Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Discourse on the Right of Return, 1948–59

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This article traces the evolving discourse on the "right of refugee return" among the Palestinian citizens of Israel during the first decade of Israeli statehood, with emphasis on the role of the local Arabic press in shaping and reflecting that discourse. More particularly, it focuses on al-Ittihad, *the organ of the communist party (MAKI), which paid the greatest attention to the refugee issue. In tracing the party's shift from a humanistic/anti-imperialist stance on the issue to one emphasizing the refugees' inalienable right to return, the article sheds light on MAKI's political strategy vis-à-vis the Palestinian minority. It also illustrates the political vibrancy in the early years of the community, generally viewed simplistically in terms of a pre-1967 quiescence and post-1967 politicization.*

In late autumn 1959, Saliba Khamis, a Palestinian member of the Israeli Communist Party (*ha-Miflagah ha-Komunist ha-Yisra'ilit*—MAKI) central committee, wrote an essay in the party's Arabic-language newspaper, *al-Ittihad* (The Union), reviewing the ongoing attempts to compensate and resettle Palestinian refugees outside Israel. In his view, such offers would never succeed because of "the vigilance of the refugees themselves and their strong insistence on their right to return to their country." Khamis's invocation of "rights" (*huquq*) permeated his analysis, appearing fourteen times in his half-page essay.[1] His comments also reflected a shift in thinking of many Palestinian MAKI leaders during the first decade of Israeli statehood.

As the only legal non-Zionist party during the 1950s, MAKI was the political home for many Palestinian citizens of Israel who held Arab nationalist beliefs but had no other outlet for political expression. Like its predecessor, the Palestine Communist Party (PCP), MAKI's platform stressed internationalism and Arab-Jewish brotherhood, though disagreements over the party's attitude toward Arab and Jewish nationalism occasionally led to tensions within the party. In 1944, Arab leaders broke away from the PCP to form the National Liberation League (NLL), which had a closer affinity to

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Arab nationalist positions. Although the Jewish and Arab branches reunited in 1948 to form MAKI, such disputes once again led to the party's split in 1965 into the predominantly Jewish MAKI and largely Arab RAKAH parties. During the period under review, MAKI's Arab and Jewish leaders worked together to maintain an internationalist outlook while tailoring their political messages to appeal to their respective communities.

Given the disproportionately large Arab makeup of the party, MAKI's Arab leaders used their party's publications to enhance their reputation as the champion of Israel's Palestinian minority and to convince readers to vote for MAKI in parliamentary elections. While we cannot know with certainty how widespread the views expressed in *al-Ittihad* actually were, a close review of the paper gives us insight into the political positions MAKI leaders believed would resonate in the Palestinian community, thus providing us with a useful lens through which to examine Palestinian political discourse in Israel during its early years. Reports and editorials that appeared in *al-Ittihad* throughout this period show how two threads in the discourse on return developed, crystallized, and ultimately converged.

Initially, the few articles written on this subject were by party leaders with a strong pro-Soviet tilt and were aimed at convincing Israeli decision makers to allow refugees to return to their original homes and lands on humanistic and anti-imperialist grounds. However, by 1959, a host of regional and domestic factors led *al-Ittihad* to emphasize the collective and inalienable right of Palestinian refugees—both the "external" refugees mainly in the surrounding states and the "internal" refugees still in Israel but prevented from returning to their villages—to do so. These factors included mounting Palestinian calls for the right of return, which, coupled with growing Soviet support on the issue, gave MAKI some of the political cover it needed to take a stronger stance. At the same time, competition with the newly formed Arab nationalist group al-Ard and the leftist-Zionist party MAPAM for the political support of Palestinian Israelis, along with pressure from internal refugees themselves, further convinced MAKI's Arab leaders to emphasize the refugees' right of return—a position they have held ever since. This confluence of domestic and regional developments makes 1959 a useful endpoint for our discussion of MAKI's transformation.

Understanding how and why these changes occurred not only gives us keen insight into the dynamics of Palestinian activism in Israel during this early period but also demonstrates that the direction of this activism was often bottom-up rather than top-down. Furthermore, it shows how *al-Ittihad* helped connect the geographically and politically isolated Palestinians in Israel to the rest of the Arab world, paving the way for a reunited Palestinian political entity in the post-1967 era.

The refugee issue is one of the most contentious of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Palestinians have long argued they have a legal right to return to their homes in historic Palestine. This was based in part on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provision, "Everyone has the right to leave any country,

including his own, and to return to his country,"[2] as well as on UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), which recognizes "that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property."[3] Israel, however, has maintained that Palestinians do not have a legal right to return and that a solution to the refugee problem must be part of a broader peace agreement focused on the resettlement of refugees. While Israel did allow a few thousand refugees to be repatriated under family reunification provisions negotiated at the Lausanne conference in 1949, it has resisted pressures to accept large numbers of refugees since then.[4]

Much of what has been written on the Palestinian refugees has focused on the origins of the problem and their prospects for return.[5] Studies of internal Palestinian refugees in Israel have outlined the mechanisms by which they were deprived of access to their lands and their own attempts to return.[6] Less attention has been paid to how Palestinians in Israel viewed the refugee issue as a whole, especially during the early years of the state.[7] One reason for this may be the fact that Palestinian citizens of Israel are often viewed as having been quiescent prior to 1967, whereas after 1967, exposure to Palestinians in the newly occupied territories and in exile led them to challenge government policies more forcefully.[8] This was certainly true to some degree: the military government imposed on the community between 1948 and 1966, coupled with land confiscations, economic discrimination, and travel restrictions, greatly hindered any attempt at political mobilization during that period.[9] Nonetheless, bisecting the political history of Palestinian Israelis into "pre-1967" and "post-1967" periods glosses over more nuanced developments within the community during the early years of the state. Among the aims of the present study is to determine when the concept of "right of return" became commonly used in MAKI's discourses on refugees.

