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Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, Cold War Poet

ELLIOTT COLLA*

Abstract

In the autumn of 1959, the Iraqi modernist poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926–1964) published a series of perplexing autobiographical vignettes entitled *I Used to be a Communist* (*Kuntu shiyū‘iyyan*) in the Baghdad daily, *Al-Ḥurriyya* (Freedom). For 17 weeks, al-Sayyāb detailed his involvement with the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), his decision to leave in 1954 and his reflections on the present state of Iraqi culture and politics. Al-Sayyāb’s writing attempts to settle personal scores and reveal uncomfortable secrets, but it does more than that—it serves to plant al-Sayyāb’s flag within a Cold War that is as local as it is global. Indeed, its publication took place in the shadow of al-Sayyāb’s emerging relation with the Central Intelligence Agency front organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom. *Kuntu shiyū‘iyyan* is more than a key document in the shifting political tides of 1959; it is also a literary-critical work, and indeed the only major prose work by one of modern Iraq’s most important poets. The author would like to thank Qussay Al-Attabi, Elizabeth Holt, Kevin Jones, and Levi Thompson for their astute comments and help on earlier drafts of this essay. My special appreciation to Elizabeth Holt for so generously sharing the jewels she has been extracting from the IACF mines.

Introduction

Fifty years after Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb’s passing, it is time to consider his anti-communist polemic entitled *Kuntu shiyū‘iyyan* (I Used to be a Communist), a collection of essays that al-Sayyāb referred to as his ‘memoirs’ (*mudhakkirāt*).¹ While widely known, the memoirs have been surprisingly marginal to the study of the poet. Considering the dearth of biographical materials on al-Sayyāb, and the dearth of critical editions of modern Arabic letters in general, this oversight has had a deleterious impact not just on our understanding of al-Sayyāb’s development as an artist, but also on our understanding of Arab literary modernism as a mid-century cultural phenomenon.

The ‘memoir’ is composed of a series of 40 newspaper essays hurriedly published by al-Sayyāb in the Ba‘thist newspaper *Al-Ḥurriyya* (Freedom) during the autumn of 1959. They have come to be known by the title of the first 29 essays, which was simply ‘*Kuntu shiyū‘iyyan*’ (or ‘I was a Communist’, with emphasis on the aspect of completion).²

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In 2007, Walīd Khālid Aḥmad Ḥasan edited these essays and *Manshūrāt al-Jamal* published them in a book that is now widely available. In a field lacking in biographies of major writers and poets, and in a field lacking in scholarly critical editions of first editions, letters, memoirs and essays, Ḥasan's contribution is significant.

The memoirs represent al-Sayyāb's longest concerted work of prose, but even so it is easy to see why no one wants to touch them: they are a mess in terms of genre, jumping from philosophical memoir to cheap anecdote, from personal attack to nuanced criticism. There is also much that is ugly and unconvincing. Al-Sayyāb recounts the details of sex scandals and corruption. He names and attacks old friends. Many of these attacks—like the one on his younger brother, Muṣṭafā—are vicious and cruel. Moreover the anti-Jewish, anti-Kurd and anti-Iranian streak of his pen is impossible to deny. Given their mixed quality, and given that they show al-Sayyāb in such an unpleasant light, it is easy to see why his champions have largely ignored what these essays actually say, even if they have used them as sources.³ Historians of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), certainly aware of al-Sayyāb's attacks, have likewise ignored them, happy to turn the page on an unpleasant chapter.

Nonetheless, the memoirs give a vivid account of a poet attempting to live a life under extremely difficult conditions. In 1959, the year al-Sayyāb published the memoirs, he was eking out a life on the margins of Iraqi society. Unemployed and under attack, these were difficult times for al-Sayyāb and it impacted his creativity: in 1958 and 1959 he composed only five relatively short poems. The memoirs are filled with astute (and less astute) readings of poetry and literature. He elaborates on the virtues of English modernists like Edith Sitwell and T. S. Eliot, and on the vices of bad communist writers. He reflects on his own experiences teaching and writing and reading. Most startlingly, al-Sayyāb's essays reveal him to be a Cold War public intellectual, quite willing to throw himself into the ranks of the anti-communist liberal front then emerging across Western Europe. Indeed, in the memoirs, al-Sayyāb explicitly aligns his own experiences with the ICP and the experiences of ex-communist writers, like Stephen Spender and Ignazio Silone, leaders within the Congress for Cultural Freedom CCF, (later International Association for Cultural Freedom), which was a creation of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This connection to Spender and Silone was also underscored by the fact that translated excerpts from the anti-communist classic *The God That Failed* appeared in the pages of *Al-Ḥurriyya* alongside al-Sayyāb's memoirs.⁴ Like Spender and Silone, al-Sayyāb would find patronage (albeit of a third-class nature) within the CCF. While at least one of al-Sayyāb's biographers has noted these connections and implications, he chose to downplay them, just as he doubts whether the funding sources and motives of the CCF would have been known at the time.⁵ Recent historical studies suggest otherwise, as do al-Sayyāb's memoirs. Indeed, the memoirs invite us to revisit this moment in his biography, and invite us to conceive of al-Sayyāb as a self-conscious Cold War poet. At present, it is foreign to study Arabic letters in terms of the Cold War context, and we should not expect al-Sayyāb's champions to embrace it. But doing so allows us to contextualize his own growth as a poet during the critical period following his break from the ICP in 1953–1954 until his death in 1964. This article traces the outlines of this period, and attempts to summarize some of the major statements of the memoirs.

We might begin with two questions that are raised but only partially answered by al-Sayyāb's memoirs: why did al-Sayyāb break with the ICP in 1953–1954, and what, if any, impact did this rupture have on his poetry? If al-Sayyāb broke with the ICP by 1954, why did he dig up this history so publicly in August 1959?

