

IRAQI STATESMAN

A portrait of
Mohammed Fadhel Jamali

Harry J. Almond

"Iraqi Statesman is at once an engaging portrait of an Iraqi statesman in pre-Saddam Iraq and a picture of the more humane society Iraq once was and may yet become."

RICHARD NOLTE, *President, American Geographical Society; former U. S. Ambassador to Egypt.*

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IRAQI STATESMAN

A Portrait of Mohammed Fadhel Jamali

by Harry J. Almond



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**IRAQI STATESMAN:
A Portrait of Mohammad Fadhel Jamali**

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Contents

Preface	vii
1. Son of a Shi'a Sheikh	1
2. University in Beirut and New York	17
3. Educator	35
4. Career Switch	45
5. Foreign Affairs	53
6. The United Nations	61
7. Diplomacy of Relationships	89
8. Bandung: the First Afro-Asian Conference	107
9. Business as Usual: Prelude to Revolution	127
10. Death Sentence	139
11. Teaching Again	159
Sources Consulted	167
Index	171

To my beloved wife, Beverly,
and our daughters, Anne and Betsy,
who share my love for the people of the Middle East.



Preface



This book is offered as a portrait of an Arab statesman, an Iraqi. It is not intended to be a definitive biography but to provide a picture of a flesh and blood person with a real faith. He is no doubt outspoken on controversial matters, perhaps overly blunt on matters of deep conviction, but he is nonetheless a fair sample of his age. He is ever a teacher and a devoted father, a crusty, feisty man with a redeeming sense of humor.

There have been biographies of Arab heads of state, but there is almost nothing published about people on the level of cabinet minister, those who served their countries year in year out, sometimes merely trying to implement the desires of their superiors, sometimes daring to differ. So I chose to write of Jamali, a long-serving cabinet minister, because he is typical of a generation that should be better understood. He spans a wide period of history. From the post World War I era he has been active in his country's affairs. He signed the United Nations (UN) Charter and was one of the initiators of the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955. Imprisoned and condemned to death by the 1958 Revolution, he was pardoned and exonerated by the Iraq Government in 1961. He lectured at the University of Tunis until retirement in 1987, and at 89 he continues his writing and speaking.

I suggested writing his biography several years ago, and he offered the unpublished manuscript of his *Memoirs*, 687 typed pages. This when sorted provided a chronological outline and notes. All references to these *Memoirs* are indicated by page numbers in parentheses. This outline has been supplemented with other material from the indicated publications and the *New York Times*, the Netherlands Foreign Ministry, the British Public Record Office, the Records of UN Proceedings, the National Archives of the United States, and my own notes.

Many have helped this enterprise. Mrs. Edward Perry, a longtime friend of the Middle East donated a computer. Ambassador Richard H. Nolte gave his encouragement and a copy of his own monograph about Jamali. Professor Walid Khalidi of Harvard has been generous with his advice, correction and support. Dr. Dick van Tetterode of the Hague deserves special thanks for his labors of love both in the basement files of the Dutch Foreign Ministry and in translating that material into English. My colleague and friend Michael Henderson deserves special appreciation for editing and other helps. I am most grateful for the cheerful cooperation of the Jamalis all, who have graciously granted permission to use personal material.

Harry J. Almond
Egremont, Massachusetts
1993

1

Son of a Shi'a Sheikh

In Mecca, above the Red Sea on the Western slopes of the Arabian peninsula, Jamali forebears were known in the time of the Prophet Mohammed at the turn of the seventh century, AD. They belonged to the *beni Sheiba* clan of the Prophet's own Qureish tribe. The *beni Sheiba* were entrusted with the key of the *Ka'aba*, a pagan shrine which became Islam's Holy Place and focus of the *hajj*, the annual pilgrimage.

