Supporting the Struggle Against Apartheid Then and Now

written by Barry Finger | July 29, 2014

The discussion of a socialist strategy towards Palestine never recedes from global pertinence and urgency. The basic terms of the Palestinian tragedy established in 1948 remain a festering wound—unaddressed, malignant and oozing in blood and rot. With it the Israeli garrison state continues to descend, and rightfully so, into isolation and disrepute in the court of civilized opinion. But under the protective and ever indulgent umbrella of American imperialism, Israel nevertheless continues to defy international outrage without consequence in its relentless march to impose a grotesque and monstrous caricature of a one-state solution on the whole of Palestine.

The Palestinian plight has its origins in the 1948 partition and ensuing war, although this was a direct continuation of the Zionist-Arab conflict that had been brewing for decades. In that conflict, both sides practiced ethnic cleansing, with no Jews remaining in areas conquered by the Arabs and few Palestinian remaining in areas conquered by Israelis. But the UN partition plan called for the Israeli state to constitute 55 percent of Palestine, in which the Arab population would represent almost half of the population. In the run up to and during the war, the victorious Israeli state expanded its territories to 78 percent, and mostly emptied those regions of their Arab inhabitants. Three quarters of a million Palestinians, some from the original 55 percent allotted to the Jewish state, were driven out; over 450 Arab villages were uprooted and their dwellings leveled. New Jewish villages, kibbutzim or immigration camps were built on or near the former sites of these Arab villages. Urban dwellings were reoccupied by Jews, often holocaust survivors. Jewish refugees from Arab nations, subsequently cleansed in retaliation for the Palestinian catastrophe (Nakhba), were sent to jerry-rigged development towns.

Gaza and the West Bank, the sites of huge concentrations of Palestinian refugees, fell—with Israel's approval—into the hands of Egypt and Trans-Jordan (now Jordan) respectively; the possibility of a Palestinian state all but extinguished. This all changed when, after the Six Day war in 1967, these territories were brought under the control of the Israelis, uniting all of historic Palestine and reviving the Palestinian national movement. The colonial project at the heart of Zionism, of settlement and expulsion, was also reignited and several hundred thousand additional Palestinians were again expelled to Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The remnants were left to the mercy of an ever more brutalizing occupation. The armistice boundaries of the 1948 war (the green line) were effectively effaced and Israel emerged as a nation unique in its refusal to define its borders—symptomatic of an Israel further seeking to consolidate its character as an ethnic Jewish state, but on a vastly broader canvas.

Today the struggle for justice for Palestinians continues. Where are Palestine's allies? What power can it leverage? International solidarity has yet to save lives, to redeem territories, to compensate and repatriate refugees, or to establish the right of Palestinians to national self-determination in defiance of Israeli intransigence. An internationalist Israeli left, never more than a tiny minority and unable to implant itself in the Hebrew working class, is besieged not only by state repression, but also by a now burgeoning fascist street presence. The protracted Arab Spring, momentarily checked by United States and Iranian intervention, has yet to mature as an agency that can brake and reverse the momentum of Israeli settlement and dispossession.

Conversely, 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—that require it to halt its colonization process in return for diplomatic recognition and a regional accord. These have been repeatedly offered to it by its neighbors and blithely ignored or scornfully dismissed. And although Israel is periodically called upon to mollify successive American administrations by going through the motions of negotiations with Abu Mazen, it formulistically does so while seizing every opportunity to further strangle the occupied territories. The Janus face of international civic responsibility is inseparably paired with the grim visage of sabotage and betrayal. The hapless Palestinians too are ritualistically called upon time and again to participate in this farce, hoping against experience that the outcome might yet, just this one time, improve. But the outcome is always the same. The Palestinians earnestly talk compromise while "facts" on the ground continue to be implanted. They can then either stay and loose street credibility or leave and feed Israel's habitual public relations theme that it has is no partner with which to negotiate peace. The obdurate reality is that the cruel hoax of negotiations expresses itself in an endless succession of groundhog days for Palestinians, exceptional only in that they lose traction with each successive iteration.

It is clear, if only in retrospect, that Israel would only have made peace with its neighbors, Egypt and Jordan, insofar as the framework for those agreements provided a protective bubble behind which its colonization project could safely proceed. These treaties would never have been signed had an end to hostilities been contingent on a binding resolution to the Palestinian problem. What is also tragically clear is that no satisfaction to the just demands of the Palestinians is likely to come about through negotiations within the currently existing dynamic of power alignments.

