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Iraq under King Ġāzī Internal Political Development, 1933–1939

Abstract

Through the whole interwar period the Iraqi monarch, centred in Baghdad, had in effect a social meaning diametrically opposed to that of the tribal shaykhs, who were then still virtual rulers of much of the countryside. The shaykhs represented the principle of the fragmented or multiple community (many tribes), the monarch the ideal of an integral community (one Iraqi people, one Arab nation).¹ While the shaykh was the defender of the divisive tribal tradition, the monarch was the exponent of the unifying national law. In the view of the presence of large non-Arab minorities in the country, there was some inherent contradiction between the ideal of one Iraqi people and that of one Arab nation. By the mid-1930s, several officers of the Iraqi army had become actively interested in politics and found that the army's reputation for suppressing the Assyrian rebellion was a political asset. The most influential officers were true nationalists, that is, pan-Arabist, who inspired many of the junior officers. They looked to the examples of neighbouring Turkey and Iran, where military dictatorships were flourishing. Under the leadership of General Bakr Šidqī the army took over the government in the fall of 1936, and opened a period of army's meddling into politics. Although under the reign of young and inexperienced King Ġāzī (1933–1939) Iraq fell prey to tribal rebellions and military coups, there was nevertheless no essential deviation from the prior trend of royal policy. Except during the short Hikmat Sulaymān government, the pan-Arab character of the state became more pronounced.

¹ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: a Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1978, p. 27.

With end of the mandate and the withdrawal of the British, Iraq attempted to create a strong government of national unity. King Fayṣal moved to propitiate the nationalist opposition by bringing some of its members into the government. In March 1933, he appointed a new cabinet containing a majority of the *National Brotherhood Party* (Ḥizb al-Iḥā' al-Waṭanī)² members under the premiership of Raṣīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī.³ On 7 September 1933 Iraq suffered a hard blow: King Fayṣal died suddenly in Geneva of a heart attack. On Friday morning, 8 September, the people of Baghdad awoke to learn the news of Fayṣal's tragic death, and they were stunned. Although there was no succession crisis, his death removed the one man capable of moderating the differences among Iraq's diverse elements.⁴

The Cabinet held a meeting immediately after the news was received, and two hours later Amīr Ġāzī, Fayṣal's only son, who was acting as regent during his father's absence, was sworn in before the members of the Cabinet and proclaimed King Ġāzī I.⁵ He was a man of twenty-one, active, warmly patriotic and not unamiable, he was popular with the public and with the young Iraqi officers with whom he had been educated,⁶ but too young and inexperienced to fill his father's role of political balancer. Moreover, neither his training nor his temperament was suited to the task. He had little interest in the political world, but his general sympathies were broadly pan-Arab. Like many in Iraq, he also resented British domination. However, he could show neither his father's sensitivity to the forces at work in Iraqi society nor his acumen in drawing them into the circles of royal patronage.⁷

The youngest child and only son of Fayṣal Ibn al-Ḥusayn, Ġāzī was born in Mecca on 21 March 1912 and spent his first eleven years there. In the summer of 1923 he came to Amman and lived there with his uncle Amīr 'Abd Allāh. According to the Iraqi constitution he became crown prince and arrived in Baghdad on 5 October 1924 with his mother and sisters. Educated at first by an English governess, in 1926 Ġāzī was sent to Harrow in England to finish his studies. On his return to Iraq in 1928 he went through the normal course of training at the Military College in Baghdad, where he graduated

² The Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 was regarded by politicians, such as Yāsīn al-Ḥāšimī and his followers, as unsatisfactory for the realization of the national aspirations of Iraq. Former members of the *Peoples Party* (Ḥizb aṣ-Ṣa'b) and the *National Party* (Al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī) came together and organized the *National Brotherhood Party*. The leader of this party was Yāsīn al-Ḥāšimī and the most prominent members were Raṣīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī, Ḥikmat Sulaymān, and Muḥammad Zakī. The *National Party*, while officially remaining as a separate party, was in close alliance with the *National Brotherhood Party* for the purpose of opposing the Treaty. Like former parties, these new parties also aimed at achieving the real independence of Iraq, and the only differences among them were on the means of effecting this. In: Fritz G r o b b a, *Irak*, Berlin 1941, pp. 40–47.

³ As-Sayyid 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasānī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'irāqīya*, (7th edition), Vol. 3., Dār aṣ-Ṣu'ūn at-Taḡāfiya al-'Āmma, Baghdad 1988, pp. 233–235.

⁴ Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī, *Muḍakkirāt fī al-'Iraq*, Vol. II (1927–1941), Dār at-Taḥrī'a, Beirut 1968, p. 274.

⁵ Muḥammad Ḥusayn az-Zubaydī, *Al-Malik Ġāzī wa-murāfiqūhu*, Baghdad and Surrey, Laam Ltd. 1989, pp. 78–79.

⁶ Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950. A Political, Social and Economic History*, Oxford University Press and Beirut, Librairie du Liban, London 1968, p. 237.

⁷ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press 2000, p. 81.

in July 1932 as a second lieutenant in the cavalry.⁸ He identified with the young army officers who were becoming increasingly nationalist in ideology and outlook.

Fayṣal's noble birth and personal involvement in the struggle for Arab independence from Turkey had made him uniquely qualified to appeal to the nationalist sentiments of the people. However, while Fayṣal's acknowledged ability in handling his opponents gave the country the unity it so badly needed, this same vigour and typical style of rule had a harmful effect in contributing to the enormous obstacles in the way of developing a viable political system.⁹ In most respects Ġāzī stood in contrast to his father: he was the product of a system which aroused bitter Ṣī'ī resentment of the Sunnī-dominated state during the next few years. As a member of the younger generation with a Western education, he was much less tuned to the mentality and interests of the tribal and religious leaders or to the older Ottoman-trained politicians. On the other side, his youth, his genuine nationalist feelings, and his proclivity for the army put him in tune with the emerging educated classes.¹⁰

On 9 September upon the accession of King Ġāzī in accordance with constitutional practice, Raṣīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī tendered his resignation. Ġāzī invited him to form a new Cabinet on the same day.¹¹ To appease his critics, in a speech made on the occasion of his reinstatement as prime minister, Raṣīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī declared that the policy of his government would be the same as that followed by the late King Fayṣal, assuring the British government of his friendly attitude.¹² His declarations which were intended merely for foreign consumption produced a violent reaction among his colleagues in the *National Brotherhood Party*, who feared that the government might change its former policy. Confronted with such opposition, the premier decided to improve the government's position by dissolving parliament and holding new elections, but this step proved disastrous. When the king refused to approve the request for dissolution, Raṣīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī presented his resignation on 28 October 1933.¹³

'Ālī Ġawdat al-Ayyūbī, Chief of the Royal Dīwān, made it possible for Ġamīl al-Midfa'ī,¹⁴ a non-partisan ex-minister, to form a new government on 9 November 1933. His Cabinet was the first of a series to be formed on purely personal rather than

⁸ Ibrāhīm Khalīl A ḥ m a d and Ġa'far 'Abbās Ḥ u m a y d ī, *Tārīḥ al-'Irāq al-mu'āṣir*, University Press, Mosul 1989, p. 75.

⁹ Muhammad Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics: a Case Study of Iraq to 1941*, KPI, London 1982, p. 101.

¹⁰ Luṭfī Ġa'far Faraġ, *Al-Malik Ġāzī wa-dawruhu fī siyāsāt al-'Irāq fī al-maġālayni ad-dāhili wa-al-hāriġi, 1933–1939*, Maktabat al-Yaqza al-'Arabiya Baghdad 1987, p. 62.