Family tradition relates that one of the *beni Sheiba* was rude to the Prophet prior to Mohammed's move with the first small band of Muslims to Medina in AD 622. Twelve years later Mohammed returned triumphantly to Mecca. His cousin and son-in-law Ali recalled the *beni Sheiba*'s slight to Mohammed, and he took the key of the *Ka'aba* by force from Othman bin Talha, one of the *beni Sheiba*, in order to enter the shrine and destroy the idols, which had been objects of superstition and worship as well as a source of considerable profit. Ali's taking the key in this way gave occasion for the revelation of this verse to Mohammed: "Allah commands you to give back the trust to its owners..." (*Qur'an*, "The Women," IV:58).¹ Thereupon the Prophet ordered Ali to return the key and that it should remain with the *beni Sheiba* "until the end of time."²



Just as English names like Taylor, Smith or Weaver evolve from an occupation or trade, so it often is with Arab names. Thus the Jamali ancestors, the Sheibis, were also known as Beni Abd ed-Dar, "Sons of the Servant of the House"—the *Ka'aba*. In the critical Battle of Uhud they were also standard bearers for the Qureish.

One branch of the Sheibis, who were of course Sunnis, migrated to Mesopotamia centuries later. There, finding themselves in a largely Shi'a society, they eventually joined that community as did most of the other Arabian tribes who settled along the banks of Iraq's twin rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. But this was generations before Sheikh Abbas al-Jamali and his two sons, Mohammad Fadhel and Abdur Rasoul, appeared on the scene.

The Jamali family have in their keeping a *firman*, or decree, from the Caliph in Istanbul dated in the month of Muharram, AH 1020 (AD 1611). It grants the care within the Kadhimain mosque of the shrine of Imam Abu Yusuf, the seventh Shi'a Imam, to Jamal ed-Din bin Mullah Ali, the Jamali ancestor. "Jamali" thus became the name for those Sheibis who were the descendants of that particular Jamal ed-Din.³ Two other branches of the beni Sheiba also migrated to Iraq: one in Kadhimain is headed by Sheikh Kalid-dar, a Persian name meaning "keeper of the keys"; and the other, al-Bu'ajini, settled in Nejef.⁴ Imam Musa al-Kadhim, Abu Yusuf, the care of whose tomb under one of Kadhimain's twin domes was entrusted to the Jamalīs, was born about AD 745, and he died about AD 799.⁵

The tomb of Imam Abu Ja'afar Mohammed ibn Ali, also known as Mohammed at-Taqi (the God-fearing) lies under the second golden dome and is in charge of another branch of the beni Sheiba clan. The name Kadhimain simply means the two Kadhims, the two forbearing or restrained ones, and their remains are buried there. Imam Abu Ja'afar, the ninth Imam, is the grandson of Imam Musa al-Kadhim. The present shrine dates from the early sixteenth century, and the domes were first tiled in gold in 1796.⁶

After World War I and the defeat of the Central Powers the Arab people of the Middle East, newly liberated from Turkish rule by British and Arab troops, were not given the immediate and full independence they felt they had been promised by Britain. Instead, they found themselves under the League of Nations with independence promised, but only eventually. Britain was designated to exercise mandatory power over the area that is now Jordan, Iraq and Palestine, while France exercised her tutorial powers over Syria, which then included the districts we know today as Lebanon.

On 3 September, 1932, the 52 members of the League of Nations admitted Iraq, the first Arab state under mandate to be so recognized.⁷ This, in principle, ended the mandate given to Britain under the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. Nonetheless, British Advisors stayed in Iraq through the Second World War.⁸ By the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne, Iraq was detached from the Ottoman Empire, but modern Iraq had already been born in 1921, when King Feisal, son of Sherif Hussein of Mecca and the outstanding fighter for Arab independence, was enthroned.

In the West King Feisal is known for his exploits against the Turks with T. E. Lawrence as his advisor. Feisal was first enthroned in Syria, and his elder brother, Emir Abdullah, was thought by many, including himself, to be the natural candidate for the throne of Iraq. However, the French had been given the mandate over Syria, and they forced Feisal to leave Damascus. He eventually became King Feisal I of Iraq when on 11 July, 1921, the Council of State, persuaded by British High Commissioner Sir Percy Cox, passed a unanimous resolution declaring Feisal king of a constitutional, democratic monarchy. He was crowned on 23 August, 1921, and his first Council of Ministers met on 10 September that same year.⁹

A major contender for leadership of the new state, Sayid Talib el-Naqib, had been forcibly removed to Ceylon by the British before the plebiscite took place.¹⁰ Abdullah was disappointed, and, although he became Ruler, Emir, of what was

then Transjordan and eventually King of Jordan, he never forgot his earlier hope.

