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## Between National Liberation and Anti-Colonial Struggle:

The National Liberation League in Palestine

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## Abstract

In discussing the 1947 partition of the Palestine mandate, the dominant narrative posits that the Palestinians uniformly rejected the idea of partition. In this Working Paper, Dr. Abigail Jacobson demonstrates how in 1943 a small but avant-garde Palestinian movement--the leftist National Liberation League--had already embraced these ideas. The paper focuses on the NLL and examines its short-lived history with the aim of offering a more complex perspective of both mandatory Palestine and the Palestinian rejection of partition itself. Dr. Jacobson also reveals the ways in which the NLL, though forgotten in history, anticipated many of the arguments that decades later led Palestinian nationalists to embrace partition. Additionally, the paper explores the ways in which concepts of identity, nationalism, class, and ethnicity were conceptualized, debated, and contested during a time of national conflict and anti-imperialist struggle, and highlights tensions between ideology and practice, and between nationalism and internationalism.

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## Introduction

In March 1950, almost two years after the establishment of the State of Israel, a leaflet entitled “The Popular Struggle” was published by the National Liberation League (*Usbat al-Taharur al-Watani*, hereinafter NLL), a left-wing Palestinian Arab Communist movement that had split from the (until then) binational Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) in early 1944:

Today, after the killing of many Arabs, and after the flight of the Palestinian Arab people and their disaster, the imperialists and their Arab and Jewish dogs [*sic*] announce the beginning of a new round against Eretz Israel [the Land of Israel] [*sic*]. . . .

The direct call for the masses of our people is to create a popular front for an organized struggle to fully carry out the 1947 UN partition plan, including the internationalization of Jerusalem, because this is the only way to secure the liberation of the Arab part of Palestine from the armies of Abdullah, Farouq and Ben Gurion and to establish a free democratic government, economically united with Israel. This is the only way to secure the return of our refugees to their homes, and their rehabilitation.<sup>1</sup>

At the time this leaflet was published, the Arab members of the NLL had joined Jewish Communists to form the Israeli Communist Party (*MAKI*).

The leaflet, with its angry, provocative, and defiant tone, brings to the fore some of the intriguing characteristics of the NLL, which placed it in a unique (and heretofore little noticed) position in the history and historiography of Palestinian Arab society and the Palestinian national movement during the period of the British Mandate. Those include, first and foremost, the NLL’s support of the UN 1947 partition plan for Palestine and its acknowledgment of the right of the Jews in Palestine to self-determination—along with its strong opposition toward what

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1. Israel State Archives (ISA), GL-17115/34. The original was most probably published in Arabic. The above is based on the Hebrew translation.

it regarded as local and international reactionary imperialist forces, Jewish and Arab alike. The tone and content of the leaflet are even more surprising considering its time of publication: after the 1948 war and the war's consequences for the Palestinian Arabs, and in the first months of the military regime imposed on the remaining 150,000 Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel.

This paper focuses on the National Liberation League and examines its short-lived history in light of the three relevant contexts in which it operated: the local Palestinian national context; the regional context of Communist activity in the Middle East, and the external/internationalist context established by the Soviet Union. An analysis of the NLL allows for a close examination of the ways in which concepts of identity, nationalism, class, and ethnicity were conceptualized, debated, and contested during a time of national conflict and anti-imperialist struggle, and highlights tensions between ideology and practice, and between nationalism and internationalism. Hence, the NLL offers an important opportunity to look into the complex matrix of Communist movements that combine anti-imperialist struggles with struggles for national liberation in the context of a national conflict, and to examine their dilemmas and what might seem to be their internal contradictions.

Indeed, in the context of Arab society in mandatory Palestine, the NLL was quite an avant-garde organization and as such was very critical of the political nationalist ideologies presented by both the Zionist movement and the Palestinian national movement. The importance of the NLL lies in the alternative position it offered the fractured Palestinian national movement, as well as in the way it challenged the national-based dichotomies, discourses, and political agendas prevalent during this time. In many ways, as will be discussed below, the NLL was both intellectually creative and politically imaginative at a time of dogmatic nationalist ideologies.

The influence of the National Liberation League's then dissident voices would play out years later, as its views became the dominant ones amidst changing realities in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Already in the early years of the State of Israel, many of its founders would become intellectual and political leaders among the Palestinian citizens of Israel. An examination of the NLL, then, offers a more complex and diverse perspective than is usually encountered on the sociopolitical realities of mandatory Palestine, and suggests some new lenses through which relations between Jews and Arabs, as well as internal tensions within Arab society, can be analyzed.

### **Setting the Background: The National-Based Split in the PCP**

The NLL entered the Palestinian political scene after breaking away from the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) in early 1944. The PCP itself was established in 1923, mainly by Jewish Communists, but it subsequently became a binational Communist party operating according to Communist ideology and following the guidelines of the Comintern, which accepted it as a member in 1924. The history of the PCP is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that throughout its history the party went through various nationally based crises (such as, for example, a split which followed the Arab Revolt of 1936–39), as well as some intranational tensions and conflicts. The nature of Jewish and Arab leadership changed during its years of existence: In some periods the Jews were more dominant than the Arabs; in others, the reverse was true.<sup>2</sup>

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2. On the history of the PCP, see Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle*

The Arabization of the PCP, together with the growing national tension between the Jewish and Arab national movements, accelerated the national crisis in the party, which was enhanced with the dismantling of the Comintern in 1943.<sup>3</sup> The event that led to the final split in the party took place at the main conference of the PCP in May 1943. The objective of this conference was to try and keep the party united, even at the cost of compromising with the opposition. During the conference, however, the Jewish opposition members, led by Pnina Peinhois and Shmuel Mikunis, circulated an Arabic leaflet written by Emile Habibi and Abdullah Bandak, which was distributed in Haifa. The leaflet laid out the disagreements in the party, and asserted that the Palestinian Communist Party was an Arab national party, which included within its framework Jews who agreed to its national program—and insisted that the Jewish members would have to adhere to that program.<sup>4</sup> Shmuel Mikunis, who was one of the main Jewish activists in the party, claimed that Habibi and Bandak’s leaflet “provided the theoretical basis for the split in the PCP.”<sup>5</sup>

Following the circulation of the leaflet, the split was inevitable, and all attempts to prevent it failed. In September 1943 the Arab members decided to form a separate Arab organization that would focus primarily on the national question in Palestine and the problems of Arab workers.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of 1944, the new organization was named the National Liberation League (in Arabic: *Usbat al-Taharur al-Watani*). Its leaders were Emile Touma, Emile Habibi, Taufic Toubi, and Fuad Nasar. The Jewish Communists, under the leadership of Meir Vilner, Shmuel Mikunis and Esther Vilenska, reestablished the PCP as a Jewish party.<sup>7</sup> The split in the ranks of the Palestinian Communist Party was thus complete.

The split in the PCP was mainly a national one, resulting from the growing gap between its Jewish and Arab members regarding the national conflict in Palestine, so that joint membership in one party became extremely difficult to sustain. Regional developments also contributed to the split. Both Jewish and Arab Communists were perceived as traitors within their respective societies, and it seems that they both had to compromise and abandon their internationalist ideology. Interpretations of the division within the PCP varied among the Communist leaders themselves, and there was certainly some embarrassment arising out of a national split in a

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for *Internationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010); Ilana Kaufman, *Arab National Communism in the Jewish State* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Sondra Miller Rubenstein, *The Communist Movement in Palestine and Israel, 1919–1984* (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1985); Avner Ben-Zaken, *Komunizem ke-imperializem tarbuti: ha-ziah ben ha-omuzim ha-Eretsyisreeli la-omunizim ha-Aravi, 1919-1948* (Communism as cultural imperialism: The Affinities between Eretz Israel communism and Arab communism, 1919–1948) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2006); Shmuel Dothan, *Adumim: ha-miflagah ha-omunistit be-Erets Yiśrael* (Reds: The communist party in Palestine) (Kefar-Saba: Shevna ha-Sofer, 1991); Joel Beinin, “Communism in Palestine,” *MERIP Reports*, no. 55 (March 1977); and Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel, 1948–1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

3. For an analysis of what led to the split, see Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, pp. 98–108. On the Arabization process in the PCP, see Tareq Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), pp. 57–63. See also the Haganah Archives (HA) 112/1305 (“Overview of the Arab Communists,” May 1946).

4. Shmuel Mikunis’s notes, from the Lavon Archive (LA) IV-104-85-28; CZA, S 25/7533; G. Z. Israeli, *MPS-PCP-MAKI: The Communist Party in Israel* (Tel Aviv, Am Oved), p. 180.

5. Shmuel Mikunis’s notes.

6. Interview with Tawfik Toubi, March 5, 1999.

7. Yehoshua Porat, “The National Liberation League (*Usbat al-Taharur al-Watani*): Its Revival, Essence, and Breaking Up,” *Ha-Mizrah Ha-Hadash* 14 (1964), p. 356.

movement that was supposed to be based on Marxist internationalist ideology. Contact between Jewish and Arab Communists, however, continued to a certain degree throughout the five years of separation, between 1943-1948.<sup>8</sup>

### **The National Liberation League: Communism, Nationalism, and Anti-Imperial Struggle**

The founding manifesto of the NLL was published on February 1, 1944. This important document, its national pact, presents the main political goals of the NLL, as well as its economic and social agenda.<sup>9</sup> The NLL's slogan, "National Unification for National Liberation," appears at the beginning of the document. Its main political goal was to establish independent national rule in Palestine, by means of national political activity and by developing national consciousness among the Arabs in Palestine. The center of the League would be in Haifa, with branches in other localities in Palestine.<sup>10</sup> The NLL would fight against fascism, its manifesto proclaimed, in all its forms.

