

# I Went to Defend Jerusalem in Cordoba

## Memoirs of a Palestinian Communist in the Spanish International Brigades

Najati Sidqi

*Editors' Note: Najati Sidqi (1905–1979) was a leading figure in Arab and Palestinian communism. A leader of the trade union movement in Palestine during the 1920s and 1930s, he represented the Palestine Communist Party in the Comintern and was one of the very few Arab socialists – despite his claims below – to join the antifascist struggle in Spain. He contributed significantly to the political and cultural journalism of the Left in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Sidqi's description of his experiences in Spain was published in the Beirut-based journal al-Tali'a (The Vanguard) in June 1938, under the title "Five Months in Republican Spain: The Memoirs of an Arab Fighter in the International Brigades." It seems that this was to be the first of several pieces written by Sidqi for the journal, but no further installments exist. However, a full account can be found in Sidqi's memoirs (Mudhakkirat Najati Sidqi), published in Arabic by the Institute for Palestine Studies in 2001. Sidqi's 1938 article, translated and annotated here by Alex Winder, remains valuable as a record of the time, uninfluenced by the knowledge of the outcome of the Spanish Civil War or by Sidqi's experiences in the Communist party afterward. Based on the situation as it stood in August 1936, two months after the formation of the United Socialist party, Sidqi's assessment is rather idealistic and reflects the optimism that prevailed in the early days of the war among the ranks of the International Brigades. No mention is made of the deadly factionalism of the Leftist forces, which contributed to the eventual defeat of the Republicans. The only critique he makes of the opposition is a well-mannered attack on the anarchist forces and their "divisive role" in the trade union movement; as he puts it, "they are barking up the wrong tree . . . and the future is a guarantee to solve their problems."*

## I Defended Arab Freedom on the Madrid Front

I was in Paris when the Spanish Civil War broke out, and I was among those who realized at once the seriousness of this war, upon whose outcome depends, to a great extent, the fate of mankind as a whole. I knew immediately that Franco, a servant to German and Italian fascism, had announced an insurrection against Spanish democracy and a revolt against his people. He would not hesitate to offer his country up as an easy prey to foreign colonizers in exchange for their assistance in the form of supplies, ammunition, and troops.

I noticed that the volunteers in the Republican ranks and those that constituted the International Brigades were a mixture of Frenchmen, Englishmen, Italians, Ethiopians, Americans, Chinese, and Japanese. A brigade of Arabs, too, had come from various Arab countries, so I said to myself: truly, there is no excuse for excluding the Arabs from volunteering. Are we not also demanding freedom and democracy? Would not the Arab Maghreb be able to achieve its national freedom if the fascist generals were defeated? Would the defeat of the Italian fascist forces at the hands of the popular democratic Spanish forces not lead to the salvation of Arab Tripoli from the clutches of the tyrant Mussolini?<sup>1</sup> Would the victory of the Spanish Republicans over the German and Italian colonizers not tip the scales in favor of supporters of democracy, and of oppressed people the world over?

I did not hesitate, and in a matter of days I was on my way to Spain.

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It was one o'clock in the morning when I arrived in the Spanish city on the border. We stopped in front of one of the houses, its electric lights shining and the blue, yellow, and red of the Republican flag flying above it, as well as the red flag of the Socialists, Communists, and Trade Unionists.

We entered the house to a host of young men from the People's Army, a Republican militia, heavily armed. Most of them were dressed in blue workers' clothes with black hats that resembled the Iraqi *sidara*, from the front of which hung a red tassel. It was a house of remarkable movement. Boys and girls, men and women, all burning with enthusiasm: this one cleans his weapon while that one bangs away at a typewriter; one inspects his laissez-passer while another who came yesterday from the battlefields recounts news and entertaining stories, and a third arrives to receive instructions.

Here is a scene that sends a shiver through the heart, a shiver of pleasure and of zeal: a Spanish girl wearing a militia uniform, holding a rifle on her shoulder, girdled with a belt of bullets, going out with the Spanish boys to defend sacred freedom! How far is this armed Spanish girl, with her rough clothes and her harsh life, from the refined Iberian Carmen that we see in the European theater, with her hair curled and her big brooch set with a glowing pearl, a black shawl thrown over her shoulder; who sings and is boisterous and plays, between glasses of champagne, with the minds of millionaires; who knows nothing of life but amusement, triviality, and frivolity, wandering here and there with her soft-skinned body, her slender waist, her waves of hair!