THE ARABIC PRESS AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Scholars have long debated the utility of examining media outlets to assess the salience of political issues in a given community. McCombs and Shaw's work on agenda-setting theory demonstrates how news coverage on a particular issue can increase its prominence in the public agenda. More recent scholarship has shown that a second level of agenda-setting affects *how* the public thinks about a particular issue.[10] Specifically in the Palestinian context, Rashid Khalidi has shown how the proliferation of local newspapers helped shape the early political views of Palestinian Arabs, a thesis corroborated by Ami Ayalon's research on Mandate-era newspapers.[11]

The thriving Arabic press during the Mandate was shattered by the 1948 war, after which most Arab-produced Palestinian publications, including three dailies and a host of weekly and monthly publications, were either relocated abroad or shut down, while the Israeli government limited both the importation

of media from the Arab world and the number of Arabic newspapers and peri-odicals allowed to be published internally.[12] Moreover, restrictions on press freedoms initiated in the late Mandate period continued to be enforced by the new authorities. These laws gave the government wide-ranging authority to control the licensing and content of publications through a system of permits and military censorship, as well as to punish those whose writings were per-ceived as going beyond acceptable norms of discourse.[13]

While a few minor periodicals published by Palestinian religious groups continued from the pre-1948 era, most of the Arabic press that emerged after the war was sponsored by one of three political parties. The communist paper *al-Ittihad*, founded in 1944 and suspended by the British in January 1948, was relaunched by MAKI in October of that year. Originally a four-page weekly, in March 1955 *al-Ittihad* began appearing twice weekly and covered both local and international news, largely from a Marxist and pro-Soviet per-spective. The editor-in-chief, Emile Habibi, wrote much of the copy and many of the lead editorials. Meanwhile, the ruling MAPAI (Labor) party launched its daily, *al-Yawm* (Today), in September 1948, with an editorial line aimed at convincing Arab readers to support the Jewish state. While much of the paper reported on "positive" government policies toward its Arab minority, Palestinian Israelis occasionally contributed to the paper as well, offering muted criticisms of Israeli policies.[14] The third party-affiliated publication was the weekly *al-Mirsad* (The Observation Post), launched in 1951 by the leftist Zionist MAPAM with an editorial emphasis on Arab-Jewish brother-hood and the desire for a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

A fourth periodical *not* affiliated with a legally recognized political party emerged briefly a decade later. This was *al-Ard,* launched in October 1959 by a group of Arab nationalists who had organized themselves under the same name several months earlier.[15] With an editorial line supporting Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and strongly criticizing Israeli policies, the periodical was not granted a publishing permit despite repeated requests, and the editorial board was arrested in February 1960 for distributing it without a license.[16] None of these publications discussed the refugee issue nearly as extensively as *al-Ittihad*.

Of the four publications studied, *al-Ittihad* appears to have had the small-est circulation, whereas *al-Ard*, short-lived though it was, may have had the largest.[17] The following table shows the estimated circulation figures of the four.[18]

Major Arabic Press Outlets in Israel, 1948–59

Title	Years	Frequency	Party Affiliation	Est. Circulation
Al-Yawm	1948–68	Daily	MAPAI	3,500–5,000
Al-Ittihad	1948–today	(Semi)weekly	MAKI	1,000–2,800
Al-Mirsad	1951–76	Weekly	MAPAM	2,500
Al-Ard	1959–60	Weekly	*Harakat al-Ard*	2,000–8,000

It bears emphasis that circulation figures do not present the full picture: as was common during the Mandate period, newspapers frequently passed from one person to another or were read aloud to those who were illiterate.[19] Moreover, *al-Yawm*'s relatively high circulation figures are at least partially due to the fact that Arab state employees had mandatory subscriptions to the paper, whereas Palestinian Israelis accused of purchasing *al-Ittihad* risked expulsion from their jobs on the grounds of being MAKI members, leading many to pass around the paper surreptitiously.[20] Thus, despite the figures, *al-Yawm* overall was received coolly by Palestinian Israelis, and its editors eventually conceded their inability to thwart *al-Ittihad*'s appeal.[21]

My survey of over 700 issues of *al-Ittihad* from October 1948 through December 1959 yielded approximately eighty articles, editorials, and reports focusing on internal and/or external Palestinian refugees, as determined by the keywords *al-laji'un* (refugees) and *al-musharradun al-'arab* (displaced Arabs) in the headline or subheading.[22] Although coverage of the refugee issue was uneven during this period,[23] two distinct frames of discourse on return can be found. The first is a "humanistic/anti-imperialist" frame, mainly espoused by MAKI leaders, which argued that allowing the refugees to return would foster Arab-Jewish brotherhood and thwart imperialist plans to sow divisions between them. The second is a "rights/justice" frame, found more commonly among non-MAKI activists and the refugees themselves, which argued that refugees had a fundamental legal right to return to their homes that could not be abrogated by anyone. The development of these frames can be divided into three stages that correspond roughly to the stages of state-refugee relations laid out by Hillel Cohen.[24] During the first stage, from 1948 to 1951, as Israeli leaders debated whether to allow Palestinians refugees to return, MAKI's humanistic/anti-imperialist frame was most prominent, whereas during the second stage, from 1952 to 1957, the plight of the internal refugees led to increased discussions of rights and justice. But it was not until the pivotal third stage, beginning in 1958 and culminating in 1959, that the rights/justice frame—embodied by the phrase "right of return" (*haq al-'awda*)—became the dominant discourse in the pages of *al-Ittihad*.