Both Iraq and Transjordan were then poor, but Iraq had the priceless assets of water from the Tigris and the Euphrates, with their port city of Basra, and, eventually, oil. Good relations between the two countries, in spite of Abdullah's disappointment, rested on the family tie, which was strong. That it stayed so was due in no small measure to Feisal's generosity of spirit towards his older brother.

Many young Arabs who had studied in Istanbul at the Turkish Military Academy prior to World War I came home in 1916 when Sherif Hussein of Mecca sent his sons, Abdullah, Zeid and Feisal, to fight alongside the British against the Turks. They joined the Arab Army under Feisal, and many moved on with him to Syria and Iraq. They had been active in secret Arab nationalist societies during their days with the Turkish Army, and the call to rise up under the Hashemites was for them a call to freedom. They were for the most part Syrian and Iraqi, but an Egyptian, Aziz Ali al-Misri, also played a leading part in promoting Arab patriotism among their ranks.

Jamali, in common with many others, regards the liberation of Damascus in 1918 by the Arab Army led by Emir Feisal as the first fruit of the Arab Revolt against the Turks. Feisal then became the first and only King of Syria. In March, 1920 at a Conference in Damascus presided over by Hashim al-Atassi the unity of Syria and Iraq was declared.

In the Arab view two agreements had been made which broke Britain's promises of independence: One was the Sykes-Picot Treaty between France and Britain by which they secretly agreed to divide Syria, Palestine and Iraq between themselves. This came to light when the Russian papers were made public by Lenin after the Revolution. Russia had been a third party, but the Revolution intervened, removing Russia as a participant. In accordance with the terms of that secret Treaty and by the authorization of the San Remo Conference of April, 1920, the French were awarded the mandate for all of Syria. The Arab Kingdom headed by King Feisal came to

an end that same year after considerable resistance. The King had to leave and went to Baghdad, but many Syrians cherished fond memories of him.

The second unjust agreement was the Balfour Declaration of 1917 in which the British government

view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.¹¹

The latter clause, rarely quoted, is a misleading reference to a long-established community which then made up close to 90 percent of the population and which owned well over 90 percent of the land. The Jews of Palestine then numbered about 55,000.

The League of Nations put Syria, which included what we now know as Lebanon, under French Mandate and Iraq, Trans-Jordan and Palestine under the British. In 1920 the Iraqis revolted. Britain finding it costly to rule so turbulent a country, yielded to the wishes of many, although by no means all, Iraqis, and in 1921 King Feisal, the ex-King of Syria, was enthroned as Iraq's first King. One of the young, Turkish-trained officers who accompanied Feisal was Nuri es-Sa'id. First appointed Chief of Staff, he became the dominant figure in Iraq politics for the next thirty seven years. Ja'afar al-Askari, also Turkish-trained, was the first Minister of Defense. Jamali, then eighteen years old, was an elementary school teacher.

During World War I, as the British forces moved North from Cairo into Palestine with the Mediterranean on their left flank, the Arabs under Feisal formed the right flank in the desert area east of the Jordan. Feisal's Arab army had joined the British under Allenby in fulfillment of the Arab part of Sherif Hussein's and British High Commissioner Sir Henry McMahon's agreement that the Arabs would be assured independence in return for their help against the Turks.¹²

Feisal personified the ideal of Arab nationalism for that generation. When he came to Baghdad he brought with him two well-known Arab nationalists; Sati' el-Hasri, who became Director General of the Ministry of Education, and a Sorbonne-educated Lebanese, Rustam Beg Haidar, who was appointed Head of the Royal *Diwan* (Court). These two men, along with the Turkish-trained Iraqi officers who had fought with Feisal against the Turks, did much to promote the cause of Arab nationalism in Iraq. Ancient Mesopotamia, now known as Iraq, had been a province of the Turkish Ottoman Empire like the rest of the Arab world since 1514.

