

When Parliaments Ruled the Middle East

Matthieu Rey

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Iraq and Syria, 1946–63

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To Peter Sluglett

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Timeline of Key Events

- 1789: Start of Selim III's reign
- 1826: Mahmud II erases Janissaries from the Ottoman Empire
- 1830: Ibrahim Pasha, son of Muhammad 'Ali, invades Syria; the end of the Mamluk dynasty in Iraq
- 1838: Establishment of two assemblies, *dar i shura* and *meclis i vala*
- 1839: Proclamation of Edict of Gulhane
- 1840: Ibrahim Pasha withdraws from Syria
- 1856: Proclamation of *batt-i humayun*
- 1858: New land code promulgated
- 1860: Massacre of Damascus
- 1876
- 23 December: A constitution is promulgated
- 1877: War between the Ottoman Empire and Russia
- 1878: Abdülhamid II disbands parliament
- 1890: Reuters obtains a concession in Persia
- 1892: Massive protests against Reuters' concessions
- 1908
- 3 July: Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) organizes a coup; the 1877 constitution is reestablished
- 1909
- April: Failed attempt at a counter-coup
- April: Opening of the new parliament
- 1912
- July: Parliament is disbanded after a coup
- 1913
- 23 January: A triumvirate assumes power over the Ottoman Empire
- 1914
- October: The Ottoman Empire enters the First World War

- 1915: Battle of Kut in Iraq
- 1916: The last Ottoman parliament is dissolved
- 1917
- 23 March: General Maud enters Baghdad
- 1918
- 1 October: Faisal, son of Husayn, the Sharif of Mecca, enters Damascus alongside Anzac soldiers
- 1919–20
- 7 June 1919 to 24 July 1920: The Syrian Congress rules in Bilad al-Sham
- 1920: Revolt in Iraq
- 1924–26: Revolt in Jebel Druze and then throughout Syria
- 1926: League of Nations recognizes Mosul *wilaya* as part of Iraq
- 1928: The French promulgate a new constitution in Syria
- 1932: Iraq becomes independent; legislative elections take place in Syria
- 1935: Major strike against the French in Syria
- 1936: The National Bloc (al-Kutla al-Wataniya) wins the elections in Syria
- 1 October: Bakr Sidqi stages the first coup in Iraq
- 1937
- August: Bakr Sidqi is killed; further coups take place in Iraq
- 1941
- May: The regent and ministers flee Iraq after a coup; a government of “national union” is formed
- 1 June: The British reoccupy Iraq and reestablish the regent
- 11 July: Defeat of Vichy forces in Syria
- 1943: Free French authorities reestablish the Syrian constitution and launch legislative elections. Shukri al-Quwatli becomes president.
- 1945
- 29 May: Damascus uprising against the French
- 25 October: First government of Sa’d Allah al-Jabri in Syria
- 1946
- 5 March: Tawfiq al-Suwaydi forms a new government in Iraq
- March: Five political parties are licensed in Iraq
- 27 April: Second government of Sa’d Allah al-Jabri in Syria
- April–May: In Bludan (Syria), the second Pan Arab conference condemns Zionist enterprise; Iraqi ministers argue in favor of an oil blockade

- June: al-Suwaydi fails to pass his budget in the Iraqi Senate
 - 18 June: New government of Arshad al-'Umari in Iraq
 - 19 July: Strike in Kirkuk
 - October: Nuri al-Sa'id forms a new government
 - 16 December: Syrian authorities execute Sulayman Murshid,
an Alawite leader
- 1947
- 19 January: Arrest of Comrade Fahd
 - 10 March: Elections in Iraq
 - 30 March: Salih Jabr, first Shia prime minister of Iraq, forms a
new government
 - 7 April: Birth of the Ba'th Party in Damascus
 - 31 May: New electoral law in Syria; women are able to vote but not to
run for office
 - June: Creation of the National Party in Syria
 - 10 June: Friendship agreement signed between Turkey and Iraq
 - 20 July: Legislative elections in Syria
- 1948
- 15 January: British and Iraqi ministers sign a new treaty in
Portsmouth
 - 18–27 January: The Wathba; massive demonstrations erupt in Baghdad
 - 15 May: Israel declares independence
 - 16 May: Iraq and Syria declare war on Israel
 - 2–3 December: Major demonstrations erupt in Damascus
- 1949
- 16 January: Nuri al-Sa'id forms a new government
 - 30 March: Husni al-Za'im stages a coup in Syria
 - 16 May: Syrian government ratifies the Taplina agreement
 - 26 June: New constitution written in Syria
 - 14 August: A second coup is staged in Syria
 - October: Failure of the national charter proposed by Nuri al-Sa'id to
the other Iraqi political parties
 - 31 October: Taha al-Hashimi supervises a mission to unify Iraq and
Syria
 - 24 November: Legislative elections in Syria
 - 10 December: 'Ali Jawda al-Ayyubi forms a government
 - 14 December: Third coup in Syria
 - 26 December: Khalid al-'Azm forms a new government in Syria

