

## The Arab Communists

### *Between the Nakba and Independence*

A general sentiment became pervasive among those who remained under Israeli rule after the Nakba—a sense of being like orphans who could only hope for scraps from the table. Only a small discordant minority was the exception to this, and not afflicted with this overwhelming sense of defeat and loss. Some individuals and groups in northern Palestine collaborated with the Jews and supported their war effort in 1948. Prominent among them were al-Hayb ‘Arabs in eastern Galilee, the leader of the Zu‘bi villages (Sayf al-Din al-Zu‘bi) in Marj ibn ‘Amr, and the Circassians and Druze in the villages of Mount Karmil and Shafa ‘Amr.<sup>1</sup> Those and their like had cooperated with their Israeli settler neighbors and their institutions since the 1930s. When skirmishes began following the partition resolution, many of them chose to join the Jewish side instead of fighting it. In an early instance of this behavior, al-Hayb ‘Arabs under the leadership of their shaykh, Abu Yusuf, struck a deal with Yigal Alon to conscript some young men of the tribe from the villages of Tuba al-Zanghariyya to fight on the side of the Haganah on the eve of Operation Yiftah to occupy eastern Galilee. They continued enlisting for military service after the spring of 1948 and became an example to be emulated by others in the Bedouin villages in the north of the country.

Eastern Galilee was within the border of the Jewish state according to the partition resolution. When the Zionist leadership decided to launch their offensive military operation Plan Dalet, the weakness of the Palestinian people and their internal divisions became quite visible. The military superiority of the Jews was apparent in Haifa as it was in eastern Galilee, prompting some Druze leaders in Mount Karmil and Shafa ‘Amr to strengthen their cooperation with Israel. After the fall of Haifa and the uprooting of the majority of its Arab population at the end of April 1948, some of those leaders enlisted their sons to fight alongside the Haganah. An agreement concluded between the Druze shaykhs and the Zionist side

saved all members of that sect from being uprooted and exiled. However, the split in ranks, and tying the sect's destiny to that of Israel in the year of the Nakba contributed a great deal to tearing Druze youth away from their people and imposing the draft on them later. This prominent case of Arabs remaining by a clear decision of the Zionist and Druze leaders is familiar to researchers and readers. Certainly, there were similarities among collaborators with the Zionist side, but there were differences also which warrant an in-depth examination in a future study.

Arab communists were another group that did not consider the establishment of Israel a catastrophe for the Palestinian people, based on their class analysis of the conflict and their acceptance of the partition resolution. One can consider the Palestinian communists a special case of "pessoptimists" who thought the Arab region was on the verge of a bright future in the aftermath of the disaster. Expelling British colonialism from the Middle East and reinforcing Soviet influence were their guideposts in adopting a position on the events of 1948. Whereas most Palestinians felt overwhelming loss and despair on the eve of the creation of the state of Israel, the members of the National Liberation League emerged relatively quickly from the ruins and charted their own path, which went against the Arab nationalist current. Later, they joined the Israeli Communist Party (Maki) in October 1948 and became the first among the Arabs who remained to choose to integrate in the political organizations of the Jewish state.

The Arab communists in Israel later took pride in the realism of their political decision to accept the 1947 Palestine partition resolution. After the Nakba they reorganized quickly and led a daring struggle against the Israeli military government and its agents, and promoted the reconstruction of cultural life—giving birth to resistance poetry and literature which they published in their journal and celebrated in their clubs during that period. On the other hand, activists in national and religious movements accused the communists of collaborating with Israel and Zionism in the 1948 war and justifying the political and military support of the communist camp for Israel, instead of standing with their people at a time of adversity during the Nakba. These accusations, which generally were not based on comprehensive and balanced research, lost their edge by the mid-1970s but did not disappear altogether. This political polarization in evaluating the role of the communists during and after the Nakba should be deconstructed and studied with academic rigor based on existing sources, foremost among which are the literature and documents of the communists themselves.

Although the Israeli Communist Party (Maki) has no official archives, its press offers researchers an abundance of documentation on its positions and activities in 1948 and the years after. Reviewing the party literature in both Hebrew and Arabic is essential for forming a comprehensive picture. On sensitive and controversial matters, there is an obvious difference between party publications in the two languages. In addition to the party's output in Hebrew, prominently in *Kol HaAm*, important archival material can be found in *al-Ittihad* newspaper (which resumed

publishing in its new headquarters in Haifa on 18 October 1948). In addition, there are a considerable number of party publications in Arabic, autobiographies of comrades, and dozens of interviews with the rank and file of the party covering the timeframe of this study, which constitute important sources for research. A large number of comrades, more than their contemporaries, published their memoirs, and gave oral testimonies to this author and other researchers.

Two organized entities in the Jewish state played an important role in the history of the Arabs who remained: governmental institutions and Maki. Despite the huge difference in roles and positions between these two, there was a secret or veiled partnership between them, particularly in 1948 and the early years of state formation, and each produced documents and sources that expressed its point of view. This material has been used by their researchers in the past, sometimes selectively, which obfuscated some facts—shedding light on aspects compatible with their propaganda but obscuring other aspects that they preferred to keep hidden. The historian, unlike the politician, aims to reveal facts in their historical context, to give the reader a comprehensive picture of past events. This duty creates challenges and difficulties for the academic researcher, particularly when examining known positions and actions which later became a source of embarrassment and accusations against them.

This chapter offers a new interpretation of the role of Palestinian communists in Haifa and the Galilee in the year of the Nakba. My thesis is that the decision taken by the majority of the League activists to join Maki and support its policies was a choice they made in order to remain, to which those in northern Palestine clung. This decision was later packaged and marketed as an independent ideological choice, but it was in essence the result of the change in the Soviet position from opposing Zionism to allying with it, if only temporarily. Most League activists chose to follow the communist camp and join Maki, whose Jewish members fought in the ranks of the Haganah. This act paved the way for staying in Israel alongside the victors. It also gave the communists the right to be active politically, having proved their loyalty to Israel and defended the right of the settler community to establish a Jewish state. The League members, among whom Emile Habibi was a prominent leader, represented a special model of the “pessoptimists” during the Nakba and the following lean years.

After most National Liberation League members joined Maki, they began to play the major role among Palestinians in Haifa and the Galilee in resisting the despotic policies of the military government. This resistance found fruition in the 1970s: Tawfiq Zayyad became mayor of Nazareth in 1975, Land Day was celebrated the following year, and over half of the Arab votes went to the Communist Party in the 1977 Knesset elections. These victories were the crowning achievement of resistance by the communists and of support by the Arab citizens of Israel for the party. Maki, renamed Hadash (the Hebrew acronym for the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) after 1965, remained the sole political framework for

political resistance by the Palestinian minority in Israel up to the 1980s, earning it the respect of researchers and activists who appreciated the sacrifices this entailed and their successes.

The picture would be more comprehensive if we include aspects of the party's history in the 1948 war that have been neglected in the past. We can see a clear dialectical relationship between the position of the communists during the war and the role they were permitted to play afterwards. The truce observed between their camp and leftist Labor Zionism—hegemonic in Israel at the time—is an important point in assessing their historical role. The permission by the Israeli government to create Maki during the war, thus enabling its activists, both Arabs and Jews, to participate in free organized political action in Israel, and the first parliamentary elections in January 1949, had wide-ranging significance. Most Arab historical literature on Maki neglects linking what the communists said with what they did and the role they played during the war and after. This approach would bring about a more genuine discussion between supporters and opponents of the party, from the dichotomy of either heroism or treason, and toward political and social reality in order to explain and analyze the issues, rather than prejudge on the basis of ideological positions and personal differences.

#### THE DRUZE: THE FIRST REMAINERS

The Druze have constituted a small minority among the Arabs of Palestine since they arrived from Lebanon to the north of Palestine in the days of Emir Fakhr al-Din al-Ma'ni II in the early seventeenth century. Relations between the Muslim majority and the Ma'rufiyya sect (Bani Ma'ruf)—the Druze—were occasionally marked by tensions and conflict, a bitter memory for the latter. Their relations with Christians in the Galilee were also characterized by tension and quarrels, particularly during the period of sectarian conflict in Mount Lebanon in the mid-nineteenth century. The situation in Palestine did not deteriorate into bloody conflicts such as occurred earlier in Syria and Lebanon. Nevertheless, the historical legacy of those events was likely instrumental in marginalizing the Druze role in the Palestinian national movement and minimizing their participation during the British Mandate; this, and a sense of self-preservation, constrained Druze participation in the 1936–39 revolt as well. Some members of the sect had taken the initiative in establishing cooperative relations with Abba Hushi in Haifa and other Zionist leaders, which contributed to the rift between them and the rebels.

Most of the Druze in Palestine lived in the mountains of upper Galilee, while a few lived in 'Isfiya and Daliyat al-Karmil, and the town of Shafa 'Amr, closer to the seacoast. The latter were the first to establish cooperative relations with the Jews and their institutions in Haifa. When the revolt broke out in 1936, some Druze continued cooperating with the Zionists, which led to the rebels accusing them of being Zionist agents. The accusation of collaboration cost a few their lives, and led

to attacks on others and humiliation in their own homes and villages. But the sons of those who were attacked or assassinated by the rebels were undeterred; they remained on the same path and sought vengeance for their kinfolk.<sup>2</sup> This destructive internecine fighting weakened the Palestinian people at a time when they were in the greatest need of solidarity in the year of the Nakba.

When skirmishes between Arabs and Jews began following the adoption of the partition resolution, pressure was applied on the Druze to take part in the Arab war effort. Leaders of the sect in Palestine, after consultations with Druze leaders in Syria and Lebanon, decided to create a special battalion consisting of volunteers within the Arab Rescue Army (ARA). Most volunteers in the Jabal al-Arab battalion came from Syria and Lebanon, and the battalion leader was a retired Lebanese officer, Shakib Wahab. There were about five hundred combatants in this battalion, which deployed to Shafa 'Amr and established a fortified position there in March 1948. The mountain Druze defended their villages in coordination with the ARA, as did the majority of their neighbors, but they chose a defensive strategy, like the Arab battalion, and they tried not to initiate clashes with the Jewish side.