¹¹ A l - Ḥ a s a n ī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'irāqīya*, Vol. 3, pp. 325–326.

¹² FO 371/16924 Ambassador Francis Humphrys Baghdad to John Simon FO, 14 September 1933; A l - Ḥ a s a n ī, op. cit., Vol. 3, pp. 327.

¹³ FO 371/16903 Sir Francis Humphrys to FO, 9 November 1933; A ḥ m a d and Ḥ u m a y d ī, *Tārīḥ al-'Irāq al-mu'āṣir*, pp. 78–79; A l - Ḥ a s a n ī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'irāqīya*. Vol. 3, pp. 330–333.

¹⁴ 'Ālī Ġawdat al-Ayyūbī and Ġamīl al-Midfa'ī began their public life as two army officers who took part in the Arab Revolt of 1916, and later served under Fayṣal in Syria. On the establishment of the Iraqi Government in 1921, they returned to Iraq and took an active part in politics.

partisan lines.¹⁵ Ġamīl al-Midfā'ī, who did not believe in party politics, declared on 14 December, that he needed no partisan support since he enjoyed the confidence of the leading members of parliament. It introduced the National Defence Bill to parliament. This was passed on 15 January 1934,¹⁶ setting up the machinery for conscription, the rapid expansion of the armed forces and depriving the tribal shaykhs of young and strong tribesmen. This project was dear to the hearts of most of the Sunnī Arab elite and other state centralisers, but was regarded with suspicion and resentment by many Šr'ites and Kurds.

The wedding ceremony of King Ġāzī with his cousin Princess 'Āliya, the daughter of 'Alī, the former King of al-Ḥiğāz was held on 25 January 1934.¹⁷ The happy event was shortly afterwards overshadowed by a hot dispute on the question of the Al-Ġarrāf project which led to a cleavage along Sunnī-Šr'ī lines. Rustum Ḥaydar, as the minister of public works, undertook to carry out the project in order to make possible the irrigation of a vast area in lower Iraq by constructing a dam on the Tigris.¹⁸ When Ġamīl al-Midfā'ī failed to reconcile the two factions, he tendered his resignation on 10 February 1934. However, the king still refused to order the holding of general elections and once more invited Ġamīl al-Midfā'ī to form a new government. The latter dropped the ministers whose disagreements had upset his former cabinet and on 21 February 1934 presented his reconstructed his cabinet, introducing new persons.¹⁹ However, the new government, which was mainly recruited from the least influential public men, proved to be too weak to command respect or to inaugurate any constructive work.

The position of the tribes was increasingly eroded by the growth of bureaucracy and its extension into the countryside. This was evident in a number of measures, passed in the 1930s, designed to place local authority in the hands of educated townsmen and reduce tribal autonomy. The balance of power was gradually shifting from the tribe to the government. Dissatisfied with the conduct of the government, the king expressed his desire for a cabinet change. Ġamīl al-Midfā'ī immediately tendered his resignation on 25 August 1934 and gave way to 'Alī Ġawdat al-Ayyūbī who persuaded the king

¹⁵ It comprised of General Nūrī as-Sa'īd at Foreign Affairs and Rustum Ḥaydar at Public Works representing one faction, and Nāḡī Shawkat at Interior and Naṣrat al-Fārisī at Finance representing another. It included also Ġamāl Bābān at Justice and Šālīḥ Ġabr at Education. In: Al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'iraqīya*, (7th edition), Vol. 4, Dār as-Šu'ūn at-Taḡāfiya al-'Āmma, Baghdad 1988, pp. 6–8.

¹⁶ Rağā' Ḥusayn al-Ḥaṭṭāb, *Ta'sīs al-ğayš al-'iraqī wa-taṭawwur dawrihi as-siyasī, 1921–1941*, Bahgdad University 1979, p. 115.

¹⁷ Muḥammad Ḥamdī al-Ğa'farī, *Al-Malika 'Āliya. Imra'a ḥalfa al-aḥdāt*, Dār al-Ḥurriya li-aṭ-Ṭibā'a, Baghdad 1991, pp. 35–36.

¹⁸ Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958.*, Oxford University Press, London, New York, Karachi 1960, p. 46; Al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'iraqīya*, Vol. 4, pp. 14–15.

¹⁹ Ġamīl al-Midfā'ī dropped Nūrī as-Sa'īd, Rustum Ḥaydar, Nāḡī Shawkat and Šālīḥ Ġabr and introduced Nāḡī as-Suwaydī at Finance, Ġamāl Bābān at Justice, 'Abbās Maḥdī at Economy and Transport, Rašīd al-Ḥawğa at Defence, Ġalāl Bābān at Education and 'Abd Allāh ad-Damlūḡī at Foreign Affairs. In: Al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., Vol. 4, p. 18.

to dissolve parliament.²⁰ The election of December 1934 was a success for the premier who managed to deprive men of local standing of their seats. Excluded were some of the most important Šīrī tribal shaykhs of the mid-Euphrates, laying the foundation for a dangerous tactical alliance with the *National Brotherhood Party*.²¹ With the election which reduced tribal influence in parliament still further, it is perhaps not surprising that tribal leaders decided the time was ripe to reclaim their old power and prestige.

The relative political calm did not last long. From the end of 1934 onwards, the established political system began to crumble. The growing divisions within the political elite between rival factions and personalities sharpened rather than softened the tribal problem and weakened the authority of the state. The leading politicians of the *National Brotherhood Party* wasted little time in launching their campaign against the government.²² Far more sinister was the stream of subversive propaganda which poured from Baghdad, inciting tribesmen to emotions bound to end in anti-government violence. The propaganda was addressed to potentially malcontent Kurds in the north and to the tribes around An-Nağaf.²³ In January 1935 unrest erupted in the mid-Euphrates region. Tribal grievances had been discussed often focusing on specific complaints connected with the land and irrigation rights of particular tribes, some of the issues related to the grievances of the Šīrī as a whole and were presented to the government in March 1935. It accepted the Iraqi state, but focused on the lack of proportional representation for the Šīrī in parliament and the judiciary, and called for free elections, freedom of the press and tax reductions.

At the root of tribal unrest was the transition from a society based on tribal organization and values to one based on settled agriculture. A striking manifestation of this transition was the erosion of the power and authority of the shaykh within the tribe. Originally the shaykh's main function had been military: He protected the tribe from its neighbours and from a predatory central government. Now the shaykh had become the agent of that government and often its chief representative, while the government had long since assumed responsibility for internal defence. More immediately, the shaykhs also drew up a petition asking the king to dismiss 'Alī Ğawdat al-Ayyūbī and to dissolve parliament.²⁴ When this produced no result, direct action followed. It was at this point that Hikmat Sulaymān, an opponent of the prime minister and a leading member of the *National Brotherhood Party*, urged his old friend Lieutenant General Bakr Šidqī (commanding officer of the southern region) to refuse to suppress the tribal unrest. Faced by this and by dissent within his cabinet, 'Alī Ğawdat al-Ayyūbī resigned.²⁵ No alternative appeared

²⁰ 'Alī Ğawdat al-Ayyūbī on 27 August 1934 formed his Cabinet which comprised of Nūrī as-Sa'īd at Foreign Affairs, Ğamīl al-Midfa'ī at Defence, Yūsuf Ğanīma at Finance, Ğamāl Bābān at Justice, 'Abd al-Ḥusayn al-Ĉalabī at Education. In: A l - Ḥ a s a n ī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'irāqīya*, Vol. 4, pp. 28–29.

