



A Palestinian Revolutionary: Jabra Nicola and the Radical Left

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Introduction

From its inception in the late nineteenth century, the Zionist movement and its settlement project in Palestine have encountered opposition from the European radical Left. As early as 1886, a young Russian Jewish socialist revolutionary by the name of Ilya Rubanovich argued that the settlement project was doomed to fail:

What is to be done with the Arabs? Would the Jews expect to be strangers among the Arabs or would they want to make the Arabs strangers among themselves?... The Arabs have exactly the same historical right and it will be unfortunate for you if – taking your stand under the protection of international plunderers, using the underhand

Jabra Nicola (right) with Moshé Machover in 1968. *Source: Moshe Machover.*

dealings and intrigue of a corrupt diplomacy – you make the peaceful Arabs defend their right. They will answer tears with blood and bury your diplomatic documents in the ashes of your own homes.¹

With these prophetic words Rubanovich captured two elements of the Left's critique of Zionism (a decade before the movement was formally launched): that it was bound to violate the rights of indigenous Arabs, and that it would do so by using international diplomacy to secure its position. In other words, using terminology that was not yet common, Zionism was condemned for its colonial practices vis-à-vis the indigenous population, and for its potential association with imperialist powers. How this set of ideas gave rise to different movements and activists, shaped by subsequent historical circumstances, is the topic of this article.

This critique was taken up by the Communist movement, which emerged with the Russian revolution of 1917 and the formation of the Third International (Comintern) in 1919. In Lenin's 1920 "theses on the national and colonial question," a call was made for communist parties to "support the revolutionary liberation movements in these [colonial] countries by their deeds." This should be combined with "an unconditional struggle... against the reactionary and medieval influence of the clergy, the Christian missions and similar elements," against Pan-Islamism and "similar currents which try to tie the liberation struggle against European and American imperialism" to local reactionary forces, thereby strengthening them.

The Comintern called for exposing "the deception committed by the imperialist powers with the help of the privileged classes in the oppressed countries when, under the mask of politically independent states, they bring into being state structures that are economically, financially and militarily completely dependent on them." An illustration of this was "the Zionists' Palestine affair," an example "of the deception of the working classes of that oppressed nation by entente imperialism and the bourgeoisie of the country in question pooling their efforts (in the same way that Zionism in general actually delivers the Arab working population of Palestine, where Jewish workers only form a minority, to exploitation by England, under the cloak of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine)."²

A short while later, the Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East argued that Britain, "acting for the benefit of Anglo-Jewish capitalists," drove a wedge between Arabs and Jews. It drove "Arabs from the land in order to give the latter to Jewish settlers; then, trying to appease the discontent of the Arabs, it incited them against these same Jewish settlers, sowing discord, enmity and hatred between all the communities, weakening both in order that it may itself rule and command."³

These somewhat different formulations set the agenda for communist policies towards Palestine. They outlined opposition to British imperial rule, condemnation of Zionism, and exposure of Arab and Islamic forces which collaborated with imperialism. However, they left unresolved issues that would give rise to intense debates: in the partnership between Zionism and imperialism, which of the two was the junior partner, and which the senior? Did the partnership serve primarily imperial,

settler, or capitalist interests? Were such interests compatible? If not, what were the implications for progressive forces? Which of the Arab forces were allies, and which were opponents, of the revolutionary movement? What was to be done with Jewish settlers – were they implacable enemies or potential partners of revolutionary forces? Did they remain foreign after having lived in the country for a while, or did they start a process of indigenization?

The Palestine Communist Movement (1919-1948)

It was only with the rise of a local communist movement that concrete answers were formulated and debated. Leading members of the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) took part in such debates, including activists and intellectuals such as Wolf Averbuch, Joseph Berger-Barzilai, Yehiel Kossoi, and Ilya Teper.⁴ Their demographic characteristics reflected the reality of the emerging settler-dominated Jewish society – the *Yishuv*. Jewish militants were at the forefront of left-wing mobilization, on both sides of the Zionist/anti-Zionist divide. Arab nationalist mobilization ignored this internal Jewish dispute, and regarded all Jewish immigrants as alien intruders. A change in the composition of the PCP was thus essential from the Comintern’s perspective. Throughout the 1920s it called on the Communist Party to transcend its settler origins and recruit Arabs as members and leaders, to allow it to play an active role in the national movement.

The Party’s work among Arabs was hampered by lack of familiarity with local culture and language, and by the foreign origins of its members: the vast majority owed their presence in the country to Zionism, even if they had renounced it after having reached the country. Since Jewish immigration was the main concern for the Arab national movement, the Party faced a dilemma. To oppose immigration and settlement would have undermined the position of its Jewish members. To accept them as Jewish rights would have alienated the Arab movement. The Party was an anti-imperialist force, which drew support from a community that existed and grew thanks to the same imperial force the Party regarded as its main enemy.

The way out of the dilemma was the approach known as Yishuvism. It rejected Zionism as an ideology and political movement, but accepted the *Yishuv* as a legitimate community which would continue to grow due to immigration. The strategy aimed to radicalize Jewish immigrants and push them beyond Zionism, while demonstrating to Arabs that Jews could become allies in a struggle against the British.⁵ This approach – which Nahman List defines as “anti-Zionist Zionism” or “Zionism without Zionism” – and the Party’s Jewish membership and leadership – increasingly were at odds with the thrust of the Comintern line. That line focused on support for “any national revolutionary movement against imperialism,” and on mobilizing the masses in an “anti-imperialist united front” for national liberation. Communists of European origins were supposed to assist the local proletariat to organize, without forming their own parties.⁶ That was the foundation for the debate over the policy of

indigenization, known in the local context as Arabization.

