

DEFENDING JERUSALEM IN CORDOBA:

The Palestinian Revolt, the Spanish Civil War, and Anticolonial Antifascism, 1936-1939

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IN AUGUST 1936, Palestine Communist Party leader Najati Sidqi traveled to Barcelona to join the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War. Sidqi had been editing an anticolonial magazine in Paris when Franco's Nationalist rebellion broke out in the Spanish Protectorate of Morocco in mid-July, led by colonial officers and supported by some 20,000 Arab and Amazigh troops. "I knew immediately that Franco, a servant to German and Italian fascism, had announced an insurrection against Spanish democracy and a revolt against his people," Sidqi wrote two years later in the Beirut journal *al-Tali'a*. "He would not hesitate to offer his country up as an easy prey to foreign colonizers in exchange for their assistance in the form of supplies, ammunition, and troops." Noting that the flood of foreign volunteers to the Republican cause included not only European leftists but Ethiopians, Chinese, and a "brigade of Arabs," Sidqi linked the Spanish struggle against fascism with the Arab struggle against colonialism. As he explained to one incredulous Republican commander upon his arrival in Barcelona: "I smiled and replied in French that I was an Arab volunteer and that I had come to defend the Arabs' freedom on the front in Madrid...! I had come to defend Damascus in Guadalajara, Jerusalem in Cordoba, Baghdad in Toledo, Cairo in Andalusia, and Tétouan in Burgos." Sidqi put his anticolonial internationalism to work for the besieged Republic, drafting Arabic-language propaganda to convince Moroccan troops to desert Franco for the Republican cause.¹

¹ Najati Sidqi, "Five Months in Republican Spain: The Memoirs of an Arab Fighter in the International Brigades," *al-Tali'a* (Beirut: June 1938). Reprinted as "I Went to Defend Jerusalem in Cordoba: Memoirs of a Palestinian Communist in the Spanish International Brigades," trans. Alex Winder, *Jerusalem Quarterly* 62 (Spring 2015): 102-109, here 103-105.

Sidqi's efforts to turn the civil war into an anticolonial war hint at the entanglements of two concurrent struggles which have nevertheless been treated separately by most historians of the interwar period: the Palestinian Revolt (April 1936 – August 1939) and the Spanish Civil War (July 1936 – April 1939). The 1936 uprisings in Palestine and Spain were two major flashpoints in a year of global revolt which saw anticolonial armed struggles in Ethiopia, Waziristan, Indochina, and Manchuria; a general strike in Mandatory Syria; naval mutiny in Portugal; and military coups in Greece, Iraq, Bolivia, and Japan.² But where the Spanish Civil War became enshrined in the Western popular imagination as a crucible of antifascist resistance, the contemporaneous revolt against European colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa has been largely excised from histories of the clash between fascism and antifascism. As Emily Robins Sharpe has noted, even the Spanish Civil War's own colonial dimensions have been omitted from these Eurocentric narratives.³ This despite the fact that Franco's revolt began in Spanish Morocco, threatened to destabilize French Algeria, and only succeeded with the Italian-German airlift of some 80,000 Moroccan troops – and the accompanying racist colonial tropes – to peninsular Spain.⁴

Nowhere is this failure to theorize the antifascist/anticolonial conjuncture of the “Global '36” clearer than in the case of the Palestinian Revolt, which rivalled the Spanish war both in duration and intensity of its racialized violence. It ultimately took a combined force of 50,000 British troops, auxiliary police, and Jewish settler militias to crush the uprising: in the process they killed or wounded at least 20,000 Palestinians, or approximately 10 percent of Palestinian men.⁵ As Matthew Hughes has documented, this “dirty war” in Palestine bore all the hallmarks of fascist warfare in Spain, including mass torture,

² Marc Matera and Susan Kingsley Kent, *The Global 1930s: The International Decade* (London: Routledge, 2017).

³ Emily Robins Sharpe, “Tracing Morocco: Postcolonialism and Spanish Civil War Literature,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 49, no. 2-3 (2018): 89-117.

⁴ Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ali Al Tuma, *Guns, Culture and Moors: Racial Perceptions, Cultural Impact and the Moroccan Participation in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁵ Matthew Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the Colonial State, and the Arab Revolt, 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 358, 376-378.

sexual violence, executions as reprisals, the use of human shields, and the bombardment of civilians.⁶ As Ted Swedenburg has observed, however, “The Western left’s political imaginary continues instead to be exercised by the Spanish Civil War, the ‘epic’ struggle against fascism that occurred concurrently with the *thawra* in Palestine. In the thirties Western progressives largely disregarded the Palestinian anticolonial struggle or considered it compromised by ‘fascist’ sympathies; their progeny still treat it with Eurocentric disdain today.”⁷ Scholars working at the intersection of fascism and colonialism have thus focused their attention not on Palestine but Ethiopia, the imagined “first victim” of Italian Fascist aggression and the object of a global solidarity campaign by Black and Pan-Africanist organizations.⁸

Consequently, much of the literature on the antifascist/anticolonial conjuncture of the 1930s has been rendered through Black rather than Arab eyes, even when it directly concerns Arab struggles. Emily Robins Sharpe, for example, has engaged the question of Moroccan participation in the Spanish Civil War through Black literary interlocutors like Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, who covered the war for the African American press.⁹ Robin D. G. Kelley has taken the presence of African American volunteers in Spain as the starting point of his pithily titled chapter “This Ain’t Ethiopia, But It’ll Do,” while David Featherstone has reinforced this imagined Spain-Ethiopia nexus in his analysis of Black internationalist thinkers George Padmore, C.L.R. James, and Claude McKay.¹⁰ This attention to what

⁶ Matthew Hughes, *Britain’s Pacification of Palestine*, 4-5.

⁷ Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), xxii.

⁸ Joseph Fronczak, “Local People’s Global Politics: A Transnational History of the Hands Off Ethiopia Movement of 1935,” *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 2 (2015): 245-274; Imaobong D. Umoren, “The Italian Invasion of Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War, and Anti-fascist Internationalism, 1935–1939,” in *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 37-66; Marc Matera, “Black Internationalism and Empire in the 1930s,” in *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 62-99.

⁹ Emily Robins Sharpe, “Tracing Morocco: Postcolonialism and Spanish Civil War Literature,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 49, no. 2-3 (2018): 89-117.

¹⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, “This Ain’t Ethiopia, But It’ll Do: African Americans and the Spanish Civil War,” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 123-158; David Featherstone, “Black Internationalism, International Communism and Anti-Fascist Political Trajectories: African American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War,” *Twentieth-Century Communism: A Journal of International History*, 7 (2014): 9-40.

