

The Palestine Communist Party

1919–1948



The initial core group of communists in Palestine was formed in October 1919. Jewish left-wing activists who had come to Palestine as part of the waves of Jewish immigration and who had come under the influence of what was called “socialist” or “proletarian Zionism” took the name the Socialist Workers Party; the party was affiliated to a worldwide Jewish left-wing labor federation named Po'alei Tzion (Workers of Zion). Shortly after its emergence, the Socialist Workers Party applied to join the Communist International (Comintern), which had been formed in March 1919 at the initiative of Lenin to be a political and organizational framework for uniting the various Communist movements around the world. The Comintern leadership accepted this group's membership on the condition that it adopt a policy of “Arabization” toward membership and target audience and that it change its name and sever ties with the Zionist socialist currents. After intense conflicts that resulted in a number of splits, the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) was officially announced on 9 July 1923, and its leadership declared its acceptance of the conditions for joining the Comintern.

The Communists' National and Social Struggle in the 1920s

Since its founding, the PCP was resolutely opposed to the Zionist Movement and its project. The party strongly condemned Lord Arthur James Balfour's visit to Palestine in April 1925, which it saw as a “display of English opposition to the Arab nationalist awakening.” It also actively participated in organizing demonstrations and strikes that broke out in Palestinian cities to protest Balfour's visit. In fact, in the 1920s, the PCP was known for its firm stance against the British occupation and for its support for Palestine's independence, as well as its criticism of the policies of appeasement toward Britain adopted by the leadership of the Arab nationalist movement, whose representatives were in the Arab Executive Committee.

On the grassroots level, the PCP called on Arab and Jewish workers to struggle together for social justice, and it sought to draw Jewish workers away from the Zionist Movement by encouraging them to escalate their struggles around specific demands and expand their strikes. It also sought to organize Arab workers and raise their level of class awareness. Initially, it called upon them to join the ranks of the unions affiliated with the Federation of Jewish Trade Unions (the Histadrut), in order to transform these unions from “Jewish nationalist organizations” into “internationalist organizations.” Although the Communists succeeded, in the beginning of 1926, in forming a unified Jewish-Arab workers' movement called Ehud [movement of unity], the “national contradiction” between Arab and Jewish workers remained predominant over their joint class interests, and the overwhelming majority of Jewish workers remained affiliated with the Zionist project. On the other hand, the PCP took a major interest in the hardships that the Arab peasants were suffering from, the most significant of which was their expulsion from the lands they farmed after these lands were purchased by Zionist financiers from large Arab landowners, and the resulting clashes between the Arab peasants and Jewish settlers, such as the violence that broke out in the village of Afula in late November 1924.

Repercussions of the Party's Stance on al-Buraq Disturbances

In the final week of August 1929, Palestine witnessed violent confrontations between Arab citizens and Jewish settlers in several Palestinian cities interspersed with clashes with the British police forces, during al-Buraq Disturbances, in which dozens were killed and injured on both sides. The PCP leadership, whose members were all Jewish, were blindsided by these events and initially responded negatively; they viewed the events as “religious” and “racial” in nature. The political secretariat of the Comintern Executive Committee responded by criticizing the position of the PCP leadership, and in its resolution dated 16 October

1929, “On the Insurrectional Uprising in Arabistan,” it faulted the PCP's leaders for failing to follow a clear strategy to Arabize its ranks and to focus its main activity on Arab workers and peasants. Given this, the Comintern leadership cut short the studies of some of the Arab cadres studying at Moscow 's “Communist University of the Toilers of the East ” (KUTA) and recalled them to Palestine, most prominent among them Mahmoud al-Atrash . Following their return, widescale preparations were launched for a new party conference, which was held in Jerusalem in the latter half of December 1930. The conference's delegates criticized the “political mistakes” committed by the party's former leadership and elected a new central committee that included, for the first time, a majority of Arab communists, from which emerged a party secretariat consisting of three members: Najati Sidqi , Mahmoud al-Atrash, and Joseph Berger . In 1934, new directives from the Comintern leadership were issued, and Radwan al-Helou , one of the Arab students chosen to study at KUTA in Moscow from 1930 to 1933, assumed the position of Secretary-General of the PCP's Central Committee.