No! This Carmen no longer represents Spain, nor did she ever represent the true Spain. She was nothing but a representation of Spain as the old Spanish feudal lords wanted her to be!<sup>2</sup> As for the true Spain, she is this girl who has joined the militia, the epitome of civilization and progress!

The fickle Carmen who yesterday amused the Spanish rulers is today an armed Carmen who gives courage to the heroes of freedom with her views, her strength, and her optimism. She is a Carmen who consoles wounded fighters, who inflames the passion and the spirit clamoring in the breasts of the volunteers who fight to protect their nation and its independence from the threat of Hitlerian and Mussolinian colonial domination.

I rode the train, heading toward Barcelona. Among the travellers were many volunteers, and there were even more there to see them off . . . the memories will stay with me as long as I live. An old woman in great distress, sitting next to her own child, her own flesh and blood, bidding him farewell as tears streamed from her languid eyes, encouraging him and urging him to fight to save the republic from the horrors of the gang of fascist soldiers. A girl in the prime of youth standing alone with her lover, speaking to him softly and in her eyes an indescribable tenderness, unclasps her finely-wrought necklace and places it around his neck. They embrace for a long, long time and then part slowly, slowly, following the movement of the train, which has begun its journey. They part knowing that they will not reunite until after democratic Spain has regained its freedom. Otherwise, they will never see each other again!

The train is crowded. On all sides, on every wall, are posters. In one a girl wears pants, her shirtsleeves rolled up and a cap with a red tassel perched atop her head. In her left hand she raises her rifle over her head. Her right hand is extended, pointing forward. She says: "Citizens! You can bear arms and your country needs you, so why not join the militia corps?"

Here is another one: we are shown a number of bronzed arms, fists clenched and raised. Below them is written: "Strength through Unity!"

A third poster shows a worker raising a rifle in one hand while with the other he grasps the hand of another man who trembles in fear. He says to him: "Looting is a dishonest act, and I will punish you for it severely!"

The spirit is awoken by these! This is a people that exhibits an organization and a culture spontaneously, without prior training or preparation! A people of these qualities will not be defeated, even in the face of all the iniquitous, criminal fascist forces arrayed against them.

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I am in Barcelona. Magnificent Barcelona, steeped in civilization, its history full of emancipatory awakenings. I set out to wander the streets, and with each step my attention is drawn, and my sense of wonder, appreciation, and surprise aroused. Here is a troop of vigorous militiamen. They approach and stare at me, and in their eyes is a beautiful and strange luster, the glitter of strength and activity, trust and optimism. Their commander came up to me, doubtless thinking me a Spaniard, and said in Spanish: "Why have you

not joined the ranks of the militia?" I smiled and replied in French that I was an Arab volunteer and that I had come to defend the Arabs' freedom on the front in Madrid...! I had come to defend Damascus in Guadalajara, Jerusalem in Cordoba, Baghdad in Toledo, Cairo in Andalusia, and Tétouan in Burgos . . . His face broke out in surprise and delight, and he said to me in passable French: "Are you really an Arab? You're a 'Moro' – a Moroccan? That's impossible, the Moroccans are marching with the fascist thugs, attacking our cities, killing us, plundering us, and raping our women."

I replied: "It's true that some Moroccans are marching with the reactionary generals, with those who in 1925 suppressed the 'Abd al-Karim revolt and decimated their families,<sup>3</sup> with those who plundered the bounties of their land, but these and their actions are an insult to the Arabs and to Islam. They do not represent the Arabs or Islam. They had been duped. Duped by Franco and his bloodthirsty aides, with the help of some criminal Moroccan leaders,<sup>4</sup> who sold them out, who forgot their Arabness and betrayed the spirit of Islam . . . and sent their people to serve the biggest, most heinous colonialists."

