

Reflections on a Silenced History *The PCP and Internationalism*

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In the introduction to a new edition of his 1979 study, The Palestinian Communist Party 1919-1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism (Haymarket Books 2010), Musa Budeiri reflects on the shortcomings and successes of the Palestine Communist Party in articulating a vision and platform at odds with both nationalism and capitalism in the midst of a “colonial encounter of a unique character.” Jerusalem Quarterly thanks the author and Haymarket Books for permission to publish this introduction.

When I embarked on my research in 1970, to my mind I was engaged in a political project of attempting to rescue and reconstruct a slice of history in Palestine in the years following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The very existence of a communist movement in Palestine uniting within its

Radwan Hassan al Hilou (Musa) general secretary of the Palestine Communist Party 1934-1943. *Source: Haganah Archives.*

ranks Arab and Jewish members pointed to a possible future, at variance with both nationalism and capitalism. In its short existence, the Palestine Communist Party (PCP) succeeded in bringing together Arab and Jewish workers on a platform of class solidarity.

Despite numerous shortcomings, the PCP attempted to establish a foothold in the midst of a colonial encounter of a unique character. In addition to the colonial power Britain, it faced another adversary in the shape of a Jewish nationalist movement embarked on a colonial settler project. This situation was compounded by Stalinist domination of both the Soviet state and the Communist International (Comintern). While eventually overwhelmed by the violent pull of national conflict, the PCP successfully articulated a broad platform which included all the salient features of a political program that has stood the test of time. This encompassed recognition of the imperative of Arab unity as a condition for social and economic transformation in the eastern part of the Arab world, and internationalism as the precondition for successful state formation in a multiethnic and multicultural region which after centuries of Ottoman rule was trying to rid itself of British and French colonial rule. Palestine's problems could only be resolved in a broad regional context.

In trying to reconstruct a party of men and women, rather than one made up of ideological platforms, I sought to meet with the largest possible number of (by then old) party members and activists. There was, at the time, little published material on the history of the party, and what existed was either authored by cold warriors and/or betrayed an Orientalist bias that treated the party as part and parcel of the master narrative of the contemporary Jewish settlement in Palestine.¹ Historical circumstances led to the excision of the Arab members of the party from the historical record, and they have become erased from memory. While not aiming to produce an oral history, it seemed necessary to seek them out and record their narrative, noting at the same time that those personal narratives were colored by the passage of time, by changed political and personal circumstances, by rivalry and personal issues, and also by an effort to present a politically correct attitude retrospectively.

In the period since, numerous works have appeared in Arabic, English and Hebrew, purporting to deal with the history of the party and the working class in Palestine. None provide new ways of seeing, with two exceptions. The collections of correspondence between the Eastern Section of the Comintern and the party leadership, culled from the archives in Moscow, help provide a new reading of the internal history of the party.² These have only recently become available to researchers. In addition, a number of political memoirs, some more enlightening than others, by old communist activists have been published.³

From its inception as a worker-based group among the small community of Jewish immigrants in Palestine, the PCP attempted to reconcile adherence to Zionism with Comintern membership, while the Comintern for its part wanted the party to transform itself into a territorial organization which represented the indigenous population. Though the policy of the Comintern went through numerous changes as a result of Soviet foreign-policy imperatives, it remained committed throughout to a strategy of

Arabization. In its attempt to translate Comintern directives into practical politics, the party sought to locate a radical revolutionary nationalist wing within the Arab Palestinian national movement. It elected to see Hamdi Husseini⁴, a journalist from Gaza, and a small group of associates who were grouped together as a faction within the Istiklal Party as representative of this radical trend. As the newly published documents make clear, the party, from its recognition as a section by the Comintern in 1924 until the loss of contact in 1937-8, was in constant communication with Moscow requesting guidance and support.⁵ This extended to matters large and small, to an extent that makes it difficult to talk of the PCP as an autonomous organization. The loss of contact with Moscow meant that the party was no longer able to function as a united Arab Jewish organization, even as formal break up would only come about in 1943 with the formal dissolution of the Comintern, a gesture by Moscow to its western allies. Radwan al Hilou, the party general secretary in 1943, makes the point that his authority remained unquestioned so long as Moscow supported him,⁶ and indeed it is clear from the documents that authority over the party leadership came not from its rank and file but from Comintern officials. Party leaders since the recall of the first founder of the party, Wolf Auerbach, were all Moscow appointees.