The 1959 context

The answer to the second question is easier to address. The large context of al-Sayyāb's essays is nothing less than the 1958 *coup d'état* that installed the government of Abdel Karim Qasim. Hanna Batatu, Eric Davis, Johan Franzén and Charles Tripp have described in great detail the way the July 14 Revolution turned popular Iraqi politics on its head. One of those turns was the way in which Qasim rebuffed the wishes of the pan-Arabist cadres who composed the majority of the Free Officer movement that brought about the July 14 Revolution.⁶ At the very moment when other Arab regimes were seeking political unions that would undo the borders created by colonial powers, Qasim closed the door on this option for Iraq. This insured that Qasim would never lack enemies among the pan-Arab camp.

At the same time, under Qasim, the ICP found itself enfranchised and occupying a gradually privileged position within key state institutions such as the Ministries of Education and Media. It was not just that the ICP had been released from Nuri al-Said's prison archipelago, but after the Mosul Revolt in 1959 it became a pillar of Qasim's republic, both at the level of state policy and street politics.⁷ Naziha al-Dulaymi, Qasim's Communist Minister of Municipalities, not only initiated the massive housing project known now as Sadr City, but also the personal status law of 1959, which still stands as a high-water mark of progressive rights legislation in the Arab world.⁸ On the level of street politics, the ICP—with its national mass organization and mobilization capacities—could be counted on to show support of the regime in times of challenge. Even after the ICP network of militias—*al-Muqārwama al-Sha'biyya*—was taken over by the Qasim regime, it remained associated with the party.⁹

The rise of the ICP within state institutions came at the expense of pan-Arabist parties, and in particular the Free Officers, the Ba'ath and the Nasserists.¹⁰ After 14 July Qasim never caught a break, neither from the remnants of the old regime he had helped to overthrow, nor from the pan-Arabists who felt, probably correctly, that the new republic should reflect their vision. As is well known, over the next months, the pan-Arabists, members of the old elites and allies in the military and in the old parties launched a series of challenges. In autumn 1958, Qasim was compelled to send his one-time ally, Abdel Salam Aref, into exile in Germany. Soon after his surreptitious return to Iraq, Aref was sentenced for sedition. In December 1958, Qasim defeated a coup led by Rashid 'Ali al-Gaylani. In March 1959, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was implicated in an armed revolt in the city of Mosul. It was only through a strong, bloody show of force by the Popular Resistance paramilitaries that the threat was rebuffed.¹¹ Revolutionary courts, led by ICP figures, meted out harsh punishments on captured rebels. Months later, in July 1959, clashes broke out in Kirkuk during anniversary celebrations of the revolution. In this violence, Kurdish ICP cadres exploited the situation to massacre Turkmen in the city.¹² With this incident, the reputation of the ICP suffered considerably, and its influence within the republic began to wane.¹³

This history is the immediate context of al-Sayyāb's writing. In fact, al-Sayyāb attests that it was the ugly role played by ICP militants in Kirkuk that sparked his desire to write the memoir, and they began to appear exactly one month after the massacres. For al-Sayyāb, the Kirkuk massacres were no accident, but rather part of a blood-thirsty, anti-Arab tendency that lay at the core of communism and the communist party, both in Iraq and elsewhere. In this sense, al-Sayyāb offers his memoirs as part of a war effort. As he writes,

What is my purpose in these writings? We are engaged in a war of beliefs with the communists, and the communist threat is as large as the threat posed by colonialism. Just as we were able to rid ourselves of colonialism—and its spies, its treacherous agents (like Nuri al-Sa‘id and his ilk) and its alliances, like the Baghdad Pact—so too can we save ourselves from the communist nightmare. We are engaged in a just war (*jihād*) here, defending our national identity (*qawmiyyatunā*), our religion, our ways and our tradition. We are defending our independence and our very being. O enemies of communism from all walks of life, religions and nations—it is time to unite and stand shoulder to shoulder!¹⁴

Alongside this broader history of ideas and geopolitics, there is the more personal history that is the context for al-Sayyāb’s writing. There for example, the very real difficulties al-Sayyāb faced in finding regular employment as a teacher—difficulties he experienced as a direct result of his political activism in the ICP during the 1940s. Immediately following the 14 July Revolution, al-Sayyāb was finally appointed as an English teacher, with a significant increase in income. He was soon transferred to a better position in the Ministry of Trade. But his good fortune was not to last. Following the Mosul rebellion in March 1959, al-Sayyāb was denounced as ‘an enemy of the revolution’ (*‘adūw al-thawra*) by co-workers after he refused to sign their petition condemning Gamal Abdel Nasser.¹⁵ Al-Sayyāb was detained for questioning, and then fired from his job.¹⁶ He soon applied to another job in a petroleum company but his application was rejected, supposedly due to the influence of communists within the Ministry of Petroleum.¹⁷ During this period, al-Sayyāb spent much of his free time with the Palestinian poet, critic, novelist, artist and translator Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā as well as Muḥyī al-Dīn Ismā‘īl, his friend and editor of the Ba‘th Party newspaper *Al-Hurriyya*, where al-Sayyāb would publish his essays. There are also tales of al-Sayyāb’s harassment at this time by state officials and ICP cadres. In one story, al-Sayyāb tells of being accosted by communists in the street who forced him to pin a picture of Abdel Karim Qasim on his lapel.¹⁸ In another story, al-Sayyāb describes a visit one evening by a group from the *Maqāwama Sha‘biyya* who asked to be directed to Ismā‘īl’s home, which was nearby. Al-Sayyāb’s aunt supposedly told them that Ismā‘īl had moved away and that they did not know his current address. Immediately after, al-Sayyāb ran to inform Ismā‘īl, and the two men decided to spend the evening at Jabrā’s home instead. Jabrā entertained them by reciting the entire play of *Hamlet*, whose translation he had just finished.¹⁹ In the shadow of the Kirkuk massacre of July 1959 and his personal difficulties, it is not hard to understand why al-Sayyāb would write what he did, and why he might take such a personal tone.