The Party's Stance on the General Strike and “Great Revolt”

After the outbreak of the General Strike and the Great Palestinian Rebellion , and in the light of the line adopted by the Comintern at its seventh international meeting in summer 1935, the PCP leadership adopted the strategy of the “Unified People's Front.” On 5 June 1936, it published the first issue of the party's newspaper, *al-Jabha al-sha'biyya* [the Popular Front]. The PCP published the articles of its charter in the issue dated 7 August 1936: “the revolutionary struggle for liberation from colonialism and Zionism; to work for a fully independent Palestine as part of a united Arab world; the expropriation of lands owned by Zionist companies and feudal landlords and to redistribute them in a fair manner to the poor peasants; the ‘nationalization’ of factories and workshops, as well as of land, sea and air transport and placing them under direct control of the people; the confiscation of all property and assets of distant immigrants.” When the British government appointed a royal committee of inquiry headed by Lord Peel to investigate the events in Palestine, the party leadership responded by calling it an “act of colonial deception” and called for a mass mobilization of the Palestinian people in response to British colonial policy, demanding that Communists join the armed rebel groups. In its view, the Arab movement for national liberation in Palestine could not “limit itself to a general strike as its sole form of struggle, given that the strike of the Arab people in Palestine would not be comprehensive, as was the case in Syria , because of the role played by Zionists to subvert it.”

National Disunity in the Party Ranks

This position taken by the party's leadership toward the revolution and its leaders gave rise to political differences between its Arab and Jewish members. These differences took on a new dimension, particularly because during the revolt, the PCP Central Committee created a new structure called “the Jewish Section,” and the political and economic autonomy of Jews in Palestine had become stronger. The ties between the party leadership and the secretariat of the Jewish Section, which had begun pursuing a policy different from the line approved by the Party's Central Committee, slowly began to weaken. In the summer of 1937, the secretariat of the Jewish Section approved a proposal for Jewish communists to participate in the activities of Zionist organizations with the goal of stripping them of their “revolutionary elements.” It also called for the establishment of a “popular front” with some of the “moderate” Zionist groups and parties, taking the view that the Yishuv , or the general body of Jewish settlers in Palestine, did not represent a homogenous body of people.

After the outbreak of World War II , the differences within the PCP leadership over the position on the Jewish minority in Palestine intensified. The Jews among the leadership felt that a “binational situation” had come to exist in Palestine and that alongside Arab nationalist sentiment, a nascent “Jewish national sentiment” was emerging. In December 1939, the decision taken by the Party's Central Committee to dissolve the Jewish Section helped to cement the national division within its ranks. Years later, especially after the decision to dissolve the Comintern in Moscow in May 1943, this division prompted the Arab Communists to split from the PCP and establish a new left-wing Arab organization called the National Liberation League in Palestine , after which the PCP was reduced to exclusively its Jewish members.

The National Liberation League in Palestine

World War II transformed Palestine into a gathering point and supply base for the British armies in the region, which prompted the British government to establish many military garrisons and small factories and to encourage the growth of local industry. This helped to increase the number of workers, and unemployment virtually disappeared. It also helped revive the trade union movement. This development dovetailed with the phenomenon of growing progressive and democratic trends among the ranks of Arab students and intellectuals who, in September 1941, formed the League of Arab Intellectuals in Palestine [*Rabitat al-muthaqqafin al-‘Arab fi Filastin*]. A number of social and political clubs also began to appear in the major Palestinian cities, such as *Nadi shu'a' al-amal* [the Ray of Hope Club] and *Nadi al-sha'b* [the People's Club]. A set of Marxist study circles and cells were also started.