To understand the debates of the early twenties it is necessary to remember that in the immediate post-1917 period, communists believed the future of their revolution lay with the spread of social revolution in the advanced capitalist countries – specifically in Europe – not the national independence struggles in the colonies. The PCP, like a number of other communist parties, was born in this dynamic of the international socialist movement. In the aftermath of Bolshevik success, containment, coupled with the failure of socialist revolution in Europe, and the consolidation of Stalin's authority in Moscow, led in practice to the triumph of the doctrine of "socialism in one country." The theoretical justifications advanced by Stalinism sought to legitimize an already existing political reality. All kinds of questions raised themselves as a consequence, concerning the nature of the foreign policy to be pursued by the new socialist state and the role of the various communist parties in their respective countries. Self-defense of the revolution, even before the *raison d'état* of the Soviet state, became the mainspring of Soviet policy. It searched for ways to break the iron curtain imposed by Western capitalism. Weakening Western capitalist powers suggested breaking the chain at its weakest link, their overseas possessions and the source of much of their wealth. This called for involvement in the national liberation struggle of the colonies.

Palestine possessed its own specific conditions within the colonial order. Britain had taken upon itself the task of facilitating the establishment of a Jewish national home. This necessitated the fostering of Jewish immigration to the country, its protection, and the promotion of institutions of self-rule for the Jewish community. This was legitimized as an international undertaking entrusted to Britain by the League of Nations.

The rise of the Nazis to power in Germany in the thirties led to a considerable Jewish immigration to the United States, neighboring European states, and anywhere else the Jewish refugees could gain entry. This served to transform the nature of



Emil Habibi and Towfic Toubi, leading activists of the National Liberation League in the 1940s. *Source: Central Zionist Archives.*

the Jewish community in Palestine. Initially the number of Jewish immigrants was insignificant. Zionism was a minor player in European Jewish politics, facing much stronger and longer-established parties, both traditional and revolutionary. In Palestine itself, until the 1930s, the Jewish community was small, and did not figure prominently in the political and economic life of the country. The increased rate of immigration, particularly the arrival in the country of up to 200,000 German Jewish refugees by the mid-1930s, transformed the situation.

The Zionist movement succeeded in establishing Palestine as a center for rescue and shelter for at least part of threatened European Jewry. Although Zionist credentials were not required from the newcomers, immigrants became objectively part of the Zionist settler enterprise upon their arrival in Palestine. The Arab revolt in the mid-1930s had the unintended effect of promoting the autonomy of the Jewish community. By the revolt's end, through immigration, a critical mass was achieved. The Peel Commission proposals in 1937, the first time the British masters of the country openly talked about partition, is significant in this respect. For the next ten years, and until partition took place in 1948, this was the invisible political agenda dictating the course of events.

Mid-1930s Palestine was no longer a purely Arab country with a small indigenous traditional Jewish community and a small minority of European immigrants. The "demographic consequences of Zionism"⁷ had become essential in shaping any possible future. So far, neither the PCP nor the Comintern viewed the struggle between

Arabs and Jews as a colonial encounter. It would have been surprising had it been otherwise. The modern world in the aftermath of the First World War witnessed all sorts of wars – colonial, civil and revolutionary – but no ongoing settler colonial projects, and certainly not one where the colonial power did not install its own nationals as settlers, but rather people coming from a variety of countries with the object of “recreating” themselves as a nation. In the party’s (as in the Comintern’s) worldview, Jewish immigrants in Palestine acquired equal rights to those of the indigenous inhabitants upon their arrival in the country. Party and Comintern viewed the struggle in Palestine through the prism of class, not nation. They rejected as defeatist the view that the Jewish community constituted an undifferentiated mass and that all Jews in Palestine were counterrevolutionary. The corollary that all Arabs are revolutionary was also deemed theoretically untenable. Abandoning this view would amount to abandoning any hope of working amid and gaining support of Jewish workers, and would negate the party’s *raison d’être*. After all, to the extent that there was a modern proletariat in Palestine, this was predominantly Jewish. On practical grounds, treating the Jewish community as a monolithic Zionist bloc would lead the most ideologically committed Jewish members to leave the country altogether, further weakening the party.

