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Palestinian Engagement with the Black Freedom Movement prior to 1967

MAHA NASSAR

This article examines early Palestinian engagements with multiple facets of the Black American struggle for freedom through a content analysis of influential Palestinian press outlets in Arabic prior to 1967. It argues that, since the 1930s, Palestinian intellectuals with strong anti-colonial views linked anti-Black racism in the United States to larger imperial and Cold War dynamics, and that they connected Black American mobilizations against racism to decolonization movements around the world. This article also examines Mahmoud Darwish's early analytical writings on race as a social construct in both the U.S. and Israeli contexts. Understanding these early engagements sheds light on subsequent developments in Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity and on Palestinian Afro-Arab cultural imaginaries.

IN 1966 PALESTINIAN POET AND ESSAYIST Mahmoud Darwish, at the time a citizen of Israel, wrote a column in the Communist newspaper *al-Ittihad* titled "Letter to a Negro." In it, he expressed his sense of connection to Black Americans, and particularly to writer James Baldwin. "When I read the book by your gifted writer James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*," Darwish wrote, "I felt as if James were writing about me personally, about the 'Negroes' in Israel, making only minor adjustments to the details in the picture. When he wrote about love, he was narrating my love story. And when he wrote about hate, he reflected my hate."¹ This passage not only illustrates Darwish's awareness of Black oppression in the United States, but also highlights the specific connections he made between Baldwin's analytical writings on race and his own experience as a minoritized citizen of Israel. Darwish was arguably the first Palestinian to do so, building on a longer history of Palestinian intellectual and discursive engagement with the Black freedom struggle.

A number of scholars have recently shed new light on how Palestinians and Black Americans have compared their respective struggles for freedom.² Their studies generally trace the rise of Black-Palestinian solidarity to the period after 1967, paying less attention to earlier periods of engagement and also overlooking those Palestinians who remained inside the Green Line (the 1949 armistice line) after the State of Israel was established. Moreover, given the dominance of English-language sources in this body of scholarship, several important Palestinian perspectives and voices, particularly those of Palestinian intellectuals in Israel, have not been adequately investigated. Conceptually, while race as an analytical framework is increasingly the subject of

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scrutiny in various parts of the Arab world—particularly its entwinement with slavery³ and its influence on Afro-Arab identity and solidarity⁴—the ways in which it has been understood in the twentieth-century Palestinian context remain underexplored.

I begin to address these gaps in the literature by examining how Palestinian Arab intellectuals engaged with the Black American struggle for freedom both before 1948 and in the subsequent two decades when some of them became Palestinian citizens of Israel (PCIs). I do so through a content analysis of influential Arabic-language press outlets that covered this topic in Palestine during the period under review: *Filastin* and *al-Difa'* in the pre-1948 years,⁵ and *al-Ittihad* in the 1948–67 period.⁶ Bringing sources and periods into a single analytical framework further integrates PCIs into Palestinian history, illuminating how political vocabularies are reconfigured as they transcend the pre-'48/post-'48 historical divide.

Based on a close reading of these texts, I argue that Palestinian intellectuals with strong anti-colonial views actively linked the conditions of Black Americans to those of colonized people around the world. While early engagements focused on introducing Palestinian readers to Black Americans, in the 1950s, more concerted efforts were made to link U.S. racism to U.S. imperialism. The subsequent decade saw a greater emphasis on centering Black subjectivity and connecting antiracist with anti-imperialist and decolonizing actions around the world. Focusing on how Palestinians, who were writing for their local readers, sought to make sense of these news events decenters the “great power” politics and Cold War dynamics that often inform the scholarship on this topic.⁷ In addition, by attending to Darwish's early writings on race, I shed light on his unpacking of racialized logics of oppression that manifested in overlapping yet distinct ways in the U.S. and Israeli contexts. Although Darwish may have been the first Palestinian intellectual to draw such explicit parallels, he was building upon a long-standing Palestinian engagement with the Black American freedom movement.

