

KIRKUK, JULY 1959

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The old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq), Princeton University Press, p. 912- 921.

Nothing harmed the Communists more than the bloody doings at Kirkuk on July 14-16. Yet it is now certain that these doings were neither premeditated nor authorized by their leaders in Baghdad. In part, they must be ascribed to the nature of the times: acts of extreme cruelty against adversaries are not uncommon in moments of social instability and extraordinary agitation. But the more immediate blame falls clearly upon fanatic Kurds of differing tendencies. It is significant that all but 3 of the 31 officially reported as killed, and all but 6 of the 130 known to have been injured in the incidents were Turkmen, and that all but 4 of the 28 perpetrators of excesses executed on 22 June 1963 were Kurds.¹ There were, it is true, assaults on the lives of people through private malice. For example, the mother of one of the victims testified before the Second Martial Court that the accused, who were members of the People's Resistance, had feared that her son would win away the headship of a district from their father, a rival candidate.² Again, a personal grudge seems to have been the motive of the member of the Youth Union who was behind the killing of two of his employers, the owners of Al-'Alamein Cinema in Kirkuk.³ On the whole, however, it was in the inveterate enmity between Kurds and Turkmen that the outrageous fury that gripped the city had its roots.

The Communists did take an active part in the outbreak, but as Kurds. The ends they sought were not Communist but Kurdish ends. Their communism was, in most instances, skin deep. What, in effect, seems to have happened was the bending by the Kurds of all the auxiliary organizations of the Communist party to their own needs, that is, to the pursuit of their deadly feud with their old antagonists, the Turkmen.

Kirkuk, an oil center, lying 180 miles north of Baghdad, had been Turkish through and through in the not too distant past. By degrees, Kurds moved into the city from the surrounding villages. With the growth of the oil industry, their migration intensified. By 1959, they had swollen to more than one-third of the population, and the Turkmen had declined to just over half, the Assyrians and Arabs accounting, in the main, for the rest of the total of 120,000.⁴ Other Turkish towns, such as Arbil, had undergone a similar process: Arbil itself was in such a great measure Kurdified, and the change occurred peacefully. But the Kirkuklis, who maintained close cultural links with Turkey, were of a tougher fiber and united by a stronger sense of ethnic identity.

As at Mosul, the animosity was sharpened by a near parallelism between the racial and economic divisions: in a preponderant sense, the creditors were Turkmen, the debtors Kurds; the big merchants, the middling shopkeepers, the artisans Turkmen; the oil workers, the menial laborers, the petty vendors Kurds, but there were many poor Turkmen, and not a few well-to-do Kurds.

After the July 14 Revolution, the animosity assumed a distinct political form for, according to the Kirkuk chief of police, "on the founding of the associations, organizations, and trade unions, most of the Kurds adhered to them... whereas the Turkmen banded together under Turkmenian nationalist colors."⁵

Naturally, the situation became very tense. In the last week of October 1958, a serious clash occurred. The troops, ordered out to restore peace, split along ethnic lines, the Kurdish soldiers joining in with their blood brothers against the Turkmen. When in the end the tumult was composed, the Arab local commander, Staff Brigadier Nadhim at-Tabaqchali, tried to persuade the two communities to work together through a "Committee for National Cooperation."⁶ But in the following January there were more disturbances, this time apparently sparked by an assault by armed Kurds on one of the Turkish quarters. Several people reportedly died.⁷ On 22 March, as the country was entering "the period of the flood-tide," the Kirkuk Local Committee of the Communist party, now the chief power in the city,

found it necessary to issue a special handbill in which it warned that "reactionaries and chauvinists were exciting in the hearts of Turkmen the fear of Kurds and Arabs and at the same time arousing suspicions and spreading calumnies among the Kurdish masses against their Turkmen brethren", and summoned all the citizens to "vigilance, unity, and brotherhood."⁸ From the point of view of the Kurds, violence no longer made sense, for not only was the Communist Local Committee in their hands, but also much of the government of Kirkuk. Ma'ruf al-Baranzanchi, the Kurdish Communist secretary of the Peace Partisans, was the chief of the municipality. "Awn Yusuf, a Kurdish Democrat, was the president of the court. The Kurdish Communist Captain Mahdi Hamid was the leader of the Resistance Forces. Staff Brigadier Daud aj-Janabi, an Arab, who had taken over command of the troops on 14 March, belonged, as pointed out elsewhere,⁹ to the Communists; and inasmuch as the Kurds, in their bulk, had from the beginning taken the side of his party and now constituted its most natural support, there was no wish or intention of theirs that he did not fulfill. In brief, the Kurds reigned virtually unopposed. For the solution of their historic conflict with the Turkmen, they had at their disposal well high the entire legal and political machinery of the city, and had indeed already begun adapting it to their purposes.

