

IRAQ'S FIRST COUP GOVERNMENT (1936 – 1937)*

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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-Arabists, 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 Ṣidqī the army took over the government in the fall of 1936, and opened a period of the army's meddling in politics. A monolithic, 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. The authoritarian regime that exerted the most powerful influence on Iraqis was that of Muṣṭafā Kamāl. Many of the army officers and Ottoman-educated civilians could easily imagine themselves in the Turkish president's role. As an Islamic country with a background of similar traditions and problems, Turkey offered a more attainable example than European regimes. Moreover, rapid development, political unity, and greater social discipline were the desiderata of this line of thought. The assassination of Bakr Ṣidqī marked the collapse of the Bakr Ṣidqī – Ḥikmat Sulaymān axis and the end of Iraq's first coup government.¹

Key words: the first military coup d'état in the Middle East, the role of the army in the coup, the al-Ahālī group² and the role of the reformist forces, the government of Ḥikmat Sulaymān, the assassination of Bakr Ṣidqī

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¹ YĀGHĪ, Ismā'īl Aḥmad. *Harakat Rashīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī 1941. Dirāsa fī taṭawwur al-ḥaraka al-waṭaniya al-'irāqīya. [The Movement of Rashīd 'Ālī al-Kaylānī. Study in the Development of the Iraqi National Movement]*, p. 25.

² The al-Ahālī group 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.

The surprise and the skilful fashion in which the coup d'état of Bakr Ṣidqī had been carried out brought to power a government of unprecedented popularity and prestige. The leaders of the new regime had at once become a power in the land, feared by enemies and admired by friends and adherents. Ḥikmat Sulaymān formed his new administration principally from his associates in the al-Ahālī group, leading to a cabinet that included a higher proportion of Shīʿī ministers than had any previous administration.³ Bakr Ṣidqī, now chief of the general staff, busied himself consolidating his personal power base in the armed forces as well as influencing the policies of the new government, chiefly in the realm of foreign affairs. Like Ḥikmat Sulaymān himself, he wanted to encourage closer links with Iran and in particular with Turkey, since he shared with Ḥikmat Sulaymān a strong affinity with all things Turkish.⁴ But the new government was well aware of the fact that its popularity would soon wane unless the hopes and aspirations of the people were kept alive by the initiation of immediate and spectacular reforms. In his first press conference on 1 November 1936 Ḥikmat Sulaymān, having assured the audience of his unswerving intention to carry out his former promises of reform, invited the entire nation to watch closely the conduct of the new government and to compare its promises with its achievements.⁵

Bakr Ṣidqī's sudden and unexpected coup had come as a surprise to almost all the army officers, though they were not unprepared for the idea of the army's eventual intervention in politics. The coup was a major turning point in Iraqī history. It made a critical breach in the constitution, already weakened by the National Brotherhood Party leaders, and opened the door to military involvement in politics.⁶ Army was much impressed by the skill and complete secrecy in which the coup was carried out. It was regarded as an admirable military feat and for a time most of the army officers thought that their immediate national objective had at last been achieved. The Iraqī army, it will be recalled, had for long cherished the idea of establishing a military

³ Ḥikmat Sulaymān as prime minister became minister of the interior and he installed Jaʿfar Abū at-Timman in finance, Ṣāliḥ Jabr in justice, Kāmil al-Chādirchī in economy and transport, ʿAbdallaḥ Nūrī in defence, Yūsuf ʿIzzaddīn Ibrāhīm in education and Nājī al-ʿAṣīl in foreign affairs. Bakr Ṣidqī became chief of staff. In AL-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid ʿAbdarrazzāq: *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-ʿirāqīya*. [*The History of Iraqī Cabinets*], Vol. 4, p. 230.

⁴ TRIPP, C. *A History of Iraq*, p. 89.

⁵ KHADDURI, M. *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqī Politics from 1932 to 1958*, p. 93.

⁶ SORBY, K. R. The Coup d'état of Bakr Ṣidqī in Iraq. In *Oriental Archive*, 2010, Vol. 78, No. 1, p. 47.

dictatorship in Iraq after the fashion of Kemal Atatürk's Turkey,⁷ but the more nationalist among them regarded such a military regime only as a means of realizing the pan-Arab dream. The new government began its work amidst considerable popular support, but popular support could not for long mask the ultimate incompatibility of its two major components. Authoritarian by training and outlook, Bakr Şidqī was determined to make the army the main vehicle of power within the state; the liberal democratic reformers were bent on changing the social structure of the country.⁸ These differences, papered over in a common desire to overthrow the previous regime and temporarily reconciled through the personality of Hikmat Sulaymān, soon generated conflict.

Bakr Şidqī had already committed himself to a promise that his sole object in leading the revolt was to overthrow the Yāsīn al-Hāshimī – Rashīd °Ālī al-Kaylānī regime and that he had no intention of controlling the political machine. He had, it seems, feared the reaction of the people to the army's intervention in politics, and therefore he had declared on more than one occasion that once the new regime was established the army was to withdraw, leaving the administration in the hands of the politicians. °Abdallaḥif Nūrī, the new minister of defence and co-author of the coup, had endorsed Bakr Şidqī's declarations and assurances and was a firm believer in, though not quite capable of, restraining the army officers from indulging in political activities.⁹ Bakr Şidqī's followers, however, whose number had greatly increased after the coup, were scarcely satisfied with merely overthrowing the former regime; in one respect such an action would have virtually meant the surrender of the army's long cherished ideal of military dictatorship. Thus, Bakr Şidqī's political ambitions were aroused and he was persuaded to let the army indulge in political activities,¹⁰ although he did not himself take the initiative.

Immediately after the coup rumours were circulated that the leaders of the former government would be killed and their followers arrested. Such confusing and disturbing news was indeed damaging to the reputation of the new government because it created insecurity and aroused the suspicion of the people, who feared the beginning of a regime of anarchy rather than of a new period of order and justice. These rumours were the result of the deliberate policy of Bakr Şidqī and his entourage, who decided to rid the country of the

⁷ BARRĀK, F. *Dawr al-jaysh al-°irāqī fi ḥukūmat ad-dijā° al-waṭanī, wa al-ḥarb ma° a Brīṭāniyā °ām 1941*. [The Role of the Iraqi Army in the Government of National Defence and the War with Britain in the Year 1941], p. 82.

⁸ SHABĪB, M. *Bakr Şidqī wa inqilābuhu al-°āşif*. [Bakr Şidqī and his Stormy Coup], p. 15.