The first task for the PCP in the Arabization campaign was “to intensify its activity among the urban Arab proletariat and peasantry,” and help them organize to fight Zionism and imperialism.⁷ It was clear that “the centre of gravity of the PCP’s activity must be among the Arab toiling masses.”⁸ The Comintern urged a course that involved “linking the interests of the daily struggle of the Arab toilers with the interests of the daily struggle of the Jewish proletariat, while waging a systematic campaign against Arab and Jewish chauvinism and pooling Jewish and Arab workers into a joint organized fight against the class enemy.”⁹

This balanced approach collapsed with the outbreak of country-wide clashes in August 1929. The Party was caught unawares by events that exposed its isolation from the growing nationalist sentiments among the masses of both communities. The Comintern used that opportunity to push forward Arabization in a decisive manner. It criticized the PCP for its “underestimation of revolutionary possibilities, open or hidden resistance to Arabization of the party, pessimism and passivity with regard to work among the Arab masses, fatalism and passivity on the peasant question, failure to understand the role of Jewish comrades as assistants but not as leaders of the Arab movement,” and so on.¹⁰

With this, the Party was forced to shift its orientation towards the Arab population. The growing national conflict in the country, in particular the Arab Revolt of 1936-39, gave rise to tensions among members, leading to the formation of an autonomous “Jewish section” in 1937. With the end of the Revolt, the outbreak of the World War and the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany in 1941, the Soviets moved in an opposite direction, towards recognizing Jewish rights in the country. This alienated Arab intellectuals and activists who had moved closer to the Party during the 1930s, when it sided with the Arab national struggle. Nationalist tensions were reflected within the Party, under conditions “where the Party was talking to each community in its own political language and appealing to it in terms of its national sentiments.”¹¹ The Party underwent a split in 1943, which saw the formation of the National Liberation League (NLL), *‘Usbat al-Taharur al-Watani* in Arabic, as an Arab left-wing party, alongside the centrist Palestinian Communist Party under Jewish leadership, and another group, the Communist Educational Association (later, Hebrew Communist Party), with a pro-Zionist orientation. The split in the movement “foreshadowed the coming partition of the country,”¹² and remained in effect until the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Jabra Nicola and the Move to Trotskyism

This context serves as the background for the ideas and deeds of Jabra Nicola, a Palestinian left-wing activist and intellectual, whose work is discussed here. He was born in Haifa in 1912, joined the PCP in the early 1930s but was critical of Stalinism and moved closer to dissident Trotskyist circles, working with Advocate Mordechai

Stein, publisher of *Ha-Or* (The Light). He was active in the Party as a writer and editor, translated work from English, and published booklets on labor organizations and strike activity in the country, and on Jewish and Zionist movements. These were written in the mid-1930s, when he was in his early twenties.¹³ He did not join any of the ethnic-based factions during the 1940s, but became a member of the re-unified Israeli Communist Party after 1948, and remained affiliated with it until the early 1960s.

There are only few and scattered references to Jabra Nicola's time in the PCP. His name as a leader of the left-wing of the Party, linked to Jewish Trotskyist activists, appears in an account by Bulus Farah, a leading PCP member, who recalls efforts to reconcile the Party mainstream, headed by Radwan al-Hilu, with the Jewish section. Farah was opposed to such reconciliation (regarding the Jewish section as Zionists in disguise who had no place in the Party), and reports a 1939 meeting in which Jabra participated alongside al-Hilu and others. There is no record of his position on the matter discussed, except that he translated the exchange.¹⁴ Most likely, he was the only leading Arab PCP member whose Hebrew was good enough at the time to act in that capacity. He played a further role in the reintegration of another group of Jewish dissidents, *Ha-Emet* (The Truth), in 1942, and may have flirted with the idea of challenging the al-Hilu leadership in 1943, though not much came out of that initiative.¹⁵

A Jewish activist from that period, Ygal Gluckstein (known by the pen-name Tony Cliff), who became a member of a tiny Trotskyist group, described meeting Jabra Nicola:

At the beginning of 1940 I managed to win over the editor of *El Nur*, the legal Arab paper of the Palestine Communist Party, although the party as such was illegal. His name was Jabra Nicola, a really brilliant man. While editor of *El Nur*, Jabra earned his living as a journalist on a bourgeois Arabic daily. He worked during the night. Every day at the end of his shift I would meet him and discuss with him for three or four hours. After nearly a month I convinced him. Perhaps he was also motivated by the prospect of not being pestered any longer! This was a really great achievement. To grasp the harsh conditions under which Jabra lived, I shall relate one incident. Chanie [Cliff's wife] had to go and visit him to get an article he wrote. I couldn't do this as I was on the run from the police. She went to his "house" – one room. In this one room he lived with his wife and one year old child, his widowed sister and her young child, and his mother who was dying from cancer.¹⁶