²¹ Ḥusayn Ğamīl, *Al-Ḥayāt an-niyābiya fī al-'Irāq, 1925–1946*, Maktabat al-Muṭannā, Baghdad 1982, pp. 245–246.

²² Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics: a Case Study of Iraq to 1941*, p. 103.

²³ Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950. A Political, Social and Economic History*, p. 239.

²⁴ A l - Ḥ a s a n ī, op. cit., Vol. 4, pp. 77–78.

²⁵ He resigned on 23 February 1935. In: A l - Ḥ a s a n ī, op. cit., Vol. 4, pp. 56–57.

to the formation of another cabinet under Ġamīl al-Midfa'ī. It began to work on 4 March 1935,²⁶ and was immediately confronted by a spreading tribal rebellion in the region of ad-Dīwānīya, led by two powerful tribal shaykhs who had been in close touch with Yāsīn al-Hāšimī of the *National Brotherhood Party*. The government then decided to negotiate with the rebels, but nothing helped to restore the situation to normal. This prompted Ġamīl al-Midfa'ī to resort to force to crush the rebellion, but it was adopted too late to ease the situation.²⁷

The premier's suspicions of a plot were confirmed and he, faced with certain defeat, submitted his resignation on 15 March, having remained in power only thirteen days. Yāsīn al-Hāšimī, portrayed as the only man who could "save" the situation was then invited by the king to form a government in March 1935, having effectively carried out a coup d'état against his rivals.²⁸ The activities of Yāsīn al-Hāšimī and his tribal allies had awakened a political consciousness hitherto inactive or at least suppressed. They marked a new course in Iraqi politics. Until now, cabinets came and went almost entirely owing to dissensions within the urban political elite, the influence of the king or the British embassy. Now, for the first time a government came to power owing to a popular movement.²⁹ Within a week the tribal rebellion was over and many in Baghdad became convinced that this was a manifestation of the "old Iraq" which needed to be eliminated by the march of progress. For the Sunnī ruling elites it also presented an opportunity to portray the Šī'ī tribesmen, clerics and shaykhs as obstacles to the needs of a modern state.

These views and to some extent their ambivalence had been in evidence since the ending of the Ottoman occupation and, in many of their particulars, resembled late Ottoman thinking on national identity and the importance of authoritarian command and military discipline in the creation of an ordered society. Most current and most plausible initially among the former Ottoman officials and officers who formed the administrative elite of the new state, they had been reinforced during the 1920s by the appointment of Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī, who had come to Iraq after the fall of Fayṣal's administration in Damascus as director-general at the ministry of education.³⁰ In this position, he was able to lay the foundations for a highly centralised, tightly disciplined and elitist education system in Iraq. Much of Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī's work in Iraq concerned the teaching of "nationalist history" that would engender among pupils a sense of original attachment to the Arab nation.

However, the two largest communities of Iraq – the Kurds and the Šī'ī traditionalists – saw Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī as a protagonist of the centralising, hegemonic Sunnī Arab-dominated

²⁶ This cabinet contained respected personalities: 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Qaṣṣāb at Interior, Yūsuf Ghanīma at Finance, Tawfīq as-Suwaydī at Justice, Nūrī as-Sa'īd at Foreign Affairs, Rashīd al-Khawja at Defence, Muḥammad Amīn Zakī at Economy and Transport, 'Abd al-Ḥusayn al-Ġalabī at Education, in: *Al-Ḥasanī*, op. cit., Vol. 4, pp. 60–61.

²⁷ Majīd Khaddūrī, *Independent Iraq...*, p. 53.

²⁸ The government was formed on 17 March 1935. It comprised of Nūrī as-Sa'īd at Foreign Affairs, General Ġa'far al-'Askarī at Defence, Rašīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī at Interior, Ra'ūf al-Bahrānī (Shī'ī) at Finance, Shaykh Muḥammad Riḍā aš-Šabībī (Shī'ī) at Education, Muḥammad Amīn Zakī (Kurdi) at Economy and Transport and Muḥammad Zakī al-Baṣrī at Justice, in: *Al-Ḥasanī*, op. cit., Vol. 4, pp. 80–82.

²⁹ Cit. in: Tarbush, op. cit., p. 106.

³⁰ Karol Sorby, Jr., *Arabi, islām a výzvy modernej doby*, Slovak Academic Press, Bratislava 2007, pp. 153–154.

state. By the mid-1930s the Šī'īs had already come close to dominating the ministry of education and the opposition to Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī was such that he had to resign his position. His removal paved the way for the Šī'īs, who in those years almost exclusively held the post of minister.³¹ Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī was displaced by Muḥammad Fāḍil al-Ġamālī a Šī'ī who while sharing many of previous views on Arab nationalism and on the virtues of military discipline in the formation of a modern society, advocated a more decentralised, less elitist educational system and ensured that resources were distributed more equitably in the provinces, providing opportunities in particular for the Šī'ī majority.³² At the same time, however, the educational system became increasingly militarised. By introducing military training to schools and teachers' training colleges in 1935–1936, or by establishing the paramilitary Iraqi youth movement, Al-Futuwwa, state officials were trying to ensure disciplined acceptance of the *status quo* in the name of nationalism.³³ Yet the complex of relationships and power that constituted the *status quo* was founded on economic privilege, status hierarchies and multiple forms of discrimination – tribal, familial, sectarian and ethnic – that invalidated any practical form of either Iraqi or Arab nationalism.³⁴

In May 1935 a new uprising spread rapidly in the lower and mid-Euphrates: greed, tangled land claims, religious sentiment, and the weakening of tribal authority – especially symbolized by conscription – contributed in differing degrees.³⁵ This time the government had no compunction about using force to suppress the rebellions. Military forces were sent to rebellious areas, and air force bombing took a heavy toll in lives. Summary executions were carried out under martial law. These measures were sufficient to bring peace to the tribal areas of the south, but they also helped turn the tribal population against the cabinet. General Bakr Šidqī used the full power of the newly formed Iraqi air force and the army against the tribesmen and scattered them with relative ease.³⁶ It was clear that the tribes were no longer a threat to the power of the central state. The army's role in quelling the rebellions, which had often been stirred up by politicians in Baghdad, gave rise to the notion in military circles that the army was being used as a tool of civilian politicians and that politics might be better served by direct military intervention. Yāsīn al-Hāšimī's initial failure to include Ḥikmat Sulaymān in his Cabinet proved to be a great blunder since Ḥikmat Sulaymān, with his genius for clandestine intrigues, eventually succeeded in overthrowing the Yāsīn al-Hāšimī – Rašīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī administration by force.³⁷

³¹ Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, Princeton University Press Princeton, New Jersey 2003, p. 125.

³² Al-Ḥuṣrī, *Muḍakkirātī fī al-'Irāq*, Vol. II, p. 283.

³³ Karol Sorby, Jr., *Iraq on the Eve of the Second World War*, „Asian and African Studies“ (Bratislava), No. 2/2008, p. 243.

³⁴ William L. Cleveland, *The Making of a Nationalist. Ottomanism and Arabism in the Life and Thought of Sāṭi' al-Ḥuṣrī*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1971, pp. 74–76; Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism. A Critical Enquiry*, Macmillan, London 1990, pp. 123–158.

³⁵ Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado 1985, p. 66.

³⁶ Maḥmūd Šabīb, *Bakr Šidqī wa-inqilābuhu al-'ašif*, Manšūrāt al-Maktaba al-'Ilmīya, Dār al-Ġamāhīr li-aṣ-Šihāfa, Baghdad 1992, pp. 88–90.

³⁷ Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq...*, p. 54.