Thus, on the eve of the national “disunity” in the PCP ranks, a broad left-wing, democratic, and nationalist current in Palestine was taking shape, one that was in search of the organizational structures appropriate to unite its forces. Arab Communists officially announced in February 1944 the birth of the National Liberation League in Palestine. Workers and intellectuals formed the league's mass base upon which it relied to operate; the league attempted to offer a political platform that would be responsive to the common interests of the entire Palestinian Arab people, whose existence, across its various classes and social strata, was threatened by the accelerating pace at which the Zionist project was being implemented with the support of the British occupation.

Since its founding, the National Liberation League tried to make a clear distinction between Zionism, on the one hand, and the Jews living in Palestine on the other. It rejected the Zionists' claim that they spoke on behalf of all Jews and affirmed that Zionism stood in opposition to the interests of the Jews themselves. In this context, it criticized the positions taken by the mainstream Arab nationalist leadership, who constantly stated that they “could never live in peace with the Jewish residents of Palestine, nor reach an understanding with them and ensure for them any of their democratic rights.” The league warned of the dangers of this “unrealistic position,” which could lead to the partition of Palestine. In its memorandum addressed to the United Nations in August 1947, it called for an end to the British Mandate over Palestine, the withdrawal of foreign armies, and the establishment of an independent democratic state that would guarantee equal rights for all its residents, Arab and Jewish.

After the UN Partition Plan was passed on 29 November 1947, the National Liberation League was faced with a very complicated situation. With the exception of the clause on ending the British Mandate, the Partition Plan contained nothing, in the view of the League's leaders, that would offer the ideal solution to the Palestinian issue; rather, it did a great injustice to the Palestinian Arabs and their rights as a people on their own homeland. The league continued to oppose the Partition Plan until February 1948, when, in line with the Soviet Union position supporting the resolution, the majority of delegates at the league's conference held in Nazareth decided to endorse it and to intensify the struggle to establish the Palestinian Arab state. In a communiqué it issued titled “Now ... What Is to Be Done?” it addressed the Palestinian Arab people, saying that the establishment of this Arab state was “the way to save the displaced [Palestinians] from being uprooted, and the way to preserve the borders of Palestine as part of a stable economic unit, to prevent its disintegration and the loss for ever of its defining characteristics. This is the way for the [Palestinian] people to be able to govern themselves.”

After the outbreak of the Palestine War on 15 May 1948, the National Liberation League organized a broad campaign to persuade Palestinians to remain in their homeland and not flee from it. It opposed the entry of the Arab armies into Palestine, and in July 1948, issued “an appeal to the [Arab] soldiers” in which it called upon them “to return to their own countries and direct their strikes instead at the colonial occupiers and their lackeys.” Then, a communiqué addressed to “the Arab peoples” in October 1948, issued jointly by the league and the Iraqi, Syrian, and Lebanese Communist parties, emphasized that the rulers of the Arab countries “did not declare war to prevent the partition, as they claimed, but rather to bring about partition as Britain wants.” Meanwhile, the Zionist Movement exploited the Palestine War “to consolidate its rule and expand into the Arab part [of partitioned Palestine], as well as to justify its embrace of American imperialism and to open the door for American economic and military influence to make inroads into the territory of the Jewish state and in Palestine as a whole.”

Conclusion

The Nakba resulted in the shredding of the Palestinian entity and the dispersal of the Palestinian people to several places, each of which was subject to its particular circumstances. This compelled the Palestinian Communists and members of the National Liberation League to become part of different organizational frameworks. In October 1948, league members who were able to remain in the areas in the newly created State of Israel joined together with Jewish Communists as part of the Israeli Communist Party. In May 1951, the establishment of the Jordanian Communist Party was announced, which brought together league members present in the West Bank with a number of Jordanian Marxists. Meanwhile, those members of the league present in the Gaza Strip formed the Palestinian Communist Party in Gaza in August 1953.

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