The first article of the national pact defines the NLL's political goal: the independence of Palestine and its national liberation. It calls for stopping Jewish immigration and land sales to Jews, and for the protection of democratic rights, including the rights of free speech and free journalism, the right to unite in different organizations, and freedom of religion. It demands a democratic government guaranteeing the rights of all inhabitants without distinction. And it calls for an end to foreign (mainly British) intervention in Palestinian internal affairs. In the seventh article of the pact, the NLL states its national vision: that all the minorities in Palestine should be allowed to live peacefully in a free Arab country (*watan*).<sup>11</sup>

The rest of the national pact discusses primarily economic and social issues, focusing mainly on workers and peasants, as well as small merchants, clerks, intellectuals, craftsmen, and teachers. By addressing these groups, the NLL tried to differentiate itself from the Palestinian national movement, which consisted mainly of urban notable families, landlords, religious administrators and the bureaucracy.<sup>12</sup> The League called for strengthening the status of teachers, women, and the intelligentsia; for the establishment of more schools in Palestine; and for the revival of Arab national education.<sup>13</sup>

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8. Interview with Nazir Mazali, March 10, 1999. From Mazali's perspective, the connections were mainly personal, although there were some attempts at organizational cooperation between the NLL and the PCP. There are conflicting reports on this question. See, for example, a secret CID (British Intelligence) report on Communist activity in Jaffa, reporting that there were no close connections between the Jewish and Arab members: HA 112/1326. But in a different report from August 1946, it is argued that Jewish and Arab Communists have decided to coordinate their anti-imperialist struggle against both British and American involvement in Palestinian affairs and to disseminate pro-Soviet propaganda in conformity with their shared principles. According to this report, the agreement was reached with the help of Soviet mediation: HA 47/470/2311. And according to yet another report ("Overview of the Arab Communists," May 1946), in the summer of 1944 there was at least one failed attempt to unite Jewish and Arab Communists.

9. *Usbat al-Taharur al-Watani-Bayan 'Am*, LA, IV-104-1270-2.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

12. Beinun, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?*, p. 42.

13. *Usbat al-Taharur al-Watani-Bayan 'Am*, LA, IV-104-1270-2, pp. 2-4.

The League was an exclusively Arab organization. Every Arab who supported the NLL's national pact and paid the membership fee was entitled to become a member of the League. Estimates regarding the number of its members vary, depending on the source. In 1946, for example, the number was estimated to be between 4,000, according to a British report, and 20,000 registered members, according to Emile Touma. The League's main branches were in Haifa, Jerusalem, Jaffa, Gaza, Tulkarm, Nazareth, and Hebron.<sup>14</sup>

There is no mention of Communism in the document, which raises the question of what was the real place of Communism in the NLL's ideology.<sup>15</sup> (The national pact also does not discuss the social regime hoped for in Palestine, although it pays close attention to different social groups and their concerns.) The absence of any clear reference to Communism was discussed in various British and Zionist reports on the NLL.<sup>16</sup> The reason for this absence may have been the fear of Communism in Palestinian society, and the NLL's attempt to appeal to a large audience. Yet, the Communist leanings of the NLL and the way it saw its primary audience as Arab workers and the urban intelligentsia (contrary to what was initially stated in its founding manifesto) is very clear from the NLL's newspaper and main organ, *al-Ittihad* (first published in May 1944), and from other publications. As stated clearly in the first issue of *al-Ittihad*: "Our newspaper is the Arab workers' newspaper, the first newspaper to speak on their behalf, a newspaper that will protect the people's interests . . . and [that] represents the working class."<sup>17</sup>

Palestine should become an independent Arab state, according to the NLL, where Jews, as a minority group, would enjoy full and equal civil rights. By comparison, Jewish Communists called for the formation of a binational Palestinian state, which would include Jews and Arabs alike. The Jews, then, were not recognized as a national group, and the national aspirations of the Jews are ignored in the NLL's founding document. This issue would be revisited and revised within a few years.

The main leaders of the NLL were Christian Orthodox, part of the urban intelligentsia and not the working class. Some of them were active in different labor organizations, however, and in some intellectual clubs. Among the main leaders was Emile Touma, one of its founding members, who was the editor of *al-Ittihad* and the head secretary of the NLL until 1947, when he was dismissed from his membership following his rejection of the partition plan.<sup>18</sup> Other prominent members

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14. HA 112/1326/231 and 47/480/217162 (Semi-Annual Report on Communism, January-June 1946); HA 112/1326/92 (interview with Emile Touma, October 30, 1946). Information about the NLL's various branches is from HA 47/550/902 ("rimaria t know wn in FN 8, aArab Communist Activity in Palestine"). The League's organ, *al-Ittihad*, was distributed in Haifa, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Acre, Nablus, Gaza, and Khan-Younis; the number of copies sold in 1947 was estimated to be between 4,000 and 1,500. See HA 64A/105 ("The Communists in Haifa"), and HA 64A/105 ("An Overview of the NLL and Its Influence among the Arab Workers"), February 2, 1947.

15. As Budeiri argues, the title of the NLL also indicates the non-Communist image that its Arab Communist members tried to project. *The Palestine Communist Party*, p. 108.

16. See, for example, a report published by the Arab Department of the Jewish Agency, which raised the question "How is the NLL different from any other Arab parties, what is the need for its operation and doesn't it simply add to the existing anarchy among the Arabs?" See "The League for National Liberation," March 1, 1944, ISA P 1960-35, p. 1. The British, it seems, did regard the League as a Communist organization, but differentiated it from other Communist movements by noting that the main activists of the NLL were not so much the workers, but rather the "intelligentsia and people with some money and ideas." See "Arabs and Communism," January 7, 1945, ISA P 3223-1, p. 2.

17. *Al-Ittihad*, May 14, 1944.

18. Touma (1919-85) was born in Haifa to a prominent Greek-Orthodox Palestinian family and had a Jewish

(and, in some cases, founders) of the NLL were Emile Habibi,<sup>19</sup> Tawfik Toubi,<sup>20</sup> Fuad Nassar,<sup>21</sup> and Boulus Farah.<sup>22</sup> All of them were young (in their twenties and thirties); all saw themselves as agents of modernization in Palestinian Arab society, and as representing a different political and social agenda from that of the traditional Palestinian national leadership.

### The Palestinian Political Context: The NLL and the Palestinian National Leadership

In order to understand the nature of the NLL's activities in the Palestinian political and social context of the late 1940s, it is essential to carefully examine its position within the Palestinian national movement, as well as the criticism the NLL expressed toward that movement. In many ways, the NLL positioned itself—in its social and political agenda as well as in its overall stance with respect to Jews, the Zionist movement, and the anti-imperialist struggle—as an alternative to the Palestinian national leadership. The NLL's political vision on many issues indeed differed

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wife, Chaya. He studied at the Greek Orthodox school in Haifa, and completed his graduate studies at the British Mission School in Jerusalem. His father sent him to study law in Cambridge, England, where Touma was exposed to Communist activity. Touma returned to Palestine following the outbreak of World War II, after which he completed his studies. He joined the Palestinian Communist Party in 1939 and became the head of an intellectual club that was perceived as in opposition to the PCP. He was also one of the founders of the "Workers Associations Union," HA 105/40.

19. Habibi (1921–96) was born in Haifa to a Christian family. He too studied at the Greek Orthodox school in Haifa; after graduating, he worked as a clerk in the refineries in the city. Habibi joined the Communist Party in 1940, and was the founder of "The People's Club." Prior to the split in the PCP, Habibi was the deputy to Radwan al-Hilu, the PCP's secretary, but after the split he became one of the NLL's founders and leaders. He wrote in *al-Ittihad* under the pseudonym "Juhaina," his young daughter's name. In 1949, Habibi became the editor of *al-Ittihad*, and in 1951 he was elected to the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, to represent the Israeli Communist Party. He became a leading intellectual and literary figure among Palestinian Communists in Israel, and won the Israel Prize for Arabic literature in 1992. Israeli, *The Communist Party in Israel*, p. 180.

20. Toubi (1922–2011) was born in Haifa to an established Greek-Orthodox family; his father was a small merchant who owned a shop in the city. He met Emile Touma at the British Mission School in Jerusalem. Years later the two became relatives, when Toubi married Olga, Touma's sister. Toubi was active in various professional unions and became a member of the PCP in 1940. Like Emile Habibi, he was elected to the Knesset as a member of the Israeli Communist Party; he served there until his resignation in 1990. Tom Segev, "My Father Did Not Teach Me to Become a Communist," *Koteret Rashit*, December 12, 1985, pp. 23–26; "Tawfik Toubi: A History of the Country," published by the Israeli Communist Party in memory of Tawfik Toubi, 2011.

21. Nassar (1910–76) was born in Nazareth; he participated in the Arab Revolt in 1936–39 and was one of its commanders. He joined the Communist Party in Lebanon in 1937, and in 1940 moved with the Mufti Haj Amin al-Husayni from Beirut to Baghdad. There he participated in the Rashid Ali al-Kailani revolt and was arrested. Nassar returned to Palestine in 1943 and joined the League shortly after its establishment. He was not one of the League's founders, but became one of its leaders. Although he objected to any cooperation between the League and the Arab Higher Committee, he met with the Mufti several times. In 1947, during the debate in the League regarding the partition plan, Nassar was among the supporters of partition. In 1948, prior to the breakout of the 1948 war, Nassar distributed leaflets in opposition to the Arab forces' intrusion into Palestine. The Egyptians caught and arrested him, but Nassar managed to escape to Jordan, where he was one of the founders of the Jordanian Communist Party. He died in Jordan in 1976. Israeli, *The Communist Party in Israel*, pp. 179, 183; Beinun, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?*, p. 50.

