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# **Iraq's Communists: The Potential Threat**



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**A Research Paper**

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June 1985*

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# Iraq's Communists: The Potential Threat



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**A Research Paper**

This paper was prepared by Office of  
Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, with  
 information contributed by the Office of  
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Comments and queries are welcome and may be  
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**Iraq's Communists:  
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**Summary***Information available  
as of 3 June 1985  
was used in this report.*

The Communist Party of Iraq (CPI), once a serious challenge to the Iraqi Government, continues to be regarded by Iraqi leaders as their principal secular political threat. They have brutally repressed the party and have shaped domestic policies in part to undercut the Communists' mass appeal. The Ba'thists have also penetrated the party's apparatus and have sought to divide its members through a carrot-and-stick policy.

Despite the government's concerns, the party poses no immediate threat to Iraqi stability. It suffers from internal divisions and has been weakened by harsh repression, which has forced it largely into exile. Communist guerrillas operate in northern Iraq with the support of Kurdish rebel leaders Mas'ud and Idris Barzani but can do little more than harass government forces. They probably will be forced into exile when the Iran-Iraq war ends and Baghdad can transfer troops from the front to regain control of rebel-held territory.

Although weak, the CPI has the resiliency to stage a recovery if a combination of several of the following developments occurs:

- Baghdad's financial situation continues to deteriorate, resulting in unfulfilled popular expectations that the Communists can exploit—a likely development after the war with Iran ends.
- A younger, more dynamic leadership emerges in place of the factionalized graybeards presently leading the party—improbable until the Communists' longtime leader dies.
- The Iraqi security services become weakened by Ba'thist rivalries—unlikely while Iraqi President Saddam Husayn remains in power; a near certainty if he is removed.
- The Communist Party focuses its efforts on creating a clandestine organization inside Iraq separate from the present apparatus, which is widely penetrated by Iraqi security services—probable only if the Communist leadership changes.
- The USSR significantly increases its support for the party—unlikely any time soon because the Soviets regard the near-term prospects of a Communist takeover as poor.

A resurgence of the Iraqi Communists would increase instability in Iraq, weaken the Ba'th Party's grip on power, and perhaps encourage other dissidents. The Ba'thists would hold the Soviets responsible, but Iraq would not dramatically alter its policies because of its dependence on Soviet arms.

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June 1985*

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**Contents**

	<i>Page</i>
Summary	iii
Recent Subversive Efforts Inside Iraq	2
A Party Divided	2
The Old Guard	3
The Kurdish Faction	4
The Advocates of Armed Struggle	4
Domestic Allies	4
Foreign Ties	4
Soviet Pressures on Baghdad	5
Government Response	6
Penetration	6
Suppression	6
Economic Development	6
Control of Education	6
Control of the Military	6
Prospects	7

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Figure 1



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**Iraq's Communists:  
The Potential Threat**

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Iraq's Communist Party is a modern phoenix. Since its creation 50 years ago, the party has been repeatedly repressed, only to rise again to challenge the regimes in Baghdad. Quashed in the late 1940s, the party became a serious threat to the government by 1959, only to go into decline in the 1960s because of weak leadership and persecution by the Ba'thist government.

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The deep-seated rivalry between the Communists and the ruling Ba'th Party of Iraq stems from their bloody struggle for political power in the late 1950s and early 1960s. the Ba'thists regard the Communists as their greatest secular rivals and respect their mass appeal and ability to organize large street demonstrations, skills that the Ba'thists have yet to master. Senior Ba'thists remain bitter over persecution suffered during the Communist-backed regime of Abdul Karim Qasim that followed the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958. For their part, the Communists are bitter over Ba'thist repression, which was particularly brutal when the Ba'thists overthrew Qasim and ruled for a brief period in 1963,

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Communist strength revived after the return to power of the Ba'thists in 1968 and the admission of the Communists five years later into the Progressive and Patriotic National Front, a grouping of Iraqi political parties that nominally runs Iraq. The Communists capitalized on rivalries in the Ba'th Party and the diversion of Ba'thist attention to the Kurdish rebellion in northern Iraq that subsequently collapsed in 1975.