Breaking from the ICP (1953–1954)

Kuntu shiyū‘iyyan does not offer a linear explanation for al-Sayyāb’s break with the ICP in 1953–1954, but it does describe a broad set of causes and grievances, as well as vivid stories of personal experiences. Together, they form an extended public confession and renunciation of the poet’s involvement in the ICP, along the lines of the *barā‘a* (innocence) performance that was a familiar ritual of twentieth-century political life in Iraq.²⁰

The bulk of al-Sayyāb’s complaints against communism are related through stories of sexual scandal, moral corruption and personal betrayal. As he puts it more than once,

communists face three main charges—that they are ‘ruthless killers, sexual perverts and atheistic enemies of religion’.²¹ Al-Sayyāb’s essays are peppered with salacious anecdotes that illustrate these charges, and in the process tarnishes the names of prominent ICP figures.

One such story, regarding a sex scandal that brought about the arrest of ICP leadership in 1948, will suffice. Al-Sayyāb recounts that, following the popular unrest known as the ‘Leap’ or *Wathba* of 1948, while a number of party members were under arrest, a simple, sympathetic butcher sent cooked meals to the prisoners in their jail. He sent these with his son, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and his daughter, who were both active members in the party. When one of the prisoners was released, the father invited the man to stay at their home. Subsequently, the girl became pregnant. When the father found out, he approached the comrade who declined to marry the girl on the grounds that he was not in a position to provide for her or a child and that his dangerous life as an activist would only bring her harm. The girl’s father insisted, promising to support the girl if they were married. But still, the man refused. The girl’s father and brother then approached Yūsuf Salmān Yūsuf—Comrade Fahd, the Secretary General of the ICP—who in turn implored the comrade to do the right thing. Al-Sayyāb reminds his readers that this man was an atheist, while relishing the next twist in the story: he then told the father that he could not possibly marry the girl since he was of one sect and she was of another. Comrade Fahd returned to the family to tell them he had failed. At this point, the father and the brother decided to kill the girl and bury her. After killing his sister, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb began to worry that their crime would be discovered. So, to save his own neck, he approached the police offering them details about Comrade Fahd’s whereabouts in exchange for clemency for the murder he had committed. Comrade Fahd and others were soon arrested, supposedly on the basis of the man’s testimony.²² In other places, al-Sayyāb recounts the story of how former Party Secretary Bahā’ al-Dīn Nūrī once seduced a party activist named Madeleine Mayer with promises of marriage. He then abandoned her after she became pregnant. According to al-Sayyāb, Mayer gave birth to a boy in prison while the party secretary went on his merry way.²³

Elsewhere, al-Sayyāb recounts tales of drunkenness and debauchery, such as this one from the village of Jaykūr in the 1940s:

The comrades’ gatherings never lacked drink, and they were livened by the appearance of Bilgūs, a beautiful young girl whose father worked as a peasant on my grandfather’s land. The girl’s husband had divorced her on account of her loose morals, and she had returned to live with her father. Afraid of getting pregnant, she entertained the comrades in her own uncommon way. And Comrade Fahd enjoyed the lion’s share of her supple body.²⁴

Al-Sayyāb also describes instances of atheism and godlessness, as well as stories of ICP activists winning over peasants with empty promises of land and wealth.²⁵ But of all the scandals, there are two that stand out: the Jewishness of the ICP, and the disloyal, sectarian character of the ICP and communism more generally. These two things are bound up in one another. For instance, al-Sayyāb’s account is filled with condemnations of Jewish Iraqi communists who, acting under orders from Moscow, used the ICP to pursue policies that more in line with Zionist than Iraqi or Arab national interests. Much of what al-Sayyāb argues about Jews is simply racist and deeply troubling—as, for instance, when he claims that it was ‘international Jewry’ (*al-yahūdiyya al-*

'*alamiyya*) with its 'wide influence' (*nufūdh wāsi'*) that turned public opinion against Hitler. According to al-Sayyāb, anti-Nazi sentiment was the result of 'pernicious Jewish hatred'.²⁶

Although disturbing, al-Sayyāb's comments on Jews do stem in some part from the disastrous policies of the ICP during the late 1940s, and in particular its initial support for the partition of Palestine.²⁷ Like other communist parties in the Arab world, the ICP would never live down this mistake.²⁸ But al-Sayyāb's objections to the Jewish character of the ICP go beyond a critique of the party line on Palestine: for him, the very presence of Jews in the party was an indication that the party was foreign, or, better, that it could never be considered indigenous within Arab Iraq. It is this broader 'foreignness'—or, more precisely, the non-Sunni and non-Arab element of the ICP—that is most troubling in al-Sayyāb's writings on the party. To understand this, we need to recall that by 1959 the Jewish ranks of the ICP had been depleted and few Jews still held leadership positions. In other words, his complaints about the Jewishness of the party reflect a reality that no longer existed. Importantly, however, many of the party positions that had been vacated by Jews who had emigrated were at this time filled by cadres from the Kurdish north, where the party had greatly expanded over the course of the 1950s. Similarly, too, the ranks of Shiite members of the ICP grew in size.²⁹

Thus, in the context of 1959, the threat posed by Iraqi Jewish communists was not so much real as it was an ethnic spectre for talking about the threat of Iraq's 'hybridities', to borrow Orit Bashkin's term, which included Kurds and the Shi'a, groups that did pose a challenge to the pan-Arab conception of Iraqi identity. In this respect, it is critical to recognize that, for pan-Arab nationalists, the internationalist rhetoric of the communist party was seen not as a kind of cosmopolitanism that could transcend differences, but rather as a source of sectarian division within unities that needed to be understood as ethnic and national in essence. Indeed, this point is underscored each time al-Sayyāb employs choice derogatory terms—like *shu'ūbi*, *qarāmīta* and *ikhwān al-yahūd*—to refer to the ICP.³⁰

Part of al-Sayyāb's comments here and elsewhere thus mark a clear reaction to the communist critique of nationalism as a ruling-class ideology that breaks apart and distracts the working class. Al-Sayyāb notes this explicitly, such as when he writes: 'In the eyes of communists, territorial and ethnic nationalisms are nothing but bourgeois falsehoods'.³¹ In fairness to al-Sayyāb, he cannot be blamed for deriding the ambiguity of the communist party's internationalist ethos, which prevented it from ever supporting national liberation as anything more than a conditional tactic. Add to this the ICP rejection of Arab nationalism and the partial—but significant—embrace of Zionism in ICP leadership, and aspects of al-Sayyāb's position are understandable, even if others are repugnant.