22. Farah (1910–91) could be considered the "outcast" of the NLL. He joined the PCP in the 1930s and went to the Workers' University in Moscow in 1934, returning to Haifa in 1937. In the wake of its support for Arab nationalism, he was dismissed from the PCP in 1940, and in 1943 he was among the founders of the NLL. He was against the NLL's support for the partition plan, which he believed served the "Zionist Communists." Unlike his friends in the NLL, Farah refused to join the Jewish Communists in the Israeli Communist Party, MAKI. See Farah's autobiography, *From Ottoman Rule to the Hebrew State: The Autobiography of a Palestinian Communist and Patriot, 1919–1991*, ed. and trans. Udi Adiv (Haifa, 2009).

from that of the Arab Higher Committee, the main leadership organ of the Palestinian national movement, which was reestablished in 1945, and the League did not hesitate to criticize the AHC. Notwithstanding this criticism, however, the League's leaders did try, on different occasions, to join the AHC, and to take an active part in the decision-making process regarding the future of Palestine. What were the disagreements between the League and the Palestinian national leadership? What was the nature of the links between them? In order to answer these questions, it is important to understand the nature of the Palestinian national leadership and the challenges facing it.

For most of the period of British colonial rule in Palestine, the Arab political leadership was dominated by political rivalries and factionalism, representing generational, interfamilial, institutional, and ideological differences.<sup>23</sup> The two main political factions were those represented by two urban elite families, al-Husayni and al-Nashashibi. The al-Husayni faction, *al-Majlisiyun* (named after the Supreme Muslim Council), led by the Mufti Haj Amin al-Husayni and the Palestinian Arab Party (*al-Hizb al-Arab al-Falastini*), called for the independence of Palestine and the end of the British mandate, and rejected any national aspirations on the part of the Jews. This party became the dominant and most popular party on the Palestinian political scene during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>24</sup> The second group, *al-Mu'aridun* (the opposition) was headed by Raghīb al-Nashashibi, who was appointed mayor of Jerusalem by the British after the Nabi Musa riots in 1920, replacing Musa Kazim al-Husayni.<sup>25</sup>

Traditional patron-client networks, family ties, and local loyalties supported the interfactional rivalry between these two camps, transforming Palestinian politics into more of a locally rather than nationally based system.<sup>26</sup> As Khalidi argues, both of these factions of Palestinian notables were appointed and supported, in one fashion or another, by the British. In many ways, then, both the British and the Zionists played a major role in creating and encouraging these political rivalries and internal divisions.<sup>27</sup> As will be argued here, the NLL expressed strong criticism toward all of these forces: the Palestinian elite, British colonial rule, and the Zionist movement.

The increased criticism directed at the political leadership for its ineffectiveness in dealing with both the British and the Zionists, as well as what was perceived as the lack of a political agenda altogether and the failure to create a representational leadership, led to the establishment of various movements and parties opposing the Husayni-Nashashibi traditional leadership. These included, among others, the short-lived *al-Istiqlal* party (1932–34), which Khalidi argues was “the only true Palestinian political party in the full sense of that term, meaning having a clear ideology, a broad membership and a national rather than regional, local or family-based, which was the case with all other Palestinian parties established in the 1930s.”<sup>28</sup> The NLL, I argue, would offer exactly this sort of ideologically driven politics.

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23. Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), pp. 56–66.

24. Issa Khalaf, *Politics in Palestine: Arab Factionalism and Social Disintegration, 1939–1948* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 86–88.

25. Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, p. 66.

26. Avraham Sela, “The Palestinian Arabs in the 1948 War,” in *The Palestinian National Movements: From Confrontation to Reconciliation?* ed. Moshe Ma'oz and B. Z. Kedar (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1996), pp. 118–20.

27. Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, p. 69.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Other oppositional movements included Raghīb al-Nashashibi's *Hizb al-Difa'*, which won the support of some mayors and urban notable families, but did not enjoy wide support among the Palestinian public, or among underground armed military networks such as the *Izz al-Din al-Qassam* group.<sup>29</sup> The opposition's main criticisms of the political leadership were the leadership's inability to agree on appropriate strategies, to mobilize and organize the populace, or to create an accepted, recognized, and representative national quasi-state forum.<sup>30</sup> In many ways, this also reflected the position of the NLL.

When comparing the NLL with the Palestinian traditional leadership, one of the things that should be pointed out is the difference in their social composition and target audiences. Unlike the Palestinian national movement, whose urban-based, mainly Muslim leadership had gained much social, religious, and political power (and, as a result, been the target of much criticism) since the beginning of the British mandate, the NLL attracted groups of professionals, intellectuals and urban workers, all of whom criticized the factionalism and family-based rivalries that characterized the national leadership.<sup>31</sup>

The NLL shared the AHC's agenda regarding the fight against the British mandate, the goal of establishing an independent Arab state in Palestine, and opposition to the Zionist movement. The two organizations also held common views regarding the fate of the Jewish refugees from the Holocaust and their possible immigration to Palestine: namely, that it was the responsibility of the international community to decide where to relocate the Jewish refugees, either in their home countries or in new countries that would be willing to accept them.<sup>32</sup>

The NLL strongly opposed the AHC, however, on several major issues. The first was the distinction the NLL made between the Jews residing in Palestine and the Zionist movement generally—as opposed to the AHC, which lumped the two groups together and perceived both as its enemies. The second concerned the NLL's belief in the need of all people living under occupation to fight against imperialism, by virtue of which the NLL didn't rule out cooperation with non-Zionist Jews living in Palestine. The third major point of contention revolved around the issue of democracy, and the NLL's demand for an elected and representative national leadership.<sup>33</sup> The NLL criticized the way in which the AHC sought to solve the national conflict in the country, as well as the violence and acts of terror it used to carry out its goals. It demanded that the discussion regarding the Palestinian problem be transferred to the UN, so that Britain and the United States would not be the sole international mediators resolving the question of Palestine. By this means, the NLL was hoping to involve the Soviet Union in Palestinian affairs. Two of these issues ought to be looked at closely: the distinction between Jews and Zionists, and the demand for a representative national leadership.

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29. *Ibid.*, p. 82; Khalaf, *Politics in Palestine*, pp. 86–88.

30. Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, p. 105.

31. Khalaf, *Politics in Palestine*, p. 43; Bayan al-Hout, "The Palestinian Political Elite during the Mandate Period," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 9, no. 1 (1979), pp. 85–111.

32. Porat, "The National Liberation League," p. 361.

33. *Al-Mithaq al-Watani*, pp. 2–4; Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, p. 142.

### *Jews and Zionists*

The distinction the NLL made between the Jewish masses living in Palestine and the Zionist movement defined one of the major differences between the League and the Palestinian national movement. In an editorial in *al-Ittihad* on October 1, 1944, this distinction was clearly made:

Some groups in our national movement do not distinguish between the Zionist movement and the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. However, we have to examine the Jewish society in Palestine and consider the class structure, parties and organizations. We can divide the Jewish inhabitants into classes: The working class and peasants form the majority within the Jewish population, and are the most important social classes. . . . Only the capitalists support the Zionist movement. Our struggle against Zionism is a progressive struggle for the Jewish workers and intelligentsia.<sup>34</sup>

A similar distinction appeared in another article, published on March 11, 1945:

There is an important problem that is the problem of the Jewish inhabitants. The NLL believes that it is essential to fight and oppose Jews who support the Zionist movement. The League thinks that the Jewish inhabitants [of Palestine] deserve equal democratic rights as citizens. . . . The League has to differentiate between the Jewish inhabitants [of Palestine] and Zionism. This will help in attracting Jews to our national struggle for independence, which will grant [the Jews] independence from the Zionist occupying movement.<sup>35</sup>

The same disagreement with the traditional national leadership was expressed by Emile Touma at the Communist Parties conference held in London in February 1945:

The traditional leadership of the national movement always had one disadvantage. It could never hold a positive position towards the Jews and separate them from Zionism. It never wanted to cooperate with the Jews in the liberation struggle. The National Liberation League always praised . . . cooperation with the Jewish masses against imperialism and Zionism.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the NLL, in criticizing the Palestinian national movement for not distinguishing between the Jews in Palestine and the Zionist movement, was accusing it of actually strengthening the Zionist movement. According to the NLL, the aggressive attitude of the Palestinian leadership toward the Jews left them no other option but to support the Zionists. Instead of alienating the Jews, the League argued, the Arab leadership should cooperate with the Jewish masses in a joint anti-imperialist struggle for independence. At this stage in the NLL's history, however, before 1947, Jews and Arabs were not regarded by the League as having equal status, as the Arabs were considered to be a national group, while the Jews were entitled to equal civil rights, it was believed, but did not deserve national recognition. But this position was still very different from

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34. *Al-Ittihad*, October 1, 1944.

35. *Ibid*, March 11, 1945.