1948–51: THE HUMANISTIC/ANTI-IMPERIALIST FRAME

With the establishment of the state, both the new government and communist leaders looked forward to establishing a positive relationship. In the fall of 1948, the NLL central committee formally recognized Israel within the area allocated by the 1947 UN Partition Plan, thus paving the way for the establishment of MAKI and for *al-Ittihad* to resume operation that October. Throughout the following year, as MAKI's opposition to Israeli policies intensified, the government grew increasingly suspicious of its activities. Although authorities could not ban the party outright given its mixed Arab-Jewish membership and its support from the Soviet Union, they curtailed its activities in Arab towns and rigorously censored *al-Ittihad*.[25] Nevertheless, the

paper's support for Palestinian rights and its reputation as one of the few outlets willing to publish critical voices earned it widespread support from the Palestinian minority, with MAKI receiving the second largest number of votes (after MAPAI) from Arab voters during the first two Knesset elections in 1949 and 1951.[26]

Recognizing the political sensitivity of the refugee issue, MAKI leaders initially tried to appear nonthreatening to the newly established state. *Al-Ittihad*'s first issue under MAKI auspices gingerly addressed the question of whether Palestinian refugees outside the Armistice Line should be allowed to return by presenting it through a Marxist rather than nationalist lens. According to the issue's lead editorial,

> The purpose [behind the 1948 war and the refugee problem] is to maintain a continuous state of war between the state of Israel and the neighboring Arab countries. . . . If Arabs were able to return to their towns and villages inside the state of Israel, they would inevitably cooperate with the Jewish people in their struggle for freedom, peace and constructive work. If such Arab-Jewish cooperation—which the imperialist forces do not want at any price—were to occur, the power of democracy would proliferate.[27]

The editorial's analysis reflected not only the hope that Arabs and Jews in Israel could transcend nationalist sentiment and come together on humanistic grounds but also the official MAKI view that the root of the problem was "Anglo-American imperialism," which sought to turn Arabs and Jews against one another.

Others in the Palestinian minority, however, expressed slightly different views. The rector of the Anglican church in Haifa, Father Rafiq Farah, for example, sent an opinion piece to *al-Ittihad* (reportedly after it was rejected by *al-Yawm*) in September 1949 that disputed two of the most popular Israeli arguments against repatriation—that the refugees would be better off in Arab countries and that Israel's absorption of Jewish refugees from Arab countries constituted a population exchange—as untenable and based on racist assumptions. According to Farah, the right of return was sacrosanct and "no person or group can bestow on Arab refugees the right to return or not return. . . . This right is not given to them by anyone; rather, it is one of their innate human rights."[28] Such public affirmations of refugee rights in Israel were still rare at the time, but the fact that *al-Ittihad*'s editors were willing to disseminate them, even if they themselves had not yet formulated the issue in this manner, indicates that such discourses were already circulating among Palestinian Israelis.

During the first years of the state, no legal infrastructure existed in Israel to clarify which Palestinians were citizens and who could remain in the country legally. Although the November 1948 census was intended to determine citizenship eligibility, ongoing bureaucratic disarray and Israeli preoccupation with its borders meant that thousands of Palestinians in

Israel were not counted as citizens but accused of being infiltrators and expelled.[29] Even those who were counted properly often faced delays in the registration and receipt of civil IDs, which, coupled with ongoing expulsions, "contributed to a pervasive climate of fear and insecurity in their communities."[30] Meanwhile, the expropriation of Arab-owned land became a major issue, especially after the enactment of the 1950 Absentees Property Law that designated Palestinians not on their property as "absentees," allowing their lands to be confiscated by the Custodian of Absentee Property.[31]

Many of those labeled "absentee" were still in Israeli territory, often just a few miles from their original villages. Some had temporarily left their homes during the 1948 fighting, whereas others had been expelled after the formal cessation of hostilities. The return of these internal refugees was prevented on grounds of security, the need to expand Jewish settlements, and what Israeli historian Hillel Cohen calls "a refusal to reward those who were seen as the aggressors."[32] In September 1949, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett announced the establishment of the Authority for the Settlement of Arab Refugees in Israel to deal with the problem, which, before being dissolved in 1951, persuaded some 1,200 internal refugees to accept government resettlement plans.[33] Although the resettlement efforts had little success, they raised fears among the Palestinian minority about the prospects for refugee return.