The militia commander was astonished by what I said, and began to shake his head left and right as if he was suspicious of what an Arab had said. So I told him: "I'm not the only Arab here! There are many now in the International Brigades, and others will come, too. Even those Arabs who are now among Franco's ranks, their eyes will be opened and they will desert and join your forces. I have learned of many whose eyes have been opened and are waiting for the opportunity to defect to the Republican camp. In our Arab countries, there are 70 million Arabs whose affinity lies with the Spanish Republic, who advocate for democracy, because their Arab civilization, their venerable historical traditions, are built upon a foundation of true democracy.

Delight appeared on the face of the militiamen, and that of their leader. We were soon embracing and they began to salute me by patting me on the shoulders, a beautiful and commendable Spanish tradition. Then they shook my hand, saying, "until we meet on the front, until we meet in Toledo. Do not forget that when you defend *la casa de Toledo* you are defending the most beautiful of the eternal monuments that your ancestors, the Arabs, left behind!"

As I continued my way through Barcelona, I noticed an energy in the life of this great city: an indescribable inner spirit, a zeal. Everywhere red flags fluttered next to Republican flags. New merchandise was being sold on the sidewalks, caps with red tassels, buttons, and stars, and silk ribbons of different colors representing the different political parties. And plastered to the walls every so often, a map of Spain, with red pins stuck into the Republican part and black pins in the fascist part. Large audiences stood around these maps, heatedly discussing the military developments.

I had not gone one hundred meters before I found myself in Plaza de Catalonia, the center of Barcelona and the heart of its commercial life. There were finance banks and department stores, estates of millionaire consuls, commercial agencies, and hotels for big-shot travellers. In the northern corner of the square stood an enormous building known as Hotel Colón. At the beginning of the fascist insubordination it served as a stronghold for the Spanish royal guard, and a bastion for rebellious fascist detachments. However, when the people defeated the traitors, the government of Catalonia issued a proclamation

placing this hotel at the disposal of the Unified Socialist Party in Catalonia. A placard twenty meters wide graced the building, upon which was written the following slogan: “The Unified Socialist Party, Branch of the Communist International, P.S.O. – P.C.E. – U.S.C. – P.O.C.” This party was called the unified party because it was formed through the merger of four workers’ parties, which finally came together as a result of the fascist aggression and joined the Third International. The acronyms on the banner indicated the names of these parties: the Socialist Workers’ Party, which had withdrawn from the Second International; the Catalan Communist Party; the Catalan Socialist Union; and the Proletarian Party.<sup>5</sup>

I entered Hotel Colón to request a visit as a foreign volunteer. No sooner had my feet reached the main entrance than the armed guard blocked my way and demanded my documents. I showed him my papers and after examining them, he authorized me to enter. I went up to the first floor, then the second, and on the third I was struck by what I saw: a young gunman, like a flame, with various revolutionary slogans, and commands, and images plastered on the walls without order. There was a great movement, everything accelerated, and wherever you turned, you heard nothing but *camarada*, *collega*, *companyona* – my comrade, my partner, my friend!

One of them stopped and I asked him if he could introduce me to the secretary or his deputy as an Arab volunteer who had come to lend my support to the government’s defenders. He led me to the deputy secretary’s room and after asking permission, I entered. The man greeted me in a military manner, though not without signs of affection and welcome.

I said to him: “I am an Arab volunteer who arrived just today. As I am unaware of the current situation”—this being August 1936 in Catalonia—“I hope that you can provide me with some information.”

His features broke out into a slight, but pleasant, smile, and he said: “Welcome to the noble Arab volunteer . . . welcome to the descendant of the builders of the Alhambra, welcome to the descendant of those who resided in our homes for 800 years! Let me set your mind at ease a little: don’t you see that I look more Arab than you do . . . I come from an Arab background, and my name is Ismael Ribares.”

I replied: “I am very happy to hear that. I am honored to meet you.”

He said: “And now, what do you want to know?”

I said: “Something about the history of your Catalan liberation movement and an overview of the present military situation.”

He responded: “You have what you need. We Catalans are a people of our own, we have our own culture and our own dialect, and we have a long struggle against the Castilian masters, in which we have shed much blood for the sake of our national independence. However, I will tell you that it is impossible for Catalonia to survive without the interior of Spain. The independence that we want is an internal independence – autonomy – that will allow us to participate effectively in the general policies pursued by the central authorities.