It was the threat to this ascendancy implied in the sudden removal on 29 June of Brigadier Daud aj-Janabi and Captain Mahdi Hamid that probably changed the mood of the Kurds, and so charged the atmosphere as to make possible the ghastly violence in the days of July 14-16.

It is still uncertain whether the outbreak was a planned thing, or simply an extreme variant of recurrent -almost instinctive- effusions of ethnic hatred, or the result of a conjunction of the one and the other. The Turkmen in Kirkuk insist that it was prepared beforehand, and pin the blame on the Kurdish leaders of the Communist organizations-more specifically, among others, on 'Abd-uj-Jabbar Beiruzkhan, chief of the Union of Democratic Youth; Retired Captain Fatih, Mulla Daud aj-Jabbari, a founder of the National Front; and on the already mentioned secretary of the Peace Partisans. In support, they adduce alleged warnings by certain members of these organizations to relatives and acquaintances to evacuate their women and children from Kirkuk before 14 July and to be sure, if remaining behind, to wear only Kurdish costumes or the costumes of the People's Resistance. They also claim that Kurdish tribesmen had been introduced into the city from the neighboring country in the days preceding the outbreak.¹⁰ But well-informed foreign diplomatic officers, who do not wish to be named, doubt that the violence was contrived, and are inclined to the view that it was touched off by the fierce determination of the Kurdish Communists and Kurdish Democrats to have only one city-wide July 14 procession and to run it themselves, and the no less grim resolve of the Turkmen to organize their own independent column. For their part, the Kirkuk chief of police and the Kirkuk chief of security, who appear to have had opposite sympathies,¹¹ do not agree about the side from which the initial provocations came: the chief of police points to the Turkmen,¹² the chief of security to "the noncommissioned officers and some of the soldiers" of the predominantly Kurdish Works1 Company and Military Police Detachment of the Second Division.¹³ as for the Communists, they point to paid hirelings of the Anti-Subversion Committee of CENTO.

Anyhow, according to the chief of police-and his account, if sketchy, is the only on-the-spot inside account that could be traced-this is what happened on July 14:

The Kirkuk Committee for the Celebration of the Anniversary of the Revolution had appointed for six in the evening of 14 July a procession of the popular organizations that was to march through the principal streets of the city. In view of the deep-rooted enmity between the Kurds and Turkmen, and provocative acts by the latter both before and during the festivals, appropriate precautionary measures were taken by us...

At about seven, as the procession got to the Old Bridge on its way to the Qal'ah side (see Map 7), it came upon a demonstration of Turkmen ride in army vehicles. Intervening, I kept the two sides apart. The procession moved on, with myself at its head. On entering Independence Street, I saw a column of about 60 soldiers carrying ropes and marching in the opposite direction. On my orders, the police deflected them into the side street of the Directorate of Education. When the procession, flowing forward, reached the Fourteenth July

Coffee-house, a haunt of the Turkmen, shots rang out. Who did the firing could not be determined, but the marchers became excited and a scuffle followed in which quickly led to discharges of firearms by soldiers and the men of the people and of the Resistance. Twenty Turkmen were killed and their bodies dragged about in the streets. Among the dead were Retired Caaptain *Ata Khairallah,' Uthman ach-Chaichi, owner of the Fourteenth July Coffee-house, and [a daughter and two sons of Fu'ad 'Uthman, the head of al-Khassah quarter. The injured numbered 130. In addition, 70 shops, cafes, and casinos were sacked. All this was the doing of the soldiers, the members of the Resistance, and the men of the people. Elements of the Resistance also attacked the Imam Qasim Police Station, broke into the arsenal and seized the weapons belonging to the Resistance and 18 police rifles. This attack, we have since learned, was carried out upon the initiative of Retired Police Commissioner Nuri Wali and his group.¹⁴

The account leaves unanswered a number of questions: Why were the Turkish demonstrators riding in army vehicles? Who led out the rope-carrying soldiers or was behind their clearly provocative manifestation? What kind of group did retired police Commissioner Nuri Wali, command, and what were his possible motives?