1920s–1940s: Early Encounters

Over the course of the 1920s, growing numbers of intellectuals in both Palestinian Arab and Black American communities were drawn to leftist, internationalist, and anti-colonial outlooks as a means of pushing back against the oppression and injustice they faced at home.⁸ They were drawn not only to the Soviet Union's condemnation of Western military imperialism, but also to its call to celebrate the “proletarian culture” of workers around the world.⁹ Part of the Soviet vision was realized through the establishment of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV). Launched in 1921, the university brought approximately seven hundred students from fifty-seven countries annually to attend KUTV free of charge. The students were placed in two groups—an “inner” one for individuals from within the Soviet Union and an “outer” one for those coming from abroad. The outer group was further subdivided by language of instruction—Chinese, French, or English. Students taught in English initially hailed from India, Southeast Asia, and Egypt, and they were joined by a handful of Palestinian Jews.¹⁰

In the fall of 1925, the first Palestinian Arab student, Najati Sidqi, arrived at KUTV, as did Harry Haywood, part of the first cohort of Black Americans to study there. Although Sidqi and Haywood attended classes together as members of the English-language curriculum group, neither of their

memoirs indicates that they spent a significant amount of time interacting.¹¹ Yet with an intensive curriculum that emphasized worldwide class solidarity transcending race, language, and ethnicity, Haywood and Sidqi drew on a shared political vocabulary, which depicted the colonized facing “national oppression” as peoples whom mass revolution would set free.

This vocabulary can be seen in the black belt thesis, a concept Haywood helped originate and popularize, which held that Black Americans constituted “an oppressed nation” within the United States and called for the establishment of a sovereign nation within it. Haywood’s thesis gained some support in Black internationalist circles in the United States, and after it was formally adopted by Third International (Comintern) at its sixth congress in 1928, it was disseminated to Communist parties worldwide.¹² As a result, intellectuals from everywhere—including Palestine—who came into contact with Communist ideas were also exposed to the understanding that the conditions of Black Americans had strong parallels with those of colonized peoples.

But it was not just Communists who were becoming aware of the plight of Black Americans as part of a shared struggle for freedom in Palestine; by the 1930s, a wave of younger Palestinian Arab nationalists had become interested as well. These included members of the Istiqlal Party who, in sharp contrast to the traditional Palestinian elites, emphasized anti-colonialism, mass politics, and the commonalities that Palestinian Arabs shared with other colonized people around the world, particularly in India.¹³ The Istiqlalists and their sympathizers also sought to widen the Palestinian Arab public sphere, in part by utilizing the local Arabic press to raise awareness about mass politics both at home and abroad. While the overall literacy rate among Palestinian Arabs was still quite low at this time, the mid-1930s witnessed a dramatic rise in the production and circulation of local Arabic newspapers in Palestine.¹⁴ The most popular of these were the dailies *Filastin* and *al-Difaʿ*, both of which espoused a pan-Arab nationalist outlook and were generally critical of the traditional Palestinian leadership. *Filastin*, which became a daily in 1929, tended to appeal to urban intellectuals, whereas *al-Difaʿ*, founded in 1934 by journalists active in the Istiqlal Party, quickly expanded its circulation in rural areas, soon rivaling *Filastin* in circulation and prestige.¹⁵ Moreover, although both papers had to contend with British press restrictions, they nonetheless “operated within a network of telecommunications that brought news to Palestinians from Europe, India and other Arab countries and parts of Palestine within days or hours of the reported events.”¹⁶

That telecommunications network also brought news from the United States to Palestine. Their competition for readers, coupled with their shared popular nationalist orientation and quick access to international news, help explain why *Filastin* and *al-Difaʿ* were the only newspapers that carried articles about the conditions and actions of Black Americans prior to 1948.¹⁷ The first article laying out the various forms of discrimination affecting Black Americans appeared in an April 1934 piece in *Filastin*. Its detailed and sympathetic account described “Negroes” (*Zunuḡ*) in the United States as an “oppressed and tortured” people who “are not granted any of their civil rights.” The article detailed the numerous forms of segregation they faced, then noted: “All this occurs in America, the birthplace of democracy and the land of freedom, even though the American constitution stipulates that blacks have all the rights enjoyed by whites.”¹⁸

While descriptions of their oppression took up most of the article, Black Americans were not simply portrayed as victims of oppression. Tellingly, the headline, titled “Twelve Million Negroes

in America Demand Their Civil Rights from Mr. Roosevelt,” framed Black Americans as possessing agency and acting en masse to change their conditions. The article appears to be a summary of a report published the day before in the U.S. Communist newspaper the *Daily Worker*,¹⁹ albeit denuded of any reference to Communist thought present in the original. Nonetheless, the decision by *Filastin*'s editors to include the Black American struggle for equal rights on its pages illustrates how they saw fit to place it within a larger understanding of mass politics as a form of action against an oppressive regime.