The left-wing dissident group with which Jabra Nicola became affiliated consisted of thirty members, mostly Jewish. They called themselves the Revolutionary Communist League, and were part of the Fourth International formed by Leon Trotsky in 1938, guided by the principles the Comintern had formulated in its early days. They opposed Zionism as "it serves as a support for British imperialist domination ... provokes a nationalist reaction on the part of the Arab masses, causes a racial division in the workers' movement, reinforces the 'holy alliance' of classes among both Jews

and Arabs, and thus allows imperialism to perpetuate this conflict, as a means to perpetuate the presence of troops in Palestine.” The way forward relied on progressive Arab forces, which regarded “the creation of a Union of the Arab countries of the Middle East as the only real framework for the development of the productive forces and for the constitution of an Arab nation.” In that quest, “it is the Arab masses, the workers and the poor peasants, who constitute the revolutionary force in the Middle East and also in Palestine, thanks to their numbers, their social conditions, and their material life, which puts them directly in conflict with imperialism.” In contrast, “the Jewish masses of Palestine, as a whole, are not an anti-imperialist force.” As a result, “unity between Jews and Arabs in Palestine is unrealizable” at present, and could come about only “through the abolition of all racist ideology and practice on the part of the Jews.” In other words, it required the abolition of Zionist ideology and practices, and “a split between the [Jewish] workers’ movement and Zionism. That is the condition *sine qua non* for achieving Jewish-Arab unity of action against imperialism, and it is the only way to stop the Arab revolution in the Middle East proceeding over the corpse of Palestinian Jewry.”¹⁷

Partition of the country was not a solution to the divide between Jews and Arabs:

A Jewish statelet in the heart of the Middle East can be an excellent instrument in the hands of the imperialist states. Isolated from the Arab masses, this state will be defenseless and completely at the mercy of the imperialists. And they will use it in order to fortify their positions ... The Arabs will also receive “political independence.”... In this way they hope to isolate and paralyze the Arab proletariat in the Haifa area, an important strategic center with oil refineries, as well as to divide and paralyze the class war of all the workers of Palestine.¹⁸

The old communist themes of violation of indigenous rights through Zionist settlement practices, imperialist control, and divide and rule policies were repeated here. To these, the Trotskyists added the role of the PCP and its factions, which failed to pose a working-class based alternative to the trio of enemies: Zionism, imperialism, and Arab Reaction. Instead of confronting them directly, they argued, the support of Moscow-aligned communists for the UN partition resolution of November 1947 reinforced that trio’s power to manipulate the masses.

Post-1948 conditions

The resolute opposition to partition failed, and in the ensuing armed conflict the majority of Palestinian Arabs residing in the territories allocated to the Jewish state fled or were expelled by Israeli forces. This process completely changed demographic and power relations in the country. The new conditions required major adjustments on the part of all political forces. The Trotskyists ceased to exist as a group, though a

few isolated individuals continued to be active politically. One of them wrote a piece in which he argued that “The mass flight of the Arabs from Haifa, the center of the Palestinian working class (oil refineries, railway workshops, etc.), and from Jaffa and the rest of the coastal plain, brought with it the complete annihilation of the Arab working class of Palestine.” As a result “The barrier between Jewish and Arab workers built by imperialism, Zionism and Arab Reaction, which had been broken from time to time [by joint activity in Haifa] ... has now been fortified by political boundaries between belligerent or at least rival states, excluding the physical contact between Jewish and Arab workers.”¹⁹

The post-1948 conditions isolated Israel’s citizens – both Jews and Arabs – from the region. Palestinians who remained steadfast lost much of their leadership, allowing the former activists of the PCP and NLL to occupy new positions of influence. As the only legal party independent of the Israeli-Zionist establishment and its Arab collaborators, the Israeli Communist Party (Maki) served as the focal point around which new politics of identity and resistance began to crystallize. In 1952 it started to publish a cultural magazine in Arabic by the name of *al-Jadid* (the New), edited by Emil Habibi and Jabra Nicola in Haifa. Despite his dissident past, Jabra Nicola’s skills as a writer and editor and his general intellectual stature were too important for the Party to ignore. On his part, the opportunity to work in a broader forum that allowed access to activists and popular constituencies must have seemed essential to his political mission.

In this capacity, Jabra Nicola was invited to the landmark 1958 meeting between Jewish and Arab writers. He was the oldest Arab participant there. An account published forty years after the event describes the following exchange: the Hebrew writer Aharon Meged was convinced that “the Arabs are part of the exquisite landscape of the country, and we must become familiar with that part of the scenery.” In response, according to one participant, Jabra Nicola said: “We are the salt of this land, and we want, like you, to enjoy its beauty.”²⁰ According to another participant, he said: “We Arabs are part of the country’s landscape, we are living people. Your tone of self-righteousness is the source of evil and the main obstacle blocking understanding.”²¹ He further added to the discomfort of his Jewish listeners: “According to Tammuz [a Hebrew writer who organized the meeting] ‘in his following remarks he [Nicola] hit the nail on the head by posing the disturbing question: how many of you know how to speak Arabic? Nearly all of us present, excluding two, speak Hebrew. How do you intend, therefore, to communicate with us?’”²² Needless to say, communication difficulties were not merely due to the lack of linguistic skills, but rather to inability to speak and be heard from within the same moral-political universe.