36. "A Report on Palestine," speech to the Communist Parties Conference in London, 26.2-3.3.1947, LA, IV-104-85-91.

that of the AHC, which was willing to recognize as Palestinian citizens only those Jews who arrived in Palestine prior to 1918.<sup>37</sup>

### *The Demand for a Representative National Leadership*

The call for a democratic leadership that would truly represent the Arab community in Palestine was one of the main demands that the NLL made of the national Arab leadership and the AHC. During the first period of its activity, in 1944 and at the beginning of 1945, the NLL emphasized the need for democratic representation of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine, as well as for the participation of other organizations and groups in the leadership. Such organizations as workers unions and cultural and intellectual clubs, the NLL maintained, ought to take part in the political process and should be represented in the AHC.<sup>38</sup> National unity would achieve independence and the liberation of Palestine, wrote Emile Habibi in *al-Ittihad*, and would enable fighting for social and economic rights.<sup>39</sup> Parties such as *al-Istiqlal*, *al-Difa'*, and the NLL, which were not represented in the AHC, should form a national front, he argued, and lead the national struggle.<sup>40</sup>

When the new Arab Higher Committee was established in November 1945 with the support of the Arab League, neither the NLL nor any other oppositional movement was asked to join it. The NLL accordingly regarded the new AHC as an agent of the Arab League and not as truly representing the people of Palestine, and it perceived its leaders to be weak, hesitant, and opportunistic.<sup>41</sup>

Another opportunity for the League to be included in the AHC came in February 1946, when Jamal al-Husayni returned to Palestine from exile invited the League to join the new Higher Committee. Al-Husayni actually negotiated with the NLL over its inclusion, but these negotiations failed, owing to the NLL's demand that democratic elections be held for the new AHC. Instead, al-Husayni invited Sami Taha, the leader of the Palestinian Workers Association, to join the newly formed AHC.<sup>42</sup> Husayni tried to please the Communists by inviting Dr. Khalil Budeiri, a former Communist activist, to join the AHC, but the NLL continued to demand the selection of its own representative to the AHC.<sup>43</sup> Following the formation of the new AHC, the NLL kept demanding its dissolution, arguing that "the people are the source of authority and the ones who are able to influence the leadership."<sup>44</sup>

The NLL instead tried to position itself as an opposition group vis-à-vis the AHC, and to gain wider support among the Arab masses. It organized various meetings and conferences in some villages and towns, where NLL speakers condemned the AHC and the national leadership for its wrong conduct and policies in Palestine.<sup>45</sup> Despite this harsh criticism, however, it seems that the NLL had an ambivalent and somewhat cautious position with respect to the national

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37. Porat, "The National Liberation League," p. 362; Ben-Zaken, *Communism as Cultural Imperialism*, p. 157.

38. Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, pp. 144–45; *Al-Ittihad*, June 18, 1944.

39. *Al-Ittihad*, February 25, 1945.

40. *Ibid*, March 11, 1945.

41. Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, pp. 146–48.

42. Khalaf, *Politics in Palestine*, pp. 115–22.

43. Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, p. 146; "Review of the Arab Communists," HA 105/64.

44. Report from April 11, 1946, HA 105/64.

45. "Communist Propaganda and Attack against the Arab Leaders," HA 105/64.

leadership. When asked about the NLL's position toward the AHC in an interview conducted in October 1946, Emile Touma replied that the AHC was for him a symbol of Arab unity, and that the NLL could cooperate with the Arab party very well. When he was asked if the Mufti was a war criminal (owing to his contacts with Nazi Germany), Touma answered: "Whoever fights against imperialism is our friend, and Haj Amin fights against the British." Touma was not willing to give a clearer answer to this question.<sup>46</sup> His reaction may point to some internal disagreements among NLL members regarding their stance in relation to the AHC.

The decision to establish the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) in May 1947 without the participation of Britain and the United States was viewed by the NLL as a success. As it had demanded all along, the discussion on Palestine became an international one, which would proceed without the involvement of the two imperialist powers. After the AHC announced its intention to boycott UNSCOP, the NLL declared that it intended to testify before the Committee and to demand the withdrawal of foreign forces from Palestine and the establishment of a democratic state.<sup>47</sup> It prepared a long memorandum for submission to the Committee in which it strongly rejected the idea of partitioning Palestine. Partition would signal a final separation between Jews and Arabs, it argued, and would increase hatred and antagonism; Jewish immigration to Palestine would damage the economic and social condition of both peoples living there. It is in the world's interest to intervene and to solve the problem of Palestine, argued the NLL in its memorandum.<sup>48</sup>

Surprisingly, however, under pressure from the AHC, the NLL decided to boycott UNSCOP as well, representing that its decision was motivated by its concern for national unity. This surprising change in the NLL's attitude was heavily criticized. Shmuel Mikunis maintained that the NLL had surrendered to the "national pressure" to which it had been subjected by Jamal al-Husayni. By not testifying before UNSCOP, he argued, the NLL had missed an opportunity to cooperate with a committee that represented the democratic forces in Palestine, not the imperialist ones, and had thereby harmed the struggle of the progressive camp.<sup>49</sup> Even Taufic Toubi, in retrospect, regretted the NLL decision, and admitted that it had surrendered to public pressure and to the political environment of the time.<sup>50</sup>

The NLL's ambivalent position regarding the national leadership may have resulted from its realization that it was incapable of influencing the direction of national politics without gaining some cooperation from that leadership.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, it seems that the NLL was very much noticed by the AHC and by the general Palestinian public. On August 16, 1946, for example, it is reported that the NLL organized a large conference in Jaffa, in the presence of more than 1,500 people. During the conference, when speakers criticized the AHC and its policies, they were interrupted by nationalist activists present in the room. According to the Jewish source reporting on the meeting, "the conference was a great victory for the NLL in particular, and for the Communists in general."<sup>52</sup> Another indication of the charged relations between the national

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46. "A conversation with Emile Touma," October 31, 1946, HA 105/64.

47. *Al-Ittihad*, June 8, 1947; "In the Arab Communist Movement," HA 105/64a.

48. Memorandum on the "Palestine Problem," 1947, pp. 1-18.

49. *Kol Ha'am*, June 23, 1947.

50. Segev, "My Father Did Not Teach Me to Become a Communist."

51. Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, pp. 147-48.

52. "Communist Propaganda and Attack against the Arab Leaders," HA 105/64.

movement and the NLL comes from a report that Musa al-'Alami, a prominent member of the AHC who was also involved in negotiations with the Zionist movement, invited representatives of the NLL to join him and manage the AHC's propaganda office, an offer that the Communists turned down.<sup>53</sup>

These incidents may suggest that the NLL was viewed as offering an alternative to the dominant nationalist discourse in Palestine. As will be discussed below, the criticism directed at the AHC and the Arab League would intensify and become even more vocal following their rejection of the 1947 UN partition plan, Arab military involvement in the 1948 war, and the devastating consequences of that war for Palestinian Arabs. In the Palestinian political context of the time, this criticism was significant and ought to be analyzed.

### 1947 and After: The NLL and the Debate on Partition

The NLL's clear political program, which called for the establishment of an independent Arab democratic state where Jews would enjoy equal civil rights as a minority group, changed dramatically when the League decided to support the 1947 UN partition plan and recognize the existence of two states, one Arab and one Jewish, in Palestine. The NLL thereby became even more unique in the political context of its time, as it was the only Arab organization that supported partition and recognized the national rights of the Jews. In order to understand the process that led to the NLL's dramatic acceptance of partition, one should first carefully examine the League's position toward Jews and regarding the national question in Palestine.

#### *The NLL and the Jews: Civil versus National Rights*

As we have noted above, the NLL made a clear distinction between the Zionist movement, which it viewed as an imperialist reactionary movement, and the Jewish masses. The latter were seen as having in common with the Arabs an interest in struggling both against British imperialism and against the Zionist movement, on behalf of the independence of Palestine.<sup>54</sup> Emile Touma clearly stated this position at the conference of Communist parties held in February 1947:

The Jewish masses must realize that their interest is to fight [against] imperialism and Zionism, and to cooperate with the Arab peoples who fight for liberation. The abolition of the British mandate, the independence of Palestine and the creation of a democratic regime in Palestine are the main goals of the Jewish and Arab masses. Any agreement on partition or any other imperialist plan cannot be reached. Thus it is essential that the Jewish progressive avant-garde, which is not part of the Zionist movement, will lead the Jewish public and explain the goals. . . .<sup>55</sup>

At the organizational and political level, given the split between Jewish and Arab Communists between 1943 and 1948 and the failed attempts to reconcile the two movements, it seems that the NLL was unable to fully achieve its goal of Jewish-Arab cooperation.<sup>56</sup> There were other

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53. As reported in HA 112/1326/95.

54. *Al-Ittihad*, August 15, 1945; *al-Ittihad*, March 11, 1945.

55. Emile Touma, "A Report on Palestine."

56. It seems that several (unsuccessful) attempts were made to reconcile the Jewish and Arab Communists and to reunite them in one party. See HA 105/64a (January 31, 1946).

occasions for cooperation, however, especially joint labor struggles and strikes. In 1943, for example, there were three joint strikes of Jewish and Arab municipality workers in Jaffa and Jerusalem. In 1944 the number of participants in joint strikes rose to 1,300, with the largest strike being that of Jewish, Arab, and Armenian train workers in Haifa. In 1945, a seven-day strike of workers in military camps took place in Tel Aviv, and the total number of joint Arab and Jewish strikers in that year reached 2,530.<sup>57</sup>

The biggest and most impressive strike was a strike of government employees that began in April 1946 and involved some thirty thousand Arab and Jewish workers. On April 18, 1946, the NLL and PCP issued a joint leaflet that called on the “workers and the public” to support the government workers strike and asked other labor unions to join them in their struggle. It emphasized the joint nature of the struggle and the power of the workers: “The joint front of the government workers, Jews and Arabs, can weaken the colonial administration. Jewish and Arab workers, keep your unity! Your unity guarantees your victory! There is one struggle for all the workers! Long live the Arab-Jewish workers’ unity in their struggle against the imperialist employer!”<sup>58</sup> The 1946 strike was the best example of Jewish-Arab cooperation against their common and main enemy, the British.