However, in al-Sayyāb's memoirs, it is not ideas that lead him to break with the ICP, but rather a series of painful and troubling experiences. Standing out among them are two incidents from 1952–1953 in which al-Sayyāb was a participant or observer: the 1952 'Tishrīn Intifāda',³² and his subsequent experience with the Tudeh Party during his brief exile in Iran.

Because al-Sayyāb narrates his experiences in the ICP roughly in order, it is not until late in his memoir that he recounts, in detail, the story of his involvement in the demonstrations of November 1952. Even so, near the outset of the memoir, he indicates that they were the turning point in his relationship with the ICP:

One November day in 1952, mass protests took place. One of the things that they led to was the burning of the Bāb al-Shaykh police station, and the death of a number of people [there]. I played a prominent role in those demonstrations.³³

Because of his involvement, state security sought to arrest al-Sayyāb, and he fled first to Iran, then Kuwait, before returning to Iraq. While he remained with the ICP for some time after, he had already by that time become disillusioned.

Al-Sayyāb describes the events of the 1952 Uprising as follows:

At the time, I was working as an employee in the Directorate of Foreign Investments I was at work and one of the employees in our unit—a comrade—came up to us, his eyes and nose red from the tear gas that had been used on the protestors. The director ordered the doors to our building closed. The police posted men to make sure no one left the building. Those of us communists were chomping at the bit to get out onto the streets, but we could only stand at the windows and balconies watching. I was at the window looking out when fires raged up, telling us of some massive conflagration. The demonstrators had set fire to the American Cultural Center and Library.³⁴

I ran through the exit, paying no heed to the shouts of the guards, nor to their attempts to accost me. I ran toward the American Cultural Center which was now on fire. I noticed that some of the demonstrators had climbed to the top floor, where the library was, and had begun to throw reels of sound recordings and radios and film reels and books and whatever they could lay their hands on. The demonstrators downstairs had their hands full fighting back against the police I called out, urging people to remember what had happened in Cairo [months before] and that we should not let it happen here. Most people paid it no mind, they went on burning and looting and pillaging, as if what they were destroying was imperialism itself, rather than just tape recordings, as if what they were burning was exploitation itself, rather than mere reels of film.³⁵

I climbed up one of the masts near Sūq al-Shūrja, and recited a poem I had written the night before in which I attacked the ruling class and Regent ‘Abd al-Ilah. The demonstrators who had just been busy burning and destroying things gathered around, drawn by rhythm of my poem. The ranks of the demonstrators gained strength and marched until they met the police who had taken up near Cinema Roxy. They poured tear gas down on us. Some of the communists picked up the canisters and launched them back at the police, who began to flee. The street emptied and became ours—we marched and shouted and sang. Then we headed to Ghāzī Street. Groups of demonstrators carried me on their shoulders while I recited revolutionary poem after poem.³⁶

At this point, al-Sayyāb’s account changes tone. After describing the cowardice of communist activists who would not face the live ammunition of police firing into the crowd, he tells of the attack on the Bāb al-Shaykh police station:

Those oh-so-brave comrades who had run away from the bullets of a gun or two at the police station now became brave when they found a poor ordinary man, who was wearing a blue *kūfiyya* (indicating that he was a descendent of the Prophet) One of the oh-so-brave comrades saw the man and shouted, ‘This man is secret police!’ The crowd beat and kicked him until his head was bloody and he cried out, ‘I’m not a cop! I’m just a poor man’. He had no idea that the people attacking him were comrades who always claim to defend the rights of the working poor!

While this was happening, three or four men came up and called out, ‘I’ll kill this cop for you’. One of them climbed up onto the police station and killed a policeman, and set fire to it. One policeman managed to flee. After the station caught fire, there was no more gunfire coming from inside, and the comrades regained their courage. They decided that they needed to find and kill the policeman who had fled. While they were searching, they came to a desperately poor household and began to search everywhere. In an empty water jar, they found him. One of the comrades set upon him with a knife. In a flash, a look of terror and pleading etched itself into the eyes of the poor policeman Stab by stab, the body of the policeman was torn apart. And the comrade heroes who struck the corpse were too many to count. The body was dragged out into the street, doused with gasoline, and then set on fire Night had closed in (*Kān al-layl qad aṭbaqā*). After having won all their accomplishments—burning the library and killing the policeman—the demonstration came to an end. And this moment became the measure by which the intifada would be judged.³⁷

It is not difficult to see why this incident would be a turning point. Indeed, rare is the memoir in which the story of murder is recounted by an author who was present, if not as a participant or cheerleader, then certainly as a close observer. That the incident bothered al-Sayyāb is clear, and suggests that it formed the context for poetry he would write soon after. The words of this last passage, of course, resonate with the opening words of al-Sayyāb’s epic experiment, ‘*Al-Mūmis al-‘amiyā*’ (The Blind Prostitute), the poem he wrote in the immediate wake of the 1952 experience:

Night closes in, once again. And the city drinks it down
Down to the last—as do the passersby—like some sad song.³⁸

Al-Sayyāb then recounts his flight to Iran,³⁹ where he is taken in by comrades from Tudeh, the Iranian Communist Party. Here, the poet experiences two disappointments that compound the regret he feels about the role he played in the Tishrīn Uprising. The first disappointment takes place in the context of the CIA-sponsored *coup d’état* that overthrew the government of Mohammad Mosaddeq in August 1953. He writes about how the first coup attempt was discovered and the Shah fled, in no small part because of the strong showing of popular street demonstrations in favour of Mosaddeq:

That afternoon, I joined a boisterous demonstration, with upwards of two million people participating. Tudeh directed this demonstration: I participated in it and I was overwhelmed by the breathtaking experience of watching a

sincere people, and a genuine communist party, having triumphed. And this was a victory for the nationalist movement—and communist cause—not just in Iran, but for the entire Middle East.⁴⁰

Al-Sayyāb then describes how, days later, a second coup attempt is launched. Al-Sayyāb is stunned to find that this time, rather than defending Mosaddeq, the communist party decided to sit on the sidelines and watch. ‘I called the party office in disbelief at their inaction, their decision to spectate’.⁴¹ Al-Sayyāb then recounts the argument he has with Tudeh cadres who inform him that they had received orders from the Soviets not to intervene. Al-Sayyāb responds: ‘But you are Iranians, not Soviets, and it is your job to defend the interests of your people—the Iranian people and not the Soviet Union! Let the USSR defend itself!’ Al-Sayyāb writes that the man laughed and said,

As a communist, you know that the first duty of communist parties around the world is to first defend peace. This comes before national interests. It is both necessary and for the best that we sacrifice narrow national interests for peace, and that we protect the peace. For the USSR is the stronghold of peace, and for socialism as well.⁴²

At this point, al-Sayyāb asserts, ‘Communists are agents and stooges—they are the ones who put the interests of foreign powers over the interests of their own countries and peoples’.⁴³ This, not surprisingly, leads him to speak again of the ICP position on Palestine:

Communism means always being subservient, always acting according to another’s interests. I remember the position of Iraqi comrades with respect to Palestine and how they thumbed their noses at their own people and a hundred million others from their own Arab nation, when they shouted out their slogan, ‘We are the Brothers of the Jews!’ Really—the Jews were their leaders. Yahūdā Şiddīq and Sasūn Dallāl and Ibrāhīm Yūsuf Zalkha and Nāji Shumayl, and ‘Ads—those were the leaders of the ICP back then. And because the Eastern Bloc supported Zionism, they called the Arab defense of Palestine, ‘The Dirty Palestinian War’.⁴⁴

Soon after, al-Sayyāb encounters ethnic Arabs in Khuzestan’s section of the Communist Party. He is stunned to hear their colloquial Arabic which is, of course, a hybrid of Persian and Arabic, and to find that the Tudeh party did not publish in any language other than Persian. The sense of alienation is total, and prompts al-Sayyāb to remark:

I was a complete stranger in this Arab land. For the first time in a long while, a feeling of my national identity (*qawmiyyatī*), my Arabness (*‘urūbatī*) awoke inside me. I took pride in my Arabness and swore to myself an oath not to waste it or betray it because some dirty, hard-hearted Jew who claimed to convert to Christianity in the nineteenth century wrote some book called *Das Kapital*, or because another Jew from Russia came along and launched a revolution or because other envious and haters and Jews and sectarian chauvinists (*shu‘ūbiyyīn*) in the Arab world followed the teachings of these two Jews and tricked the people and promised them Heaven on Earth, while they collected

money, and bought buildings and cars and pursued their appetites however they desired O Arabness! O nationalism of Muḥammad and ‘Umar and ‘Alī and Mutanabbi and Abū Tammām—I will not betray you, I will not cast you off while chasing after the communist mirage!⁴⁵

In al-Sayyāb’s eyes, ethnic Arabs in Iran have forgotten their identity. Actually, it is not that these Arabs had simply forgotten they were Arab, but rather that the local policies and culture of the Iranian communist party, Tudeh, had brought this about. If we are to trust al-Sayyāb’s account, it was in this confrontation with the self-alienated Arab culture of the Iranian Communist Party where al-Sayyāb begins his own journey towards Arab nationalist politics.

Cold War Poet

It is difficult to say when, exactly, al-Sayyāb ‘broke’ with the ICP.⁴⁶ As a poet he continued to compose poetry on themes that could have been handed down from party leadership. His 1952 poem, ‘*Umm saḡīn fī-Naqrāt al-Salmān*’ (The Mother of Naqrāt al-Salman Prisoner), ranks among the more bluntly ideological of his works, well within the explicit concerns of ICP aesthetics. Other poems from 1953—‘*Yawm al-ṭughāt al-akhīr*’ (The Tyrants’ Last Day) and ‘*Al-Mukhbīr*’ (The Informant)—also present as activist poetry. Finally, an anti-war poem from 1955, ‘*Min ru’yā Fūkāy*’ (Vision of Fukai), appears at first glance to reflect the ‘peace’ line of the ICP and the Soviet-sponsored, anti-nuclear front group, ‘Anṣar al-Salām’ (Advocate of Peace).⁴⁷

Al-Sayyāb’s critics have pointed out that something else was taking place during this period, namely that he had begun to grapple with the formal and thematic experimentations of T. S. Eliot, turning away from platform poetry toward a deeper mythical sensibility. Already by 1954, al-Sayyāb had encountered James Frazer’s *Golden Bough* by way of two chapters on Adonis and Ishtar, translated by Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā.⁴⁸ Those chapters, and Eliot’s poem ‘The Wasteland’, would keep al-Sayyāb busy for years to come.

