THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN HISTORY

Reflections on *Min Zawaya Ath-Thakira: Ala Hamesh Thawrat* 14 Tammuz ‘Ām 1958

Essay By the Editor

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.\(^2\)

The July 14, 1958 military coup in Iraq was a momentous event in the ongoing revolutionary process in the Arab world. It shattered the web of Western alliances, primarily the Baghdad Pact led by the United States. It also bolstered the anti-imperialist struggle at the height of Arab nationalism expressed in the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR—the union between Syria and Egypt) early in that year. The Iraqi coup also demolished the union between the two Hashemite kingdoms—Iraq and Jordan (created by Western imperialism as a counter to the UAR) and strengthened the hand of Gamal Abd el-Nasser (the UAR president) in ending the 1958 Lebanese civil war through negotiations with the United States. Prior to the formation of the UAR, Nasser had led the July 23, 1952 Egyptian military coup that toppled the Egyptian monarchy. He became the undisputed hero of the struggle for Arab nationalism and unity after the 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal and the failed Tripartite invasion of Egypt in that year by the British, French, and the Zionist settler-colonial entity in occupied Palestine. The Iraqi coup led by Abd el-Kareem Qasim and Abd es-Salam Aref was the crowning touch to the popular struggle against the Iraqi monarchy, which comprised the core of the Baghdad Pact.

Tareq Y. Ismael’s memoirs of the July 14 coup, its political development, and its ultimate demise, represent a rich intervention that contributes to a better understanding of the historic significance of that period for Iraq and, by implication, the Arab region.\(^2\) Recognizing the importance of the context in which those events had occurred, and the way in which the July 14 coup influenced those events, Tareq Ismael lays out an historic background that not only frames his account, but also situates him as an individual in the larger narrative of Iraqi history. Tareq Ismael writes about “The Beginnings of the Iraqi National Movement,” “The Political Climate of Iraq of the Fifties,” and “July 14th: From the Coup to the Revolution.” This last topic comprised the third chapter of his memoirs in which, of necessity, he as an individual was enmeshed in the maelstrom of unstoppable events. Here the dialectics of the relationship between the individual and events are laid bare.

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Individual actors had significant roles to play and yet the torrent of events, violent and nonviolent, were perceived as being beyond their grip or power. In writing about those events, Tareq Ismael recounts how he found himself in the middle of events which he had no control over, and how he had to navigate his way through a complex web that led him on trajectories he could not have foreseen.

His upbringing and his social and national/ethnic background (being Arab on his father’s side and Kurdish on his mother’s) led Tareq Ismael to pursue his scholastic and academic interests, and these, in turn, pointed him to his role as a journalist while still pursuing his education. In narrating events on the first day of the coup he introduces the reader to his encounter with Abd es-Salam Aref, the co-leader of the coup who has a significant role in Iraqi history lasting well after the demise of Abd el-Kareem Qasim, the main leader of the coup.

Qasim negotiated his way through domestic, regional, and international events, influencing those events.

Qasim was a humble man who envisioned himself as apart from political parties. He simply wanted to serve his country and defend it against Western imperialism and local and regional reaction. He depended upon the armed forces in trying to achieve these goals. He initially thought that relying on progressive social and political forces would guarantee him success. But reality intervened when he found that Aref, the other coup leader, was making decisions and acting on his own without Qasim, the main leader of the coup. Eventually, Qasim was compelled to strip Aref of his powers. That action meant that the divide between him and the nationalists grew wider, alongside the divide between the nationalist and left forces.

Qasim was out of his depth in matters regional and international. His naivety in political matters led him to take unfortunate and imprudent political positions. One outrageous decision, given the regional and international politics of the time, was his declaration that Kuwait was part of Iraq. The instability that was created inside Iraq and the region due to that declaration, gave Western imperialism and Arab reaction ammunition to use against his regime. Even Nasser of Egypt, who initially had benefitted from the July 14 coup after its destruction of Western alliances, found that Qasim’s positions had caused instability and encouraged more imperialist interventions in the region.

Here we can discern two other critical matters regarding the role of the individual in history. While that role depends upon the context, it also has to do with how well the individual grasps over the situation and how well equipped the individual is in dealing with such events. What one does in shaping such events could be the difference between success or failure. An individual might have popular support, but if that support is not mobilized, it would be easy for adversaries and enemies to sabotage that support and redirect it against the cause. A case in point was Qasim’s idealistic and naive thinking that, as the leader of the state, he was
supported by a majority of the people, which was sadly not the case, especially from the beginning of 1959. By inclination, Qasim was closer to the left parties than he was to the nationalists and yet he kept the communists at bay and then began purging them. He eventually found himself isolated with an unstable regime.

Tareq Ismael’s narration introduces us to other individuals who impacted the Iraqi political scene. Abd al-Wahhab ash-Shawwaf, leader of the failed mutiny of March 1959 in Mosul against the Qasim regime, died during the mutiny. However, the mutiny had a significant impact on Iraqi politics. It took a long while to quell the mutiny and it widened the existing divide between the nationalists and the regime, making it impossible to bridge. Here, Tareq Ismael’s narrative points out the role of multiple individuals in quelling the mutiny. He was instrumental in shaping those events, taking initiatives that actually helped in quelling the mutiny even though some of those initiatives had been contrary to standard operating procedures. He recommended that non-commissioned officers (NCOs) head the committee to deal with the different groupings on the ground, as the NCOs had knowledge of the human and physical terrain. His knowledge of Kurdish allowed him to instantly assume the role of interpreter from Arabic to Kurdish and vice versa at meetings, which helped in ameliorating testy situations. Taking the initiative is critical because once the strategic plan is ready, the rest depends upon the implementation of individual tactics. When the individual is perspicacious and proactive, tactics fall in line and support the strategic plan.