Having formed the cabinet, Yāsīn al-Hāšimī was confronted with the enormous task of fulfilling the generous promises made to his supporters. A first step in this direction was to dissolve the *National Brotherhood Party*, on 29 April 1935.³⁸ Consequently, in the general elections of 4 August 1935 he ensured that many of the tribal shaykhs entered the Chamber of Deputies, which had swollen from 88 to 108 members.³⁹ However, this would not prevent opposition to conscription (often a convenient rallying point for other grievances) from appearing in the provinces. Newspapers supporting the prime minister began to suggest that Iraq was facing a crisis of national identity that was undermining the country's ability to act in unison to solve its problems. They advocated a national consensus based on Arab and Islamic traditions, which, they claimed, must come before "social reform", an obvious reference to left-wing ideologies.⁴⁰ Unity would require discipline, not only of individuals but also of parliament and the press. The army was extremely nationalist and contained officers who believed that a strong military regime in Iraq was necessary to eliminate foreign control, to establish pan-Arab solidarity and to help sister Arab countries against imperialist domination.⁴¹ The premier had at hand a project which would increase the size of the army to four divisions and this project was successfully realised within three years.⁴²

Despite the intention to govern justly,⁴³ Yāsīn al-Hāšimī began clamping down on open political activity and concentrating power in his own hands. Freedom of association was curtailed, and the intelligence network seemed to grow with the passing months. The network's efforts were directed mainly at the left-wing Al-Ahālī group, which constituted the major remaining opposition to the government. Advocacy of social and economic reform roused the suspicions of many who saw the group as a front for the spread of communism. In fact, the communists of Iraq were taking a different road. In May 1935 the first central committee of the *Iraqi Communist Party* was formed, but by the end of the year many of its members had been arrested and its newspaper closed down.⁴⁴ This did not prevent the charge of communism being levelled at the Al-Ahālī group, suggesting a threat both to the existing social order and to Islam, whether Sunnī or Šī'ī. These fears allowed Arab nationalists to take over the Baghdad Club in 1935,⁴⁵ playing also upon Al-Ahālī group's apparent indifference to Arab nationalism and to the various Arab causes such as Palestine, which were receiving growing attention in Iraq. In these circumstances, the group began to organise itself more systematically forming a central

³⁸ A l-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'irāqīya*. Vol. 4, pp. 102–103.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 132; Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950...*, p. 244.

⁴⁰ Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, p. 67.

⁴¹ Edith Penrose, and E.F. Penrose, *Iraq: International Relations and National Development*, Ernest Benn Limited, London 1978, p. 87.

⁴² Karol Sorby, Jr., *Britsko-iracká vojna roku 1941*, „Vojenská história“, No 3/2008, p. 90.

⁴³ A l-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ...*, Vol. 4, p. 83.

⁴⁴ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes...*, pp. 436–438.

⁴⁵ Walter Z. Laquer, *Communism and Nationalism in the Middle East*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1957, pp. 176–178.

committee that included Ġa'far Abū at-Timman, Kāmil al-Ġādirċī and Ḥikmat Sulaymān.⁴⁶ However, there was no attempt to create a mass movement and its sympathisers came largely from the political and administrative elites, including the officer corps.

A totalitarian form of government seemed to offer a more effective means of unifying fragmented countries and modernizing backward societies than did constitutional democracy and the free enterprise system. More rapid development, political unity, and greater social discipline were desirable of this school of thought. If the government of Yāsīn al-Hāšimī had been strong in the arena of nationalist politics, it was liable to criticism on both social and political grounds. Its economic measures had benefited the newly emerging oligarchy, while the government failed to undertake any basic social reforms. Here the links between Ḥikmat Sulaymān and General Bakr Ṣidqī were to be decisive in shaping the political role of the group, leading to the coup d'état of October 1936 and the overthrow of the government of Yāsīn al-Hāšimī.⁴⁷ In appearing to set himself up as dictator, Yāsīn al-Hāšimī alienated many, including the king. More dangerously, he also alienated General Bakr Ṣidqī, who suspected that the prime minister's brother, Ṭahā al-Hāšimī, chief of the general staff, was blocking his own promotion. Personal frustration and resentment at this lack of recognition led Bakr Ṣidqī to listen sympathetically to Ḥikmat Sulaymān's plans for the toppling of Yāsīn al-Hāšimī's government.⁴⁸ Before the situation could worsen, one alienated member of the establishment, Ḥikmat Sulaymān, in collusion with Bakr Ṣidqī and a new group of left-wing reformers, decided to act.

In the middle of October 1936, Ṭahā al-Hāšimī left Iraq on a visit to Turkey, appointing Bakr Ṣidqī acting chief of the general staff in his place. In collusion with Ḥikmat Sulaymān and the forewarned leaders of the Al-Aḥālī group, Bakr Ṣidqī ordered units under his command to march on Baghdad.⁴⁹ This coup, which is named after Bakr Ṣidqī, was not initially the work of the general but of Ḥikmat Sulaymān, who clearly took the initiative and whose motives were partly personal and partly idealistic. This conspiracy was more carefully planned and therefore left out the unruly tribes and involved the army. The air force heightened the drama by dropping a number of bombs near the prime minister's office, hastening Yāsīn al-Hāšimī's decision to resign.⁵⁰ On the same day the king called on Ḥikmat Sulaymān to form a government. Ġa'far al-'Askarī, the minister of defence, tried to take a message from the king to Bakr Ṣidqī, requesting that the army stop its march on Baghdad, but Bakr Ṣidqī believed this was part of a ploy to crush the coup and

⁴⁶ 'Abd ar-Razzāq ad-Darrāğī, *Ġa'far Abū at-Timman wa-dawruhu fī al-ḥaraka al-waṭanīya fī al-'Irāq, 1908–1945*, Dār al-Ḥurrīya li-aṭ-Tibā'a, Baghdad 1978, p. 403.

⁴⁷ Farağ, *Al-Malik Ghāzī*..., p. 134.

⁴⁸ Šabīb, *Bakr Ṣidqī*..., pp. 103–104.

⁴⁹ FO 371/20014-05434 Archibald Clark Kerr to Mr. Eden, 2 November 1936. Detailed report of the situation given by the British Ambassador to Baghdad Sir Archibald Clark Kerr.

⁵⁰ The following day (30 October), Yāsīn al-Hāšimī, Nūrī as-Sa'īd, and Rašīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī were informed that the new government would be unable to guarantee their safety if they remained in the country. Nūrī as-Sa'īd left for Egypt and Rašīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī and Yāsīn al-Hāšimī for Beirut, followed by a number of supporters. Yāsīn al-Hāšimī died in exile of a heart attack on 21 January 1937; but Nūrī as-Sa'īd, and Rašīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī returned later to play a pivotal role in their country's political life.

ordered his officers to intercept and kill Ġa'far al-'Askarī.⁵¹ The murder was promptly carried out, thereby earning Bakr Šidqī the enmity not only of Ġa'far al-'Askarī's political associates, but also of a large number of officers who had entered the armed forces under Ġa'far al-'Askarī's patronage.⁵²

Ḥikmat Sulaymān (of a Turkish family domiciled in Mesopotamia) formed his new administration principally from his associates in the al-Ahālī group, leading to a cabinet that included a higher proportion of Šī'ī ministers than had any previous administration.⁵³ Bakr Šidqī (born in Kurdistan to a Turkish family), now chief of the general staff, busied himself consolidating his personal power base in the armed forces. Like Ḥikmat Sulaymān himself, he wanted to encourage closer links with Iran and in particular with Turkey. Two of the cabinet's members were Šī'ī, and the ministers from the Al-Ahālī group were interested in internal reform, not Arab nationalism.⁵⁴ It was associated with the attempt to create a sense of Iraqi national identity, free from the hegemony of the predominantly Sunnī Arab nationalists, and struck a chord among many Iraqis: Arab and non-Arab. However, its neglect of the Arab nationalist cause was soon to cause it considerable trouble: it generated hostility among the Arab nationalists who felt that Iraq was being cheated of the role it should be playing in the wider Arab world. This was particularly the case at a time when the Arab revolt in Palestine was a burning issue for the Arab nationalists in Iraq and elsewhere.⁵⁵

