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The Army's Growing Influence in Iraqi Politics (1937–1939)*

Abstract

The fragmented nature of Iraqi society and the divisive factor of British presence played a decisive role in the political development of the state in the late 1930s. Following the coup d'état army officers were firmly recognized as a political force to be reckoned with, and no Iraqi government could come or go without the consent of army leaders. The four most influential officers known as the "Golden Square" were commanders of the key divisions of the Iraqi army who stayed at the top of the political pyramid until May 1941. However, the army played a controversial role. It could prevent the evolution of government in the Western tradition, but it could not itself govern other than as a military dictatorship.

Introduction

Iraq was the first modern Arab state to achieve (formal) independence. It was also the first to experience a military coup d'état. Staff Lt. General Bakr Şidqī, Commander of the 2nd division at Kirkūk was, during the absence of his superior, made acting chief of staff and took advantage of his temporary post to carry out a military coup d'état. He established a precedent to be followed many times in Arab politics. The first military coup d'état, originating from new sources of political power, produced an almost complete change in the operation of the machinery of government. No other incident, since the establishment of the kingdom in 1921, had such far-reaching effects on the internal politics of Iraq.

There is a long tradition of military rule in the Middle East. In the case of Iraq, from the inception of the monarchy there had been a keen interest in organizing a well-disciplined

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national army according to European norms. The Iraqi army, from its establishment in 1921, proved capable of maintaining internal order and stability. After winning formal independence in 1930, the army was no longer sufficient for Iraq's national needs because it was deemed necessary, that the army should be the guardian of the country's independence as well as the instrument for maintaining internal order. From the mid 1920s the Iraqi cabinets sought to introduce compulsory military service, but Great Britain was opposed to conscription. Nonetheless, the Iraqi Government began to prepare a draft of the National Defence Bill, which was eventually passed on 15 January 1934.¹

In August 1933 the Iraqi army dealt with the Assyrian affair so promptly and effectively that, it was considered to have saved the integrity of Iraq and commander of the triumphant forces Bakr Ṣidqī thus emerged as a national hero.² The army's prestige in the national life of Iraq caused various ideological groups to approach the army officers in order to win them over to their side. The most influential group in the army were the Arab nationalist officers (*ad-ḍubbāṭ al-qawmiyyūn*), who had been able to inspire the army with pan-Arab ideas. Inevitably, while giving army officers added importance, the increasing reliance of the government on the armed forces led to a gradual weakening of its control over them. In the circumstances, army officers often discussed the existing political situation in Iraq and they came to the conclusion that the army should rule the country and help to create a strong and stable government. Just as the military regimes in Turkey and Persia were eliminating foreign control and carrying out reforms, so should the army officers in Iraq rule their country in order to eliminate the last vestiges of foreign control, create a stable political machine and finally liberate the sister Arab countries which were still struggling towards freedom and unity.³ The Iraqi 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. Although Iraq was under the reign of the young and inexperienced King Ghāzī (1933–1939) Iraq fell prey to tribal rebellions and military coups, there was nevertheless no essential deviation from the prior trend of royal policy. However, except during the short-lived government of Ḥikmat Sulaymān, where the pan-Arab character of the Iraqi state became more pronounced.

Bakr Ṣidqī, who won his reputation as an able and courageous soldier during the Assyrian affair, had long been watching the internal politics of Iraq with a keen eye. He had the support of both the older and younger army officers and posed as the only soldier who could command the respect of the entire army. Bakr Ṣidqī's ability deeply impressed Ḥikmat Sulaymān and they became intimate friends. They both were inspired by Kemalist Turkey, which had been able to maintain her independence only through the reorganization of her army. A member of a well-known Ottoman family and brother

¹ Raḡā' Ḥusayn al-Ḥattāb, *Ta'sīs al-ḡayš al-'irāqī wa-taṭawwur dawrihi as-siyāsī, 1921–1941*, Baghdad University, Baghdad 1979, p. 115.

² Adeer Dawisha, *Iraq. A Political History from Independence to Occupation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 2009, p. 38.

³ Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958*, Oxford University Press, London, New York, Karachi 1960, p. 78.

of General Maḥmūd Shawkat Pasha, whose march on Istanbul in 1909 had saved the Young Turk regime from extinction, Ḥikmat Sulaymān's fortunes had risen in 1933, when as a leading member of the *Patriotic Brotherhood Party* (Ḥizb al-Iḥā' al-Waṭanī)⁴ he had been made minister of the interior and had distinguished himself in the popular mind by his handling of the Assyrian affair. Yāsīn al-Hāšimī, the leader of the *Patriotic Brotherhood Party* and portrayed as the only man who could "save" the situation was then invited by the king to form a government in March 1935. Because of this, and his role in the conspiracy that had put leaders of the *Patriotic Brotherhood Party* in power, Ḥikmat Sulaymān regarded the ministry of the interior as his by right. Had Yāsīn al-Hāšimī offered him this ministry, it is likely that no coup would have taken place.

In appearing to set himself up as dictator, the premier alienated many, including the king, who became increasingly nervous of Yāsīn al-Hāšimī's ambitions as he allegedly spoke of establishing a republican system in Iraq. More dangerously, he also alienated General Bakr Ṣidqī, who was well aware of the key role he himself played in suppressing provincial dissent and who suspected that the prime minister's brother, Ṭāḥā al-Hāšimī, chief of the general staff (CGS), was blocking his advancement even though he had been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General on 4 May 1936.⁵ 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. When the rift occurred between Ḥikmat Sulaymān and Yāsīn al-Hāšimī after the latter had formed his cabinet in 1935, accordingly Bakr Ṣidqī came to believe that the army's future would depend on Ḥikmat Sulaymān becoming prime minister. He and his followers must have expected compensation if Ḥikmat Sulaymān were helped to come into power. Subsequent events proved that these expectations were justified.

