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Middle East

The impact of the Zionist project on Palestine and the region

- Features - Palestine -

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Since the start of the second Intifada in Palestine, we have seen the collapse of imperialism's Plan B for the region. Plan A had been simply to allow Israel to hold on to the territories it occupied in 1967. Following the first Intifada, it became clear that this approach was not viable, and a new plan "B" was adopted.

This Plan B proposed the establishment of something that could be presented as a Palestinian state – alongside the state of Israel. We know that it would have been nothing of the sort: the proposed Palestinian state would have had NO control of its own borders or airspace, NO armed forces, been unable to absorb the Palestinian refugees, and crucially, have had NO control of its water resources. But this Plan B has been the position of the imperialists, supported verbally by most Arab regimes and the Israeli government for the last several years.

Now this approach has collapsed and it appears that imperialism has no fall-back plan, instead reverting to a revised version of Plan A which gives Israel carte blanche in the region.

Background and Perspectives

In the past, imperialism - in its own interests - divided the Arab world into separate states with no material historical, geographical, economic or social basis. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, Britain and France rushed to stake their claims in the Middle East. Having encouraged nationalist risings against the Turks, they then made it clear that they had no intention of honouring their promises, or even of observing US President Wilson's famous "Nineteen Principles". Thus imperialism chose to dissociate the peoples of the region from its natural resources, and has fostered the development of local military or feudal leaderships with no local legitimacy and no reason to act in the interests of their subjects.

Some of these states were established in order to limit the independence of potentially powerful neighbours. Thus Kuwait was established in order to deny sea access to Iraq, a country with vast oil reserves. Meanwhile Saudi Arabia was ringed by a chain of feudal monarchies with strong defence ties with Britain. Others, notably Lebanon, were established on a spurious religio-ethnic basis, in order to deepen the confessionalism of the Middle East and undermine the appeal of Arab unity.

There can be no solution for the problems of the Arab world, including the many national minorities, in the framework of this division. The exploitation of the resources of the region for the benefit of the peoples of the region and the free development of the national minorities can only be achieved within the context of a united Middle East. This, and not any romantic support for the ideas of Arab nationalism, is why we call for the establishment of a socialist federation of the Middle East. This is not an abstract demand, but the necessary condition for the liberation of the peoples of the region, including the national minorities.

Role of Zionism and the state of Israel

Within this division of the Middle East, the state of Israel and the Zionist movement have played a key role. They have been the cutting edge of imperialist domination in the region. Unlike other regimes in the region, Israel has no

option than a strategic alliance with imperialism.

This strategic imperative was recognised by both parties. Theodor Herzl, the founder of the organised Zionist movement, wrote in 1895 of forming in Palestine “a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism”, while the British Military Governor of Jerusalem Sir Ronald Storrs, noted in 1917 that the Zionists would form for England “a little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism”.

Israel has introduced a complicating factor into the Middle East patchwork. Not only has Israel been the unshakeable ally of imperialism, it is potential threat to any radical or popular regime in the area. The very existence of Israel, as a Jewish state, its dispossession of the Palestinians, and its aggression against other states has contributed towards diverting the resources of the region and distorting the economic and social development of the Middle East. However, the actions of the state of Israel have assisted in the formation of a cross-class “national purpose” in the Arab states, and have encouraged (sometimes deliberately) the growth of the forces of political Islam.

Liberation in the Middle East thus requires the integration of Israeli Jews into the Arab world. Any approach based on the recognition and legitimation of Zionist separatism means a continuation of the present tendency towards ever-more-explicit apartheid. This integration will not be easy, and we need to pose a strategy for realising this.

Reality of Zionism

Zionism is not just a word, and it is more than an ideology. It is a very real, organised political movement with a tangible impact on developments and everyday reality in the Middle East. In one significant way, as I shall explain later, it means that Israel is a state unlike any other.

From the start, the Zionist movement set itself three tasks: the colonisation of Palestine, the recruitment of Jews to support this, and the attraction of an imperialist sponsor. It has been remarkably successful in all three of these.

Zionism arose as a flawed response to European anti-Semitism, which it viewed as a rational and legitimate reaction to what it viewed as the anomalous existence of Jews in Europe. Zionists concluded from this that an anti-racist struggle was futile, and that the only possible response was that Jews should remove themselves from European society and establish their own state in Palestine. In this, ironically, they found that their strongest allies were precisely those racists who shared their goal of ridding Europe of its Jews.

A striking example of this was the British Conservative politician Arthur Balfour, who gave his name to the notorious Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British government stated its support for the establishment of a Jewish “national home” in Palestine. This was not through love of Jews; some years earlier, the same Balfour had introduced the first Aliens Act in Britain, designed to prevent the immigration of Jews fleeing pogroms and Tsarist oppression. Balfour’s speech in the House of Commons dripped with contempt for the “unassimilatable” Jews, with their own language, religion, and suspicious links to foreign terrorists.