The coup was a major turning point in Iraqi history. It made a critical breach in the constitution, already weakened by the leaders of the *National Brotherhood Party*, and opened the door to military involvement in politics. The army had tasted power, and it gradually came to control political affairs. The most important effect of the coup was the removal of the leading politicians of the previous regime from Iraq.⁵⁶ For politicians such as Ḥikmat Sulaymān, who had little sympathy with the pan-Arab sentiments and ambitions of most of the ruling elite, there were also other reasons for looking elsewhere in shaping a distinctively Iraqi foreign policy. The emergence of Iraq as a territorial state demanded that attention be paid to its boundaries and to its powerful neighbours. Two pressing questions in particular faced any Iraqi government seeking to secure Iraqi state interests. The first concerned the issue of Šaṭṭ al-'Arab, a waterway which constituted

⁵¹ 'Alā Ġasim Muḥammad, *Ġa'far al-'Askarī wa-dawruhu as-siyāsī wa-al-'askarī fī tāriḥ al-'Irāq ḥattā 'ām 1936*, Maktabat al-Yaqza al-'Arabīya, Baghdad 1987, pp. 196–200.

⁵² FO/371-20014 FO to Baghdad, 5 November 1936. Sir L. Oliphant – Record of conversation with Sir Francis Humphreys on the subject of the situation in Iraq.

⁵³ The government was formed on 29 October 1936. It comprised of Nāḡī al-Ašīl at Foreign Affairs, General 'Abd al-Laṭīf Nūrī at Defence, Ġa'far Abū at-Timman at Finance, Kāmīl al-Čādirčī at Economy and Transport, Šāliḥ Čabr at Justice, Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn Ibrāhīm at Education, in: Al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., Vol. 4, p. 230.

⁵⁴ Ad-Darrāğī, op. cit., pp. 428–432.

⁵⁵ 'Imād Aḥmad al-Ġawāhīrī, *Nādī al-Muṭannā wa-wuḡhāt at-tağammu' al-qawmī fī al-'Irāq, 1934–1942*, Al-Maktaba al-Waṭāniya, Baghdad 1984.

⁵⁶ Marr, op. cit., p. 72.

the frontier between Iran and Iraq.⁵⁷ The second question revolved around the Kurdish question. The cabinet of Hikmat Sulaymān made some concessions which resulted in the Iran Iraq Frontier Treaty of July 1937. This treaty cleared the way for the establishment of the Sa'dābād Pact,⁵⁸ bringing together Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan in an alliance aimed ostensibly at countering Soviet penetration of the area.

The new government began its work amidst considerable popular support, but this could not for long mask the ultimate incompatibility of its two major components. Authoritarian by training and outlook, Bakr Šidqī was determined to make the army the main vehicle of power within the state whereas the liberal democratic reformers were bent on changing the social structure of the country.⁵⁹ These differences, disguised in the common desire to overthrow the previous regime and temporarily reconciled through the personality of Hikmat Sulaymān soon generated conflict. Initially, the reformers appeared to be strong; they organized a society called the *Popular Reform League* (*Ġam'īyat al-Iṣlāḥ aš-Ša'bī*) and they called for greater democracy, land reform, the legalisation of trades unions, the introduction of progressive income tax and inheritance tax, as well as a minimum wage and a maximum working day. It was, in short, a bold attack on privilege.⁶⁰

However, this prospect alarmed many. Hikmat Sulaymān and the left grossly underestimated the strength of two other political forces in the country – the Arab nationalists and the conservative landowners. The general elections of February 1937 produced a parliament in which the reformists were greatly outnumbered by the combination of conservatives, nationalists and tribal landlord-shaykhs who saw the spectre of communism behind the *Popular Reform League* and were unhappy over the Turkish orientation of the cabinet and its lack of interest in Arab affairs. Most important of all was opposition from Bakr Šidqī and his supporters in the army. On 17 March, Bakr Šidqī publicly denounced communism and sealed the fate of the entire Al-Ahālī group. For the reformists, this was the last straw and on 6 June 1937 four ministers resigned.⁶¹ They criticised the government for its lack of commitment to genuine reform and condemned Hikmat Sulaymān for his secrecy and for the nepotism and favouritism which he condoned. Shortly thereafter, the anti-reformist forces started a campaign against

⁵⁷ As far as the Šaṭṭ al-ʿArab issue was concerned, the Treaty of Erzurum of 1847, the Constantinople Protocol of 1913 and the Delimitation Commission of 1914 had established Ottoman control over the whole of the waterway up to the Persian shore. This was the frontier which Iraq had inherited. In 1932 Iran challenged this delimitation and demanded a revision of the Iran Iraq boundary to the Thalweg (median line of the deepest channel). Iraq rejected this demand.

⁵⁸ Treaty of Non-aggression (Sa'dabad Pact): Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Turkey, 8 July 1937. In: J.C. Hurevitz, *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East. A Documentary Record. Vol II, 1914–1956*, D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., Princeton, New Jersey 1956, pp. 214–216.

⁵⁹ Kāmil al-Čādirčī, *Muḏakkirāt Kāmil al-Čādirčī wa-tārīkh al-Hizb al-Waṭanī ad-Dīmuqrāṭī*, Dār at-Ṭalī'a, Beirut 1970, pp. 42–44.

⁶⁰ Al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ...*, Vol. 4, pp. 287–289.

⁶¹ They were Ġa'far Abū at-Timman, Kāmil al-Čādirčī, Yūsuf 'Izz ad-Dīn Ibrāhīm and Šālīḥ Ġabr. In: *Ad-Darrāğī*, op. cit., pp. 467–47; Al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., Vol. 4, pp. 317–320.

the left and accomplished the abolition of the *Popular Reform League* and the leading members were either banished from the country or persecuted and disgraced.⁶²

Opposition to Bakr Šidqī and the policy of the cabinet had been growing, chiefly among the Arab nationalist in the officer corps and Arab nationalist politicians. These sentiments led to a plot in the officer corps to assassinate Bakr Šidqī; the nationalists in the army could count on the support of other groups.⁶³ The opportunity presented itself in August 1937 when Bakr Šidqī stopped in Mošul on his way to Turkey. He was shot, together with his close associate Lt. Colonel Muḥammad ‘Alī Ġawād, the commander of the Iraqi air force, at Mošul airfield by a group of nationalist officers under Colonel Fahmī Sa‘īd.⁶⁴ After the resignation of the reformist ministers and with the general discontent of the Arab nationalists, Hikmat Sulaymān and his regime was put in a critical position. General Amīn al-‘Umarī, the military commander of Mosul with pan-Arab views, assumed control of the town. Two days later with the support of the commanders on Kirkuk and Baghdad, he presented the government with a list of demands. Realising the impossibility of fulfilling this ultimatum, on 17 August 1937 the premier tendered his resignation to the king,⁶⁵ who on the same day requested Ġamīl al-Midfa‘ī to form a new government.