The Party’s theoretical armory was necessarily better suited to fight the class battle, but it found itself in a situation not of its own choosing. The party was after all born within the folds of the Zionist movement, albeit within its left wing. This in itself meant that party members and party membership were predominantly Zionist until the early thirties, but most Zionists-turned-communists lost the will to remain in the country once disillusionment set in. In a best-case scenario, it was the task of the more enlightened proletarian elements to transform the condition of the native Arab population. Nevertheless, the Party was aware throughout of its settler origins, that its members were viewed as outsiders, that they were not familiar with the local language, and that they were not part of the social fabric of Arab society. While these were regarded as weakness, they were not seen as insurmountable obstacles. The party strove to represent the objective interests of both Arab and Jewish working people, the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the country. Jewish comrades would play the role at various stages of leaders and advisers, and would constitute the foot soldiers of the party. Consequently, even after Arabization was officially consecrated as official party doctrine, and after overcoming the link to Bolshevization, and the appointment of an Arab comrade as party secretary general, police and newspaper reports attest to the fact that most of those arrested distributing party leaflets and flyers and apprehended in demonstration were Jewish party members. Right to the end and the break up of the party in 1943, Jewish comrades represented the majority of party members.

It is not clear that the party fully comprehended the dynamics of Arab society or recognized the process of national identity formation taking place in the aftermath of the Anglo-French partition of Bilad al Sham (Greater Syria). It was evident that the Party had little understanding of how to carry out its aims in the absence of an Arab working class, and was unable to reach out to the Arab peasantry. Declaring the

fundamental importance of the agrarian question, which it did, was not sufficient. Declaring the importance of Arab unity, which it also did, while at the same time establishing separate sections in the mandated Arab states did not further the cause of unity. It is perhaps not inappropriate to pose the question whether the Comintern itself, to whom the Party remained faithful throughout, itself ever came to an understanding of the role of national conflict. In the case of Palestine, it held to a broad view of a fundamental antagonism between the whole of colonial society and foreign colonial powers, but excepted from this view was a thin stratum of feudal traditional and religious leaders who dominated the national movement and were thus incapable of leading an anticolonial struggle. Yet the national movement itself was differentiated. Within its ranks there was a more radical wing which was ready to carry on the struggle against British colonialism, and which refused to be deflected into directing its energies against the Jewish community.

The Party had to face criticism from within its own ranks of extending uncritical support to the Arab national movement. Party leaders later admitted, in their correspondence with their superiors in the Eastern Section, to committing serious mistakes. But if “mistakes” were made for a certain period during the first phase of the armed revolt in 1936 as a result of the party opening its ranks and its leadership to a new generation of Arab members, the record makes clear that party leaders were aware of the dangers posed by the pursuit of such policies.⁸ It is evident though that the division was not based on ethnic or national identity, but on political understanding of what the correct line ought to be. The problem lay in the Comintern’s mistaken analysis of nationalist conflict relying on the experience of selected European countries, which had long ago been through the crucible of national state formation and where internal antagonisms were centred on class rather than national or religious identities.

Politically, the party remained unable to find a common language which spoke to the interests of both Arabs and Jews in Palestine. To Jewish workers it spoke the language of the class struggle, to Arabs the language of anti-imperialism. It declared itself in the anti-imperialist camp, which served to alienate a sizeable portion of Jewish party members. Britain was the main enemy, and not only for reasons of ideological correctness, but also as a reflection of the realities of Soviet national interest. This was made clear at the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. The party withheld support for the war (a popular tactic among Arabs, but unacceptable to the overwhelming majority of Jewish inhabitants), and suffered the repressive policy of the British authorities as a result. On the entry of the Soviet Union into the war in 1941, the Party changed track and vigorously conducted a pro-war effort policy.