By 1951 popular discontent over the refugee issue among Palestinian Israelis was so widespread that it became a political football during that year's second Knesset elections. The ruling MAPAI party formed an Arab electoral list with a platform calling for the restoration of property to the original owners,[34] while MAKI leaders, who for months had been calling on the Knesset to allow internal refugees to return,[35] sought to maintain their party's position as the preeminent defender of Palestinian rights. In the aftermath of the election (in which support for MAKI rose among those who had participated in the 1949 election[36]), party activists incorporated elements of the rights/justice frame more frequently into discussions about internal refugees. For example, while a December 1951 essay by Khamis began with the classic MAKI formulation that the refugees were "victims of the Palestine war imposed on the two peoples of this country by the imperialists and their supporters," his focus shifted quickly to questions of rights. He warned that recent government attempts to resettle internal refugees in Nazareth in areas around al-Rayna and Shafa 'Amr (where they were promised ten to twenty *dunums* in exchange for relinquishing any future land claims) were meant to "terrorize the refugees and compel them to give up their rights." Khamis seemed to be speaking on behalf of the refugees, as if they could not speak for themselves. However, subsequent years would

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prove that the refugees were much more adept at articulating their demands than MAKI leaders sometimes assumed.

1952–57: SHIFTING FRAMES

From 1952 to 1957, the refugee issue was overshadowed by other news items in *al-Ittihad.* The paper's international coverage focused on cold war politics and leftist movements, while domestic news centered on the struggle over land rights. In 1953 the Knesset passed the Land Acquisition Law, which confirmed the confiscations that had occurred under the Absentees' Property Law and called for the original owners to be compensated, making it more difficult for them to regain title of their land.[37] MAKI leaders vehemently objected to the law in the Knesset, while *al-Ittihad* referred to it as the "Land Theft Law."[38] The law disproportionately affected internal refugees whose land had already been confiscated, but additional Palestinian-owned land was also at risk, giving the land issue priority during this period.

Despite the relative paucity of coverage on refugees, a discernible shift nevertheless occurred in which the rights/justice frame began to appear more regularly. This shift coincided with the rise of Arab nationalism in the region—emboldening many of MAKI's Arab leaders and members to speak up more forcefully against the state and its policies—as well as the increased prominence of internal refugees themselves and their attempts to regain access to their lands and villages. Coverage of the internal refugees' own insistence on return led to a broader awareness of their plight, even among those who did not directly experience displacement, thereby nationalizing the issue of return among Palestinians in Israel.

In the international arena, Israeli leaders continued to oppose any significant return of Palestinian refugees until the full cessation of hostilities,[39] whereas Palestinians and Arabs opposed any peace plan that did not include the repatriation of a substantial number of refugees to Israel.[40] MAKI attempted to stake out a middle ground while continuing to reach out to its traditional base of Arab and Jewish workers and recent immigrants. The program of the Twelfth MAKI Congress, held in May 1952, invoked both "the right of Arab refugees to return to their country" and championed "the anti-imperialist struggle for peace and national liberation."[41]

In a rightward shift in Israeli politics, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion began to pursue a more activist military agenda. In February 1956, the government released the Ratner report, the findings of an official commission under Yochanan Ratner that opposed the return of external Palestinian refugees for security reasons[42] and argued that since the Palestinians left voluntarily, they relinquished any claims to return. In response, MAKI's Arab leadership tried to counter the "demonization" of Palestinians inside and outside the country by setting forth an alternative vision where the refugees' return would not be seen as a threat to the state. Emil Tuma, writing under the pseudonym Ibn Khaldun, disputed the Ratner report's security

conclusions, declaring that even though Israel and the Palestinian minority were both victims of a war "imposed by imperialism . . . the ties of friendship between the two peoples [had] strengthened" in recent years. While he acknowledged that Israeli fears of return were real, he appealed to Jewish Israelis' desire for peace: "Recognizing the right of refugees to return to their country does not undermine the security of Israel and does not hurt it; rather, it would achieve its security and benefit [Israel] because it would help solve the Arab-Israeli conflict and inaugurate an era of cooperation between Israel and the Arab countries."[43] Tuma's attempt to balance notions of Arab-Jewish brotherhood and anti-imperialism by affirming the refugees' right to repatriation showed that he still believed that Israelis could be persuaded on the issue. Seven months later, however, events on the ground would lead Tuma and others to radically rethink their positions and adopt a less conciliatory stance on the refugee issue.

The Suez war of autumn 1956 marked the beginning of what Joel Beinin terms "MAKI's Arab period" in which the party's Arab leaders began siding more openly with Arab nationalist causes. Abdel Nasser's growing appeal inspired many Palestinians in Israel—including MAKI members and leaders—to adopt bolder language on a host of issues concerning the Palestinian minority, including the return of refugees.[44] At the same time, the fact that Egypt had been invaded by Israeli, British, and French forces together led many in MAKI to alter their view of Israel as a victim of imperialism. Furthermore, the shift in Israeli-Soviet relations that followed the war allowed MAKI leaders, who may have been reticent to contradict Soviet policies previously, to speak out more boldly on the refugee issue. The Soviet stance at the UN, which argued that only the repatriation of Palestinian refugees would bring about peace, was given front-page coverage in *al-Ittihad*.[45]

The refugees themselves had long been pushing to return. Since the early 1950s, external refugees had been appealing to international bodies while several groups of internal refugees had challenged their expulsions in Israeli courts. Villagers from Kafr Bir'im, for example, filed a petition with the Israeli High Court of Justice in 1951 requesting they be allowed back on the grounds that their "village houses and land have never been used by the enemies of Israel or those who violate its security."[46] When the Israelis demolished their homes in 1953 to physically prevent their return, the refugees from Kafr Bir'im abandoned claims of exceptionality and focused on direct action and public appeals to justice.[47] *Al-Ittihad* recorded this shift and championed it.[48]