The Bakr Šidqī coup, the collapse of the coalition government and Hikmat Sulaymān’s fall from power had far-reaching results. One was to remove the left from power. The attempt to introduce social reform by an alliance with the army had failed. The ascent of the left to power was premature; they were too few in number to command public support, and their ideas were too new to have put down roots in Iraqi society. With the weakening of the left, power gravitated into the hands of the conservative and nationalist elements at a critical time. Their position was strengthened by the seeming success of totalitarian regimes in Europe and their propaganda, and by the rising tide of anti-British feeling in the wake of the Palestine resistance movement of the late 1930s.

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In the two years before the outbreak of the Second World War, several distinct lines developed in Iraqi politics. One was the increased intrusion of the army in politics and the continued erosion of the constitutional system established by the British. Parliament had been brutally manipulated by the traditional politicians and the British, although meddling of the military in politics was to prove even more damaging. Another line was the tendency of the politicians – especially Nūrī as-Sa‘īd – to conduct business as usual, pursuing their own power struggles and neglecting pressing social issues. The assassination of Bakr Šidqī marked the collapse of the Bakr Šidqī – Hikmat Sulaymān

⁶² Al-Ġādirċī, op. cit., pp. 42–44; Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*..., p. 117.

⁶³ Al-Ḥaṭṭāb, *Ta’sīs al-ġayš al-‘irāqī*..., pp. 183–184.

⁶⁴ Faḍil Barrāk, *Dawr al-ġayš al-‘irāqī fī ḥukūmat ad-difā’ al-waṭanī, wa-al-ḥarb ma’a Britāniyā ‘ām 1941*, Ad-Dār al-‘Arabiya, Baghdad 1987, p. 195.

⁶⁵ Al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-‘irāqīya*. Vol. 4, pp. 358–359.

axis and the end of Iraq's first coup government.⁶⁶ Most important of the developments was the re-emergence of the Palestine problem. The shadow of Palestine fell heavily on Iraq: Zionism and the threatened partition of Palestine had long been the concern not only of the government and the politicians but also of a fair proportion of the urban public at large.⁶⁷ All this resulted in the intensification of anti-British and Arab nationalist sentiment, especially among key groups such as the students, the intelligentsia and the officer corps.

The military coups represented a successful, even if short-lived, break by the armed segment of the middle class into the narrow circle of the ruling elite. The coups were carried out on the initiative of a small number of individuals, and could be explained both by personal motives and by the intrigues of ambitious politicians. The superior weight of the pan-Arab trend was partly the consequence of the fact that a large number of younger officers hailed from the northern provinces, which leaned strongly towards pan-Arabism. The emergence of the seven senior officers of the "military bloc" or the "circle of seven" (*al-kutla al-'askariyya*)⁶⁸ who had conspired to kill Bakr Ṣidqī and who had caused the collapse of Ḥikmat Sulaymān's government introduced an era in Iraqi politics during which civilian politicians held office only with the consent of these men. Politics as usual continued in the face of the threatening international situation brought about by the onset of World War II. The intertwining of these three lines gradually drew the young officers further into politics, intensified their pan-Arab feelings, isolated the pro-British politicians, and eventually precipitated the crisis of 1941.

During the two years following the downfall of Ḥikmat Sulaymān's cabinet, the men and the policies that had previously governed Iraq gradually returned, but not without a protracted struggle. When Ḡamīl al-Midfa'ī was asked to form a government, he accepted only once he knew that he had the approval of the rebellious officers. Ḡamīl al-Midfa'ī's conciliatory policies were well known: he tried to pursue a policy of healing old wounds, and of "dropping the curtain" on the past.⁶⁹ The Chamber of Deputies was dissolved on 26 August, elections were held on 18 December and on 23 December 1937 a new parliament assembled, but its composition had changed little save for the disappearance of Bakr Ṣidqī's nominees and of the reformists associated with the radical wing of the Al-Aḥālī group.⁷⁰ However, the premier's internal policy, backed by the moderates and the king, did not satisfy Nūrī as-Sa'īd, who began to agitate for the punishment of Ḥikmat Sulaymān and his supporters. However, he was aware that without support of the Arab nationalist officers, he could not attain his goal. Therefore he charged his son Ṣabāḥ with the task of seeking their cooperation. Thanks to the intervention of Ṣalāḥ

⁶⁶ Ismā'īl Aḥmad Yāğī, *Ḥarakat Rašīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī 1941. Dirāsa fī taṭawwūr al-ḥaraka al-waṭaniyya al-'irāqīya*, Dār at-Ṭalī'a, Beirut 1973, p. 25.

⁶⁷ Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950*, p. 272.

⁶⁸ Ḥusayn Fawzī, Amīn al-'Umarī, Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāğ, Maḥmūd Salmān, Kāmil Ṣabīb, 'Azīz Yāmulkī and Muḥammad Fahmī Sa'īd, in: As-Sayyid 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, *Al-Asrār al-ḥafīya fī ḥarakat as-sana 1941 at-taḥarrurīya*, Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub, Beirut 1976, p. 12.

⁶⁹ Al-Ḥasanī, *Al-Asrār...*, p. 23.

⁷⁰ Al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'irāqīya*. Vol. 5, pp. 20–21.

ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāğ and Fahmī Sa‘īd, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd obtained Ġamīl al-Midfā‘ī’s permission to return to Iraq.⁷¹

The members of “circle of seven” all were known for their sympathy with pan-Arabism and they would intervene periodically when the question of the attitude of the government towards pan-Arabism came to the fore.⁷² These officers, all Sunnī Arab by origin, tended to share a predominantly pan-Arab view of Iraq’s identity and destiny, giving them an ambivalent attitude towards the state of Iraq itself. However, they were officers in the armed forces of the Iraqi state which, even if still tied to Great Britain in various resented ways, was formally independent. It was thus a regime of power capable both of shaping and disciplining its own society and of playing a leading role on the larger stage of the Arab world. These were the themes dominating the years during which this “military bloc” was in the ascendant and was able to contribute greatly in removing the Ġamīl al-Midfā‘ī cabinet.⁷³ The rest of Iraq’s population, its communities, hierarchies and social formations, recognised the power of these men, their command of coercive force and their capacity to dispense favours. They formed the necessary background for the officers’ exercise of power, but the latter had little interest in and no incentive to reform or reconstruct the *status quo*.⁷⁴

When Ġamīl al-Midfā‘ī consistently refused to take action, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd, now joined by Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī and Rustum Ḥaydar, in accordance with the charter of the *Arab Independence Party* (Ḥizb al-Istiqlāl al-‘Arabī) secretly collaborated with the Arab nationalist officers to end Ġamīl al-Midfā‘ī’s cabinet and seize power.⁷⁵ Ġamīl al-Midfā‘ī initially tried to placate the “circle of seven” by giving them senior posts. However, they did not trust him and there were always plenty of politicians eager to exploit that mistrust. The decisive power now lay with the officers, and the members of the “circle of seven” bore with indignation when on 31 October 1938 the prime minister gave up the post of minister of defence in favour of Colonel Ṣabīḥ Nağīb al-‘Izzī, whose tactless and arrogant attitude towards high-ranking officers was well-known, instead of Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī.⁷⁶ Matters came to a head two months later, when Ṣabīḥ Nağīb deprived the chief of the general staff of much of his powers and took steps to retire or transfer the Arab nationalist officers (the Four Colonels) and thus end their influence in politics.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Su‘ād Ra‘ūf Ṣūr Muḥammad, *Nūrī as-Sa‘īd wa-dawruhu fī as-siyāsa al-‘irāqīya, 1932–1945*, Dār aṣ-Ṣu‘ūn at-Taqaḥḥīya al-‘Āmma, Baghdad 1988, p. 39.

⁷² Muhammad Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics: a Case Study of Iraq to 1941*, KPI, London 1982, p. 150.

