

Response to Barry Finger on Israel-Palestine

August 6, 2014

I wish to commend Barry Finger for his analysis of the Israel-Palestine conflict dating back to the establishment of 1947 UN Partition Plan. (Finger makes a minor error in calling it the “1948 partition.”)

It is rare for someone on the left to admit that “both sides” in the war that followed “practiced ethnic cleansing.” He correctly notes that the UN Partition Plan was unjust in that it allotted the Jewish state 55% of Palestine, but the problem was not that “the Arab population would represent almost half of the population,” but that the Arabs, who outnumbered Jews by 2:1, were allotted only 45% of the land for their state. This was a legitimate issue, but rather than propose a more equitable division of the land, or to join the minority of Zionists who were proposing a bi-national state, the Arab side rejected partition or bi-nationalism in principle, refusing to recognize the right of Jews in Palestine to establish *any political entity*.

Furthermore, had the Arabs the foresight to accept the partition plan despite its unfair division of the land, the fact that the Arab population left inside the Jewish state was so high would have given it extraordinary political leverage. Instead, by launching a war against the Jewish population, the Arabs gave the Zionist forces the opportunity they were looking for to expel most of the Arab population.

It is also rare for leftists to admit that the Arab nations “subsequently cleansed [their Jewish population] in retaliation for the Palestinian catastrophe.” Not only was this a gross human rights violation, but it was incredibly stupid from the Arab nationalist perspective because it generated millions of new immigrants to Israel, who have remained on the right wing of Israeli political spectrum to this day.

Finger also argues that “Israel, as currently constituted, is functionally incapable of integrating itself into the Middle East. It cannot and will not accept peace proposals—whether by the Arab League, the Palestinian authority, or Hamas...” This is not exactly the case. Given the current and past state of the Middle East—characterized by dictatorships, monarchies, Islamic insurgencies etc., who have often used anti-Jewish rhetoric — it is not exactly a welcoming place. Nevertheless Israel has signed peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and came awfully close to a final agreement with the Palestinian Authority in 1999-2000. Its current enemy, Hamas, has failed to make a peace proposal that includes recognition of the state of Israel. Finally, unless and until the Palestinians give up the “right of return” there will be no peace agreement with any Israeli government, left or right. For the Palestinians to insist on *both* an independent Palestinian state on territory occupied by Israel since June 1967 *and* the right of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees to return to Israel in its pre-1967 borders is absurd.

Finger’s argument challenging the typical leftist claim that Israel is another South Africa is right on point. Israeli Jews are a nation. Many of its Jewish citizens are refugees from one of the worst genocides in human history. They may look like white Europeans, but white Europeans almost exterminated them. . Based on this experience, they are not going to give up political sovereignty in the short or medium term. Further a large minority of its population are not white Europeans in any sense, but immigrants or descendants of Jews from Arab and Muslim lands, where they experienced varying degrees of discrimination, culminating in ethnic cleansing.

Yet Finger insists on using the term “apartheid” to describe Israel, based on a very broad definition

that applies to lesser forms of discrimination. Apartheid's worst features were strict limits on the residence and movement of Black South Africans through "pass laws" and the denial of Black citizenship including the right to vote. Palestinian citizens of Israel experience housing segregation but are free to move throughout the country. They have the right to vote, have formed political parties and participate in the political process. The term "apartheid" is better suited to describe the situation of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

To those leftists who call for a single state encompassing Israel and the occupied territory, where Jews and Arabs will somehow live as equals, Finger has the appropriate response. "...They cannot specify a present path by which both Palestinians and Israelis could agree to this outcome through free will or choice."

Finger brilliantly exposes a fundamental flaw in the demand for boycott, divestment and sanctions aka BDS. "Israeli capitalism is not the principle obstacle to Palestinian national rights." A successful BDS movement will not cause solidarity among the oppressors to crack as it did in the case of South Africa, but strengthen the authoritarian and fascist tendencies in Israeli society.

Finger's alternative proposal is to demand an end to all US aid to Israel—and I would add diplomatic support. These proposals should have more appeal with Americans sick of foreign interventions and has the potential of forcing Israel to abandon its habitual reliance on military force when it realizes that it will not be bailed out by the US.

However, Finger flies off the rails by describing Israel as a "viral bulwark against the Arab democratic upsurge." Has Israel undermined the struggles for greater democracy in the Arab world? Where? In Egypt where the military is back in power? In Syria, which is in the throes of a bloody civil war between the Assad dictatorship and Islamic fanatics? In Iraq, where radical Sunnis are on the offensive against a corrupt Shia-dominated regime? For that matter, I do not understand Finger's claim that the Arab Spring has been "momentarily checked by United States and Iranian intervention."

It seems that the Arab Spring has turned into an Arab winter without any help from Israel, the United States or Iran. Iran has aided Syria against the rebels, but neither side in that conflict promotes democracy. Iran has exerted some influence in Iraq, but it has not been successful judging from the military success of the radical Sunni Islamists. I do not see why Finger singles out Iran when Saudi Arabia has done far more to promote authoritarian rule in the Middle East.

In sum, despite these disagreements, I believe Barry Finger had done a great service in articulating a cogent defense of the two state solution. It is indeed only the viable basis to any just, peaceful and democratic solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, precisely because it recognizes the national and human rights of both peoples.

This is something that the "Free Palestine" crowd has had trouble understanding. Nothing rankles more than so-called international socialists in the US and Europe wearing Arab keffiyehs.