⁹ Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid °Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-°irāqīya*. [The History of Iraqi Cabinets], Vol. 4, pp. 205 – 206.

¹⁰ SHABĪB, M. *Bakr Şidqī wa inqilābuhu al-°āşif*, pp. 16 – 18.

leaders, adherents and supporters of the overthrown government. The prime minister and his reformist colleagues, however, were not prepared to go so far. Moreover, they feared that such a vindictive policy would lead to a reign of terror. In any event, this was one of the possible reasons which led to the subsequent disagreement between Bakr Ṣidqī and that group.

A compromise was, however, temporarily reached and it was decided to deport the leading personalities of the former cabinet to neighbouring countries. Yāsīn al-Hāshimī and Rashīd °Ālī al-Kaylānī, who passed two days in anxiety and fear, were escorted by the police and deported to Syria on 30 October 1936, while Nūrī as-Sa°īd, who had sought refuge at the British embassy, fled to Egypt in a British military plane on 31 October.¹¹ While this exodus relieved the new government of possible embarrassment at home, it afforded the *émigrés* in exile an opportunity to start resistance movements both by arousing the governments and press of the various Arab countries against the alleged anti-nationalist regime in Iraq. The immediate effect of their activities was the initial hostile attitude which the nationalist papers in the Arab countries assumed towards the coup d'état government. In these circumstances, the new government was compelled to assure the governments of the neighbouring Arab countries of its pro-Arab tendencies as well as to start counter-propaganda by inviting writers and editors from Syria and Egypt to visit Baghdad in order to report to their papers what they had actually found for themselves under the new regime.¹²

On 29 October when the coup d'état occurred, parliament was not in session, but was supposed to meet on 1 November, when it had completed its summer recess. The government of the coup d'état, in order to get rid of a parliament which was the creation of the Yāsīn al-Hāshimī – Rashīd °Ālī al-Kaylānī regime, decided to dissolve it and to have elected a Chamber of Deputies more favourable to the new regime. However, since parliament was not in session and

¹¹ The government issued the following official statement on 31 Oct. 1936: "Whereas it is the duty of the Government to do everything necessary to preserve peace and order, to ensure that public tranquillity is maintained, Yāsīn al-Hāshimī, Nūrī as-Sa°īd and Rashīd °Ālī al-Kaylānī, have left the country. The Government desires that public interest should be the chief concern of all, and, to achieve this aim all personal interest must be eliminated." In Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid °Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-°irāqīya [The History of Iraqi Cabinets]*, Vol. 4, pp. 235 – 236.

¹² The Egyptian correspondent, Maḥmūd Abū al-Faṭḥ, interviewed Bakr Ṣidqī on 7 November, and on the following day an article in support of the coup d'état was published in the *Miṣrī* paper of Cairo. The famous Lebanese writer and correspondent of *Ṣawt al-Aḥrār*, Yūsuf Yazbak, arrived in Baghdad on 11 November, and made an extensive study of the new regime. In KHADDURI, M. *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958*, pp. 98 – 99.

its attitude towards the new regime was not formally declared, its dissolution was unconstitutional.¹³ The government of the coup d'état, seeking sweeping reforms as it had promised, was not courageous enough to be frank, but resorted to the traditional pretext which had often been given for former dissolutions.¹⁴ A royal decree (*irāda*) dissolving the present parliament was issued on 31 October.¹⁵

The cabinet Hikmat Sulaymān appointed after the coup necessarily represented a mixture of coup participants.¹⁶ The new government represented a striking contrast with its predecessors in several ways. It brought new people to power for the first time in more than a decade, many of whom had been educated under the British rather than the Ottomans. Liberal and leftist reformers acquired power for the first time, and initially they seemed to have the prime minister leaning in their direction. Their ideas were to prove too advanced for the country at the time, but had their reforms gone through, Iraq's subsequent history might have been completely different. The liberal and progressive social strata were in favour of change and sought, by organizing a great demonstration, both to express popular approval for the new regime and to press for certain liberal demands. A manifesto containing seven points of reform was circulated in the capital two days before the date set for the demonstration.¹⁷ On 3 November a demonstration began and as the gathering was rapidly growing, the excited crowd started to parade through the capital from

¹³ Nājī as-Suwaydī in a letter sent in reply to a question raised by °Abdarrazzāq al-Ḥasanī criticized the events. Text of the letter in Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid °Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-°irāqīya* [*The History of Iraqi Cabinets*], Vol. 4, pp. 243 – 244.

¹⁴ Both Nūrī as-Sa°id and °Alī Jawdat al-Ayyūbī had dissolved parliament during its recess in 1930 and in 1934.

¹⁵ Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid °Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-°irāqīya*. [*The History of Iraqi Cabinets*], Vol. 4, p. 242.

¹⁶ The al-Ahālī group received the lion's share of the economic and social ministries in the cabinet including Ja°far Abū at-Timman, the most consistent anti-British politician in the country. In Ad-DARRĀJĪ, °Abdarrazzāq °Abd. *Ja°far abū at-Timman wa dawruhu fī al-ḥaraka al-waṭanīya fī al-Irāq, 1908 – 1945*. [*Ja°far abū at-Timman and his Role in the National Movement in Iraq*], pp. 431 – 432.

¹⁷ The manifesto demanded: (1) elimination of the effects of past injustice; (2) full strengthening of the army; (3) public amnesty for all political prisoners; (4) freedom for trade unions and newspapers suppressed by former cabinets; (5) improvement of the condition of the poor, provision of work for the unemployed, and encouragement of local industries; (6) co-ordination of the various popular movements in the Arab countries in order to ensure progress; (7) equality of rights for all Iraqis maintenance of the internal unity of Iraq and the spread of cultural and health measures all over Iraq. In AḤMAD, Ibrāhīm Khalīl, ḤUMAJDĪ, Ja°far °Abbās. *Tārīkh al-°Irāq al-mu°āšir*. [*Contemporary History of Iraq*], p. 109.

north to south with occasional outbursts and shouts hailing the king and the army.