⁷³ Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāğ, *Mudhakkirāt aṣ-ṣaḥīd al-‘aqtā ar-ruqn Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāğ. Fursān al-‘urūba fī al-‘Irāq*, Aṣ-Ṣabāb al-‘Arabī, Damascus 1956, p. 70.

⁷⁴ Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, p. 96.

⁷⁵ Yāğī, *Ḥarakat Rašīd ‘Ālī al-Kaylānī 1941*, p. 27.

⁷⁶ Barrāk, *Dawr al-ğayṣ...*, p. 173.

⁷⁷ Maḥmūd ad-Durra, *Al-Ḥarb al-‘irāqīya al-briṭānīya 1941*, Dār at-Ṭalī’a, Beirut 1969, p. 93; Aṣ-Ṣabbāğ, *Fursān...*, p. 69.

This was probable the main reason why the government fell.⁷⁸ On 24 December, while considerable forces were concentrated at Ar-Rašīd camp in the outskirts of Baghdad, the officers insisted on the resignation of the cabinet on the grounds that the army no longer had confidence in it.⁷⁹ The prime minister was informed that a coup d'état was in the offing. The chief of the general staff then told the king that the army had lost confidence in the government and that either Nūrī as-Sa'īd or Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī (both had been busy cultivating the "circle of seven") should be asked to form a new cabinet. When Ğamīl al-Midfā'ī called Nūrī as-Sa'īd, the latter made it clear that he fully supported the officers, thereafter Ğamīl al-Midfā'ī's resignation followed the same day, and Nūrī as-Sa'īd became prime minister for the first time since 1932.⁸⁰

Nūrī as-Sa'īd retired the supporters of Ğamīl al-Midfā'ī in the army and held an election, filling parliament with his own supporters. He then attempted to deal with Ḥikmat Sulaymān and his collaborators in the coup. Since he was unable to bring them to trial for the coup because of an amnesty law previously passed by Ḥikmat Sulaymān's government, a new charge had to be found. An alleged plot against the life of the king was "discovered" in March 1939, and Ḥikmat Sulaymān and a number of his group were implicated, brought to trial, and convicted. The evidence convinced no one. Only the intervention of the British ambassador Sir Maurice Peterson got the sentences reduced and saved Ḥikmat Sulaymān's life.⁸¹ This indicates the extent to which Nūrī as-Sa'īd was willing to go for retribution and the degree to which personal feelings were allowed to dominate politics.

When Nūrī as-Sa'īd was asked by the king to form a government, he too found that his power depended largely on his ability to placate the "circle of seven". To some degree he was able to do so because of the views they shared on the importance of the question of Palestine.⁸² In recent years, Nūrī as-Sa'īd had made considerable efforts to establish a role for Iraq – and thus for himself – in Palestine. In 1936, with the outbreak of the general strike organised by the Arab Higher Committee in Palestine, Nūrī as-Sa'īd had made several unsuccessful attempts to mediate first between the Arabs and the Jewish Agency and then between the Higher Committee and the British authorities. His professed hope was to bring all sides together in agreeing to a solution to the Palestine problem within the framework of a larger Arab federation of the Fertile Crescent, led by the Hāšimite dynasty.⁸³ This was an idea that he repeatedly sought to promote, making much-publicised visits to various Arab capitals and suggesting that he held the key to

⁷⁸ Lord Birdwood, *Nuri as-Said. A Study in Arab Leadership*, London, Cassell 1959, p. 163.

⁷⁹ FO 371/23200-05603 Baghdad, Ambassador Sir Maurice Peterson to FO Viscount Halifax, 27 December 1938; Al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-'irāqīya*, Vol. 5, p. 36.

⁸⁰ Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī, *Mudakkirāt Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī, 1919–1943*, Dār at-Ṭalī'a, Beirut 1967, pp. 296–297; Al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., Vol. 5, pp. 54–55.

⁸¹ Al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., Vol. 5, p. 76.

⁸² Petr Přebinda, *Cesta k soudobému Iráku. Núrī as-Sa'īd a dějiny irácké monarchie (1920–1958)*, Montanex, Ostrava 2005, p. 88.

⁸³ Al-Ḥasanī, *Al-Asrār...*, pp. 38–40; Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950*, p. 272.

reconciliation between the British and the Palestinian leader Al-Ḥaġġ Amīn al-Ḥusaynī. This proved not to be the case, but it served to create the impression in Iraq that Nūrī as-Sa'īd, more than any other of the established politicians, was determined to work on behalf of the cause of Palestine. This stood him in good stead with the pan-Arab officers of the Iraqi army. Consequently, when he became prime minister he was careful to pursue these initiatives, personally heading the Iraqi delegation to the London Round Table Conference on Palestine in January 1939, where he tried to bring about agreement between the Palestinian and British sides. He failed, but his commitment won the approval of the “circle of seven” in the armed forces.⁸⁴

Now when Nūrī as-Sa'īd and his supporters were in power, the opposition was taken over by Ġamīl al-Midfa'ī and his followers. There were also those, who supported neither of the two. Therefore it was not surprising that Nūrī as-Sa'īd should harbour a feeling of insecurity which – in his view – could be diminished by installing his “men” in parliament. So his next move was to have parliament dissolved and to set in motion plans for general elections. According to a number of Iraqi authors he had three tasks to solve: 1. to settle the problem of King Ġāzī;⁸⁵ 2. in view of the looming war to put Iraq fully in the service of the British war effort and 3. to contain the nationalist forces within and outside the army by pretending to endeavour to solve the national problems.⁸⁶ Arab nationalist sentiments were hardly new in Iraq, but the end of the mandate and the escalation of the Palestine problem gave them new impetus. The wave of fascist propaganda emanating from some European countries fanned already intense anti-British feeling. These sentiments, although shared by some of the older politicians, had their firmest roots among the younger generation raised under the British mandate and now coming into their own. Nationalist clubs like al-Muthannā (named after a seventh-century Arab hero) and Al-Ġawwāl al-'Arabī (the Arab Scout) appeared in schools and colleges in addition to the government sponsored Al-Futuwwa program.⁸⁷

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General Nūrī as-Sa'īd was struggling with his opponents for his political survival with every possible means with tacit British support. And in this tense situation another incident occurred which had far-reaching effects on the internal politics of the country. This was the sudden and unexpected death of King Ġāzī. According to the official communiqué, King Ġāzī was on his way from Zuhūr Palace to Ḥārīṭīya Palace on the late evening of

⁸⁴ Michael Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict and the History of Modern Iraq*, F. Cass, London 1994, pp. 30–79.

⁸⁵ FO/371-20017-2067 from J.G. Ward to FO Eastern Department, 20 July 1936. The British Embassy already in 1936 considered King Ġāzī too weak and was looking for a possible candidate to replace him.

⁸⁶ Maḥmūd Šabīb, *Asrār 'irāqīya fī waṭā'iq inklīzīya wa-'arabīya wa-almānīya, 1918–1941*, Al-Maktaba al-Waṭanīya, Baghdad 1977, p. 103; Raġā' Ḥusayn al-Ḥaṭṭāb, *Al-Mas'ūliya at-tārīḥīya fī maqāt al-malik Ġāzī*, Maktabat Āfāq'Arabīya, Baghdad 1985, p. 49; Faraġ, *Al-Malik Ġāzī wa-dawruhu...*, pp. 263–264.

⁸⁷ Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton University Press 2003, pp. 77–78.

