

Part One

Foundations of the Movement

CHAPTER 1

Establishment of the Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon

The early history of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon is much better documented than that of its counterparts in the Arab world because it developed in the open rather than in a clandestine manner. Thus, its emergence can be traced through publications and organizations.¹

Geographical Syria, which encompassed Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to 1918. Following World War I, British and French forces controlled the coastal areas and Arab forces the interior. Arab forces under the command of Sharif Faisal of Hijaz anticipated the independence of a united Arab state, including geographical Syria, by the terms of the Hussein-McMahon correspondence of October–November 1915. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in Autumn 1918, he set up an Arab national government in Syria's interior. It lasted from November 1918 to July 1920. During its tenure, an Arab nationalist party, Hizb al-Istiqlal al-ʿArabi (Arab Independence Party) took up the banner of nationalism from al-Fatat (a leading Arab nationalist party in Istanbul in the last years of the Ottoman Empire). It rallied nationalist forces around Sharif Faisal, giving the Arab national government a base of support among Arab nationalists. In March 1920, a Syrian General Congress was held in Damascus with eighty-five delegates drawn from all over geographical Syria. It proclaimed Sharif Faisal of Hijaz king of Syria.

Under the guise of the League of Nations mandate system, Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire were turned over to colonial powers for administration. In essence, it was a case of the fox guarding the henhouse. The French and British had prearranged the dismemberment of the region into zones of influence in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 16 May 1916. The San Remo conference of May 1920, at which the victorious allied powers settled the fate of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, allotted the

northern half of geographical Syria (which encompassed the territories subsequently known as Syria and Lebanon) to France and the remainder (i.e., Palestine) to Britain.

In Syria, the French administration set out to squash nationalist aspirations of independence and unity. At the Maisaloun battle on 24 July 1920, the French routed King Faisal and his nationalist forces. The separation of Lebanon from Syria and establishment of the State of Greater Lebanon on 30 August 1920 followed. The new country was created by the addition to the prewar Maronite sanjaq of Lebanon “all the Muslim areas it could safely dominate.”² The wishes of the populations of those areas were not taken into account. According to the Basic Law of 23 November 1920, the French high commissioner, seated in Beirut, was responsible to the French foreign minister; and the French government was the intermediary between the high commissioner and the League of Nations. By 1925, the French high commissioner ordered the promulgation of a constitution for Lebanon. It was drafted by the Representative Council of Lebanon and formally proclaimed in May 1926.

Ideological Formations

The first predominantly Arab communist organization in the Middle East had its origins in the interplay of indigenous sociopolitical dynamics and imported ideological and organizational patterns. Against this background of nationalist fervor and colonialist intrigue, Marxist-oriented circles emerged in the major cities of Syria and Lebanon in the early twenties. They were initiated among small groups of enlightened bourgeois intellectuals who were influenced by Western humanist philosophies—the notions of the leftist wing of the French Revolution as well as the principles of the Russian October 1917 Revolution. Early attempts at organizing a communist movement in Lebanon and Syria stemmed from personal and individual initiatives taken by some of those educated intellectuals. Prominent among them was Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak (1901–1982), who pioneered the formation of a Marxist circle. He was instrumental in establishing the first Arab communist organization in Lebanon and Syria. In an interview that I conducted with him about his early involvement, he said, “I was only a person who was deeply touched by the Lebanese starvations during World War I. I detested the Ottoman’s colonialism. I used to read and be influenced by the outcome of French humanism. My family was relatively well off, and I sympathized with the poverty stricken and needy people and was

deeply touched by the conditions of my poor fellow citizens. I was an idealist who wanted to fight injustice and see that my people are freed from its burden. I was not aware of any theoretical ideas or any of their basic principles.”³

After the First World War an embryonic press emerged in Beirut, and this was an important vehicle for the exchange of ideas and debate among the small class of educated elite. One newspaper, *al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh* (The Wandering Journalist), attracted reformers and activists. It was first issued on 28 September 1922 by Iskandar al-Riyashi (1890–1962).⁴ This newspaper is considered to have laid the intellectual foundation for leftist thought, which in turn produced the organizational basis for Lebanon’s early socialist movement, including Marxism and communism. The red banners of the newspaper read “al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh, al-Bardoni: The newspaper for the proletarian and oppressed class.”⁵

The sequence of development of socialist thought, including Marxist and communist ideas, can be readily traced in *al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh*. This newspaper became a lightening rod for the spread of socialist ideas among the young intelligentsia, and through its editorials, the theoretical basis of the Lebanese communist movement was formed. Moreover, the intellectual and organizational leaders of the socialist and communist movement had formative roots in *al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh*. As a friend of the newspaper’s chief editor, Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak became one of the main writers. He was its intellectual force and attracted a number of young Lebanese idealists who were sensitive to social problems and eager to advocate social and political change. Reflecting on the significance of the newspaper, Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak told me:

The newspaper gave us the opportunity to write what we wanted. In the meantime, it forced us to develop many of our ideas as it expected us to continue to contribute. In most cases when I wanted to write, I used to search, think, contemplate, analyze and become fully informed of what I wrote about. I used to read foreign books very carefully, particularly the French ones, and try to assimilate in-depth their theories, endeavoring to develop them in a way that would suit the social and economic conditions in Lebanon. We can safely say that this newspaper and its owner were two important factors in organizing my way of thinking. The initial stage of commencement of the Marxist, and particularly the communist intellect, should be called the “al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh” stage. It was our first school for the theoreticians of the

communist movement in Lebanon. It introduced the early socialists to each other, and consequently the communist party organization stemmed from that and formed its early leaders.⁶

In the fifty-eighth issue of *al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh* (5 May 1923), Yazbak published his seminal study "Socialism in Lebanon": "I have looked at the world with an objective eye and found it to be a major battlefield between the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak." After describing the character of capitalism and the aims of socialism, Yazbak wrote:

We do not expect at present to be able to fully implement socialism in Lebanon. I do not call upon you now to embrace socialism, as its ideology is not yet rooted in our country. Our fellow citizens should attain their rights before they attend to their duties. They are used to being lazy, and seem to enjoy slavery. Our fellow citizens do not want to lead the respectable life. That is the reason why I do not call upon you to implement socialism at present.