It is not *evident* that the Party understood clearly enough that no solution to the conflict in Palestine would be possible that did not provide for joint Arab Jewish co-existence. It put forward class as the basis of common interests. But the two communities lived separate lives, and more importantly viewed relations with the colonial power through different lenses. The Arabs largely viewed Britain as an imperialist power, and one which was facilitating the growth and power of the Jews



Al-Ghad, monthly journal of the League of Arab Intellectuals, September 14, 1945.

in Palestine. The Jewish community, beneficiary of British promises and policies, was eager for more British support, and regarded it as Britain's duty to come to its defense. Its opposition to the British Mandate in its final years grew out of a feeling of betrayal. For Arab nationalists, all Jewish immigration to Palestine was illegitimate and they could not conceive of political rights for members of the immigrant community, not only collectively, but also on an individual level.

For the PCP, emphasis was on shared social and economic needs and interests and not on ethnic identity, and these were held in common as far as the vast majority of both groups, the only exception being a thin strata of servants

of British imperialism from both national camps. That one group was indigenous and the other part of a settler colonial project was irrelevant and beside the point.⁹ This was theory. In practice, and as Comintern documents make clear, the Arab leadership of the party was unable, at times of heightened national conflict, to remain unaffected by the general Arab nationalist atmosphere, which did not allow it to perceive the Jewish community as a differentiated society with conflicting interests.¹⁰ The same goes for Jewish party members, the majority of whom during the years of the Arab Revolt became inactive or established themselves as autonomous factions.

In order to understand the situation confronting the party, it is perhaps necessary to pose a number of questions, such as whether the PCP ever succeeded in transforming itself into a territorial organization. If so, then what does this say about the establishment of the National Liberation League as a framework for Arab communists and left-wing nationalists in 1944, and the separate existence of Jewish communists organized in a number of competing but purely Jewish organizations? It behooves us to inquire whether prior to the Soviet declaration for two states, the PCP itself actually called for the establishment of what kind of state? An Arab state? A binational state? Two states? Or what?

It was clear even before the end of the mandate and the ensuing struggle between natives and settlers that the British did not aim and had not created a new Palestinian identity or nationality, and that there were two separate and antagonistic national groups in the country, Arabs and Jews, holding mutually exclusive nationalist demands. The party did not acknowledge this and continued to place culpability at the door of British policies of divide and rule. The challenge of the changing and evolving nature of the Jewish community was not met by the party or by the Comintern in

their theoretical articulations. Events forced themselves on the party. Jewish and Arab members had different responses. They did not live in the same binational reality. They lived and struggled within their own national communities which they saw as differentiated and nuanced. These were closed worlds and allowed them the comfort of correct positions. As relations between the party leadership and the Comintern grew weaker in the thirties, coming to a full stop during the latter years of the Arab revolt, this had a twofold effect. It allowed party members to pursue their own inclinations. The removal of Comintern control strengthened the respective nationalist tendencies within each group. At the same time, Moscow's absence weakened the position of the party's general secretary, who now came to constitute another competing faction, no longer safeguarded by the infallibility of the Comintern.

It is tempting to ask at what point the party changed its analysis of the conflict in Palestine, and if so when it ceased to regard it as primarily an anticolonial struggle. There is little doubt that various groups of Jewish communists did undergo such a transformation. Already in the opposition to Arabization and the rearguard action linking it to Bolshevization we can see evidence of a reluctance to follow a path which shifted the weight of party activity from the social to the national terrain. The party's theoretical stance remained consistent that both Arab and Jewish communities were internally differentiated divided groups, thus priority was given to competing class interests and differences, and the necessity of continued activity within all national groups. At the same time, party activity, by aiming to ground itself within the Arab national community, appeared to lead to the adoption of the main slogans of the Palestinian Arab national movement, such as the cessation of immigration, the cessation of land sales, and the establishment of an independent Arab state. The advent of the era of the popular front, declared by the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, enabled both Arab and Jewish members to argue that it was permissible for the party to establish links with progressive elements within both national camps. In itself this was the beginning of the formal recognition of symmetry between the two national groups, without at the same time entering into a discussion about whether they possessed equal political rights or the legitimacy of their respective claims.

The various groups of Jewish communists would, in 1948, coalesce to support the establishment of the Jewish state within the borders decreed by the UN partition proposals. While politically rejecting Zionist practices aimed at establishing a national home and since Biltmore in 1942 openly calling for statehood, they were confronted by the consequences of the success of this endeavor, which developments, both regionally and internationally, forced them to acquiesce to.