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The party's fortunes have fallen sharply since 1978 when widespread arrests, executions, and other government harassment forced the CPI underground and its leaders into exile. Since then, most of the party's leadership has remained abroad and the party has been quiet, with the exception of approximately 800 guerrillas fighting in the mountains of northern Iraq.

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**Communist Party of Iraq Organization**

**Central Committee.** This 41-person body meets irregularly outside Iraq and sets party policy. It last met in June 1984. Members reside in the USSR, Eastern Europe, Syria, and Iraq.

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**Politburo.** This 15-person body of Central Committee members runs the party between Central Committee meetings.

**Branches.** the party maintains centers in Moscow, Prague, and Sofia, and regional headquarters in Damascus and northern Iraq.

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**Finances.** Moscow meets all expenses of party conferences and pays medical expenses of senior officials.

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**Publications.** The party publishes a newspaper Tariq al-Sha'b (Path of the People) in Damascus.

**Membership/Recruitment.** The party is experiencing no membership growth.

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Communist Party membership also has followed a roller coaster path and is now at its lowest point in more than a decade. Although estimates of Communist strength vary widely, we agree with those

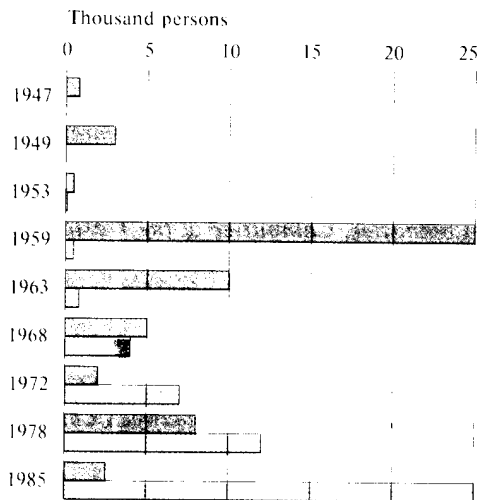
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**Figure 2**  
**Estimated Membership<sup>a</sup> of the Communist and Ba'th Parties, 1947-85**

Shaded portion indicates range

Legend  Communist Party  
 Ba'th Party



<sup>a</sup> Full members only. Ba'thist candidate and affiliate members outnumber full members of the Ba'th Party by severalfold.

1968. [redacted] the participants as mostly Kurds and Communists who were protesting the summer callup of male students to active duty in Iraq's militia. [redacted]

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The propaganda efforts of the Communists also remain a source of concern to the government. [redacted] the party clandestinely distributed large numbers of antigovernment leaflets throughout Iraq on a single night in April 1984. The tracts called on former members to rejoin the party. Iraqi security officials were particularly alarmed that the leaflets received such widespread distribution, indicating an extensive Communist apparatus. [redacted]

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The Communist guerrillas operating in northern Iraq are an irritant to the government as well. [redacted] Communist guerrilla bands maintain four bases in Dahuk, Irbil, and As Sulaymaniyah Provinces. Guerrillas began operating openly near Zakhu in July 1984, [redacted] and have opened a headquarters 15 kilometers from Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city. Ba'th Party officials in As Sulaymaniyah in Kurdistan were concerned before the National Assembly election last October that the Ba'thists might lose a majority of their district's seats to Kurdish Communists and backers of Jalal Talabani, a popular Kurdish dissident leader. [redacted]

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**A Party Divided**

The Communists are divided by religious and ethnic factors. [redacted] favoritism and patronage along religious lines are increasing both in the Central Committee and among the guerrillas. [redacted]

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[redacted] most party members are Sunni Kurds, Shia Arabs, and, to a lesser extent, Christians rather than Sunni Arabs who dominate the government and the military. We believe that more than half are Sunni Kurds from northern Iraq. The next largest segment is composed of Shias from southern Iraq. The Communist appeal and activities are strongest in these two

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[redacted]  
305639 5-85

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[redacted] the Communists number 1,500 hardcore members inside Iraq and about 1,000 abroad. By comparison, [redacted] the ruling Ba'th Party now has about 25,000 members. When the Ba'thists seized power in 1968, they numbered about 3,000, [redacted]

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**Recent Subversive Efforts Inside Iraq**

