

Red star over Iraq: Iraqi Communism before Saddam, by Johan Franzén, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, x + 276 pp., \$60.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-231-70230-0

A startlingly sympathetic whirlwind account of the dramatic rise and fall of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), this book is a remarkable credit to the author's diligent perseverance in investigating what must be one the great 'what-ifs' of modern Arab history. *Red star over Iraq* charts the history of the ICP between 1934 and 1979, when Saddam Hussein crushed it. The ICP developed from a nascent satellite Communist Party 'established with the help of the Communist International [Comintern] in Moscow' (p. 1) into a genuine mass party – perhaps the largest popular Communist organization inside the Arab world.

Dr Franzén demonstrates an intricate and deeply nuanced knowledge of the full spectrum of both Marxism and the ICP's conceptualization of this ideology. He explores the incongruous theoretical ambiguities and asks how much this was a genuinely 'revolutionary' party. It should be noted that the ICP was one of the few Iraqi political groups to have substantial membership from all Iraqi communities, including minorities – Arabs, Kurds and Turkomen, Sunni and Shi'a, Christians from various local denominations, urban and rural workers, and – in the 1930s at least – even some local Jews. Iraqi Communists were essentially part of a new wave of secular-educated urban intelligentsia, often drawn from the lower ranks of the middle classes rather than either the existing social elite or the proletarian masses. Initially, they were drawn together by a common dislike of imperialism. Marxist ideology created a unique if surreal and unlikely bond. Curiously, having briefly introduced and explained the concept of *'aṣabiyya* (group solidarity) in relation to the pre-secular power-politics of the region before 1920, Franzén fails to relate this to the ICP's success. It would certainly explain the unique ability of the ICP to surmount the serious ethnic and sectarian differences that have crippled Iraqi politics over the past 90 years. Communism, based on entirely foreign political conceptualizations taken from nineteenth-century Europe, evidently provided a surprisingly tenacious glue of intellectual and social unity, enabling the party to hold out against otherwise strong centrifugal forces.

Paradoxically, it was the relative success and popularity of the ICP throughout the 1950s and 1960s that led to its demise. Other factions, most obviously the Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party, imitated their tactics and adopted some of their policies without any of their ideological, intellectual or ethical restraints. 'The Iraqi Ba'ath Party not only copied the organisational set-up of the ICP but also sought to emulate most other aspects of the successful approach of the communists' (p. 247). Ultimately the ICP failed because of its own 'rigid socio-political analysis of Iraqi society' (p. 95), which led to the wrong conclusions regarding the Ba'ath Party. Later in the 1980s, ICP survivors in exile would berate the Ba'ath Party for failing to adhere to the historical imperatives of the Communist ideological and theoretical framework.

This is a most interesting book. However, there are some omissions. Maps would have been helpful. There is little discussion of the diversity of Iraqi society or the evolution of ICP secularism. When the author talks about young Iraqi intellectuals meeting in coffee houses in the 1920s, he does not mention that initially one of the earliest gathering places was in fact Baghdad's Haidarkhanah Mosque. Why and how did that change? Furthermore, he glosses over Soviet connections without fully explaining how the USSR exerted or developed its influence in Iraq. What of the Soviet Embassy there? Or their Secret Services? How exactly did the Kurdish nationalist Mullah Barzani end up in exile in Soviet Russia? The otherwise excellent bibliography, moreover, is revealingly lacking in any Russian literature. Too many points are simply left unexplained. However, although flawed in some

respects, this book is an extremely enjoyable read, and there are some wonderfully bold assertions that make it a sheer delight: 'The Iraqi Communist Party stands out as arguably the most important political organisation in the Middle East never to have attained state power' (p. 245). The illusory intellectual myopia of the ICP is well presented, and the concluding chapter is a simply brilliant overall assessment of the party and its significance and relevance to contemporary Iraq. Ultimately, the ICP was a uniquely interesting (and sometimes successful) exercise and example of secular politics in a religiously diverse society, where Christians and Muslims came together in corporate solidarity for a common ideological cause.