In his memoirs, al-Sayyāb discusses his literary break with the party by way of his experience trying to publish ‘*Al-Mūmis al-‘amyā*’ ‘The Blind Prostitute’.⁴⁹ According to al-Sayyāb, the ICP tried to discourage him from publishing the experimental epic poem, suggesting that instead he publish his anti-war poem ‘*Al-Aslīḥa wa-l-atfāl*’ (Weapons and Children).⁵⁰ Al-Sayyāb went ahead and published ‘*al-Mūmis al-‘amyā*’ anyway. As he would write in an infamous explanatory note explicitly directed at the ICP,

An understanding of nationalism has been lost on our local sectarian (*shu‘ūbiyyīn*, i.e. *communist*) and chauvinist parties. Nationalism must be populist, and populism must be nationalist. The descendants of Muḥammad, ‘Umar, ‘Alī, Abū Dharr, the Kharajites, the first Shiites and the Mu‘tazilites ought to live a life befitting them as humans and as the heirs to the glories of the Arab nation. Thus, isn’t it shameful for us Arabs that our daughters have become prostitutes sleeping with men from every race and color?⁵¹

As the note underscored, al-Sayyāb’s attack on the ICP was bound up in a racial fear of miscegenation.

Even though al-Sayyāb’s poem marks a break from the thematic dictates of the ICP, there is good reason to read the poem as an attempt on al-Sayyāb’s part to replicate

Nazim Hikmet's experiments with epic form and ambiguous themes that did not conform to the party line. Given al-Sayyāb's translations of Hikmet at this time, this is quite plausible.⁵² The mediating role of Hikmet—the Communist Party poet *par excellence*—suggests that, far from attempting to break with the party mould of the poet, al-Sayyāb may have been trying to reinvent his aesthetics within the fold, not outside it. Regardless of whether anyone recognized the shadow of Hikmet over the poem, both he—and his former ICP comrades—understood this poem to mark his exit from the party.

Much of the memoirs are dedicated to comparative study. On the one hand, al-Sayyāb presents a series of lacklustre translations of poetry produced in the USSR and China. Al-Sayyāb ridicules in particular the work of Konstantin Simonov, held up to be the greatest of the Soviet poets. Al-Sayyāb translates long sections of a poem by Simonov, and then comments,

There you have comrade Simonov's poem. Any sixth grader could compose rote lines about a trip to the sea and it would be better than this poem. But, as a communist, you are compelled to love it, and forced to consider it a treasure.⁵³

As an aside, he snarks,

By the way, I should note that the greatest contemporary poet in the USSR is Pasternak, author of *Doctor Zhivago*. However, he is not recognized as a poet because his poems are not about struggle, but about flowers, birds and lakes, and besides, he is a horrid spy and an agent of the warmongering American capitalists.⁵⁴

Al-Sayyāb contrasts Soviet poetry with 'good literature', produced by the likes of T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell—noting wryly,

As a communist and party member, I was supposed to defend poets like [Hikmet, Neruda, Aragon, Mao Tse Tung and Simonov], and say that they were the greatest poets in the world. I was supposed to say that a silly poet like Hikmet was greater than the genius English poet Eliot or Sitwell. Edith Sitwell is a religious poet. Eliot is the poet of death, feudalism and world imperialism. But to myself, I loved Eliot and Sitwell. I loved the great German poet Rilke, who is considered by the communist critics to be reactionary⁵⁵

Elsewhere, he sums up: 'The reason why poetry has withered and died in countries under communist rule is that communism and poetry are opposed to one another, and can never be reconciled'.

But the greatest literary focus of the memoir is George Orwell's novel *1984*. Six episodes of the memoirs are dedicated to a discussion of Orwell: he summarizes the entire plot, he translates long excerpts and he analyses characters and motivations. But most of all, he uses Orwell's novel as a lens on contemporary Iraq. He likens Yūsuf Salmān Yūsuf, Comrade Fahd, to Big Brother, and the ICP's public discourse to doublespeak.⁵⁶ This is a point he makes more than once: Abdel Karim Qasim's Iraq is nothing less than Orwell's novel come to life. He writes,

[There is] a great resemblance between what [Orwell] imagined would happen under the communist regime in 1984, and what is happening in reality during Iraq's red nightmare. A person might be shocked to see this amazing resemblance—so how could Orwell imagine it? Could he imagine that a man would allow himself to kill the mother or father of a small child, then cut off the hand of a child sleeping in his crib and stuff his mother's severed breast in his mouth? This is what the good comrades, those supporters of peace and democracy, did in Kirkuk. Could Orwell imagine that a man would volunteer to strap a young girl to a piece of wood, then drive nails into her body? This is a crime the sons of Comrade Fahd's party committed in Mosul. It would have been better for the English writer to live in Iraq during the period of the red nightmare, so he might see with his own eyes the killing and display of bodies and other communist crimes, then go back to his own country and start writing his novel from scratch again.⁵⁷

Al-Sayyāb's reading of Orwell is not subtle, nor is it particularly perceptive. Indeed, at times it seems comic. So what is the purpose? These passages on Orwell—like those on the other poets and writers—may not stand as careful literary criticism, but they do stand as a signal of positioning: on the one hand, against the Communist Party, its conception of literature and its roster of writers; and on the other, with the emergent organizations of cultural anti-communism, their conception of literature and their roster of writers. In other words, al-Sayyāb's memoir signals an acceptance of the autistic terms of the Cold War: against the Soviets, and with the West. He writes,

If someone wants to say that this is McCarthyism, so be it. McCarthy is a thousand times more decent than most of those that the communists call their great leaders and intellectuals. One again, I raise my voice and cry out, 'Enemies of communism, unite!'⁵⁸

Conclusion

In late 1961, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb would travel to Rome to participate in a conference entitled 'The Arab Writer and the Modern World'.⁵⁹ The event was sponsored by the International Association for Cultural Freedom (IACF), the same organization which had until recently been known as the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) until its financial and organizational ties to the CIA were revealed.⁶⁰ The gathering brought together many of al-Sayyāb's closest literary allies and friends, including Adūnīs, Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, Yūsuf Khāl, Salmā al-Khaḍrā al-Jayyūsī and Tawfiq Ṣāyigh, as well as Arab writers and academics living in Europe, like Kateb Yacine, Albert Hourani, Simon Jargy and Farhat Ziadeh, and European and American Orientalists. Over four days, during 16–20 October, this illustrious group of writers discussed a range of themes while simultaneous translation took place between Arabic, English and French. Al-Sayyāb delivered a paper on commitment (*iltizām*). His respondent was Ignazio Silone, the former Italian Communist he had praised so much in his essays. Adūnīs lectured on innovation (*tajdīd*), and his respondent was none other than Stephen Spender, the former British Communist praised by al-Sayyāb and whose anti-communist manifesto, *The God That Failed*, had been excerpted in the pages of *Al-Ḥurriyya* in November 1959. These presentations and discussions were published by Manshūrāt Adwā', the