Yet one key fact remains. American imperialism does not require Israeli expansionism. An on-going Zionist project does. But given that Washington requires Israel as an asset to further its policies, it can also reliably be counted on to "stand with Israel" and subsidize Zionist adventures. This is, however, not a blank check relationship and Israel's outrageous behavior portends a poisonous turn in a partnership yielding diminished dividends. Still, as long as the American treasury underwrites the colonial project in the occupied territories, it defers the fissures that would disrupt Israeli social cohesion were Israel otherwise called upon to directly finance its own expansion. It is this dynamic that cements the symbiotic relationship between Israel and the United States assuring that a colonizing Israel remains a Jewish national, that is Zionist, state. Were these cracks not paved over from without, all the class and ethnic tensions that are currently suppressed would bubble to the surface. Israel would revert to capitalist normality. Its no-longer subsidized rulers would predictably seek to offload the enormous cost of occupation on to its already beleaguered working class. The top-down nationalist alliance between Israeli capitalism and its exploited multi-ethnic underclasses could be shattered. The social isolation of Palestinian-Israelis might finally be breeched in the struggle for working class power.

The liquidation of the colonization project implicitly places the battle for a genuinely anti-imperialist two-state solution at its center. The dissociation of Israel from American imperialism is likewise the precondition for a truly Israeli state—ultimately a binational citizen state of Jews and Arabs—carrying out Israeli policies in Israel's, rather than America's, national interests. And those national interests would first and foremost find expression in the relaxation of tensions between Jews and Palestinians; a joint struggle for a just resolution to the broader Palestinian refugee problem in its entirety, including recognition of the right to repatriation/compensation; full national rights for Palestinian citizens, including the right to secession; and, in return, a full integration of Israel into the Middle East on an equal national footing.

For Israel, perhaps more than any other nation, war and the threat of war is indeed the health of the state. And its continuing project of colonization, dispossession, humiliation, lethal oppression, and ethnic cleansing assures itself that insurgency, both armed and peaceful, remains a constant

menace. It also predisposes its citizenry—and international supporters, and blind well-wishers— to remain harnessed in perpetual mobilization against that resistance. Israel has its roots in colonial settlerism. As long as that project continues, Israel will reliably exist behind this iron wall—arrogant, messianic, and myopic; and its international supporters will be driven ever further to the right.

But Israel is not, the West Bank excepted, simply a cluster of colons. It is a fully elaborated capitalist society, whose class tensions are structurally contained through identifiable political and economic networks of domestic and international power. That is why those who make the analogy of Zionist settlerism with apartheid and draw upon strategies consistent with the South African anti-apartheid struggle are searching in the wrong direction. The conventional position of the anti-imperialist Arab and pro-Palestinian left, the socialist voices of the oppressed, has been that the Palestinians, like the Algerians, Zimbabweans, and South Africans have the right to statehood in all of Palestine; and to accede otherwise, that the Israeli oppressor has the right to a separate state, is an accommodation to settlerism as a living project and going concern. But it is not necessary to place the nationalism of the oppressed on the same level as the rights of the oppressor to recognize the existence of a distinct and class-differentiated Hebrew community with characteristics wholly commensurate with dozens of other national entities whose right to national self-determination has never been denied by socialists. Most of North and South America, Australia, and New Zealand, after all, have their roots in settler colonialism. Most also became "normal" capitalist states once the colonial-settler stage of development was brought to an end. And the conventional means by which this came to an end was through a one state solution in which the original inhabitants were marginalized, expelled or annihilated, precisely the paths that political intervention here and now is urgently called upon to short-circuit in Palestine.

Israel, no doubt, meets the legal definition of apartheid. That definition refers to ethnic, racial, or national exclusion with the purpose of "nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life." This definition can be consistent with a denial of collective rights as a national entity, without the denial of individual rights. Think of the history of the French community in Quebec. But it can also apply to discrimination against individuals by policies such as Jim Crow, absent national oppression (presuming of course that African Americans in the main never came to consciousness of themselves as a distinct nation.) Think too of the pervasive gender apartheid in traditional societies. Palestinians within Israel and the occupied territories, citizens and subjects, suffer from both forms of apartheid, so understood. That is, they are denied both individual and national equality on either side of the green line.