Qasim’s purging of the communists, who were openly declaring that they should assume command of the country, opened the way for the Baathists to take over the leadership of the professional associations and trade unions. Hence, Qasim’s enemies had control of large sections of the political actors on the ground, which they ultimately used to topple the regime. Along the road to the demise of the regime was the December 11, 1959 attempt on Qasim’s life that was perpetrated by Saddam Hussein. Qasim was severely wounded while Saddam, who was wounded in the leg, managed to escape.

The beginning of the end of the regime in Tareq Ismael’s estimation was Qasim’s imprudent declaration that Kuwait was part of Iraq, which he made without consulting his Foreign Minister, who heard about it on the news. That rash action had significantly increased the Qasim regime’s isolation.

A critical point for Iraq, where all these events were taking place, is the larger international context. While the author focuses on the Iraqi domestic scene and provides a directly related Arab and international context to those events that he both witnessed and participated in, much of what occurred was directly or indirectly connected to international forces. The Qasim and Aref military coup was a case in point, as it destroyed Western alliances to control regional revolutionary movements. Another example was the U.S. and Western involvement in toppling the Qasim
regime. It is important to keep in mind that, in many instances, the role of the individual appears miniscule when measured against the global context, but appears bigger and sometimes heroic when measured in a local context, such as the Iraqi political scene. The role of Abd al-Wahhab ash-Shawwaf demonstrated that point. As did the author and the new leader, Colonel Hassan Abboud whom Qasim had appointed to replace ash-Shawwaf and quell the mutiny, along with multiple other political actors who had been instrumental in quelling ash-Shawwaf’s mutiny.

On the cultural front, Tareq Ismael’s engagements had their origin in his upbringing. Even now he most enjoys listening to the Iraqi Maqām performed by famous singers such as Nathem al-Ghazali, Mohamed al-Qabanji, and others whom he met along the way and whose company he valued while living in Iraq. His cultural commitments grew deeper once he transitioned from military life as a reserve officer working in the Defense Ministry at Qasim’s information desk, to civilian life as the assistant to Salim Fakhri, the head of Radio Baghdad. Tareq Ismael also developed the regime’s Press Directorate. His work in those arenas made him aware of the advanced planning that Qasim had made for national guidance through the cultural activities of radio, the nascent TV broadcasting, and the press. Qasim welcomed the left’s role in those areas, as the left had attracted many of the most brilliant and capable literary, artistic, and intellectual figures in the country. However, in both the cultural and the political arenas, rivalry amongst the actors adversely affected the regime’s goal.

In the midst of this turmoil, the author had already been charting another course for his life, one that was more in tune with his passion. Tareq Ismael left the newly formed Iraqi republic he had worked diligently for in order to pursue his Ph.D. His goal was to advance his country—to benefit the Iraqi people, their culture, and by implication, the Arab dimension of progressive Iraqi politics and culture. However, it was through the field of international relations that he realized himself and excelled as an intellectual.

The activities in which he engaged to remain true to his principles and moral and ethical commitments took him and his American wife to Beirut in the 1960s and early 1970s where he spent summers in the company of friends, consumed in debates with Iraqi, Lebanese, Palestinian, and other Arab and foreign intellectuals. In 1975 the war in Lebanon brought those activities to a close. However, those Beirut encounters with intellectuals tentatively resumed in the twenty-first century. In the U.S. and Canada, Tareq Ismael became active in Arab associations and cofounded the Arab American University Graduates (AAUG) along with Edward Said, Ibrahim abu-Lughod, and others. He also founded the International Association of Middle East Studies (IAMES), which has been active for over 50 years. He later initiated the International Association for Contemporary Iraqi Studies (IACIS), and the International Center for Contemporary Middle East
Studies (ICCMES). These academic spaces attracted many Arab and foreign intellectuals whose research focused on West Asia and North Africa. His position as Professor of International Relations at the University of Calgary provided the prestige to these academic spaces he established. His role as Co-Editor (Professor Jacqueline Ismael being the other Co-Editor) of the *Journal of Contemporary Iraq & the Arab World (JCIAW)*, previously known as *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies (IJCIS)*, has, over the years, given space for top-notch research on Iraq (and the Arab world). The multiple international conferences he spearheaded through these intellectual spaces attracted top Arab and foreign academics who contributed their knowledge for a better understanding of the contemporary situation in the Arab world. In fact, his memoirs about the 1958 Iraqi revolution came about as a result of deliberations with colleagues on the threshold of the conference he had spearheaded at the American University in Cairo in 2015.

To this day Tareq Ismael remains committed to justice and liberation, and true to his roots and identity. His focus continues to be on Iraq and the Arab world. His methodology is humanistic in its anticolonial and antiimperialist tradition. As an engaged intellectual, Tareq Ismael’s journey splendidly demonstrates the role of the individual in history. His memoirs corroborate Karl Marx’s keen and perspicacious observation about human beings and history.

**Notes**

1. The translation of the title is: *From the Threshold of Memory: on the Periphery of the July 14, 1958 Revolution*.