The coup named after Bakr Ṣidqī was not initially the work of the General but of Ḥikmat Sulaymān, a man of excellent ability and generally popular, who shrewdly assessed the strength of the various anti-government forces. He was a Sunnī, like most of the political elite and no statesman felt more impatiently his exclusion from power than he did. He clearly took the initiative and his motives were partly personal and partly idealistic. Although, like Yāsīn al-Hāšimī, he played a prominent part in organizing opposition to 'Alī Ḡawdat al-Ayyūbī's Cabinet in 1935, he was not offered the post he desired in the subsequent government and this may have intensified the feeling of animosity towards the prime minister. He had criticized the nepotism of Yāsīn al-Hāšimī's government, its provocative display of wealth, and the abuses in the distribution of state lands. In Baghdad he was allied with the left wing and he placed himself increasingly in contact with leaders of the army. Ḥikmat Sulaymān was also interested in reform and in more rapid economic and social development, but his model for reform was the paternalistic authoritarianism of Mustafa Kemal. His admiration for the Turkish leader had increased after his visit

⁴ Fritz Grobba, *Irak*, Junker und Dünnhaupt, Berlin 1941, pp. 40–47.

⁵ Maḥmūd Ṣabīb, *Bakr Ṣidqī wa-inqilābuhu al-'ašif*, Manšūrāt al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, Dār al-Ġamahīr li-aṣ-Ṣiḥāfa, Baghdad 1992, p. 90.

to Turkey in 1935, after which he wrote several articles advocating a thoroughgoing secularism and modernization on Turkish lines.⁶ This attitude brought him into close communion with General Bakr Ṣidqī and the army.

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The assassination of Bakr Ṣidqī and the collapse of the coalition coup-government had far-reaching results. The moderate left was removed from power. 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 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. The rhetoric of some leftists caused the Al-Ahālī group⁷ to be regarded as extremist by moderates who might otherwise have acquiesced in their platform, which included necessary educational and land reforms. Had these measures been implemented, they would have provided a corrective to Iraq's social structure early in its development, thus helping to prevent later revolutions and instability. In any event, the reformers were unprepared for their task in terms of organization, ideological cohesion and political experience, and they were in no way a match for the army.⁸ Their lack of contact with the army officers left them in complete ignorance of that group's very different motives and aims. Phebe Marr states that "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".⁹

The army was left divided, while jealousy among the leading army officers induced each faction to support a different set of civilian politicians. However, though divided, the army continued to influence the course of internal politics from behind the scenes and indeed became virtually the sole deciding factor in the rise and fall of almost all cabinets from 1937 to 1941.¹⁰ All these forces contributed to the events of 1941 and the second British occupation of Iraq. Most important of all, the events opened the door to

⁶ Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2009, p. 69.

⁷ The Al-Ahālī group (*Ġamā'at al-Ahālī*) was formed in 1931 by a few enthusiastic young men who were imbued with liberal ideas. Members of the group advocated socialism and democracy. The group had a long way to go before it could claim support from the masses, though its leaders often spoke in the interest of the poor and wretched. In: Muḥammad Ḥadīd, *Mudakkirāt. Aṣ-Ṣirā' min aġli ad-dīmuqrāṭiyya fī al-'Irāq*, Dār as-Ṣāqī, Beirut 2006, pp. 105–109.

⁸ Peter Wein, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism. Authoritarian, Totalitarian and pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932–1941*. Routledge, London 2006, p. 79.

⁹ Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado 1985, p. 76.

¹⁰ Karol R. Sorby, *The Coup d'état of Bakr Ṣidqī in Iraq*, „Oriental Archive“ 2010, No. 1, p. 48.

the misuse of power by the military. The coup of 1936 was followed by a series of less spectacular military interventions, which became the most marked feature of political life in the years between 1936 and 1941.

In the two years before the outbreak of the Second World War, three 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 Şidqī marked the collapse of the Bakr Şidqī – Hikmat Sulaymān axis and the end of Iraq’s first coup government.¹¹ 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.¹² 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 coup of Bakr Şidqī and the “coup government” 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 coup was 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*)¹³ who had conspired to kill Bakr Şidqī and who had caused the collapse of Hikmat 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 young army officers drawn into politics gradually isolated the pro-British politicians, and eventually precipitated the crisis of 1941.

After the assassination of Bakr Şidqī and the downfall of Hikmat Sulaymān’s cabinet it became widely clear within the power elite that Iraq was in need of a moderate cabinet. On 19 August 1937 the king called upon Ğamīl al-Midfa‘ī who enjoyed the support of the

¹¹ Ismā‘īl Aḥmad Yāġī, *Ḥarakat Raşīd ‘Ālī al-Kaylānī 1941. Dirāsa fī taṭawwur al-ḥaraka al-waṭaniyya al-‘irāqīyya*, Dār at-Ṭalī‘a, Beirut 1973, p. 25.

¹² Naġī Şawkat, *Şirat wa-ḍikrayāt. Tāmanīna ‘āman, 1894–1974*, Vol. 1. Maktabat al-Yaqza al-‘Arabiyya, Baghdad 1990, pp. 278–279; Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950. A Political, Social and Economic History*, Oxford University Press and Librairie du Liban, London-Beirut 1968, p. 272.

¹³ They were: Ḥusayn Fawzī, Amīn al-‘Umarī, Şalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Şabbāġ, Maḥmūd Salmān, Kāmīl Şabīb, ‘Azīz Yāmulkī and Muḥammad Fahmī Sa‘īd. In: As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, *Al-asrār al-ḥafīyya fī ḥarakat as-sana 1941 at-taḥarruriyya*, Maṭba‘at Dār al-Kutub, Beirut, 1976, p. 12.

pan-Arab army officers, to form a government. Ğamīl al-Midfā'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.¹⁴ The politicians, who were forced to leave Iraq after the coup, were permitted to return.¹⁵ The murderers of Bakr Şidqī were granted amnesty and no punitive measures were imposed on Hikmat Sulaymān and his associates.¹⁶

Aware of the obvious need for maintaining unity within the armed forces, the premier appointed the members of "circle of seven" to high positions. However, in spite of the government's efforts to silence the officers, and the appointment on 22 August 1937 of Lieutenant General Husayn Fawzī, the least political among them, as Chief of the General Staff (CGS),¹⁷ the army remained a source of intrigue and it would intervene periodically when the question of the attitude of the government towards pan-Arabism came to the fore.¹⁸ This was not simply a question of foreign policy, even though it often came to a head over specific foreign policy issues. It was more a question of their vision of Iraq's identity which they felt it was the duty of any government to preserve.