Another case highlighted in *al-Ittihad* involved refugees from the village of Saffuriyya who had been evicted in January 1949 and scattered across Nazareth and neighboring areas.[49] The paper had reported intermittently on the Saffuriyyan struggle to return[50] and in 1957 took up their cause more forcefully in an article headlined, "Yes, the Saffuriyyan refugees will return to their lands." The article described how Saffuriyya's former imam Shaykh al-Azhari led a delegation of villagers to the Adviser for Arab Affairs requesting to return to their village. When that did not yield results, the delegation

took the matter to the High Court, after which the military declared the area a closed security zone and ordered MAPAI Arab MK Salah al-Salim to prevent the refugees from utilizing their land until they relinquished their claims to the village. Al-Azhari told *al-Ittihad*'s correspondent, "All the government machines try to force me and force the refugees of Saffuriyya to relinquish our right to return to our village and to the lands of our fathers and grandfathers." But, he vowed, "The battle will continue until . . . Saffuriyya returns to its lands."[51] By championing Saffuriyyans' attempts at return and implicating an Arab MAPAI representative in government attempts to thwart them, *al-Ittihad* showcased MAKI as a supporter of refugee rights in an effort to promote MAKI at MAPAI's expense. Al-Azhari's insistence on the right of Saffuriyyans to return to their village also points to the growing prominence of a rights-based framework on the pages of *al-Ittihad*, which served to nationalize the refugee issue. Soon such a framework would become the dominant discourse by all strata of MAKI's Arab leadership as well.

1958–59: CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE RIGHTS/JUSTICE FRAME

As Israel entered its second decade, the dynamics between the external Palestinian refugees (entering their second decade of statelessness) and the Palestinian citizens of Israel (entering their second decade of military rule) changed, and the right of return came to dominate the refugee debate. The refugees' own insistence on return, editorials arguing against government compensation plans, and a national conference in Haifa all formed a decisive shift in the discourse on refugees among Palestinians in Israel—one that reconnected them to those in the diaspora and emphasized the inalienable right of all refugees to return to their homes.

These shifts came about as four key political developments shaped the period. First, the rise of Nasser-inspired Arab nationalism, with its promise of Palestinian liberation and the return of refugees, inspired a new wave of Palestinian political activism in Israel with a clear Arab nationalist tilt that emboldened MAKI activists to take a more defiant stand against Israeli policies. This led to the creation of the communist-nationalist alliance within Israel known as the Popular Front in May 1958. Second, Israel's accelerated efforts to settle external refugees in their host countries (through international lobbying) and internal refugees in their host towns (through resettlement offers) heightened Palestinians' sense of urgency on the matter. Third, the international community, especially the United Nations, seemed more willing to accommodate such resettlement plans, as illustrated by UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold's June 1959 report on refugees advocating inter alia refugee repatriation. Finally, the collapse of the Popular Front in mid-1959 had repercussions that challenged MAKI's position as the supreme champion of Arab rights in Israel. All these developments—which will be discussed in turn—led MAKI's Arab leaders increasingly as of 1959 to frame the refugee issue in terms of fundamental rights and justice,

causing the specific formulation of "right of return" to appear regularly in *al-Ittihad*.[52]

The Popular Front was founded in July 1958 in the wake of large-scale arrests of Palestinian demonstrators during that year's MAKI-sponsored May Day processions in Nazareth at a time when communists and pro-Nasser nationalists throughout the Arab world were coalescing into an alliance in the wake of the establishment that February of the United Arab Republic (UAR) comprising Egypt and Syria.[53] The Front's leaders included many MAKI and non-MAKI members with strong Arab nationalist beliefs who were eager to capitalize on support from within the Palestinian community, which they did in part by reaffirming refugee rights. The Front's platform (as published in *al-Ittihad*) called on the government to "allow villagers to return to their villages" and "allow the 1948 refugees to return."[54] The group's founding charter asked, "How can there be peace when there are hundreds of thousands of original inhabitants of this country who look every day, if not every hour, to their homes and their country, longing to return to their nation?"[55]

While continuing to cover potential peace deals and ongoing discussions on refugees in the international arena,[56] *al-Ittihad*'s editors became increasingly alarmed at developments on the ground aimed at precluding the return of refugees. Israel had been redoubling its efforts to resettle internal refugees in their host villages and persuade them to accept compensation for their lands, and by 1958, with the government-sponsored *al-Yawm* extolling the benefits of the plan,[57] large numbers of internal refugees were accepting the offers.[58]

Al-Ittihad defended those who refused to accept the government offers.[59] In one article, refugees living in al-Rama were interviewed on their attitudes toward the compensation schemes. One insisted, "we will not accept a substitution, even if they gave us heaven," while another declared, "I have sold all my possessions. I have nothing left to sell except my land in Iqrit, but I will not sell it or give it up. I will not give up my right to return as long as I am alive."[60]

Fears that the right of return would not be implemented were exacerbated by the results of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold's fact-finding mission to the Middle East aimed at determining what shape a resolution to the refugee problem should take. *Al-Ittihad* covered his visits and reported on his meetings with Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip and Jericho who insisted on their right to return to their original homes.[61] *Al-Ittihad*'s editors had expected that Hammarskjold's report would acknowledge return as a right;[62] instead, it called for the "reintegration of the refugees into the economic life of the Near East, either by repatriation or resettlement."[63]

Arabs throughout the region denounced the report,[64] and many Palestinian activists in Israel viewed it as surrender to the Israeli position. A lead editorial in *al-Ittihad* declared: "a thousand reports do not forfeit the rights of a million refugees."[65] *Al-Ittihad*'s coverage also included regional reactions, especially from refugees. In Beirut, the paper reported, refugees had gathered to

chant, "No uprooting and no resettling, instead returning to the homelands," and held a conference on refugee rights to inform the international community of their "request to return to the homeland." [66] Thus, rather than defusing the refugee issue, Hammarskjold's report increased its political salience and reinforced the sense of connectedness between Palestinians in Israel and those outside.