In return, the Haganah intelligence unit (Shai) consolidated its ties with two Druze leaders: Labib Abu Rukn (1911–1989) from 'Isfiya and Salih Khunayfis (1913–2002) from Shafa 'Amr. Khunayfis succeeded in convincing Jabr Dahish Ma'di (1919–2009) from Yarka to become a party to the cooperation with the Israeli side, and together they led a reversal of the sect's position towards the parties to the conflict.<sup>3</sup> The Druze remained neutral until the battle of Husha and al-Kasayir (16 April) in which the Arab battalion gave a good account of itself, suffering dozens of dead and wounded, while the Jewish side also lost a large number of men, the most prominent among them Zohar Dayan, the brother of Moshe Dayan. However, when Haifa fell a week later (22 April), it became obvious to all that the balance of force favored the Jews. At that point, Salih Khunayfis and Jabr Ma'di convinced Shakib Wahhab, the battalion commander, to withdraw his men from the combat and tend to their own affairs. The withdrawal agreement was concluded in Khunayfis's house in Shafa 'Amr on 9 May 1948.<sup>4</sup> The volunteers were given the choice of returning to their homes in Lebanon or Syria or joining the Haganah, and most chose to return. For the dozens who chose to stay and join the Israeli army in the war, it was agreed that they would be paid twenty-seven Palestine pounds monthly.<sup>5</sup>

According to the agreement, cooperation and coordination between the Druze along the coast and the Jewish side increased in early May 1948, and dozens of Druze participated in the occupation of 'Akka and some western Galilee villages in mid-May. Isma'il Qablan, one of Shakib Wahhab's assistants, reportedly entered 'Akka during the Haganah siege of the city, and then gave a detailed report to the Jews about its fortifications and the location of the fighters. As for Salih Khunayfis, he advised the besieging forces to cut off water and electricity to the city to speed up the surrender of the inhabitants. Others added that a number of Druze were

in the vanguard of those who entered 'Akka when it fell on 16 May and went from street to street "ululating and exulting in the victory."<sup>6</sup> Thus news of the positions of the Galilee Druze as of the spring of 1948 raised the level of ethnic tensions for a while, but also opened an important door for sheltering and remaining.

After the withdrawal of Druze volunteers from Shafa 'Amr, ARA leader Mahmud al-Saffuri entered the town at the head of a local force of about two hundred men, and he and his assistants went about arresting some alleged collaborators and interrogating them. Some of these interrogations reportedly involved assault and humiliation, which raised the level of tension and lack of trust between Muslims and Druze in Shafa 'Amr and the whole region in general.

The leaders of the Zionist movement took advantage of the special situation of the Druze in northern Palestine by making them a generous offer that guaranteed a successful policy of divide and conquer. The agreement assured the survival of all Druze villages and towns, and their inhabitants, in return for services by their leaders in that critical phase of the war, on the eve of the entry of the Arab armies. Most of the Galilee Druze tried to remain neutral until the spring of 1948, but the survival instinct and an awareness of imminent danger propelled them to accept the Israeli hand extended to them. The leaders of the Jewish state had their own regional motivations which prompted them to exclude members of that sect from the ethnic cleansing plan of the Nakba. In this way, the Druze in northern Palestine became the first large group of residents who remained, and in a position to help many of their Muslim and Christian neighbors to stay in their homes, as we saw earlier.<sup>7</sup>

The cooperation agreement with the Druze was tested on the eve of the Israeli attack on Shafa 'Amr, a town inhabited by members of all three sects. Through negotiations with Salih Khunayfis via the mediation of Labib Abu Rukn and others, an agreement was reached that facilitated the entry of Israeli forces into the town. In accordance with that agreement, Israeli forces under the command of Ben Dunkelman entered the town from the Druze side on the evening of 14 July without any actual fighting taking place, both sides firing in the air in a mock battle. The Shafa 'Amr agreement was the launch of successful and open cooperation between the two sides, in which a Druze unit led by Sulayman Abu Rukn joined the Israeli army in occupying the town.<sup>8</sup> The same unit later participated in completing the occupation of the Galilee in Operation Hiram. This activity by Druze in the 1948 war consolidated what is often referred to as the "blood pact" (Brit Damim) in Zionist writings.

The story of the Druze in northern Palestine represented the first and most important model for how a collectivity was able to resist displacement through cooperation with the victorious side. The Druze were unique among the Arabs of the region in their ability to maneuver and seize opportunities at an important juncture in order to guarantee that the sect might continue to live in their villages. Despite the problematic perspectives on that survival in place, it nevertheless

created an exception in the policy of ethnic cleansing which could be used in other occupied Arab areas—as the Druze in the Galilee contributed to the neighboring Muslims and Christians remaining as well. Arab researchers have bypassed this topic in large part because of the sensitivities it evokes for many parties. There have been attempts to broach the subject by collecting verbal testimonies,<sup>9</sup> but these are no substitute for historical research which relies on all available sources and documents in order to present a comprehensive and integrated account of this prickly issue.

#### THE COMMUNIST CAMP AND THE PALESTINIAN NAKBA

Constantine Zurayk mentioned the role of “the Russians” along with the English and the Americans among the external factors leading to the Palestinian tragedy.<sup>10</sup> Musa al-‘Alami, in his book *The Lesson of Palestine*, expanded the circle of those responsible to the great powers. In his opinion, the foremost party responsible was the English, who promised Palestine to the Jews, and then opened the doors of the country to them, turning a blind eye while they armed. He then added: “The Americans and the Russians share this [heavy responsibility].”<sup>11</sup> George Hanna (1893–1969), not content with such fleeting references to the role of the Russians, expanded on this with explanations and analysis: “Russia . . . is also responsible. Despite its hostility to Anglo-American policy . . . it endorsed the idea of partition, and the establishment of a Zionist state alongside an Arab state, hoping this would provide it with a gateway to the East.”<sup>12</sup> These words by Hanna, who was a Lebanese socialist and a friend of the Soviet Union, have special significance, as they reinforce the Arab consensus at the time concerning the role of the Russians in establishing the state of Israel and in fomenting the Palestinian tragedy.

The role of the communist camp under the leadership of the Soviet Union in the Nakba of the Palestinian people and the establishment of Israel was subsequently expunged from Arab historical and political literature (along with the voices of those who remembered this role),<sup>13</sup> a phenomenon that reflects the ambiguities of the widespread narratives of the Nakba and the sensitivity of issues in the modern history of the Arabs, particularly those concerning Palestine. The National Liberation League’s merger with the Maki party—joining the Israeli side—enabled Arab communists to play an important role in leading the Palestinian minority in the Jewish state. This was the price paid for Israel’s permission to play this leadership role in a legal way.

Prior to the League’s merger with Maki, they expressed their positions on the Palestine war in a publication signed with three Arab communist parties.<sup>14</sup> This document, dated early October 1948, contained an unsparing criticism of “English and American colonialist war projects and reactionary Arab regimes which are



subservient to colonialism.” Its authors agreed with the assessment of Zurayk in *The Meaning of al-Nakba* of the enormity of the disaster which befell “the Arabs of Palestine and resulted in their ruin and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and the usurpation of new parts of their lands.”<sup>15</sup> The communists primarily blamed colonialism and reactionary Arab parties, more than Israel, for the non-creation of a Palestinian state according to the UN partition resolution. The role of the Soviet Union in supporting the establishment and expansion of the Jewish state was completely absent from this publication. Since the communist intellectuals, unlike the nationalist intellectuals, did not return to the analysis of the causes of al-Nakba, the treatment of the role of the communist camp in the Palestinian Nakba remained for them “a frivolous campaign of obfuscation, lies and fabrications that maligned the great Soviet Union.”<sup>16</sup>

By the time the position paper was released, the communists had gone a long way in cooperating with the activists of Mapam. The finger of accusation which they shyly pointed at Israel’s policy and its criminal acts placed only some of the responsibility for the Nakba on “reactionary Zionist leaders.” The Marxist Zionists who carried out several of the massacres and expulsions through the Palmach (the Haganah’s strike forces), and subsequently joined the leading ranks of the army, were absent from the picture altogether. This obfuscation of the role of the Zionist left was also necessary to justify cooperating with it and lifting it to the rank of a class ally in contrast to the Arabs, who were portrayed as reactionary elements collaborating with colonialism. This analysis, which obscures the nationalist dimension of the struggle, remains the key to understanding the positions of the Communist Party even after the Zionist left allied itself with Ben-Gurion and launched the invasion of Egypt in 1956. A critical interpretation of the position of Maki and its leadership in that historic period of foundation has remained absent even after the passage of dozens of years.

Despite the distinctive role played by National League activists who joined Maki, they did not fully write their own history. Some members of the second generation made an effort to rectify this by documenting the experiences of first generation members in the 1948 war.<sup>17</sup> However, the testimonies of leaders and activists are no substitute for a written history of the party and, before that, a history of the role of Jewish and Arab communists after the Palestine partition resolution was adopted. But neither should autobiographies and personal testimonies be disregarded, particularly if they are truthful, rich in detail, and offer a penetrating perspective. The first and most prominent testimony in Ahmad Sa’d’s book, *Roots of the Evergreen Tree*, is by Tawfiq Tubi. This communist leader did not publish an autobiography, so we shall rely instead on that testimony and his activities in the Israeli parliament. In addition to Tubi’s statements, the book includes the testimonies of twenty-four living and committed members of the party; a few important individuals are missing from this group, such as Emile Habibi and Hanna Abu Hanna, whose writings are readily accessible.



Musa al-Budayri, a research specialist in the history of the Communist Party in Palestine, conducted more than twenty interviews with communist leaders in the mid-1970s, but did not publish them until forty years later.<sup>18</sup> Most of the communist leaders during the British Mandate with whom al-Budayri recorded interviews were not active in Maki, except for the two Emiles: Tuma and Habibi. Considering that they both became prolific writers, their publications constitute important material for the study of the history of this party after the Nakba. But interview statements by others, such as Radwan al-Hilu, shed light on aspects that the communists rarely talk about. Despite the passage of more than half a century since that historic period for the party, no one was “provoked” into chronicling the events, role, and positions of the communists during the 1948 war in a critical way. The available historic literature either uncritically praises the party or criticizes it in an imbalanced way without crediting its importance after the Nakba.

What is missing from the history of those who stayed, particularly the communists, is the connection between their actions in the year of the Nakba and their role in the following decade. The leadership role that the Jewish state allowed the communists (both Arabs and Jews) served the Zionist enterprise; it was also an expression of gratitude to the Soviet camp. The communist acceptance of formal stateless citizenship—without full and equal citizenship for the entire population—ensured there would be no objections to the identity of the Jewish state and its Zionist symbols.<sup>19</sup> This political position represented the full reversal of the communist position from opposing Zionism to accepting it, and then supporting the Zionist project to establish a Jewish state on the ruins of Palestine. In contrast to those who remained and accepted citizenship after the Nakba to ensure they could stay in their homeland and prevent expulsion, members of the League sought to make it ideologically palatable through an organized political decision to dissolve the League and be absorbed into the Israeli Communist Party (Maki) in October 1948.

Just as the Nakba that befell the Palestinian people is not a past event that ended, so the positions adopted by the members of the Liberation League who joined Maki define the positions of their descendants towards Zionism, and historical analysis and future solutions to the Palestinian problem. Until today, the communist activists in this trend have still not critically evaluated their political role and conduct during the Nakba and the legacy of these positions in subsequent decades. More surprising is that most Palestinian historians still distance themselves from this subject. In fact, a courageous and critical study of the past is the first step toward a deep understanding of the tragic present and prognosis of the future.