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.¹⁹ 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 Ğamīl al-Midfā'ī cabinet.²⁰ The government's policy of forgetting the past was manifested by deciding to allow the émigrés to return from exile. Thanks to the intervention of the Colonels Şalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Şabbāğ and Fahmī Sa'īd, also Nūrī as-Sa'īd obtained Ğamīl al-Midfā'ī's permission to return to Iraq.²¹

In December 1937 the government decided to hold elections for a new parliament which then assembled on 23 December, but its composition had changed little save for the disappearance of Bakr Şidqī's nominees and of the reformists associated

¹⁴ *Siyāsat isdāl as-sitār*, in: Al-Ḥasanī, *Al-asrār al-ḥafīyya fī ḥarakat as-sana 1941 at-taḥarririyya*, p. 23; FO 371/23200, Note on the recent change of government in Iraq. Baghdad to Foreign Office, 3 January 1939.

¹⁵ The daily „Az-Zamān“, 22 September 1937.

¹⁶ FO 371/23200, Note on the recent change of government in Iraq. Baghdad to Foreign Office, 3 January 1939.

¹⁷ Rağā' Ḥusayn al-Ḥattāb, *Ta'sīṣ al-ğayṣ al-'irāqī*, pp. 200–201; Karol R. Sorby, *Arabský východ, 1918–1945*, Slovak Academic Press, Bratislava 2009, p. 243.

¹⁸ Mohammad Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics: a Case Study of Iraq to 1941*, p. 150.

¹⁹ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 94.

²⁰ Şalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Şabbāğ, *Muḍakkirāt aṣ-ṣaḥīd al-'aḳīd ar-ruḡn Şalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Şabbāğ. Fursān al-'urūba fī al-'Irāq*, Aṣ-Şabāb al-'Arabī, Damascus 1956, p. 70.

²¹ Su'ād Ra'ūf Şīr Muḥammad, *Nūrī as-Sa'īd wa-dawruhu fī as-siyāsa al-'irāqīyya, 1932–1945*, Dār aṣ-Şu'ūn at-Taḳāfiyya al-'Āmma, Baghdad 1988, p. 39.

with the radical wing of the Al-Ahālī group.²² However, this policy, backed by the moderates and the king, did not satisfy Nūrī as-Sa‘īd, who began to agitate for the removal of Ğamīl al-Midfā‘ī’s cabinet and for punishment of Ḥikmat Sulaymān and his supporters. On this issue, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd found common ground with the Arab nationalist officers, who opposed Ḥikmat Sulaymān and the policy he represented and also feared retribution for Bakr Ṣidqī’s assassination, should the former prime minister ever return to power.²³

Ğamīl 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 Staff Brigadier Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī.²⁴ 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)²⁵ and thus end their influence in politics.²⁶ When Ğamīl 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 Ğamīl al-Midfā‘ī’s cabinet and seize power.²⁷ This was probably the main reason why the government fell.²⁸

Granting amnesty to the collaborators of Bakr Ṣidqī and the ratification on 6 March 1938 of the treaties with Iran concluded in July 1937 by the previous government, decidedly weakened the image of Al-Midfā‘ī’s cabinet with the Iraqi public at large. There were indeed other causes of its further weakening: First of all, the role of the army in politics increased markedly and especially the bloc of nationalist, pan-Arab officers. They benefited from the fall of the coup regime as they could fill a number of important vacant posts. Staff Colonel Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāğ for example became deputy Chief of the army general staff and director of its department of operations.²⁹ At his proposal Staff Colonel Muḥammad Fahmī Sa‘īd was made commander of the newly established motorized unit. Staff Colonel Kāmīl Ṣabīb became commander of

²² As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-‘irāqīyya*. Vol. 5, Dār aṣ-Ṣu‘ūn at-Taqaḥfiyya al-‘Āmma, Baghdad 1988, pp. 20–21.

²³ Phebe Marr, op. cit., p. 77.

²⁴ Faḍīl Barrāk, *Dawr al-ğayṣ al-‘irāqī fī ḥukūmat ad-difā‘ al-waṭanī, wa-al-harb ma‘a Brīṭāniyā ‘ām 1941*, Ad-Dār al-‘Arabiyya, Baghdad 1987, p. 173.

²⁵ The Four Colonels are in English written books commonly referred to as „the Golden Square“.

²⁶ Maḥmūd ad-Durra, *Al-Ḥarb al-‘irāqīyya al-brīṭāniyya 1941*, Dār at-Ṭalī‘a, Beirut 1969, p. 93; Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāğ, *Mudakkirat*, p. 69.

²⁷ Ismā‘īl Aḥmad Yāğī, *Ḥarakat Raṣīd ‘Ālī al-Kaylānī 1941*, p. 27.

²⁸ Tawfiq as-Suwaydī, *Mudakkirāt. Niṣf qarn min tārīḥ al-‘Irāq wa-al-qaḍīyya al-‘arabiyya*, Dār al-Kātib al-‘Arabī, Beirut 1969, pp. 206–207; Lord Birdwood, *Nuri as-Said*, p. 163.