But do you not want to be happy? Do you not want to liberate yourselves from slavery? Do you not want to have your share of dignity and a place under the sun and moon? Do you not like to see that your beloved children are comfortable? Then why are you asleep? . . .

Workers are no doubt the major promoters and leading supporters of the socialist ideology, because they have realized that it serves their interests. In almost all the parliaments worldwide, the labour representatives are among the socialists.

Where are the labour syndicates? Where are their associations? Where are their aid funds? Where are their shelters for the aged persons? Where are their schools? Where are their libraries? Where are the workers themselves?

After its initial year, the writers of *al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh* began to broaden their audience by writing in newspapers with wider circulations such as *al-Ma'radh* and *al-Dabbour*. Socialist ideas were gaining a broader base of interest. By 1924, Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak started to write under his own name rather than his pen name (al-Shabah al-Baki). This coincided with the arrival of the Lebanese communist syndicalistic Fouad al-Shamali (1894–1939), who was expelled from Egypt by the British authorities because of his communist organizing activities which included efforts to form an Egyptian communist party and a socialist association among Syrian and Lebanese workers in Alexandria. His arrival in Beirut in June 1923 was one

catalyst for the formation of a Lebanese communist party.⁷ In an interview with the Egyptian newspaper *al-Ahram*, al-Shamali declared that his objective was the economic liberation of Syria and Lebanon: “We called it the Syrian Lebanese Socialist Party. . . . Based on the Third International, the party aims at handing over as early as possible, whenever there is an opportunity, the ruling power to the proletariat and farmers. This is the cornerstone of our principles. We are nothing but the spokesman of the oppressed working class.”⁸

In August, al-Shamali reached Beirut after he was expelled from Egypt. Coincidentally, the officer in charge at the Immigration and Port Control happened to be Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak, who had previously read about al-Shamali’s news. Yazbak immediately took al-Shamali under his wing, initiating a friendship that lasted twenty years until al-Shamali’s death.

Soon after his arrival in Lebanon, al-Shamali moved to Bekfia City to work in its tobacco factories. Cigarette factories were one of the region’s fastest growing enterprises, and their workforce reached about 2,000. Al-Shamali started to organize its labor and in early August 1924 formed the General Syndicate of Tobacco Workers. Bekfia was the center of the syndicate. The syndicate established contacts with other labor groups, establishing in November 1925 the Supreme Committee of Syndicates (al-Lajnah al-Naqabiyah al-‘Uliya), which included representatives from tobacco workers, print press workers, cooks, carpenters, shoemakers, and drivers. Among the most active of the General Syndicate of Tobacco Workers organizers, in addition to al-Shamali, were Farid Toma, Butros Hishimah, and Bashara Kamil.⁹ In September 1924, al-Shamali and ten of his colleagues, whom he had organized, attempted to contact the Comintern and to associate themselves with it.¹⁰

Formation of the Lebanese People’s Party

In late autumn of 1924, Yazbak was visited by Joseph Berger, a representative of the Palestinian Communist Party, who posed as a Polish journalist. Berger was interested in contacting socialists in Beirut, and Yazbak set up a meeting with al-Shamali.¹¹ According to Yazbak, Berger was assigned by the Palestinian Communist Party to set up a branch in Lebanon. Berger told Yazbak that the Palestinian Communist Party had a predominantly Jewish membership and was unsuccessful in attracting Arab members. Thus, Berger was sent to Beirut to contact Arab socialists in an attempt to expand the party’s base beyond the confines of the minority Jewish community.¹²

After two meetings were held in October 1924 at al-Hadath (a suburb of Beirut), a communist party in Syria and Lebanon was formed on 24 October 1924 by five Arabs (four workers and one intellectual): Yazbak, al-Shamali, Farid Toma, Ilyas Qashami, and Butros Hishimah. They selected Yazbak as secretary general and called the party the Lebanese People's Party (LPP) as a public front for the communist party. The Supreme Committee of Syndicates constituted the main membership of the communist party and its front organization, the Lebanese People's Party. This was the first organized and constituted communist party in the Arab world.

Almost since the very beginning there were signs of major disagreement between the representative of the Palestinian Communist Party, Joseph Berger, and the Lebanese communists in connection with the rejection by those present of the Palestinian guardianship of the Lebanese party. It was obvious that the Palestinian Communist Party wanted the Lebanese party to be a branch, whereas the Lebanese insisted on maintaining their independence. This occurred in spite of the coordination that was going on between members of the party and their counterparts in Palestine during the party's first decade.