Palestinian citizens in Israel focused, of necessity, on a struggle to reconstitute their collective identity and regain and extend basic social and political rights. At the same time, the Middle East as a whole was entering a period of great turmoil, coinciding with the rise of the “Third World” as a political actor. Left-wing forces in the region welcomed these changes but also raised concerns. The international Trotskyist movement took part in this debate through a booklet written by one of its foremost

activists, Michel Pablo.

Pablo's 1958 work, *The Arab Revolution*, reflected the perspective of the Fourth International on the anti-colonial struggle. Arab national unity was a revolutionary goal: since the Arab ruling classes suffered from "organic inability" to achieve it, "the unity of the Arab nation will prove to be historically the exclusive result of the victory of the Arab revolution under proletarian leadership in its socialist stage." The call for "a national anti-imperialist united front rallying all classes" had to be combined with "merciless ideological criticism of the inevitable limitations of the national bourgeoisie, and the no less inevitable class struggle against it, in order to complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution and to tackle the socialist tasks."²³

Very little attention was paid to the Palestinian issue in the document. This was common at a time in which Palestinians, dispersed to different countries and fragmented internally, seem to have disappeared from the scene. With them, Zionism disappeared (conceptually) as well, leaving imperialism and Arab Reaction as the big enemies of revolutionary forces. We do not know whether Jabra Nicola made any contribution to the document, though he did maintain links with the Fourth International during that period, and joined its International Executive Committee in the 1963 World Congress. Whatever role he played in their resolutions and positions did not receive direct attribution, though as the senior person in the Middle East region it is safe to assume he was responsible for the (rather meagre) attention the topic received.²⁴ His role received much greater attention at the same time, however, in a local structure. The most substantial theoretical contribution ever made by Jabra Nicola was through his involvement with the Israeli Socialist Organization, which was formed in 1962 and became known by the name of its monthly publication *Matzpen* ("Compass" in Hebrew).

The *Matzpen* Period

Having risen to political prominence in the aftermath of the 1967 war, five years after it had been formed, *Matzpen* epitomized the radical Left critique of Zionist ideology and practices. Its members were few in number but its impact was big. It was the clearest voice speaking against the 1967 occupation, and calling for the restoration of the rights of Palestinians in Israel, the occupied territories and the Diaspora. Its voice was fresh and authentic, free of the cumbersome Soviet-style jargon. But, its support base remained limited and it never managed to move beyond the political margins.



A poster for the meeting of the Comintern. Source: Website of 21st century manifesto.

The initial approach of Matzpen was shaped by its origins in the Israeli Communist Party. Like the Party it called for “recognition of the national rights of the two peoples of Eretz Israel – the Jewish and the Arab.”²⁵ It asserted that “The Question of Palestine” – the entire set of relationships between Jews and Arabs in the country – had not been resolved: “Israel and Jordan divided between them the territory that belongs to the Arabs of Palestine. Both the private property of individuals and the homeland of an entire nation were forcibly taken away from them. But the nation itself did not disappear, and still exists.” Israel must “abolish immediately the military government in Israel, declare publicly that it is ready to return to the Arabs of Palestine what was taken away from them in 1948, recognize their rights as individuals and as a nation, help them acquire political independence and remove Hussein’s yoke – only such a policy can save Israel from the threatening future.” An agreement between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs would resolve the conflict and normalize Israel’s relations with Arab countries.²⁶

This position placed Matzpen at the extreme left of the Israeli political spectrum, but it was not very different from that of the Communist Party, and did not challenge the existence of the State of Israel or the right of Israeli Jews to self-determination. A crucial ideological challenge posed by Matzpen, though, was growing rejection of Zionism. From its initial call for improved relations between Israel and Arab countries it gradually moved towards a critique of Zionism. It redefined the clash between Jewish settlers and indigenous Palestinians as colonial in nature, and called for Israel to be “de-Zionized”, that is, to cease being a Jewish state and sever its links to Zionist institutions and policies that entrenched the conflict. With that, Zionism rejoined imperialism as a target of the revolutionary struggle.

The first instance in which Zionism was defined as the source of the problem, due to its colonial nature, was in an article discussing the Palestinian-Arab nationalist movement *al-Ard*, which faced persecution by the Israeli authorities. Matzpen argued, for the first time, that Palestine faced a colonialism of a special type, “the colonialism of the Zionist movement.” Whereas colonialism in general exploited the labor of the native majority, “the Zionist settlement movement was different. Its goal was the dispossession of the original residents in order to establish a Jewish state. Normal colonialism’s aim was to exploit the riches of the country; Zionist colonialism’s aim was the country itself.”²⁷ In that the Zionist movement was different from other colonial movements. Therefore, “the Israeli-Arab conflict is not a national conflict in essence... In the main it is a struggle between the Zionist colonial movement, that sought and continues to displace the Arabs from an ever-growing part of Palestine, and the Arab national movement, which tries to establish sovereign control over all territories inhabited by Arabs.”²⁸

This point was developed in a May 1967 statement, a month *before* the 1967 war and the subsequent occupation: this was “not an ordinary conflict between two nations,” because “the state of Israel is the outcome of the colonization of Palestine by the Zionist movement, at the expense of the Arab people and under the auspices of imperialism.” The solution to the conflict involved “the de-Zionization of Israel,”

which would bring an end to the discrimination and oppression suffered by the Arab citizens of the state, and recognition of the right of refugees to return or receive compensation. At the same time, “the recognition of the right of the Hebrew nation to self-determination” was essential as it would lead to the “integration of Israel as a unit in an economic and political union of the Middle East, on the basis of socialism.” The prospect of secure existence in the region would allow Israeli Jews to free themselves from Zionism.²⁹