Padmore termed “colonial fascism” has usefully complicated Eurocentric theories of fascism, which located its origins in the failures of European capitalism and paid little attention to the violent workings of empire beyond the metropole.¹¹ Yet theorizing fascism from the standpoint of the “Black Atlantic” has not only centered Ethiopian resistance at the expense of the concurrent struggle in Palestine, but has effectively erased Fascist Italy’s first, genocidal campaign against Arab Libya (1923-1934) from the map of antifascist struggle altogether.¹² The result, as Sana Tannoury-Karam has argued, is the virtual absence of Arab intellectuals in historical reconstructions of interwar debates about the relationship between colonialism and fascism.¹³

Yet Palestine *was* the Ethiopia of the Arab world in 1936, both in its heroic resistance to imperialism as well as its transnational mobilizing power, which linked diasporic anticolonial activists from Buenos Aires to Baghdad. As Amal Ghazal has argued in the Algerian context, “The question of Palestine was originally regarded as one of a number of equally important questions in the Arab world, until ... the Palestinian Revolt shifted the question of Palestine to the center of attention.”¹⁴ Like their Black radical counterparts, who read the Spanish Civil War through the lens of Ethiopia, these Arab intellectuals imagined the simultaneous uprisings in Palestine and Spain relationally, as two fronts in a conjoined struggle against colonial fascism that spanned the Mediterranean. They drew connections between the breakdown of liberal imperialisms in Mandate Palestine and Spanish Morocco and the “fascistization”

¹¹ George Padmore, “Fascism in the Colonies,” *Controversy* 2, no. 17 (February 1938), Marxists.org.

¹² For the perspective from the Black Atlantic, see Leslie James, “Blood Brothers: Colonialism and Fascism as Relations in the Interwar Caribbean and West Africa,” *The American Historical Review* 127, no. 2 (June 2022): 634-663; and Tom Buchanan, “‘The Dark Millions in the Colonies Are Unavenged’: Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s,” *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 4 (2016): 645-65. On responses to the Italian campaign in Libya, see William L. Cleveland, *Islam Against the West: Shakhb Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 100-102.

¹³ Sana Tannoury-Karam, “This War is Our War: Anti-Fascism among Lebanese Leftist Intellectuals,” *Journal of World History* 30, no. 3 (September 2019): 415-436, here 417.

¹⁴ Amal Ghazal, “Palestine in Algeria: The Emergence of an Arab-Islamic Question in the Interwar Period,” in *The Arab and Jewish Questions: Geographies of Engagement in Palestine and Beyond*, eds. Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020): 68-86, here 68.

of their respective settler-soldier communities. Likewise, they diagnosed the dangers of uncritically embracing Franco's challenge to Anglo-French dominance by pointing to Italian and German imperial designs on the Levant. Far from succumbing to the seductive logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," Arab anticolonial activists like Najati Sidqi identified fascism as a colonialism in its own right, born out of imperial instability as much as metropolitan class struggle. Most compellingly, Sidqi and his compatriots located fascism's most pressing threat to the Arab world not in Italy or Germany, but in the twisted settler socialism of the Zionist colonial project in Palestine.¹⁵

Theorizing the anticolonial/antifascist conjuncture from Palestine thus allows us to extend the critique of colonial fascism beyond the imperialism of avowedly fascist powers like Germany, Italy, and Japan. It also goes beyond the usual condemnations of liberal imperialisms in Britain, France, and Republican Spain for their "fascist" denial of democratic rights to colonial subjects, most powerfully expressed by the Caribbean intellectuals Aimé Césaire and George Padmore.¹⁶ Reconsidering the Palestinian '36 as a site of both anticolonial *and* antifascist struggle is not, however, to recapitulate the errors of Popular Frontism, which sought to subordinate anticolonialism to a Eurocentric fascist/antifascist framework. Rather, it is to place the Palestinian, Moroccan, and Spanish revolts at the intersection of what Joshua Cole has termed the "dual fracture" of interwar politics, in which popular movements clashed along simultaneously colonial/anticolonial and left/right axes.¹⁷ Following on from Haggai Erlich, who has argued that Arab responses to the Palestinian and Ethiopian crises were "integrally connected," I argue that this frame must be expanded to include the Spanish Civil War and, crucially, Morocco, where the

¹⁵ For more on the rise of right-wing Zionism during the interwar period, see Dan Tamir, *Hebrew Fascism in Palestine, 1922–1942* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and Daniel Kupfert Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955).

¹⁷ Joshua Cole, *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the French Politics of French Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 67.

Spanish Republic's refusal to decolonize paralleled British recalcitrance in the Mandate and the ensuing settler revolts.¹⁸ By thinking Palestine and Spain together, as did Arab anticolonial activists, historians are forced to rethink settler colonialism itself as a form of fascism, the bedrock of racialized violence upon which all liberal imperial projects ultimately rest.

Settler Fascism in Palestine (1929-1936)

As the self-proclaimed “first Arab ... from the Asian parts of the Arab world” to study in Moscow at the Communist University for Toilers of the East in 1925-1929, and later as the Palestine Communist Party's envoy to the Comintern, Najati Sidqi spent much of the 1920s away from his native Jerusalem.¹⁹ Like many of his more stationary comrades, however, his commitment to anticolonial antifascism was nonetheless forged amid the rise of right-wing Zionism and the corresponding “militarization of the Yishuv,” or Jewish settler community, which he worked to combat in the late 1920s and early 1930s.²⁰ As Daniel Kupfert Heller has observed, this rightward turn within the Zionist movement mirrored developments in Europe, where middle-class nationalist activists “increasingly turned to Fascist Italy for inspiration to restore order, reinvigorate their economies, prevent the spread of communism, and create a mobilized community of loyal followers.”²¹ Among the Jewish settler population in Palestine, as among European settlers in North Africa, this took the form of accelerated colonial dispossession.²²

¹⁸ Haggai Erlich, “The Tiger and the Lion: Fascism and Ethiopia in Arab Eyes” in *Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism: Attraction and Repulsion*, ed. Israel Gershoni (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): 271-288, here 272.

¹⁹ Najati Sidqi, *Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi [Memoirs of Najati Sidqi]*, ed. Hanna Abu Hanna (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001), quoted in Salim Tamari, “Najati Sidqi (1905-79): The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 79-94, here 88; Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010 [London: Ithaca Press, 1979]), 188.

²⁰ Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948*, 60.

²¹ Daniel Kupfert Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children: Polish Jews and the Rise of Right-Wing Zionism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 69.