The Communist Party of Palestine, which was then almost exclusively Jewish, was at that time the most ideologically mature, organizationally coherent, and genuine communist outpost in the Middle East. Its leaders believed the party to be "the only communist front in the Arab Orient" and considered it their duty "to pay attention to every question . . . in relation to the revolution . . . to look into matters relating to Syria, Egypt, and Islamic Congresses in Cairo, Mecca, and elsewhere."¹³ However, their aspirations were soon curtailed by the Secretariat for Oriental Affairs of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, which in December 1926 "censured" the Palestinian communists for their "ambitious demand to monopolize work in contiguous countries" and considered it to be a malady, harmful for the further expansion of communist influence in the region.¹⁴

In the first six months of the LPP, the party concentrated on gathering supporters and organizing the scattered members. Fouad al-Shamali was able to incorporate the General Syndicate of Tobacco Workers in Lebanon into the party.¹⁵ Explaining the party commitment and conditions in 1925, Yazbak wrote:

Some of us have participated in the establishment of the first Arab led communist party in the East. But was there among us somebody who scientifically and truly understood Marxism?

Was there any of us who read Lenin? Or who has at least read his eternal directive study “What Is To Be Done?”¹⁶

Has any one of us reviewed the ABC’s of communism?

Frankly I say “No.”

I am not ashamed of confessing. They said that I was the most culturally cultivated comrade, the more knowledgeable about Western literature than any of the others. Modestly, I would state that they said that I was “the intellectual and political leader”—I confess that during the year 1925, I was, on many occasions, directing our Party contrary to the Leninist principles. We were going on haphazardly.

We were ignorant of what we should have following in our path. Do we fight the colonialist rulers who occupy our land . . . ? Do we fight for the sake of a national democratic and constitutional order so that the powerful reactionary forces can win elections and conspire with the Mandate authority behind our backs? Do we fight capitalism and feudalism in all the Arab world? Such a fight would weaken the common front against imperialism. Do we struggle to realize the demands of all workers and peasants and call for international revolution? And where are we vis-a-vis the leadership of the said revolution which does not even acknowledge us? Rather, where are we vis-a-vis our own local revolution prior to considering [the question of] joining the international revolution?

In other words, do we politically cooperate? Do we socially cooperate? Do we struggle on both fronts?

We were motivated by sincere devotion and snobbish self-pride. We were completely ignorant of the Bolshevik movement (this is what the communists were called in the early days), and we had no contacts with anybody outside Lebanon, except with individuals from the Communist Party in Palestine. Such relationships were of minor nature and not deep. They were merely contacts between a member from our side with another from that party, and not a strong tie between two “brother” parties.

If somebody asked me about our political identity: Who are you? and do you have a popular following? My answer would have been: At that time, we were a wonderful entity in terms of quality and a very little thing in terms of size. In terms of quality, we were the vanguard who shook the brains of people. . . . We were bold and initiated fights against all the powerful bodies at all levels, whether rich or rulers, clergy, or traditional leaders. . . . That was our character and our identity in the Lebanese community.

As regards our number, it did not exceed nine young Lebanese, which went down in history as the secret founders of the first Communist Party in the Arab world. These were the nine truthful, courageous, young inexperienced persons who formed the first “purely” Arab communist party.

I called it a “purely” Arab party because they were all Lebanese Arabs whose party had a Lebanese Arab leadership; its will was Lebanese Arab; its brains were Lebanese Arab. That was not the case, neither in Palestine nor in Egypt. When communism started in those two sister countries, it was seen by the national population to be a foreign rooted movement, in terms of religion, race and class.¹⁷

On 30 April 1925, the party put in an application for a license to operate. Once legal and public, it was able to celebrate May Day at Crystal Cinema in Beirut. Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak used the occasion to articulate the labor demands, which were:

1. Ban night work and impose a limit of eight hours on the working day.
2. Introduce legislation to establish a minimum wage and to establish social security insurance.¹⁸

The May Day celebration was attended by a great number of Lebanese activist intellectuals and notables. The media gave the event considerable coverage. Two weeks later, Yazbak, as party secretary general, issued *al-Insaniyyah* (Humanity), a weekly newspaper (named after the official organ of the French Communist Party, *L'Humanité*). That was the first official Arab communist newspaper and carried the recommendations, teachings, declarations, and circulars of the party in Syria and Lebanon. In the editorial of the first issue, published on 15 May 1925, the newspaper's mission was declared:

This newspaper was established by poor victims of injustice living in a victimized society. It is dedicated exclusively to the support of the people victimized by tyranny, monopoly and oppression. It stands for the unification of workers and peasants, and speaks out not only in protest but to restore their usurped rights.

In the second issue of *al-Insaniyyah* (24 May 1925), the party's principles appeared as party policies:

1. Promotion of Lebanese industry, agriculture, and trade; advocating the levying of a tax on mechanical, agricultural, and industrial

equipment which causes labor redundancy. Alternatively, the government could own such machinery and allow importation of only that which assists the economy and the national workforce.

2. Encouragement and strengthening of the civil spirit in public affairs, fighting religious fanaticism and sectarianism, discouragement of clerical interference in political matters.
3. Advocacy of public education, compulsory for both males and females. Foreign schools should be subject to national educational standards. The government must promote Arabic as the language of instruction which should prevail in all schools, public and private.
4. Organization of mass labor and peasants' unions to defend the interests of toilers and protect their rights such as banning child labor, imposing a maximum of eight hours for the work day, and a minimum wage. Advocacy of legislation making obligatory a two month fully paid maternity leave, effective from one month prior to delivery.
5. Promotion of a tax on inheritance and on wealth and a reduction of taxes on the masses.
6. Advocacy of public control of religious endowments.
7. Promotion of women's liberation.
8. Reliance of the party on the Lebanese people, whether inside or outside Lebanon; unification with parties which have the same common goals, adopting all possible means to reach goals.