1950

- 1 February: ‘Ali Jawda al-Ayyubi declares himself to be against foreign involvement in Syria. He has to resign after this declaration.
- February: Adib al-Shishakli obtains a loan from the Saudi government
- 5 February: Tawfiq al-Suwaydi forms a new government
- 6 March: The Iraqi minister of interior, Salih Jabr, issues a law that strips all Jews of Iraqi nationality
- 13 March: Lebanon and Syria break the economic union
- May: The Tripartite Declaration from western powers prohibits weapons exports to the Middle East
- 25 June: Outbreak of the Korean War
- 8 July: Ba‘th Party claims “Neutrality, the natural way toward Arabness [*al-‘uruba*].”
- December: Foundation of the Development Board

1951

- 2 January: Nuri al-Sa‘id delivers a speech in the House of Representatives denouncing feudalism (*al-nizam al-iqta‘i*)
- August: Nuri al-Sa‘id reaches a new oil agreement with the Iraq Petroleum Company
- 2 December: Fourth coup in Syria by Adib al-Shishakli

1952

- 4 April: al-Shishakli bans all political parties in Syria
- 23 July: The Free Officers take power in Egypt
- October: A series of demonstrations lead to the resignation of the president of the Lebanese Republic, Bishara al-Khuri
- 22–25 November: Intifada in Iraq

1953

- 22 May: Faisal II is crowned king
- 21 June: al-Shishakli becomes president of the republic and a new constitution is established
- 29 September: Representatives of most of the Syrian parties attend a congress in Homs and announce a pact denouncing the new constitution and committing to fighting the regime until its collapse
- September: Muhammad Fadil al-Jamali forms his first government
- October: The Arab Liberation Movement wins the legislative elections in Syria

1954

February: Uprising in Jebel Druze

25 February: al-Shishakli is overthrown

April: al-Jamali resigns after failing to pass his budget

April: Massive flood in Baghdad

6 June: Legislative elections in Iraq

August: Nuri al-Sa'id forms a government and launches policies against communists and constitutional freedom

September: New legislative elections in Iraq overseen by Nuri al-Sa'id

24 September–6 October: Legislative elections in Syria

1955

6–13 January: 'Adnan Menderes negotiates the Baghdad Pact with al-Sa'id

1 February: Resignation of Bishara al-Khuri, prime minister of Syria

28 February: Israel launches an attack on Gaza

16 April: Bandung Conference

25 April: 'Adnan al-Malki, Ba'thist officer, is killed in Damascus

May: The British withdraw from the Hannabiya and Shayba airbases

4 August: al-Quwatli becomes president of the reinstated Syrian republic

1956

February: al-Quwatli calls for a national pact to ease political tensions

13 August: Arab lawyers meet and denounce western powers' attacks against Egypt; following the meeting, Kamil al-Jadirji is arrested

5 July: Parliament unanimously approves plans for a committee to negotiate with Egypt for a federal union of Egypt and Syria

26 July: Nationalization of the Suez Canal in Egypt

10 October: Four Iraqi communists who had recanted are pardoned by royal decree

29 October: Israel invades Egyptian Sinai; beginning of the Suez War

3 November: The USSR pledges its assistance to Syria to reinforce Syrian independence; the pledge is made during a reception in Moscow honoring President al-Quwatli prior to his departure from the USSR

1957

8 January: The trial of 47 Syrians on charges of treason opens

26 February: Eleven Syrians and a Lebanese are sentenced to death in Damascus for conspiracy and treason; three are acquitted and thirty