From Matzpen’s perspective, the 1967 war and occupation confirmed that “Zionism is by nature a colonizing movement of settlers,” operating “at the expense of the Arabs and against the Arabs.” Uniquely among Israeli political forces, Matzpen linked the occupation to the ongoing dominance of Zionist ideology within Israel. What was needed was a revolution that would transform Israel “from a Zionist state, a tool for furthering Zionist colonization ... into a state expressing the real interests of both Jewish and Arab masses, a state which can and will be integrated in a socialist union of the Middle East.”³⁰ Only a revolutionary struggle in the entire region, against both the existing Arab regimes and the Zionist regime in Israel, could guarantee true cooperation between people of different origins.³¹

This transition, from regarding the conflict as national to seeing it as colonial in essence, was done largely under Jabra Nicola’s influence. He joined the organization about a year after it was founded. A little later a group of Haifa communist activists joined as well, among them his wife, Aliza. In their statement they criticized the CP, which had expelled them, for its lack of internal democracy and its refusal to debate issues of revolution and reform that were raised by the Sino-Soviet conflict of the time. No issues related directly to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were mentioned in the statement.³² Jabra Nicola’s articles during that period do not deal with the conflict either, and focus on developments in the Middle East – Egypt, Iraq and so on. There is no direct evidence for the role he played in shaping the theoretical orientation of the organization. And yet, his colleagues assert it was central.

In an obituary, Moshé Machover described Jabra Nicola’s impact:

He was much older than us, the founders of the organization, by 20-25 years. He had gone through the previous 30 years of the history of the world revolutionary movement without being contaminated by Stalinism. He remembered from personal experience things that we knew about only through reading books. In particular, he remembered the crucial period of the Zionist settlement process. Further, he had precisely what we lacked then – a consistent and comprehensive grasp of the Zionist settlement process and especially its impact on Arab society in Palestine. We acquired from him a deeper, more complete conceptualization of Israel as the realization of Zionist settlement. He also grasped the Arab Revolution as one indivisible process. The positions of Matzpen on these issues were adopted mainly under his influence. Some of his arguments we accepted immediately, as they seemed reasonable from the start. Others we accepted eventually, perhaps with some

modifications. Of course, it was not a one-sided but a dialectical process. Nevertheless, his impact is clearly visible in all our statements on Zionism and the Arab East.³³

Along similar lines, Akiva Orr defined Jabra Nicola's contribution as "the expansion of the political perspective from an approach that is restricted to Palestine to an approach that regards problems in Palestine as part of the problems of the Arab East in its entirety."³⁴

The new approach developed by Jabra Nicola was referred to as "The Arab Revolution" – a term already used in Pablo's document – which was not socialist in essence, though its dynamics pushed it in a socialist direction:

National unification is necessary not simply because the Arabs of the *Mashreq* [Arab East] share a long common history, a language and a cultural heritage. It is necessary primarily because the present political fragmentation of the *Mashreq* is a huge obstacle in the way of development of the productive forces, and facilitates imperialist exploitation and domination ... All these historical, cultural and economic factors are vividly reflected in the consciousness of the Arab masses throughout the region... But Arab national unification is impossible without a struggle to overthrow imperialist domination, which is the root cause of the present balkanization. And genuine anti-imperialist struggle means at the same time struggle also against the ruling classes in the Arab countries.³⁵

Palestinians play a strategic role in that struggle as they need to challenge the "old middle-class and landowners leadership of the Arab national movement" and the new "petit-bourgeois" leadership, both of which showed "total inability to solve the Palestinian question." Only "the exploited masses themselves, under a working-class leadership," can solve their historic problems, but this requires "a subjective factor – a political organization with a revolutionary theory and a revolutionary all-Arab strategy." The only way for the Palestinian people to defeat Zionism is by fighting its allies – imperialism and Arab Reaction – and "rally to itself a wider struggle for the political and social liberation of the Middle East as a whole." A political formula restricted to Palestine alone is doomed to fail. Only when the Palestinian and Israeli masses enter "a joint struggle with the revolutionary forces in the Arab world for the national and social liberation of the entire region," can the struggle succeed. And for Israeli Jews (and other non-Arabs) to participate, their national rights would have to be recognized.³⁶

These ideas were formulated more comprehensively in a 1972 document titled *Theses on the Revolution in the Arab East*.³⁷ In line with the Trotskyist tradition, the revolution in the Arab East is defined as permanent revolution, in which even the national and democratic tasks – let alone socialism – can be met only through a campaign led by the working class supported by the poor peasantry. The lack of development of an urban-based national bourgeoisie, and the historical failure of

the traditional ruling classes and the new state-oriented petite bourgeoisie to offer systematic opposition to imperialism, means that “the struggle against imperialism – inseparable from all democratic struggles – can only be a struggle against all the existing dominant classes and regimes in the region.” All local campaigns and mass mobilizations must be “directed by an all-Arab East revolutionary strategy supported directly by mass struggle throughout the whole region ... This strategic unity of the revolution corresponds to the most general national task of the revolution – Arab national unification.” This national task, though, “cannot be waged under the banner of nationalism.”