In the course of his subsequent interviews and declarations the prime minister gave more lavish promises, including the seven points set forth in the foregoing manifesto; but the most important general statement of policy so far made was given by Ja^cfar Abū at-Timman, minister of finance, on behalf of the government in his broadcast on 5 November.¹⁸ He condemned despotism, promising an end to the suppression of liberty and advocating reforms in the educational system and the distribution of state lands. An inclination towards an **“Iraq first”** policy was shared by most of those associated with the new regime. For many, however, it meant primarily concentrating on social reform. Accordingly, the formation of the new government was greeted by demonstrations of support in towns throughout Iraq, arranged by various radical discussion groups, by the informal and underground labour associations and by the embryonic *Iraqi Communist Party* (ICP), all expecting that their various goals could now be achieved. Hoping to build on these sentiments, the al-Ahālī group sponsored the formation of the *Popular Reform Association* (Jam^cīyat al-Iṣlāḥ ash-Sha^cbī).¹⁹ Its executive committee included four of the most reform-minded ministers, Kāmil al-Chādirchī, Yūsuf ^cIzzaddīn Ibrāhīm, Ja^cfar Abū at-Timman and Nājī al-^cAṣīl, as well as ^cAbdalqādir Ismā^cīl (editor of al-Ahālī and later a prominent figure in Iraq’s communist movement) and the labour leader Ṣāliḥ al-Qazzāz. Its program called for the annulment of laws against the peasants, the legalisation of trades unions, land reform and the spread of culture among the masses.²⁰ Hardly radical by contemporary standards, the association clearly intended to redistribute wealth, erode the economic power of the

¹⁸ Ad-DARRĀJĪ, ^cAbdarrazzāq ^cAbd. *Ja^cfar abū at-Timman wa dawruhu fī al-ḥaraka al-waṭanīya fī al-Irāq*. [*Ja^cfar abū at-Timman and his Role in the National Movement in Iraq*], p. 452.

¹⁹ BATATU, H. *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*, p. 440.

²⁰ Specifically it demanded the repeal of the Law Governing the Rights and Duties of the Cultivators and the introduction of progressive income tax and inheritance tax, as well as a minimum wage and a maximum working day. The association brought together all those who wanted some of the fundamental injustices of Iraqi society to be addressed and promised a radical programme of legislation for the new parliament. In: TRIPP, C. *A History of Iraq*, pp. 91 – 92.

landlord class and spread education widely. It was, in short, a bold attack on privilege.²¹

This speech was received with a warm welcome by the liberal and progressive elements and aroused great interest in the press and in Baghdad political circles. However, the conservative and nationalist groups received it with a certain apprehension and distrust. The minister's silence about Arab national aspirations and his casual reference to Arab unity were regarded by the opposition as ample grounds for attack while the reference to the distribution of lands aroused the hostility of the landlords and tribal shaykhs, who did not fail to label the new regime as communistic.²² Criticism at home and abroad alleging that the new government was not sufficiently nationalistic forced the prime minister, much to the dislike of his colleagues, to give lavish promises to the nationalists and to assure them of the strong Arab national character of his government. He probably gave such promises for reasons of expediency, but later, under pressure from the nationalists, he gradually became more convinced by nationalist demands than by the socio-economic proposals of his al-Ahālī colleagues. It seems that Hikmat Sulaymān had sought to satisfy the various shades of opinion from his leftist or reformist allies (the members of al-Ahālī group) to the right nationalists. The regime's action programme was highly commended for being progressive and yet not going too far.²³ He also intended to conciliate British opinion, since the British press had expressed apprehension regarding the attitude of the new government towards Great Britain.

However, this prospect alarmed many. Faced by mounting opposition, Hikmat Sulaymān suppressed hostile newspapers and intensified purges of officials suspected of disloyalty, but alarm at the reformists' intentions spread to Bakr Ṣidqī's supporters in the officer corps. Their vision of an authoritarian regime ruling over a disciplined society was in deep contrast to many of the reformists' ideas.²⁴ As the latter discovered, the balance of established power was tilted firmly against them despite their influence in the cabinet. The general elections which ended in February 1937 produced a parliament in which they were greatly outnumbered by Bakr Ṣidqī's nominees and by a combination of conservatives, nationalists and tribal shaykhs who saw the spectre of

²¹ The Program of the *Popular Reform Association* (Minhāj Jam'iyat al-Iṣlāh ash-Sha'bī), In Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid 'Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-irāqīya* [The History of Iraqi Cabinets], Vol. 4, pp. 287 – 289.

²² BATATU, H. *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, p. 440.

²³ LAQUEUR, W. Z. *The Soviet Union and the Middle East*. London, p. 124.

²⁴ Al-KHAṬṬĀB, Rajā' Ḥusayn. *Ta'sīs al-jaysh al-irāqī wa taṭawwur dawrihi as-siyāsī, 1921 – 1941*. [The Establishment of the Iraqi Army and the Development of its Political Role], p. 185.

communism behind the *Popular Reform Association*.²⁵ Ḥikmat Sulaymān made some concessions to the reformists in the ambitious government programme unveiled at the opening of parliament, but little was achieved. Even the modest proposal to distribute a limited amount of government land to individual peasant proprietors was represented as the beginning of radical land reform and was blocked through the vehement opposition of a wide range of disparate allies in the chamber.²⁶

The government dealt less gently with its opponents at home than with those abroad. At the outset the prime minister declared that he was not going to restrict the freedom of the press and in his first press conference on 1 November he actually invited journalists to criticize his government. But when the opposition papers defended the leaders of the former government and warned their readers of the dangers of “changes made overnight”, the prime minister could not swallow such a cryptic remark.²⁷ The attitude of the opposition papers apparently exhausted the patience of the prime minister, who, in his press conference on 12 November, did not conceal his dissatisfaction with the attitude of *al-Istiqlāl* to his government. The controversy in the press reached its culmination when the nationalist daily *al-Istiqlāl* published a long leader on 16 November in which it severely criticized the speech of the minister of finance, given on 5 November. This attack eventually forced the government to suppress not only that paper but also other hostile papers such as *aṭ-Ṭarīq* and *al-ʿIrāq*.²⁸

The coup d'état government, which had promised the raising of administrative efficiency and morale, followed the same method of transfer and dismissal on the grounds of political allegiance. Moreover, under the threat of dismissal or intimidation by army officers, a number of senior officials resigned. Others resigned in protest against the arbitrary conduct of Bakr Ṣidqī or his army

²⁵ JAMĪL, Ḥusayn. *Al-ḥayāt an-niyābīya fī al-Irāq, 1925 – 1946. [The Parliamentary Life in Iraq]*, pp. 279 – 280.

²⁶ TRIPP, C. *A History of Iraq*, p. 92.