At first, the Zionist movement attracted little response. In the period between 1881 and 1914, some 2 million Jews fled the Russian Empire. Of these, only some 50,000 went to Palestine and half of these left within five years. In fact, mass Jewish support for Zionism followed, rather than led to, the establishment of the state of Israel.

The Zionists expressed their policy of colonisation of Palestine in the phrases “conquest of the land” and “conquest of labour” – ie, expropriation and dispossession of the Palestinians and their exclusion from the economy. Before 1948,

this was carried out on a small scale, largely through land purchase from absentee landlords. In sharp contrast with traditional patterns of ownership, however, the Zionists did not buy the land in order to use the tenant farmers already working the land, but rather to replace them. Hence, there are reports of evictions and clashes dating back to the beginning of the 20th century.

With the creation of the state of Israel...

Since the mass expulsion of Palestinians and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, this process has accelerated massively. Hundreds of Palestinian villages were depopulated, and their lands taken over. These lands have been administered by the World Zionist Organisation and the Jewish National Fund, which since 1952 have officially shared power with the Israeli government.

These bodies, which are not answerable, even in theory, to the people of Israel – nor even to the Jews of Israel – but to the legal fiction of “the Jewish people”, manage nearly all land and determine land use policy in Israel and in much of the land occupied in 1967. In effect, a major element of state power has been extra-territorialised by official legislation. Since these Zionist organisations are statutorily obliged to work for the benefit of Jews alone, this means that use of over 90% of the land in Israel is denied to non-Jews.

Additionally, the World Zionist Organisation and the Jewish National Fund take responsibility for much of the social service provision in Israel, including education, welfare and infrastructure. Thus, structural discrimination can be maintained, without the need for any explicit racist legislation.

But these Zionist bodies are also registered charities in many western states, which are thus subsidising this discrimination. Belatedly, the solidarity movement is realising the necessity of challenging this.

The Current Role of Zionism in Imperialist Strategy in the Middle East

This is the context in which Zionism fits into the imperialist strategy of dividing the Middle East. The alliance between Israel and imperialism is not accidental, and nor is it a result of the power of any “Zionist (or Jewish) lobby”. In fact, as has been clearly demonstrated by US political scientist Abramo Organski, the growth of this lobby followed, rather than led to, massive increases in US political, military and financial aid to Israel. In fact, the lobby is more a function of US foreign policy, than an influence on it.

Because the Zionist project is not synonymous with the imperialist project, there have at times been differences and tensions. Given the results of the recent US and Israeli elections, it is likely that we will see such tensions in the coming period, and we must be ready to respond appropriately.

The US is still, formally at least, committed to its Plan B; indeed, Obama probably supports this with greater enthusiasm than Bush ever did. But any new Israeli government, under the likely leadership of Netanyahu, will be well to the right of the former Olmert line. Even if the ultra-nationalist Lieberman is excluded, such a new government would be likely to resist even minimal concessions. So we can expect US pressure on Israel to focus on a two-state settlement.

Problems of the Two-State Solution

But we must recognise that any international pressure for such a settlement can never resolve the conflict.

Can the rights of both Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews be ensured, and can we move towards a revolutionary transformation in the Middle East, through the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel? Many on the left argue that this is possible, indeed necessary. Citing the decades of conflict, the history of European racism and the Nazi holocaust, they argue that Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs are incapable of living in a common state. They therefore support the demand of the PLO leadership, and of parts of the Israeli peace movement, for the establishment of a Palestinian state next to Israel. Some go even further, adopting the explicitly apartheid slogan of “Two states for two peoples” – the logic of which implies the removal of Palestinians from the Jewish state, and of Jews from the Palestinian state.

Against this, we argue that a further partition would perpetuate the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, would reinforce the national consensus of both communities, and would undermine the possibility of any development of class unity. We recognise that the continued existence of Israel as a Jewish state will necessarily act against a revolutionary transformation of the region, yet there is no logic for Israel's existence in any other form.

A two-state approach, even in its most generous application, with a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, would still leave unresolved key questions. Without recognising the right of return for the millions of Palestinian refugees and establishing mechanisms for this to take place, there is no chance of a lasting solution. Clearly there is no possibility of their large-scale resettlement in the relatively arid and unfertile West Bank.

Other issues, too – in particular, the use of scarce water resources – could only be addressed on a Palestine-wide, if not regional, basis. Additionally, any demand for the removal of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories would be met by an Israeli demand for “transfer” – the expulsion of Palestinian citizens from the state of Israel. Indeed, this seems to be the logic of the “Two states for two peoples” demand.

Strategy for the Palestine solidarity movement

Analytically, this means that our position, our propaganda, should emphasise the centrality of the Zionist project, and the key role of Zionism, in alliance with imperialism, in subjugating and dividing the people of Palestine and of the Middle East.

Practically, in terms of our involvement in the solidarity movement, this also has serious implications. In particular, while working to develop the international campaign for boycott, divestment and sanctions and to expose Israeli war crimes, we must work to ensure that the solidarity movements establish direct links with Palestinian and other activists, and we should strive to make this, rather than lobbying legislators, our primary focus.