²² For the “fascistization” of French colonial politics in Algeria, see Samuel Kalman, *French Colonial Fascism: The Extreme Right in Algeria, 1919-1939* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Radicalized by their time in the British army fighting “Arabs,” and emboldened by the promise of the Balfour Declaration, First World War veterans like Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Joseph Trumpeldor sought to press the Zionists’ advantage militarily by organizing militias within the Jewish settler community. As Lorenzo Veracini has argued, the “exclusivist military racism” of settler militias like the Haganah, established in 1920 by another veteran of Britain’s wartime Jewish Legion, effectively materialized the ideal of “the fascist citizen-soldier, where ‘citizen’ and ‘soldier’ become indistinguishable.”²³

By the late 1920s, Jabotinsky and his Revisionist Zionist movement were calling for the rebirth of the “Hebrew race” through confrontation with the Palestinian majority and their Labour Zionist rivals, whom they charged with failing to adequately defend their co-religionists against the “Arab” enemy.²⁴ This apparent fascistization of the settler community exploded into the open in August 1929, when paramilitary cadres with Jabotinsky’s youth organization, Betar, marched on Jerusalem’s Western Wall, sparking a week-long Palestinian uprising and British crackdown which left some 250 people dead.²⁵ The resulting polarization between Palestinians and Jewish settlers was felt even within the avowedly internationalist confines of Sidqi’s Palestine Communist Party (PCP). Sidqi, back from Moscow with orders to oversee the “Arabization” of the PCP branch in Haifa, recounted the debates prompted by the “armed clashes between Jews and Arabs ... after Jabotinsky led his followers to the Wailing Wall.”²⁶ Writing decades later, he recalled: “The rebellion of 24 August 1929 shook the party severely.... Stormy meetings were held in which the rebellion was debated: was it a national revolt, or a sectarian massacre? At this point the party began to split.”²⁷ Sidqi sided with the former and began mobilizing resistance.

²³ Lorenzo Veracini, “Fascism and Settler Society,” in *ArbeiterInnenbewegung und Rechtsextremismus – Labour and Right-Wing Extremism*, eds. Jürgen Hofmann and Michael Schneider (Vienna: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 2007): 111-123, here 121.

²⁴ Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children*, 81-82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-85.

²⁶ Sidqi, *Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi* quoted in Tamari, “Najati Sidqi (1905-79): The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik,” 86.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

However, shortly after opening “clandestine contacts” with the Haifa imam and guerrilla leader Sheikh ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam, Sidqi was arrested and jailed, part of a wider British crackdown on Arab activists in the wake of the August revolt. He spent the next two years in prisons in Jerusalem, Acre, and Jaffa.²⁸

While Sidqi traveled the British colonial prison circuit, Revisionist Zionists continued to make inroads among the settler community. Seizing upon the chaos that his movement had instigated, Jabotinsky lambasted the Labour Zionist leadership for underestimating the Arab threat and declared to crowds in Tel Aviv that “*there is only the path of war for Zionism to the fullest extent.*”²⁹ The Revisionists ramped up their paramilitary activities accordingly. In 1930, far-right journalist Abba Ahime’ir, whose regular column ran under the title “From the Notebooks of a Fascist,” launched the Brit ha-Biryonim militia, which openly declared its admiration for Italian and even German fascism.³⁰ Meanwhile, Betar activists formed the core of the right-wing Irgun militia, which broke away from the Haganah and its Labour Zionist leadership in 1931.³¹ The training of Betar cadres at the Italian naval academy in Civitavecchia, as well as growing Revisionist calls for the British to “hand over” the Palestine Mandate to Italy, only underscored the relationship between Italian Fascism and its settler sympathizers.³² With such links in mind, Labour Zionists castigated Jabotinsky, Ahime’ir, and their fellow Revisionists as “fascist Jews.”³³

²⁸ Sidqi, *Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi*, quoted in Tamari, “Najati Sidqi (1905-79): The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik,” 82.

²⁹ Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children*, 83-85.

³⁰ Dan Tamir, *Hebrew Fascism in Palestine, 1922–1942* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 33.

³¹ Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children*, 223-224.

³² Vincenzo Pinto, “Between imago and res: The Revisionist-Zionist Movement’s Relationship with Fascist Italy, 1922-1938,” *Israel Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2004): 90-109, here 94, 99.

³³ Raanan Rein, “Echoes of the Spanish Civil War in Palestine: Zionists, Communists and the Contemporary Press,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 1 (January 2008): 9-23, here 15.

Like the Jewish socialist parties, PCP activists were quick to recognize the growing threat of “Hebrew fascism.”³⁴ But Sidqi’s efforts to Arabize the party membership meant that the PCP’s commitment to antifascism did not stop merely with Jabotinsky and his followers, as Sidqi put it.³⁵ Instead, Palestinian activists extended their critique of fascism beyond its most visible manifestations in the Revisionist movement to include the national-socialist commitments of Labour Zionism itself. Their chief target was the Histadrut trade union federation, whose “conquest of labor” campaign to secure employment for the Jewish settler population – and only the Jewish settler population – had intensified under the pressure of the Revisionists. Together with the economic crisis of the early 1930s, this popular scapegoating of Palestinian workers and the Jewish businesses which employed them only fanned the flames of right-wing reaction, as Ghassan Kanafani has argued: “The policy that raised the slogan of ‘Jewish labour only’ was to have grave consequences, as it led to the rapid emergence of fascist patterns in the society of Jewish settlers.”³⁶ Consequently, PCP propaganda drew attention to the connection between the racial-exclusionary policies of the supposedly socialist Histadrut and the anti-socialist Revisionists. When Zionist picketers in Jaffa physically enforced the “conquest of labor” in October 1932 by protesting Jewish firms which hired Palestinian workers, the PCP denounced them as “Hitleristic labor conquerers” and urged Palestinian workers to physically resist the “hooligan fascist campaign.”³⁷ Indeed, the PCP reiterated this critique of Labour Zionism as a form of colonial fascism in May 1934 in a Hebrew-language pamphlet titled “Down with the Fascist Conquest of Labor.”³⁸

³⁴ Dan Tamir distinguishes Hebrew from Jewish fascism: “Hebrew is not Jewish. While the first defines an earthly, territorial, linguistic and historical social group, the latter represents a religious, ex-territorial, confessional, non-historical congregation.” See his *Hebrew Fascism in Palestine, 1922–1942* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 14.

³⁵ Sidqi, *Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi*, quoted in Tamari, “Najati Sidqi (1905-79): The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik,” 86.

³⁶ Ghassan Kanafani, *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine* (London: Tricontinental Society, 1980 [New York: Committee for a Democratic Palestine, 1972]), 13, PFLP-Documents.org.

³⁷ Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948*, 41-42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

The PCP's attention to the settler-colonial foundations of Labour Zionism formed both the strength of its antifascist analysis and its fundamental weakness, cementing its newfound anticolonial credibility among the Palestinian population while downplaying serious contradictions within the Zionist camp. Much like the European communists who condemned their enemies in the social-democratic parties as "social fascists" even as Mussolini and Hitler strode over them to power, Musa Budeiri argues that Palestinian communists adopted an "unchanged position of hostility towards the Zionist movement as a whole," which effectively limited their "activity to the one section of the population which showed potential for activity in the independence struggle."³⁹ Indeed, at the Comintern Congress in July 1935, Budeiri records that the PCP secretary was censured for having "described the Jewish population as a whole as a 'colonizing society.'" It fell to the second PCP delegate present to restate the official line on the need for a united working-class front against Zionism.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Zionism-as-fascism line persisted. In one October 1935 pamphlet calling for Arab solidarity with Ethiopia, the PCP linked Italian Fascism and Jewish colonialism by pointing out the "fascist role" that Zionist settlers played as shock troops for British imperialism in Palestine.⁴¹ But the party's interchangeable condemnations of "hooligan fascist campaign[s]" and "Zionist hooligan groups," as during its fight against the Histadrut, implied a simple equation of Zionism with fascism that blinded communists to the specific dangers of the Revisionist movement and the possibility that it would turn its guns on its imperial protectors.⁴²

By the mid-1930s, fissures were already beginning to emerge in the Revisionists' so-called "Iron Wall." Following the uprising of August 1929, the British government published a white paper that suggested limiting Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine, prompting frequent Jabotinsky collaborator and

³⁹ Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948*, 62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴¹ "A Statement of the PCP: For the Alliance of All the Arabs and Their Friends against All Imperialists," October 1935, quoted in Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948*, 59, 196.