²⁷ The attitude of the *al-Istiqlāl*, *al-ʿIrāq*, and *aṭ-Ṭarīq* papers had become increasingly hostile to the new regime when the liberal papers, such as *al-Aḥālī*, *al-Ḥāris*, and *al-Anbāʾ*, initiated a vigorous attack on Yāsīn al-Hāshimī and Rashīd ʿĀlī al-Kaylānī and the latter two papers abused them in the most vulgar terms. This personal attack induced *al-Istiqlāl* to reply in like manner and to suggest that if the members of the former cabinet were guilty, then why not “try them”? Cit. in KHADDURI, M. *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958*, pp. 99 – 100.

²⁸ AḤMAD, Ibrāhīm Khalīl, ḤUMAJDĪ Jaʿfar ʿAbbās. *Tārīkh al-ʿIrāq al-muʿāṣir. [Contemporary History of Iraq]*, p. 109; KHADDURI, M. *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958*, p. 100.

officers.²⁹ A less noticeable but more significant change in the long run was that the new government contained few Arab Sunnīs and not a single advocate of the pan-Arab cause on which all previous governments had been founded. Bakr Ṣidqī was of Turkish stock but grown up in a Kurdish village and Ḥikmat Sulaymān was mainly Turkish in origin and orientation.³⁰ Two of the cabinet's members were shīʿī, and the Ahālī ministers were interested in internal reform, not Arab nationalism. This configuration resulted in a foreign policy oriented toward Turkey and Iran instead of the Arab countries.

The government had already promised to publish its programme before the general elections, but much controversy had taken place in the cabinet before it was possible to reach an agreement on its final text. It was therefore formally published on 9 December, one day before the order to hold general elections was issued.³¹ The text of the programme (minhāj al-wizāra) dealt with foreign policy issues, promised extensive reforms in internal affairs, promised reforms in the taxation system, the encouragement of foreign trade and the stimulation of emerging industries, but also promised to pay attention to labour conditions as well. It also promised the reorganization and expansion of the army and air force and the encouragement of the martial spirit throughout the country. It promised free public education up to secondary level.³² It is to be noted that such extensive promises of reform were beyond the capacity of any government in Iraq to carry out, and virtually could not be fulfilled even within one generation, but almost all cabinets had drawn up programmes, which reflected their hopes and aspirations rather than the capacity of achievement. The weakness of such an approach lies in its divergent provisions, which were meant to satisfy both reformists and nationalists; but in practice each group criticized the programme on the points which were to satisfy its opponents. The

²⁹ The most important resignations were those of Rustum Ḥaydar, Chief of the Royal Dīwān; Maḥmūd Ṣubḥī ad-Daftarī, director-general of municipalities; and ʿAlī Mumtāz, director-general of public accounts. Such coercive measures, which were intended to liquidate opposition, added insecurity to the already existing spirit of discontent among public officials. In KHADDURI, M. *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958*, pp. 100 – 101.

³⁰ According to one Arab author: “General Bakr Sidqi was a pure Turk (he was in fact born in ʿAskar, a small village in Kurdistan, to a Turkish family), and has always had an unbounded admiration for Mustafa Atatürk.” In TARBUSH, M. *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941*, p. 140.

³¹ The government programme (Minhāj al-wizāra) of the Ḥikmat Sulaymān cabinet in Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid ʿAbdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-ʿirāqīya. [The History of Iraqi Cabinets]*, Vol. 4, pp. 246 – 251.

³² Official text in Programme in Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid ʿAbdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-ʿirāqīya. [The History of Iraqi Cabinets]*, Vol. 4, p. 250.

reformists were not happy about the nationalistic items the nationalists criticized liberalism and the reactionaries attacked its “communistic” provisions regarding the distribution of land.³³

General elections were ordered to be held on 10 December 1936, but by this time relations between Bakr Şidqī and the reformists had begun to deteriorate.³⁴ The reformists, counting on their popularity among the liberals as well as the rank and file Iraqi people, suggested trying out the experiment of “free” elections; but to this neither Hikmat Sulaymān nor Bakr Şidqī would agree, fearing that free elections might return a number of deputies favourable to the former regime, and especially unfavourable to a cabinet which had swept into power through a military coup d'état.³⁵ The prime minister and the minister of finance intervened and persuaded Bakr Şidqī to change his mind in the interest of the cause for which they had so assiduously worked. The elections, which were held on a compromise basis in order to satisfy Bakr Şidqī and the army, the reformists, tribal shaykhs, personal desires of cabinet ministers and the interests of certain pressure groups were not completed until 20 February 1937.³⁶ Parliament was formally opened a week later.

The new Chamber of Deputies, composed of 108 deputies, was different from its predecessors in many respects. Only one third of the former Chamber was returned, while the majority of the other two thirds had never before been members of parliament. In the newly elected Chamber, at least thirty seats were given to Bakr Şidqī's own nominees, while only thirteen were allotted to the reformists.³⁷ No wonder, therefore, that the reformists were somewhat disappointed with the results of the elections; nevertheless they did not entirely lose hope and they decided to stand firmly together in the new Chamber in order to influence legislation by their liberal ideas. The Senate, being an appointed body, remained as it had been in the former regime; but its president for the new session, Shaykh Muḥammad Riḍā ash-Shabībī, was elected for his favourable attitude towards the new regime. The parliament met on 27 February in an extraordinary session, since ordinary sessions were usually held on 1

³³ Ad-DARRĀJĪ, °Abdarrazzāq °Abd. *Ja'far abū at-Timman wa dawruhu fī al-ḥaraka al-waṭaniya fī al-Irāq, 1908 – 1945. [Ja'far abū at-Timman and his Role in the National Movement in Iraq]*, pp. 452 – 453.

³⁴ JAMĪL, Ḥusayn. *Al-ḥayāt an-niyābiya fī al-Irāq, 1925 – 1946. [Parliamentary Life in Iraq, 1925 – 1946]*, p. 273.

³⁵ AḤMAD, Ibrāhīm Khalīl, ḤUMAJDĪ Ja'far °Abbās. *Tārīkh al-°Irāq al-mu'āşir. [Contemporary History of Iraq]*, p. 109.

³⁶ Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid °Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-°irāqīya. [The History of Iraqi Cabinets]*, Vol. 4, p. 251.

³⁷ JAMĪL, Ḥusayn. *Al-ḥayāt an-niyābiya fī al-Irāq, 1925 – 1946. [Parliamentary Life in Iraq, 1925 – 1946]*, p. 276.