[redacted] the Communists still possess the organizational talent that has long worried the ruling Ba'thists. Last May, for example, 2,000 students at Mosul and Irbil Universities and the Technological Institute of Karkuk participated in some of the largest organized public demonstrations since the Ba'thists seized power in

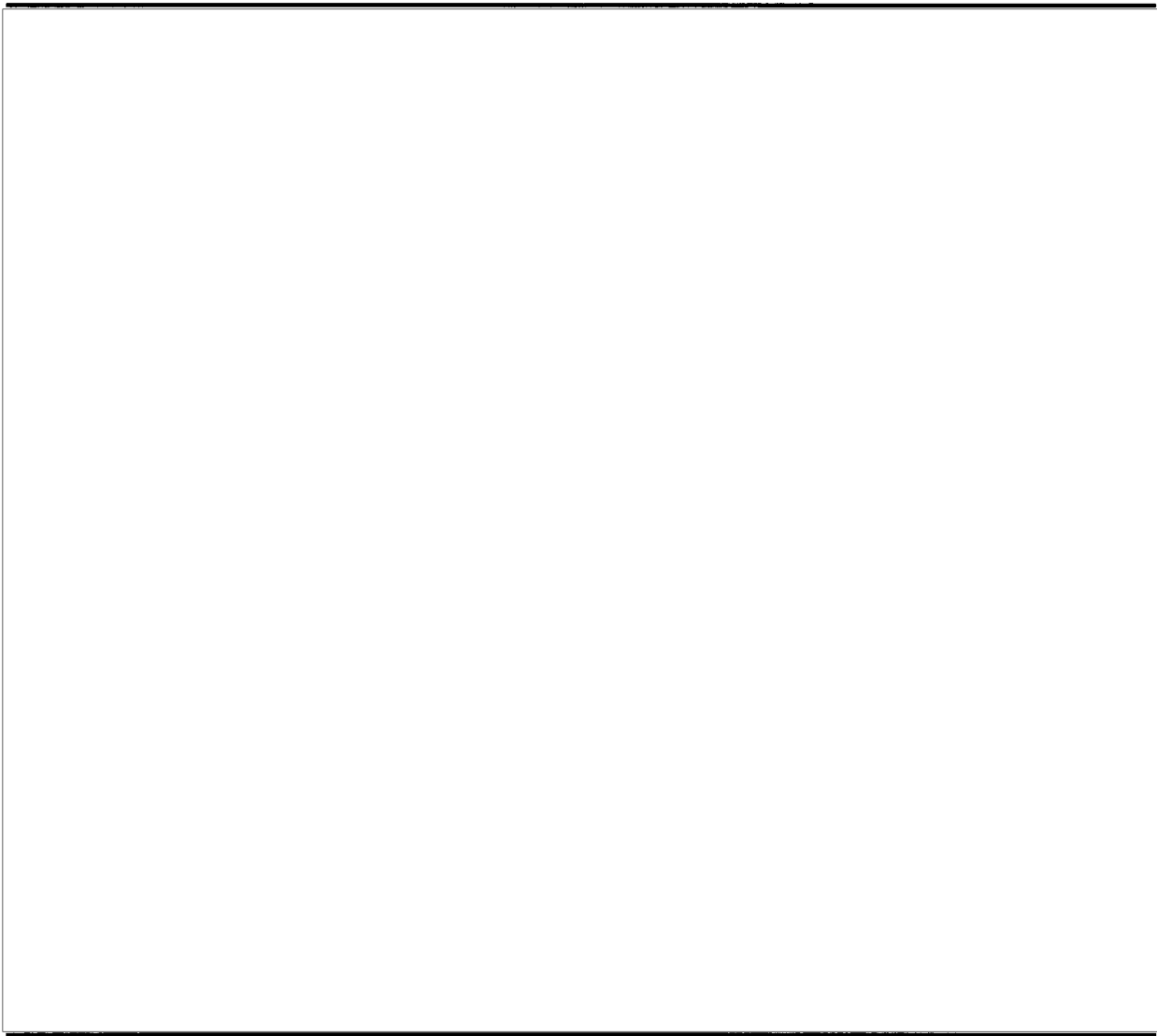
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areas. We have little information on the social and economic composition of the membership. Although the Communist guerrilla units are ethnically mixed, they tend to break down into ethnically homogeneous subgroups. [redacted] attempts to craft party doctrine to meet the demands of Kurdish nationalism while not offending the Shias create recurring friction. [redacted]