This celebration of mass politics was expressed more clearly in the Palestinian Arabic press one year later as fascist Italy prepared to invade Ethiopia. The only independent Black African state at the time, Ethiopia had a strong symbolic resonance for a growing number of Black internationalist and leftist intellectuals in the United States. Throughout the 1920s, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) had stressed Ethiopia as a marker of Black American civilizational heritage, and its official anthem was “Ethiopia, Thou Land of Our Fathers.” Therefore, when Italy began to move on the country in early 1935, the UNIA's emphasis on Black American connections to Ethiopia laid the groundwork for widespread mobilization in support of the African nation against the imperial invader.²⁰

The Palestinian Arabic press followed developments in Ethiopia closely,²¹ with nationalists rallying around the Ethiopian cause.²² Beginning in February 1935, *Filastin* and *al-Difa'* ran several articles lauding Black Americans for supporting the Ethiopians against the Italian invasion. Articles reported favorably on Black Americans who were boycotting Italian American businesses, to the extent of refusing to buy pasta, in protest at Italy's aggression toward Ethiopia.²³ *Al-Difa'*, with its Istiqlalist orientation, was especially keen to hold up their collective action as an example for the Palestinian Arabs to follow. One headline read “To the Youth! The Generosity and Valor of the American Negroes: They Volunteer for the Ethiopian Army and Cross the Ocean!” The article explained that “despite what we hear about the severity of their oppression,” Black Americans, especially young men who had distinguished themselves in the U.S. armed forces during World War I, were eager to use their military skills to “protect Ethiopia from foreign imperialism.”²⁴ By centering their agency and their commitment to protecting a sovereign African nation from colonial invasion, the article discursively linked Black Americans to the global anti-colonial movement.

The portrayal of Black Americans as valiantly fighting against imperialism continued as Italian soldiers slowly advanced in Ethiopia that summer and fall. *Filastin* and *Al-Difa'* reported on Black Americans' ongoing protests, fundraising campaigns, and enlistment drives, providing upbeat assessments of their success.²⁵ Although U.S. government harassment and repression, coupled with divisions among Black leaders, mitigated the effectiveness of Black American aid to Ethiopia,²⁶ Palestinians became familiar with this community as one that possessed a strong sense of collective national duty, a clear anti-colonial orientation, and the agency to help in the fight against imperialism.

In addition to learning about Black Americans' on-the-ground actions, Palestinians were also being exposed to the defiant, anti-colonial sensibilities of writers affiliated with the Harlem Renaissance. Inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois, Garvey's UNIA, and the global radical outlook of the “new Negro” movement,²⁷ the Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement of literature and

the arts that flourished in the 1920s and early 1930s and called for a proud assertion of Black cultural identity amid the ongoing denigration of Black American culture.²⁸ Several Harlem Renaissance writers were also drawn to the Soviet Union and its claim to have created a society free of racialized prejudice. Claude McKay visited Moscow in 1922 as a delegate of the Comintern,²⁹ Langston Hughes traveled there from June 1932 to January 1933, and Paul Robeson paid his own visit in December 1934 (although neither Hughes nor Robeson appears to have formally joined the Communist Party of the United States of America, or CPUSA).³⁰ Other writers, such as Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, and Sterling Brown, did not visit the Soviet Union, though they too were associated with the Communist Left.

The Soviet Union likewise took an interest in Black American writers. In 1930, the conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW) adopted a resolution to “promote the ‘development of Negro writers and artists,’” in part by providing support for literary activities.³¹ In the United States, this led to a rise in the number of publications and events (many affiliated with the CPUSA) that showcased both well-known and up-and-coming Black writers, particularly those connected to the Harlem Renaissance.³² Moreover, the IURW-sponsored journal, *Internatsionalnaya Literatura* (International literature), distributed the works of these writers to an international audience, placing them alongside English translations of works by other leftist, anti-colonial writers such as Nicolás Guillén, Federico García Lorca, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. In doing so, the journal “brought the work of Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Richard Wright to a large new foreign audience.”³³

By the 1940s, that international audience included a growing number of young Palestinian Arabs. The Anglo-Soviet Agreement, signed in 1941, meant that previously banned Soviet publications were now able to enter Palestine more freely, and several leftist Palestinian activists who had been expelled from the country by the British during the 1936–39 Great Revolt were now allowed to return. In Haifa and Nazareth, bookstores opened carrying leftist and Communist material, including Soviet-sponsored publications in Arabic and English, allowing a younger generation of Palestinians to gain access to leftist and anti-colonial perspectives from around the world.³⁴