But socialists also seek to understand settler apartheid in its operational specificity through the interplay of class and nation. When socialists refer to Israeli apartheid they are generally seeking a parallel between South Africa and Israel It is a parallel that suggests that there is no distinct Hebrew nation aside from a narrow cultural layer and that this community has no distinct right to self-determination, any more than did South African Whites of British or Dutch extraction. There are of course many parallels. In some pointed ways, Israel's repressive policies in the occupied territories are far more horrific. But the decisive difference resides in this. The White population of South Africa (or the French in Algeria, the British in Rhodesia) never experienced full social and class differentiation. The exploiters were of European background; the working classes were Third World people of color. The white community in South Africa lived off the labor of a black nation-class harnessed to capitalism and subordinated to white supremacy through apartheid. This form of settlerism generally ended with decolonization and the repatriation of colons to the metropole. That it did not resolve precisely in South Africa, as it did in Algeria, the former Rhodesia, Vietnam, and countless other recent decolonization struggles is the exception, not the rule. Settlerism in the "new world" in contrast rarely passed through this apartheid stage in its relations with aboriginal peoples.

European implantation there was in the main not discriminatory and exploitative, but genocidal.

Zionist colonialism did not transplant Jews to Palestine to exploit the native peoples, but to acquire in isolation and through marginalization and ethnic cleansing, a new society with its own national culture. Jewish colonization quite consciously fostered its own Hebrew working class. It resembles neither South Africa nor French-dominated Vietnam and Algeria. And were Israel to be militarily overwhelmed there would be no mother country to take the colonists back. They would be a captured nation, not a cultural residue of empire.

Another, more integral argument against Hebrew, as opposed to Zionist, self-determination and nationhood is that the Israelis do indeed constitute a nation, but a nation that exists and is maintained by the exclusion and denial of another nation's right to exist. This, perhaps, is the thinking of many who are uneasy with the South African parallel, but who nevertheless seek a one-state solution as the only means of rectifying one historical injustice, without creating another. That is, it aims to address the Palestinian national problem and eliminate the conditions of apartheid on both sides of the 1967 borders, without reversing the situation of oppressed and oppressor. It promises an equality of citizens in combination with an equal collective right to cultural development and expression within a unitary state.

Certainly national self-determination is not per se a supreme ideal. It is a democratic right. Socialists approach the advocacy of this right instrumentally, guided by whether its exercise advances or obstructs the class struggle. If the goal of working class unity can better be realized in a unitary state, socialists will advocate that the "right" to nationhood be subordinated to the needs of struggle. This might, for instance, be a consideration in a socialist orientation towards Scottish independence. Socialists cannot commit themselves to encourage each and every nation regardless of concrete circumstance the right to establish an independent state. We generally reserve such encouragement to where national oppression suppresses class struggle and binds the oppressed nation's working class with its capitalists in democratic opposition. Here, self-determination is welcome as a precondition for interclass fragmentation. It secures a more favorable context for socialist fight back.

Neither, reciprocally, can socialists advocate in principle and at all times our preference for multi-national states over nation-states. Where such possibilities loom, the only general principle that must be upheld is that the surrender of the right to independent national existence be fully voluntary and not the result of coercion. For any joint framework based on compulsion reintroduces the very mechanism of national oppression that re-validates the call for self-determination as a democratic right and socialist imperative, even when led by reactionary alliances.

We as socialists are, in all circumstances, driven by the desire to accommodate national rights only to the degree necessary to dissipate the poisons of nationalism and raise to prominence the struggle between classes.

And here is the rub. While one-state advocates sincerely envision a non-coercive and peaceful multi-national framework, they cannot specify a present path by which both Palestinians and Israelis could agree to this outcome through free will and choice. Under the best of conditions unity must be preceded by an enormous amount of mutual cooperation and confidence building. And of these, there is simply precious little history in Palestine. There is no other path than that of a genuine two state experience from which such measures can be forged. A forced fusion of nations at Israel's expense, unlikely in any event, would only throw the Israeli working class deeper into an alliance with reaction and perpetuate the conflict on a different, albeit non-Zionist, footing.

Why do these distinctions matter? The immediate task is to mobilize worldwide support in defense of

the Palestinians and to prevent the Zionist colonization project from proceeding to further rounds of mass murder and ethnic cleansing. But the long-term strategy is to drive a wedge between the Zionist ruling class and the Hebrew working class, to break the iron wall of chauvinist solidarity thereby unleashing conditions favorable to the creation of a mass, bi-national, Israeli left. The immediate task and the long-term strategy are in fact intimately linked and must condition the tactics that socialists act upon to bring about these ends.