With the coming of King Feisal and his entourage to Iraq, the idea of liberation and Arab unity made a deep impression on young Jamali. Such leadership inspired in the next generation a patriotism whose aim was the eventual liberation and unification of all Arab lands. Young Arabs were not happy to find themselves separated from one another by the frontiers drawn on maps by Europeans at the Versailles Conference.

Into this kaleidoscope of history, intrigue, betrayal, courage and idealism Mohammed Fadhel Jamali was born in 1903 in the holy city of Kadhimain, known for its imposing mosque, four miles upstream from Baghdad on the west bank of the Tigris River. Baghdad's population was then about 140,000 people: by 1987 there were nearly four million. His father, Sheikh Abbas ibn Hajji Mohammed al-Jamali, was a religious leader in the Shi'a community. He had been born in Kadhimain and had spent twenty years in religious studies at Nejef, a respected scholar some of whose disciples eventually became Fadhel's teachers. Fadhel's mother, Alawiya Khadija, was the daughter of a famous woman mullah from Hilla, Sayyida Zahwa, who was also a poetess. She was a personality for whom people rose when she passed. As a child Fadhel was often known as "the son of Mullaya Zahwa's daughter." Alawiya Khadija herself was regarded by the community as a saintly woman whose prayers were answered by God. She conducted special rituals for the women and gave them threads to be hung around patients' necks, inspiring hope of recovery. Young Fadhel therefore grew up in a strict Shi'a

Muslim home where Arabic was the family language, the language of the Holy *Qur'an*, while Turkish was the language of government.

The family lived near the golden domes and minarets of the Kadhimain mosque where Sheikh Abbas was often consulted by the pilgrims who came from all over the Muslim world. Entrance to the mosque is through an arched gateway fifty feet high and covered with glazed tiles of turquoise blue and pink. There are six other arched doorways, each with a long chain hung from its peak and gathered in loops to each side. Young Fadhel regularly went there with his father for prayers and Qur'anic instruction, and he tagged along when visitors were shown the shrines.

There was never much money, but here Fadhel quotes a proverb: "An honest *alim* (religious scholar) has little money." When his father and mother quarreled the boy was usually on his father's side. When Fadhel's mother became old and infirm his father married his cousin Bahiya, a young widow with two daughters. Fadhel's mother died in 1938, and Sheikh Abbas died in 1941. Bahiya lived until after 1962 when Fadhel and Sarah had gone to Tunisia. Of the seven Jamali children only two survived, Mohammed Fadhel and his brother, Abdur Rasoul, who was born in 1910, seven years after Fadhel. With his parents so highly regarded in the community Fadhel was assured a boyhood typical of a strictly conservative Shī'a home. It was an upbringing rich with superstitions and quite rigid in matters of religion.

As a young man he listed the habits and attitudes acquired in childhood which he had to overcome later in life. These included:

... a negative attitude toward Sunni Muslims, believing that God would send them to Hell; the feeling that he had to go daily to the Kadhimain mosque to pray; that he must not look at women's faces or even listen to their voices except for members of his own family; the obligation to pay respect to great religious personalities, kissing their right hands on meeting; a negative attitude toward

government officials, believing that, since they were Sunnis, they could not be honest people.¹³

Jamali recalls with remarkable frankness that as a child he used to play in the street with the children of the neighborhood, learning the filthy words and dirty habits a boy could acquire there, but which he never practiced before his father for fear of a beating. He delighted in being one of the gang and joined the neighborhood children in throwing stones at intruders from other parts of the town. Recreation consisted chiefly of playing in the outer area (*sahan*) of the mosque and in walks in the gardens or along the Tigris embankment.

He watched the bands of men who marched beating their breasts once a year in *Ashura* (the first ten days of the month of *Muharram*) when they lamented the martyrdom of the younger grandson of the Prophet (Hussein ibn Ali, on the tenth of *Muharram*, AH 61, or 10 October, 680 AD). Fadhel writes:

I used to attend *Ashura* gatherings for men where the story of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his family was recited and people wept and cried. Every night for the first ten nights of *Muharram* I used to see the procession of mourners and torchbearers coming to the Holy Mosque. On the tenth day of *Muharram* we saw the drama of Kerbala performed in the outer yard of the mosque.¹⁴

This religious commemoration is a unique tradition of the Shi'a sect. The name "Shi'a" means party, and a member of the sect is a "Shi'i," or partisan, because they were and are partisans of the line of the Caliph Ali. The Shi'is continue today to follow the succession of Ali's descendants or *Imams*, as they call their leaders, although differences in their ranks occur over the question of whether there have been seven or twelve rightful *Imams*.