Meanwhile, growing numbers of Black Americans were connecting their struggle for freedom at home with anti-colonial movements abroad. Robeson noted that the Italian invasion of Ethiopia highlighted for many “the parallel between [Black American] interests and those of oppressed peoples abroad.”³⁵ He also led the way in terms of highlighting the interplay between domestic racism and international imperialism, leveraging his fame as a baritone singer and an actor to draw attention to the spate of lynchings that had taken place in the United States after World War II, which he linked to broader dynamics. Robeson’s work on this front garnered international press attention, including in Palestine, where a 1946 front-page story in *Filastin* discussed a meeting between a delegation headed by Robeson and U.S. president Harry Truman. Summarizing an article from the Associated Press, *Filastin* reported that “the famous Negro singer Paul Robeson headed a delegation to the White House and informed President Truman that if the government did not do anything to stop of the killings of Negro people without trial (lynching), the Negroes would act.” The paper further noted that “the president told [Robeson] that America and Britain were the last refuge of freedom in the world. Robeson

disagreed and said that the British Empire was one of the greatest enslavers of human beings.”³⁶ In highlighting Robeson’s vehement opposition to both the scourge of lynching at home and British imperial policy abroad, *Filastin* discursively linked ostensibly domestic concerns with international ones. In doing so, it once again placed Black Americans within an anti-imperial framework.

The following year, 1947, was an ominous one for Black Americans and Palestinians alike. The declaration of the Truman Doctrine in March, which realigned U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union and ushered in the beginning of the Cold War, foreclosed the political space in which Black Americans could criticize imperial forces that were allied with the United States.³⁷ In Palestine, the United Nations partition plan (November 1947) and subsequently the forcible Zionist takeover of land allocated to the Jewish state under the plan, ushered in the Nakba. The extreme repression of Black anti-imperialist activity in the United States led many Black leaders to focus on the domestic aspects of their struggle, while the profound loss and dislocations of the Palestinians shattered most institutions of Palestinian life.

To be sure, Palestinian engagement with the conditions of Black Americans was marginal during this period, especially when compared to local press coverage of anti-colonial movements in India, for example.³⁸ But the efforts of the popular press to call attention to the mass mobilizations of Black Americans indicate an early awareness of their activities and a deliberate effort to position Black Americans within the realm of colonized peoples. Moreover, while the Communist press played a key role in acquainting Palestinians with the activities of Black Americans, those connections predated the Cold War.

Cold War contestations became more significant in the political, ideological, and cultural arenas in the following decade, but they were not the only determinant of Palestinian engagement with the conditions of Black Americans.

The 1950s: Racism and Imperialism

While scholars have shed important light on how Cold War considerations impacted civil rights debates in the United States,³⁹ Palestinian attention to the Black freedom movement was not merely derivative of Cold War dynamics. This is especially true for the approximately 150,000 Palestinians who remained within the Green Line, and who became a minoritized community within the new state of Israel. Though most of them were granted Israeli citizenship by 1953, they faced various forms of discrimination, including placement under military rule (up to 1966), subjection to continued land confiscations, and arrest for political activity deemed a security threat.⁴⁰ Thus, they became acutely aware of the discriminatory regimes affecting their daily lives, and they turned both to their own history and to that of their contemporaries around the world to help them understand and resist their subjugation.

With the owners and editors of *Filastin* and *al-Difa’* forced into exile, and with the new Israeli government viewing expressions of Palestinian nationalist identity as subversive, the Israeli Communist Party (ICP), particularly its semiweekly Arabic newspaper, *al-Ittihad*, emerged as a key space for Palestinian critical expression in Israel. As the only non-Zionist political formation that accepted both Jewish Israelis and PCIs on an equal footing, the party attracted a number of Palestinian Arab intellectuals. Some were strong ideological Marxists, while others saw it as the

only legal outlet for a sustained critique of Israeli policy and the Zionist ideology undergirding it.⁴¹ Although the engagement of PCIs with the Black American experience was mediated through the party's pro-Soviet stances, the prior exposure that Palestinian intellectuals had to Black American anti-imperialism also spurred their interest in the conditions of Black Americans, forming an unbroken continuity with pre-'48 Palestinian engagements with the Black American experience.