The solidarity movement correctly understands that an imperialist brokered two-state solution is likely to be a sham solution, based on Bantustan autonomy and military domination, i.e., one giving "due consideration" to Israeli security. It has understandably focused its energies not on encouraging illusions, but in isolating Israel in the court of public opinion through the tactics of boycott, divestment, and sanctions, BDS. BDS is an eminently democratic call employed to some success, not only in the struggle against South African apartheid, but also, one might add, by the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry. How telling that these past supporters and modern day co-thinkers and camp followers of the Student Struggle can reliably be counted upon to raise fierce objections, including the demand for repression and intimidation against BDS, now that the object of their affections is being duly targeted.

BDS demands an end to the occupation and colonization of Arab lands and the dismantling of the separation barrier, granting full civil rights and equality to the Arab minority in Israel and respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinians to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194. What BDS seeks is not inconsistent with a two state solution, although it is officially agnostic on the question. Still, the majority of Palestinian membership organizations and individuals who support BDS also stand on record in accord with a two-state solution.

But are BDS tactics against Israel actually commensurate with advancing the socialist cause? Isolating apartheid South African was a means of demonstrating to South African capital that the cost of doing business would require an overhaul in its structure of exploitation. It created a more propitious context for class struggle. Isolating Israeli capital would only have the desired results if apartheid served the same functional expedient. But this is where the distinctions between South African and Israeli apartheid crucially breaks down. Israeli capital does not rest on Palestinian exploitation, but on Palestinian exclusion. Zionist apartheid, as we have shown, is not a political superstructure of exploitation, but the modus of colonization. Israeli capitalism benefits economically from the occupation regime to the extent that it retains a captured market in the impoverished territories and makes use of state force to hijack land and water rights. It also, more importantly, benefits politically insofar as Zionism unifies classes in subordination to "nation building," that is, to colonization and its perpetual need to defend that project. But Zionism and Israeli capitalism are separable social concerns. The harmonization of class conflict can persist only as long as the occupation regime is underwritten and subsidized from abroad. The relatively dovish character of the Israeli bourgeoisie is likewise attributable to a basic recognition that the Middle East as a whole constitutes its natural customers and Arab businesses its natural partners. The point is this: Israeli capitalism is not the principle obstacle to Palestinian national rights.

An effective embargo of Israeli capitalism, such as envisioned by BDS though by no means imminent, would ramify against the working class of Israel through mass layoffs. Sinking the Israeli economy would be experienced as a form of national oppression and would easily be exploited as a rallying cry for Zionist reaction to mobilize all classes around itself. The hundreds of thousands of guest workers who replaced Palestinians following the Oslo accords would be expelled, further thinning the Israeli working class and depleting its potential power. Class conflict would further self-suppress into the interstices of Israeli public life. It would be open season, as if it's not already, on Palestinian and leftist scapegoating. Social and economic dependency on an imperialist lifeline would

predictably strengthen, providing an even more eager and viral bulwark against the Arab democratic upsurge.

This is not a program for struggle. It is a program of despair that writes off the Israeli worker as a partner in the struggle against capitalist oppression and imperial domination. What needs to be confronted, isolated, and sanctioned instead, are the official agencies and representatives of Zionist domination and repression. What needs to be boycotted as illegitimate are goods and services produced in the occupied territories. What needs to be divested from are international businesses that partner with an Israeli state that continues to discriminate in the dispersal of public goods and resources and to oppress its occupied subjects.

Every means must be employed to shatter, not reinforce, the Zionist consensus.

Central to that end, however, is a unified demand to halt all state aid to Israel and a military embargo. They should be combined with the call for aid to be redirected to the Palestinians in the form of humanitarian relief and infrastructural support. Let Gaza and the West Bank rebuild their housing, their schools, their sewage and water treatment plants, and their hospitals. Let it create air and seaports for the export and import of its goods and services. Let it build an economy capable of lifting its citizenry out of poverty. Private aid and assistance to Israel should also not be exempt. We should demand that it be heavily taxed with those tax proceeds earmarked for Palestinian development. Let the Palestinians create the prerequisites of a functioning state.

Israel, after all, claims an inviolable right to defend itself against the consequences of its occupation. Let Israel, alone, pay for it.