The uproar over the refugee issue led Palestinians within Israel to reemphasize the right of return by holding the first Conference on Lands and Refugees in Haifa on 4 July 1959, sponsored by the Popular Front. *Al-Ittihad*

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publicized the conference for months in advance and provided detailed coverage of the proceedings. The conference called for an end to military rule, for "internally displaced refugees to return to their villages," and for the government "to respect the [Universal] Declaration of Human Rights and implement its articles in their entirety with regard to the Arab people in this country."[67] The themes of the conference were almost entirely domestic; no mention of the external Palestinian refugees appeared in the proceedings. Nevertheless, the conference marked the first attempt by Palestinians in Israel to organize a nationwide event around specific political goals pertaining to the return of refugees.

Communist and nationalist leaders, along with hundreds of refugees and nonrefugees, reportedly attended the conference. Hundreds more—including villagers, activists, private individuals, and community leaders—had expressed the desire to attend but were unable to do so; several activists were arrested on the eve of the conference. Many of those who could not attend sent statements of support that were read aloud at the conference and mentioned in *al-Ittihad.* Nationalist Popular Front leader Yani Yani was one of those prevented from attending, but his remarks were read by another nationalist leader, Habib Qahwaji, who declared, "We have come to honor from this podium our brothers from among the refugees who have refused . . . to relinquish one inch of their land, no matter how valuable the compensation or substitution offered to them, out of their belief in their right to return to their villages and reclaim their land."[68]

Despite the apparently united front presented at the conference, the collapse of the communist-nationalist alliance in Israel was already underway. The breakdown reflected the broader disintegration in relations between nationalists and communists in the region stemming from the rivalry that had emerged earlier that spring between the pan-Arabist Nasser and Iraq's communist-backed 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, who had overthrown the monarchy the year before. MAKI openly sided with Qasim, whereas most Arabs (including many Palestinians in Israel) sided with Nasser.

Among the repercussions of the disintegration of the alliance was the above-mentioned emergence of the nationalist movement al-Ard in mid-1959.

Al-Ard's publications not only celebrated the achievements of Nasser and the UAR and openly challenged Israel's Zionist ideology but also questioned the parties claiming to represent the Palestinians in Israel. Against the background of the Nasser-Qasim split, al-Ard called for a boycott of the 1959 Fourth Knesset elections on the grounds that no party effectively represented the interests of the Palestinian minority;[69] MAKI in particular was challenged.

Yet neither *al-Ard* nor MAPAM's publication *al-Mirsad*, which also supported Nasser's Arab nationalism, paid much attention to the refugee problem in their pages. Although *al-Ard*'s first issue did call for "recognition of the right of Arab refugees to return to their homeland" as part of the group's platform,[70] subsequent issues did not discuss the topic at any length (perhaps out of concern that any emphasis on the issue would further jeopardize the group at a time when it was already seen as a threat to Israel's security). As for *al-Mirsad,* occasional articles touched on the poor living conditions of internal refugees, crediting MAPAM with improving their lives. The left-Zionist paper also cautioned that a solution to the refugee problem was possible only within the framework of a comprehensive peace agreement and, while studiously avoiding any discussion of rights, argued that if return were not possible, compensation should be paid to the owners of the land.[71]

Nonetheless, MAKI's insistent calls for the right of return could not compensate for the losses it suffered among Palestinian Israelis because of its support of Qasim over Nasser: the party lost half its Knesset seats (three out of six) in the 1959 Knesset elections. Following the defeat, MAKI's Arab leaders only reinforced their framing of the refugee issue in terms of rights. They were rewarded in the Fifth Knesset elections in 1961, when MAKI received more than twice the Arab votes as in the previous election, winning back two of the three seats lost in 1959. Habibi insisted that the refugee issue had been the primary campaign concern in the Palestinian community.[72] By then, the rights/justice frame of the refugee issue had become firmly ensconced on the pages of *al-Ittihad*[73] (which saw its circulation rise in the early-1960s[74]) and would continue in subsequent years. This helped contribute to MAKI's (and later RAKAH's) steady rise to prominence among Palestinians in Israel, culminating in the 1977 election in which RAKAH won the majority of Palestinian votes in Israel.

CONCLUSION

In May 2011, Palestinian refugees and activists in Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip utilized social media outlets to successfully organize a series of processions toward Israel's armistice lines to affirm their right of return. They were joined by Palestinians in Israel who held similar processions to the lands of their former villages. Such grassroots actions illustrate how connected the Palestinians in Israel, once so isolated, have become to those outside their homeland, and how refugees themselves are pushing their political leaders to acknowledge the centrality of the refugee issue.

