

## **Communists Undaunted by Murders**

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Leaders of revived leftist party determined to continue spreading the word despite attack on local office.

In the wake of the deadly explosion that ripped through a newly-established branch office of the Iraqi Communist Party in Baghdad al-Jadidah, a neighbourhood in the capital, on January 22, there's no shortage of suspects.

The Communists have many enemies in this poor district of the capital, from neighbours who resent the presence of such "unbelievers" and local politicians angry at the party's attempts to build support, to Islamists who are said concerned about its cooperation with the United States-led Coalition Provisional Authority.

Some officials in the Communist Party reportedly blame former members of Saddam Hussein's intelligence and security organisations for the attack.

But conservative Shia groups also are said to harbour long-standing enmity toward the Communists. Last summer, a Shia mob burned down a Party office in the southern city of Nasiriyah.

Officially, at least, the party has not pointed the finger at anyone in particular.

"We call on all the relevant quarters to act quickly and seriously to identify and apprehend the murderers and refer them to justice so that they will receive just punishment for their crime and treachery," the party said in a statement published on January 25 by its newspaper Tariq al-Sahaab.

The statement referred only to "the hand of treachery, crime and terrorism" that killed two members, identified as Yasir Abbud and Shakir Jasim Ujayl. The statement said the two victims were at the office on the evening of January 22 when the bombing destroyed nearly the entire building.

Party officials told IWPR that the blast occurred at 6:13 pm, only half an hour after a meeting ended in the small premises they rent on the second floor of a commercial building.

While the party has not officially accused anyone of the crime, the head of the al-Jadidah office, who spoke to IWPR under his nom de guerre of Abu Wisam, suspects the attack was carried out by Islamist radicals intent on exacting retribution.

According to Abu Wisam, the Communists had earlier informed the coalition about three suspected foreign Islamist fighters - two Yemenis and a Syrian - who were living in the area. The three foreigners were killed on January 19, when US forces raided their house and discovered a cache of arms.

But no one is sure that revenge actually was the motive, or even that Islamists carried out the attack.

Neighbours suggest that another local political party or a member of the local council could have carried out the bombing, angry at the Communists' attempts to win support by doing such things as distributing

free cooking gas.

There is even uncertainty over how the attack was carried out.

Although some witnesses claim to have seen the trail of a missile that hit the building, at least one party official suspects the damage was done by a bomb concealed inside a television set given to the office.

"We recently received a television as a gift," said activist Abu Ali. "Someone came to us saying that he was a Communist from outside the area, and he wanted to give us the TV to show his joy that we were opening an office here."

But whether the blast was an act of revenge or not, such troubles are nothing new to members of the Iraqi Communist Party. The party was once considered one of the more powerful Marxist organisations of the Arab world, and was a particularly attractive alternative to Shia and Kurds who rejected the pan-Arab philosophy of the Baath and other Sunni parties.

Viciously repressed in the 1960s and 1970s, the Communists were driven underground, and their dwindling support base was eventually surpassed by the rising tide of Shia religious movements.

Since the downfall of the Saddam regime, however, the Communist Party has staged a comeback. Not only has it opened dozens of offices around the country, but its general secretary, Hamid Majid Mousa, 61, is a member of Iraq's US-appointed Governing Council.

Ideologically, members range from social democrats to hard-core Maoists, from militant atheists to left-leaning Islamists who argue that the early Muslims were the world's first socialists.

For the time being, though, the party's general approach to politics is pragmatic, even down its inoffensive slogan "Democracy and Renewal".

It was against this background that Iraq's Communist Party opened its office in Baghdad al-Jadidah, only 20 days before the explosion.

Most of the branch members are older men, who have come from outlying districts to win new supporters for the party.

While they have not made any converts so far, they have still created a stir in the area, with local residents expressing a variety of views about them.

"I'm very surprised - they're all very poor," said contractor Ahmed Shaker. "How can they make a living?"

Others are quick to attack the Communists for their secularism. "It's a party of unbelievers," says Sheikh Hussein Abdullaki, a preacher at a local mosque.

While Abdullaki condemned the bombing, local resident Qassem Abu Mohammed declared it to be "the neighbourhood's answer to this party, communicating our rejection [of its presence]".

Elderly resident Hajji Haytham claimed that the Communists are "always drinking [alcohol]" and that "there's also a mosque nearby, and they don't go".

Communist activists appeared genuinely surprised by the hostility their presence engendered.

"We no longer use the slogan, 'Religion is the opium of the people'," said Abu Wisam. "My family is religious. When we were imprisoned, we organised prayers in jail."

Yet that is clearly not enough to earn a welcome in the neighbourhood.

The bomb that took the lives of two party members just three weeks after they arrived in Baghdad al-Jadidah unmistakably shows that Iraq's Communists have a long way to go before they are accepted there.

The Communists say they are prepared to meet that challenge, and they have promised to continue their work peacefully.

Even as it condemned "this treacherous attack and despicable crime", the statement in Tariq al-Sahaab said party members were "determined to move forward to achieve amity, welfare and a better life in Iraq in an atmosphere of peace, democracy and full national sovereignty".

Underlining that sense of resolve, the day after the attack, one of Iraq's bright red double-decker buses arrived at the party office, packed with Communists shouting, "We will rebuild! We are continuing with our goals! No one can stop us!"

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