An examination of *al-Ittihad's* coverage of Black Americans during the 1950s reveals that, even as the paper moved to more explicit discussions of race in the U.S. context over the course of the 1950s, it repeatedly and emphatically positioned U.S. racism firmly within the larger lens of condemning of "Anglo-American imperialism."⁴² As with other Communist press outlets across the world, news and opinion were often intertwined in a single story as writers sought to guide readers to interpret current events. Thus, analyzing "news stories" can also shed light on how *al-Ittihad's* columnists understood the events that were unfolding. Moreover, while Cold War ideological dynamics clearly accounted for much of the coverage, this engagement was a natural outgrowth of the earlier period, and the anti-colonial and anti-imperial concerns expressed were independent of the Cold War.

That notwithstanding, the few early *al-Ittihad* articles that drew parallels between Black Americans and Palestinians in Israel focused almost exclusively on Cold War dynamics. This is evident in a 1950 piece that compared two events—one in New York and one in Ramleh—that happened within a few months of each other. The first was the Peekskill riots, in which angry mobs attacked mainly Black and Jewish attendees of a concert by Robeson who, by this time, had been excoriated by the U.S. press for supposedly pro-Soviet statements.⁴³ The second was a mob attack on Palestinian and Jewish ICP members walking in that year's May Day procession. According to *al-Ittihad*, in both instances, thugs (*zu'ran*) tried to violently disrupt a peaceful gathering. "The fascist method is the same," the paper explained: "terrorizing communities, oppressing national minorities . . . and turning away from the people's struggle for bread, work and peace [and] toward . . . regression and imperialism."⁴⁴ By ignoring the racialized dimensions of these events, the article positioned them within a broader ideological struggle between fascism and imperialism, on the one hand, and socialism and equality, on the other.

Another manifestation of the Cold War-inflected struggle was the reprinting of works by Black American leftist poets. In an attempt to revitalize engagements with socialist realist literature, *al-Ittihad* published poems by Arab and international figures known for their leftist and anti-colonial orientations.⁴⁵ In 1950, it added a literary supplement to its output, the entire front page of which was, in June, devoted to an Arabic translation of Wright's famous 1934 poem, "I Have Seen Black Hands."⁴⁶ The poem, written shortly after Wright joined the CPUSA, honors Black lives, denounces their exclusion from U.S. wealth, and condemns the violence to which they are subjected. In keeping with socialist realist imagery of the time, it ends on a note of revolutionary hope at seeing "millions and millions" of Black and white workers with their hands "raised in fists of revolt" on "some red day."⁴⁷

Al-Ittihad ran the poem without commentary or explanation, indicating perhaps that the editors were not interested in the poem's message about race so much as the way it fit into the ICP's overall literary orientation. During the 1950s, the ICP stressed global class solidarity across racial divides

and upheld the power of literature to help the masses affect social and political change.⁴⁸ Wright's poem echoed this approach, as did those of other international poets. Over the following years, *al-Ittihad*, along with the ICP's monthly Arabic cultural journal *al-Jadid*, ran numerous poems by prominent leftist Arab writers, as well as Arabic translations of poetry (likely acquired through *Internatsionalnaya Literatura*) by such figures as Pablo Neruda, Lorca, Nazim Hikmet, and Mayakovsky. They also continued to publish translations of Black internationalist writers, including Brown and Hughes.⁴⁹ By positioning these authors as part of a global literary movement, the ICP editors were emphasizing their leftist orientations rather than their perspectives as Black writers *per se*.

By the late 1950s, as the Black freedom movement coalesced around overturning the blatant racial segregation under Jim Crow and achieving full equality throughout the United States, international media attention turned increasingly to these events. This was due in part to the coverage by Soviet and Chinese Communist press outlets, which were eager to exploit the unrest for ideological purposes; it was also because the international editions of U.S. weeklies like *Time* and *Newsweek* were increasingly circulating stories and pictures of the Black American protests to audiences around the world.⁵⁰

In a parallel development, *al-Ittihad* began to include more explicit discussions of the racial dimensions of the Black freedom movement, positioning the endemic racism in the United States as part of global imperialism. In a 1957 article on school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, the paper noted that white resistance to Black students' attendance at Central High School "embodied the spirit of odious discrimination that the Negroes of the United States have endured and still endure," and was the very "incarnation of the spirit of white supremacy."⁵¹ At the same time, the article described U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower's call-up of the National Guard to enforce the desegregation order as an attempt to "to clean up [America's] image in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America."⁵² While it discursively linked white supremacy to U.S. imperialism as an aspect of a larger contestation for global hearts and minds, the article drew upon themes found in earlier press coverage of the topic but provided no in-depth analysis to explain the relationship between U.S. domestic racial discrimination and imperialist policies.