A historical precedent can be discerned in the events outlined in this article. Throughout the 1950s, changing political circumstances, coupled with pressure from refugees whose voices were increasingly represented on the pages of *al-Ittihad*, persuaded MAKI's Arab leaders to adopt a firm commitment to the right of return for Palestinian refugees. In other words, *al-Ittihad* not only set an agenda with regard to refugees but also reflected the agenda of at least some of its readership, thereby nationalizing the refugee issue and increasing its salience within the Palestinian community. While a cynical reading of these events might dismiss MAKI's evolution as a mere vote-getting strategy, a more nuanced appraisal reveals how the bottom-up dynamics of political activism can persuade democratically elected leaders to adjust their political stance—even on such a highly contentious issue—to more closely reflect that of its constituents. If current regimes in the region evolve into or are replaced by more democratic ones, we may see similar changes in the years ahead.

ENDNOTES

1. *Al-Ittihad*, 20 November 1959.

2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13, para. 2, http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a11. See also Fayez Sayegh, *The Palestinian Refugees* (Washington, DC: AMARA Press, 1952), pp. 47–53.

3. Resolution No. 194 (III), Article 11. UN Document A/810, *Official Records of the General Assembly*, Third Session, p. 24, http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/043/65/IMG/NR004365.pdf?OpenElement.

4. Yaffa Zilbershats, "International Law and the Palestinian Right of Return to the State of Israel," in Eyal Benvenisti, et al., eds., *Israel and the Palestinian Refugees* (Berlin: Springer, 2007), pp. 191–218; Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947–1951* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992), pp. 218–43.

5. Naseer Aruri, ed., *Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return* (London: Pluto, 2001); Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

6. Sabri Jiryis, *The Arabs in Israel, 1948–1966*, trans. Meric Dobson (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1969), pp. 55–87; Ian Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (Austin: University of Texas,

1980), pp. 58–64; Nur Masalha, ed., *Catastrophe Remembered*: *Palestine, Israel and the Internal Refugees* (London: Zed, 2005); and Nihad Boqai, *Returning to Kafr Bir'im*, trans. Khalil Touma and Simon Boas (Bethlehem: BADIL Resource Center, 2006).

7. On post-1967 attitudes, see Alexander Schölch, ed., *Palestinians Over the Green Line: Studies on the Relations between Palestinians on Both Sides of the 1949 Armistice Line since 1967* (London: Ithaca, 1983).

8. As'ad Ghanem, *The Palestinian-Arab Minority in Israel, 1948–2000: A Political Study* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Elie Rekhess, "The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority in Israel," *Israel Studies* 13, no. 2 (2007), pp. 1–28; Nadim Rouhana, "The Political Transformation of the Palestinians in Israel: From Acquiescence to Challenge," *JPS* 18, no. 3 (1989), pp. 38–59.

9. Jiryis, *The Arabs in Israel*, pp. 1–54; Lustick, *Jewish State*, pp. 123–29.

10. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): pp. 176–87; Salma Ghanem, "Filling in the Tapestry: The Second Level of Agenda Setting," in Maxwell McCombs, et al., eds., *Communication and Democracy: Exploring the Intellectual Frontiers*

in Agenda-Setting Theory, (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997), pp. 3–14.

11. Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

12. Charles S. Kamen, "After the Catastrophe II: The Arabs in Israel, 1948–51," *Middle East Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 1988), p. 101–3.

13. Pnina Lahav, "Israel's Press Law" in Pnina Lahav, ed., *Press Law in Modern Democracies: A Comparative Study*, (New York: Longman, 1985), pp. 265–313.

14. Nissim Rejwan, *Outsider in the Promised Land: An Iraqi Jew in Israel* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), p. 66; Ellen Joyce Kubersky Geffner, "Attitudes of Arab Editorialists in Israel, 1948–67: An Analysis of *al-Ittihad, al-Mirsad*, and *al-Yawm*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1973), pp. 26–27.

15. The sponsors of *al-Ard* took advantage of a little known law carried over from the Mandate era that allowed any citizen to publish a single paper without a permit. Thus, each issue was published under the sponsorship of a different citizen and with a slightly altered title.

16. Habib Qahwaji, *Al-Qissa al-Kamila li-Harakat al-Ard* [The complete story of the Ard movement], (Jerusalem: Manshurat al-'Arabi, 1978), p. 27.

17. As part of the legal loophole that allowed for its publication, the papers could not be sold; readers were instead asked to make a contribution to the Ard movement. See Fouzi El-Asmar, *To Be an Arab in Israel* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978), pp. 74–75.

18. Except for the *al-Ard* estimates, the figures are from Michael Assaf, "The Arabic Press in Israel," *International Communication Gazette*, 7 (1961), pp. 23–24. For *al-Ittihad*, however, Assaf's estimates are 1,000–2,000. The circulation figures in the table reflect Joel Beinin's research in the MAKI archives, which show them to be somewhat higher. See Joel Beinin, *Was the Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948–1965* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), p. 242. For *al-Ard* estimates, see El-Asmar, *To Be an Arab,* pp. 74–75.

19. Ayalon, *Reading Palestine,* pp. 138–53; Jacob Landau, *The Arabs in Israel: A Political Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 59–60.

20. El-Asmar, *To Be an Arab,* p. 93; Siham Daoud, interview with author, Haifa, 21 May 2007; Hanna Ibrahim, interview with author, Bi'nah, 23 May 2007.