November, and the king addressed both houses in a joint session. The speech from the throne promised the inauguration of a new period of reforms and listed a number of urgent measures which the government had decided to carry out during the current year. The speech also reminded the parliament of its duty to consider those measures as well as others in the light of experience and reason.³⁸

When the new Chamber sat to deliberate on the government's reform programme, the deputies were naturally divided into two main camps. First, there were the reformists and their adherents who avowedly supported liberal legislation and pressed for a more advanced policy on the part of the new government. Secondly, there were the nationalists, the conservative elements and the tribal shaykhs, who invariably opposed liberal legislation.³⁹ The reformist position was probably best stated by Muḥammad Ḥadīd, who in his speech on 6 March briefly but clearly described the economic situation in Iraq and explained the underlying causes of the country's backwardness. He regarded the chief cause of backwardness as agricultural, and he therefore contended that the most urgent reforms were those dealing with agrarian problems.⁴⁰ Disagreement between the reformists and their adversaries was manifested in the course of debate on almost all important legislation. This was indeed most evident during the debate on the budget. The attack on the reformists turned on one cardinal principle, that of whether the new government's policy was to be communist or nationalist. Matters came to a head in connection with the debate on the new land policy. Both the prime minister and the minister of finance declared that there was no question of taking land from the owners to be distributed among the peasants; there was, they asserted, enough government land which had never been owned or claimed by any individual, which they intended to give to the peasants.⁴¹

However, it was not long before opposition to the *Popular Reform Association* and its programme began to surface from a number of sources. Chief among these were the landlord-shaykhs, who felt their authority to be threatened, and the Arab nationalists, who were unhappy over the Turkish orientation of the

³⁸ Text of the speech in Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid °Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-°irāqīya*. [*The History of Iraqi Cabinets*], Vol. 4, pp. 252 – 254.

³⁹ AḤMAD, Ibrāhīm Khalīl, ḤUMAJDĪ Ja°far °Abbās. *Tārīkh al-°Irāq al-mu°āšir*. [*Contemporary History of Iraq*], p. 110.

⁴⁰ Ad-DARRĀJĪ, °Abdarrazzāq °Abd. *Ja°far abū at-Timman wa dawruhu fī al-ḥaraka al-waṭanīya fī al-Irāq, 1908 – 1945*. [*Ja°far abū at-Timman and his Role in the National Movement in Iraq 1908 – 1945*], p. 455.

⁴¹ Ad-DARRĀJĪ, °Abdarrazzāq °Abd. *Ja°far abū at-Timman wa dawruhu fī al-ḥaraka al-waṭanīya fī al-Irāq, 1908 – 1945*. [*Ja°far abū at-Timman and his Role in the National Movement in Iraq 1908 – 1945*], p. 456.

cabinet and its lack of interest in Arab affairs. Most important of all was opposition from Bakr Ṣidqī and his supporters in the army.⁴² For Ḥikmat Sulaymān, the support of the reformists counted for less than the continuing alliance with Bakr Ṣidqī. On 17 March 1937, Bakr Ṣidqī publicly attacked the reformists for being secret communists and for advocating the dissolution of all the fixed points of Iraqī social and political life, confident that reform sympathisers amongst the army officers were in a minority. This was a scarcely veiled repudiation of the entire al-Ahālī group, and this sealed their fate.⁴³ A series of strikes in March and April over questions of pay and conditions of work were taken up by those reformists who wanted to put on a show of defiance against their growing exclusion. However, this only hardened the lines of conflict. Ḥikmat Sulaymān showed his own authoritarian preferences by using police to end the strikes, arresting some of the organisers and sending others into internal exile.⁴⁴ In spite of strife between the liberal reformists and the conservative nationalists, the coup d'état parliament was able to pass 45 bills either as new laws, amendments to existing laws, or as approval of decrees issued before it met. Having completed its annual four month session, it held its last meeting on 26 June 1937.⁴⁵ It never met again, since it was dissolved by the new cabinet formed after the fall of Ḥikmat Sulaymān's cabinet.

Similar tactics were employed by the government in its dealings with the tribal shaykhs of the mid-Euphrates. Alarm at the implications of land distribution proposals had been compounded by the familiar complaint by some tribal shaykhs that they had been unjustly excluded from the 1937 parliament. Ḥikmat Sulaymān had tried to reassure the shaykhs that the government intended them no harm and had done much to settle the tribal disturbances which had marked the last year of Yāsīn al-Hāshimī's premiership. However, when it seemed that certain shaykhs were preparing for open rebellion, Ḥikmat Sulaymān agreed with Bakr Ṣidqī that pre-emptive action should be taken. In May 1937, the armed forces moved into the mid-Euphrates and arrested the leading shaykhs, provoking the very rebellion which the government had tried to prevent.⁴⁶ It simmered on for much of the summer, but the government forces showed that

⁴² AḤMAD, Ibrāhīm Khalīl, ḤUMAJDĪ Ja'far 'Abbās. *Tārīkh al-ʿIrāq al-mu'āṣir*. [Contemporary History of Iraq], p. 110.

⁴³ MARR, P. *The Modern History of Iraq*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Al-CHĀDIRCHĪ, Kāmil. *Mudhakkirāt Kāmil al-Chādirchī wa tārīkh al-Ḥizb al-waṭanī ad-dīmuqrāfī*. [Memoirs of Kāmil al-Chādirchī and History of the National Democratic Party], pp. 42 – 52.

⁴⁵ JAMĪL, Ḥusayn. *Al-ḥayāt an-niyābīya fī al-ʿIrāq, 1925 – 1946*. [The Parliamentary Life in Iraq, 1925 – 1946.], p. 343.

⁴⁶ Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid 'Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-ʿirāqīya*. [The History of Iraqi Cabinets], Vol. 4, p. 312.

they were able to contain it, while Hikmat Sulaymān tried conciliation with the shaykhs once again.

The issue that brought the conflict between Bakr Ṣidqī and the al-Ahālī group to a head was incidental – a rebellion by the tribal supporters of the previous cabinet, which Bakr Ṣidqī and Hikmat Sulaymān decided to crush by force.⁴⁷ More significant than the rebellion itself was the cabinet crisis which followed, since Hikmat Sulaymān and Bakr Ṣidqī had sent troops to suppress the impending revolt without consulting their colleagues. Hikmat Sulaymān's manner of dealing with the situation caused an irrevocable split with the reformers in the cabinet. For the three reform ministers – Ja'far Abū at-Timman, Kāmil al-Chādirchī and Yūsuf 'Izzaddīn Ibrāhīm – this was the last straw and on 6 June 1937 they resigned together with Ṣāliḥ Jabr, a Shī'ī politician from the south.⁴⁸ 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. The resignation of four of his seven ministers weakened the prime minister, but also gave him the opportunity to make a final break with the reformists. In their place, he appointed men more acceptable to Bakr Ṣidqī and his following in the officer corps.