A distinction should be made between the progressive quest for national unification and the reactionary nature of nationalist ideology. Alongside the realization of national unity, the Arab Revolution “must recognize and defend the rights of all non-Arab nationalities in the Arab East.” Whereas minorities oppressed by Arabs (such as Kurds) deserve unconditional support, Israeli Jews are different: “their existence within the borders of this state is the product of a chauvinist colonialist operation, realized by means of oppression and expulsion of the Palestinians from their country.” Yet, they have become a nation distinguished from Jews elsewhere and from local Arabs. Their current national expression is reactionary and counter-revolutionary, and the main task is to restore national rights to Palestinians, but “the programme of the Arab Revolution should include a clause on the right of self-determination of the Israeli Jews after the victory of the revolution.” With the victory of the Revolution, “Israeli Jews will no longer constitute an oppressive nation but a small national minority in the Arab East. Then it becomes possible to speak of the equality of nations and the rights of every nation to self-determination.” The task of revolutionary activists is to show that the only safe future of Jews in Israel is to abandon Zionism and join the Arab revolution.

It is crucial to realize that Palestinian independence was not the answer for Jabra Nicola: an independent Palestinian state never existed and the struggle against Zionism and imperialism before 1948 was part of the struggle of the whole Arab East for national independence and unification. The petit-bourgeois Palestinian nationalist leadership (PLO, Fatah) “failed to recognize in theory and practice the regional (all-Arab East) scope of the revolution. It separated the struggle for the “liberation of Palestine” from the struggle against all Arab regimes.” That mistake led to its defeat. It neglected the regional dimension of the struggle, subordinated the class struggle to “national unity” with the Arab regimes (but not the masses), and focused on military campaigns. All this made it impossible “to politicize the masses in the various Arab countries and mobilize them for a revolutionary struggle” in the entire region. Only such mobilization could combine absolute rejection of all Zionist institutions with recognition of the national rights of Israeli Jews. That was the only formula that could potentially recruit the Jewish masses to the revolutionary cause.

By the time the document was written Matzpen had split into two factions, both of which continued to adhere to the same overall perspective. Much of Jabra Nicola’s published work was written together with Moshé Machover of the Tel Aviv

faction, who had moved to London in 1968. Jabra Nicola's relocation to London in 1970, following the death of his wife, facilitated their collaboration, and Machover continued to pursue the same analysis subsequently.³⁸ At the same time, due to his Trotskyist orientation, Jabra Nicola became affiliated with the Jerusalem-based faction, which joined the Fourth International in 1973. This latter faction carried forward a focus on the Arab Revolution, especially through ongoing debate over a document meant to provide a regional perspective on behalf of "organizations belonging to the Fourth international in the Arab region."³⁹ Due to illness, Jabra Nicola did not take active part in the debate and work on the document, completed in 1974, although his influence over it was clear.

History as a Context

Jabra Nicola's analysis was not merely political in nature, but rather an attempt to provide an overview of Arab history through a Marxist theoretical lens. This concern with history was not new for him.⁴⁰ He spent the last years of his life working on a manuscript that sought to apply Marx's concept of Asiatic mode of production to the Arab East. His focus was on the historical role of the Ottoman state in blocking the rise of an independent urban bourgeoisie, which could have embarked on a nationalist programme of industrialization and modernization. Such a class was the main driving force behind Europe's rise to global domination, but it had no equivalent in the Middle East. Instead, the traditional ruling classes combined land ownership and commercial pursuits to enrich themselves, at the expense of the rural and urban masses, frequently in collaboration with rather than opposition to European forces.

Arab society at present must be seen against a deep historical background of decline of the productive forces and spirit of research and innovation, going back to the end of the fifteenth century. The "dark ages" of the Arab East started just as Europe was embarking on the processes of renaissance, enlightenment and industrial revolution. Ottoman power, the dominant force in the Arab East for 400 years, reinforced the rigidity of traditional social structures and isolated the region from progressive influences emanating from Europe. As a result, when Europe started intervening in the Middle East in the late eighteenth century, regional social and political institutions

could neither repulse the invasion of foreign capital and foreign trade nor meet the urgent demand for the exploitation of the natural resources and the development of the forces of production ... In the Arab East there was neither a native bourgeois class to play the leading role in propelling the development of the productive forces, nor an efficient state to stem the tide of foreign capitalist invasion and steer the course of economic development.⁴¹

Attempts to reform the Ottoman state to allow it to withstand the European onslaught focused on building the military forces rather than the economy: “those reforms were superimposed upon a backward society that lacked the basic prerequisites for the development of the socio-economic structure and remained insignificant enclaves in a pre-capitalist economy and society.” This distorted their economic development, deformed the social structure, and damaged traditional cultural institutions without replacing them with new advanced ones: “capitalist exploitation was imposed upon traditional oppression.” Because western bourgeois civilization was brought to the Arab East “at the point of a gun” it became associated with plunder and aggression and gave rise to resentment against it. The result was a society “that had lost an old world without gaining a new one, and remained with the worst features of both,” undergoing a “crisis of asymmetrical, distorted and deformed development.”