For its part, the Arab national movement, with the exception of the Hamdi Hussein group, which probably held an exaggerated sense of the party's capabilities, evinced no interest in the party and its activity, and for a long period regarded it with hostility (the Arab press regularly ran stories warning of the Bolshevik virus carried by Jewish immigrants, alerting the authorities to the danger posed by communist activity, and by extension Jewish immigration) and remained uninformed and uninterested in what were regarded as internal Jewish quarrels. All immigrants, regardless of ideology or

political affiliation were considered part of the settlement enterprise, and consequently to be opposed. Even in the mid-1940s, when the Arab communists organized within their own “national” framework, i.e. a separate Arab party, they remained suspect, were excluded from the inner circles of national leadership bodies, and were accused of cooperating with Zionist parties.

On the outbreak of armed hostilities between the two communities in preparation for the impending departure of British forces scheduled for late 1948, the communists found themselves in a quandary. Since 1924, and the admission of the PCP to the ranks of the Comintern, the party had opposed Zionist efforts to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, characterized Zionists as British imperialist agents, and called for independence, in effect endorsing the call for an independent Arab Palestinian state. The call for an Arab state in Palestine, like the call for an Arab state in Syria or in Iraq, both of which had sizeable Jewish and other religious and ethnic minorities, was not primarily concerned with the small non-Arab ethnic communities but directed against the colonial authority itself, Britain. This was the slogan raised since the early twenties, but conditions in the late forties were fundamentally different.

In 1948, the Arab communists, despite a split in their ranks in reaction to Soviet support for partition and the chaos which engulfed the Arab community as an outcome of the absence of any form of national authority, nevertheless succeeded in retaining a rudimentary form of organized existence. They professed to see the expulsion of the British from the country as a tremendous achievement, weakening Britain’s imperialist hold over the Arab east. They clamored for the establishment of an Arab state as decreed by the UN partition resolution, characterizing the ensuing war as an attempt to thwart the desire for independent statehood, and rejected the entry of the Arab Liberation Army into the country and the call for armed intervention on the part of the surrounding Arab states. They paid for this in the areas which fell under Arab military control with harassment and imprisonment. The destruction of Arab society, the transformation of its people into refugees living outside its borders as a result of Israel’s refusal to allow their return to their towns and villages after the cessation of hostilities, meant they lost their main base of support within the organized Arab working class. The Jewish communists for their part collaborated with the Zionist leadership of the Jewish community to establish a Jewish state and participated in the forums of its elected bodies, while Meir Vilner, one of the veteran communist leaders since the mid-thirties, put his name along with other leaders of the organized Jewish community to the Israeli Declaration of independence.

The changed demographic nature of the country, with the near total departure of the country’s Arab inhabitants, led to the disappearance of the independent existence of an Arab communist faction. The few remaining Arab communists were absorbed into the party’s ranks in a demonstrative act of reunification of the two national factions. But there was very little doubt that this was not a coming together of two equal halves. The PCP had gone back to its very beginnings. Shaped by events, and having shown itself unable to exert significant influence, it now re-established itself as an Israeli party. While remaining committed to defending the rights of workers and oppressed

national minorities, it ended up after decades of trying to maintain an internationalist perspective as a party whose mass base lay in the Arab national minority yet which continued to be regarded as overwhelmingly a Jewish party.