Despite the class-based nature of these joint struggles, these strikes carried a clear political message as well: The struggle in Palestine was not between Jews and Arabs, but between the inhabitants of Palestine and British imperialism. The goal of the struggle was liberation from the reactionary and imperial forces operating in the region—Britain, the Zionist movement, and to a certain extent the AHC—by means of Arab-Jewish cooperation.

### *The Dramatic Change on the Question of Partition*

The NLL’s political agenda of demanding a democratic Arab state in Palestine changed dramatically when it decided to support the 1947 UN partition plan.<sup>59</sup> The acceptance of partition positioned the NLL uniquely in Palestinian Arab society, as the Arab national movement rejected partition and actively sought to defeat it. The NLL’s position regarding the national question created quite a dramatic debate within the League’s leadership, and indeed led to a temporary split in the organization. Similar debates took place within the Communist movements of Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, as will be briefly explained below. It is important to understand first, however, what led to the NLL’s support of partition, and what this position entailed.

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57. “The Struggle for Liberation: The Testimony of the Palestinian Communist Party before UNSCOP,” July 1947 (A Communist Party publication, Tel Aviv), presentation of Meir Vilner, pp. 32–33. On joint Jewish-Arab strikes, see David De Vries, “British Rule and Arab-Jewish Coalescence of Interest: The 1946 Civil Servants’ Strike in Palestine,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36, no. 4 (2004), pp. 613–36, and Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*.

58. Government workers leaflet, April 18, 1946, LA, IV-425-33; Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, pp. 332–35.

59. Issam Makhoul, one of the leaders of the Communist Party in Israel and currently the director of the Emile Touma Center there, argues that the decision to support partition was approved by the NLL only in February 1948, after lengthy consideration and debate. What was at stake was the attempt to ensure the right of self-determination for the Palestinian people, which is what the League tried to achieve by accepting partition. This, for him, is proof that the NLL did not automatically follow Soviet directions, as it were. Interview with Makhoul, April 17, 2011. According to the NLL’s publications, however, the announcement regarding the League’s support of partition had already been made in December 1947.

It seems that the change in the NLL's position began with a speech by Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet representative to the UN, to the UN General Assembly on May 14, 1947. Mandatory rule in Palestine had failed, argued Gromyko in his speech. One cannot ignore the aspirations of the Jews in Palestine, he continued, especially considering their suffering during World War II. He enumerated four possible solutions to the problem of Palestine: to establish a Jewish-Arab state with equal rights for both peoples; to partition Palestine into two separate states, Jewish and Arab; to establish an Arab state in Palestine without taking into consideration the rights of the Jews; and to establish a Jewish state without considering the rights of the Arabs. But the history of Palestine and the current realities could not justify a unilateral solution to the problem, Gromyko maintained; only an independent, democratic Jewish-Arab state in Palestine, based on the equal rights of both peoples, could fulfill the just legitimate aspirations of both groups. At the end of his speech, however, Gromyko added: "If this solution [an independent, democratic state for both Arabs and Jews] is not realistic, and considering the bad relations between the two parties, it would be necessary to consider the partition of Palestine as a solution to the problem. I say again that this solution would be justified only if it will be proven that coexistence between the two sides is not possible. The UN committee needs to consider these two solutions."<sup>60</sup>

Gromyko's speech left the NLL's leadership in a state of confusion, and the League now had trouble explaining its position. Unlike the NLL, Gromyko did not differentiate between the Jewish masses and the Zionist movement, but rather treated the Jews as one group. He referred to the Jews as a "people" (not as a "nation"), ignored the Zionist movement altogether, and did not refer to Zionism as a national liberation movement.<sup>61</sup> Gromyko saw Jews and Arabs as two peoples, each with historic roots and a right to self-determination. This sense of symmetry had been missing in the NLL's ideology up to this point. The change in the Soviet position, which until then had been in essence anti-Zionist, was most probably driven by the Soviets' desire to remove Britain from the Middle East, to become a significant power that would be able to impact political decisions in the region, and to gain the support of the Zionist movement and the American Jewish community, in the hope that they could influence American foreign policy.<sup>62</sup> The transformation in Soviet policies affected not only the NLL but also the other Arab Communist parties in the Middle East, and resulted in some ideological splits.<sup>63</sup>

Gromyko's speech was the beginning of the change in the NLL's political position. It still continued to present its former positions in *al-Ittihad* and elsewhere,<sup>64</sup> but it is clear that the leadership was embarrassed because of the revised Soviet position. Their official reaction to this position was that the USSR still supported an independent state with an Arab majority, and regarded partition or the establishment of a binational state as a first step toward such a regime.<sup>65</sup> In a memorandum sent to the Soviets, Emile Touma wrote that Gromyko's speech stood in contradiction to previous Soviet policies, and that with this statement the USSR was

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60. Gromyko's speech to the UN General Assembly, May 14, 1947, LA, IV-104-85-97; Benjamin Pinkus, "Special Relations": *The Soviet Union and Its Allies' Relations with the Jewish People, Zionism and the State of Israel, 1939-1959* (Beer-Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007), pp. 168-69.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-70.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-73.

63. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World*, p. 64; Ben-Zaken, *Communism as Cultural Imperialism*, pp. 158-68.

64. See, for example, *al-Ittihad*, May 25, 1947; *Ibid.*, June 8, 1947.

65. "In the Arab Left Parties after Gromyko's Speech," HA 105/64a.

expressing support for Zionism and for British imperialism. The new Soviet stand, he wrote, might weaken the revolutionary movement and strengthen the forces of reaction.<sup>66</sup>

When UNSCOP declared its support for partition, the NLL again rejected it, while also accusing Arab national leaders of having paved the way for partition through their racist and negative approach toward the Jews of Palestine. The AHC had not suggested any alternative solution to the problem of Palestine, claimed the NLL, but rather had allowed the Arab League, Britain's ally, to decide the issue. The NLL also pointed up the danger of turning the struggle for independence from an anti-imperialist struggle to a racist and ethnic one. The AHC's use of violence and terror, it argued, would damage and divide the Arab national movement.<sup>67</sup>

The Soviet policy became clear on October 13, 1947, when Samion Tserapkin, the Soviet consul in Washington, publicly announced Soviet support for partition as the solution to the Palestine problem. The gap between the two sides is too deep, said Tserapkin, and it will be impossible to reach any understanding.<sup>68</sup> Tserapkin's announcement, which presented the official Soviet position, put further pressure on the NLL, as that position was obviously completely opposite to the NLL's stance to that point. One of the few responses from the NLL was published in an editorial in *al-Ittihad* on October 19, 1947, six days after Tserapkin's speech. In a very rare move, the NLL openly opposed the Soviet position:

We are united with all the citizens in the struggle against partition, [the struggle] for the evacuation of the British forces, the end of the mandate and the application of independence in Palestine. . . . We disagree with [the representative of] the Soviet Union on its position towards the Palestinian problem. We believe that partition is an unfair solution, which separates between the inhabitants of Palestine and carries out the imperialist mission. We shall act according to an independent policy, which will not be limited by the Soviet Union or any other external force. . . . The mission of our people is the just liberation. We are here united with all the national forces in a struggle against partition and for the evacuation of the British forces and the independence of Palestine.<sup>69</sup>

The NLL kept rejecting partition almost until the United Nations vote on the plan on November 29, 1947. In an article on November 2, 1947, it tried to distinguish between the American position and the Soviet one. The United States, claimed the writer, wanted to carry out the partition of Palestine before dealing with any other issue. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, wanted to first set a date for the evacuation of Britain from Palestine, and only then start dealing with the political situation.<sup>70</sup>

As the time for the UN vote approached, the NLL stopped openly rejecting the partition plan; its spokesmen maintained that the Soviet Union supported partition only to end the British mandate in Palestine. On November 29, 1947, the day of the vote in the UN General Assembly, the NLL's secretariat met in Jerusalem to discuss the UN decision in the presence of the League's

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66. As quoted at Pinkus, "Special Relations," pp. 175–76.

67. Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, pp. 156–57.

68. Martine Ebon, "Communist Tactics in Palestine," *Middle East Journal* 2, no. 3 (July 1948), p. 262.

69. *Al-Ittihad*, October 19, 1947.

70. *Ibid.*, November 2, 1947.

prominent figures, including Emile Touma, Emile Habibi, Taufic Toubi, and Fuad Nassar. Most of the leaders, the exception being Emile Touma, accepted the partition plan, claiming that it also had some positive aspects. Taufic Toubi, for example, argued that partition was the best way to end the British mandate and to establish an independent state in Palestine.<sup>71</sup>

The League's decision to support partition was clearly influenced by the change in the Soviet position. In order to justify this dramatic change, the NLL explained that in light of changing circumstances, supporting partition was the only way to protect the chance of establishing a free Arab country in Palestine. The two other alternatives—that Palestine would become a Jewish state, or that it would be taken over by King Abdullah—were worse options.<sup>72</sup>

The public announcement of the NLL's new position regarding partition took place at a general conference in Nazareth in December 1947. Many of the NLL's activists participated in the debate, at the end of which the majority agreed to follow the Soviet position and support partition. The main opponents were Emile Touma and Khalil Sanir. Bulus Farah, who also opposed partition, did not participate in the debate.<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, some representatives of the PCP and the NLL met prior to the conference and discussed the new developments affecting the Palestinian situation. It was agreed that an organization of the Communists in Palestine would be established, regardless of their national affiliation.<sup>74</sup> The way to unification between the NLL and the PCP was already paved, then, a year prior to its actual achievement.