⁴² Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948*, 42-43.

self-proclaimed fascist Abba Ahime'ir to form “the first [Zionist] anti-British movement in Palestine,” the Brit ha-Biryonim militia.⁴³ Ahime'ir and his comrades were repeatedly arrested for inciting violent demonstrations, including against British officials. Despite these seditious activities, including public flirtations with Nazism and their likening of the British to the Roman Empire, the historic oppressors of the Jewish people, Brit ha-Biryonim was only criminalized after it was implicated in the assassination of a Mapai socialist party leader in 1933.⁴⁴ Even in the face of settler subversion, however, the British mandatory authorities were reluctant to disarm or otherwise inconvenience the settler militias. Keenly aware of their small numbers and the settler population's importance in putting down the 1929 revolt, British colonial officials were willing to tolerate the rising anti-British radicalism of the Irgun and even Brit ha-Biryonim in order to protect their relationship with the Yishuv and its 15,000 paramilitaries.⁴⁵ It was this relationship, between British imperial liberalism and Jewish settler fascism – not between the Labour and Revisionist Zionists – which Sidqi and his PCP comrades failed to adequately theorize. For Palestinian communists, like their European comrades, fascist reaction always remained beholden to the interests of international capitalism.⁴⁶ Even the PCP's more expansive understanding of settler colonists playing a “fascist role” in Palestine still framed them as the shock troops of British capitalism. Settler fascism as an independent, even revolutionary force, “a truly mass movement with the capacity for self-radicalisation,” was unthinkable.⁴⁷ This would change with the Francoist revolt in Morocco.

⁴³ Tamir, *Hebrew Fascism*, 33, 43, 71-72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12, 33.

⁴⁵ Kanafani, *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine*, 57.

⁴⁶ For more on the cross-class composition of fascist movements and the anti-capitalist tendencies within them, see Rowland Keshena Robinson, “Fascism and Anti-Fascism: A Decolonial Perspective,” 11 February 2017, <https://onkwehonwerising.wordpress.com/2017/02/11/fascism-anti-fascism-a-decolonial-perspective/>.

⁴⁷ Alfie Hancox, “Fascisation as an Expression of Imperialist Decay: Rajani Palme Dutt's *Fascism and Social Revolution*,” 23 March 2021, *LiberatedTexts.com*, <https://liberatedtexts.com/reviews/fascisation-as-an-expression-of-imperialist-decay-rajani-palme-dutts-fascism-and-social-revolution/>.

***Thawra* in Spain, Al-Andalus in Palestine (1936-1939)**

Like the British in Palestine, the Spanish Republic had an ambivalent relationship with its own settler-soldier garrisons in the Moroccan Protectorate in the mid-1930s. A decade earlier, in September 1923, Spanish colonial war veterans led by General Miguel Primo de Rivera had seized power in Madrid in a coup d'état, bent on avenging their disastrous loss to Rifian rebel forces at Annual in 1921 and the subsequent, humiliating parliamentary investigation into their defeat. The ensuing military dictatorship empowered pro-imperialist *Africanista* officers, including a young Francisco Franco, at the expense of so-called *abandonistas*.⁴⁸ The new regime crushed Spanish working-class resistance to the Rif War and joined forces with the French to defeat 'Abd Al-Karim's rebellion and retake the Rif in 1926.⁴⁹ Despite this dangerous precedent of settler subversion, the Second Spanish Republic declared in 1931 did little to challenge the Spanish colonial military's power on the ground in Morocco. As Shannon E. Fleming has noted, "The Republic's exaggerated fear of indigenous discontent ... kept it from both declawing the Army of Africa and monitoring the conspiratorial activities of its anti-Republican officers." Indeed, the new Republic was far more concerned with communism and indigenous nationalism, even naming as its first High Commissioner of Morocco a notorious general known as the "Marquis of the Rif."⁵⁰ Fleming attributes the success of Franco's rebellion to "the Army of Africa's importance to the Second Republic as a guarantor of peace and order in the [Spanish] Zone and the Republican authorities' early acceptance of this 'fact of life.'"⁵¹ As with the British tolerance and eventual embrace of Jewish settler militias, such colonial "facts of life" would have dire consequences for the liberal imperialist regimes.

⁴⁸ Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93-94, 182-183.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 108-115.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 244-245.

⁵¹ Shannon E. Fleming, "Spanish Morocco and the Alzamiento Nacional, 1936-1939: The Military, Economic and Political Mobilization of a Protectorate," *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 1 (January 1983): 27-42, here 27.

When Franco's Nationalists launched their coup d'état against the center-left Republican government from their Moroccan garrisons in July 1936, they quickly seized control of the Moroccan Protectorate, even as the revolt stalled in Spain itself. Only the joint German-Italian airlift of some 20,000 Moroccan troops to the mainland, followed by another 60,000 over the course of the war, salvaged the uprising.⁵² As Sebastian Balfour observes, "Without the intervention of the colonial army, backed by the military force of Hitler and Mussolini, the coup would have failed."⁵³ Crucially, the mobilization of Moroccan recruits was underpinned not only by various political and economic incentives, including promises of Moroccan autonomy and generous military pensions, but also by the Nationalist forces' invocations of their shared "Hispano-Arab culture," dating back to the medieval Islamic kingdom of Al-Andalus.⁵⁴ By casting their invasion of Spain as a second "Reconquest" and a Christian-Muslim "holy war" against communism and atheism, Franco's lieutenants claimed that their crusade to overthrow the Republican government would restore the lost Andalusian heritage of the "real Spain" and, thus, the real Morocco.⁵⁵ Starting in late 1936, Franco's military administration in the Moroccan Protectorate strengthened these connections by legalizing the Moroccan nationalist parties and funding their educational programs.⁵⁶ Looking to burnish its Islamic credentials across North Africa and the Middle East, the regime set up the Casa de Marruecos in Cairo to freely house visiting students, followed by the even more ambitious General Franco Institute for Hispano-Arab Research, which promoted the new "Andalusian" alliance.⁵⁷

⁵² Ali Al Tuma, *Guns, Culture and Moors: Racial Perceptions, Cultural Impact and the Moroccan Participation in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)* (London: Routledge, 2018), 34.