The communist camp, under the leadership of the Soviet Union, remained hostile to the Zionist movement and its project to establish a Jewish state in Palestine until World War II. Zionism was considered a settler movement in collaboration with British colonialism, one that was hostile to liberation movements in the Arab Orient. Based on this position, there were attempts to arabize the Communist Party in Palestine after the events of 1929. Considering that most members of the

Palestine Communist Party were Marxist Zionist immigrants, the party faced major challenges even after Radwan al-Hilu became its secretary general.<sup>20</sup> The contradiction of accepting equal rights for the Zionist immigrant settlers and the indigenous Palestinians was a major contradiction, disguised under the slogan of "Arab-Jewish brotherhood." When the Arab Revolt (1936–39) against Britain and Zionism broke out, the Palestinian communist camp supported the nationalist effort, increasing tensions and eventually open division among the ranks of communists in Palestine on the basis of national origins. When the split occurred in 1943, the National Liberation League was established in isolation from the Jewish communists. However, both Arab and Jewish communists maintained their negative position on the Zionist project, and demanded independence for Palestine, an end to colonialism, and support for one united and independent country. Despite the establishment of two communist organizations, the unequal relationship between the League and the party did not change much on the eve of the war in Palestine (1944–47), and the two sides continued to meet and coordinate. However, the activists in the League, who drew closer to the Palestinian national movement and its positions, faced a real dilemma when the socialist camp changed its position on Zionism in 1947, as part of its policy change toward liberation movements and the adoption of Cold War policies in the Middle East. Their support became public with Soviet acceptance of the partition resolution and the establishment of a Jewish state in 1947. The important turning point for the party in the year of the Nakba was obscured in the deluge caused by the shock of the war and its harsh consequences. When the Arab peoples awoke years later, the communist camp had returned to supporting liberation struggles, and the role of the Soviet Union in the Palestine war was forgotten.

#### THE POSITION OF THE LEAGUE ON ZIONISM AND THE PARTITION RESOLUTION

The communist bloc support, under the leadership of the Soviet Union, of the 1947 partition resolution and establishment of a Jewish state, created a political earthquake for the League.<sup>21</sup> While the Jewish communists welcomed this transformation and joined the Haganah to fight for the establishment of Israel, the League's leaders and activists were shocked and divided. Even after the communist position of support for partition became clear, *al-Ittihad* newspaper came out in October 1947 with a firm declaration stating that the position of the League had not changed and was "to demand a British withdrawal and an end to the Mandate, full independence, and the right of the Palestinians to self-determination."<sup>22</sup> This opposition to partition and hostility to the Zionist project remained a constant position until the eve of the adoption of the UN Partition Plan on 29 November, after which turmoil ensued for several weeks, ending in February 1948 with the

declaration (in Nazareth) of support for partition.<sup>23</sup> This important chapter in the history of the League from the Nazareth conference to the absorption into Maki is still much obscured.

Days before the UN vote, *al-Ittihad* published a communique signed by the League's central committee describing partition as a "colonialist proposal which has been under preparation from the first day that [British] colonialism set foot on the land of Palestine." It warned the Jewish masses in Palestine of the danger of supporting the Zionist objective of partition and a Jewish state, that the policy of partition would not guarantee security and stability to the Jewish masses and would transfer a racist war from Europe to Palestine. The communique concluded by exhorting the Palestinian people to work "for a democratic and independent, undivided Palestine."<sup>24</sup>

Jewish communists readily accepted the new Soviet position on Zionism, and accommodated to the UN resolution permitting a state for the Jews in Palestine, as this change placed them in the heart of the Zionist consensus and opened up the opportunity for them to play a future political role. The situation of the League comrades was starkly different: for them, accepting partition meant not just turning away from resisting Zionism, which they had been struggling against for decades. It also meant accepting the Zionist project, which was based on tearing apart the Palestinian people—a choice between standing with their people or aligning with the Soviet camp. It took months to make a final decision, which was reached not by consensus but by simple majority.

What was the explanation by the League for supporting partition and the establishment of a Jewish state at the expense of the Palestinian people? What were the ramifications of this support for their positions on the 1948 war in Palestine? And how did these positions during the war affect the Arab communists who stayed in Haifa and the Galilee after the Nakba? Whatever the reasons for the change in the Soviet position under Joseph Stalin regarding Zionism and its project to establish a state for the Jews in Palestine, all communist parties had to line up behind this position and support it. Jewish communists hastened to embrace the partition resolution and join the Zionist Jewish consensus.<sup>25</sup> The leaders and activists of the League, on the other hand, had to depart from the Arab national consensus, and disown their previous positions, and the fact of the tragic failure of the partition resolution for the Palestinian people. The League therefore underwent a sharp division between supporters and opponents of partition, despite the clarity of the Soviet position as of the summer of 1947. The camp of supporters of partition was led by Fu'ad Nassar, Tawfiq Tubi, and Emile Habibi who held their convention deliberately in Nazareth.<sup>26</sup> After that conference, Emile Habibi went to Belgrade to attend the conference of communist parties (Cominform).

Emile Tuma (1919–1986), the editor of *al-Ittihad* until early 1948, was the most prominent of the opponents of partition, and paid a huge price for his dissenting

position. He continued to oppose it even after the partition resolution was adopted and the League conference was held in Nazareth, expressing his opinion of partition in the newspaper, saying: "Our friendship with the Soviet Union, in its capacity as a non-imperialistic state that supports the freedom of peoples, does not mean that we are bound to a Western foreign policy. We and all democrats adhere to an independent policy, not tied to the policy of the Soviet Union, or any other organization, because our policy aspires to freedom and justice for our people."<sup>27</sup> Emile Tuma stayed in Haifa until the city fell, then left for Lebanon where he was arrested because of his membership in a communist party and held in Baalbek prison for months. He remained in Lebanon after his release in September, until he was allowed to return to Haifa in April 1949. But he faced a period of exclusion which delayed his return to a leadership position in the Communist Party until the early 1960s.<sup>28</sup> The party did not readmit members who did not apologize for their opposition to partition, which Bulus Farah for one refused to do.

There is little available information concerning the League conference in Nazareth. Why was this city in particular chosen? What were the precise dates and venue of the meeting? How were invitations to the conference issued? How many attended and what percentage of members did they represent? I have sought answers from more than one veteran communist, but have been unsuccessful so far. Maki's publications rarely mention the event and give no details. Even after Bulus Farah raised doubts concerning the legitimacy of the meeting and the veracity of "a majority vote" in favor of accepting partition, the facts remain hidden with the leadership of the party.<sup>29</sup> Tawfiq Tubi and Emile Habibi led the League in northern Palestine on the path that took them to the Israeli Knesset. As was retroactively demonstrated, this path allowed the communists to play an important role in defense of the civil rights of those who stayed, but the fact that following the positions of the Soviet Union contributed to the Nakba of the Palestinian people is overlooked.

Accepting the partition resolution was not easy, but it was even more difficult for the Liberation League to continue opposing the position of the Soviet Union. However, after the Nazareth conference the position of members of the League moved onward from supporting the partition to allying with friends and partners on the Jewish side and harboring hostility to the Arab Palestinian consensus. The fighting among Jews and Arabs in northern Palestine caused a large number of casualties as well. This painful reality exacerbated the political and ethical dilemma for members of the League, some of whom fought alongside the Arab Rescue Army to protect the Galilee while their communist and Marxist friends (in Mapam) fought alongside the Haganah. Even though Haganah, along with the Palmach, committed a number of massacres in the villages of al-Khisas, Balad al-Shaykh, Sa'sa', and elsewhere in northern Palestine in late 1947 and early 1948, well before the Dayr Yasin massacre, the leaders of the League enhanced their coordination and cooperation with the Israeli side, as we shall show below.

### THE TRANSITION OF THE LEAGUE FROM ACCEPTING PARTITION TO SUPPORTING THE JEWISH STATE

ʿAwda al-ʿAshhab (Abu ʿAdnan) mentions in his memoir that Fuʿad Nassar asked him to secure a visa for Emile Habibi from the Yugoslav consulate prior to Habibi's departure to Belgrade. Al-ʿAshhab adds that in the consulate he met comrade Wolf Erlich who was there for a similar reason, as a service to party secretary Shmuel Mikunis, and so he learned that Mikunis and Habibi would be travelling together to the conference in Belgrade.<sup>30</sup> At that time, Habibi had become the new spokesman for the League and was one of the most prominent Palestinian communists known for his cooperation with Labor Zionism in Israel. Tawfiq Tubi oversaw cooperation with Marxist comrades in the communist and Mapam parties. Fuʿad Nassar, the League secretary, played an important role in this coordination and in leading the organization at that difficult stage. This trio, Nassar, Tubi, and Habibi, became responsible for the new direction of the League which led to integration in Israeli political life as of October 1948.

Emile Habibi claimed, after taking part in the Belgrade conference, that Mikunis had invited him to accompany him to Prague, and that he had known nothing about the Czech arms deal. When *al-Sinnara* newspaper of Nazareth accused him of going to Prague with Mikunis in order to secure arms for Israel, he raised a libel suit against the paper in an Israeli court and won.<sup>31</sup> But despite the court ruling, the suspicions about Habibi's trip to Prague with Mikunis dogged him for several years. Is it credible that Habibi accepted Mikunis's invitation to travel to Prague with no knowledge of the trip's objectives, and without the approval of the League? Similarly, is it credible that the two representatives of communist parties in Palestine should go to Prague without the approval of, or at least coordination with, Moscow, which had been pressing for sending arms to the Jewish side quickly? These and similar questions concerning arms deals and sending volunteers from Prague and other states in the communist camp to Palestine were never posed and never answered, at least on the Arab side.<sup>32</sup>

The British authorities banned *al-Ittihad* newspaper from publishing at the beginning of 1948, while *Kol HaAm*, the organ of the Israeli Communist Party, continued to publish. At the beginning of March, the party was invited to join the interim government of the Jewish state, and Mikunis was chosen to represent it in the cabinet.<sup>33</sup> That same month, the U.S. State Department appeared to be pulling back from the partition resolution, and a search began within the UN for other possible alternative solutions. This U.S. position worried the Zionist leadership, but the Soviet Union fended off all of the proposed alternative solutions to secure a cease-fire and made sure none passed. Any international reversal of the partition resolution was tantamount to a gain for the Arabs and would have been a diplomatic setback for Zionist diplomacy at the time. The Jewish communists, under the leadership of Mikunis, expressed very strong opposition to proposed

alternative solutions, and commended Moscow's support for the establishment of a Jewish state, without postponement or delay.

A reader of *Kol HaAm* in early 1948 and later would not have found a big difference between the newspaper's positions and those of the Labor Zionist discourse under the leadership of Ben-Gurion. When U.S. proposals were put forward to place Palestine under UN trusteeship for five or ten years, they were categorically rejected by the communists. Their newspaper criticized the American proposal and called it "a shameful betrayal by the American government." On the other hand, the paper was jubilant about Andrei Gromyko's statements "forcefully demanding that the partition resolution be implemented."<sup>34</sup> *Kol HaAm* dedicated its editorial that day to a discussion of "the American betrayal," in contrast to the continuing political and military support by the USSR for the establishment of the Jewish state. The communist camp became convinced that the Jewish state would provide the USSR with a foothold in the Middle East. The alliance between Moscow and Tel Aviv became clearer in March 1948, with the communist camp placing all of its political weight on the side of establishing the state of Israel without delay, and supporting that position with speeded-up Czech arms shipments.