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Endnotes

- 1 G S Israeli. (Walter Lacquer) *The Story of the Communist Party in Israel* (Tel Aviv. 1953) (Hebrew); Walter Lacquer, *The Soviet Union and The Middle East*. (London 1961); *Communism and Nationalism in The Middle East* (London 1961); J Hen Tov, *The Communist International, the PCP and the Political Unrest in Palestine in 1929* (Worcester 1970); I Spector, *The Soviet Union and the Muslim World. 1919-1958* (Washington 1967); A Darwaza, *Local Communism and the Arab National Struggle* (Beirut. 1961)(Arabic).
- 2 L Zahavi, *Lachoud Ou Biyachad, Yahudeem Ve Araveem Ba Palestina Al Pei Mismachei HaKomintern 1919-1943* (Apart or Together, Arab & Jews in Palestine According To The Documents of The Comintern) (Keter, Jerusalem 2005) (Hebrew). A slightly incomplete Arabic translation of the book was published in Jerusalem in 2009); M al Sharif (ed), *Filastin Fi Al Arshif Al Sirri Lil Komintern* (Palestine in the Secret Archive of the Comintern). (Al Mada Publishing House, Damascus, October 2004) (Arabic)
- 3 B Farah, *Min Al Othmaniya ila ad-Dawla Al Ibriya (From Ottomanism to the Hebrew State: Memoirs)* (Al Sawt, Nazareth 1985) (Arabic); H Abu Hanna (ed), *Muthakarat Najati Sidki (The Memoirs of Najati Sidki)* (Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut 2001) (Arabic); *Odeh Al Ashab Tathakurat (Memoirs)* (Birzeit University Center for the Documentation of Palestinian Society, Birzeit University, March 1999) (Arabic); F Warrad, *Muthakart: Khamsoun Aman Min Al Nidal (Memoirs: Fifty Years of Struggle)* (Peoples Party Publications, Ramallah 2005) (Arabic).
- 4 H Hussein, originally from Gaza, was a journalist active in Jaffa in the Istiqlal Party and commonly perceived as heading an informal group of radical youth within it. (In a telegram to the Second Congress of the League Against Imperialism held in Frankfurt in July 1929, he signed his name as the Representative of the Left Wing in the Seventh Palestinian Arab Congress). Recently published Comintern documents show a much closer degree of consultation and cooperation between party leaders and Hamdi Hussein, and that this, it seems, was done on a personal level, without the knowledge of the party's rank and file. This was undertaken at Comintern prompting. Not only was he introduced to the League Against Imperialism, and participated in its European congresses, but he was taken to Moscow where he reportedly met with Stalin himself. The documents also show that Moscow's financial aid was sought to provide Hussein with funds to establish an Arab daily newspaper and to finance his travels outside Palestine. The close nature of the relationship allowed Hussein to present during the period of the armed rebellion in 1936 plans to carry out armed activities against the British to be supported and funded by the Comintern. In the event, the Comintern turned down these plans, and reprimanded the party for even considering them. Letter from Hamdi Hussein to CC of PCP on plan to occupy Jerusalem 17.7.1936 in Zahavi, op.cit., Arabic edition, p. 453.
- 5 The correspondence between the leadership of the PCP and the Eastern department of the Comintern is full of repeated requests both for financial and manpower support. At the same time the PCP secretariat shows itself to be always ready to criticize its own political positions if these contradict those of the Comintern, and is constantly seeking the latter's advice on how to proceed, affirming that it is faithfully carrying out the Comintern's instructions.
- 6 In a meeting with Radwan al Hilou in Jericho on February 1, 1974, he explained

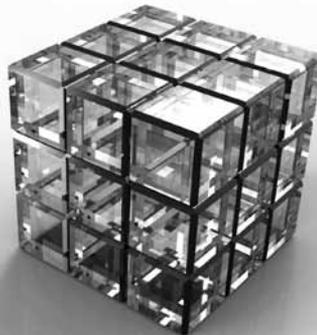
that decisions in the party secretariat were never taken by majority vote, and that until the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, no decision could be taken without his consent, as general secretary of the PCP.

- 7 R Greenstein, "Zionism, Nationalism and Revolutionary Socialism: The Radical Left and the Colonial Model in Israel/Palestine." Forthcoming in *Peoples Apart: Israel, South Africa and the Apartheid Question*, Ilan Pappé (ed) (IB Tauris 2009), p.14. A similar article entitled "Class, Nation & Political Organization: The Anti- Zionist Left in Israel/ Palestine," can be found in *International Labour & Working Class History*, N 75, Spring 2009, pp 85-108.
 - 8 On party leadership attitude to Mohammad Nimr Odeh and his role, see B Farah, *Memoirs*, op.cit. p. 99-102 and Interview with Radwan al Hilou, Jericho, February 16, 1974.
 - 9 M Machover, "Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict & Resolution." An expanded version of the Barry Amiel & Normal Melburn Trust annual lecture, delivered November 30, 2006. *International Socialist Review*. On the historical legitimacy of settler state formation, p.3.
 - 10 Radwan al Hilou letter on use of anti-Semitic epithets and arming Arabs. In Zahavi, op.cit. p. 464.
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