²⁹ Rağā‘ Ḥusayn al-Ḥattāb, *Ta’sīs al-ğayṣ al-‘irāqī*, p. 200.

the first infantry brigade within the first division located in the Ar-Rašīd Camp on the outskirts of Baghdad and Major General Amīn al-‘Umarī was appointed to the post of commander of the first division.³⁰ These officers, after taking up their posts, adopted an extremely negative attitude towards the government because of its indifferent stance to the associates of Bakr Šidqī, which made it impossible for any understanding between the army and the government. Moreover, the premier’s decision to make Colonel Šabīḥ Nağīb minister of defence in his cabinet instead of Staff Brigadier Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī caused great indignation.³¹ The decision was motivated by his dislike of the nationalist forces. As Ğamīl al-Midfa‘ī and his minister of defence had been aware of this sensitive issue, they tried to cause a rift in the ranks of the army by preferring the Generals to make a counterbalance to the raising influence of the four Colonels. At the same time they encouraged the antinationalist current within the officer corps, where naturally the sympathizers of Bakr Šidqī belonged. The premier’s intention was obviously the weakening of the army’s role in Iraqi political life. He confirmed this intention by refusing to fulfil the demands of the army concerning the armaments.³²

Secondly, the strife and conflicts among the civilian politicians continued. Besides Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s hatred for Ḥikmat Sulaymān, controversy began between Nūrī as-Sa‘īd and Ğamīl al-Midfa‘ī. Nūrī’s position became stronger when Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī who had been on friendly terms with the four Colonels took his side.³³ Nūrī as-Sa‘īd also had cool relations with King Ğāzī as he was convinced that the king was badly qualified to rule the country and on several occasions expressed his opinion, that the king’s uncle, Amīr Zayd should sit on the throne.³⁴ He erroneously assumed that the king was involved in Bakr Šidqī’s coup and did not punish the murderers of General Ğa‘far al-‘Askarī. Moreover, he accused the king for the injury to his son during an air force exhibition because of the king’s irresponsible orders.³⁵ There were visible marks of rivalry and dissension within the cabinet which led to frequent personal changes. Because of the unhealthy relations between the prime minister and his ministers and among the ministers themselves, some of them began to cooperate with the opposition and rivals of the premier.³⁶

Such a situation did not contribute to the proper functioning of the government but weakened it and had a harmful impact on the army’s condition. Šalāḥ ad-Dīn aš-Šabbāğ in detail describes the situation in the army in his Memoires. When analysing the causes of Ğamīl al-Midfa‘ī’s cabinet fall, he stresses some of them: 1) The cabinet and mainly the minister of defence Šabīḥ Nağīb tried to divide the army into two camps and so achieve

³⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

³¹ Šalāḥ ad-Dīn aš-Šabbāğ, *Mudakkirāt*, p. 69.

³² FO 371/23200, From M. Peterson, Baghdad to Viscount Halifax, FO, 27 December 1938; Šalāḥ ad-Dīn aš-Šabbāğ, *Mudakkirāt*, pp. 68–69; FO 371/23200, From M. Peterson, Baghdad to Viscount Halifax, FO, 27 December 1938.

³³ Šalāḥ ad-Dīn aš-Šabbāğ, op. cit., p. 70.

³⁴ FO 371/23200, From M. Peterson, Baghdad to Viscount Halifax, FO, 27 December 1938.

³⁵ FO 371/23200, Note on the recent change of government in Iraq. Baghdad to Foreign Office, 3 January 1939.

³⁶ As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-‘irāqīyya*, op. cit., p. 34.

a balance of forces which would make it possible to control the army; this endeavour was supported by the British, who had the same interest; 2) The political position of the cabinet in the country was weakened after having the agreement with Iran ratified, renouncing Iraq's rights concerning the Šatt al-‘Arab river. As a consequence the cabinet's position became weaker towards the British too; 3) Ğamīl al-Midfa‘ī ceased to support the Palestinian uprising and public rumours began to circulate about his relations with a rich Zionist Chaim Nathaniel; 4) The prime minister used his defence minister to implement the policy of “divide and rule” in the armed forces with the help of Tawfiq as-Suwaydī and Ibrāhīm Kamāl; 5) Ğamīl al-Midfa‘ī refused to appoint Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī as minister of defence; 6) The prime minister did not keep his promise to continue equipping the army with new weapons; 7) Nūrī as-Sa‘īd wanted the fall of the government soon, therefore, from the beginning he had secret meetings with Muḥammad Fahmī Sa‘īd and Šalāh ad-Dīn aš-Šabbāg. Also, they were later attended by Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī and Kāmīl Šabīb. At the meetings Nūrī as-Sa‘īd tried to persuade the others that the army should become the leading force and organizer of political life in the country and so fill the vacuum existing after the death of King Fayṣal I, who was able to control the cabinets and political factions and settle personal quarrels.³⁷

If the outward impression after the assassination of Bakr Šidqī and the downfall of Hikmat Sulaymān indicated that the overall attitude in the army was patriotic and nationalistic, it was not quite true. The army which began to play its role in politics, was not able to offer a leader, who would surpass the traditional politicians and present a comprehensive plan for the political solution of the Iraqi problems. The leading officers had only vague notions on the future development of the country like political independence and a greater role in inter-Arab questions (Palestine). They presented these ideas to the so called “Arab national pact” (*al-miṭāq al-qawmī al-arabī*) already in 1927.³⁸

On 24 December 1938, 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. The prime minister was informed that a coup d'état was in the offing. On that evening Ḥusayn Fawzī, the CGS, visited King Ğāzī and told him 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.³⁹ The Ğamīl al-Midfa‘ī's resignation followed the same day and thereupon the king called on Nūrī as-Sa‘īd to form a government which he did on the following day and became prime minister for the first time since 1932.⁴⁰ His opposition to Ğāzī sharpened as he found himself unable to bring influence to bear upon the young king, either by persuasion or by pressure. On the other hand the king

³⁷ FO 371/23200, From M. Peterson, Baghdad to Viscount Halifax, FO, 27 December 1938; Šalāh ad-Dīn aš-Šabbāg, *Mudakkirat*, pp. 68–70.