At the conference, the secretariat of the NLL admitted that the Jews in Palestine were a “nation in formation.” It also admitted that the NLL, throughout the years, had not seen the struggle for self-determination of the Jews, together with that of the Arabs, as pointing the way to a solution of the problem of Palestine. The speakers admitted that the national split in the PCP had harmed the NLL and reduced its ability to influence political affairs in Palestine.<sup>75</sup> This was the first time that prominent members of the NLL admitted that the Jews were a national group entitled to self-determination.

The NLL's acknowledgment of the weakness stemming from its uninational nature in a multinational country was surprising as well, in light of the League's positions in the past. Partition was now the only way to free Palestine from imperialist rule, the conference speakers asserted. They stressed the importance of cooperation between workers and peasants and between Jews and Arabs, which would enable all of them to fight imperialism, and to struggle

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71. Tawfik Toubi, “Safahat Nasiaa min al-Ta'arich al Mashrik,” in Ahmad Sa'd, *Jud'ur min al-Shajara Daiima al-Khud'ara* (Haifa: Emile Touma Institute for Social and Political Research, 1996), p. 16.

72. This position was expressed, for example, by Dr. Issam Makhoul, Mr. Nuri Murkus, and Mr. Nadim Mussa. See fn. 106 below.

73. Dothan, *Reds*, p. 500. In his memoir, Bulus Farah claims that only a minority of NLL members participated in the December meetings and supported partition. See *From Ottoman Rule to the Hebrew State*, pp. 101-2. Farah was one of the strongest opponents of partition as a solution to the national problem in Palestine, and argued that support for partition was a disaster for both peoples. He was also very critical of the role of the Jewish Communists and of their connection with the Zionist movement. (Ibid., pp. 107-10.) Ben-Zaken (*Communism as Cultural Imperialism*, p. 161) also argues that the main opponents to partition—Touma, Farah, Musa al-Dajani, Mukhlis Amr, and Khalil Snir—boycotted the meeting.

74. “A letter to the *Kader* regarding the development of the National Liberation League,” February 4, 1948. (The MAKI collection, Yad Tabenkin Archive, 35/1/9). See also Shmuel Mikunis's analysis regarding the changing political situation in Palestine following Gromyko's speech: LA IV-104-85-34.

75. “A letter to the *Kader*,” p. 1.

for the establishment of democratic regimes in two states, one Jewish and one Arab.<sup>76</sup> Regarding the Jewish Communists, the secretariat stressed the need “to discuss the situation with [them], and to try and establish a united party.” Unity was important, it was argued, for the joint Jewish-Arab struggle against racism and for democracy, as well as for securing the rights of the working class.<sup>77</sup> Some criticism was directed at the Palestinian national leadership and at King Abdullah, who was doing everything he could to prevent the establishment of an Arab state in Palestine.<sup>78</sup>

Following the Nazareth conference and the League’s declaration of its position, a final split in the NLL occurred when Emile Touma, Bulus Farah, and Khalil Sanir were expelled from the ranks of the League. They established a small organization, “The National Liberation League—Northern District,” which was more radical in nature. Touma joined the fight against the Zionist forces in Haifa during the 1948 war, subsequently escaping to Lebanon and returning to Israel after spending a few months in prison.<sup>79</sup> Upon his return to Israel, Touma joined MAKI, the Israeli Communist Party, only after publishing a “self-criticism” document regarding his previous opinions during the debate over partition. In the 1960s, Touma was again elected to participate in the central committee of the party.

The NLL’s explicit support for the right of the Jews to self-determination and for an independent state made the national split among the Communists meaningless: The Jewish Communists, too, expressed their wish to reunite with the Arabs in one party. Prior to the unification with the PCP, however, the central committee of the League published a “self-criticism” document acknowledging the League’s past ideological mistakes, including its responsibility for the 1943 split. The solely Arab nature of the NLL, the League now believed, had prevented it from diagnosing the new situation in Palestine, understanding the development of the Jews into a national group, and acknowledging their right to self-determination. The struggle for the liberation of Palestine from imperialism should have been combined, the League now asserted, with a stronger fight against the bourgeois leadership of both the Arabs and the Jews in Palestine. The NLL’s secretariat called on all of its members in the new State of Israel to join the Israeli Communist Party, MAKI, whereas the NLL’s branches in the regions intended to become an Arab state (according to the partition plan) would remain NLL branches.<sup>80</sup>

The Jewish Communists responded to the NLL’s self-criticism on October 6, 1948, declaring their support for unification with the League. The unification conference took place in Haifa on October 22, 1948. Emile Habibi, greeting attenders on behalf of the League, promised to maintain the “full organic unification of the Jewish and Arab Communists,” and observed that this unification represented a victory for the working class in the State of Israel as a whole as well as in the Arab parts of Israel—as only the workers, he declared, could create peace and understanding between Jews and Arabs.<sup>81</sup> Habibi also referred to the important role of the NLL, which, he noted, led the anti-imperialist struggle in Palestine and fought against Arab reactionary forces—the supporters of the Mufti and of King Abdullah—as well as against

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76. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

79. Dothan, *Reds*, p. 501.

80. *Kol Ha’am*, October 15, 1948; Beinun, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?*, pp. 51–52; Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, pp. 161–62.

81. “The National Liberation League’s Greeting to the Unification Conference,” October 22, 1948, the MAKI collection, Yad Tabenkin Archive, 35/1/9.

Britain and the Arab armies. The League had won wide support “among the Arab masses, the workers and the *fellahin*,” remarked Habibi.<sup>82</sup> After five dramatic years, then, the Palestinian Communist Party was united again.

### The NLL in the 1948 War and After

The reaction of the NLL to the 1948 war and the statements it issued during that war were quite remarkable, considering the realities in Palestine at the time, and stand out in complete opposition to the stance of the Palestinian national leadership. The NLL strongly condemned the Arab armies’ invasion of Palestine, claiming that it was an attempt to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian Arab state. It called on Arab soldiers to return to their homelands and publicly called for the establishment of two independent states, side by side.

In June 1948 the NLL also addressed Arab soldiers in a leaflet, calling on them to return to their countries and fight against imperialism—as the war, the leaflet maintained, served only the interests of the world’s imperialist powers and not the interests of the Arabs.<sup>83</sup> The League criticized the Palestinian national leadership for fleeing the country, for encouraging the Arabs to leave their homes, and for demoralizing the Arabs in Palestine—who, it claimed, lacked any real leadership.

The Palestinian leadership was also accused of rejecting any possibility of living with the Jews in peaceful coexistence.<sup>84</sup> These accusations were voiced, for example, by the secretary of the NLL, Saliba Hamis, at a special conference of Arab and Jewish Communists which took place in November 1948. In his opening comments, Hamis accused Arab reactionaries (alluding to the national leadership) of misleading “the naive inhabitants of the nation” and cooperating with foreign imperialist forces—and of complicity in the disaster that the Palestinian Arabs had experienced as a result of the war.<sup>85</sup> For his part, King Abdullah of Jordan was accused by the League of cooperating with Britain, and of attempting to annex the Arab territories of Palestine to Jordan. A leaflet from September 1948 argued that

Abdullah’s representatives are secretly negotiating on the annexation of the Arab part of Palestine to Jordan. . . . They wanted to destroy the Arab people in Palestine and expel them from their land. . . . Our people will fight for the establishment of an Arab state according to the UN decision, for economic unity with the Jewish state, and for a democratic regime. The establishment of an Arab state in Palestine is the way to foil any imperialist intentions to annex the Arab state to Jordan, and to create an understanding between the Jews and the Arabs. Such an understanding is essential for peacemaking.<sup>86</sup>

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82. Ibid.

83. Ben-Zaken, *Communism as Cultural Imperialism*, pp. 178–79. See also a leaflet published secretly on September 30, 1948, by the NLL and the Communist parties in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, criticizing the imperialist forces and calling for the return of the refugees and for the withdrawal of Zionist and Arab forces from the territories of the future Arab state. I thank Nimr Murkus for providing me with this document. For a critical reading of this document, see Beinun, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?*, pp. 53–54.

84. Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, pp. 160–61.

85. “A report from the NLL conference,” ISA G-308/43.

86. *Kol Ha’am*, September 5, 1948. See also the criticism of King Abdullah in the leaflet mentioned above, “The Popular Struggle,” ISA GL-17115/34 (March 1950).