Although capitalism as a dominant mode of production initially emerged in Europe, there were many instances of earlier capitalist relations in other societies around the globe. The question was why they did not evolve into full-fledged capitalism as they had in Europe. The Arab East had been dominated by a variant of the Asiatic mode of production, but to understand developments there today we have to “discover what specific features of that mode of production did exist in the traditional Arab society, what external historical influences had and still have their effect on that society and how these internal and external forces interacted and still interact.” That was the agenda for Jabra Nicola’s envisaged book, which he did not manage to complete.

How might this analytical framework affect our understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Among other things, it would direct our attention to social relations in Palestinian-Arab society (a part of the Arab region in the Ottoman Empire) before the beginning of Zionist settlement, and how these shaped the responses of different social forces to Zionism; it would allow us to examine the links between these social realities and indigenous organization and resistance; it would explore the connections between class formation and state and identity processes; it would study the quest for Arab solidarity with the Palestinian people in its social context, and differentiate between the responses of various classes; it would provide a basis for examining the social and political capacities of Arab and Palestinian movements in their campaigns against Zionism and imperialism, and for unity and development; and it would explore potential links between Arab and Jewish social forces across the ethno-national divide. While Jabra Nicola did not live to continue these explorations, others who followed him advanced these scholarly and political goals in their own ways.

Conclusion

It, it is instructive to read the following account, written thirty years after Jabra Nicola's death, by Tariq Ali:

Jabra Nicola was a Palestinian of Christian origin, who lived in Haifa but spent the last years of life in exile. He was a strong believer in a bi-national Palestinian state, where all citizens would have the same rights and which would one day form part of a federation of Arab socialist republics. He brooked no dissent from this position. There were *no* intermediate solutions, except for time-servers and opportunists. Nationalism was the problem, not the solution. Could we not see what Jewish nationalism had done to Palestine? The answer was not to reply in kind with the nationalism of the oppressed, but to transcend it altogether. It sounded grand and utopian. I was easily convinced.

I met him for the last time in the late 1970s... His son had rung and said his father wanted to see me urgently. It was raining when I reached Hammersmith Hospital in West London. The old Palestinian lay dying in a geriatric ward, surrounded by fellow patients watching TV soaps. Since most of them were partially deaf, the cacophony made conversation difficult. He grabbed my hand and held it firmly. His strength startled me. "I want to die," he said in an embittered tone. "I can't do anything more." And then he let go of me and made a gesture with his right hand, indicating the contempt he felt for the world. Who could blame him? He hated being in this hospital. I thought of the orange groves, the blue skies and the Mediterranean that he had left behind. He must have been thinking the same. I held his hand tight, told him he was still needed, a new generation would have to be educated, just as he had once prepared us, but he shook his head angrily and turned his face away. He was not a sentimental man, and I think he was annoyed with me for pretending that he could live on. He died a few weeks later. We buried him in a London cemetery. Another Palestinian burial far away from home.⁴²

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Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 129.
- 2 *Theses on the National and Colonial Question*, adopted by the second congress of the Communist International, <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch05.htm>. This and all Web sites following last accessed March 30, 2011.
- 3 *Manifesto of the Congress to the Peoples of the East*, <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/baku/manifesto.htm>.
- 4 Walter Laqueur, *The Soviet Union and the Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1959), 76-104; Joseph Berger-Barzilai, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Revolution* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved,