³⁸ Raġā‘ Ḥusayn al-Ḥattāb, *Ta’sīṣ al-ġayṣ al-‘irāqī*, p. 144.

³⁹ As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārāt al-‘irāqīyya*, Vol. 5, pp. 48–49.

⁴⁰ Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī, *Mudakkirat Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī, 1919–1943*, Dār at-Ṭalī‘a, Beirut 1967, pp. 296–297; As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., pp. 54–55.

himself so detested Nūrī as-Sa‘īd that on 24 December 1938, the day of the coup, he told Colonel Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāḡ that he would be willing to entrust the government to any premier that the army might choose, but not Nūrī.⁴¹

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Now that Nūrī as-Sa‘īd with his supporters was in power, he retired the supporters of Ġamīl al-Midfa‘ī in the army. On coming to power, the cabinet immediately placed five senior officers on retirement, while a number of others were transferred from their commands.⁴² Feeling insecurity, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd tried to diminish it by installing his own men in parliament. Therefore through the elections for a new parliament which were held in February 1939, he filled the chamber of deputies with his own supporters. He then attempted to deal with Ḥikmat Sulaymān and his collaborators in the coup.⁴³ 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” on 1 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 Petterson got the sentences reduced and saved Ḥikmat Sulaymān’s life.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ 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 Ḥāšimite dynasty.⁴⁶ This was an idea that he repeatedly sought to promote, making

⁴¹ Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāḡ, *Muḏakkirāt*, p. 95; Karol R. Sorby, *Blízky východ v Mezinárodnej politike, 1918–1945*, p. 110.

⁴² Maḥmūd ad-Durra, *Al-ḥarb al-‘irāqīyya al-brīṭāniyya 1941*, p. 97.

⁴³ 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*, pp. 340–341.

⁴⁴ As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., p. 76.

⁴⁵ Ḥāzim al-Muftī, *Al-‘Irāq bayna ‘ahdayn. Yāsīn al-Ḥāšimī wa-Bakr Ṣidqī*, Maktabat al-Yaqza al-‘Arabiyya, Baghdad 1990, pp. 200–201.

⁴⁶ As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, *Al-asrār al-ḥafīyya fī ḥarakat as-sana 1941 at-taḥarruriyya*, pp. 38–40; Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950*, p. 272.

much-publicised visits to various Arab capitals and suggesting that he held the key to reconciliation between the British and the Palestinian leader Al-Ḥāǧǧ Amīn al-Ḥusaynī. 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 February 1939,⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

Mr. Butler, the British permanent undersecretary for foreign affairs who allegedly told him that the king was playing with fire and might burn his fingers.⁴⁹ Both Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāǧ and Rašīd ‘Alī al-Kaylānī suspected Nūrī as-Sa‘īd of having planned the king’s murder, while the general public accused the British intelligence of the crime. At the king’s funeral groups of mourners were heard chanting “Thou shalt answer for the blood of Ġāzī, O Nūrī!”⁵⁰

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 immediate political consequence was the necessity to appoint a regent since his son, was only four years old. Curiously enough, on the morning of 4 April 1939 Queen ‘Āliya brought forward a written statement signed by her and Ġāzī’s sister Princess Rāǧiḥa to the effect that it was the wish of Ġāzī that in the event of anything happening to him, his son being a minor, her brother should be regent.⁵¹ However, it was commonly known that Ġāzī was forced into a political marriage and his relation with the queen was rather formal. As he resented his cousin and brother-in-law, ‘Abd al-Ilāḥ, he would never have suggested him for the regency.⁵²

The candidacy of Amīr ‘Abd al-Ilāḥ 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;⁵³ according to others, he was rejected as too independent to be

⁴⁷ Lord Birdwood, *Nuri as-Said*, p. 164.

⁴⁸ Tawfiq as-Suwaydī, *Mudakkirāt. Niṣf qarn min tāriḥ Al-‘Irāq wa-al-qaḍīyya al-‘arabiyya*, pp. 317–320; Michael Eppel, *The Palestine Conflict and the History of Modern Iraq*, Frank Cass, London 1994, pp. 30–79.

⁴⁹ Cit. in: Muḥammad Ḥusayn az-Zubaydī, *Al-Malik Ġāzī wa-murāfiqūhu*, Laam Ltd., Baghdad and Surrey 1989, p. 165.

⁵⁰ Cit. in: Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, p. 344.

⁵¹ Muḥammad Ḥamdī al-Ġa‘farī, *Al-Malika ‘Āliya. Imra‘a ḥalfa al-aḥdāt*, Dār al-Ḥurriyya li-ṭ-Ṭibā‘a, Baghdad 1991, pp. 77–78.

⁵² Naǧm ad-Dīn as-Sahrawardī, *At-Tāriḥ lam yabda’ ḡadan*, Ṣarikat al-Ma‘rifa li-an-Naṣr wa-at-Tawzī‘, Baghdad 1989, pp. 11–13; Tāriq an-Nāṣirī, *‘Abd al-Ilāḥ al-waṣīyy ‘alā ‘arṣ al-‘Irāq, 1939–1958. Ḥayātuhu wa-dawruhu as-siyāsī*, Dār aš-Šu‘ūn at-Taḡāfiyya al-‘Āmma, Baghdad 1990, pp. 23–24; Muḥammad Ḥusayn az-Zubaydī, *Al-Malik Ġāzī wa-murāfiqūhu*, pp. 193–194.