Aharon Cohen, a prominent leader of Mapam, commented on the importance of the Czech arms: "In the wake of the arms embargo by the West, there developed a severe shortage of arms in March 1948. . . . This shortage was overcome through the arrival of the first Czech plane carrying munitions at one of the secret Jewish airfields."<sup>35</sup> At the same time, a ship carrying thousands of rifles and hundreds of light artillery pieces arrived in the country. Important heavy arms arrived by aerial convoy on 20 May, and continued to arrive until 10 August 1948. These arms "played a decisive role in the war of independence," according to an Israeli army report.<sup>36</sup>

The role of Czech arms in the victories of the Jewish state is no longer disputed in the historical Zionist literature despite Zionism's differences with communism. Studies in Arabic which revealed the truth about the Czech arms deals emanated only from those who accused the communists of treason. Arab armies were not allowed to intervene to help the Palestinians at this point in time, so modern arms sent to the Jewish side were first used in fighting the Arab native population and expelling them from their homes and homeland. Jewish communists supported this war which the leaders of Israel launched to carry out their policy of ethnic cleansing in Palestine. The arrival of the weapons put the comrades in the League in a tight spot, and this became a sensitive topic they preferred not to delve into, especially in Arabic.

Simultaneously with the arrival of quality weapons from Prague, Ben-Gurion began implementing Plan Dalet which caused hundreds of casualties among the Palestinians. In the north of the country, activists in the League learned of the occupation of Tiberias and Haifa and dozens of villages in the proximity of the two cities, and the expulsion of their Arab residents. Earlier those same imported arms had been used in the battles of Bab al-Wad, including the famous battle of al-Qastal, and in the villages in the Galilee mountains. The devastating

results of the Jewish war on the Palestinians should have sounded the alarm for the Arab communists, but the ethnic cleansing policy, which had entered a decisive phase in April, did not change the League's position from favoring the establishment of a Jewish state with the support of the communist camp. Instead, the members of the League increased their coordination with their Jewish comrades, and officially declared their opposition to the entry of Arab armies which came to the aid of the ill-fated Palestinians.

Apparently the League leaders who were supporting Soviet policy deluded themselves into thinking at the time that it was possible for them, through cooperation with the Jewish Marxists, to play a decisive historic role in the Palestinian question. Prominent among them was Fu'ad Nassar (1914–1976) who met with Aharon Cohen in Tawfiq Tubi's house in Haifa at the beginning of 1948 before he left Nazareth.<sup>37</sup> Nassar then traveled from the north of the country to Gaza, to take part in setting up an Arab government under the leadership of the communists and their friends. However, a few weeks after he arrived Egyptian forces entered Gaza, and he was forced to flee because he was wanted by the Egyptians. From Gaza, Nassar went to the West Bank, as the area became known later, disguised as a Bedouin shaykh. In his new location he continued his work and kept up his contacts with Aharon Cohen through messengers, including Midhat al-Sha'ar.<sup>38</sup> The cooperation between the League and representatives of Mapam led to actions by the communists in Gaza and Jabal al-Khalil against Egyptian soldiers, which we will explain later.

At the time that Emile Habibi went from Prague to Beirut to coordinate the positions of the League with Arab communist parties, and Nassar went to southern Palestine to lead the activities of the comrades against the Egyptian army, Tawfiq Tubi remained in Haifa to coordinate with Labor Zionists. Tubi mentions that after the fall of Haifa and the expulsion of the great majority of its population (including members of the League and their families), he could find only two comrades in the city, 'Isam al-'Abbasi and Muhammad 'Abdu.<sup>39</sup> The Czech arms were used by the Haganah in occupying Haifa and expelling its Arab population, including dozens of Arab communists and their families, which Tubi witnessed. In testimony published in the 1990s Tubi said that he and 'Isam al-'Abbasi wrote a handwritten leaflet on 2 May addressing the residents remaining in Haifa at the time.<sup>40</sup> This leaflet, which was distributed only ten days after the fall of the city, describes what occurred in the tragedy. Tubi gives a biting and strongly worded attack on British colonialism for what happened in Haifa and its district, saying: "The painful calamity that befell the existing Arab society in Haifa and its district is a catastrophe which colonialism wanted and worked for very diligently,"<sup>41</sup> by stoking "the fire of nationalist warfare" to safeguard its interests. Accusations are also made at the Palestinian leadership, and even more so at King Abdullah, "the agent of British imperialism." This leaflet was a bold voice which differed from the nationalist discourse, since it called for fighting colonialism, and for an end to the fighting between Jews and Arabs.<sup>42</sup> However, there is no mention of the



criminal activities of the Zionist leaders headed by Ben-Gurion, who planned and implemented the occupation of Haifa, the terrorizing of the city's Palestinian inhabitants, and their expulsion, nor any condemnation or denunciation of them. Whoever examines this leaflet (which was not appended to the book of testimonies by the comrades) will not find any trace of the citations and statements that Tubi put forward in his later testimony.<sup>43</sup> It appears that this leaflet, which assigned responsibility for the Nakba of Haifa to others rather than its perpetrators, was the natural cost or result of the political position of the League and its following Moscow's line of support for Israel.

Consistent with its military and political support for the Zionist side, the Soviet Union recognized the state of Israel (without defining its borders) and its interim government immediately after the declaration of its creation. Minister Molotov expressed the hope that the establishment of "the independent state of the Jews will reinforce peace and stability" in the region, and stated the confidence of his government "in the development of amicable relations between the USSR and the state of Israel."<sup>44</sup> The editorial in the communist paper stressed that after this recognition, relations between Israel and the USSR must be based on friendship and cooperation and mutual assistance. Those days were the "honeymoon" which crowned Soviet support for Israel and formed a solid basis for the cooperation of the communists with Zionist labor parties.

The representative of the Israeli Communist Party in the cabinet of the interim government was a signatory to "the declaration of independence" of the state of the Jews.<sup>45</sup> The interim cabinet also included two ministers from the Mapam (Zionist Marxist) party, the ally of the communists. These developments appeared to be the realization of Moscow's dreams and the USSR intensified its support for the Jewish state after its formation. As for the activists in the League who supported the partition resolution and the establishment of a Jewish state in accordance with the Zionist project, they found that there could be no turning back and had nowhere to flee except forward on the same path. Consequently, we find them continuing to follow the Soviet position of supporting Israel and its policies and to place responsibility for the Nakba, the tragic aspects of which had begun to manifest themselves, solely on the shoulders of Arab leaders and colonialism. At this stage, leaders of the League intensified their negotiations with the activists in Mapam and the Jewish communists, in order to unify their capabilities and prepare for the political role they anticipated for themselves in the Jewish state.

#### PARTNERS IN SETTING UP THE JEWISH STATE?

Early in the summer of 1948, the competition between the supporters of the mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, and King Abdullah broke out into open conflict over what was left of Palestine. At this stage, the leaders of the League decided to elevate their support for the Jewish state in preparation for their political role in that state. In June, the League escalated its verbal attack on reactionary Arab regimes and

their armies which had entered Palestine, which the League described as “invaders” and “foreign.” Members of the League distributed leaflets to Egyptian soldiers. The leaflet, which bore the title “An Appeal to the Soldiers,” read: “Return to your homelands and aim your fire at the chests of the colonialists and their lackeys.”<sup>46</sup> This leaflet, and the role of the comrades in the League in distributing it and in incitement against the soldiers of the Arab armies, are issues which have been largely hidden in the communist literature on the war.

The authors of the leaflet asked: “For whose sake did your governments send you to be killed in Palestine? Are the claims of these reactionary governments about their desire to liberate Palestine true?” The leaflet describes those governments as “treasonous, offering their nations and peoples for sale to the Anglo-American colonialists.” It asks: “Aren’t these treasonous governments, which claim to have sent you to liberate Palestine, the same governments who play the role of watchdog for colonial companies and interests?” The leaflet concludes: “Soldiers, our brethren, you are being slaughtered here and sent far from your homes and families for the sake of treasonous Arab feudalists who have sold their lands and fled Palestine.”<sup>47</sup> This escalation in the communist rhetoric against Arab leaders in the summer of 1948 reflects the extent of the rapprochement between them and their new Zionist Marxist allies in Mapam.

It is not difficult to understand the positions of the communists on British colonialism and reactionary Arab regimes. What is perplexing about supporting the war that Israel launched with Czech arms was the silence concerning the massacres and expulsion of the Palestinian people. While their Jewish comrades were fighting on the side of the Haganah to expand the borders of Israel, activists in the League were objecting to the participation of Arab armies in the war. The war that Israel continued to wage since the summer of 1948 was to expand the territory of the Jewish state at the expense of the contemplated Arab state under the partition resolution. How can we explain the League’s silence about the Zionist expansion and criminal actions at the very time that members of the League were opposing the Arab war effort? Would the withdrawal of Arab armies from Palestine, as the communists were demanding, have served the cause or harmed it? These are some of the questions that must be asked in any critical evaluation of the League at the time. The facts on the ground clearly showed that Israel expelled Arabs from all the cities and villages which it occupied in southern and central Palestine.

Fu’ad Nassar, the League’s secretary, appears to be the person responsible for editing that leaflet and distributing it to Arab soldiers; on the first anniversary of his death (1976) his close friend Tawfiq Tubi revealed that Nassar had been responsible for distributing the leaflet during the war.<sup>48</sup> However, Tubi quoted a reworded version of the last sentence concerning Palestinian leaders, so that it was transformed into: “Soldiers, our brethren, you are the fuel on which this base conspiracy feeds and its innocent victims. Palestine shall gain its freedom only through a common understanding between the Arab and Jewish peoples against colonialism.”<sup>49</sup> The distribution of this leaflet, which undermined the morale of the

soldiers of the Arab armies, was particularly ill-timed. It coincided with the Israeli attack on Lydda and Ramla on 11–12 July 1948. The leaflet was greeted with scorn for the communists and led to their persecution on the Arab side, while it was well received by the Israeli side, which saw it as a real participation in the psychological warfare against the Arab armies.

After the distribution of this leaflet, there was an upsurge in the legal prosecution of communists on the Arab side so that some had to go into hiding and work in secret. Fu'ad Nassar himself was detained in Bethlehem and charged with distributing the leaflet, yet he managed to escape that same night and dropped out of sight. Other distributors of the leaflet were less fortunate, including 'Awda al-'Ashhab and Hasan Abu 'Isha, both of whom were arrested on 11 July in Hebron, and were taken to the Abu 'Ujayla prison in Sinai, where they spent months until the end of 1948. There they met some comrades from Gaza and elsewhere in southern Palestine, which was under the control of the Egyptian army.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the position of the comrades of the League gradually changed from accepting the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a state for the settlers, to supporting the establishment of that state, politically at least. Once again, that position was coherent with the support of the Soviet camp for Israel and its war on the Palestinian people.