The resignation of four ministers signalled a clear victory for Bakr Ṣidqī and the nationalist contingent. The conservative and authoritarian direction became clear with the subsequent suppression and abolition of the *Popular Reform Association* and the start of a campaign against the left shortly thereafter. 'Abdalqādir Ismā'īl and his brother were deprived of Iraqi nationality and forced to leave the country.⁴⁹ Hikmat Sulaymān promised the dissolution of the newly-elected parliament and a second election was designed to remove leftist influence. Thus ended any attempt to tamper with Iraq's social structure until after the revolution of 1958. From the first, Bakr Ṣidqī had pursued an entirely different line from al-Ahālī. He had expanded the army and strengthened his position within it. Plans to double the air force were announced the military college was enlarged to take on another 150 students in a crash-course programme, and a long shopping list of armaments and equipment was

⁴⁷ Al-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid 'Abdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-'irāqīya*. [The History of Iraqi Cabinets], Vol. 4, p. 313.

⁴⁸ Ad-DARRĀJĪ 'Abdarrazzāq 'Abd. *Ja'far abū at-Timman wa dawruhu fī al-ḥaraka al-waṭanīya fī al-Iraq, 1908 – 1945*. [Ja'far abū at-Timman and his Role in the National Movement in Iraq 1908 – 1945.], p. 469.

⁴⁹ Al-CHĀDIRCHĪ, Kāmil. *Mudhakkirāt Kāmil al-Chādirchī wa tārīkh al-Ḥizb al-waṭanī ad-dīmuqrāfī*. [Memoirs of Kāmil al-Chādirchī and History of the National Democratic Party], p. 45.

submitted to Britain.⁵⁰ Britain was unable to accommodate the Iraqis, so Bakr Ṣidqī began to cast about for an alternative supplier. He soon found it in Germany. Fritz Grobba, German minister to Iraq, arranged for the purchase of some planes and equipment from Italy and Germany.⁵¹ Some of this material was delivered, but the orders were subsequently cancelled by successive Iraqi cabinets. This episode marked the first rift in the alliance with Britain, and clearly foreshadowed the events of 1941. British refusals of Iraqi military requests generated much resentment in the army that was to grow in succeeding years.

As the first of the League of Nations Mandates to achieve independence, Iraq could be presented as the vanguard of these emerging states, increasing the obligation for Iraq to assist them in their own independence struggles and holding out the possibility of an Iraqi leadership role among the states of the Fertile Crescent.⁵² Therefore, the development of an Iraqi foreign policy, at least as far as regional states were concerned, was to be an important symbol of Iraqi sovereignty which no government could afford to ignore. In addition, King Ghāzī came to see this as the political field in which he could best make his mark, leading occasionally to friction with his ministers, but also used by them sometimes to divert the censure of the British. In terms of the sympathies and interests of much of the ruling Sunnī Arab elite, the Arab world attracted most of their attention, especially the territories of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan.

The difficulty was that any independent foreign policy in that area would bring Iraq up against the controlling interests of Great Britain and in particular mean any Iraqi government would be faced with the choice between subservience and defiance which had so vexed Iraqi leaders under the Mandate. However, there was a limit to the extent to which the government could deviate from the nationalist line, and events in Palestine were always bound to have repercussions in Iraq. It was thus a matter of dire political expediency for the government to maintain an overt interest in the Palestinian problem. Perhaps this is what motivated Ḥikmat Sulaymān to come out with a proposal that could be seen as a constructive development of an idea of Nūrī as-Saʿīd that is, a

⁵⁰ FO 371/20796 Sir Archibald Clark-Kerr (Baghdad) to Anthony Eden (FO), 22 December 1936.

⁵¹ TARBUSH, M. *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941*, p. 142.

⁵² TRIPP, C. *A History of Iraq*, p. 89.

federation of Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan but with the added incentive of unlimited Jewish immigration.⁵³

Although Bakr Şidqî was born in a Kurdish village he was hardly a Kurdish nationalist. Nevertheless, his coup provoked anti-Kurdish feeling among Arab nationalists, as they viewed the Kurds as an impediment to their political dreams.⁵⁴ Bakr Şidqî's party was attacked by the pan-Arabists on the grounds of championing the cause of the Kurds against the interests of the Arabs. This was partly due to Bakr Şidqî's Turkish origin, but mainly because his followers had not avowedly and immediately begun to work for the pan-Arab cause, and they were thus branded as anti-Arab. In point of fact, however, the majority of Bakr Şidqî's entourage were Arabs and to do Bakr Şidqî justice, he had proved to be a supporter rather than an antagonist of the Arab nationalist movement long before the First World War.⁵⁵ After the coup d'état Bakr Şidqî often reiterated his support of the Arab national cause. It is true that a few enthusiastic Kurdish nationalists, had taken the opportunity of the coup and secretly issued letters and pamphlets in which they ostensibly pleaded for co-operation between Arabs and Kurds while in fact demanding freedom for the Kurdish people.⁵⁶ These, however, had neither been originally inspired nor were they subsequently supported by Bakr Şidqî.

For politicians such as Hikmat 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 question concerned Iraq's only access to the sea via the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab, a waterway which constituted the frontier between Iran and Iraq and which therefore raised Iraqi fears about its vulnerability. For the government of Hikmat Sulaymān, backed by Bakr Şidqî, it had become crucially important that

⁵³ TARBUSH, M. *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941*, p. 139.

⁵⁴ McDOWAL, D. *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 288.

⁵⁵ There are very few who still remember or admit that Bakr Şidqî was one among a few nationalists in Baghdad before the First World War who championed the cause of the oppressed Arabs against the Turks. See a telegram signed by Bakr and other Arab nationalists in Baghdad, sent in support of the first Arab Conference in Paris held in 1913. Cit. in KHADDURI, M. *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958*, p. 107.

⁵⁶ *Al-Akrād wa al-ʿArab [The Kurds and Arabs]* edited by a few Kurdish young men (Baghdad, Najāḥ Press, 1937). Cit. in McDOWAL, D. *A Modern History of the Kurds*, p. 289.