⁵³ Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāǧ, *Mudakkirāt*, p. 82.

malleable.⁵⁴ Nūrī as-Sa‘īd and the leading army officers, with whom Amīr ‘Abd al-Ilāh had recently tried to develop friendly relations through Maḥmūd Salmān, insisted on his candidacy. As 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-Ḥiḡāz and brother of Queen ‘Āliya, mother of Fayṣal II. Amīr ‘Abd al-Ilāh. 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;⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

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, ‘Abd al-Ilāh had been lacking.⁵⁷ As events were to prove, ‘Abd al-Ilāh’s appointment changed the delicate balance between the Palace, the officer corps, the civilian political elite and the British. ‘Abd al-Ilāh differed from his late brother-in-law in that he was grateful to the British and was ready to fulfil their instructions.⁵⁸ He considered the alliance with Great Britain the main guarantee for the Hāšimī dynasty. He was not popular, but he was known to be pro-British, and he had good relations with Nūrī as-Sa‘īd, Ṭahā al-Hāšimī, and the officers who supported him. This meant that he had little in common with the Arab nationalist army officers whom he tended to regard as social upstarts, unworthy of his cultivation.⁵⁹ Even Anthony Eden admitted that “while he (the regent) is not a very strong character [...] there can be no question of his loyalty”.⁶⁰

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The Iraqi politics were increasingly overshadowed by the approach of war in Europe. The relationship with Great Britain came to the fore once again, partly because the growing number of British demands reminded the officers and others of the more controversial

⁵⁴ As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., p. 82.

⁵⁵ 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: Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, p. 140.

⁵⁶ Muḥammad Ḥusayn az-Zubaydī, *Al-malik Ġāzī wa-murāfiqīthu*, pp. 286–289.

⁵⁷ Mohammad Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics*, p. 159.

⁵⁸ Muḥammad Mahdī Kubba, *Mudakkirātī fī šamīm al-aḥdāt, 1918–1958*, Dār at-Ṭalī‘a, Beirut 1965, pp. 96–97.

⁵⁹ Charles Tripp, op. cit., p. 98.

⁶⁰ Cit. in: Mohammad Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics*, p. 159.

aspects of the 1930 Anglo-Iraqi treaty. At a time when the British were increasingly intolerant of dissent or reluctant compliance by Iraq, many of the Arab nationalist officers were wary of being drawn into the British orbit. The British did not appreciate the rise of national consciousness of the officers and were convinced that they were influenced by the example of National Socialist Germany, the image of which had been assiduously promoted by the head of the German legation in Baghdad during these years, Dr. Fritz Grobba.⁶¹ The officers resented Great Britain's demands and were convinced, or wanted to believe, that the Axis Powers would win the war. Many of the civilian politicians and the regent found themselves caught between two opposing forces and relatively helpless.

In accordance with constitutional practice, Nūrī as-Sa'īd tendered his letter of resignation to the Regent on 6 April in order to give him the opportunity of making his choice for the premiership. On the same day Amīr 'Abdalilāh invited Nūrī as-Sa'īd to form the new Government, affirming confidence in the man who had supported his candidacy for the Regency.⁶² Nūrī as-Sa'īd made no immediate change in the composition of his Government, but when a month later Nāğī Šawkat, Minister of the Interior, who supported the conspiracy case, resigned, he sought to strengthen his Government by taking the portfolio of interior himself and giving the portfolio of Foreign Affairs to 'Alī Ğawdat al-Ayyūbī.⁶³

Before this pattern of events became clear, Nūrī as-Sa'īd organised general elections in May. The elections were completed early in June, and the new Parliament met on 11 June. Owing to overwhelming internal difficulties, and to the deterioration in the international situation, the elections were rigidly controlled and martial law was still in force.⁶⁴ The Government nominees were therefore all returned as members of the new Chamber of Deputies which proved to be a subservient tool in the hands of various Cabinets. However, Nūrī as-Sa'īd knew that parliamentary support was no match for the kind of power represented by the army. He ensured that he stayed on good terms with the "circle of seven", particularly with its four leading members, Šalāḥ ad-Dīn aš-Šabbāğ, Fahmī Sa'īd, Maḥmūd Salmān and Kāmil Šabīb. These Four Colonels formed a body which the British began to call the "Golden Square" that had become the effective arbiter of power in Iraq.⁶⁵

Nūrī as-Sa'īd tried to mediate once again on the Palestine issue by seeking to persuade the muftī of the virtues of the British White Paper on Palestine of May 1939. Although obliged to be critical of the White Paper in public, Nūrī as-Sa'īd was unable to bring the muftī round to his point of view and the differences between the two men became ever

⁶¹ Rağā' Ḥusayn al-Ḥattāb, *Ta'sīs al-ğayš al-'irāqī wa-taṭawwur dawrihi as-siyāsī, 1921–1941*, pp. 218–220.

⁶² As-Sayyid 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., pp. 89–90.

⁶³ Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950*, p. 277.

⁶⁴ As-Sayyid 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., pp. 85–86.

⁶⁵ The group of Four Colonels known as the Golden Square consisted of Staff Colonel Šalāḥ ad-Dīn aš-Šabbāğ, commanding the 3rd division stationed in and around the capital, Staff Colonel Kāmil Šabīb, commanding the 1st division, Colonel Maḥmūd Salmān, head of the Iraqi Air Force and Staff Colonel Muḥammad Fahmī Sa'īd, in charge of mechanized forces.

sharper, contributing to the growing polarisation of Iraqi politics. In his Speech from the Throne on 12 June the Regent confirmed the standpoint that the White Paper would help to constitute a national government in Palestine and stop the Zionist political ambitions.⁶⁶ While Nūrī as-Sa‘īd showed remarkable ability in handling Iraq’s internal problems the deterioration in the international situation greatly affected the policy of his Cabinet. Iraq had been subjected to ideological propaganda for a long time, and the familiar subject of the role of the Arabs should the war break out was discussed by various groups. The foreign policy of Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s cabinet was based on pursuing: 1) the policy of alliance with neighbouring independent Arab States, and sincere friendship with our two neighbours, Turkey and Persia, in the spirit of the Sa‘dābād Pact; 2) the policy of alliance with Great Britain in the view of mutual advantage.⁶⁷