In the next three issues (31 May, 7 June, and 15 June 1925), *al-Insaniyyah* became strident in its advocacy of better working conditions and its attacks on the French mandate. The party's relative freedom was short-lived, however. The newspaper was closed down on 16 June 1925 by government authorities after only five issues. An order was issued for the arrest of its editor and the party leadership. This was a result of the party's support for the Syrian uprising which began in July 1925. In early 1926, the party distributed a circular in French, Arabic, and Armenian calling on the people to support the uprising and the French soldiers to join the rebellion. To avoid arrest, Yazbak fled to France, where he contacted *L'Humanité* newspaper and the French Communist Party. That constituted the commencement of communication between the two parties, although the intellectual relationships between the leaders, particularly the contributors of *al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh*, dated back many years.

Almost half a century later, reflecting on the early foundations of the communist movement in Lebanon, Yazbak observed:

We copied everything of Marxism and often we over-exaggerated it. We imagined that to be revolutionary required opposition to everything that we identified as causing society's problems. We mistook religion for sectarianism, nationalism for chauvinism, and patriotism for ethnocentrism. We thought all the evil conditions of the world—poverty, ignorance, exploitation, corruption—could be eliminated with this new doctrine. This must be understood against the background of the early 1920s with the West in occupation of the Arab lands and the Soviet Union a revolutionary state extending its hand to the rest of the oppressed world. As young intellectuals disillusioned with the conditions of our society, we enthusiastically grasped the extended hand.¹⁹

In this period, Hizb al-Sha'ab (People's Party), a nationalist party headed by Dr. Abdul Rahman al-Shahbender, was organized in Damascus in May 1925. It was a bourgeois liberal party advocating a platform of social reform and was the first political party France allowed to be licensed. In the party's first public meeting on 5 June 1925, which was attended by more than 1,000 people (although its membership was only about 200 at the time), al-Shahbender declared:

The foundation of Europe is being threatened with a fierce war called a class war. The essence of this war is that nine-tenths of the Western people are workers who toil day and night to feed the stomachs of the remaining ten percent and fill their pockets. . . . If we stop ten people walking in any European capital, we would find nine of them will denounce the horrible conditions of most of the Western governments. These are the ones who will say when they hear of the atrocities and injustices committed in their name that there is no misunderstanding among the people of this planet. This conflict is that of the capitalists. With the bankruptcy of the colonialist countries, these governments will return to the [control] of the working class. All will cooperate to liberate humanity.²⁰

The basic party platform called for the unity and constitutional independence of Syria and for the encouragement of economic development.²¹

Establishment of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon

At the May Day celebration at Beirut's Crystal Cinema in 1925 (discussed earlier), representatives from the Armenian communist organization Spar-

tacus League initiated contact with the Lebanese People's Party. The seeds of organized communist activities were sowed among the Armenians in Beirut in early 1924 through the establishment of the communist organization by Artin Madoyan and Haykazun Boyadjian, two émigrés from Turkey. They called it the Spartacus League after the communist organization established in Germany during World War I. The May Day meeting was the first time the two groups met, and an immediate outcome of this was the unification of the league and the party under the name the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon (al-Hizb al-Shiuy'ie al-Suri al-Lubnani). An interim Central Committee was formed of three members of the Central Committee of the Lebanese People's Party (Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak, Fouad al-Shamali, and Ilias Abu Nadher), two from the leadership of the Spartacus League (Artin Madoyan, the Spartacus League's secretary general, and Haykazun Boyadjian), and Eli Teper (from the Communist Party of Palestine). The new party held its first conference, a clandestine meeting, on 9 December 1925.²² It was attended by fifteen representatives drawn from Beirut, Bekfia, Zahla, and Aleppo. The interim Central Committee was duly elected with additional members added. A formal program was approved and organizational rules and procedures adopted. The agenda of the meeting included:²³

1. Report of the Central Committee on (a) conditions in Lebanon; (b) the organizational structure of the party; (c) the workers' movement.
2. Election of the Central Committee.

The conference arrived at the following decisions:²⁴

1. To support the Syrian revolution.
2. To strengthen the struggle against imperialism.
3. To struggle for national independence and democratic freedoms.
4. To struggle for workers' rights in Syria and Lebanon.
5. To advocate the confiscation of the property of landowners who did not support the revolution.

On 18 July 1925, a mass uprising in Syria began among the Druze and spread throughout Syria, spilling over into Lebanon. By September, nationalist groups in Damascus, particularly Hizb al-Sha'ab's leader al-Shahbander and others of its prominent leadership, joined the uprising, proclaiming a general Syrian rebellion and the formation of a national government. In October, the French high commissioner, General Sarrail,

ordered the bombardment of Damascus. However, the rebellion continued to spread. By the end of 1925, it engulfed all of Jebel Druze, Damascus, parts of Homs, and southern Lebanon.

Following the outbreak of the rebellion, suppression of political activism in Lebanon became ruthless. This was aptly demonstrated by the reaction to a public demonstration to protest abolition of rent control that was organized by the party and held on 20 July 1925. Thousands of protesters gathered in front of the Government House. The police opened fire on the demonstrators, killing ten, wounding forty, and arresting sixty.²⁵ On 22 July 1925 the party issued a circular in Arabic, French, and Armenian denouncing the government's brutality in breaking up the demonstration and declaring its support for the Syrian uprising. It announced in the name of the newly formed Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon that it would "coordinate with the international communist movement to support the great Syrian revolution."