Recently, some of the historical leaders of the Liberation League plucked up the courage to criticize the positions and activities of the communists in the year of the Nakba. They spoke out in criticism of the secretary of the League, Fu'ad Nassar, in particular. In Na'im al-'Ashhab's discussion of how the idea of a democratic state overwhelmed the leadership, he recently wrote that "Nassar overemphasized the idea of class struggle in the days of the war and neglected the nationalist aspect of the struggle in Palestine."<sup>51</sup> Concerning the position of the Soviet Union on the war in Palestine, he added: "Apparently there were more than a few delusions, even among Kremlin leaders including Stalin and those around him, concerning the speed with which [Israel] would convert into a socialist country." On the other hand, "the Kremlin viewed the Arab states as states governed by reactionary, quasi-feudal regimes. But within a few years only, it was shown that this assessment was superficial and wrong, even defeatist."<sup>52</sup> Al-'Ashhab, not content to level bold criticism at the Kremlin, also accused Nassar of responsibility for these wrong analyses, saying: "One of the characteristics of the leader of the League at that time was that if he was convinced of an idea he would be strongly driven by it, even recklessly at times."<sup>53</sup>

While about ten men were arrested for distributing the leaflet to "the soldiers of Egypt and the Arab countries" and led off to Abu 'Ujayla, League activists in Nazareth were arrested on the charge of treason and collaboration with the Jewish side. On 12 July, some League activists were arrested in Nazareth by the Arab Rescue Army in the city. However, city leaders from the al-Fahum family, in cooperation with the poet 'Abdul Rahim Mahmud, who was a respected officer in the ARA, intervened on behalf of the detainees and freed them quickly.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the

arrests of members of the League, with Saliba Khamis at the top of the list, turned into a legend and tales about the “heroism and sacrifice” of the communists in opposing the war as a whole and the ARA in particular. At the end of this chapter we shall provide examples of those tales which were created by the Arab communists to prove that the League played a role in supporting the establishment of the Jewish state.

The communists in Haifa and Nazareth constituted a special type of Palestinian survivor, as became apparent from their positions as of July 1948. On the heels of the fall of Nazareth that month, the minister of minorities, Bechor Shitrit, visited Nazareth and met with the mayor and notables in the city, including a delegation that represented the League, headed by Saliba Khamis. During the meeting with Shitrit, League members made clear their position of cooperating with Israel by saying: “There are elements who are prepared to cooperate with the Jews, just as they cooperated earlier with Britain and with the mufti and al-Qawuqji,”<sup>55</sup> and then added that the Jews should not rely on those, but on “the popular forces” like the League. Minister Shitrit listened to them and promised that there would be nothing to prevent the activities of the League and the “Workers’ Conference” in Nazareth. Indeed, the activities of the communist organizations in Nazareth revived strongly after the occupation, in cooperation with the military governor, Elisha Soltz.

Members of the League saw themselves as ideological partners of the Israeli state and not as collaborators with an occupying state, as did some collaborators in Nazareth and elsewhere. Their conversation with Minister Shitrit was a genuine expression of their beliefs based on the priority of the class dimension of the struggle and reliance on the support of the communist camp for Israel. This viewpoint made their expectations from the state much higher than those of most Arabs who stayed in the north of the country. At that stage in the Palestine war, the communists thought they were capable of being in the vanguard of laying the foundations of a better future for both the Arabs and the Jews. But this “revolutionary” vision clashed at the end of the war with the reality of the policies of the Ben-Gurion government, which was prepared to accept cooperation with its interests from several Arab sources but did not see them as true partners. Still, the second part of 1948 witnessed the peak of dreams—or communist delusions—about the possibility of constructing an international partnership with Labor Zionism.

#### THE BEGINNING OF COMMUNIST LEADERSHIP OF THE ARAB MINORITY IN ISRAEL

The months of ceasefire in the wake of the occupation of Nazareth and lower Galilee (July to October) were the real beginning of the communist assumption of leadership of the Palestinian minority remaining in Haifa and the Galilee. After the meeting with Minister Shitrit and other representatives of the Israeli government, the League, under the leadership of Saliba Khamis, became active

in organizing Arab workers to cultivate the fields and orchards of the refugees in cooperation with the military governor and the trustee of absentee property.<sup>56</sup> Unlike their competitors, such as Sayf al-Din al-Zu'bi, the communists had wide experience in organizing labor and their success increased their political influence and expanded League membership in Nazareth and elsewhere. The communist growth in the City of Annunciation angered their rivals, particularly the sons of families who had been cooperating with the Jewish side for decades. These grievances reached the ears of Ben-Gurion's advisors and his inner circle, and they in turn forwarded these complaints to the leadership of the Mapam party.

When complaints about the communists multiplied, to the extent that people in the city began to believe that only the communists and those close to them could find work in Israel, activists in Mapam rose to defend their policy and their support for the Liberation League. Prominent among them was Eliezer Be'eri Bauer who wrote, in an article titled "The Nazareth Scandal," that there were no casualties among the people of Nazareth during the occupation of the city and the occupation was not accompanied by pillaging and the expulsion of the residents.<sup>57</sup> He added that life in the city quickly returned to normal, and what is the harm in that? The author responded to the criticism directed at the activists in his party who supported the communists, saying: "The League has been active in Nazareth for many years, and it has acquired much influence in the city. However, this organization ceased to be active during the war because of Qawuqji's gangs." He concluded his defense of the communists by saying, "The IDF freed men of the League and the Workers' Conference from jail, and some are now working behind the front lines in Gaza and Beirut."

Be'eri did not stop at this defense of the League; he also asked those close to Ben-Gurion to read what their party newspaper *Davar* had printed on 15 July 1948. The paper's editorial said that "words of gratitude and respect" were in order for the leaflets which members of the League had distributed to soldiers in the Egyptian and Jordanian armies. He asked: "Well, then, how do we treat our allies?" He clarified his defense of the communists by adding: "This is the first time in the history of Zionism, and during the days of war in particular, that an Arab organization which is popular with the masses supports a political project in Palestine (originally the Land of Israel), which is close to the official Jewish project."<sup>58</sup> The writer stressed, "We were not given friends like these so as to allow ourselves to spit in their faces." This article was not unique in the statements and writings of Mapam activists in that period. Aharon Cohen, mentioned earlier, also put forward a defiant defense of the need to continue giving special treatment to men of the League in Haifa and Nazareth and elsewhere. He stressed that this good treatment had borne abundant fruit which was important to Israel as it began to chart its path in 1948.<sup>59</sup>

I return to an important sentence at the end of the article by Eliezer Be'eri concerning the activities of members of the League "behind the front lines in Gaza

and Beirut,” which served the interests of Israel in an attempt to explain it. Putting aside the activities of members of the League in Gaza for later, as far as Beirut is concerned, a number of League members reached the city after the fall of Haifa and the expulsion of its population at the end of April 1948. Emile Habibi's arrival in the Lebanese capital following his visit to Prague with Mikunis and his presence there for about six months remained a shrouded secret. While Emile Tuma was arrested upon his arrival in Lebanon, as we mentioned earlier, Emile Habibi, the supporter of partition and the League's spokesman, remained free. In the several months he spent in Beirut, Habibi met with representatives of Arab communist parties as well as his friends and acquaintances. Was this the activity that Eliezer Beëri was referring to in his article mentioned above?

As compared to the leaders of Mapam who were eager to ally with the League, influential figures in Mapai were not so pleased with the way the communists in Nazareth were being pampered. They had received several complaints about the huge privileges which the communists had been granted, particularly in the area of organizing work and workers in the city at the time. Even Moshe Chertok (Sharett) became involved in the case, and wrote to Minister of Minorities Shitrit, saying: “While we should allow members of the National Liberation League to participate in the institutions we are setting up, we should do so according to what is suitable, as long as this does not exclude other elements which we care about . . . we should not set up League members as bosses over the Arab masses. In all arrangements for local self-government for the Arabs of the occupied areas, we should rely basically on the circles and men who have cooperated with us from early on.”<sup>60</sup>

Sharett was well versed on the Arab population of Nazareth and their circumstances and had himself established relations with them from long ago. He did not object to allowing League members to participate in the institutions of government, but only placed some conditions on them. Some old collaborators, such as Sayf al-Din Zu'bi, had long cooperated with the Haganah and HaKeren HaKayamet. After Shitrit received Sharett's letter, he followed his instructions and wrote Elisha Soltz, the military governor, saying: “The major families in Nazareth, the Fahum family and the Zu'bi family, whose members have cooperated with us for a long time, are complaining because it appears as though workers' affairs have been put in the hands of the communists. Such ideas should not take hold in the Arab public's mind since they do not like socialist ideas or find them palatable.”<sup>61</sup> These positions on the part of prominent Israeli leaders make it abundantly clear that they appreciated the important role that the communists were playing at that vital juncture, reflected in their treatment of members of the League, but there is no doubt that this positive Zionist position was first and foremost a recognition to the debt owed to the socialist camp.

In addition to Nazareth, League members managed to reestablish their organization in Haifa as well. Although the vast majority of League activists and its leaders migrated from the city when it fell and its Arab residents were expelled,

many communists returned to the city in coordination with Israeli political and military leaders. Tawfiq Tubi was one of the few who did not leave the city (more or less) and he played a central role in bringing his comrades back.<sup>62</sup> Emile Habibi, who had returned from Beirut, joined him in Haifa, where they made preparations to resume *al-Ittihad*. Due to these numerous activities by the leaders and activists of the League in Haifa, some of their rivals made complaints to the authorities concerning the freedom of movement and activity granted to the communists. A report registered with city officials by one of the objectors states: "The Arab who is not affiliated with their (the communists') organizations feels very unjustly treated. There is a dominant belief among the Arabs that only communists can live in freedom and dignity in Israel."<sup>63</sup> This belief, which was no secret in Haifa and Nazareth, contributed a great deal to consolidating the role of the communists in the leadership of the survivors.

At that stage, clearly some Israeli leaders were supporting the communists as a thank you to the Soviet Union for its support of a Jewish state, and the communists acquired special privileges regarding their travel, movements, and approval for many to return from Lebanon and elsewhere. Mapam leaders were the biggest supporters of the policy favoring the communists. Zahi Karkabi testified that he travelled from 'Akka to Beirut, but decided to return a few weeks later.<sup>64</sup> He arrived in the village of al-Bi'na in central Galilee with two other comrades, Jamal Musa and Matiya Nassar, at the end of June 1948. The three spent the night in the village, then travelled on to al-Makr, which was under Israeli control at the time. There they searched for members of Mapam, seeking their help, and traveled to 'Akka aided by soldiers. They were detained there for a few days, then set free and went to Haifa safely with help from a Mapam leader.<sup>65</sup> This story is repeated in various forms with other comrades who gave testimonies on how they returned from Lebanon in 1948.