When the war lastly broke out in Germany’s attack on Poland on 1 September, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd and a few of his followers were prepared to carry out in full Iraq’s obligations under the treaty. In a speech of the same day he reminded the country of the terms of article IV of the treaty under which railways, rivers, ports and aerodromes would be at the disposal of Great Britain.⁶⁸ On 3 September when Great Britain declared war on Germany, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd went so far as to advocate the declaration of war on the side of Britain. The Iraqi Government issued a decree announcing that the international situation has become critical, and therefore the Minister of Interior was empowered to censor all news or other information that was received for publication, especially that which had a bearing on the foreign policy of Iraq.⁶⁹ With the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, Great Britain asked Iraq to sever diplomatic relations with Germany, to intern all Germans and to give whatever assistance Great Britain would require under the terms of the treaty. Nūrī as-Sa‘īd was quick to comply and on 5 September the Iraqi Government broke off diplomatic relations with Germany. On the following day the German Minister, Dr Fritz Grobba, was given his passport and left Iraq, with the members of his staff. Moreover all German subjects in Iraq were at first interned and then, when handed over to the British authorities, were deported to India.⁷⁰

By proclaiming a “state of emergency” Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s government on 12 September introduced censorship, curfews, rationing, requisitioning and all the regulations needed to place Iraq virtually on a war footing. The next day two more decrees were issued, the first entitled “Decree for Organizing the Country’s Economic Life during the present International Crisis”, gave the Government powers to issue regulations for the control, prevention, or restriction of the import or export of certain goods, including goods which were in possession of the Customs authorities. The second provided for the establishment of a Central Supply Board (*Mağlis at-Tamwīn al-Markazī*) to be appointed by the Council

⁶⁶ Maḥmūd Šabīb, *Asrār ‘irāqīyya fī waṭā’iq inkltīziyya wa-‘arabīyya wa-almāniyya, 1918–1941*, p. 132; As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, *Tārīḥ al-wizārat al-‘irāqīyya*. Vol. 5, pp. 93–95.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁶⁸ Lord Birdwood, *Nuri as-Said. A Study in Arab Leadership*, p. 170.

⁶⁹ Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, pp. 145–146.

⁷⁰ As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, *Al-asrār al-ḥafīyya fī ḥarakat as-sana 1941 at-taḥrurīyya*, pp. 51–52.

of Ministers which was entrusted with the duty of seeing that the measures for regulating the economic life of the country were effectively carried out.⁷¹ The government now had the power to rule by decree and by administrative regulation, causing great concern among Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s political opponents, since they rightly feared that these powers would be used against them. Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s action in breaking off diplomatic relations with Germany aroused criticism in nationalist circles who had hoped that German victory would free Palestine and Syria from British and French control.⁷² His action in handing over the German subjects in Iraq to the British authorities was particularly criticized by both moderate and extremists as an unnecessary measure of unfriendliness towards Germany.⁷³ The Axis propaganda, augmented by nationalist frustration in Syria and Palestine, had influenced a great number of the people who looked forward to a better future for the Arabs if Great Britain and France lost the war. In the generally anti-British environment, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s support of Britain surpassed even that of the leaders of her own dominions. The pan-Arab group (including Rašīd ‘Ālī al-Kaylānī, the muftī, and the leading army officers) wanted to extract from Britain concessions on Palestine and Syria in place of Iraq’s fulfilment of her treaty obligations; however, the majority, while seeing no reason to declare war on the side of Britain, advised caution.⁷⁴

Conclusions

The year following the king’s death was one of relative stability, partly because of a temporary coincidence of interest between Nūrī as-Sa‘īd and the nationalist officers. As a result, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd was able to break relations with Germany in September 1939, without any protest from the officers. The calm was deceptive. Beneath the surface, nationalist sentiment continued to mount, creating a climate of opinion that would eventually isolate the pro-British politicians and create irresistible pressures within the establishment.⁷⁵ From the Munich Agreement to the declaration of war, opinion was divided as to the attitude of the Arabs should the Middle East be drawn into the war. The Arab nationalists in Iraq saw an opportunity to achieve the true independence they had dreamt of for so long. The ongoing conflict in Europe would offer them a possibility to rise against their British masters.⁷⁶

At this stage the ‘circle of seven’ in the officer corps saw no reason why Iraq should not comply with Great Britain’s requests. Nor were they perturbed by the strengthening of Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s position since they knew that he was aware of the terms on which he

⁷¹ Ismā‘īl Aḥmad Yāgī, *Harakat Rašīd ‘Ālī al-Kaylānī 1941*, p. 41.

⁷² Eduard Gombár, Lukáš Pecha, *Dějiny Iráku*, Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Praha 2013, p. 341.

⁷³ ‘Uṭmān Kamāl Haddād, *Harakat Rašīd ‘Ālī al-Kaylānī 1941*, Ṣaydā 1950, pp. 13–14.

⁷⁴ Rağā’ Ḥusayn al-Ḥattāb, *Ta’sīts al-ğayš al-‘irāqī wa-taṭawwur dawrihi as-siyāsī, 1921–1941*, p. 219.

⁷⁵ Maḥmūd ad-Durra, *Al-ḥarb al-‘irāqīyya al-brīṭāniyya 1941*, p. 106; Rağā’ Ḥusayn al-Ḥattāb, *Ta’sīts al-ğayš al-‘irāqī*, pp. 221–222.

⁷⁶ Mohammad Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics*, p. 160.

occupied the office of premier. For his part, Nūrī as-Sa‘īd still believed that he could maintain the balance between their brand of Arab nationalism and the demands made upon his government by the British. He therefore made no objection – whatever misgivings he may have felt privately when the officers invited the defeated leader of the Palestine revolt, the *mufīī* of Jerusalem, Al-Ḥāğğ Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, to Baghdad in October 1939.⁷⁷ However, the *mufīī* was to become an influential figure during the following two years, keeping alive both the cause of Palestine and the hostility towards Great Britain which that causes evoked.