Shortly thereafter, al-Shamali, representing the Central Committee of the party, met with representatives of the Comintern who were also members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Palestine: Abu Ziam and Eli Teper (alias Max Kogal). They agreed to supply the Syrian revolution with material and moral and political support and to seek the cooperation of all branches of the International Comintern in this endeavor.²⁶ On 22 July 1925, the party issued a circular announcing its support for the Syrian uprising and declaring in the name of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon that it would "coordinate with the international communist movement to support the great Syrian revolution." Following this declaration, the party leadership was arrested. On 26 January 1926, the Mandate authorities arrested the rest of the party leadership, including Yazbak who had just returned from Paris. They were not released until 18 January 1928, when a general amnesty was granted to all political prisoners. With their arrest, the party ceased to function.

However, during that period the outlook for communism in Syria and Lebanon was debated at the Secretariat's session on Oriental Affairs of the Executive Committee of the Communist International in December 1926. The Oriental Secretariat noted regretfully "the silencing of the voice" of the Lebanese-Syrian Party, and in spite of certain restrictions decided, at least for the present, that the Palestinian Communist Party should be responsible for "control and organization" of Lebanese and Syrian communists.²⁷ The Communist International also approved Haim Auerbach's suggestion to create a "Communist Center for the unity of parties in Arab countries"²⁸ and in July 1927 sent a special mission to Syria to create in Aleppo "a center

exclusively for Arabs.”²⁹ The mission, which also included as one of its members Eli Teper, vice-chairman of the Palestinian Communist Party, turned out to be a complete failure, and communist activity in the area did not start to revive until the political prisoners were released.³⁰

Two weeks after their release, the Central Committee met in February 1928 to look into rebuilding the party. Yazbak left the party. The Central Committee was reconstituted and composed of Artin Madoyan, Haykazun Boyadjian, Farid Tuma, and Nasim al-Shamali, with Fouad al-Shamali as secretary general. The strategy of the party, according to Fouad al-Shamali, was to “work diligently to deceive the authorities so they will not put us under surveillance and harass us. We must first strengthen our party organizations . . . so we can replace those comrades who will be arrested with other comrades so the party will not be dissipated. They must continue to publish leaflets, manage the party, and lead it forward. We only advertise the party’s existence when we are sure that we’re not vulnerable.”³¹ Thus, all leaflets and announcements carried the name of individual members of the party, but not the party name.

From 17 July to 1 September 1928, the party participated in the Comintern Sixth Congress and was admitted to membership in the Comintern. It thus acquired independence from the guardianship of the Communist Party of Palestine. As soon as Fouad al-Shamali returned from the Comintern meeting in Moscow, the name of the party was changed to al-Hizb al-Shioui‘ie al-Suri—a branch of the Comintern. This indicated the party’s refusal to accept the French division of Syria, which was the dynamic developing in Syrian politics.³²

In 1928, the Syrian Constituent Assembly was elected to prepare an Organic Law for Syria as a stage in the evolution toward self-government, in compliance with the terms of the Mandate. The nationalists, represented by the National Bloc, opposed the formulation of a constitution, fearing it would institutionalize the fragmentation of greater Syria, especially the separation of Lebanon. They insisted on adding amendments to the constitutional question guaranteeing the unity of greater Syria.

The National Bloc was a political organization formed after the collapse of the Syrian rebellion by moderate remnants of Hizb al-Istiqlal al-‘Arabi and the Damascus-based Hizb al-Sha‘ab, parties that accepted peaceful means to pursue nationalist goals. From its emergence until 1945, it played a powerful role in Syrian politics. It emerged in July 1927 from the National Congress of Beirut, a conference organized to bring together nationalist groups for participation in the upcoming elections scheduled for 24 April 1928. The National Bloc won a majority of seats in the Constituent Assem-

bly and put forward the draft of a constitution that guaranteed basic national and individual rights. It had 115 articles in all. The French high commissioner, in an effort to safeguard French superiority, added an article that declared all parliamentary decisions required the approval of the high commissioner. In effect, he held an absolute veto. The assembly balked, and after delaying its meeting three times, he dissolved it on 22 May 1930. He then unilaterally declared the constitution as amended. In reaction, the National Bloc split into moderates who favored working within the mandatory system and activists who opposed the mandatory system.³³

On the constitutional question and separation of Syria and Lebanon, the Syrian Communist Party Central Committee declared, "We strongly reject [all] imposed constitutions and announce that all those who accept or work for their implementation directly or indirectly are the enemies of Syrian unity and the country's independence. . . . The Syrian Communist Party calls upon you to: (1) strongly reject all declared constitutions in all the Syrian country; (2) expose the treasonous national leaders; (3) call for the holding of a popular Syrian congress composed of freely elected representatives to express the real will of the Syrian people."³⁴ With this, the party decided to move its headquarters to Damascus to elude the security services in Beirut.³⁵ One of the activist leaders declared, "The new Constitution and all imposed constitutions by the French authorities . . . aim at fragmenting the country into mini-states and governments."³⁶

The newly constituted Communist Party of Syria concentrated on educational and public affairs activities. Members were active in the creation of the Popular Election Committee. This committee was formed by political activists and unions to mobilize the working classes and the poor to participate in the parliamentary elections scheduled for 1930. Its electoral platform was:

1. Secularization of politics.
2. Democratization of the electoral system.
3. Free public education.
4. Freedom of the press.
5. Government regulation of the economy.
6. Protection and promotion of Lebanese agriculture and industry.
7. Reform of the tax law to a system of progressive taxation.