4 April 1939 when he drove his car at excessive speed into an electric pole. He died shortly afterwards of a fractured skull. Although the investigations were very perfunctory, the police report stated that “it has been proved that the crash was purely accidental”. The case was therefore closed on the advice of highest authorities “as there was no suspicion of a criminal act”.⁸⁸ This official version of the king’s death has always been treated as suspect by Iraqis and particularly by the nationalists, who have claimed that Nūrī as-Sa’īd and the British had hatched and accomplished this treacherous murder.⁸⁹

King Ġāzī’s death created a serious political vacuum at the centre of power, providing an opportunity for the establishment to recoup some of its losses by installing one of its supporters. The candidacy of Amīr ‘Abd al-Ilāh to the Regency became the subject of controversy among leading politicians. Some of them supported the candidacy of Amīr Zayd, uncle of the late king and half brother of Fayṣal I, an older man with some experience who was married to a Turkish woman. He was rejected, according to some, because of his liberal social behaviour and because his Turkish leanings were viewed with suspicion by the Arab politicians;⁹⁰ according to others, he was rejected as too independent to be malleable.⁹¹ Nūrī as-Sa’īd and the leading army officers, with whom Amīr ‘Abd al-Ilāh had recently developed friendly relations through Maḥmūd Salmān, insisted on his candidacy.

The immediate political consequence of Ġāzī’s death was the necessity to appoint a regent since his son, was only four years old. On 5 April, early in the morning the Council of Ministers met at Zuhūr Palace and passed the following resolutions: 1. to proclaim His Royal Highness Amīr Fayṣal as His Majesty King Fayṣal II, in accordance with Article 20 of the constitution;⁹² 2. to proclaim His Royal Highness Amīr ‘Abd al-Ilāh regent, in view of the fact that His Majesty the King had not come of age; and 3. to convene parliament, in order to approve the proclamation of regency in accordance with article 22 of the constitution.⁹³ The British were in a dire need for a loyal figure as a head of state, the choice (as a part of the same complot) fell on Prince ‘Abd al-Ilāh, the 26-year-old son of ex-king ‘Alī Ibn al-Ḥusayn of Al-Ḥiğāz and brother of Queen ‘Āliya, mother of Fayṣal II. Amīr ‘Abd al-Ilāh was proclaimed regent on the alleged contention of the Queen and Princess Rāḡiḡa, King Ġāzī’s sister before the Council of Ministers, that this had been the wish of the late King. However, it was commonly known that Ġāzī was forced into a political marriage and his relation with the queen was rather

⁸⁸ Text of the “Report of the Baghdad West Investigating Magistrate”, “Iraq Times”, 6 April 1939. Cit. in: Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, p. 140.

⁸⁹ Al-Ḥaṭṭāb, *Al-Mas’ūliya...*, p. 49.

⁹⁰ Aṣ-Ṣabbāḡ, *Fursān al-‘urūba fī al-‘Irāq*, p. 82.

⁹¹ Al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīkh al-wizārat al-‘irāqiya*. Vol. 5, p. 82.

⁹² Art. 20 states: The heir apparent shall be the eldest son of the King, in direct line, in accordance with the provision of the law of succession (text of the article before the Second Amendment of 1942). Cit. in: Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, p. 140.

⁹³ Az-Zubaydī, *Al-Malik Ġāzī wa murāfiqūhu*, pp. 286–289.

formal. As he resented his cousin and brother-in-law, ‘Abd al-Ilāh, he would never have suggest him for the regency.⁹⁴

There is little doubt that Ġāzī’s death came as a relief to the British and strengthened Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s hand still further. Always in tune with the younger army officers, the young Ġāzī had become an outspoken advocate of anti-British and nationalist sentiment. German and Italian propaganda made their contributions to this state of mind of the Iraqis, the German minister in Baghdad, Dr. Fritz Grobba, doing much to promote pro-Axis feelings in the country.⁹⁵ Political sympathies linked the king to his generation among the Sunnī Arab elite of Iraq. He resented the continued British influence, but in a rather unfocused way, since the question of that influence was not the burning issue of Iraqi domestic politics by the time he came to the throne. In 1937 he had begun broadcasting from a private radio station in his palace, violently denouncing French rule in Syria and Zionist claims in Palestine, and attacking British influence in the Gulf.⁹⁶ He was associated with the first serious public airing of the Iraqi claim to sovereignty over Kuwait.

Like that of his father, King Ġāzī’s death dealt a serious blow to Iraq’s fragile centre of power. Though of limited effective power, the monarchy provided a balancing, at times crucial, instrument for the country’s political structure. A swift containment of the country’s “imbalance” required a vision, a charisma and a determination that King Ġāzī’s effective successor, ‘Abdalilāh had been lacking.⁹⁷ At the time of Ġāzī’s death, ‘Abdalilāh was not popular, but he was known to be pro-British, and he had good relations with Nūrī as-Sa‘īd, Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī, and the officers who supported him. He was also young at 26 and for that reason, the politicians probably felt that they could control him. As events were to prove, ‘Abdalilāh’s appointment changed the delicate balance between the palace, the officer corps, the civilian political elite and the British. ‘Abdalilāh differed from his late brother-in-law in that he was grateful to the British and was ready to fulfil their instructions. He considered the alliance with Great Britain the main guarantee for the Hāšimite dynasty. Even Anthony Eden admitted that “while he (the regent) is not a very strong character ... there can be no question of his loyalty”.⁹⁸ This meant that he

⁹⁴ Nağm ad-Dīn as-Sahrawardī, *At-Tārīḥ lam yabda’ ġadan*, Šarikat al-Ma’rifa li-an-Našr wa-at-ṭawzī’, Baghdad 1989, pp. 11–13; Ṭāriq an-Nāširī, ‘*Abd al-Ilāh al-waṣīy ‘alā ‘arš al-‘Irāq, 1939–1958. Ḥayātuhu wa-dawruhu as-siyāsī*’, Dār as-Šu‘ūn at-Taqāfiya al-‘Āmma, Baghdad 1990, pp. 23–24; Az-Zubaydī, op. cit., pp. 193–194.

⁹⁵ George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, Cornell University Press, New York 1957, p. 246.

⁹⁶ “King Ghāzī’s total irresponsibility”, writes Sir Maurice Peterson, “became accentuated under the new regime. In particular his private broadcasting station in the Palace, which had long been a source of anxiety, became more and more mischievous in tone, especially towards the Sheikh of Koweit, Iraq’s next-door neighbour at the head of the Persian Gulf and a ruler who stood in close relation to the British Government. The line taken by the broadcast was that the Sheikh was an out-of-date feudal despot whose backward rule contrasted with the enlightened regime existing in Iraq. Koweit, it was implied, would be much better off merged with her northern neighbour”, in: Maurice Peterson, *Both Sides of the Curtain*, Constable, London 1950, p. 150.

⁹⁷ Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics*, p. 159.

⁹⁸ Cit. in: ibid., p. 159.

had little in common with the Arab nationalist army officers whom he tended to regard as social upstarts, unworthy of his cultivation.

The death of King Ġāzī was felt to be a national calamity, since he was regarded as a popular hero by the Arab nationalists and the rank and file of the people. His personal relations with certain influential army officers were intimate, and his outspoken political pronouncements gave great satisfaction both to the army and the nationalists. His sudden death was a mystery to the great majority of the people, especially in the absence of a clear official announcement immediately afterwards. It therefore took Iraq by surprise and gave rise to speculations and rumours which spread like wildfire throughout the country that the accident was due to a secret British plot or to a combined foreign and internal political intrigue.⁹⁹ Arab nationalist and anti-British sentiment was sweeping Iraq.

⁹⁹ Different versions as to the possibility of the assassination of King Ġāzī, see: A ṣ - Ṣ a b b ā ġ, *Fursān...*, pp. 80–97.