The connection between racism and imperialism was made more explicit two years later as the phenomenon of lynching garnered increasing international attention. U.S. officials sought to characterize such attacks as an anomaly peculiar to the South, but *al-Ittihad* linked them to the dynamics of imperial violence. This is evident in a May 1959 article on the kidnapping of Mack Charles Parker from a prison in Poplarville, Mississippi and his subsequent lynching over accusations that he raped a white woman. After recounting the gruesome details of his kidnapping and emphasizing that Parker maintained his innocence throughout the ordeal, the article opined: "Now the U.S. government is pretending that it is angry and that it will investigate. . . . But however much the American government pretends, it does not change the reality that the kidnapping is a new civilizational 'lesson' that the African people have learned well."⁵³ The article linked a Black American victim of racialized mob violence to victims of imperial violence in Africa, and in doing so it called attention to the idea that violence against Black people—whether in the United States or Africa—was meted out in order to justify Western claims of civilizational superiority. Yet unlike previous articles that discussed U.S. racism, the relatively short piece about Parker's ordeal invoked his name five times. In doing

so, *al-Ittihad* was beginning to center the subjectivity of a victim of violence rather than only condemning the systems of oppression that perpetrated that violence.

In sum, an examination of Arabic-language ICP publications during the 1950s reveals an evolution in the party's discourse about Black Americans from one that focused on antifascism and class revolution to one that offered a more pointed critique of the ways in which global imperialism was tied to violence against Black Americans. The bulk of the news coverage during this decade focused on condemnations of racism in the United States and of U.S. imperialism abroad rather than on analyses of the ways that racism and imperialism worked together against racialized and colonized peoples. By 1959, the idea that both Black American and African peoples were victims of racial and imperial violence came to the fore, anticipating a discursive shift that would continue in the years ahead.

Early to Mid-1960s: Anti-Colonial Civil Rights

The year 1960 was a significant one in the struggles against both imperialism and racism. Fourteen African countries gained formal independence that year, and Black Americans made more concerted efforts to gain equal rights. Inspired by the Algerian struggle for liberation from colonial France, Palestinian leftist intellectuals and activists in Israel were closely attuned to movements for freedom around the world,⁵⁴ and the U.S. civil rights movement was gathering momentum in terms of international media attention.⁵⁵ Against that background, *al-Ittihad* focused more concretely on Black subjectivity and agency, linking Black Americans' struggle for freedom to the global wave of decolonizing movements.

Al-Ittihad's discursive linking of the Black American freedom movement to international struggles for decolonization was made clear in a January 1961 article summarizing the previous year's civil rights protests in the United States. Beginning with the February 1960 sit-in at a Woolworth's café counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, the article noted the ongoing sit-ins (*muzaharat julus*) and the numerous campaigns to desegregate universities, colleges, and schools.⁵⁶ Referencing the increased "threats and terror" by white supremacists, the article argued that "the consciousness of Negro residents increases in the same measure, and their determination to continue their struggle strengthens."⁵⁷ Yet, rather than reporting on these developments simply in order to condemn U.S. structures of racism, the article pointed to the connections between Black antiracist mobilizations in the United States and decolonization movements around the world. "The wave of revolutionary battles for the oppressed peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America have called out to the American Negroes," the article stated, paraphrasing a September 1960 speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in which he argued that the decolonization movements, especially in Asia and Africa, had given Black Americans a newfound sense of confidence.⁵⁸ Thus, the Palestinian press brought into view the international dimension of the Black freedom movement as well as some of its major leaders and activities.

Another key element of *al-Ittihad's* focus on Black subjectivity was its framing of Black American protesters as justified in their actions, regardless of the means they used. A front-page article on the May 1963 events in Birmingham, Alabama, in which police forces unleashed attack dogs on nonviolent Black protesters, is one such example. The piece, which was accompanied by the iconic

photograph of a Black protester being attacked by a police dog, described the violence as part of a racist backlash against “the partial victory that Blacks achieved in their magnificent battle [*ma'rakatihum al-ra'i'a*] to defeat racial segregation.”⁵⁹ In using military terminology to describe the emphatically nonviolent civil rights movement, the article turned readers' attention to the violence that protesters were confronting in their quest for justice. Similarly, when police forces and Black protesters clashed violently in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1965, *al-Ittihad's* front-page story described the five thousand troops that had been deployed to the city as “undertaking a vicious, bloody campaign of terror against the segregated Negro people who are demanding to live with dignity and freedom in their homeland.” Not until the last paragraph did the article mention the damage done to buildings that were looted and burned.⁶⁰ Rather than describe events in Watts as “riots,” which would have implied a blind rage on the part of the protesters, the paper stressed instead the conditions of segregation and oppression that they faced, subtly endorsing their actions.