Arabic language imprint of the CCF.⁶¹ Even before the event, the master of ceremonies, John Clinton Hunt—the Secretary General of the IACF—had already offered al-Sayyāb a scholarship to study in Britain.⁶² In the months that followed Rome, al-Sayyāb attempted to follow through on the offer, corresponding with Albert Hourani and R. B. Sergeant about the possibility of studying at Oxford or the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London).

The Rome event was by no means the first meeting between the IACF and Arab intellectuals. Since the mid-1950s, the Congress for Cultural Freedom had been hosting a series of workshops and conferences across the Arab world: in Beirut in May 1956 and again in 1962; in Tunis in April 1959; in Cairo in April 1959 and again in December 1960; and in Khartoum in January 1961.⁶³ The IACF also had its own regular in-house newsletter, *Adwā*. Just as the IACF had covertly bankrolled ‘independent’ journals (like the *Paris Review*), it funded Tawfiq Ṣāyigh’s journal, *Hīwār*.⁶⁴ During the last years of his life, al-Sayyāb would contribute to the journal, with new poems and a regular ‘country report’ on cultural activity in Iraq. The small fees he earned were his only income at times during these difficult months.

During this same period, al-Sayyāb—in desperate need of money—also translated for the Franklin Press, another Cold War-era initiative of covert cultural programming. Funded by the State Department’s International Information Agency (later known as the US Information Agency), the Franklin Book Program was charged with bringing out inexpensive translations of American cultural documents. It operated intensively in Cold War battlegrounds during the 1950s and 1960s, from Egypt to Iraq and Iran, to Pakistan and Indonesia. It brought out hundreds of titles of books in Arabic during its existence from 1952 to 1978.⁶⁵ Al-Sayyāb’s contribution to this effort was a now forgotten three-volume tome entitled ‘American Literature’.⁶⁶ But for al-Sayyāb, the work took up the lion’s share of his time, even as he began to face his own mortality.

It would be wrong to say that al-Sayyāb volunteered in the Cold War. Borrowing from David Scott’s theorization of the unfree choices of the colonial world, we might say that al-Sayyāb was conscripted into the war by way of difficult circumstance and lack of better options.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, al-Sayyāb’s correspondence from this period indicates he was fully aware of the role he was playing, and that at times he even relished it. In his letters from the period, for instance, al-Sayyāb does not hesitate to trumpet his anti-communist credentials, or to celebrate the bloody repression of the ICP following the 1963 overthrow of Qasim by Baathists.⁶⁸ Similarly, in celebrating the Rome event, he makes it clear that what was at stake was a contest for hearts and minds. ‘The Rome conference was a complete success’, he writes. ‘Some attempted to diminish the value of Islam and the Arab literary tradition. But we beat them roundly, and we won over the Orientalists to Arabness (*‘urūba*) and Arabic literature’.⁶⁹ While he might not have agreed to call himself a cold warrior, there is no doubt that he understood that he was a key soldier in a global war of ideas, parties and states.⁷⁰

This history suggests that al-Sayyāb’s memoirs—these 40 polemics he published in 1959—are by no means an aberration in his career, but rather a central event within it. They mark a full embrace of his role as a Cold War public intellectual and his willingness to lend his name to the ranks of the anti-communist cause. They also give a sense of the degree to which pan-Arab political ideologies could align with blatantly pro-American positions, and do so in the name of anti-imperialism, art and modernity.⁷¹ This was workable in 1960, but within a few years the contradictions in such a position would be too much to bear. While al-Sayyāb’s students have avoided the memoirs, he himself was

quite proud of them, and consciously used them as a calling card when approaching the IACF during the last years of his life.⁷² They are, along with the published letters, his most significant work outside the poems themselves. It is difficult now to appreciate them as an intellectual or artistic contribution—they belong to a war that seems so distant. Yet, even if many of the terms of that war are long forgotten, many (if not most) of the same old binaries still abide, although attached to new objects.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Al-Sayyāb, *Rasā'il al-Sayyāb*, 145 and 150. In correspondence with Adūnis and Yūsuf Khāl, al-Sayyāb suggests that Adūnič was planning on publishing the memoirs in book form as early as 1960. Elsewhere, al-Sayyāb claims the memoirs would soon come out in French translation. Neither of these things occurred.
2. Three to four essays were published per week from 14 August through early October, with a two-week hiatus immediately following the assassination attempt against Abdel Karim Qasim on 7 October, and then again until 17 November. See Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq*, 111.
3. 'Abbās, for instance, uses the essays as a source of information, but does not comment on them. In his biography, *Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb*, Boullata describes them as 'unpleasant nastiness' (*rajsan maktūhan*) and asserts that 'al-Sayyāb's interest in quarreling got the best of his emotions, and caused him to lose his ability to discover the core of the issue and distill real experience and measured wisdom' (106).
4. Boullata suggests that it was al-Sayyāb who may have translated them as well *Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb* 106. For al-Sayyāb's praise of *The God That Failed*, see al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 24.
5. Boullata, *Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb*, 165–170.
6. Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 143–185; and Davis, *Memories of State*, 108–147.
7. Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq*, 85–126.
8. Davis, *Memories of State*, 114–117; and Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 152.
9. Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq*, 112.
10. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 27.
11. Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, 866–889.
12. *Ibid.*, 912–925.
13. *Ibid.*, 926–973.
14. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 82.
15. Boullata, *Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb* 105.
16. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 28–29.
17. *Ibid.*, 26–27 and 31–32.
18. *Ibid.*, 105–106.
19. *Ibid.*, 105.
20. Franzén describes the ritual *barā'a* that ICP members were forced to perform during the 1940s (*Red Star Over Iraq*, 67). It is clear that the practice remained part of political culture, as for example, in standard application forms under Baath Party rule. Similarly, during the US occupation, two such forms—'Agreement to Disavow Baath Party Membership' (*Taşrīh qaṭ' al-'alāqa ma' Hizb al-Ba'th*) and 'Baath Party Denunciation' (*Tashjīb li Hizb al-Ba'th*)—were part of the official culture governing employment and political activity.
21. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 96 and 100.
22. *Ibid.*, 72–75. Al-Sayyāb claims to have heard the story directly from 'Abd al-Wahhāb during his stay in Iran in 1952.
23. *Ibid.*, 23 and 88–89.

