both Kurdish and Shi'ite irredentism which cut into the PCI’s two main bases of support, and some missteps by a party leadership that was not free from personality conflicts and shortsightedness and that was worn down by long years of clandestine activity, exile, and work under extremely unfavorable conditions.

Finally, it should be noted that although the January 2005 elections were dictated by the occupying force, were not conducted under normal circumstances (occupation, terror, resistance, and boycott, as well as the absence of international monitors), and there were signs they would be rigged by powerful and power-hungry parties, the Communists did not question the facts and were enthusiastic supporters of holding the elections. There is no question, however, that had the elections been conducted under normal conditions, the Communists would have fared much better.

Annex B. The PCI “Overcoat”

On the impact of the PCI, see Batatu (1978). On the rise and impact of the Marxist intelligentsia in the 1940s and 1950s, see my article (Yousif 1991), where I also give a few details on some of the cultural figures cited here. See, also, the statements by a member of the Ba’th Regional Command in 1963, Hani al-Fkaiki (1993: 133, 168, 308, and 319) on the success of the PCI in winning the support of the intelligentsia. A recent testimony in the Saudi-sponsored newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat, by Khalid al-Qishtainy (2001), a liberal Iraqi writer and long-time expatriate in London, asserts the prominence of Marxist thought in Iraq during the mid 20th century:

“The Iraqi Communist Party, along with the leftist factions on its orbit, was the largest political and intellectual force in Iraq between the 1940s-1970s. Most of what was produced in the fields of thought, literature, poetry, and art had the stamp of this movement and its philosophy.

I remember that as a liberal during my high school years, I used to feel inferior and backward compared to all those bright colleagues who believed in socialism and Marxism. I recall that during the month of Ramadan, I used to pray to God to guide me to Marxism in order to join those colleagues.

The outcomes of this leftist hegemony are still alive…. Credit goes to the Communists for spreading an international awareness among the intellectuals, introducing Picasso, Bernard Shaw, Dickens, Tolstoy, Gorky, Paul Robinson’s songs, Western music, graphic and plastic arts, and the free verse movement.”

Today in occupied Iraq, Vice President Adil Abdul-Mahdi, currently a leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution and a contender to the post of Prime Minister, Mahdi al-Hafidh, Minister of Planning and Development, and Naseer al-Chadirji, a Governing Council member and leader of the post-2003
revived National Democratic Party and son of its historic leader Kamil al-Chadirji, are all former card-carrying Communist Party members. Abdul-Mahdi started as a Ba’thist, then joined the PCI, then the PCI-Central Command. Later on he left for France where he studied economics; he finally ended up an Islamist. Mahdi al-Hafidh served as the President of the worldwide communist International Student Federation in the 1970s and was on the Central Committee of the PCI in the late 1970s-early 1980s. Other figures had Marxist backgrounds or had flirted with Marxist ideology at one point or another. Jalal al-Talbani, Interim President of Iraq and head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, was associated in the mid-1970s with a Marxist-Leninist Kurdish group which was later renamed as the League of the Tilers of Kurdistan. Salah al-Mukhtar, a leading Ba’thist intellectual, journalist, and diplomat, currently living in exile and is an ardent advocate of armed resistance to the American occupation, is believed to have been a former Marxist. One might add Kanan Makiya of the “sweets and flowers” fame. Shortly before the 2003 invasion, Makiya told President George W. Bush that the Iraqi people would greet the invading army “with sweets and flowers;” he later described the bombing of Iraq as “music to my ears.” Makiya is a former Trotskyite. He is best known for his Republic of Fear and for Cruelty and Silence. Finally, leading newspapers in occupied Iraq have Communists, Marxists, or former Communists as their editors-in-chief (for example, the Occupation-launched Al-Sabah had Ismael Zayer as its first editor-in-chief and currently has Jum’a al-Halafi in that position, both of whom are regarded as “Communists”).