The Sunnis, or traditional Muslims, are the vast majority in Islam. They follow the line of Caliphs chosen by consensus, beginning with the defeat of Ali's sons at Kufa and Kerbala near the Euphrates River in the year 680. Abu Bakr,

Omar, Ali and Othman are known by both Sunnis and most Shī'is as the "rightly guided Caliphs."

Sheikh Abbas, as a religious leader, was primarily supported by the local Shī'a community, but his brother, Abdul Karim al-Jamali, was also generous to the family. When Fadhel was four his father went to Najaf to continue his studies in theology, and young Fadhel was entrusted to the home of his uncle and aunt, Abdul Karim and Alawiya Sukna al-Jamali, who treated him as they did their own son. Their house was in another section of Kadhimain, and there he says he had "a much more peaceful life" and was educated in "better social and personal habits. I was deprived of street contacts altogether and had as examples before me my cousins."¹⁵

The cousins, Abdul Karim's and Alawiya's children, were Abdul Amir, Sadiq and Zahra. Their father, uncle Abdul Karim, was in charge of two big bath houses in Kadhimain, one for men and one for women and together called *Hammam al-Jadid* or "new bath." Abdul Karim was also registered as a "Servant of the Holy Mosque"—a title of some honor. Others of the Jamali family also served the Kadhimain shrine in various capacities while some were business and professional people.

His boyhood home was near the mosque in a neighborhood of narrow, unpaved and winding streets where the houses of relatives clustered together. It was a patriarchal community where married sons and their families lived together in the father's house, and the children played together. The Jamali house actually belonged to Fadhel's mother. The household was unusual in that Fadhel's father and mother kept separate kitchens, each holding to his or her own way. The young lad seems to have known how to get the best from both sides. Also there was "Mama" Attiya, a next door neighbor who with her sister, *Jidda* (Midwife) Kumi, frequently looked after Fadhel when his mother went to recite selections from the *Qur'an* or to give other traditional readings during *Ashura*.

The Jamali home was entered from a small entrance on the street, where a few steps led up to the courtyard off which there were three rooms. Under the courtyard was the *surdab*, the underground room which was cool in the summer heat. *Shenashil*, wooden bay windows with blinds, projected over the street in front. They caught any little breeze and offered a discreet view of comings and goings. Thick, mud-brick walls retained their coolness in summer and absorbed heat from the charcoal braziers, *munqalas*, in winter. These thick exterior and interior walls were bridged with closely spaced poles which were in turn covered with several thicknesses of mats woven from date fronds. On this was poured a thick layer of clay mud mixed with straw for binding which kept out summer heat and winter rain. If a leak occurred, it was a simple matter to pour on more mud and straw mix over the offending crack. This flat roof made for comfortable sleeping in the summer when the northerly *shemal* wind prevailed. Homes were interconnected by passages, and special dishes were shared among the houses. The Jamali family was well-known for delicious cooking. The old family house in Kadhimain was sold after the death of Sheikh Abbas. Jamali sums up his boyhood life as follows:

I can say that I opened my eyes in an old and stereotyped society, with rigid religious and superstitious practices on the one hand and good-hearted, cooperative and patriarchal kinship on the other. And until I went to school my questioning of the *status quo* was not to be dreamt of.¹⁶

Fadhel's schooling began at the Kadhimain mosque when he was seven. There the boys learned to read the *Qur'an*, to write and to do elementary arithmetic. They sat cross-legged on palm mats spread over the floor in front of the teacher, who perched on a high bench with sticks handy to beat the feet of students who misbehaved. There was even a "dungeon room with ankle shackles for pupils guilty of a great misdemeanor."¹⁷ Fadhel could not have been a model student, even if he was the son of a sheikh, for he writes that he once blew his nose on the Persian boy who sat opposite him. For