In its use of similar terminology to describe both the nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham and the more violent Watts protests, *al-Ittihad* avoided pathologizing those Black protesters who resorted to violence, focusing instead on the righteousness of their cause and the brutality of the police response. Regular readers of *al-Ittihad* would have also found the language describing the events in Birmingham and Watts to be quite reminiscent of that used in regard to Palestinian protests in Israel.⁶¹ In both instances, the paper framed the events as the use of excessive violence by the police to disperse valiant protesters demanding basic freedoms and dignity. While not drawing explicit links between Black American and Palestinian efforts to achieve greater civil rights and justice for their cause, such framings nonetheless invited readers to draw those parallels.

In sum, *al-Ittihad's* news coverage of the Black freedom movement during the first half of the 1960s portrayed it as a struggle for freedom and dignity that had strong parallels with decolonizing movements globally. The centering of Black subjectivity and agency, along with the use of value-laden terms such as “magnificent” not only conveyed the paper's support and admiration for the protesters, but also linked their actions to anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa, which were described in similar terms.⁶² To be sure, the paper still positioned these events as part of its international coverage and shied away from drawing explicit parallels with the conditions of Palestinians in Israel. But a young Palestinian intellectual would soon attempt to make those parallels crystal clear.

Mahmoud Darwish's “Letters to a Negro”

For Palestinians who had experienced the 1948 Nakba as children and had grown up under Israeli rule, living conditions were strikingly similar to those of Black Americans. Like Black Americans, they had attended segregated schools that were overcrowded, underfunded, and dismissive of their culture and heritage.⁶³ Like Black Americans, they often found that, even with a high school diploma and good test scores, their admission to college was blocked and only manual labor was available to them.⁶⁴ And like their Black American counterparts, they all too often discovered that if they were politically active, they were accused of “incitement” and punished, all the while being told that they should be grateful to live in a vibrant democracy.⁶⁵

Building on earlier linkages between antiracist movements in the United States and anti-colonial movements abroad, some of these younger Palestinian intellectuals began to draw direct parallels between the conditions facing Black Americans and their own personal experiences as minoritized citizens of a state that was founded on excluding them from equal treatment.

Arguably, the first intellectual to point out these connections directly was Palestinian poet and essayist Darwish. Born in the northern village of al-Birwa in 1941, Darwish fled to Lebanon with his family in 1948 and returned a few years later, illegally, according to Israeli policy. Unable to obtain identity papers, he and his family lived in the shadows of the Israeli state for years. As a teenager, he was an avid reader of *al-Ittihad* and *al-Jadid*, which he credited with shaping his leftist-nationalist, anti-colonial worldview.⁶⁶ In 1961, Darwish joined the ICP and became a columnist for *al-Ittihad*, where many of his essays tackled the ways in which cultural production could humanize colonized peoples in the eyes of their oppressors.⁶⁷ Several of his columns also exhibited what Sophia Azeb terms “an Afro-Arab imaginary,” whereby he identified “with both Black and Arabic . . . cultural forms.”⁶⁸ This can be seen in his early columns celebrating literary expressions from Angola, Sudan, and other African nations—particularly their emancipatory role in decolonizing struggles.⁶⁹

Even as Darwish’s fame as a poet rose steadily over the course of the mid-1960s, he occasionally returned to *al-Ittihad* as a columnist. In 1966, he published a pair of essays, titled “Letter to a Negro” and “Second Letter to a Negro,” where he offered a trenchant analysis of the functioning of race as a social category in both U.S. and Israeli societies. In the first letter, he wrote:

You know that the white person is not your enemy by virtue of his whiteness. And you also know that the Black person is not your brother by virtue of his blackness. Love is hidden under every cover and under every color. But color in our cases has become a symbol of reality. Therefore, when “Black” is said in your country, the listener only sees in the word an oppressed person. That symbol has crossed the borders of your country and reached me, whereupon . . . I become “Black” without needing to . . . [have] similar features.⁷⁰

Darwish’s use of the first- and second-person singular pronouns indicates a much deeper engagement with the concept of race as a localized social construct than had been the case hitherto. Darwish may have been influenced by Mizrahi Israelis who also referred to themselves as “Negroes” when pointing out the discrimination they faced in Israel.⁷¹ But by emphasizing the transnational circulation of these vocabularies—how they have “crossed the borders of your country and reached me”—he highlighted global circulation of media discourses, as well as the impact that earlier Palestinian engagements on this topic had on shaping his understanding of how race functions in the United States and in Israel.