Iraq should be assured of tranquil relations with its powerful eastern neighbour, even if it meant making concessions. This resulted in the Iran-Iraq Frontier Treaty of 4 July 1937 (mediated by Britain), which settled the border question between Iran and Iraq on the Shaḥḥ al-^cArab.⁵⁷ Iraq also reached an agreement with Iran attempting to settle the boundary. It gave freedom of navigation on the Shaḥḥ to Iran and increased the territory under Iran's jurisdiction, concessions which greatly roused public opinion against the government.

The second question revolved around the attitude of Turkey⁵⁸ and Iran respectively towards the Kurdish question, with Iraq's permeable frontiers and the recently discovered oil fields in the region heightening the Iraqis' sense of vulnerability in this area as well.⁵⁹ Therefore, on 8 July 1937, shortly after the frontier treaty was signed, the Sa^cdābād Pact was concluded between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite opposition to this treaty in Iraq, it cleared the way for bringing together four Muslim countries in an alliance aimed ostensibly at countering Soviet penetration of the area.⁶⁰ The possibility of the Soviet threat was quite remote in Baghdad, but for the newly independent Iraqi government it was important to ensure stable and regular relations with Iran as well as with Turkey. The earlier promise of massive oil reserves in the Moṣul region had been realised, thereby increasing its value. Equally, it was clear that the Kurds had by no means been reconciled with the subordinate role allotted to them by Baghdad.⁶¹

Demonstrations in Baghdad and Baṣra against the 1937 treaty accused the government of ceding Iraqi territory and of betraying the Arabs of Arabstān/Khūzistān. This set the tone for more general criticism, emanating

⁵⁷ The negotiations and the text of the Iran-Iraq Frontier Treaty of 4 July 1937. In AL-ḤASANĪ, as-Sayyid ^cAbdarrazzāq. *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-^cirāqīya*. [*The History of Iraqi Cabinets*], Vol. 4, pp. 322 – 329.

⁵⁸ Frontier Treaty: the United Kingdom and Iraq and Turkey, 5 June 1926. In HUREWITZ, J. C. *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East. A Documentary Record. Vol II, 1914 – 1956*, pp. 143 – 146. (The frontier between Turkey and Iraq had been recognised; however, there could be no disguising the Turkish government's unhappiness at the loss of Moṣul.)

⁵⁹ During 1934 Iraq felt so pressed on the issue that it took its case to the League of Nations, although without success. This led in turn to direct negotiations between Iraq and Iran in 1935, but the compromise worked out by Nūrī as-Sa^cīd (minister of foreign affairs at the time) and the shah of Iran was rejected by the Iraqi cabinet since it involved ceding some control over the Shaḥḥ al-^cArab to Iran.

⁶⁰ Treaty of Non-Aggression (Sa^cdabad Pact): Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Turkey, 8 July 1937. In HUREWITZ, J. C. *Diplomacy in the Near and Middle East. A Documentary Record. Vol II, 1914 – 1956*, pp. 214 – 216.

⁶¹ SILVERFARB, D. *The Twilight of British Ascendancy in the Middle East: A Case study of Iraq 1941 – 1950*, pp. 81 – 89.

particularly from members of the Sunnī Arab political elite, that the direction in Iraqi foreign policy was implicitly downgrading the importance of Iraq's ties with the Arab world. Hikmat Sulaymān's cabinet gave birth to the "Iraq First" policy of Iraq for the Iraqis, but its neglect of the Arab nationalist cause was soon to cause it considerable trouble.⁶² This policy was associated with an 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. By the same token it also generated considerable 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.⁶³

The real weakness of Bakr Ṣidqī's party, however, lay not so much in its ideology, which indeed had a fairly wide appeal, but in the conduct and character of both of its leader and of his intimate followers. Bakr Ṣidqī himself was praised for his courage and he had a shrewd sense of humour.⁶⁴ Bakr Ṣidqī's entourage comprised both army officers and civilians who, although shrewd and ambitious, were very inexperienced young men. They were uncompromisingly anti-democratic, if not truly dictatorial, in spirit; they were therefore naturally opposed to the reformists and sought through their influence on Bakr Ṣidqī, to force them to withdraw from the government. They were also opposed to the pan-Arabists, and thus failed to unite all the army officers. In trying to follow such a narrow policy they lost support both from the reformist and nationalist ranks; and their reputation among the people declined owing to their outrages and over-indulgence in the cafes and cabarets of Baghdad. Their sole source of strength was the prestige and power of Bakr Ṣidqī and after his assassination they were left almost powerless and with very few followers.⁶⁵

Opposition to Bakr Ṣidqī and the policy of the cabinet had been growing chiefly among the Arab nationalist politicians, who were already in contact with a group of Arab nationalist army officers. Among the officers were Muḥammad Fahmī Sa'īd and Maḥmūd Salmān, later to figure in the 1941 coup.⁶⁶ The Arab nationalist officers resented Bakr Ṣidqī who had encouraged the Kurds in the

⁶² MARR, P. *The Modern History of Iraq*, p. 73.

⁶³ TRIPP, C. *A History of Iraq*, p. 91.

⁶⁴ SHABĪB, M. *Bakr Ṣidqī wa inqilābuhu al-ʿāṣif* [Bakr Ṣidqī and his Stormy Coup], pp. 12 – 16.

⁶⁵ KHADDURI, M. *Independent Iraq. A Study in Iraqi Politics from 1932 to 1958*, p. 108.