⁵³ Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, x.

⁵⁴ Eric Calderwood, *Colonial Al-Andalus: Spain and the Making of Modern Moroccan Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 167-168.

⁵⁵ Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, 252; Eric Calderwood, *Colonial Al-Andalus*, 119-120; Al Tuma, *Guns, Culture and Moors*, 206.

⁵⁶ David Stenner, "Centring the Periphery: Northern Morocco as a Hub of Transnational Anti-Colonial Activism, 1930-43," *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 3 (2016): 430-450, here 444.

⁵⁷ Stenner, "Centring the Periphery," 445; Eric Calderwood, *Colonial Al-Andalus*, 170.

Franco himself sponsored the 1937 Moroccan hajj by chartering a steamship from Ceuta to Jeddah – the first of many such pilgrimages to Mecca financed by his regime into the 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁸

Nationalist efforts to portray the Spanish war as a battle for the lost paradise of Al-Andalus intersected in the Maghreb with Arab imaginings of another “Al-Andalus” struggling for its existence: Palestine. As early as July 1927, the Algerian exile newspaper *Al-Minhaj* “warned against plans to turn [Palestine] into another Andalusia, thus raising alarms regarding not just the possible loss of Palestine but also the loss of its Arab-Islamic identity and heritage.”⁵⁹ As Amal Ghazal has argued, the parallels between Palestine and medieval Al-Andalus gained increasing force amid the Palestinian Revolt of 1936-1939, when Palestinian civil society launched a six-month-long general strike following the killing of Sidqi’s erstwhile contact, the Haifa imam and guerrilla leader Sheikh ‘Izz al-Din al-Qassam, by British forces.⁶⁰ By October 1936, when the local notables of the Arab Higher Committee attempted to end the strike, the revolt had spread beyond their control, with the Palestinian peasantry waging a full-fledged war of liberation against British troops, Jewish police, and settler militias, including the Haganah and Irgun, which had been effectively deputized through the creation of the murderous “Special Night Squads.”⁶¹ News of the mounting repression stoked concerns across the Maghreb that Palestine would suffer the same fate as Al-Andalus. In October 1937, and again in March 1938, the Algerian newspaper *Al-Shihab* invoked the specter of Al-Andalus: “We have been distracted from shedding a warm tear for our sister Palestine, that the British colonialism subjects in this age of civilization and enlightenment to what Spanish colonialism did to the lost paradise of Islam ‘Al-Andalus’ in the dark ages.”⁶² For Moroccans

⁵⁸ Eric Calderwood, *Colonial Al-Andalus*, 142-146.

⁵⁹ Ghazal, “Palestine in Algeria,” 74.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁶¹ Hughes, *Britain’s Pacification of Palestine*, 287-288.

⁶² *Al-Shihab* 141 (26 October 1937), 1-3, quoted in Ghazal, “Palestine in Algeria,” 80-81.

deluged with Francoist propaganda, on the one hand, and news reports from Palestine, on the other, the imaginary of Al-Andalus served as a conceptual bridge between the revolts in Spain and Palestine.

The Palestinian press, too, drew their own connections between the two struggles. As Mustafa Kabha has noted, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, at the height of the Palestinian general strike, meant that Franco's rebellion "vied for space" with Palestinians' own revolt in the pages of the local newspapers.⁶³ Kabha continues: "Events in Spain received a surprisingly prominent place in the Palestinian press, featured both on front pages and in editorials and commentaries," with *Al-Difa* even splitting its front page between Spanish and Palestinian developments on several occasions during the course of 1936-1937.⁶⁴ The Palestinian press initially identified with the anticommunist nationalism of Franco's forces, designating the Nationalist rebels "*thawra*" as they did their own anti-British guerrillas and echoing the Francoist line that the Moroccan rebellion was a crusade against heresy and atheism. At the same time, the more conservative newspapers, especially *Falastin*, branded the defenders of the Spanish Republic as a French-supported collection of "reds," "Jews," "communists," and "atheists."⁶⁵ But they were outdone by the Revisionist Zionist papers clustered around Jabotinsky, which expressed "remarkable" sympathy for Franco's uprising, as Raanan Rein has argued.⁶⁶ While the Labour Zionists organized solidarity rallies and raised funds for Spanish workers, Abba Ahime'ir attacked the socialist Mapai party as a Comintern front and criticized the Histadrut's fundraising for Spain amid the ongoing Palestinian Revolt under the headline "They Worry About Madrid – We Worry About Jerusalem."⁶⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Revisionist affinities for European fascism, the only known volunteer

⁶³ Mustafa Kabha, "The Spanish Civil War as Reflected in Contemporary Palestinian Press," in *Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism: Attraction and Repulsion*, ed. Israel Gershoni (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): 127-137, here 127.

⁶⁴ Kabha, "The Spanish Civil War as Reflected in Contemporary Palestinian Press," 128, 131-132.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 128-130, 134-135.

⁶⁶ Raanan Rein, "Echoes of the Spanish Civil War in Palestine: Zionists, Communists and the Contemporary Press," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 1 (January 2008): 9-23, here 11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 13.

from Palestine to have fought for Franco was Moshe Unger Wind, a Betar activist killed at the front. The circumstances of his death in Spain were officially suppressed by the Revisionist movement.⁶⁸

The Labour Zionists also drew upon the imagery of the Spanish Civil War to press their own agenda. At the height of the Palestinian Revolt, the kibbutz movement Hakibbutz Ha'artzi claimed that "the Yishuv is fighting for its life no less than the Spanish Republic" and maintained, contra Ahime'ir, that "Hanita [a frontier kibbutz] comes before Madrid."⁶⁹ They reinforced this settler-socialist imaginary in one September 1936 telegram to Spanish workers: "From the trenches whence we defend socialist Zionism against the attack of the forces of [Arab] reaction, we send this fervent, brotherly salutation to the Spanish proletariat, who are paving with their blood the road to the future of socialism."⁷⁰ Two years later, kibbutz leader Ya'akov Riftin again invoked the trope of "fascist" Arab rebels, so common in Spanish republican propaganda, to discourage Jews from volunteering for military service in Spain: "We have neither the time nor the ability to deal day in and day out with the events taking place on the Spanish fronts. We too are defending ourselves in the trenches for the third year now. We are losing people every day. And no one knows if we have reached the height of terror or if the worst is still ahead."⁷¹ These ideological transferences, in which "Arabs were portrayed as the Francoist rebels or fascists and Nazis, while the Jews in Palestine were depicted as the republican freedom fighters," became increasingly common in the Labour Zionist press as the war raged on.⁷² Indeed, as Rein notes, the Spanish and Palestinian revolts were so entwined in the popular imagination by late 1936 that no less than *Ha'aretz* helpfully "suggested" the partition of Spain along republican and nationalist lines.⁷³

⁶⁸ Rein, "Echoes of the Spanish Civil War in Palestine, 20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁰ *Hasbomer Hatza'ir*, 1 September 1936, quoted in Rein, "Echoes of the Spanish Civil War in Palestine," 14.