The reactionaries, both among the Palestinian national movement and among the Jews, and their unwillingness to reach an understanding were responsible for the deteriorating political situation in Palestine, according to the leaders of the NLL. The unwillingness of Palestinian nationalists to acknowledge the Jews as citizens of a Palestinian Arab state also contributed to the deterioration of the situation, they argued. The League called for immediate implementation of the partition plan, for cooperation between the Jews and their Arab neighbors, and for the liberation of the Middle East from British imperialism.<sup>87</sup>

The NLL was active to a certain degree during the final stages of the war and the early years of military rule, imposed on the Arab citizens of Israel between 1949 and 1966. It was active in Acre, Nazareth, Jerusalem, and Haifa as well as in some villages, and its activities are mentioned in various reports issued by the Ministry of Minority Affairs during the years 1948–1949.<sup>88</sup> In Haifa and Nazareth the NLL was operating with the permission of the military authorities, and it was in touch with the Ministry of Minority Affairs in attempting to assist the Arab residents who remained in these cities. In Jerusalem the NLL held the British and the Zionist forces responsible for the chaotic situation in that city, and it suggested ways of assisting the local population to deal with the war crisis.<sup>89</sup>

Reading some of the reports, leaflets, and letters that were published by the NLL and that discuss its operations during this period may shed some light on the first years of military rule in Israel and the role of the Communists during this period. The NLL's operations in the city of Haifa are of special interest. Haifa was the base of the NLL until the war and was also one of the main mixed cities in Palestine, whose Arab population shrank dramatically as a result of the 1948 war. On May 10, 1948, only a few days after the occupation of Haifa by forces of the Jewish paramilitary group Haganah, the NLL published a leaflet addressing the "Jewish workers and democratic forces" as follows:

We, the members of the National Liberation League that unites in it the workers and progressive Arab intelligentsia, write to you from "occupied" [sic] Arab Haifa, beyond the barriers that the reactionary and imperialist (forces) set between us. We address you because we want to bring the truth out. 90,000 Arabs lived in Haifa and Balad al-Sheikh, and on behalf of the 4,000 Arabs who remained [in the city], we write to you today. 15 days ago the Haganah forces occupied Haifa with British consent, while murdering many innocent people and looting homes and businesses. . . . 15 days have passed since the "occupation" [sic] but the looting continues. . . . the restrictions on the movement of the Arabs in Haifa, on the return to their homes and the opening of their businesses prevents the return to normal life. Arabs are also prevented from returning to their work in the port and elsewhere, and electricity and water supply are still cut in the Arab neighborhoods. We, the few Arabs who decided to continue living in the place where we were born, are willing to struggle and fight for our human existence, for our right to live in our city. We are determined to fight against any policy that aims at weakening us. We

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87. *Kol Ha'am*, August 8, 1948; Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party*, p. 160.

88. The Ministry of Minority Affairs (*Ha-Misrad Le-'Inyanei Mi'utim*) operated between the years 1948 and 1949 and was in charge of various issues involving the situation and status of the Arab citizens of Israel who were placed under military rule. The responsible minister was Bechor Shalom Shitrit.

89. A leaflet from the Jerusalem Branch of the NLL, January 19, 1948, ISA P-2878/7.

cannot sit quietly while observing the destruction of our economic life, the looting of our homes, and the unemployment of our workers. However, we know that our struggle is your [the Jewish workers'] struggle as well, and we hope that you will help us to radically change the situation. Democracy and friendship between the two peoples in the country would be severely damaged by what is happening in Haifa today. You can make a difference, which is why we address you. The military rule in Haifa should be brought to an end! Conditions of peace, freedom, security and labor should be provided for the peaceful Arabs who remained in Haifa, and to those who want to return to the city. Conditions should be made to weaken the reactionary and imperialist forces and to strengthen democracy and independence in the country!<sup>90</sup>

This leaflet was attached to a report addressing the provincial government and the Haganah command, written by the central committee of MAKI and focusing on the grave situation of the Arab neighborhoods in Haifa following the occupation of the city. What is most interesting about this report is not so much the descriptions of the situation in Haifa, but rather the way in which the writers choose to portray and analyze the developments that led to the situation they describe. According to the report, the Arabs fled the city as a result of the fear and panic that “the imperialist forces and the [Arab] gangs” caused. Haifa was “liberated from the gangs,” but the situation in the city may “turn our military victory into a grave moral and political defeat.” The mass exodus of the Arabs from Haifa was organized by our enemies, the report continues, in order to harm the prestige of the Jewish community, but only few among the Arab residents of Haifa joined and supported the gangs; the majority among them want to live peacefully. This is true, the report avers, regarding the Arabs of Haifa as well as those in the country at large, and so the authorities should not treat them as a hostile population but rather as equal citizens in the Jewish state. The Jewish community should fight against the gangs, but should cooperate with the majority among the Arabs who want to live in peace. A list of demands from the provincial government appears at the end of the report, which concludes by calling for treating the “calm Arab residents of our country” in a democratic way.<sup>91</sup>

The report and the leaflet that is attached to it are both fascinating. In many ways, they reflect the complex situation of the Communists, Jews and Arabs alike, during this crucial time of war. The lack of mention of any forced deportation of the Arabs from Haifa is striking, as is the way in which Arab gangs and imperialist agents are solely blamed for the situation. Just a short time after the destruction of Arab life in Haifa, it is stunning to learn that the remaining NLL activists are struggling to restore their rights and can still imagine some sort of coexistence and cooperation between Jews and Arabs. It is this belief that led them to unite with the Jewish Communists, and to continue to struggle for the rights of the Arab minority during the years of military rule and afterwards.

The NLL was active on behalf of remaining Arab communities in other places as well. At the beginning of August 1948, for example, it was reported by the Israeli authorities that members of the NLL had begun to assist the remaining Arabs in Nazareth, and had even tried to return

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90. “A Message from the Democratic Arab Forces in Haifa to the Jewish Community,” leaflet published by the National Liberation League, Haifa, May 10, 1948, ISA G 5671/22.

91. “The Situation in Haifa,” a report by MAKI to the provisional government, ISA G 5671/22. On the situation in Haifa after the occupation by the Haganah, see Farah, *From Ottoman Rule to the Hebrew State*, pp. 113–17.

some refugees to their villages. The writer of the report argues that the NLL is criticizing the Israeli authorities when meeting with foreigners, and hence they (the NLL) should be treated with a grain of salt (*Kabdehu ve-Hashdehu*, in the words of the writer).<sup>92</sup>

Another interesting mention of the League's operations is in an August 19 letter to the minister of minority affairs, in which it is mentioned that the NLL in Nazareth is trying to secure a supply of flour for the Arab residents of the city, where there were then about 5,000 Arabs who were unemployed. Interestingly, the same letter mentions that "Arab notables are keeping in close touch with Arabs from outside the country" (*Aravim min hachutz*, in Hebrew) through letters and personal meetings. The writer of the letter suggests that such meetings and contacts should be prevented, unless they are coordinated with the Israeli authorities.<sup>93</sup>

NLL activists, especially those in Haifa, were mentioned and discussed at the meetings of the provisional Israeli government as well. In late September and early October 1948, for example, the government discussed the NLL's request to be represented in Haifa's municipal council, and to allow the renewal of its newspaper, *al-Ittihad* (whose publication had been suspended during the war). The debate that took place at these meetings is fascinating, because it touched upon critical questions regarding the nature of Israel as a democratic state, the limitations on freedom of speech, the role of censorship, and the state's general position toward its Arab citizens and toward the Communist party. The NLL, then, despite its limited presence and activities, still managed to challenge the state and to generate a debate on crucial issues.<sup>94</sup>

Two founders of the League, Tawfik Toubi and Emile Habibi, continued to struggle for the rights and protection of the Arab citizens of Israel for many years as members of the Knesset, or Israeli parliament. Toubi was elected to the first Israeli parliament in January 1949 as part of MAKI, and served as a member of the Knesset until his resignation in 1990. During the years of military rule and afterwards, Toubi challenged the state over various issues concerning the rights of Palestinians in Israel, as well as on the question of refugees. Toubi's and Habibi's families, who left for Lebanon during the 1948 war, were allowed to return to Israel after several appeals by Toubi to different governmental authorities—an unusual case of refugees being allowed to return to Israel following the war. There were several attempts to deny these appeals, but the families' return eventually materialized thanks to pressure put on David Ben Gurion by MAKI.<sup>95</sup>

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92. "The National Liberation League," August 8, 1948, ISA G-308/43. On the NLL's operations in Nazareth in relation to the displaced Palestinians, see also in ISA GL-17114/4. In the same document, there is an interesting reference to the tensions between the NLL and the heads of the churches in Nazareth. The latter were trying to organize the workers who did not support the NLL, and accused the NLL of Communist activity. The NLL, for its part, accused the churches of being fascist.

93. ISA G-308/43. Contacts between members of the NLL and Palestinian refugees are mentioned elsewhere. See, for example, a report sent from the Haifa branch of the Ministry of Minority Affairs on October 27, 1948, entitled "A Report on the Conditions of the Minorities and Their Demands," p. 8, ISA G 302/62.

94. Minutes of the provisional government, September 29, 1948, October 10, 1948, ISA G 8227/41.

95. On Toubi's family specifically, see in ISA G 299/43, and on his parliamentary work on behalf of MAKI and the Arabs in Israel, see in ISA G 5375/40. See also the analysis of Ben-Zaken on this matter, in *Communism as Cultural Imperialism*, pp. 212–13.

## The Regional Context: The NLL and Arab Communist Parties

The dilemmas and debates discussed by the NLL did not occur in a vacuum. The NLL and the PCP were closely connected to other Arab Communist groups in the Middle East, including the Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraqi Communist parties. As such, there was a network of Arab Communist movements in the Middle East that were all influenced, in one way or another, by the changing policies of the Soviet Union, especially regarding the Palestine question.