The government dissolved the committee in late April 1929.³⁷

On 17 March 1930, Fouad al-Shamali issued a new weekly newspaper, *Sawt al-'Umal*. The paper's basic aim, declared in its inaugural editorial,

was to “stand with the oppressed against the oppressor, with those whose rights were usurped.” The paper was closed down after four weeks.

In this environment, the Communist Party publicly announced its existence. In April 1930, the second national conference of the party was held in Beirut. It was attended by thirty-six delegates; they came from party branches in Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, Tripoli, Bekfia, Balbak, Zahla, Homs, Agar, Nabk, and Ybrod. The most important decisions were first to publicly declare the party and then to initiate its public presence. The Central Committee was charged with drawing up a platform to identify its basic aims and its position on important social issues.³⁸

In the wake of its inauguration onto the public stage, the party initiated a vanguard role in organizing labor, which was severely impacted by the Great Depression. In June 1930, the Tobacco Workers Union election took place. Fouad al-Shamali was reelected its secretary general. On 6 July 1930, the union issued a call for the creation of a general workers union with the basic aims of achieving a social security system for all workers.³⁹ This call was positively responded to by the Printers' Union, Umal al-Matabie', which announced in its newspaper, “The Executive of the Printers' Union discussed the announcement of the Tobacco Union and their call for a general congress. The Executive decided to fully support the idea.”⁴⁰

In early 1931, the party began issuing a clandestine four-page newsletter, *al-Fajr al-Ahmar*, in Arabic and Armenian. Journalists and important political figures in major cities in Syria and Lebanon were targeted on the newsletter's mailing list. It explained the party's position on important issues. As labor activism was a central issue for the party, one of the early issues of the newspaper called for all unemployed workers to participate in a public meeting to be held in Beirut on 4 February 1931, to discuss working conditions and unemployment. However, the meeting was banned.⁴¹

Despite the efforts of security forces to stop the publication of *al-Fajr al-Ahmar*, they were ultimately unsuccessful. Its publication continued and became an important medium for the coordination of labor activism. The Tobacco Workers Union sponsored clandestine meetings on working conditions and social problems among workers. It succeeded in organizing a network of affiliated unions, among them electricity, tramway, port, and petrol workers and drivers. In March 1931, there was a public outcry against the high costs of electricity and public transportation. The party and the unions participated in organizing a boycott campaign against utilities and tramway companies. The boycott continued for three months and by mid-July 1931 resulted in the reduction of electricity prices by 40 percent

and tramway prices by 20 percent. After this initial success, the labor movement in Syria and Lebanon rapidly spread.⁴²

On 7 July 1931, the Central Committee issued a detailed program under the title “Limatha Unadhil al-Hizb al-Shioury‘ie al-Suri: Ghayatuhu wat shaie’ min proghramuhu” (What Does the Communist Party of Syria Struggle For: Its Ultimate Goal and Some of Its Programs) and printed under the imprint of the Communist Party of Syria Press as the first publication in a series.⁴³ This was a direct challenge to the authorities, who were trying to close down the party and silence it. The program identified the party’s mission as “dismantling the imperialist-capitalist system and creating a socialist system.”⁴⁴ In establishing the goals of the party within the framework of this mission, the program identified the following priorities and action plan:

1. Liberation of Syria: rejection of the mandate and withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria. This includes: (a) unity of Syria: rejection of the fragmentation of Syria and the pseudo-legal means—constitutional and electoral—for institutionalizing this; (b) abolition of foreign concessions and monopolies: rejection of the special privileges given to religious missions and foreign companies; (c) freedom of press and political prisoners.⁴⁵
2. Improvement of workers’ conditions: This includes enactment of labor laws to regulate minimum wages, working hours, working conditions, and the development of a basic social security system.⁴⁶
3. Improvement of the peasants’ conditions, which constitutes the majority of the population. This includes:⁴⁷ (a) abolishment of debts and debtors prison for small farmers; (b) reduction of taxes on small farmers; (c) nationalization of water resources; (d) abolishment of forced labor; (e) enactment of labor laws and social security to protect agricultural workers; (f) land reform and abolishment of feudal practices.
4. Women’s liberation and rights. This includes:⁴⁸ (a) the full legal and social equality of women and their political and economic empowerment; (b) the abolishment of the veil and forced marriages; (c) abolishment of restrictions against women’s entrance into the professions; (d) maternity leave for working women; (e) enactment of labor laws to protect the rights of working women.
5. Child labor legislation, which includes the abolition of child labor below the age of fifteen; reduction of working hours for workers aged fifteen to eighteen; equal pay for equal work; allowing young

- workers to join unions; free, compulsory education for all children.⁴⁹
6. Other internal goals which include an equitable, progressive taxation system, rent controls, development of accessible, universal health care and education, expulsion of colonial administrations, rejection of sectarianism.⁵⁰
 7. Other external goals which include working for the liberation of colonized peoples and the right to self determination; working for international solidarity; working for a common unified Arab front against imperialism; working for the creation of alliances between workers and peasants in the Arab world.⁵¹