“Our land is a massive center of industry, the wellspring of the proletariat and the source of its trade unionist movement. This much is obvious: of all the Spanish provinces,

it was the first to establish political parties and trade unions for the working class. As for the particularity of our workers' movement, it is that they do not open their eyes without finding themselves in the embrace of the anarchism nourished by the teachings of Mikhail Bakunin and his successor, Prince Kropotkin.

In our world today there are different parties with a variety of theories, but they have finally united in a single party in order to fight fascism with arms. I am only too happy to see this unity, which I had dreamed of throughout my life. Yet despite that, I can tell you that my heart is full of regret: the anarchist workers' organizations remain far removed from us.

After the fascists tried to seize power and we were able to forcefully subdue their attempts, all the big industrialists went over to their side. There they were joined by the feudal lords, the tyrants of money who own the banks, and others with unjust privileges. They fought the workers in the streets and opened fire on the crowds from the windows of their palaces. The masses responded in kind to defend themselves and some were killed, others imprisoned, and still others escaped.

When security was restored and the waters calmed, the Republican government saw the reality before it, which was that, free of the capitalists who had left and betrayed their country and joined with the enemy, heavy industry had been fueled by the trade unions and their affairs administered by committees of workers. As a result, heavy industry in Catalonia was confiscated and the government tends to issues of production and distribution of products.

This situation and these measures, however, are not genuine socialism. Rather, this is a special case created by the civil war, and its direct cause was that the major capitalists sided with the fascist judges. I say that it is not socialism because the present system in Catalonia is a republican system that does not infringe upon the principle of private property for the industries. The confiscation that I mentioned to you is a confiscation forced upon the government as a punishment for the traitors that joined the side of the people's enemies.

Take the example of Juan March, a major financier and owner of many commercial and industrial firms in Spain, Marrakesh, and Gibraltar. This man, one of the biggest suppliers of money to republicanism's enemies . . . shouldn't the government confiscate his holdings?<sup>6</sup>

I assure you that we did not interfere with family businesses or light industry because their owners are democratic Republicans, fighting in the ranks of the people against the insubordinate generals."

Here my interlocutor stopped and looked at me silently, waiting for me to ask any other questions I might have. When I realized this, I asked: "How is the situation on the Zaragoza front?"

- It is very good and our position will soon change from defense to attack.
- What do you think is the future of the war and which side will be victorious?
- The civil war will drag on because of the intervention of Germany and Italy. But the victory will be ours without a doubt. . .

- Are you helping the central government with war materiel?
- The Unified Socialist Party does all that it can to help the central government, including what our factories produce in terms of tanks, armored vehicles, artillery, and bombs. However, the anarchist elements oppose aid to some extent, on the pretext that these things are required only for the defense of Catalonia! . . .
- What is your view of the future of Spanish anarchism?
- Anarchism is a significant force here . . . But they are barking up the wrong tree,<sup>7</sup> my friend, and the future is a guarantee to solve their problems.

With that, my conversation with Señor Ismael Ribares came to an end. I bid him farewell, thanking him for the valuable information that he had provided me. I had nearly left his room before he caught me and asked me, laughing, “Would you like to interview a young man who speaks Arabic?” I replied that I would be most grateful. In no more than a few minutes, a young man of about twenty, laughing and light on his feet, entered and set about questioning me: “You know Arabic?” I replied in the affirmative and asked him in turn: “And you? How did you learn it?” He replied in broken Arabic that his mother was Arab and his father was Spanish. He had been in Marrakesh and Algeria and Malta. We had a very interesting talk.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Italian forces conquered coastal areas of Libya during the 1910–1912 war between Italy and the Ottoman Empire, and in the 1912 Treaty of Lausanne, the Ottomans ceded the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica to the Italians. After Mussolini rose to power in 1922, an Italian military campaign to suppress Libyan anti-colonial resistance intensified, with Italian forces imposing forced migration and concentration camps on the population. By the mid-1930s, Italian forces had effectively suppressed the Libyan resistance, and Italian colonization increased, the number of colonists reaching more than 100 thousand by the time Sidqi joined the Republican forces in Spain. On the Italian colonization of Libya, see Nicola Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia: 1911–1931* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012) and Claudio G. Segrè, *Fourth Shore: The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
- 2 For a discussion of Carmen and the construction of Spanish identity, from the introduction of the opera to the Spanish theater up to the present day, see: Elizabeth Kertesz and Michael Christoforidis, “Confronting *Carmen* beyond the Pyrenees: Bizet’s Opera in Madrid, 1887–1888,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 20, no. 1 (Mar. 2008): 79–110; and José F. Colmeiro, “Exorcising Exoticism: ‘Carmen’ and the Construction of Oriental Spain,” *Comparative Literature* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 127–144.
- 3 Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi (1882/83–1963), popularly known as ‘Abd al-Karim or Abd el Krim, was a political and military leader in the Rif region of northern Morocco. In June 1921, when the Spanish military entered previously unoccupied territories in the Rif, ‘Abd al-Karim led a significant force of armed men to attack the Spanish forces. After a number of stunning victories for the Riffian forces, ‘Abd al-Karim declared an independent Republic of the Rif in September 1921. The fall-out from the Riffian revolt was significant, contributing to the September 1923 coup d’état by General Miguel Primo de Rivera and the installation of a military dictatorship from 1923 to 1930. After handing defeat after defeat to the Spanish forces, ‘Abd al-Karim’s forces began to advance into French-occupied Morocco, reaching as far as Fes in April 1925. The French sent a massive military force to quell the rebellion, and a combined Spanish-French army of over 250 thousand soldiers finally forced surrender on ‘Abd al-Karim in May 1926. For more on ‘Abd al-Karim and anti-colonial rebellion in the Rif, see: Rene Gallissot, ed.,