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The effectiveness of the Iraqi Communist Party is also seriously weakened by quarrels about overall leadership of the party. These disputes have divided the Communists into three main factions. [redacted]

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**The Old Guard.** The predominant, Soviet-backed moderates call for reconciliation with Baghdad. [redacted] the old guard, which includes the Moscow-based Secretary General Aziz Muhammad and several Politburo members, generally follows the Soviet line that calls for the party's return to Iraq. [redacted] however, reconciliation with the government is a contentious issue even among some members of the old guard. Most Communists doubt—with good reason—Ba'athist promises that they will not be persecuted. [redacted]

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**The Kurdish Faction.** Former Politburo member Baha al-Din Nuri has broken with the party to head the Corrective Movement, a faction composed largely of Kurdish Communist guerrillas in northern Iraq near As Sulaymaniyah. He has cooperated with leftist Kurdish dissident leader Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and favors an accommodation with Baghdad and rejoining the National Front,

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[redacted] Corrective Movement leaders argue that the CPI can never be strong until it reestablishes itself in Iraq, giving it the opportunity to penetrate the Ba'th Party and the military. The Movement claims that the party in exile is doing nothing to combat the threat of a takeover by Iranian-sponsored Shias. [redacted]

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Nuri's ambitions led to his expulsion from the CPI. He had waged a vigorous campaign to regain the leadership of the party that he held during 1949-53,

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[redacted] His ouster occurred at the Central Committee meeting in June 1984 over efforts to give the party a Kurdish orientation, [redacted]

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[redacted] Nuri's ambitions have alienated a number of Central Committee members, even those who advocate a greater role for military activities in the party's strategy. [redacted]

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**The Advocates of Armed Struggle.** Many guerrilla leaders and young members call for continued armed struggle against the Iraqi Government and oppose efforts at reconciliation, [redacted]

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[redacted] They blame the party's top leadership for joining the National Front in 1973 and making the party's overt apparatus vulnerable during the subsequent Ba'thist crackdown. These fighters also resent the risks they are taking while the old leadership leads a life of perceived ease and inaction abroad, [redacted]

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**Domestic Allies**

The Communists' domestic allies are largely Kurdish nationalist groups. Although the Kurds are the most effective dissidents in Iraq, they are factionalized and operate almost exclusively in remote mountainous regions. The CPI's relations with these groups are in flux, reflecting the continually shifting loyalties of the Kurdish groups. [redacted]

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The Communists' marriage of convenience with their closest ally, the pro-Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), is strained. The KDP, led by Mas'ud and Idris Barzani, is the largest Kurdish dissident group. [redacted]

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[redacted]

[redacted] Communist armed cadres resent their domination by the KDP, and Tehran's persecution of the Communist Tudeh Party of Iran limits the Iraqi Communists' willingness to cooperate with Tehran's Kurdish allies. [redacted]

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We believe that the CPI has reached a tacit truce with its traditional Kurdish ally, the leftist Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani. PUK turned on the old guard in 1983 as Talabani improved relations with Baghdad in preparation for autonomy negotiations. [redacted]

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[redacted] the PUK captured and turned over to Iraqi authorities 24 Communists, including two senior officials in June 1983. Communist and PUK fighting continued until last fall when Talabani's autonomy negotiations and cease-fire with Baghdad broke down. PUK now is allied with Barzani in opposition to the government and Kurdish forces loyal to Baghdad.

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[redacted]

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[redacted]

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**Foreign Ties**

The party is supported by the USSR, East European countries, and Syria and receives limited aid from People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) and radical Palestinian groups. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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[Redacted]

[Redacted]

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We believe that the CPI obtains its arms largely from its Kurdish allies, who in turn obtain them from Syria, Iran, and perhaps Libya. [Redacted] the Ba'th Party informed its members in 1980 that Bulgaria and other Communist countries were providing arms to Iraqi Communist guerrillas. Even though we have no confirmation of such shipments, we do not rule them out, given the poor state of Iraqi-Soviet relations at that time because of Moscow's courtship of Iran. We doubt that the Soviets have approved more recent arms shipments, but they could resume indirect transfers if Moscow decides to improve relations with Tehran.