**Annex C. The Death Train**

Following the failed uprising of Hasan Sari’ in Al-Rashid military camp in Baghdad, some five hundred Communist prisoners, mainly military officers, who were already in detention in Military Prison No. 1 in the same military camp, were herded into a cargo train and crowded into compartments that were tightly sealed and the floors covered with tar. The train conducer was given explicit orders to go at a very slow speed towards Samawah in the south, the last urban center before the Nuqrat al-Salaman desert prison. Under searing July temperatures, with sealed compartments without air vents, the condition of the overcrowded prisoners can be imagined. After some time on track, the conductor was wised up to the nature of the “cargo” he was carrying; he took the risky and courageous decision of accelerating train speed to the maximum, thus saving the lives of the prisoners (only one prisoner died), many of whom had fainted or were gasping for breath. In the meantime, word had reached the people of Samawah about the train. When the train finally arrived at Samawah, people were waiting for the prisoners with water and food, but the physicians among the prisoners instructed that salt be taken first. After their ordeal the prisoners were transported to Nuqrat al-Salaman. The whole episode came to be known as the Death Train. For a detailed account of the uprising of Hasan Sar’ as well as of the Death Train episode, see Ali Karim Said (2002: 250-308).

Références bibliographiques

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1 Article publié en français dans l’édition papier.

2 During the Cold War the United States used to characterize Iraqi communists as “hard core.” It sounded the alarm to stem the ascendency of the ICP and the left in Iraq in the late 1950s. For its part, the ICP was as staunchly opposed to American imperialism as it was supportive of the Soviet Union, often aligning its policies to the Soviet line. The current convivencia between an ultra-right American administration and the ICP, however circumscribed the latter has become, is rife with ironies and may very well lead to further decline in the Party’s fortunes and thinning of its ranks.

3 See Yousif (1991: 172-196). In my concluding paragraphs I affirmed that “Marxist ideology continued to captivate the Iraqi intelligentsia, to inform literature and the arts, and to disseminate the concept of revolution.” This contention, on the whole justified at the time of writing the article in 1989, appears in hindsight at present to have been somewhat optimistic, for in focusing on what I characterized as the three cultural formations of official culture, pan-Arabist culture, and democratic (leftist) culture, I merely referred in passing to the fact that though an Islamist cultural formation was in decline in the 1940s and 1950s (the time period which was the focus of the study), it was not totally dormant. Of course, none of the monumental events of the War for Kuwait or the fall of the Berlin wall that were to change the world as we knew it at the time had unfolded yet. I might add that in the very last paragraph of The Old Social Classes, Batatu expresses the opinion that the many tasks along the process of building a prosperous Iraqi nation-state “can be accomplished only if the country’s principal political forces—the Ba’th, the Communists, and the Kurdish Democrats—pull together and work hand-in-hand for the good of their people” (1978: 1134). A quarter of a century later, one can see the catastrophic results for Iraq of the failure of these three political forces to pull together and of the rise not only of politicized religious movements but of ethnic and sectarian politics as well. I should point out that since the present article focuses on the 1960s, the Islamist cultural formation, which became a force to be reckoned with only in the 1970s, will not be discussed here.

4 It should be noted that many prominent leftist intellectuals at the time hailed from well-to-do families or from families with religious standing.
5 A historical term, dating back to the Abbasid period, which refers to the ascendency of non-Arabs, mainly Persians, in the state administration and cultural field at the time, and to the pride they sometimes boasted in their non-Arab, pre-Muslim past.

6 Ali Saleh al-Sa’di, Secretary of the Ba’th Regional Command (Iraq), 1960-1963 and Deputy Premiere in the government that toppled Qasim, later affirmed what has since become a frequently quoted statement: “We came to power in an armored, American train.

7 Al-Nawwab’s literary fame and popularity started with his publication in the early 1960s of poems in the colloquial dialect of southern Iraq. He modernized the colloquial poem and made it appealing to the educated urbanites. Al-Nawwab was one of the leaders of the popular armed resistance to the 1963 putsch in his neighborhood of Al-Kadhimiya. He then fled to Iran, was captured, interrogated and tortured by the SAVAK, and finally handed back to the Iraqi regime where he spent a few years in prison till his famous and daring jailbreak from the Hilla prison along with a number of Communist prisoners who managed to dig a tunnel that led them to freedom. Al-Nawwab left Iraq in 1969 and has been living in exile ever since (in Libya, France, Greece, and elsewhere). In the early 1970s he attained fame as the Arab world’s poet provocateur, satirizing the Arab regimes in such widely circulating poems like “Watariyat Layliya” (Nocturnal Strings). He now lives in Syria. For an article in English on Al-Nawwab, see Bardenstein (1997).