- Abd el-Krim et la République du Rif: actes du colloque international d'études historiques et sociologiques, 18–20 janvier 1973* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1976); Charles R. Pennell, *A Country with a Government and a Flag: The Rif War in Morocco, 1921–1926* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1986); David S. Woolman, *Rebels in the Rif: Abd el Krim and the Rif Rebellion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968).
- 4 In his memoirs, Sidqi specifically names ‘Abd al-Khaliq al-Turaysi as an example of such leaders. Turaysi (1909–1970) was a key figure in supporting Franco in Morocco and recruiting Moroccans to the pro-Franco forces. In 1937, he established the National Reform party (*hizb al-islah al-watani*) that called for Moroccan autonomy under the patronage of fascist Spain. After Moroccan independence in 1956, the party was merged with the Independence party (*hizb al-istiqlal*) and Turaysi became minister of justice. He later served as Morocco’s ambassador in Cairo. See Najati Sidqi, *Mudhakkirat Najati Sidqi* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2001), p. 127.
  - 5 The Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (*Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya*, or PSUC) was formed on 23 July 1936 through the merger of the Catalan Federation of Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, or PSOE), which was a member of the Labor and Socialist International, founded in 1923 as a continuation of the Second International; the Catalan Communist Party, the local branch of the Communist Party of Spain (*Partido Comunista de España*, or PCE); the Socialist Union of Catalonia (*Unió Socialista de Catalunya*, or USC), which had split from the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party in 1923; and the Proletarian Catalan Party (*Partit Català Proletari* or PCP), which drew significant support from the *Centre Autonomista de Dependents de Comerç i Industria* (CADCI) trade union.
  - 6 Juan March Ordinas was a businessman and founder, in 1926, of the March Bank. He had launched his career as a smuggler between North Africa and Spain and gained wealth and influence by supplying both sides during World War I. He became increasingly influential under the reign of King Alfonso XIII, but was later imprisoned by the Republican government. He escaped prison and fled to Gibraltar, where he was protected by his connections within the British government. From there he backed the 1936 rebellion against the Republic, arranged Franco’s passage from the Canary Islands to Spanish Morocco, and financed the Italian airlift of colonial troops from Morocco into southern Spain. After the fascist victory in the Spanish Civil War, March returned to a position of wealth and influence in Spain, and by the end of World War II, he was considered the seventh richest man in the world. March has been the subject of a number of biographies in Spanish, including: Manuel D. Benavides, *El último pirata del Mediterráneo* (Mexico: Roca, 1976); Arturo Dixon, *Señor monopolio: la asombrosa vida de Juan March* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1985); and Ramón Garriga, *Juan March y su tiempo* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1976).
  - 7 In the original, Sidqi uses the Arabic saying *annahum yamsakuna bi-l-qushur duna al-lubab* – they grasp the rind without the fruit.