The story of Matiya Nassar, who returned with Karkabi, is unusual and quite astonishing. Matiya was born in the village of al-Tayba in the Ramallah district in 1927. His father, who was married to a Spanish woman, migrated with his family to Spain when Matiya was six months old. In 1938, the father decided to return with his family to Palestine. Matiya, who could only speak Spanish, could not enroll in the existing schools, so he worked from an early age in printing presses, where he met some communists, including 'Awda al-'Ashhab.<sup>66</sup> When the family moved to Haifa in 1941, Matiya also worked at a printing press. After the city fell, Matiya found himself being swept along with dense crowds to the port and boarding a ship which took him to the port of Marseilles in France. In that city he managed to find the Sahyun house, belonging to an Arab family from Haifa, who helped him get to Beirut.

In Beirut Matiya again found himself working at a printing press for a short while. He met Emile Habibi, who informed him that the League intended to resume publication of *al-Ittihad*, and convinced him to return to Haifa to work



at the paper. Matiya mentioned in his testimony that comrades in the Lebanese Communist Party helped him and his two companions to travel to Rumaysh, and from there they travelled to Tarshiha. On his way to Tarshiha he was captured by members of the Arab Liberation Army, who thought he was a spy because he could not speak Arabic well. However, Zahi Karkabi, whose father was well-known in Shafa 'Amr, saved him from that predicament. From Tarshiha he went to al-Bi'na and on to 'Akka and Haifa.<sup>67</sup>

The story of the three comrades on their way back from Lebanon is similar in many ways to those of other League members who returned to Haifa and the Galilee in 1948. Israel agreed in the summer and fall to the return of dozens of communists and members of their families, most of them by land. Lawyer Hanna Naqqara, however, returned by plane on 10 August 1948, via Nicosia.<sup>68</sup> Naqqara became one of the pillars of Maki's public activities, and played an important role in the defense of the rights of the Palestinian survivors in Haifa and the Galilee after the Nakba. With the inclusion of the returning comrades of the League, Tawfiq Tubi succeeded into turning the city of Karmil into a second stronghold of the League, alongside Nazareth. Despite the fact that the number of veteran and experienced comrades in both cities did not exceed one hundred (in the fall of 1948), they managed to play an important role in leading the Palestinian minority that remained in Israel.

The political position and role of the communists in Israel was formulated gradually during the year of the war, not after its end. The period from February to October 1948 witnessed a rapid shift in the position of the League leadership, from a timid endorsement of partition to integration into the Israeli political regime. This race to join Maki constituted an implicit renunciation of partition and of fighting for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Most members of the League came from Nazareth, 'Akka, Shafa 'Amr, and the Galilee villages in the area allocated for the Arab state under the UN resolution. Had it not been for this role of implicit legitimization for the annexation of the Galilee to Israel, it would have been difficult to imagine the Zionist "generosity" to the Arab communists. So, in addition to Israel's gratitude to the Soviet camp, the role played by the leaders and cadres of the League justified their acceptance as a subordinate partner of the Israeli political establishment.

#### FROM THE LIBERATION LEAGUE TO THE ISRAELI COMMUNIST PARTY

In the summer of 1948, the last shipments of heavy arms from Prague arrived, including dozens of fighter aircraft. As is well known, Zionist and Marxist Jews from the Mapam party in particular played an important role in concluding the Czech arms deal. The Israeli leadership's treatment of Arab communists was an acknowledgement of the receipt of those arms. Indeed, a security services

document dated August 1948 provided an analysis of the activities of League members and indicated that no one should suspect them of posing any military danger to Israel. It added, "Our enemies are their enemies. In all their activities and actions, they demonstrate loyalty to our state. We therefore see in them (the League members) an important political factor and real ally of the state of Israel."<sup>69</sup> This kind of language largely explains the "generosity" of the Israeli government towards the comrades of the League who joined Maki in October 1948.

The Mapam activists continued to be most eager to support the members of the League in Nazareth and elsewhere. Eliezer Béeri published his memoirs on that period in the party newspaper, and spoke with fervor about the grave dangers that the Arab communists courted in distributing leaflets to soldiers from Arab countries.<sup>70</sup> He mentioned that the leaflet distributors asked his help personally, as well as the help of IDF officers and the Haganah intelligence service (Shai) under his command.<sup>71</sup> In the following month, on the eve of the Israeli attack on the Egyptian army, Abba Kovner, who was in charge of cultural affairs in the army, wrote to Aharon Cohen asking him for a copy of the communist leaflet distributed to Arab soldiers so that he could use it in the Israeli psychological war against the Egyptian army on the southern front.<sup>72</sup>

In return for their services, League members asked for freedom of movement along the front lines, and for permission to publish a newspaper in Arabic. Some of their leaders asked for financial support from the government in return for their positions and services.<sup>73</sup> The Arab communists succeeded in the 1950s in concealing the statements and actions which would cause them embarrassment in the future. However, they made sure, with pride, that the references to the "secret movement" which they led and their acts of resistance to the soldiers of the "invading" Arab countries reached the ears of the Jews in late 1948 and early the following year. Such statements, examples of which we will look at later, contained much exaggeration—in my opinion—but they served the interests of the party in Israel during that period. Several years on, however, they came into conflict with the reversal of the position of the socialist camp and the party, and the bursting of illusions about the policy of the Jewish state; it then became necessary to keep these statements in secrecy and to attack anyone who tried to bring them to light.

Hanna Abu Hanna related in his memoirs a story that may seem peculiar to the reader in our day and age, but that illustrates the mentality of some League leaders at the time and the atmosphere of facilitating cooperation with leftist (mainly Mapam) Zionists. About two weeks after the fall of Nazareth, Tubi met Saliba Khamis in his office in the city. After Tubi left, Khamis called Abu Hanna and let him in on the substance of the secret meeting, which amounted to a proposal for the League to participate in the operation to oust the Arab Rescue Army from the Galilee, and asked him to prepare a list of young men who might be prepared to take part in this secret mission.<sup>74</sup> A few days later Abu Hanna gave Saliba Khamis a list containing the names of about thirty young men. A month later Abu

Hanna asked Saliba Khamis about that mission and when it might be carried out, but Khamis told him that the subject was closed. Abu Hanna adds in his memoirs that when he asked Tubi fifty years later (1998) what had happened to that ambitious plan, the latter simply told him the idea had not been practical.<sup>75</sup>

Whatever the circumstances that prevented the League's participation in expelling the ARA from the rest of the Galilee, the mere proposal indicates the confidence of the League members in believing that they could play a leading role in governing the Galilee and other areas in Palestine in cooperation with Israel. To play this role, they were actually prepared to cooperate with the army of occupation and Zionist political leaders, particularly the Mapam party. League members in Nazareth under the leadership of Saliba Khamis had no objection to cooperating with the military government and the other Israeli occupation authorities at the time. It would appear that the successes the League achieved as a result of this cooperation "intoxicated" the leaders of that organization in the summer and fall of 1948. At the personal level, it is well known that the Israeli authorities gave Saliba Khamis a pistol and a car for his sole use, privileges that were only granted at the time to the Israeli authorities and to major collaborators, such as Sayf al-Din Zu'bi. Incidentally, Saliba Khamis kept the pistol even after the war ended in 1949.<sup>76</sup>

The month of October 1948 was decisive in the military and political battles in southern and northern Palestine. At the beginning of that month, the mufti's men were trying to set up an All-Palestine government in Gaza. Meanwhile in Amman, King Abdullah was completing the process of annexing the "West Bank" to Jordan. In northern Palestine the League had completed its preparations for inclusion in Israel by way of merging with the Israeli Communist Party, Maki. The first step in that direction was distributing the famous leaflet, signed by three Arab communist parties in addition to the Liberation League. Emile Habibi, Tawfiq Tubi, and Fu'ad Nassar played a major role in coordinating efforts for the publication of the leaflet at the beginning of the month, a copy of which was smuggled from Beirut to Haifa by League comrades from al-Bi'na.<sup>77</sup> From there dozens of comrades distributed it in various parts of Palestine, particularly in the north of the country. The distribution of the leaflet in the Galilee villages was a source of pride for many comrades documented in their memoirs and testimonies concerning their activities in those difficult days.<sup>78</sup>

The communist leaflet was distributed in early October, at the same time that Zurayk was publishing the second edition of his book, *The Meaning of al-Nakba*. The term "al-Nakba" was used several times in the leaflet to describe the tragic circumstances in which the Palestinians found themselves,<sup>79</sup> but the burden of responsibility was put on the shoulders of colonialism and Arab reaction, with only a timid reference to "reactionary Zionist leaders." The contradiction in the positions of the communists was particularly apparent at that time when they continued to talk about partition and the "invading" Arab armies while maintaining

silence about Israel's occupation of the Galilee and other areas allocated to the Palestinian state. In effect, the communists implicitly accepted Israel's occupation of the Galilee by joining Maki and rushing to take part in the Israeli elections at the end of 1948 without any reservations.

The story of Jibra'il Bishara and his brothers from Tarshiha may be the best example of the dangers which members of the League and the distributors of the leaflet in upper Galilee were courting. Jibra'il served as the secretary of the Maki branch in his village for decades, but before that had been a League activist in Haifa until 1948. He was arrested after he distributed the Communist Party's leaflet in Mi'lya, Fassuta, and other villages.<sup>80</sup> He and his three brothers were led off to the ARA's detention center in Bint Jubayl. Bishara referred to his arrest and trial before a Lebanese military judge, Sa'id Shihab, in his handwritten memoirs.<sup>81</sup> When news spread of the fall of upper Galilee to the Israeli army near the end of October, he was released. His three brothers had been released earlier and returned to their village, Tarshiha. One brother, Antoine, moved to Nazareth years later, where he raised his family.<sup>82</sup>

Along with criticizing Arab leaders, the communists also conducted self-criticism concerning the League's responsibility for dividing the ranks of the Palestine Communist Party along nationalist lines in 1943. These positions paved the way for the decision to merge the League with the Israeli Communist Party in October 1948. The record of events of the Conference of the Union of Arab and Jewish Communists in Haifa includes a request by the League on 1 October to join the Maki party, the same day on which the leaflet of the Arab communist parties was distributed.<sup>83</sup> Maki's central committee considered this request and approved it on 5 October, and the decision was officially issued the following day. At the same time, the League put forward its request to the Israeli authorities for permission to publish *al-Ittihad* newspaper in Haifa and the paper began publishing on 18 October. A few days later, on 22–23 October, the conference was held in the Mayo movie theatre in Haifa; it was not a union between two equal partners, but rather an acceptance of the conditions of the Jewish communists under the leadership of Mikunis.