Before the national-based split in the Palestinian Communist Party, the PCP had played a central role in leading and guiding Communist activities in the Middle East, in a form that Avner Ben-Zaken calls “cultural imperialism.” In 1943, after the dismantling of the Comintern and the split in the PCP, the last internationalist framework in the Middle East had disappeared. Still, the NLL remained very influential in determining the Arab Communist line regarding the Palestine question.<sup>96</sup> Hence, in 1945 the Syrian and Lebanese Communist parties adopted the political line of the NLL and called for the establishment of a democratic Arab state in Palestine with full civil rights for Jewish residents, but without acknowledging Jewish national rights.<sup>97</sup> In Egypt, where the Communist movement was split among different ideological lines and agendas, and where many Jews played central roles, the general position toward the Palestine question was similar, calling for ending British imperial rule and fighting against the Zionist movement while distinguishing between Jews and Zionists. This unanimous position changed when Henri Curiel, the leader of the Democratic Movement for National Liberation, began adopting a political line closer to that of the Jewish Communists in Palestine: namely, recognizing the national rights of Jews in Palestine. Curiel’s position changed even before the change in the Soviet position, and gave rise to much animosity and debate within the Egyptian left.<sup>98</sup>

The change in the Soviet position, starting with Gromyko’s speech, created great confusion among Arab Communist parties as well, and gave rise to ideological debate. While Curiel’s group in Egypt supported partition and acknowledged the national rights of the Jews, other groups continued at first to reject partition and adhered to the Soviet line only after some debate.<sup>99</sup> The Communist parties of Syria and Lebanon at first rejected partition, despite the Soviet shift, but later changed their political line and expressed support for partition, probably because they sought to maintain their position of superiority among the Arab Communist parties, and also because they did not want to risk their relationship with the Soviets.<sup>100</sup> The same late support was provided by the Iraqi Communist party as well. The internationalist struggle against imperialism, then, took priority over the national struggle, and not only in the NLL.

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96. Ben-Zaken, *Communism as Cultural Imperialism*, pp. 137–38.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 141.; Yossi Amitay, Mitsrayim ve-Yisra’el-mabat mi-semol: ha-semol ha-Mitsri vaha-sikhsukh ha-‘Arvi-Yisre’eli, 1947-1978 (*Egypt and Israel: A Look from the Left; The Egyptian Left and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1978*) (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1999), pp. 104–9. The history of Egyptian Communism is fascinating and has been examined from different angles, including recently specifically from the Jewish perspective. See, for example, Beinín, *Was the Red Flag Flying There?*; Selma Botman, *The Rise of Egyptian Communism, 1939-1970* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988); and the recent study by Rami Ginat of Jews in the Egyptian Communist movement, *A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011).

99. Amitay, *Egypt and Israel: A Look from the Left*, pp. 112–14; Ben-Zaken, *Communism as Cultural Imperialism*, pp. 165–69.

100. Ben-Zaken, *Communism as Cultural Imperialism*, pp. 163–64, 184.

Personal connections between NLL members and leaders of the Arab Communist parties existed throughout all these years, including during the 1948 war. As mentioned above, various leaflets were distributed by the NLL and by the Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraqi Communist parties against the war and against Arab involvement in it. The NLL also received support from some representatives of Communist countries who were positioned in Palestine in order to help arrange its underground activities.<sup>101</sup> Many Communists in all these countries also paid a high price for their support of partition, for their opposition to the Arab invasion of Palestine, and for what seemed to the general non-Communist public to be a pro-Zionist stance. In Egypt, many Communists, including Curiel himself, were arrested, and Communist activity in the country was prohibited. In Palestine, NLL activists were targeted by the Arab armies, who perceived them as Communist threats, traitors, and Zionist collaborators, as well as by the Israeli forces. Many activists were arrested during the war, only to be later released on account of pressure put on the Israeli authorities by the Jewish Communists, and by Communist movements worldwide.<sup>102</sup>

### **National Liberation and Anti-Colonial Struggle in the Context of a National Conflict**

In many ways, the dilemmas and contradictions that the NLL presented and lived through during its short history can teach us something about the complexities and challenges of Communist anti-imperialist struggle in the context of a grave national conflict. And indeed, many of the questions that the NLL was engaged with were in many ways similar in nature to those that other Communist movements, acting in colonial settings, faced at times of war and conflict.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, when considering the NLL in light of the recent wave of uprisings in the Arab world, which were largely motivated by protest over the misconduct of certain Arab regimes, the NLL and Arab Communist activities demonstrate an early phase of popular revolt against what they viewed as conservative and reactionary regimes. How, then, should the NLL's activities be assessed, given its unique position within the Palestinian realities of its time? What is its significance in Palestinian and Israeli history?

The main political stance of the NLL in support of partition, together with the idea of self-determination for both Jews and Arabs in two states, has since become the generally accepted formula for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given how small the NLL was, and that it was composed of mostly young, albeit highly motivated, activists, it is remarkable to recall the courage and daring its leaders expressed in going against the mainstream Palestinian national leadership, particularly in a time of war. The League's attempt to connect the political struggle with the social struggle was successful in the sense that it managed to gather around it the urban working classes, and to present an alternative to the traditional national leadership.

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101. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

102. *Ibid.*, pp. 198–207.

103. Two examples are the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the French Communist Party (PCF), and the ideological and strategic tensions they encountered during World War II. See, on the Indian case, S. N. Gupta, *Communism and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1939–1945* (New Delhi: Sage, 2008), pp. 187–214, 258–69, and Habib Manzer, “Communist Party Policy during the Imperialist War (1939–1941),” *Social Scientist* 35, no. 11/12 (2007), pp. 55–62. On the French Communist Party, see M. Adereth, *The French Communist Party: A Critical History (1920–84): From Comintern to “The Colors of France”* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 91–130; and on its dilemma during the Algerian War, see Danie`le Joly, *The French Communist Party and the Algerian War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. xvi, 68–79, 94–98.

It seems that it was less successful in reaching the majority of Palestinian society, the peasants, who were still very much influenced by the traditional leadership. The NLL was also unable to fully bridge and solve the tension between internationalism and the Palestinian *national* struggle: After a national “experiment,” the internationalist option finally won the upper hand when the NLL reunited with the Jewish Communists in 1948.

Still, one cannot ignore certain tensions and inconsistencies in the overall positions of the NLL, both pre-1948 and during the early years of the State of Israel. In contrast to the perspective that views the agenda of the NLL as unique and brave given the circumstances under which it operated, there is another prism through which the work of the NLL and the Communist Party in general can be analyzed. Such a position is articulated, for example, by Ahmad Sa’di, who argues that the Jewish section of the Communist Party in many ways endorsed and cooperated with Zionist ideology and the Zionist establishment—and, as a result, was afforded relative freedom of activity by the Israeli authorities during the years of military rule. Regarding the NLL, Sa’di argues that the Arab Communists not only affirmed the Soviet pro-Zionist position in support of partition, but also “endeavored to undermine the legitimacy of the Arab struggle for Palestine.”<sup>104</sup> Moreover, according to Sa’di, “a division of labor between Jewish and Arab Communists existed: while the Jews purchased weapons and mobilized volunteers for the Haganah, some major Arab figures engaged in a propaganda battle to de-legitimize and undermine the Arab armies’ intervention in Palestine.”<sup>105</sup> Sa’di’s criticism is mainly directed at the Jewish Communists, who he argues supported and collaborated with the Zionist establishment prior to and during the 1948 war, but the NLL and its leaders are not left unreproached. Going back to some League publications from late 1948 and early 1949 mentioned above, one can understand the basis for Sa’di’s criticism.

Another question that comes up when trying to assess the activities of the NLL is its connection to the Soviet Union, especially in light of its dramatic acceptance of partition. Not surprisingly, when speaking with members of the Communist Party, both first-generation (such as Tawfik Toubi) and second-generation, the belief conveyed is that the NLL operated independently, and reached its decision regarding the question of partition after much consideration and internal debate.<sup>106</sup> Yair Tzaban, a former Jewish member of the Communist Party and former Israeli Minister, argues that the members of the NLL revisited the question of partition and tried to justify their position only in retrospect. According to Tzaban, the idea of operating in

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104. Ahmad H. Sa’di, “Communism and Zionism in Palestine-Israel: A Troubled Legacy,” *Holy Land Studies* 9, no. 2 (2010), p. 179.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 180. Sa’di refers here to the way the PCP facilitated the connection between the Communist government of Czechoslovakia and the *Haganah* Jewish paramilitary organization and the Jewish Agency, thereby making possible Czech arms deals during the 1948 war.

106. Former Hadash party MK and current director of the Emile Touma Center in Haifa, Dr. Issam Makhoul, claims that the NLL reached its final decision regarding partition only in February 1948, after many debates among the League’s leaders—as opposed to the Jewish members of the PCP, who accepted partition immediately after the vote in the UN. The partition plan became the only visible alternative for the Palestinians, claim Dr. Makhoul, Nuri Murkus, and Nadim Mousa, and the only way to secure self-determination for the Palestinians in the context of changing realities, including the activities of the Arab and Zionist reactionary forces. Interviews with Dr. Issam Makhoul (April 17, 2011), Nuri Murkus (June 22, 2011), Nadim Mousa (June 22, 2011), Tawfik Toubi (March 5, 1999), and Nazir Mazali (March 3, 1999).

opposition to the Soviet stand was very deterring, and there was hence an attempt to avoid such opposition.<sup>107</sup>

Whatever the reasons for the change in the NLL's political program, it exhibited great courage during those crucial and dramatic years. Although it could not ignore the pressures exerted on it by the Palestinian national movement, and was even tempted for a while to join it, the NLL was still the only Palestinian organization that supported the partition plan. It also analyzed the changes that had taken place in Palestine and acted accordingly, without being bound to its former views or dogmas. During the war years, and in the early years of the State of Israel, the NLL worked under great constraints and in very difficult circumstances, yet still managed to challenge the State over issues that were crucial for the Arab citizens of Israel. Its work reflected political imagination that expressed unique possibilities while dealing with unresolved tensions, and in many ways it is still very relevant to today's realities, both in Israel and in the Arab world.

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107. Interview with Yair Tzaban (July 25, 2011).

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