**Soviet Pressures on Baghdad**

Soviet pressure on the Saddam regime to treat the Iraqi Communist Party more favorably has had little success since the mid-1970s. The Soviets now are urging the party and Baghdad to reconcile. [Redacted] the USSR renewed pressure on exiled Iraqi Communists to return home after Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Ramadan visited Moscow in April 1984. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

We believe that the Soviets generally try to balance two conflicting policy goals: maintaining good ties to the Iraqi regime while rebuilding Communist influence in Iraq. [Redacted]

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Syria has increased its aid to Iraqi Kurdish guerrillas—probably including some Communists—as part of its campaign to bring down Iraqi President Saddam Husayn. [Redacted] Politically, Syria has publicly backed the formation of a front composed of Iraqi Kurds, nationalists, and Communists opposed to Baghdad. This front is the secular counterpart of the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the umbrella organization of largely Iraqi Shia opposition groups based in Iran, from which Iraqi Communists are excluded. Neither group poses more of a threat to Iraq than numerous predecessors. Syria also permits the Iraqi Communists to operate an office openly and publish a newspaper *Tariq al-Sha'b* in Syria. [Redacted]

Soviet support for the Iraqi Communists has lately waned because of the party's ineffectiveness and Moscow's desire for warmer relations with Baghdad. Moscow, however, has not given up its desire for more influence. [Redacted] the USSR advocates reconciliation because it believes that a legal Communist presence in Iraq after the Iran-Iraq war would be better situated to exploit weaknesses in Saddam's regime—a view we share. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Despite Moscow's efforts, we do not believe Baghdad views the Communist threat or Soviet pressure as sufficiently strong to compel it to legalize the party. The Iraqis gave the appearance of bowing to Soviet pressure last year when, [Redacted] they agreed in principle to the return of the Iraqi Communists and to allocate a cabinet post to the Communists. We believe, however, that Baghdad probably placed unacceptable limitations on the type of activities the Communists could engage in if they returned. Should the Iraqi Communists accept

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Iran does not support the Iraqi Communists, although it has tolerated the party's use of Iran as a base from which to harass the regime in Baghdad. Iraqi Shia dissident groups supported by Iran have refused to cooperate with the party, largely because of its atheistic ideology and ties to Moscow, [Redacted]

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strict conditions for their return, Baghdad probably would welcome them because the Ba'thists are eager to bolster an image of widespread acceptability. [redacted]

**Government Response**

We believe that the Ba'th Party has shown remarkable skill and discipline in countering the Communists. [redacted]

[redacted] In our judgment, the regime's concerns about preempting the appeal of Communists and preventing their rise to power heavily influence domestic policies. [redacted]

**Penetration.** The security services have extensively recruited Communists in Iraq to aid in the identification of exiled members who return, [redacted]

**Suppression.** Baghdad deals harshly with those who fail to cooperate, deterring prospective Communists. [redacted]

[redacted] Iraq executed 152 Communist prisoners in late 1983, most of whom had been detained since 1980-81. Similar executions of Communists in Iraq's military in 1978 persuaded many Iraqi Communists to flee the country. [redacted]

**Economic Development.** Although they would have implemented their socialist policies in any event, the Ba'thists have taken pains to assure that the benefits of economic projects reach the masses, in part, we believe, to deny the CPI an exploitable issue. The Ba'thists used sharply higher oil income during the 1970s to finance ambitious development programs and have been careful to continue this policy despite reduced income because of the war. The government transformed the Thawrah slums of Baghdad, a former stronghold of Shia Communists, into Saddam City, a modern suburb with full utilities. Similar development projects have taken place throughout the country, particularly in Kurdistan and Shia areas of southern Iraq. [redacted]

**Control of Education.** In recognition of the significant role that the military and students have played in past Communist political bids in Iraq, the Ba'thists tightly control the Army and the educational establishment. All teachers are Ba'thists, according to the Embassy. The Ba'th Party also controls the National Union of Iraqi Students and Youth, the only authorized student organization. According to US diplomats, students are pressed to join and sometimes are harassed if they do not. Representatives of the union wield enormous influence on the governing boards of universities in the granting of scholarships. [redacted]