The "unity" conference opened with speeches by the leaders of the party, Jews and Arabs, who enthusiastically repeated their blessings for the renewed "international unity."<sup>84</sup> Prominent among the speakers were Esther Vilenska, Tawfiq Tubi, Shmuel Mikunis, and Emile Habibi. Habibi gave a fiery speech in the name of the League and "the secret popular resistance movement against the armies of occupation in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, and Gaza,"<sup>85</sup> in which he said: "I speak in the name of a party which stands in the vanguard of the popular war to expel the armies of occupation from the Arab part of the land of Israel." Habibi claimed that the League "represents thousands of comrades who stand in the vanguard of popular resistance against the armies of occupation."<sup>86</sup> Of course, what Habibi meant were the Jordanian and Egyptian armies, not the Israeli army which had

occupied Nazareth and other cities and villages in the Galilee, to which "army of occupation" was not applied. Instead it was considered a liberator of the people from the "Qawuqji gangs."

Habibi, Tubi, and the other League comrades—mostly from Haifa and the Galilee—who joined Maki were young men who were excited at the time about the triumph of socialism in Israel. This atmosphere reached its high point in the unity conference in Haifa. During the days of the conference itself it was no longer a secret that Israel, which had renewed its attack on the Egyptian army in the south, would soon occupy the rest of the Galilee. While comrades of the League in Gaza and the West Bank were being tracked down and arrested, its members in Israel were honored and well treated. Therefore, it was not strange that we did not hear any criticism of Israel's actions on their part, including for its expansion into the territory allocated to the Arab state under the partition resolution. *Al-Ittihad* newspaper, after it began appearing in Haifa, expressed the enthusiastic views of the League about the victories of the Jewish state, as we shall relate below. But the killings and the expulsion of the population which accompanied the finalization of the occupation of the Galilee and other areas did not earn a mention, much less condemnation, in the Maki party press at the end of 1948.<sup>87</sup>

The position of the members of the League, as with the armies of Arab states, was very hostile to the volunteers in the Rescue Army. They increased their incitement against the ARA in the Galilee. After the occupation of the Galilee was completed, the communists revealed their hostility towards Fawzi al-Qawuqji's army in a new attempt to prove their loyalty to Israel. In return, the comrades in Maki, both Jews and Arabs, took pride about their role in the war of "independence" and the sacrifices they made for the creation of the Jewish state. At the end of December an opportunity arose to shed light on those sacrifices when the plane carrying Eliyahu Gozansky, one of the most prominent leaders of the party at the time, crashed. The plane, carrying arms and volunteers, fell over Athens, and Gozansky and his companions were killed.<sup>88</sup> *Al-Ittihad* newspaper carried the news of the accident and the death of the party leader the following day, on the front page: "He lived as a warrior, he died as a warrior. . . . He died for the sake of duty. May his memory be a lantern that guides warriors."<sup>89</sup>

Gozansky's mission was mentioned only briefly and with some secrecy at the beginning, yet as the date of the parliamentary elections (25 January 1949) approached, the Maki press carried abundant details on the subject. The Hebrew-language party organ mentioned that in addition to Gozansky, twelve Jews had died in the accident, their bodies transported from Greece and buried in the Nahalat Yitzhak cemetery in Tel Aviv.<sup>90</sup> On the thirtieth-day anniversary of the death of the leader, party secretary Mikunis published a long article under the title: "Eliyahu Gozansky: the Man and His Deeds,"<sup>91</sup> in which he showed how proud Maki was of its hero on the eve of the first elections for the Israeli parliament. Thus the members of the League transferred their affiliation and activities from the

Palestinian national camp to the Israeli Communist Party. They adopted Maki's discourse and its positions, thinking that they would be partners in the leadership of the Jewish socialist state, the friend of the communist camp which supported Israel's establishment politically and militarily. These illusions were gradually dispelled after 1949, but at that time party leaders did not carry out a critical review of their positions and analyses.

#### "PARTNERS" IN ISRAEL'S VICTORY AND PROPAGANDA

During 1948, the Jewish communists expressed their pride in the victories which Israel scored against the Arabs. *Kol HaAm* newspaper was full of headlines and news which reflected its adoption of Zionist discourse to a large extent. The victims of the war on the Israeli side were heroes who fell either in a just war or in criminal massacres perpetrated by the Arab side, according to the paper. On the other hand, Arabs who were killed were, according to the paper, the victims of defensive retaliation against the "centers of gang activity." The news about the Czech arms with which the Israeli army fought was a cause for pride and esteem because these arms were the instrument through which the Jews scored their victories.<sup>92</sup> When the United States complained about the arrival of heavy arms to Israel during the period in which there was supposed to be a total embargo on the sale of arms to states in the region, the party organ carried the answer of the Czech foreign minister who said he could not have cared less about the American condemnation.<sup>93</sup>

Even after the conference of Jewish and Arab communists in Haifa, the Hebrew-language party paper did not alter its Israeli nationalist tone. By the end of October Israel had completed its occupation of the Galilee, and *Kol HaAm* carried the news with pride without any mention of the massacres and expulsions of the Arab population.<sup>94</sup> The Arabic-language party paper published not dissimilar articles about the renewal of the fighting. Concerning the refugee problem and the Nakba in general, analysis and commentary in the paper continued to assign responsibility to colonialism, Arab reactionary forces and the Higher Arab Committee. Israel's role was lopped off at the end of an abbreviated list of indictments, although there was mention of "certain circles" which dreamt of a purely Jewish state free of any Arab residents.<sup>95</sup> The communists (both Jews and Arabs) had no reservations concerning the expansion of the borders of Israel at the expense of the territory of the Arab state under the partition resolution. The concepts of "occupation" and "occupied territories" were reserved (in both the Hebrew and Arabic-language Maki newspapers) for Gaza and the West Bank. The Galilee was "occupied" when it was under the control of Arab Rescue Army, according to the discourse of the communists and their press; however, after it was occupied by the Jewish army, references to the term "occupation" disappeared from the party's papers.

The formation of Maki came as talk increased about holding elections in the Jewish state, the borders of which were not yet determined. The fact that members

of the League joined the Israeli Communist Party held great significance in the opinion of Ben-Gurion and his colleagues in the Zionist leadership. Completing the occupation of the Galilee and its annexation to Israel met no opposition from Maki and its press. Even after news of the massacres and the expulsion of the residents of villages in upper Galilee leaked out at the end of the year, the major figures in Maki did not express criticism of these actions.<sup>96</sup> The communists in Nazareth and other cities and villages in the Galilee saw no dilemma in joining an Israeli party at the end of 1948 or regarding their infatuation with taking part in the Knesset elections at the beginning of the following year. In this way the Liberation League in the Galilee was integrated into the Jewish state at an important juncture in the year of the Nakba, while the majority of the Palestinians who remained in the Galilee were overwhelmed by a sense of tragedy and mourning.

The communist camp imagined that it would reap the fruits of its unconditional military and political support for the young Jewish state by way of the Marxists in parliament. At the time, the communists did not speak of “saving what could be saved” in the wake of the Nakba. The Soviet Union had participated in the Nakba of the Palestinian people, and the local communists (Jews and Arabs) contributed to the legitimization of the annexation of the Galilee to Israel. Members of the League had joined the Maki party late in 1948, as Israeli flags fluttered and the chant of “Hatikva” reverberated in the Mayo movie theater in Haifa. In the festive atmosphere of the “unity conference” there was no voice reminding of the Nakba of the Palestinian people and its suffering.

Like the USSR, the Maki press and its leaders recognized the borders of Israel, which had expanded at the cost of the Palestinians. They defended those borders when the party endorsed the position of the Israeli leaders who refused to withdraw from the territory they had occupied in the Arab region as it was defined by the partition resolution. When Israel came under pressure from the representatives of the UN and other international organizations, the party hastened to defend the expansionist Zionist position. For example, *Kol HaAm* supported the statements of Foreign Minister Sharett, who declared that Israel “would not relinquish the Negev and the Galilee.”<sup>97</sup> What is worse, when it appeared as though Israel was prepared to make territorial “concessions” for peace near the end of 1948, the Mapam and Maki parties strongly opposed the idea. They even refused the concept that “territories from the land of Israel” remain “under the control of the invaders,” a clear reference to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.<sup>98</sup>

The communist bloc states opposed United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 concerning the right of Palestinian refugees to return or receive compensation for their property. Arab countries also opposed this resolution, but for different reasons than the states of the communist bloc, whose opposition was based on unconditional support for Israel. The Maki press embraced this position when it opposed the proposal by Israeli foreign minister Sharett to accept the return of 100,000 Palestinian refugees to Israel, which Maki said was the result



of American pressure.<sup>99</sup> At that time competition between the communist and capitalist camps over who was the stronger and more important supporter of the nascent Jewish state was at its height. The illusion that the Jewish state would stand by the socialist camp was still strong among communists. That is why they were not concerned about what consequences that support would have for the Arab peoples in general and the disaster-afflicted Palestinian people in particular.

The Palestinians who remained in the Galilee after it was occupied suffered from repression and repeated attempts at uprooting them, but the Maki press made no reference to this subject on its pages even after the electoral battle was over. The first criticism that *al-Ittihad* directed at Israeli policy after the occupation of the Galilee had to do with the hundreds of young men who were arrested in their villages and sent to prisoner of war camps,<sup>100</sup> which included dozens of comrades and friends among them. *Al-Ittihad* described them as being combatants “in the secret resistance movement against the armies of Arab states.” They had even risked their lives—“Qawuqji had threatened to execute them, and the Egyptian army locked them up in prisons and detention centers”—so how could the Israeli authorities arrest them? The communists were reprimanding the authorities, speaking as partners in the establishment of Israel and its victories, in a tone that no one else in the Arab community was using at the time. The paper added, “Public opinion in Israel has heard much about the heroic acts of the men of the National Liberation League in upper Galilee against Qawuqji’s troops. The popular resistance movement had in fact prevented the entry of Qawuqji’s troops into several villages. The elements who conspired with Qawuqji’s troops . . . have been allowed to go free. But the elements who risked their lives for peace . . . to evict the invaders from the homeland, and to implement the [UN] resolution of 29 November 1947, were thrown into the dark recesses of jail.”<sup>101</sup> In this way, the Arab activists in Maki attempted to prove that they had played an effective role in the defense of the establishment of the Jewish state and its expansion, and the merger with Maki made them feel like partners in Israel’s victory over “the reactionary Arab regimes.”

When dozens of comrades continued to be detained in POW camps for months, the leaders of Maki raised this issue with their contacts in government and on the pages of newspapers. The decision by detained League comrades to go on a hunger strike brought renewed attention to this issue. *Al-Ittihad* reported on the reasons for the strike: “When the Israeli army entered the villages of upper Galilee the villagers expected this action would end the days of occupation, pressure, and slavery. But then we saw the military authorities arresting young men in the villages, the biggest share being Arab communists. They have arrested and ill-treated 75 communists,”<sup>102</sup> so they decided to go on a hunger strike. These admonitions were repeated on more than one occasion, and reflected the sense of partnership that the communists felt with the victors, as opposed to the feeling of defeat dominant among Arabs in the year of the Nakba. This tone of blaming the government on

the one hand, and incitement against everyone who fights Israel on the other, continued for a long time.

