

The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon

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To Jenann
bint-al-batt ʿawamah

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PREFACE

On a pleasant summer evening in 1968, I completed a public lecture at the American University in Beirut entitled “The Crisis in the Communist Parties of the Arab World.” This lecture was subsequently published in the American University of Beirut’s oldest academic Middle East journal, the *Middle East Forum* (vol. 45, no. 4, 1969), which, seven years later, ended over sixty years of publication as one of the first casualties of the civil war.

A discussion ensued after the lecture in the Faisal coffee shop opposite AUB campus, which used to be the gathering point of an intellectual circle. My friend, the late Bulend al-Haydari, a distinguished Iraqi poet and independent Marxist, was at that point in exile in Beirut, driven from Iraq after the Baathist coup of 8 February 1963, having almost lost his life following a humiliating arrest. He introduced me to one of the people from the audience who had joined us, the late Dr. Hussein Mroué, a distinguished leader in the Lebanese Communist Party. They both began raising some issues that they thought were already being dealt with in the turmoil taking place at that time in the party. Dr. Mroué shook his finger and said, “You have good ideas and I think you should follow the debate raging in the Lebanese Communist Party.” I began, from that lecture, to follow his advice. He was assassinated almost fifteen years later during the civil war and was one of the most missed intellectuals of the area. My friend, al-Haydari, who continued to live in exile in England, arranged for some meetings, first with his friend, Mohammed Dakroub, the devoted Lebanese communist who was then secretary of the party’s journal, *al-Tareik*. He gave me a complete set of the journal, which was my first schooling in the thoughts and intellectual foundations of Lebanese communism; years before he wrote his magnificent book on the subject. He even went as far as writing some useful, introductory ideas. Soon after I met the charismatic intellectual founder of the Lebanese Communist Party of fifty years earlier, Yusuf Ibrahim Yazbak, still vigorous in his late seventies and still intellectually full of life and

ideas, a Marxist but not a communist, eager but not emotional, secular but not antagonistic and, above all, a magnificent human being. We struck up a friendship that lasted until his death in 1982 and that was cemented by both of us being members of the executive board of the Union of Arab Historians. While he was living in Paris, escaping the civil war, Abu Ibrahim served as my mentor, guide, and thermometer of Arab politics in general and the ideological web of the Lebanese Communist Party in particular. My friend Bulend al-Haydari was again forced to escape the raging civil war in Beirut and went to London where he continued his support and generosity toward the authors until his sudden death in 1996.

All of these individuals had a hand in encouraging the ideas that went into this book, and this book should serve as a living testimony to their spirit, but any defect must surely be attributed to the authors. They supplied us with all the documents they had and through the years took our work as a service to historical academia rather than to a narrow political expression of ideological convictions. I hope this book will contribute to the memory of these people and to an understanding of their contribution to history.

The nature of the communist movement in Syria and Lebanon is examined in this study in terms of the discourse conducted by the movement from its founding in the early twenties to the present. Party documents and publications—programs, communications, pamphlets, journals, and newspapers—constitute both the record of the movement's history and the imprint of the movement on history. As an impression on the landscape of history, discourse records the perspectives of its creators on their world in time and over time. In time, in other words, discourse records their definition of the situation; and over time it provides a record of continuity and change—in both the situation and in the perspective.

By the communist movement we are referring to the set of actors that subscribed to communism and played a role in the politics of communism in Syria and Lebanon. While the Communist Party is a central part of the movement, at any given time it may not have been the only actor. In other words, the communist movement encompasses the Communist Party, but is broader. *Movement* denotes purposeful motion—in this case motion in history; *party*, on the other hand, denotes an organizational form.

This is the second book in a trilogy on the communist movement in the Arab world that we have been working on for almost two decades. The first, *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920–1988*, was published in 1990; and the third, tentatively titled *The Communist Movement in the Arab World: International Foundations and National Cases—Iraq and Sudan*, is in draft form

and should be completed within the year. While the project was initiated long before the collapse of the Soviet Union and may not seem as relevant now as when it was initiated to understanding the forces operating in Middle East politics, this research indicates otherwise.

There are many systems of transliteration of names from Arabic, and no particular standards prevail. Transliteration used in this book followed the Library of Congress system, with one modification: diacritical marks are dropped.

We are indebted to many scholars and friends who contributed so much to our research along the way. Although we cannot thank all of them here, their contributions are reflected in the fruition of this work. We would be remiss, however, not to acknowledge the particular contribution of Dr. Andrej Kruetz of the Institute of International Studies, University of Lodz (Poland), who critically read and commented on the sections related to the role of the Soviet Union in the international movement. Research is an arduous, expensive and labor-intensive task as well as a labor of love. We wish to acknowledge the contributions of the University of Calgary, Killam Resident Fellowship, and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting this research; and to thank Judi Powell and Doreen Neville for their patience and skill in transforming scribbled notes to printed text.

Tareq Ismael