⁷¹ *Hasbomer Hatza'ir*, 1 September 1938, quoted in Rein, "Echoes of the Spanish Civil War in Palestine," 16.

⁷² Rein, "Echoes of the Spanish Civil War in Palestine," 14.

⁷³ *Ha'aretz*, 2 December 1936, quoted in Rein, "Echoes of the Spanish Civil War in Palestine," 12.

Yet these attacks on “fascist Arabs” did not go unanswered. Leftists in the PCP and Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon (PCSL) rejected both Palestinian nationalist sympathies for Franco, the erstwhile “butcher of the Rif,” even as they challenged Zionist appropriations of the Spanish Republican cause. In the process, militants working across the Levant recast the Republican struggle as not only a defense of metropolitan democracy, but an anticolonial struggle in its own right, waged by “volunteers who fight to protect their nation and its independence from the threat of Hitlerian and Mussolinian colonial domination,” as Sidqi put it.⁷⁴ For Sidqi, then editing the Comintern journal *The Arab East* from exile in Paris, Franco’s “reconquest” of Spanish democracy was an example of colonialism turned inward, and thus represented a victory, not a defeat, for colonialism. The triumph of this fascist colonialism in Spain, he argued, would have dangerous ramifications for Palestine and the rest of the Arab world:

Are we not also demanding freedom and democracy? Would not the Arab Maghreb be able to achieve its national freedom if the fascist generals were defeated? Would the defeat of the Italian fascist forces at the hands of the popular democratic Spanish forces not lead to the salvation of Arab Tripoli from the clutches of the tyrant Mussolini? Would the victory of the Spanish Republicans over the German and Italian colonizers not tip the scales in favor of supporters of democracy, and of oppressed people the world over?⁷⁵

Sidqi’s handlers in the Comintern took a similar line. In August 1936, following a meeting in Moscow, Sidqi was dispatched to Barcelona to liaise with the Republican government and establish an Arabic-language propaganda apparatus that would win Franco’s Moroccan recruits to the Republican cause. But it was his second, intimately related mission which would prove more difficult: convincing Spanish Republican leaders to embrace Moroccan demands for independence.

⁷⁴ Sidqi, “I Went to Defend Jerusalem in Cordoba,” 104.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

Settler Dictatorship and Arab Antifascism

Although Sidqi may have been particularly well-connected, he was far from the only Arab leftist to travel to Spain to render his services to the Republic. At least three other PCP militants followed him, including Ali Abdul Khalek al-Tuwaini from al Jib, who died fighting in the International Brigades.⁷⁶ Abdellatif Ben Salem has identified as many as 721 Republican volunteers from across the Arab world, including 493 Algerians, 211 Moroccans, 11 Syrians, three Egyptians, two Iraqis and one Lebanese.⁷⁷ They were joined in Spain by scores of Jewish communists who had been deported from Palestine by the British authorities as part of their crackdown on the PCP at the height of the Palestinian Revolt.⁷⁸ As Ghassan Kanafani notes, “the Zionist movement, which was rapidly becoming fascist in character and resorting to armed terrorism, sought to isolate and destroy the Communist Party, most of whose leaders were Jews, and that resisted being contained by Zionist labour organisations.”⁷⁹ Consequently, British and Jewish colonial police pressured numerous captured PCP militants to leave for Spain or face imprisonment, with the Jewish Agency even paying the way for one PCP militant’s journey to the Spanish border.⁸⁰ According to Nir Arielli’s calculation, “Of the 200 communists who were arrested during the first four months of the uprising (April-August 1936), at least 20 ended up in Spain,” while another hundred communists left Palestine, supposedly “of their own accord,” in the next two years.⁸¹

Based out of Madrid, Sidqi worked tirelessly through autumn 1936 to combat Francoist propaganda. Writing under the pseudonym Mustafá Ibnu Jala, he drafted dozens of leaflets, newspaper articles, and

⁷⁶ Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948*, 17, 188.

⁷⁷ Abdellatif Ben Salem, “Nayati Sidqi, un internacional palestino en el Madrid de la guerra,” *Madrid Islámico* (29 August 2020), MadridIslamico.org; Al Tuma, *Guns, Culture and Moors*, 190.

⁷⁸ Arielli, “Induced to Volunteer?”, 859-860.

⁷⁹ Kanafani, *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine*, 16.

⁸⁰ Rein, “Echoes of the Spanish Civil War in Palestine,” 17-18

⁸¹ Arielli, “Induced to Volunteer?”, 859-860.

radio addresses calling on Franco's Moroccan recruits to desert the ranks of their colonial oppressors. But his work to undermine Nationalist propaganda was not restricted to Moroccan audiences. Keenly aware of how Franco had deployed colonial shock troops to exploit Spanish fears of Arab "savagery," Sidqi challenged anti-Arab racism among the Republicans themselves, as when he was confronted by one commander who questioned his identity: "Are you really an Arab? You're a 'Moro' – a Moroccan? That's impossible, the Moroccans are marching with the fascist thugs, attacking our cities, killing us, plundering us, and raping our women."⁸² In crafting his response, Sidqi expertly disentangled fascism, anticolonialism, and Islam, while stressing the colonial prehistory of Franco's attempted coup d'état:

It's true that some Moroccans are marching with the reactionary generals, with those who in 1925 suppressed the 'Abd Al-Karim revolt and decimated their families, with those who plundered the bounties of their land, but these and their actions are an insult to the Arabs and to Islam.... They do not represent the Arabs or Islam. They had been duped. Duped by Franco and his bloodthirsty aides, with the help of some criminal Moroccan leaders, who sold them out, who forgot their Arabness and betrayed the spirit of Islam ... and sent their people to serve the biggest, most heinous colonialists.⁸³

Sidqi drew liberally upon these themes in his appeals to Moroccan troops, highlighting the brutality of the Spanish colonial forces in the Rif and their continued exploitation of Moroccan land and labor. Sometimes Sidqi made these points personally, during his interviews with Moroccan prisoners of war or through loudspeaker addresses delivered in Arabic on the front-line, for which he was rewarded in at least one case with an extended burst of machine-gunfire directed at his armored car.⁸⁴ But mostly he wrote leaflets and newspaper articles emphasizing the colonial roots of the fascist rebellion, pushing back on Francoist talking points and Republican racism alike in articles like "About the 'Second Arab

⁸² Sidqi, "I Went to Defend Jerusalem in Cordoba," 105.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁸⁴ Najati Sidqi, *Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi [Memoirs of Najati Sidqi]*, ed. Hanna Abu Hanna (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001), quoted in Nieves Paradela, «Najati Sidqi: recuerdos de un comunista palestino en la guerra de España», *Nación Árabe* 51 (Summer 2004): 137-152, here 146-147.