By end of 1948 and early 1949, the Maki leaders were busy with the first parliamentary elections in Israel, and they needed their comrades who were detained. But those few dozen were a small minority of the thousands of civilian detainees whom Israel called prisoners of war, and kept in jail for a year or more.<sup>103</sup> The party fought the elections of January 1949 using a purely Israeli nationalist discourse, particularly in front of Jewish audiences. The principal role of Arab communists in these elections was to convince the residents of Haifa and the Galilee to participate and not boycott the elections. After the League comrades decided to become Israelis by merging with Maki, they felt no embarrassment in calling on the people of Nazareth, Shafa 'Amr, and villages in western Galilee to vote, that is, to legitimize the occupation and annexation of the Galilee to Israel. Their participation helped open the door for the leadership role played by communist Arabs of the Palestinian minority in the Jewish state.

Following the elections, which made Tawfiq Tubi a member of the Israeli Knesset, the statements and actions of the communists in support of Israel and its policies did not end. The political battles which they fought did not go far beyond civil rights for the Arabs as a minority in the state of the Jews. The leaders of Maki tried to outdo Ben-Gurion in their nationalism and protectiveness for Israel's interests. When the compulsory military service law (which exempted Arab youth) came before the Knesset, the leaders of the party, with Tawfiq Tubi at their head, demanded that Arabs be drafted like their Jewish comrades. In taking this position in 1949 Tubi was reflecting the position of his party. In 1954 Tubi once again supported military service in the Israeli army for young Arab men when the Sharett government favored that, but the government then retreated from that position. The Maki leaders also did not object to the law of return for Jews or to the ban on Palestinian refugees exercising their right to return to their homeland. Maki also supported the Zionist policy of settling Jews in the lands of Palestinian villages which had been denuded of their populations—including settlements established by Marxists from the Mapam party, allies of the communists, on land belonging to the villages of Kufr Bir'im and Sa'sa', as well as others.

In line with most "believers," they deluded themselves into thinking that the leaders of the communist camp in Moscow were, in their wisdom, leading the region to what would be best for its peoples, along the path of international socialism. The "believers" only had to hear and obey and accept the wisdom of the leadership, which often conceals its wisdom from the simple common people. The new Soviet position impelled the communists to undergo challenges pertaining to the line of policy supporting Israel in the year of the Nakba, not opposing the occupation of land allocated to the Palestinian state in the Galilee and elsewhere under the partition resolution, legitimizing this annexation by joining Maki, and then participating effectively in the first Israeli elections in January 1949.<sup>104</sup>

The call by the Maki party for the Palestinians remaining in Nazareth and western Galilee to participate in the elections represented an important step toward their “Israelification” at that early stage, when the fate of the Galilee had not yet been determined politically, and no one had acknowledged its annexation to the state of the Jews at that stage in the war (early 1949). Ben-Gurion quickly grasped the opportunity and allowed those remaining in Haifa and the Galilee to participate in the parliamentary elections. Consequently, these elections became the historic “initiation” of those who remained of their own free will, or at least the will and encouragement of the remaining communist leaders and collaborators, such as Sayf al-Din al-Zu’bi.<sup>105</sup> Those elections laid down the rules for political organization for the Palestinian “survivors” in Israel. There were only two choices: either Maki’s or the Zionist parties’ lists; there was no third choice. The independent and nationalist survivors were deprived of the blessing of organized political action, and found both of these choices equally unpalatable.

Until the mid-1950s, the communists remained hopeful that they could play an important role in the leadership of the Jewish state and its institutions; however, Ben-Gurion excluded them from his government and reinforced Israel’s relations with the United States and the West in general, and was publicly hostile to the communist camp during the Cold War. He not only excluded the communists, but excluded the Mapam party as well in his first government. The leaders of Maki lost hope that they would have an important political role after the first elections (in 1949), and illusions about Israel becoming a socialist state and an ally of the USSR began to be gradually shed. The ramifications of this were clear in 1956 when the socialist camp stood by Abdel Nasser’s Egypt and against Israel, the ally of Britain and France in the Tripartite Aggression Pact. At the beginning of the attack on Egypt, the well-known Kafr Qasim massacre took place, and Tawfiq Tubi helped in exposing the Ben-Gurion government’s effort to conceal that massacre, as it had done with the massacres of 1948.

### SUMMARY

This chapter dealt with three topics and research areas each of which has its specialized literature and historians: the establishment of the state of Israel, the Nakba of the Palestinian people, and the role of the communist camp from the UN partition resolution to the end of 1948. But the main point of the chapter was to uncover the ramifications of the Soviet support for Israel for the unification of Arab and Jewish communist ranks in the Maki party in 1948. It is no coincidence that the history of the Liberation League in that period is enveloped in mystery even decades after the events, and a quarter of a century after the fall of the USSR and the Soviet bloc in 1989. Party comrades and their friends prefer to remain silent about the events of that period and to jump to their undeniable role and the causes for which they fought following the end of the war with all of its tragedies. The enemies and rivals

of the communists remind us of this “behind the scenes” or forgotten role, which they label “treasonous” at times. We tried to present here an unabridged first reading of the important developments in the positions of the League leaders in the year of the Nakba only.

Uncovering the role of the Soviet Union in the Palestinian Nakba and shedding light on the statements and activities of the communists in 1948 does not detract from their role in the struggle after that. No one could ignore their political capital as leaders since they played an important role in the survival of the Palestinian minority and in building the cultural and political institutions of the Arabs in Israel. Critiquing the performance of the leaders, as well as acknowledging the good they have done, places their role in a historical perspective which can be explained and analyzed to draw lessons from any errors that were made. Leaders are not infallible. Bringing leaders down from the level of symbols to that of human beings is essential for anyone who seeks to benefit from the legacy of the past and to build a better future. Acknowledging errors and explaining them in their historical context is far better than concocting or conniving to deceive oneself.

This chapter tried to present a new reading of the positions and actions of the communists in the year of the Nakba based on their statements and writings at the time of the events, in order to deconstruct the typical tales of heroism and treason which prioritize the political dimension over the criteria of academic research which is biased towards truth in historical context. Seven decades have passed since the Nakba and the many calamities which the Palestinian people suffered; it is time to hold oneself accountable instead of colluding to deceive oneself and others. The Soviet Union and the subservient communist regimes have collapsed, and researchers have uncovered the deeds of Stalin during his years in power. In light of all that, it is strange that some Arab comrades insist on stoning anyone who tries to lift the curtain to reveal what many in the world know about us and about them.

In that fateful year, the communists deviated from their previous analyses of the essence of the struggle in Palestine and joined the Zionist left. This alliance, which could not have come about were it not for the reversal in the Soviet position, enabled the communists to play a role of leadership for the Palestinian survivors in Israel, but it also tied them to a discourse and positions which held them until the fragility of their assumptions and limited nature of their vision became clear to everyone. Accepting the partition resolution and backing the Soviet camp in supporting the establishment of a Jewish state on the ruins of Palestine in 1948 were actions that continued to cast their shadow on the positions of the Israeli Communist Party for decades after. Despite the fact that the hopes (or delusions) which had been attached to labor Zionism when making the alliance with the Soviet camp in the 1950s were dashed, the leadership of Maki has not conducted a courageous and critical review of its positions in the year of the Nakba. In conclusion, it is useful, in light of the above, to summarize the many turning points for the League leaders in the year of the Nakba:

- The first turning point was the decision of the League majority in Nazareth to accept the partition resolution and to support it in practice, not just in words (in February 1948), then the trip by Habibi and Mikunis to the communist parties' conference in Belgrade, and from there to Prague. Mikunis, according to his own testimony, was coordinating his actions with Ben-Gurion on one side and with the USSR on the other, which proved to play an important role in speeding up the Czech arms supply deal at the end of March 1948. These facts about the position of the communists from the beginning of the war point to a special ideological perspective about staying in Palestine, unlike the rest of the Arabs who simply preferred living under the occupation and its humiliations to being expelled and losing both land and homeland.
- Secondly, the decision by the Liberation League to resist the presence of Arab armies on Palestinian soil as of May 1948. The communist bloc under the leadership of the USSR recognized Israel immediately after its establishment was declared and started supplying it with heavy arms, including aircraft, while the Israeli army was expanding the borders of the Jewish state at the expense of the territories allocated to the Arab state. That expansion included massacres and the intensive forcible expulsion of the population, as in Lydda, Ramla, the Galilee, and other towns and villages in the ethnic cleansing effort. None of this affected the continued Palestinian communist support for Israel.
- October 1948 was a third important turning point towards the communists' alignment with Israel and their alliance with Zionism, witnessing the distribution of the leaflets by the League and other Arab communist parties in early October, followed by the decision to join the Israeli Communist Party based on the acceptance of the state for the Jews. The merger was crowned by the convening of the so-called "unity" conference in Haifa and the resounding speeches by the Jewish leaders and Emile Habibi.<sup>106</sup> Maki's Hebrew-language newspaper celebrated the coming event by saying: "The union of Jewish and Arab communists in the framework of the Israeli Communist Party will reinforce the war for the independence of the state of Israel," without any reference to the ramifications for the Palestinian people even in the territory allocated to their state under the partition resolution.<sup>107</sup>
- Fourth, comrades in the League "forgot" the partition resolution after October and participated enthusiastically in elections for the Knesset on 25 January 1949. The significance of joining Maki, and participation in the elections in Nazareth and other occupied Palestinian areas, could be seen during the war. Thus, the annexation of the Galilee and other areas to Israel was legitimized before any international or Arab party knew where Israel's borders were. Following that, the communists adopted an Israeli form of discourse and participated in a crucial way in separating the remaining Palestinian minority in Israel from the rest of their people. Party gatherings, conferences, and demonstrations were held under the Israeli flag which was raised high with pride, following the singing of

the Israeli anthem “Hatikva” on occasion. These positions were the price paid in advance for Israel allowing Maki to make demands for some civil rights for the Palestinians and to oppose the military government and its policies.

- Finally, one of the most prominent manifestations of the communists’ adoption of Israeli nationalist discourse was the 1949 request by Tawfiq Tubi to draft Arab youth into the Israeli army. Tubi and his friends in the leadership of Maki at the time could not see the political and moral dilemma inherent in pushing the fate-struck Palestinian people to serve their executioners. It was the good fortune of the Palestinians who remained in Israel that Ben-Gurion and members of his government refused the request. When Moshe Sharett became prime minister and his defense minister proposed to call up Arab young men to register for compulsory military service in October 1954, the communists supported this idea enthusiastically. They also continued to celebrate Israel’s “Independence Day” at international communist conferences until 1956. After illusions about the essence of the Jewish state and its (international and local) policies kept being dismissed, the discourse of the party changed at its 1957 conference, followed by clashes in Nazareth on 1 May 1958. But the party quickly retreated once again and fell into the trap of Soviet policy in the Middle East, as we shall see later.