



The Commander: Fawzi al-Qawuqji and the Fight for Arab Independence, 1914–1948 by Laila Parsons.

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This outstanding study of the Arab nationalist and pan-Arabist Fawzi al-Qawuqji could have been subtitled “Have Gun (and military training), Will Travel (to support anti-colonial actions against the British and French).” Qawuqji (1890–1977) studied military science and the doctrines of Islam at the Ottoman military academy and then fought against the British and French forces seeking to end Ottoman rule in the Arab East during World War I. He later backed Amir Faysal (later King Faysal I of Iraq) in his brief postwar stint as ruler over Syria, where the French wanted to establish colonial rule. During the Syrian rebellion of 1925–27, Qawuqji supported rebel forces seeking to overthrow the French. In 1936, he joined Palestinian Arabs in a rebellion against the British in an effort to curtail Jewish immigration. His final military action was as commander of the ad hoc Arab Liberation Army spawned by the UN’s 1947 decision to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states.

Throughout his career, the charismatic Qawuqji demonstrated a military acumen sorely lacking among Arab leaders who had little or no formal military training. Again and again, Arab opponents of British and French colonial rule and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine turned to him for military leadership. His extensive and revealing memoirs,¹ much the richest source² for historians interested in Qawuqji, portray a leader who melded tactical ability with personal magnetism.

Historian Laila Parsons (McGill Univ.) confronts a question facing all scholars’ using their subject’s autobiographical works: are they reliable? To her credit, she checks Qawuqji’s self-presentation against relevant material in British, French, and Israeli archives. She has also read memoirs of other Arab nationalists and fellow soldiers as well as the secondary literature on the protest movements and revolts Qawuqji engaged in.

Though she is acutely aware of autobiographers’ tendency to inflate their own importance and elide their errors, she usually sides with Qawuqji, often pointing out the biases of British, French, and other critics, who claim that his military skills were lacking and that the units he commanded were poorly trained. In fact, the fighters he pulled together (often in haste) faithfully carried out his orders and were as disciplined as their adversaries.

On the other hand, Parsons is less judicious in her treatment of Qawuqji’s support of Germany’s military efforts during World War II, during which he lived in Berlin (1941–47) and fell in love with and married a German woman. Although Qawuqji, like the rest of the world, would have been well aware of the Holocaust in 1947, his memoirs make no mention of it. In addition, like many Arab nationalists, including Anwar Sadat and Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, he had preferred a German conquest of the Arab East to the hated colonialism of the British and French.

1. *Mudhakkirāt Fawzī al-Qāwuqjī, 1890-1977*, ed. Khayrīyah Qāsimīyah (Bayrūt: al-Tawzī‘ fī Lubnān ..., 1995).

2. They appear fifty-seven times in Parsons’s “Notes on Sources” (257–58).

Qawuqji even wrote a long report in 1941 for the German Foreign Ministry, entitled “The Customs and Traditions of the Tribes of Syria and Iraq,” identifying the tribes most likely to welcome a German invasion of their regions. But were Arab nationalists, especially those living in Germany during the war, so utterly oblivious to German colonial ambitions not only in eastern and central Europe but also in the Middle East? Not to mention the blatant racism and anti-Semitism that German “liberators” would have applied to Arabs as well.

To be sure, the author differentiates Qawuqji’s views from those of Amin al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem, who also resided in Germany during the war and applauded the extermination of Jews. Parsons’s insistence that Qawuqji bitterly resented the German government’s refusal to state its intent to create independent Arab states does not excuse his turning a blind eye to the Third Reich’s virulent racial fascism.

Parsons provides a helpful road map of Arab resistance to British and French colonial ambitions in the Levant. Particularly impressive is her account of Qawuqji’s Arab Liberation Army, which opposed the formation of an Israeli state by the partitioning of Palestine. She does not spare the young Israel’s political and military leaders; specifically, she details the aggressions of the Israeli military forces, including their brutal policies against Arab villagers, which have now been well documented even by Israeli historians.

Laila Parsons has rescued an important Arab nationalist from obscurity and clarified the many, often abortive, efforts of Syrian and Iraqi leaders to stop the founding of the state of Israel in 1947–48 and the imposition of British and French colonial rule in Arab lands. Her book is a triumph. Anyone seriously interested in the history of the Middle East should read *The Commander* with care. The sooner, the better.