⁶⁶ AL-ḤASANĪ, *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-ʿirāqīya*. [The History of Iraqi Cabinets], Vol. 4, p. 342.

army, and they felt that the policy of Ḥikmat Sulaymān's government had been too pro-Turkish. These officers feared a renewal of Turkish aggression toward Iraq, especially around Moṣul. Muḥammad Fahmī Sa'īd's wife was related to the wife of the murdered Ja'far al-Askarī, and hence Muḥammad Fahmī Sa'īd also had personal feelings against Bakr Ṣidqī.⁶⁷ The nationalists in the army could count on the support of other groups. The Shī'a detested Bakr Ṣidqī for his brutal suppression of the tribes and were disgruntled by the resignation of two strong shī'ī ministers. Above all, the opposition was aided and abetted by the members of the previous cabinet. Nūrī as-Sa'īd, motivated partly by revenge and partly by opposition to the cabinet's policy, waged an incessant campaign from Egypt against Ḥikmat Sulaymān and Bakr Ṣidqī, first urging the British to take a stand against the cabinet, then writing anonymous articles in the Egyptian press against the regime, and finally instigating civilian and army politicians to take action.⁶⁸

The nationalist army officers, inspired by the pan-Arabists on the one hand and by leaders of the former regime on the other, became more active again when Bakr Ṣidqī's followers lost prestige. A number of groupings were secretly organized; some of them were in close touch with the al-Muthannā Club⁶⁹ others were actively encouraged and directed by exiled political opponents of the government; and still others were aroused by the dissenting Reformists who resigned in protest against the arbitrary Bakr Ṣidqī – Ḥikmat Sulaymān policy. The political activities of the nationalist army officers were by no means coordinated nor indeed were there any well-organized groupings, which again reflected a lack of leadership. There were, however, a number of adventurous army officers who were genuinely opposed to the Bakr Ṣidqī – Ḥikmat Sulaymān regime and determined to put an end to it even at the risk of assassinating Bakr Ṣidqī.⁷⁰

However, by this stage the centre of gravity had shifted to the officer corps itself and away from the cabinet. Within the armed forces, resentment at Bakr Ṣidqī's favouritism combined with more general concern about the leadership's seeming neglect of pan-Arabism and the "duties" which an Arab nationalist creed was assumed to bring with it. These sentiments led to a plot in the officer

⁶⁷ Al-KHAṬṬĀB, Rajā' Ḥusayn: *Ta'sīs al-jaysh al-'irāqī wa taṭawwur dawrihi as-siyasī* [The Establishment of the Iraqi Army and the Development of its Political Role, 1921 – 1941], p. 190.

⁶⁸ FO 371/20014 Sir Miles Lampson, Cairo to the Foreign Office, 25 November 1936.

⁶⁹ A pan-Arab society formed in 1935 in Baghdad for the promotion of the Arab nationalist movement.

⁷⁰ As-SUWAYDĪ, Tawfīq: *Mudhakkirātī. Niṣf qarn min tārīkh al-'Irāq wa al-qaḍīya al-'arabīya*. [My Memories. A Half-Century of Iraqi History and the Arab Question], p. 275.

corps to assassinate Bakr Şidqī. Various attempts on Bakr Şidqī's life had been made but failed. Another opportunity presented itself on August 11 August 1937, as Bakr Şidqī and Muḥammad ʿAlī Jawād, commander of the air force, were resting at Moşul airport on their way to visit Turkey: both were shot at point-blank range by a soldier under orders from the Arab nationalist officers.⁷¹ It is important to note here how helpless Bakr Şidqī's entourage became when their leader disappeared. Bakr Şidqī's assassination put Hikmat Sulaymān and his regime in a critical position. With the withdrawal of the reformers from the cabinet, and with the general discontent of the Arab nationalists, Hikmat Sulaymān's main support had been reduced to Bakr Şidqī and his contingent in the army. With Bakr Şidqī's assassination, this prop abruptly collapsed.⁷²

Hikmat Sulaymān immediately initiated an investigation, which identified the assassin and uncovered the plot behind the attack. The conspirators, including Muḥammad Fahmī Saʿīd, were arrested. By killing Bakr Şidqī, his opponents within the army severely weakened the loyalty of the armed forces to the government, as Hikmat Sulaymān discovered when he ordered the arrest of some of the conspirators and their transfer to stand trial in Baghdad. The commander of the Moşul garrison Major-General Amīn al-ʿUmarī, who was known for his pan-Arab views, was ordered to send them to Baghdad for trial, but he refused to comply with the prime minister's request.⁷³ The bulk of his officer corps in Moşul sided with the plotters and sounded out the sympathies of the army commanders in the north. Two days later, after having gained their support, he issued a list of demands in the form of an ultimatum. He declared that the northern army command would no longer obey the orders of the government, implicitly threatening the country with civil war. By now, the Moşul military units were clearly under the control of the younger Arab nationalist officers.⁷⁴ When the commander of the major army camp at al-Washshāsh on the outskirts of Baghdad also declared himself in support of the Moşul faction, Hikmat Sulaymān found himself caught between opposing army factions. Growing numbers of officers declared themselves in support of the rebellion and the hitherto dominant supporters of the late Bakr Şidqī found themselves isolated and outnumbered, forcing Hikmat Sulaymān to resign. If

⁷¹ PENROSE, E., PENROSE, E. F. *Iraq: International Relations and National Development*, p. 90; AL-KHAṬṬĀB, Rajā' Ḥusayn: *Ta'sīs al-jaysh al-ʿirāqī wa taṭawwur dawrihi as-siyāsī [The Establishment of the Iraqi Army and the Development of its Political Role, 1921 – 1941]*, pp. 190 – 191.

⁷² SHABĪB, M. *Asrār ʿirāqīya fī wathāʾiq inkilāzīya wa ʿarabīya wa almānīya, 1918 – 1941. [Iraqi Secrets in English, Arab and German Documents, 1918 – 1941]*, p. 90.

⁷³ TARBUSH, M. *The Role of the Military in Politics: A Case Study of Iraq to 1941*, p. 149.

⁷⁴ MARR, P. *The Modern History of Iraq*, p. 75.

civil war was to be avoided, Ḥikmat Sulaymān had no alternative but to resign, which he did on 17 August 1937.⁷⁵ His regime, which had come to power with such great expectations of reform, had fallen within ten months.

The Bakr Ṣidqī coup, the collapse of the coalition government, and Ḥikmat 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. The rhetoric of some leftists caused the al-Ahālī group 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. Their lack of contact with the army officers left them in complete ignorance of that group's very different motives and aims. Moreover, Ḥikmat Sulaymān and the left grossly underestimated the strength of two other political forces in the country – the Arab nationalists and the conservative landowners.

Thus ended Iraq's first coup government. Given the circumstances of its coming to power and the numerous, though by no means unique, shortcomings of its conduct of affairs, perhaps it was remarkable that it lasted as long as it did. 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, by the propaganda emanating from the German representatives in Baghdad and by the rising tide of anti-British feeling in the wake of the Palestine resistance movement of the late 1930s. All these forces contributed to the events of 1941 and the second British occupation of Iraq. Most important of all, the coup opened the door to 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.

⁷⁵ Al-ḤASANĪ, *Tārīkh al-wizārāt al-irāqīya*. [*The History of Iraqi Cabinets*], Vol. 4, p. 359.

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