- others draw prison sentences ranging from three months to twenty years
- 7 May: Syria protests to Turkey that military concentrations on the Turko-Syrian frontier are harming relations between the two countries
- 13 August: The Syrian authorities request that the United States recall three members of its consulate; beginning of the “Syrian crisis”
- 13 October: Egyptian troops land in Lattakia
- 10 November: Premier ‘Ali Jawda announces the establishment of a \$40m five-year social development program in Iraq
- 19 September: Partial legislative elections in Damascus, opposing ‘Adnan al-Malki against Mustafa al-Siba’i
- 18 November: In a joint session with the Syrian parliament, an Egyptian parliamentary delegation votes for the federal union of Syria and Egypt
- 1958
- 2 February: Egypt and Syria merge into the United Arab Republic (UAR)
- 14 February: Jordan and Iraq form the Arab Federation
- 24 February: Dissolution of all political parties in the UAR
- 14 March: Yemen joins the UAR
- April: Nasser’s visit to the “northern province” (former Syria) greeted with huge popular support
- 14 July: Revolution in Iraq, assassination of King Faisal II and the Iraqi royal family
- 20 July: ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim, head of the Revolutionary Council, agrees to receive help from the USSR ahead of Iraq’s withdrawal from the Baghdad Pact
- 12 September: ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif is relieved of his post
- 27 September: First agrarian reform in Syria
- 29 September: Iraq launches its first agrarian reform
- 1959
- 8–14 March: Failed attempt to overthrow the government after the uprising in Mosul
- 14 July: Massacre in Kirkuk
- 7 October: Assassination attempt against Qasim
- 31 December: Akram al-Hawrani resigns as vice president of UAR

1960

14 September: Creation of OPEC

6 October: Iraqi newspaper *al-Bayan* calls for a permanent constitution

1961

September: Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade

28 September: Dissolution of UAR

December: Legislative elections in Syria

1962

28 March–2 April: Coup and counter-coup in Syria

20 September: The Syrian government dissolves parliament

15 October: Negotiation over Euphrates Dam in Syria completed

16 October: Iraq announces it is not cooperating with Arab League after the League admits Kuwait

3 December: Qasim announces discussions with Syrian authorities to unify Syria and Iraq

9 December: Syrian prime minister announces the next elections to be held before next July

1963

27 January: Serious clashes between students and police in Damascus

28 January: Syrian government takes drastic measures to ensure order

8 February: Ba‘thist and Iraqi officers stage a coup; a new revolutionary government assumes power

14 February: An Iraqi delegation meets Arab delegates to resume Iraq’s participation in the Arab League

19 February: Peace negotiations start between the new Iraqi government and Kurdish rebels

15 March: Hassan Bakr, Iraqi prime minister, outlines the policy of the Revolutionary Council

Introduction

17 April 1946. Damascus. On the balcony of his residence, the Syrian president, Shukri al-Quwatli, wearing a frock coat and tarboosh, stands in front of the crowd gathered to listen to his speech.¹ His posture and clothes are part of his performance as representative of the Syrians and defender of the renaissance of modern Syria. He delivers a speech to launch the festivities: the last French soldier has left Syrian territory, symbolically heralding the independence of the former mandate. In his speech, al-Quwatli recalls his country's long struggle against colonial powers, drawing parallels between the Ottoman and French occupations in order to condemn any encroachment on national sovereignty. He commends the authorities—the parliament, and himself as the newly elected president of Syria since 1943—for their role during the final stages of the struggle against the French. Finally, he describes the new challenges ahead, including the need to assert national sovereignty in the economic and diplomatic fields and to fulfil the true promise of independence by giving “the people” the right to live and to exercise their prerogatives as citizens. Thus he gives birth to the new nation under his command.

In 1946, Shukri al-Quwatli was already well-known as a First World War activist against the Ottoman authorities and as a member of the major nationalist group al-Kutla al-Wataniya (the National Bloc). He rose to the top of the party by taking a strong stance against any negotiations with the French. Thanks to his political maneuverings both inside the party and in the parliament, he managed to get himself elected as president at the end of the Second World War. He symbolized the elite, who had campaigned for the establishment of a constitutional order to achieve independence, and who argued that a parliamentary system could resolve the divisions within the nation witnessed during the Ottoman period and subsequently help build a modern and independent country. Their commitment to the

constitutional ideals that emerged during the late nineteenth century saw them ascribe a high value to economic freedom and political rights. 1946 marked a turning point: representatives in the assembly could now assume power and rule the country without any foreign supervision.