No light can be shed on the first question. As to the rope-carrying soldiers, they may have belonged to the Works' Company and the Military Police Detachment which, according to the chief of security, figured prominently in the happenings on that day and "had played an effective role in the time of the ex-commander of the Division," the Communist Staff Brigadier Daud aj-Janabi.¹⁵ This, if true, would suggest that the guiding thread in this case may have been in the hands of Kurdish Communists. With regard to the retired police commissioner, Nuri Wali, it would appear from independent evidence given in the Second Martial Court that his group was in some degree made up of his relatives, and engaged in violence in part at least to settle purely personal scores. Its appeal was not to political but to ethnic feelings: an eye-witness, a sergeant in the army, attested that on issuing from the Imam Qasim police station, Nuri Wali handed out the arms to a crowd waiting outside which, shortly afterwards, hurriedly set off in the direction of the bridge and the Qal'ah, firing in the air and crying: "The Turkmen have slaughtered all our Kurdish brethren!"¹⁶

If the version of the chief of police is obscure on certain counts, its description of the outcome clearly suggests that the Turkmen were essentially unarmed. This makes it doubtful that the mysterious shots that crackled near the Fourteenth July Coffee-house came from their side, and raises the question as to whether these shots were a prearranged signal, or a thoughtless initiative, or the act of a third party a question that cannot be settled.

If the element of deliberateness is not plainly discernible in, at least, the first incidents on July 14, it seems, on the other hand, to have characterized the events of the next two days. On July 15, Kurdish soldiers from the Fourth Brigade, using mortars, shelled the Turkish-owned Atlas and 'Alamein Cinemas and some of the Turkish houses in al-Qal'ah from which, they claimed, fire had been aimed at them. But the Kerkuk chief of security wrote to Baghdad subsequently that the firing on the soldiers was a put-up thing, and blamed it on the Youth union and the Resistance.¹⁷ In another report he maintained that it had come to light that on the fifteenth, Retired Captain aj-Jabbari of the National Front, Beirüzkhān of the Youth Union, and others, accompanied by certain members of the military police, were "designating to be slain and dragged about every person whom they considered to be hostile to them and whom they happened to meet at the gate of the Divisional Headquarters or the local club," where many Kirkuklis had taken refuge.¹⁸ Later, on 29 July, at a press conference, Qasim asserted apparently on the strength of complaints by Turkmen that "the anarchists proceeded to houses that had been marked on maps beforehand, brought out their residents, and put them to death."¹⁹ Nothing about this could be traced in the contemporary Kirkuk police accounts. However, in a letter on 27 July, the chief of security, charging the Youth Union with the misdeed, reported that "lately", that is, not during but several days after the disturbance, marks had appeared on a number of houses in the city, which excited fear in the Turkmen and occasioned the flight of about four hundred families to Baghdad.²⁰ Upon this subject the principal organ of the Communist party remarked a few days afterwards: "It has been said that signs had been put on certain houses with the intention of attacking their residents,

where as now it is know that the Department of Electricity was doing that for its own purposes."²¹

Order was not fully restored in Kirkuk until after the arrival of 17 July of military reinforcements from Baghdad and the disarming of the Kurdish soldiers of the Fourth Brigade. All in all 120 houses, cafes, and stores were gutted or plundered. As to the victims, the chief of security wrote on 20 July that the known dead were 32, but estimated that there were 20 others buried in places that were still being searched.²² On 2 August, Qasim put the total at 79,²³ but on 2 December, that is, just after his recovery from bullet wounds inflicted upon him by members of the Bath party, he retracted the figure, and said that only 31 were actually killed and that the confusion was due to the fact that "each corpse was photographed many times from various angles."²⁴ The final official estimate for the injured was 130.