The Ba'thists' concern is not misplaced. A Western academic study on Iraqi Communists says that during the 1940s and 1950s the Communists concentrated their recruitment efforts on schoolteachers who in turn recruited students. The Communists found students more receptive to recruitment than workers or peasants, in part because they were better educated and more willing to take chances. The Communists continue to focus on students. [redacted]

**Control of the Military.** Similarly, the Ba'thists closely monitor the loyalty of the military. [redacted] the party ruthlessly weeds out military officers with Communist sympathies, promotes Ba'thist officers rapidly, and rotates and transfers officers frequently to prevent commanders from building personal followings. Guidance officers report directly to the Directorate of Political Guidance in the Defense Ministry, bypassing the normal military chain of command. [redacted]

CPI recruitment efforts within the armed forces have not been successful. [redacted] as of 1982 the Communists had no members in the armed forces. The death sentence prescribed for such membership is doubtlessly a strong deterrent. [redacted] at the height of their power in 1959, the Communists had at least 235 military officers as members, including the commander of the Air Force. [redacted]

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**Prospects**

We believe that the Communists do not pose a threat to the stability of Saddam Husayn's regime in the near term and are not likely to gain much strength as long as the Ba'thists retain popular support for repelling Iran. We would expect them to make another comeback if several of the following developments take place after the war:

- *Iraq's economy cannot fulfill popular expectations.* If the government cannot adequately resume its development program after the war because of low oil revenues in a depressed world oil market, the Communists are certain to exploit this weakness. The Communists also could capitalize on any housing shortages and breakdowns in municipal services caused by Baghdad's rapid growth. [redacted] during its last resurgence in the mid-1970s, the party depicted itself as the only political element genuinely concerned with improving the working and living conditions of the common citizen.

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We believe that Ba'thists are likely to face considerable economic problems during the next five years despite the likely doubling of Iraq's present oil exports of 1 million barrels per day. The Ba'thists probably will have to deal with a populace frustrated that Iraq's economy has not resumed the rapid growth of the 1970s. Iraq's need to import capital goods to rebuild its economy and military equipment to maintain Iraq's substantial edge over Iran will limit Baghdad's ability to import consumer goods.

- *Iraq's security services are weakened by rivalries within the Ba'th Party or the removal of Saddam.*

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The Ba'th Party has retained power in large part because of its effective security forces. Saddam purged the services during the past two years to remove his half brothers, whom he suspected of establishing a rival base of power, [redacted]. The Embassy reports that rivalries between the maternal and paternal sides of Saddam's family continue. To date, we have observed no deterioration in the effectiveness of the services. If, however, the divisions deepen or Saddam is removed, the capabilities of the services to suppress the Communists would be curtailed.

Whether divisions within the Ba'th Party or Saddam's family reach serious proportions is problematic. Saddam has a firm grip on power and has repeatedly demonstrated his ability to preempt moves against him by potential rivals. His assassination, however, is an ever-present risk as demonstrated by repeated attempts on his life. We believe that none of his likely successors would match Saddam's cunning or skills in manipulating the party, the military, and the security apparatus.<sup>1</sup>