21. Kamen, "Catastrophe II," pp. 102–3; Geffner, "Arab Editorialists," p. 151; Rejwan, *Outsider,* p. 66.

22. This is a conservative count as it does not include dozens of additional pieces that touched on elements of the Palestinian refugee issue but did not focus on it.

23. I found twelve articles published in 1949, and twenty-eight articles in 1959. The remaining years averaged five articles annually.

24. Hillel Cohen, "The State of Israel versus the Palestinian Internal Refugees," in *Catastrophe Remembered*, pp. 59–61.

25. Samih al-Qasim and Emile Habibi, "Two Views on the Forms of Censorship and the Limits of Freedom," *Index on Censorship* 11, no. 4 (1982), pp. 19–20.

26. Landau, *The Arabs in Israel,* pp. 110, 115.

27. *Al-Ittihad*, 25 October 1948.

28. *Al-Ittihad*, 11 September 1949.

29. Shira Robinson, "Occupied Citizens in a Liberal State: Palestinians under Military Rule and the Colonial Formation of Israeli Society, 1948–1966" (Ph.D diss., Stanford University, 2005), pp. 64–116; Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949-1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), pp. 28–57.

30. Robinson, "Occupied Citizens," p. 46.

31. Cohen, "The State," p. 59.

32. Cohen, "The State," pp. 56–58.

33. Alexander Bligh, "Israel and the Refugee Problem: From Exodus to Resettlement, 1948–52" *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (1998), p. 136.

34. Bligh, "Refugee Problem," p. 140.

35. *Al-Ittihad*, 6 January and 17 March 1951.

36. Landau, *The Arabs in Israel,* p. 116.

37. Lustick, *Jewish State*, pp. 174–75.

38. *Al-Ittihad*, 6 and 20 March; 17 and 24 April; and 1 May 1953. See also Beinin, *Red Flag,* p. 138.

39. Bligh, "Refugee Problem," pp. 128–32. See also *al-Yawm,* 18 June and 29 November 1953; and 17 November 1955; *al-Ittihad* 22 November 1955.

40. Sayegh, *The Palestine Refugees,* pp. 1–4 and 47–54.

41. Beinin, *Red Flag,* p. 142.

42. Ilan Pappé, "An Uneasy Coexistence: Arabs and Jews in the First Decade of Statehood," in S. Ilan Troen and Noah Lucas eds., *Israel: The First Decade of Independence* (Albany: State University New York Press, 1995), pp. 625–26.

43. *Al-Ittihad*, 3 April 1956.

44. Beinin, *Red Flag,* pp. 193–95.

45. *Al-Ittihad*, 22 February 1957; 13 August 1957.

46. Boqai, *Returning*, p. 43.

47. Boqai, *Returning*, pp. 55–67

48. *Al-Ittihad*, 27 September 1953.

49. Morris, *Birth,* p. 241; Isabelle Humphries, "'A Muted Sort of Grief': Tales of Refuge in Nazareth (1945–2005)," in *Catastrophe Remembered*, pp. 154–55.

50. *Al-Ittihad*, 4 March and 20 December 1955.

51. *Al-Ittihad*, 22 March 1957.

52. Of the twenty-eight articles on refugees published in 1959, fourteen included the phrase "*ḥaq al-'awda*" in the heading or subheading, more than all previous years combined.

53. Beinin, *Red Flag,* pp. 202–3.

54. *Al-Ittihad*, 8 July 1958.

55. *Al-Ittihad*, 26 September 1958.

56. *Al-Ittihad*, 28 February and 2 July 1958, 20 January 1959.

57. *Al Yawm*, 10 April 1959.

58. Cohen, "The State," p. 61.

59. *Al-Ittihad,* 20 June 1958 and 20 January 1959.

60. *Al-Ittihad*, 14 April 1959. On Iqrit, see Boqai, *Returning*, pp. 43–49.

61. *Al-Ittihad,* 26 December 1958, and 6 January 1959.

62. *Al-Ittihad*, 19 May 1959.

63. United Nations General Assembly, Proposals for the Continuation of United Nations Assistance to Palestine Refugees, UN Document A/4121, 15 June 1959, http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/2ee946 8747556b2d85256cf60060d2a6/8b7825ee cb50097e85256e4c0074e182.

64. Fayez Sayegh, *Mashru' Hamarshuld wa-Qadiyat al-Laji'in* [The Hammarskjold Plan and the Refugee Issue] (Beirut: Dar al-Fajr al-Jadid, 1959).

65. *Al-Ittihad*, 23 June 1959.

66. *Al-Ittihad*, 30 June and 3 July 1959.

67. *Al-Ittihad*, 9 June and 7 July 1959.

68. *Al-Ittihad*, 7 July 1959

69. *Kalimat Al-Ard*, 31 October 1959

70. El-Asmar, *To Be an Arab,* p. 72.

71. *Al-Mirsad*, 6 March, 30 March, 27 November, and 18 December 1958; 25 June, 2 July, 22 October, 26 November, and 3 December 1959.

72. Beinin, *Red Flag,* p. 235. According to Landau , MAKI's "propaganda for the return of the Arab refugees proved an invaluable vote-getter." Landau, *The Arabs in Israel*, p. 134.

73. *Al-Ittihad*, 27 May, 18 November, and 30 December 1960; 24 March, 5 May, 2, 20, 27, 30 June, 14 July, 1, 22 September, 10 November, and 8 December 1961.

74. Beinin, *Red Flag,* p. 242.