24. Ibid., 9–10.
25. Ibid., 42 and 145.
26. Ibid., 120.
27. Ibid., 44–46 and 103–108.
28. On the experience of the Egyptian Communist Party in this regard, see Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?*
29. Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, 699–705.
30. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 85, 103 and 212–213. The term *shu'ūbī* has a long and complex history within the Iraqi context, for its resonance within contemporary Iraqi discourse, see Franzén, *Red Star Over Iraq*, 98–99.
31. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 111.
32. On the Intifada of November 1952, see Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, 666–670.
33. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 12.
34. Ibid., 205.
35. Ibid., 206.
36. Ibid., 206–207. The episode is recounted with great detail and context in Jones, 'Poetics of Revolution', 254–255.
37. Ibid., 208–209.
38. Al-Ṭarīfī, 'The Mother of an Inmate at Naqrat al-Salman' 281.
39. The event is also narrated in his poem, 'Fīrār 'āmm 1953', published in 1962.
40. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 14.
41. Ibid., 15.
42. Ibid., 16.
43. Ibid., 17.
44. Ibid., 17.
45. Ibid., 211–212.
46. Most critics simply pass over this conversion in al-Sayyāb's life. Boullata, for example, simply writes: 'Both when he was a communist early in his life (1944–54) and later when he was not, he wrote poems extolling the heroism of those who struggled for freedom, justice and peace' ('Badr Shākīr Al-Sayyāb and the Free Verse Movement', 254).
47. On the 'Peace Partisans' and popular front strategies of the ICP, see Jones' insightful discussion of Iraqi poets Muḥammad Ṣalīḥ Baḥr al-'Ulūm and Muḥammad Maḥdī al-Jawāhirī. Jones, 'Poetics of Revolution', 242–245.
48. Boullata, 80.
49. Ibid., 79.
50. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 19–25. Boullata notes that when the poem was republished in 1960, al-Sayyāb removed references to Wall Street, and changed 'Dan River' to the 'Ganges River'. (Boullata, 80).
51. al-Sayyāb, *al-Mūmis al-'amiyā*, 31.
52. During 1950–1951, al-Sayyāb worked for al-Jawāhirī's newspaper, translating poetry. During this time he translated poetry by Nazim Hikmet. In the memoirs, he vilifies Hikmet, but this is not entirely convincing. See Boullata, 'Poetic Technique', 63.
53. Al-Sayyāb, *Kuntu shuyū'yyan*, 135.
54. Ibid., 128–129.
55. Ibid., 105.
56. Ibid., 173–176.
57. Ibid., 179.
58. Ibid., 168.
59. See Boullata, *Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb* 165–170.
60. On the CCF and the IACF, see the authoritative work of Saunders, *Cultural Cold War* as well as Coleman, *Liberal Conspiracy* and Scott-Smith, *Politics of Apolitical Culture*. On the CCF in the Arab world, see Holt, 'Bread or Freedom'.
61. It is notable that of the five Arabic titles published by Manshūrāt Adwā, only two were not translations of political treatises: this collection and Simon Jargy's biography of al-Sayyāb *Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb*.
62. In letters to Jabrā and Yūsuf al-Khāl (dated April, June and July 1961), al-Sayyāb raises the issue of IACF support for graduate studies in the United Kingdom. In one,

- al-Sayyāb urges Jabrā to stress that his 'anti-communist articles' had created quite a stir when they appeared. See al-Sayyāb, *Rasā'il al-Sayyāb*, 161–163 and 165. See also the correspondence of John C. Hunt to al-Sayyāb dated 3 July, 1962. IACF Archive, University of Chicago Library Special Collections Research Center. Box 228. Folder 9.
63. See the IACF archive at the University of Chicago Library: <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.IACF#idp83262352>
 64. See Coleman, *Liberal Conspiracy*, 189–190; and especially Holt, 'Bread or Freedom'.
 65. See Robbins, 'Publishing American Values'.
 66. Al-Sayyāb, *Rasā'il al-Sayyāb*, 175–176.
 67. See Scott's discussion of Stanley Diamond and Talal Asad in this regard: Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 8–9. In one letter, dated 25 October 1961, John C. Hunt claimed the al-Sayyāb had wholeheartedly volunteered for service with the organization. IACF Archives. Box: 292. Folder 8.
 68. For instance: 'Have you heard the Soviet protest against the dawn of the new Arab era in Iraq, and how it means that they will be held accountable for their crimes during Qasim's time? It is laughable' (al-Sayyāb, *Rasā'il al-Sayyāb*, 203).
 69. *Ibid.*, 174.
 70. On the role of the CIA infiltration into other sectors of Iraqi civil society during this period, and its relation to the mass killings of 1963, see Paget, *Patriotic Betrayal*, 286–289.
 71. See McAlister, *Epic Encounters*.
 72. See al-Sayyāb's comments to Jabrā in July 1961: 'Be sure to tell [Prof. Sergeant] that I am the author of anti-communist articles'. Al-Sayyāb, *Rasā'il al-Sayyāb*, 165.

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