Invasion' of Spain: The Enemies of the Spanish People are Franco, Mola and International Fascism.”⁸⁵

In another of his missives “to the generous Moroccan people, to the enemies of fascist imperialism,” Sidqi argued fiercely that the generals leading the revolt against Spanish democracy were those most directly responsible for the violent colonization of Morocco, especially after the 1923 military coup:

Who threw the Moroccan farmer off his farms? Who tore down the mosques of the Muslims? Who abused the people with their high taxes? Who killed the revolutionaries in the Rif War and after? Aren't the former generals Franco, Mola and others traitors? ... For the benefit of the Moroccan people, dispossessed, they must side with the Spanish people in their fight against the fascists and the military.⁸⁶

Sidqi's connections between fascism and colonialism were echoed by leftist activists on the ground in Palestine. Writing from Jerusalem in 1936, Lebanese socialist Ra'if Khoury denounced Zionist settlers as “fascist colonists” whose specious socialism was built on the dispossession of Palestinian peasants through national-socialist institutions like the Histadrut.⁸⁷ This theme was expounded in another PCP leaflet in 1936, “Uncovering Mapai's fascist face,” which reframed the settler-colonial foundations of the socialist party Mapai as itself constituting a form of fascism.⁸⁸ Shortly afterward, the Socialist Arab Students League launched their antifascist journal, *al-Ghad*.⁸⁹ Taken together, such critiques challenged Labour Zionist efforts to assert the settlers' monopoly over the imagery and language of antifascism.

Khoury's triple equation of fascism, colonialism, and Zionism was effectively endorsed the following year by Khaled Bakdash, secretary-general of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon (PCSL) and Sidqi's chief intellectual rival. In his 1937 book *The Arabs and the Spanish Civil War*, Bakdash departed

⁸⁵ Ben Salem, “Nayati Sidqi, un internacional palestino en el Madrid de la guerra.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Tannoury-Karam, “This War is Our War,” 420.

⁸⁸ Nir Arielli, “Induced to Volunteer? The Predicament of Jewish Communists in Palestine and the Spanish Civil War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 4 (2011): 854-70, here 861.

⁸⁹ René Wildangel, “More Than the Mufti: Other Arab-Palestinian Voices on Nazi Germany, 1933-1945, and Their Postwar Narrations,” in *Arab Responses to Fascism and Nazism: Attraction and Repulsion*, ed. Israel Gershoni (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014): 101-126, here 122.

from the official line laid down in Moscow two years earlier by Comintern chairman Georgi Dimitrov, who defined fascism as “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”⁹⁰ Instead, Bakdash emphasized the formative role of colonialism over capitalism in producing fascism, arguing that “fascism is the dictatorship of the most brutal colonists.”⁹¹ By doing so, Bakdash not only adapted the Comintern’s Eurocentric understanding of fascism to the colonial realities of life under the British and French Mandates, but drew attention to the settler-colonial origins of the Francoist officer corps, whose permanent garrisons had first seized power in Tétouan and were now marching on Madrid. In this, Bakdash echoed Sidqi’s own claim that the Spanish Nationalists, far from being a force for Moroccan national liberation, were in fact the “the biggest, most heinous colonialists,” and that peninsular Spain itself was being “colonized” by Franco’s forces with support from Rome and Berlin.⁹² Perhaps fittingly, given the closeness of their analyses, Sidqi’s own book on the civil war, *An Arab who Fought in Spain*, was falsely published under Bakdash’s name, spurring another round of infighting.⁹³

While neither the Palestinian nor Zionist press made virtually any mention of the Moroccans in Spain, Sidqi and his comrades made Spanish Morocco central to their appeals for anticolonial antifascism.⁹⁴ Indeed, these newspapers’ erasure of the colonial dimension from a self-evidently “European” conflict echoed Palestinians’ own experiences amid the left-right tensions in the Yishuv. Dismissed as “Arabs” when they were mentioned at all in Western press accounts, Palestinians had likewise been reduced to the mere landscape upon which the “real” politics of the Revisionist and Labour Zionists played out.

⁹⁰ Georgi Dimitrov, “The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism,” Seventh Congress of the Communist International, 2 August 1935, Marxists.org.

⁹¹ Tannoury-Karam, “This War is Our War,” 427.

⁹² Sidqi, “I Went to Defend Jerusalem in Cordoba,” 105.

⁹³ Salim Tamari, “Najati Sidqi (1905-79): The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 2 (2003): 79-94, here 52.

⁹⁴ Kabha, “The Spanish Civil War as Reflected in Contemporary Palestinian Press,” 132-133.

By linking Moroccans' involvement in the Spanish Civil War to anticolonial struggles across the Middle East, the PCP challenged this dual erasure of Moroccans and Palestinians in left-right settler clashes. Rather than throwing their lot in with fascist colonizers, the PCP suggested in one bulletin, Moroccans would do better to follow the example of the Palestinians' uprising against both Britain and Zionism: "General Franco's movement is a fascist war against liberty and democracy; it is an aggressive war not only against the Spanish people but also has the potential to cause heavy damages to the Arab people as well, particularly the Arabs in Morocco who have begun to sense the big mistake they made by supporting fascist Spain. This was made even more clear once he began to harass their leaders and execute some of them."⁹⁵ Through continuously reframing Franco's fascist uprising in colonial terms, Sidqi, Bakdash, and other Arab antifascists helped to drive Palestinian disillusionment with the once-popular Spanish Nationalist *thawra*. As Mustafa Kabha has observed, Palestinian press coverage of the Nationalists became decidedly hostile over the course of the civil war, as the press slowly "discovered" that Franco and his Italian and German allies were imperialists on par with the British and French.⁹⁶

As the Palestinian armed struggle intensified in October 1936, Sidqi stepped up his Moroccan counter-recruitment efforts in Spain. Alongside Moroccan and Spanish republican activists, he established the Spanish-Moroccan Antifascist Group (*Agrupación Antifascista Hispano-Morroquí*) in hopes of expanding his anti-Francoist propaganda efforts and eventually organizing deserters and ex-POWs into a special "Moroccan Militia Battalion" in defense of the Republic.⁹⁷ At the same time, his organization would attempt to disabuse Spanish republican troops of their racial animus by explaining that the Moroccan recruits "had been forced to fight by deception, because of the misery and dire living conditions caused

⁹⁵ Kabha, "The Spanish Civil War as Reflected in Contemporary Palestinian Press," 128-129.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁹⁷ Ben Salem, "Nayati Sidqi, un internacional palestino en el Madrid de la guerra."

by Spanish colonialism.”⁹⁸ But Sidqi had overestimated the allure of his anticolonial antifascism, both among the Moroccan troops and, even more damagingly, among the Republican leadership in Madrid. The latter had sabotaged his outreach efforts by continuing to execute Moroccan prisoners despite his calls for amnesty in the communist newspaper *Mundo Obrero*.⁹⁹ The formation of his Antifascist Group, much less the “Moroccan Battalion,” proved too much for his Republican colleagues, as he recounts:

I carried out this work completely convinced of its interest, but when the news reached the newspapers, the Spanish comrades reproached me, telling me that they were suspicious of the existence of such an association.... I remember that the Spanish comrades maintained a more theoretical than practical stance towards the Moroccans and the Moroccan question. I noticed in them, and especially in [Communist Minister of Agriculture] Vicente Uribe, an absolute lack of confidence in any Moroccan. On more than one occasion, I made them remember the executions of imprisoned Moroccan soldiers, and I felt in my heart of hearts that my mission was failing.¹⁰⁰

It was not the first time that the Popular Front coalition of republican, socialist, and communist parties had squashed anticolonial activism around Morocco. The month prior, enterprising anarchist leaders in Catalonia had signed a pact with the exiles of the Moroccan Action Committee “guaranteeing the autonomy of the Spanish protectorate, the military evacuation of the zone and the confiscation of the resources of the rebellious military” in return for supporting the Republic, and took the agreement to Madrid for ratification.¹⁰¹ But as with Sidqi’s own attempts to invert Lenin’s formulation and turn the civil war into an anti-imperialist war, the proposal was summarily dismissed by the socialist premier. While the anarchist militias would continue to plot with Moroccan exiles to launch an uprising behind the Francoist lines, including a particularly far-fetched bid at rescuing ‘Abd Al-Karim from his captivity

⁹⁸ Sidqi, *Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi*, quoted in Nieves Paradela, «Nayati Sidqi», 152.

⁹⁹ Najati Sidqi, «Tres soldados marroquíes, condenados a cadena perpetua. El Gobierno del Frente Popular debe amnistiarles [Three Moroccan soldiers, sentenced to life imprisonment. The Popular Front Government must grant them amnesty]», 31 October 1936, quoted in Ben Salem, «Nayati Sidqi, un internacional palestino en el Madrid de la guerra».

¹⁰⁰ Sidqi, *Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi*, quoted in Nieves Paradela, «Nayati Sidqi», 152.

¹⁰¹ Danny Evans, “Carrying the war into Africa? Anarchism, Morocco, and the Spanish Civil War,” *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism*, 23 November 2020. <https://freedomnews.org.uk/2020/11/23/carrying-the-war-into-africa-anarchism-morocco-and-the-spanish-civil-war/>.

in French Réunion, the Republic refused to budge on Moroccan independence, even at its own peril.¹⁰² As Sebastian Balfour concludes: “In marked contrast to Nationalist efforts to win over Moroccan opinion, the Republican government failed to seize the opportunity to undermine the military rebels by offering autonomy or independence to the Spanish Protectorate.”¹⁰³ Najati Sidqi left Madrid the following month. Searching for “a more useful and effective way to influence the Moroccan soldiers,” Sidqi headed for Algeria, where he hoped to establish a secret radio station which would broadcast republican propaganda in Moroccan and Kabyle dialects.¹⁰⁴ Ultimately the plan came to nothing and Sidqi returned to Paris, where his enmity with pro-colonial elements in the French Communist Party resulted in his repatriation to Lebanon and then, finally, his expulsion from the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon in 1938.¹⁰⁵

The failure of Sidqi’s anticolonial project in Spain, and the ensuing fall of the Republican government to Nationalist forces in April 1939, portended the victory of settler fascism in Palestine later that year. In Palestine as in Morocco, despite a change of British governing coalitions at the peak of the Revolt in 1937, “decolonization was not on the agenda of the new government, for all its progressive liberal programme at home.”¹⁰⁶ With the British high command unwilling to send reinforcements to Palestine in the looming shadow of another European war, the Mandatory administration became increasingly reliant on the Jewish settler militias, providing them with arms, training, uniforms, and even armored units, as Ghassan Kanafani has documented.¹⁰⁷ This British military support emboldened the militias and “reinforced the bonds between the Revisionist movement and the Irgun,” leading them to adopt

¹⁰² Evans, “Carrying the war into Africa?”

¹⁰³ Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, 274.

¹⁰⁴ Sidqi, *Muthakkarat Najati Sidqi*, quoted in Nieves Paradela, «Nayati Sidqi», 152.

¹⁰⁵ Ben Salem, «Nayati Sidqi, un internacional palestino en el Madrid de la guerra».

¹⁰⁶ Balfour, *Deadly Embrace*, 244.

¹⁰⁷ Kanafani, *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine*, 56-60.

increasingly radical measures: the Irgun soon declared Ze'ev Jabotinsky its “supreme commander.”¹⁰⁸

With the signing of the Munich Agreement in 1938 and European peace apparently secured, British troops “flooded” into the Mandate to relieve their settler allies and crush the Palestinian resistance.¹⁰⁹

But the British would never entirely regain control – not so much of the Palestinian majority, whose paramilitary institutions would remain shattered for another decade, but of its armed settler populace.

As Kanafani has argued: “The foundations of the Zionist military apparatus were laid under British supervision.”¹¹⁰ Like the Spanish military garrisons that rose in Morocco against the imperial liberalism

of the Second Republic, it was this settler-soldier apparatus which would turn against the “decadent” British, first in 1940 with the Lehi outgrowth led by Avraham Stern, and then definitively in 1944 with the Irgun’s decision to range the full strength of its underground army against the British colonizers.¹¹¹

The rise of this right-wing settler movement, side-by-side with Franco’s revolt in Morocco and Spain, powerfully shaped how Arab intellectuals like Sidqi, Bakdash, and their comrades understood fascism.

Nir Arielli has argued that “as a result of the preoccupation with the nationalist struggle, the [Palestine Communist] Party’s Arab leaders did not pay much attention to the struggle against fascism that was so central to communist parties in Europe as well as to leftist public opinion in Palestine.”¹¹² Yet their

continued engagements with the question of colonial fascism in Spain, Morocco, and Palestine indicate that, as Sana Tannoury-Karam has argued, it was precisely their attention to the national question that drove their commitment to antifascist politics.¹¹³ Kanafani, too, captures the anticolonial antifascism

of an earlier generation of Arab communists in his argument that “fascist Zionism was using the same

¹⁰⁸ Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children*, 224.

¹⁰⁹ Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine*, 176.

¹¹⁰ Kanafani, *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine*, 58

¹¹¹ Heller, *Jabotinsky's Children*, 239, 242.

¹¹² Arielli, “Induced to Volunteer?”, 861.

¹¹³ Tannoury-Karam, “This War is Our War,” 422-423.

tools as the mounting fascism in Europe.”¹¹⁴ The simultaneous revolts in Spain and Palestine allowed Arab antifascists to make such grim comparisons in real time.

¹¹⁴ Kanafani, *The 1936-39 Revolt in Palestine*, 16.

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