- 1968, in Hebrew), and Garay Menicucci, "Glasnost, the Coup, and Soviet Arabist Historians," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 24, 4 (November 1992): 559-77.
- 5 Nahman List, "Tzadak Hakomintern..." Part 4, *Keshet*, 24 (1964): 111-16 (in Hebrew). On one Arab activist won to the cause in this way see Salim Tamari, "Najati Sidqi (1905-79): The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32, 2 (Winter 2003): 79-94.
 - 6 Fourth Congress of the Communist International, *Theses on the Eastern Question*, 5 December 1922, in <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/eastern-question.htm>.
 - 7 Executive Committee of the Communist International [ECCI], "Resolution on Work in Palestine," 10th May 1923, in Leon Zehavi, *Apart or Together: Jews and Arabs in Palestine According to the Documents of the Comintern, 1919-1943* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005, in Hebrew), 40-41.
 - 8 ECCI, "Resolution Regarding the Report on the PCP," June 26, 1926, in Zehavi, *Apart or Together*, 83-84.
 - 9 Letter from ECCI to Central Committee of PCP, June 16, 1928, in Zehavi, *Apart or Together*, 144.
 - 10 ECCI Political Secretariat "Resolution on the Insurrection Movement in Arabistan," November 26, 1929, in Zehavi, *Apart or Together*, 203. English Translation in Jane Degras, *The Communist International 1919-1943, Documents: Vol. III, 1929-1943* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 76-84.
 - 11 Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979), 159.
 - 12 Budeiri, 153.
 - 13 His book on labour movement was referred to by a later historian thus: "Niqula was a veteran communist activist whose survey of strike activity in Palestine denounced both the 'Zionist Histadrut' and the 'opportunist' Michel Mitri [a Jaffa labor leader] for their 'betrayals' of the workers. His accounts of strikes tend to exaggerate the role played by the Transport Workers' Union, a marginal organization controlled by the PCP," in Zachari Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 404. Two surveys written in 1947 about the Arabs of Palestine by Jewish "Arabists" – Yosef Waschitz's *The Arabs in Palestine* and Yaakov Shimoni's *The Arabs of Palestine* – mention his book *In the Jewish World*, as does Michael Assaf in his 1970 book on Jewish-Arab relations in pre-1948 Palestine.
 - 14 Bulus Farah, *From the Ottoman Regime to the Hebrew State* (al-Nasira: al-Sawt, 1985, Hebrew edition, 2009), 60-62.
 - 15 Shmuel Dotan, *Reds: The Communist Party in Palestine* (Kefar-Saba: Shebna Hasofer, 1991, in Hebrew), 366-67; 417-18.
 - 16 Tony Cliff, *A World to Win: Life of a Revolutionary*, www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/2000/wtw/ch01.htm. The few factual inaccuracies in this account cast doubt on the role Cliff played in "converting" Jabra Nicola – he had been close to dissident circles long before then.
 - 17 International Secretariat of the Fourth International [written by Ernest Mandel], "Draft Theses on the Jewish Question Today," January 1947. Published in *Fourth International*, Vol. 9, No. 1, January-February 1948: 18-24, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1947/01/jewish.htm> Other documents from that period reflecting Trotskyist positions on the Middle East are in <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/fi/index2.htm>.
 - 18 Revolutionary Communist League, "Against Partition!," *Kol Ham'amad* (The Voice of the Class), 31, September 1947, in www.marxists.de/middleeast/misc/partition.htm.
 - 19 S. Munier [pseudonym of Gabriel Baer], "Zionism and The Middle East – The Aftermath of the Jewish-Arab War (A Report from Israel)," *Fourth International*, 10, 9, October 1949: 277-283, in <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/fi/vol10/no09/munier.htm>.
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 - 21 Somekh, 20.
 - 22 Somekh, 10.
 - 23 Michel Pablo, *The Arab Revolution*, 1958 in <http://www.marx.org/archive/pablo/1958/arabrev/main.htm>.
 - 24 His analysis of Egypt, Nasser and the prospects for socialism, appeared in the Fourth International's theoretical magazine under the name of A. Sadi [Said], as "'Arab Socialism' and the Nasserite National Movement," *International Socialist Review*, 24, 2 (Winter

- 1963) <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isr/vol24/no02/sadi.html> .
- 25 “There is an address,” *Matzpen*, 1, November 1962.
 - 26 A. Israeli, “Palestine,” *Matzpen*, 4, February-March 1963. Further elaboration of this position is found in A. Israeli, “Israel-Arab Peace, How?,” *Matzpen*, 11, September-October 1963 and *Matzpen* 12, November 1963.
 - 27 S. Meir, “Al-Ard and Us,” *Matzpen*, 21, August-September 1964.
 - 28 S. Meir, “The Root of the Conflict: Zionism versus Arab Nationalism,” *Matzpen*, 23, November-December 1964.
 - 29 ISO central committee, “Statement on the Israeli-Arab conflict, May 1967,” in *Matzpen*, 36, June-July 1967.
 - 30 “Down with the Occupation,” A statement by the ISO, January 1, 1969.
 - 31 A collection of all the core documents of *Matzpen* is found in Bober (ed), *The Other Israel: The Radical Case against Zionism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972). <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/mideast/toi/index.html>. For recent analysis see Ran Greenstein, “Class, Nation and Political Organization: The Anti-Zionist Left in Israel/Palestine,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 75 (Spring 2009): 85-108.
 - 32 Statement in *Matzpen* 14, January 1964.
 - 33 Moshé Machover, “Comrade Jabra Nicola, 1912-1974,” *Matzpen* 73, March-April 1975.
 - 34 Akiva Orr, “He was not a Teacher but we did Learn a Lot from Him,” *Matzpen* 73, March-April 1975.
 - 35 A. Said [Jabra Nicola] and Moshé Machover, “The Arab Revolution and National Problems in the Arab East,” *Matzpen*, 64, May-June 1972 (Hebrew), *The International*, Summer 1973 (English).
 - 36 A. Said [Jabra Nicola] and M. Machover, “The Struggle in Palestine Must Lead to Arab Revolution,” *Black Dwarf*, 14 (19), June 14, 1969.
 - 37 A. Said [Jabra Nicola], *Theses on the Revolution in the Arab East*: matzpen.org/index.asp?p=english_theses-jabre, September 14, 1972.
 - 38 See for example, Moshé Machover, “Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict and Resolution,” Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust annual lecture, November 30, 2006, www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/articles/moshe%20machover%20%202006lecture_b.pdf.
 - 39 The main author was Gilbert Achcar (of the Revolutionary Communist Group of Lebanon). Its title is “The Arab Revolution: Its Character, Present State and Perspectives” internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1608.
 - 40 A reference to such interest going back to 1952 is found in Bulus Farah, *From the Ottoman Regime to the Hebrew State*, 126-27.
 - 41 Jabra Nicola, unpublished manuscript on the social and economic history of the Arab East (London, 1974). All subsequent quotations are from that manuscript.
 - 42 Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads, and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2004), 88-9. The date of the last encounter is wrong, as Jabra Nicola died in 1974, after he had returned home from the hospital. In addition, it must be pointed out that Jabra Nicola did not support a bi-national Palestinian state, or any other state for that matter, but focused instead on the need for regional socialist unity that would transcend nationalism.