25 February 1946. Baghdad. Tawfiq al-Suwaydi, often seen in a suit and tie and wearing small glasses, has not waited for his confirmation as president of the council of ministers to put forth his ideas for reform. He has written an article for the national daily newspaper, *al-Zaman*,² in which he argues for the necessary amendment of the emergency law in order to reestablish constitutional order. This initiative comes a few days before his appointment as president of the council, a position he had occupied two decades earlier. On 5 March, he stands up in the House of Representatives (Majlis al-Nuwwab al-'Iraqi), confident of the assembly's support for his program. The regent, who is in charge of the country until the young King Faisal II comes of age, agrees to al-Suwaydi's initiative, which will put an end to the particular circumstances created in the aftermath of the Second World War. Since 1941, the British have reoccupied the country, and successive Iraqi governments have implemented emergency laws. Hamdi al-Bashahshi, the previous president of the council, has tried to shift away from this position. Eventually, Tawfiq al-Suwaydi announces a new era in which the Iraqi constitution will overtly structure the political game: all Iraqi men will have the right and the opportunity to compete for power.

Tawfiq al-Suwaydi had already been president of the council once, the youngest ever, in 1929.³ After studying law, he joined the new Iraqi bureaucracy formed in the wake of the First World War. He distinguished himself in the service of King Faisal I and soon rose to be president of the council when Iraq became a member of the League of Nations. He embodied the new elite that supported the Iraqi monarchy, and ascribed a high value to the law as a tool for changing the social, cultural, economic, and political orders, whilst also upholding the social order prevailing in Iraq. He therefore fought for the spirit of the constitution, proclaiming Iraq as a "constitutional liberal monarchy." His campaign against the emergency law highlighted his commitment to this and opened a new era. In the coming months, political parties emerged and competed with one another. In 1946, events took place in Iraq that emphasized the need for a true parliamentary system.

Both leaders represented the new elite who had assumed power on the eve of independence. Their general attitude toward the institutional system was reflected both in their posture—adopting clearly western standards not

only in terms of attire but also in terms of the constitution—and their practices. Al-Quwatli led the National Bloc, trusting this party to be the right vehicle to fight against the French and then to establish his dominion over parliament. Al-Suwaydi went through several new political groups before forming and leading the government, and advocated strongly in favor of the full implementation of constitutional freedoms. Both belonged to families of the established classes who had become involved in politics during the interwar period, endorsing constitutionalist values as the true way to build modern nations on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

8 February 1963. Baghdad. In the early morning, officers and soldiers first assassinate Jalal al-Awqati, the communist air force chief, and then occupy the Abu Ghraib radio station. In the following hours, ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif and his supporters will manage to take control of the majority of the centers of power and besiege the Ministry of Defense, where the prime minister and head of state, ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim, has taken refuge. The attackers finally seize the building and execute Qasim. The coup staged by ‘Arif and his followers establishes the first Ba‘thist regime in Iraq, which is to witness massive bloodshed in the coming months. This event also ends all discussion of the reestablishment of certain constitutional elements and former political parties.⁴ Those remaining politicians who played a role during the monarchy and Qasim’s regime are sidelined. A new era has begun. A month later, the event is mirrored in Damascus. Officers stage a coup against Khalid al-‘Azm’s government despite the fact that he had introduced emergency law a few weeks earlier. Soon thereafter, the new leaders call on the Ba‘thist activists to assume power and govern. As in Iraq, a new historical sequence has been set in motion.

Both regimes employed the same rhetoric and practices of power—even if in the case of Iraq they were far more brutal. As a last resort, in both countries a revolutionary council appointed a government, whose policies and administrative appointments framed general state discourse. The two Ba‘thist coups did not put an end to military unrest. On the contrary, leadership turnover accelerated during the 1960s. Something new emerged from these coups and counter-coups, marking a period that has been identified as an “age of revolution.”⁵ The core principles of this period put all aspects of the parliamentary system, liberal ideas, and constitutional regulations in jeopardy. The circumstances—including the rural crisis, the betrayal of the old elites, and imperialist threats—legitimized authoritarian rule from the perspective of the new authorities. In 1963, something snapped.