Qasim reacted sharply to the news of the bloodletting at Kirkuk. "It is within our power", he declared on 19 July, "to crush anyone who confronts the sons of our people with anarchic acts stemming from grudges, rancor, and blind fanaticism." He also called on all soldiers and officers "to obey only orders issued by the high command."²⁵ When he later saw pictures of the frightfully mangled corpses he was shocked. "Hulagu in his time did not commit such atrocities, nor even the Zionists!" he exclaimed in a meeting with Iraqi journalists on the twenty-ninth. "Can these be the acts of... organizations which allege to be democratic?" he asked. But, while passionately denouncing the perpetrators as knaves "without honor or conscience" and "baser than Fascists", he made clear in that meeting, and again in an address to the representatives of unions and vocational organizations on 2 August, that he was not blaming nor had any intention to call to account any particular party or principle. "Individuals," he said, "are responsible for these catastrophes and I shall deal with them as individuals. I do not want to persecute organizations."²⁶

Upon the Communist leadership in Baghdad, news of the savagery at Kirkuk came like an ill wind. It had obviously nothing to gain from a senseless slaughter of Turkmen. But it had been for many months under the influence of the paralyzing idea that "the opposing of excess would weaken the revolutionary spirit of the people."²⁷ That is why it did nothing to condemn the shady elements that had hooked up with the party and had, back in March at Mosul, indulged, in its name, in bestialities to settle long-standing private grudges or family or ethnic feuds in their own interests. But then it could afford to shut its eyes. It was entering the period of its maximal power. The violence could also be extenuated: there had actually been a revolt. Now, however, it was impossible to cover up for the Kirkuk Communists or pseudo-Communists, although at first the party leadership tried to do just that, by throwing the blame on the "Turanians"²⁸ and the agents of the imperialists, while at the same time, to appease Qasim, placing "unrestrictedly" at his disposal "all the forces and capabilities of the party."²⁹ But after Qasim's shaking of his fist at the "anarchists"³⁰ and as the newspapers, hostile to communism, began giving wide play to the atrocities, the Central Committee of the party met, upon urgent summons, in an extraordinary plenary session. Its debate was vehement from the very start. According to 'Aziz ash-Shaikh, a member of the committee,³¹ the demand was voiced at one point for the removal of Husain ar-Radi, the general secretary, but al-Radi produced a secret report by the new commander of the Second Division, in which the latter affirmed that the army had put into effect the "Kirkuk Security Plan", but meeting with resistance, used mortars, killing a number of people; and that, moreover, the leaders of the "popular organizations" had placed themselves at his disposal with a view to the restoring of tranquillity.³² The Central Committee, having no reason to doubt the authenticity of the report, gave in credence; but, in view of its inaccuracies, to say the least, it would appear that some elements, perhaps Kurdish Communists in the Second Division, were leading not only Baghdad but their own party command astray. It is extremely unlikely that ar-Radi would have himself manufactured the report. At any rate, the plenum insisted that the party must take an unequivocal attitude against "torture, the dragging about of bodies, the plunder of property, and other violations of the law."³³

The feeling of the plenum soon found reflection in Ittihad-ush-Sha'b. In one of its more expressive editorials, that of 2 August 1959, the paper wrote:

It is laid to us that we believe in violence within the frame of the national movement and in the relations with the other patriotic forces. This is a sheer libel..,

In well-known articles published a long time ago we stressed that "the method is the touch-stone." But it seems that there is a deliberate intent to confuse this correct and firm attitude ... with the impetuosities of some simple nonparty masses...

We utterly condemn any transgression against innocent people ... or the harming or torture even of traitors... We condemn these methods on principle...³⁴

The apology of the plenum was published on 3 August in summary form, and on the twenty-third in full. It referred to the "practical impossibility" under the monarchy of educating the masses and habituating them to organized political work; to the difficulty of taming their energies, once liberated; to a party "mistakenly embarrassed" and hesitation of clandestineness in organization despite the open character of the party's political activity-which, as cells greatly multiplied, hindered the command from closely supervising the rank and file and facilitated the "misapplication" of the party's policy by "some of the less experienced party organizations," and the perpetration of "excesses" by nonparty elements "pretending to be Communists." The plenum also admitted that the party was in the wrong in not standing firmly against such occurrences at the time, and called for stern disciplinary measures against every party member who could be shown to have been involved in culpable behavior.³⁵

But the owl of Minerva began its flight too late.