The program essentially signaled the stage of ideological and organizational development the party had reached. This was further indicated in a conference of the communist parties of Palestine and Syria held in 1931, where the tasks of the communists in the Arab national movement were outlined. According to the final resolution of the conference, "In Syria, Palestine, and Egypt . . . the urgent and immediate task of the Communist parties is an agrarian peasant revolution and the organization of their work in accordance with the aims of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism."⁵² The conference, in effect, signaled to the Comintern and other communist parties throughout the region the coming of age of the Communist Party of Syria and its introduction onto the stage of regional politics, as reflected in the final resolution, which noted:

The following steps are necessary in order to strengthen the activities of Communists in all Arab countries:

1. To develop a mass educational campaign on the aims and tasks of the anti-imperialist Arab national liberation movement, interlinking it with the regular tasks of the workers' and peasants' movements in the corresponding countries.
2. For this purpose, it is necessary to hold large and small meetings, and wherever possible demonstrations, to issue special leaflets, to organize anti-imperialist committees to assume the initiative in the struggle, whose representatives are chosen from rural and urban working populations.
3. To create a general press organ, for the time being, for the communist parties of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and the communists in Iraq. To establish a more regular and lasting contact for the exchange of experience and to coordinate the work in the early stages among the communist parties of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and the commu-

nists in Iraq, bearing in mind the fact that in the future it will be necessary to secure the over-all collaboration of the communists of Tripoli, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. Having taken special measures to organize and to unify the communists in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, the future course must be to detach the organization of all these countries from the French Communist Party and make them independent units.⁵³

End of the Formative Stage

In this period, 1930–33, the party initiated expansion in Tripoli, Aleppo, and Damascus and recruited a number of young activists. They included Khalid Bakdash, Mustafa al-^ᶜAris, Hasan Quraitim, Yusuf Khatar al-Hulo, Fouad Kazan, Nikola Shawi, Faraj Allah al-Hulo, and Rafiq Ridha. What is significant about this is that many from this group were subsequently sent to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow for training and were thoroughly imbued with a Stalinist perspective. The first manifestation of their impact on the party was the Khalid Bakdash coup against Fouad al-Shamali. In the autumn of 1932, Bakdash had al-Shamali expelled from the party on the basis of unsubstantiated and specious allegations that he had connections with the Security.⁵⁴

The coup signaled that the formative stage in the development of the communist movement in Syria and Lebanon was drawing to a close. While its ideological formation was nurtured by Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak, Fouad al-Shamali had nurtured its organizational development. His ouster from the party marked a turning point in the movement. Reflecting on al-Shamali's contribution to the party a half-century later, Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak observed:

It's true I left the party, but I continued an emotional and intellectual attachment with it. . . . Whatever I did, I gave the Communist Party priority in it. When I published my paper *al-Sayar*, the party's news and activities were prominent in it. Thus, I developed views on the party and its leadership as an objective, though sympathetic, observer. I must testify for the historical record that no man contributed more to the development of the party, or was more devoted and paid a higher price personally than Fouad al-Shamali. The foundations of the party must be credited to him.⁵⁵

The change in the party's leadership cadre coincided with an effort at arabization of the party leadership. According to Nikola Shawi, the Comin-

tern had issued a report to the party in 1932 emphasizing the need for arabization. The problem, from the point of view of the Comintern, revolved around the predominant role of minorities in the communist movement in the Middle East—i.e., Jews in Palestine, Armenians in Syria and Lebanon, French in North Africa.⁵⁶ According to Yusuf Khatar al-Hulo, “this was a major issue that almost split the party in the period 1931–1933.”⁵⁷

Between 1932 and 1936, party activities concentrated on political education among the Arab intelligentsia. In January 1934, the party acquired the journal *al-Duhour*, a defunct publication revived by the party under the editorship of an American-born Lebanese Marxist and long-time party activist intellectual, Salim Khayatah (1910–1966). Under his editorship, the journal quickly revived and became a popular forum for ideological and political debate throughout the region. As an extension of this, Khayatah helped organize the Congress of Arab National Liberation held in Zahla in March 1934. The congress called for the creation of an Arab journal of anti-imperialist thought.⁵⁸ It also called for a federal Arab state in which foreign policy, defense, economics, and armed forces were under a central authority. The gathering identified imperialism as the major enemy of the Arab people and ignorance, poverty, and sectarianism the most serious social problems. The congress also specified that the struggle against Zionism was not religious but political, stemming from the imperialist nature of Zionism.⁵⁹ *Al-Duhour* was published for less than a year, however, and produced only ten issues. Within a few months, its editor was arrested and deported and the press denied permission to operate.⁶⁰

Thereafter, the party concentrated its efforts on building a popular front of progressive intelligentsia in Syrian and Lebanese politics. To this end it established cooperative activities with other groups. The establishment of *al-Tali‘ah*, a journal dedicated to “intellectual liberation” (as announced in its subtitle), was the main manifestation of this cooperation and of Salim Khayatah’s efforts. Its first issue appeared on 16 April 1935. Its editorial board included Fuad al-Shayeb, Kamel ‘Ayyad, Salah El-Din al-Mahayeri, and Michel Aflaq.⁶¹ In an editorial in its first issue, the editors declared, “The journal disclaims any association with any group or sect, either in this country or any other country. An issue may contain conflicting viewpoints and dispositions. Our main objectives are to foster a healthy intellectual environment and to disseminate knowledge.” *Al-Tali‘ah* quickly achieved prominence among Arab intellectuals and became the vanguard publication of political thought in the Arab world. The critique of capitalism and imperialism emerged as dominant themes in its literature. In the summer

of 1937, the objectives of the journal were identified as “the rekindling of progressive thought in Arab culture and literature and promoting development of young Arab intellectuals and introducing them to humanist thought.”⁶²