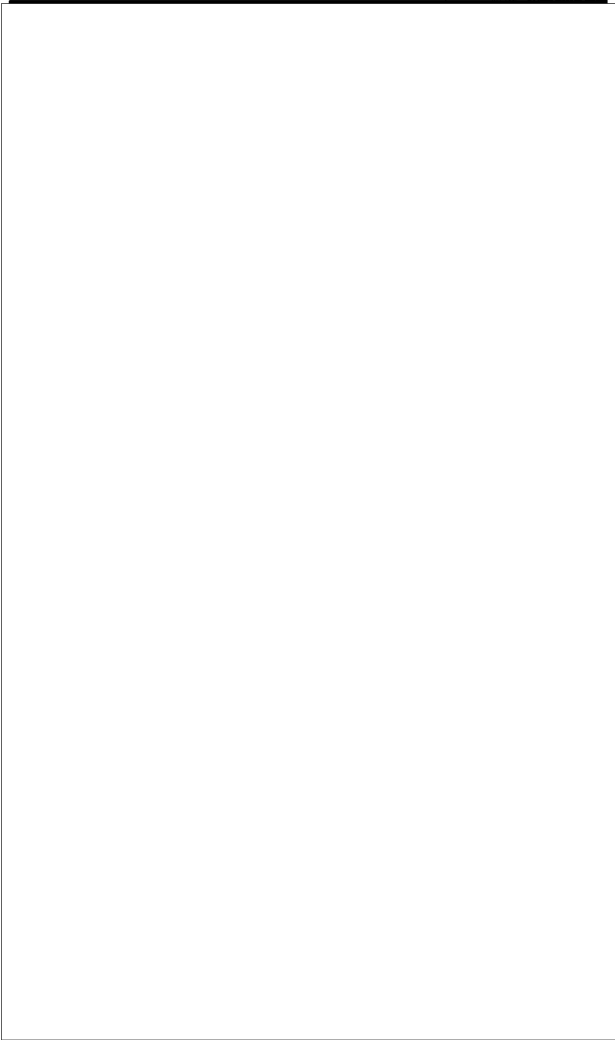
- *A younger, more dynamic leadership emerges within the CPI.* We believe that current Politburo members, most of whom are in their sixties, lack the dynamism, fresh ideas, and perhaps the courage needed to run effective clandestine operations in the face of brutal repression. The chronically ill Secretary Aziz Muhammad has headed the party for 20 years. His leadership has been weak and indecisive, in our judgment. No other leader has demonstrated the qualities needed to reinvigorate the party. Baha al-Din Nuri is renowned for his energy and ambition, but we believe that his appeal is limited primarily to Kurdish Communists.

- *The party concentrates its organizational talents on construction of a clandestine network in Iraq.* To be effective, the party—whether legal or illegal—must create an underground network divorced from the existing one, which has been compromised. Building on the present nets or relying on an overt structure would leave the party vulnerable to roundups by the security services. Similarly, devoting too much energy to guerrilla activity would divert energy from the creation of cells within the military and security forces. We believe that a Communist armed rebellion centered in the north and far from the center of power in Baghdad is unlikely to threaten the regime significantly. We believe that such a dramatic policy change will occur only under younger leadership, a development that is likely only when Aziz Muhammad dies or is otherwise incapacitated.

[redacted]

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On balance, the CPI's fortunes are likely to rise only after the war if Iraq's economy is weak and either Saddam is removed or the CPI gains new leadership.

[Redacted]

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A resurgence of the CPI would increase instability in Iraq, weakening the Ba'th Party's grip on power and perhaps encouraging other dissidents. In foreign relations, the Ba'thists would hold the Soviets largely responsible for Communist successes, and Iraqi-Soviet relations would become strained. US-Iraqi ties probably would not benefit proportionately because the Ba'thists would be likely to increase criticism of the United States to counter Communist accusations that they were pro-West.

[Redacted]

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A Communist takeover would severely damage US interests. The new regime would improve ties to the USSR, but probably not to the satisfaction of the Soviets. Iraq's Communists have a reputation for being among the most independent in the Arab world. We would expect the Iraqi Communists to back Arab and Iranian Communists and to support leftist efforts to subvert moderate, pro-US regimes.

[Redacted]

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The Communists, however, would be preoccupied with containing the considerable opposition to their rule. Iraqi Kurds would press their claims for greater autonomy and funds from a weakened central government and would resort to armed rebellion when their demands were not met. We would not expect the Communist economic program to differ substantially from that of the Ba'thists, with the exception of less reliance on Western economic development and a reversal in the present policy that encourages a greater role for the private sector. Communist attempts to purge Ba'thists and other opposition elements from the military and government would be countered by coup attempts and outbursts of popular unrest such as those that occurred in Iraq in the 1960s.

[Redacted]

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- *The Soviets significantly increase support for the Communists with the aim of overthrowing Saddam.* We believe this is highly unlikely over the next few years because Moscow regards the near-term prospects for a Communist seizure of power as thin. Moreover, although Moscow has no love for Saddam, it has repaired relations with him since 1982 and also does not appear to see an urgent need to work for his ouster. The Soviets, however, might significantly step up support for the CPI if their relations with Iraq deteriorate or if the death or ouster of Saddam leads to domestic political turmoil.

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