References

1. Letter No. 497 of 15 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of police to the muttaşarrif (governor) of Kirkuk province; letter No. 6443 of 17 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of security to the director general of security, Baghdad; letter No.5 725 of 23 June 1963 from the Kirkuk chief of security to the muttaşarrif of Kirkuk; undated letter to Premier Qasim from the Turkmen leaders Tahsin Ra'fat and Retired Colonel Shaker Saber; and Ittihad-ush-Sha'b of 4 August and 3 December 1959. The Kirkuk security and police letters referred to in this and other footnotes in this chapter were perused by this writer at the Kirkuk Police Headquarters in February 1964.
2. For the text of her testimony, see Al-hurriyyah, 22 September 1959.
3. See proceedings of Second Martial Court in Ath-Thawrah, 4, 6, and 14 April 1960.
4. The 1957 official census showed a population of 120,402, of whom 12,691 were Christians and the remainder Moslem, except for a few hundred Sabeans, Yazidis, and members of other denominations: Iraq, Ministry of Interior, Statistical Compilation Relating to the Population Census of 1957 (in Arabic) , I Part IV, 170.
5. Letter No. 497 of 15 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of police the mutasarriif of Kirkuk province.
6. Statement of Brigadier aat- Tabaqchah before the "People's Court" on 23 August 1959, Iraq, Ministry Of Defence, Muhakamat... XVIII, 7231-7232.
7. B.B.C. No. 755 of 15 January 1959, p. 8
8. Ittihad-ush-Sha'b, 27 March 1959.
9. See p.891 and Table 45-1.
10. Undated letter to Premier Qasim from the Turkmen leaders Tahsin Ra'fat and Retired Colonel Shaker Saber.
11. They were respectively Jasim Mahmud as-Su'udi and Nurial-Khayyat, both Arabs, but the first tepidly for and the other warmly against the Communists.
12. Letter No. 497 of 15 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of police to the mutasarriif of Kirkuk province.
13. Letter No. 6433 of 17 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of security to the director general of security, Baghdad.
14. Letter No. 497 of 15 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of police to the muttaşarrif of Kirkuk province.

15. Letter No. 6433 of 17 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of security to the director general of security, Baghdad.
16. For this testimony see Al-Hurriyyah, 22 September 1959.
17. Letter No. 6857 of 27 July 1959 from the chief of security of Kirkuk to the Directorate General of Security, Baghdad,
18. Letter No. 6694 of 20 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of security to the Directorate General of Security, Baghdad.
19. Al-Bilad, 30 July 1959; and Ittihad-ush-Sha'b, 30 July 1959.
20. Letter No. 6857 of 27 July 1959 from the Kirkuk chief of security to the Directorate General of Security, Baghdad.
21. Ittihad-ush-Sha'b, 4 August 1959.
22. His letter No. 6694 of 20 July 1959 to the Directorate General of Security, Baghdad.
23. Ittihad-ush-Sha'b, 5 August 1959.
24. Ittihad-ush-Sha'b, 3 December 1959; and Iraqi Review, I, No. 20, 23 December 1959.
25. Iraq, The Principles of the July 14 Revolution in the Speeches of the Faithful Son of the People, the Leader 'Abd-ul-Karim Qasim (in Arabic), II (1959), pp. 44,47.
26. Ittihad-ush-Sha'b and Al-Bilad of 30 July and 3 August 1959, and B.B.C. ME/92/A/1 of 31 July and ME/95/A/1 of 5 August 1959.
27. I am not here unquestioningly accepting the explanation given by the Central Committee Plenum of mid-1959. The ex-Communists Sharif ash-Shaikh and Daud as-Sayegh confirmed to this writer in February 1964 that this was, in fact, the argument given in the party prior to July 1959 for the command's silence on the excesses at Mosul.
28. I.e., Turkmenian nationalists.
29. Ittihad-ush-Sha'b, 18 July 1959.
30. In his speech of 19 July 1959.
31. For 'Aziz ash-Shaikh, see Table 37-1.
32. Statement to Ba'thi investigators in April 1963 by 'Aziz ash-Shaikh, member of the Central Committee from 1956 to 1963, in Iraqi Police File QS/26.
33. Idem., and report in summary from of the Plenum of the Central Committee held in mid July 1959, published in Ittihadush-Sha'b of 3 August 1959.
34. Ittihad-ush-Sha'b, 2 August 1959.
35. Ibid., 3 and 23 August 1959.