When parliament was convened on 1 November 1939, criticism was made of some aspects of Nūrī as-Sa‘īd’s policy. In his Speech from the Throne the regent reviewed the policy of the government and also referred to the decision of the Iraqi government to sever diplomatic relations with Germany, and its reaffirmation to fulfil Iraq’s treaty obligations towards Britain.⁷⁸ The speech was criticized in both houses of parliament on the grounds that the government, before making those decisions, should have summoned parliament to an extraordinary session, in order to discuss the measures necessary for the defence of the country and the regulation of its economic life. With regard to Iraq’s treaty obligations towards Great Britain, the prevailing opinion in Parliament was favourable to their fulfilment; but a few members, in both houses, requested the government to ask Britain to fulfil the national aspirations of the other Arab countries, especially those of the Arabs of Palestine.⁷⁹

The leading Iraqi nationalists were apprehensive as to the fate of the Arabs if the Axis Powers penetrated to the Middle East which created divided loyalty and the clash between the two groups. The extremely pro-British stance of Nūrī as-Sa‘īd was met with disapproval from many quarters, including three members of his cabinet (Rustum Ḥaydar, Ṭāhā al-Ḥāsimī and Maḥmūd Ṣubḥī ad-Daftarī), and, more importantly, by the ‘circle of seven’, particularly the Generals Ḥusayn Fawzī and Amīn al-‘Umarī. In addition, there were the cabinet’s traditional rivals, consisting mainly of politicians out of office, who would naturally exploit an opportunity to give their opposition a patriotic line. They too now sought the friendship of the Four Colonels, appealing to them to overthrow the cabinet.⁸⁰

Despite the growth of pan-Arabism and residual anti-British feelings in Iraq, it is doubtful whether popular opinion would have become as inflamed as it did, had it not been for the role of the Palestine struggle and the influence of the *mufīī* who led the resistance movement in Palestine which had reached a peak between 1936 and 1939 and was ruthlessly crushed by the British. The activities of the Palestinians and the *mufīī*, which received the sympathy of most Iraqis, put an increasing strain on Anglo-Iraqi relations and on the continuance of the alliance.⁸¹ The *mufīī* becoming refugee in Baghdad added his voice to the mounting anti-British sentiment and his contacts with Iraqis intensified,

⁷⁷ Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāğ, *Muḍakkirat*, p. 109.

⁷⁸ As-Sayyid ‘Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ḥasanī, op. cit., pp. 107–108.

⁷⁹ Majid Khadduri, *Independent Iraq*, pp. 147.

⁸⁰ Mohammad Tarbush, *The Role of the Military in Politics*, p. 162.

⁸¹ Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Iraq, 1900 to 1950*, pp. 272–273.

especially with the Palestine Defence League, headed for a time by Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī. Muftī's house soon became one of the centres of political life in Baghdad.⁸²

The political opponents of Nūrī as-Sa'īd contended that the strength of his Cabinet was mainly due to Rustum Ḥaydar, minister of finance, who had already distinguished himself in the service of King Fayṣal I in Syria and Iraq and had been a close friend of Nūrī as-Sa'īd. Rustum Ḥaydar, it is true, was praised for his intelligence and integrity,⁸³ but his Syrian origin and the fact that he was a *Šī'ī* told against him. He was mistrusted by *Sunnī* and anti-Syrian elements for championing the cause of the *Šī'ī* community. Rustum Ḥaydar was also much criticized by many Arab nationalists for his support of Nūrī as-Sa'īd's policies, in particular his pro-British policy.⁸⁴

However, after the tragic end (or murder) of King Ġāzī, he became suspicious of the prime minister's role in this event and began opposing prime minister plans within the cabinet.⁸⁵ On 18 January 1940 Rustum Ḥaydar was murdered by a violently anti-British adventurer. Nūrī as-Sa'īd chose to see this as part of a more general plot organized by his enemies and seemed ready to use this case as he had done the alleged 'plot' of March 1939 to ensnare and to eliminate his political rivals. He decided to carry out an extensive investigation using the case against his political opponents (the Ġamīl al-Midfa'ī group), who were accused of "inducing the murderer to commit the crime".⁸⁶ However, the court martial came to the conclusion that the assassination was the work of a lonely disgruntled civil servant who had moved in the circles of anti-British and pro-Axis Iraqis, and that the murderer had committed the crime on his own initiative; he was accordingly sentenced to death and hanged. Nūrī as-Sa'īd, who could not count on Rustum Ḥaydar's loyalty any longer (possible at British instigation) needed to get rid of him. Both Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī and Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāġ imply that Nūrī as-Sa'īd had somehow been an accomplice to the murder and therefore personally supervised the immediate silencing of the murderer.⁸⁷

⁸² Ṭāriq an-Nāširī, *'Abd al-Ilāh al-waṣiyy 'alā 'arṣ al-'Irāq, 1939–1958*, pp. 85–86.

⁸³ He was born in Ba'labakk in 1889, a town in Syria before the First World War (now in Lebanon). In: Rustum Ḥaydar, *Mudakkirāt Rustum Ḥaydar*, Ad-Dār al-'Arabiyya li-l-Mawsū'āt, Beirut 1988.

⁸⁴ Naġda Fathī Ṣafwat, *Al-'Irāq fī mudakkirāt ad-dīblomāsīyyīn al-aġanīb*, Al-Maktaba al-Wataniyya, Maṭba'at Munīr, Baghdad 1984, pp. 152–154; Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn aṣ-Ṣabbāġ, *Mudakkirāt*, p. 71.

⁸⁵ Ismā'īl Aḥmad Yāġī, *Ḥarakat Rašīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī 1941*, p. 39.

⁸⁶ Majīd Khaddurī, *Independent Iraq*, pp. 150.

⁸⁷ Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī, *Mudakkirāt Ṭāhā al-Hāšimī, 1919–1943*, Dār at-Ṭalī'a, Beirut 1967, p. 134.