8 It is worth noting that in the mid 1960s, a delegation of workers visited Al-Nawwab in his Hilla prison and gave him as a present a copy of the poem written in gold water.

9 Indeed, Batatu uses the words of Dostoievsky to describe the Ba’thists’ poverty of ideas and their proclivity to violence: “Nothing is harder than to have an idea or easier than cutting off heads.” (1978: 1014). In his memoirs, the leading Ba’thist figure Hani al-Fkaiki, member of the Regional Ba’th Command in 1963, confirms this contention of the Ba’th’s poverty in the cultural field and he also acknowledges that the ICP’s impact on intellectuals has been far superior to that of the Ba’th Party (1993: 133, 168, 308, 319, and passim).

10 Al-Sa’di led the left-wing faction. Shortly after his ouster in an internal struggle with the right-wing faction and the ensuing demise of the Ba’th regime, Al-Sa’di left the Ba’th Party and embraced Marxism.

11 Haseeb and Al-Jadir were instrumental in introducing the nationalization decrees of 1964. After the Ba’th came to power again in 1968, Haseeb left Iraq and has been the director of the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut. He now leads seminars and presents initiatives to end the American occupation of Iraq. Fuad Al-Rikabi was the former Secretary of the Ba’th Regional Command (1952-1959). He became disaffected with the Ba’th in the early 1960s and defected to the Nasserite camp. The Ba’th regime arrested him in 1969, and he was assassinated in prison in 1971. Al-Nasrawi is still active in the Iraqi political scene in occupied Iraq today, heading the same but now small Arab Socialist Movement, which is aligned with the ICP and other secular forces.

12 Al-Taakhi was the organ of the Kurdish Democratic Party. It should be noted that Al-Taakhi’s managing editor and KDP prominent leader Dara Tawfiq was a former Communist. The second newspaper, Al-Nûr, belonged to Ibrahim Ahmed and Jalal al-Talabani, who in the mid 1960s became disaffected with the KDP “tribal” leadership and its policies and led a splinter group which attracted a number of leftist Kurdish intellectuals. This splinter group was the seed, along with a Marxist Kurdish group, the League of the Toilers of Kurdistan, from which the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party was to emerge in the mid 1970s.

13 Title of a famous novel of Nicolas Otrovski, typical of soviet edifying literature in the 1930s.

14 A few years later the ICP likewise parroted the Soviet Communist Party’s line on Euro-Communism and also regarded such communist thinkers as Roger Garaudy and Louis Althusser as revisionists, just as it did so with Trotsky a few decades earlier. In reality, very few leftist Iraqi intellectuals were familiar with Trotsky’s writings, including his writings on aesthetics. As for Althusser, it is doubtful that any in the ICP
leadership even read him in the 1970s-1980s. And Gramsci was “discovered” only in the early 1980s, after the exodus of Iraqi Communists and Marxists to the diaspora.

15 The account presented here is based mainly on Najm Mahmoud’s version (1980: 113-130), Ali Karim Said’s version (2002: 213-225), Haydar Haydar’s (1984) semi-documentary novel Walima li-a’shab al-bahr (A Banquet for Seaweed), and scattered remarks by Aziz al-Haj (1994). Najm Mahmoud is believed to be the pseudonym for Ibrahim Allawi, leader of the Cadre group. His participant-insider’s account presents his version of events and should be complemented with Aziz al-Haj’s account in various publications as well as with Aziz Sbahi’s forthcoming third volume of Decades from the History of the Iraqi Communist Party (the multiple volume text is endorsed by the ICP as its “official” history).

16 After her release from prison, Haifa Zangana left Iraq. Today she lives in London, where she has established herself as a painter, writer, member of surrealist groups, and a frequent contributor to The Guardian and other journals, writing against the sanctions and now against the American occupation of Iraq.

17 It was rumored at the time that the Ba’th murdered Al-Hani because he served as the link between the 1968 putschists and the CIA and thus knew too much about their ties with the USA and how the 1968 putsch was “cooked.”

**P.S.**

*Salaam Yousif, «Le déclin de l’intelligentsia de gauche en Irak/On the Decline of the Leftist Intelligentsia in Iraq1»,*  
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