From its inception up to the end of World War II, most of the articles of *al-Tali‘ah* were exclusively directed against fascism and its racist doctrines, highlighting its attitudes toward the Arabs. Commenting on Adolph Hitler’s book *Mein Kampf*, *al-Tali‘ah* noted that “Hitler classified the Arabs among . . . the apes at the bottom of the [evolutionary] ladder.”⁶³ The party made an effective contribution to the 1935 formation of the Anti-Nazi and Anti-Fascist League of Syria and Lebanon (‘Usbat Mukafahat al-Naziyah wa al-Fashiyah fi Suriya wa Lubnan). *Al-Tali‘ah* devoted a special issue exclusively to the publication of the proceedings of the first Syrian-Lebanese Anti-Fascism Conference, held in Beirut on 6 and 7 May 1939. Introducing the issues, the editors declared that “Fascism is no longer a theory or principle which the Arabs can consider. . . . Fascism is a potential danger which threatens the Arab countries.”⁶⁴ On 20 December, the Anti-Nazi and Anti-Fascist League of Syria and Lebanon published a magazine called *al-Tareik* which was edited and supervised by Marxist and progressive nationalists. The first editorial, by Anton Thabit, entitled “The Mission of the League,” declared:

The Anti-Fascism and Anti-Nazi League was formed in Syria and Lebanon in 1935 for the sole purpose of defending the oppressed, struggling against their mortal enemies and unveiling the potential dangers of political and social ideologies which threaten civilization and human values. *Al-Tareik* was established in order to bring all [anti-fascist] forces together in order to define the agenda, the route and methods of reform. We desire to maintain our cultural heritage, renew, enliven, and strengthen it in order that the free Arab intellect may fulfill its historic humanitarian mission. How can Arab dignity tolerate acceptance of an aggressive state such as [Fascist] Germany which despises our history, disrespects our heritage and mocks our models and ideals.

The First Stage in Historical Perspective

The epistemological foundations of the communist movement in Syria and Lebanon can be traced through the writings of young Lebanese intellectuals. Politically marginalized by the Mandate system and culturally margin-

alized by the colonial ethos of imperialism, they found expression for their disaffection in the social critique of the humanist tradition. Newspapers such as *al-Sahafi al-Ta'eh*, *al-Ma'radh*, and *al-Dabbour* provided a medium for their discourse. In this context, socialist formulations generally, and communism in particular, supplied a ready ideological model for this discourse.

The phenomenological foundations of communist organization in Syria and Lebanon can be traced to the arrival of Fouad al-Shamali to Beirut in 1923. A seasoned communist activist and labor organizer, al-Shamali initiated labor activism in Lebanon and in effect quickly transposed the praxis of the movement from social critique to labor activism. Initiating this new praxis with the organization of the General Syndicate of Tobacco Workers in Bekfia in August 1924, he directly facilitated the organization of the first Arab communist party, the Lebanese People's Party, in October 1924. With party roots established in the labor movement and with labor activism its central platform, the movement moved outside the pale of social critique and into the trenches of class warfare. As the only member of the LPP with any substantive grounding in Marxist theory or communist praxis, al-Shamali was in effect the party's ideologue. Under al-Shamali's tutelage, the LPP's bent for labor activism soon brought it in confrontation with Mandate authorities.

Until late 1925, the Syrian and Lebanese communist movement was centered in Lebanon. Communist activity in Syria was essentially confined to the Armenian community. Liberal nationalist forces, represented in the People's Party (founded in May 1925), were the major voice of opposition in Syrian politics. With the initiation of the Syrian rebellion in July 1925, the LPP became increasingly active in the Syrian arena in support of the rebellion. In December 1925, the LPP amalgamated with the Spartacus League to form the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon, in effect signaling the expansion of its revolutionary mandate. With the spread of the rebellion, government suppression of political activism, then outright oppression, followed suit. Party leaders were arrested or fled in early 1926, and the party ceased to function until their release two years later.

With the release of the members of the party's leadership in 1928, the party reconstituted itself, achieved full membership in the Comintern (in effect signaling its recognition as a member of the world communist movement), and changed its name to the Communist Party of Syria. Ontologically, this both constituted an implicit challenge to French plans to divide Lebanon from Syria and signaled the entrance of the party into the arena of regional politics. The new identity was directly linked to the reality of labor

politics, which remained the central praxis of the party through the rhetoric of imperialism and national liberation as objectives of class struggle.

With expansion of the party into Syria, a new breed of young idealists were recruited from Aleppo, Tripoli, and Damascus. Some were sent to the Moscow Institute of Marxism-Leninism for ideological training and were in effect transformed into a new breed of communists. Through a coup against Fouad al-Shamali in 1932, they took over the party and initiated its transformation into their image of communism—an image reflected from the centers of communist power (the Comintern and Moscow) rather than one molded by the rank and file in labor activism as under the tutelage of Fouad al-Shamali. The first manifestation of this was the arabization of the party, prompted by the Comintern. Under the leadership of this new breed of communists, the party's ties to the labor movement weakened as party praxis increasingly concentrated on the education of the Arab intelligentsia against fascism rather than on labor activism against capitalism and imperialism. The coup against Fouad al-Shamali signaled the closing of the formative stage and the initiation of a new stage in the evolution of the communist movement in Syria and Lebanon.