In his second letter, Darwish laid out other parallelisms, such as unemployment and incarceration rates that were disproportionately high relative to their percentage of the overall population. But Darwish also noted some key distinctions between Black Americans and Palestinians in Israel. He wrote, “My friend, I beseech you not to understand from my letter that we suffer to the same extent that you suffer [in terms of] constant discrimination. Truth be told, your condition is worse. We can enter cafés and schools and hug blonde women because our color is not as clearly distinctive as yours.”⁷² While Darwish’s acknowledgement of the more

explicitly racialized forms of oppression that Black Americans faced highlight his care not to equate the two situations, he was nonetheless interested in how the underlying governmental structures that marginalized Black Americans and PCIs operated in strikingly similar ways. He continued:

But I won't mislead you—I will tell you that we can't go everywhere we want to in our own country! And we can't farm our land because it is, as they say, not for us. And the [policymaker] in the current government here is much smarter than [the policymaker in] your government when it comes to the job of oppression. For he sees but is unseen. He tries to take the land under our feet without us feeling his smooth hands.⁷³

Darwish's comparison points to the ways in which he understood the U.S. and Israeli government systems as sharing internal logics of oppression, even if the external manifestations of that oppression were not the same. While the U.S. system was clearly predicated on racialized distinctions, in Israel the hierarchy was not based on race *per se* (though racial biases were certainly present). Yet being constantly confronted with reminders that one is excluded from aspects of a nation in which one is (technically) a citizen was a clear parallel that Darwish felt with Black Americans.

By articulating his sense of camaraderie with Black Americans through an engaged effort to understand race as a social construct, Darwish's essay offers intriguing insights into how he understood the logics and systems of oppression to operate in both the United States and Israel. Whereas the former had more explicitly racialized logics of oppression that were coupled with systems that were blatantly predicated on maintaining racial hierarchies, Israel's logics of oppression were less explicitly racialized, and it adopted more subtle systems to maintain existing hierarchies. Yet, as with the press coverage, Darwish did not just critique the oppression that the two peoples faced, he also highlighted the ways in which they resisted that oppression. His invocation of Baldwin (mentioned at the opening of this article) reveals his belief that by affirming their own humanity, writers from racialized and minoritized communities could mobilize literature to inspire one another and to push back against the dehumanizing discourses endemic to all forms of oppression.

* * *

I have argued that the engagement of Palestinian anti-colonial intellectuals with the Black freedom struggle through the local circulation of global media discourses offers important insights into how they became familiar with—and came to have empathy for—the conditions and struggles of Black Americans. Drawing on pre-'48 coverage that positioned Black Americans as working against imperialist and fascist powers, during the 1950s, columnists at *al-Ittihad* focused on drawing connections between U.S. racism and imperialism as part of its broader Cold War ideological stance. By the early 1960s, *al-Ittihad's* coverage increasingly stressed subjectivity and agency, linking the Black American freedom struggle with decolonization movements around the world. But while racism was clearly understood to lie behind much of the oppression that Black Americans faced, there was neither much effort to engage directly with race as an analytical lens for understanding how that oppression worked, nor any attempt to connect the conditions of Black Americans with those of PCIs.

That disconnect changed with Darwish, who offered a trenchant analysis of how race functioned in Israel and the United States as a social construct that marginalized Palestinian and Black citizens, respectively. Darwish stressed that anti-Blackness was a distinctive form of oppression, and he was careful not to elide the differences between the subtle forms of discrimination he faced as a Palestinian citizen of Israel and the more blatant racial violence that Black Americans had to endure. Yet in drawing a personal connection between Black American experiences and his own, he offered an early example of how an Afro-Arab imaginary manifested in a Palestinian context, shedding light on how this imaginary might function in other contexts.

Understanding this early history illuminates the intersection of anti-imperialism and antiracism and its impact on subsequent developments in Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity, especially from the late-1960s onward. Moreover, as scholars continue to explore how race as a conceptual framework can be understood in the Palestinian (and other Arab) context(s), recognizing race's historic embeddedness in discussions of imperialism, colonialism, and decolonization will be a key aspect of such analyses.

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

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