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Palestine solidarity

Perspectives for Palestine

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I will start out with a historical account on how positions on the question have evolved, and then go on to a discussion of the problem as it is posed nowadays.

If we start out with solutions for settlements, proposed in just after the Second World War, between 1945 and 1948, on the Arab side there were two basic positions:

1) One that was the position of the League of Arab States, which at the time was essentially led by Wafdist Egypt; that is by a liberal nationalist current which intersected with the positions of the left to be found in the region, and particularly in Palestine, including among Jewish and Arab communist activists. This perspective was what we would now call a binational solution, in the sense that in both cases what was contemplated was a State made up of the current inhabitants of Palestine, thus non-exclusive. The proposal formulated by the Arab States for parliamentary representation, with one third of seats guaranteed to the Jewish population, reflecting their proportion among the population of Palestine at the time. This means overall, a formula for a democratic state, but also taking into account the difference between the two national communities; although of course the Jewish-Israeli community was a nation in formation, if we can put it that way.

2) Faced with this perspective, there was the outlook represented by the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husseini, which is an outlook described as ultranationalist, which consisted of demanding the departure of all Jews who arrived in Palestine after 1917.

So there was a split going back to that era between two types of positions.

In the later course of events, we can see the dominant political current from the mid-1950s and 1960s of which Nasser was the foremost representative. From the outset, the Nasserist outlook, contrary to the myths surrounding the June 1967 war, took a stand in against the idea of "throwing the Jews in the sea". Nasser made statements against such ideas straight away, and supported a position that was more or less in the footsteps of the League of Arab States position, supporting a State of Palestine, a Palestine in which the Jews present could live with their full rights as a minority, a justifiable term if we look at Palestine within the mandate borders, as there were more Palestinians than Israeli Jews.

The PLO, founded in 1964 in Jerusalem under the aegis of the Arab regimes and in particular of Arab reaction (and contrary to what is believed, Choukeiry was not a close friend of the Nasser regime, with which he had had many conflicts) was rather, in its founding charter, in the continuity of the Mufti's ultranationalist vision, with a definition of the Jews entitled to remain in Palestine as Palestinian Jews, i.e. the native Jews. Even when the charter was amended in 1968, the formula retained spoke of the Jews entitled to remain in Palestine as those who had been present in Palestine before 1917, according to the mufti's ultranationalist formula. This implied that all those who arrived later had to pack their bags and return to their countries of origin, patterned after the exodus of Europeans in Algeria after national independence.

When Palestinian guerrilla movements developed after 1967, and started to progressively take control of the PLO, they formulated another approach, which however could never be inscribed in the PLO charter, due to resistance of ultranationalists, present in PLO institutions, in particular in PNC, (the Palestinian National Council).

As for Fatah, a certain number of leaders and intellectuals linked to the movement developed the idea, which actually

converged with the other outlook and is not really new, of a democratic Palestine, a democratic State in Palestine, to cite the precise formulation, which would include all Palestinians, including returning refugees, and Jewish inhabitants of the land, not without ambiguities at times, for example such as the allusion to political conditions that would determine who would have the right to remain in democratic Palestine. The fundamental idea is to speak of a State where Palestinian Arabs and Jewish immigrants to Palestine would coexist.

This perspective was also formulated by the Popular Front, which developed the same idea: of a democratic State of Palestine, with a clearer stance on its openness to all its inhabitants, though ambiguities remain.

This democratic State perspective has faced much criticism from the start; there was even criticism from an Arab nationalist standpoint, of the fact that such a perspective enclosed the Palestinian question within the borders of the British mandate, just as questionable from an Arab nationalist viewpoint as all the other Arab borders. The fundamental criticism of this type of approach is: that it views the Israelis as Jews. In other terms, it sees the Israeli question as a religious community question, and fails to take into account the existence of the historical formation of an Israeli national fact. Thus, the solution to the conflict can't be reduced to a democratic, secular State, as if it were just a question of coexistence of religious communities, while ignoring the unavoidable national dimension.

Obviously, the second criticism of such a formulation from a Marxist viewpoint is its limitation to a "democratic" perspective, i.e. a bourgeois programme: it is the idea that there can be a substantial solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem solution within a capitalist, bourgeois democratic framework.

Faced with this type of formulation we can find, as early as 1970 in Palestinian circles, a perspective that can be seen as the most advanced of the era, formulated by the Democratic Front, which was originally a split from the Popular Front, a combination of activists from the Popular Front, itself from the Arab nationalist movement, but also a very important contribution from left communists fleeing the bloody repression launched after the 1968 Ba'athist coup. Among these, there were people with Trotskyist sympathies, which can be seen by the references to Trotsky in the earliest Democratic Front documents, combined with references to Mao Tse-Tung.

Nayef Hawatmeh, the main leader of the Democratic Front then advocated a binational socialist solution, with Yugoslavia as a model. Of course nowadays, in light of what has become of Yugoslavia, this is as bad as Arafat's frequent reference to Lebanon as a model for Secular Democratic Palestine, (apart from the fact that Lebanese secularism is entirely questionable, to say the least). Of course, references must be viewed in the context of the times. What is essential in the Democratic Front outlook is the idea of a federative solution taking into account national entities that could only be achieved in a socialist perspective.

On the Israeli side, in the 1960s the Israeli Socialist Organisation was formed, better known as Matzpen, which at the outset also subscribed to the Marxist perspective of a fundamental solution to the problem in a socialist framework, and spoke of a Middle Eastern socialist federation. Leaving out the term "Arab" reflected their desire to include a State of Israel in this federation. ISO put Palestinian self-determination and self-determination of the Israeli nation, as they put it, on the same plane.

We had a disagreement with such a perspective, because it is not possible to put the right to self-determination of a nation that is not only self-determining but is also determining the fate of others, in other terms and oppressor nation, on the same plan as that of an oppressed people.

The perspective we developed when we began to have an organised existence in the region from 1970 was a programmatic perspective taking into account both the criticisms I have mentioned but also a criticism of any vision of liberation of Palestine resulting only from a struggle waged from outside (which was the overall prevailing outlook at

the period in the Arab world, in PLO, in Fatah. Only DFLP had a somewhat different outlook that took into account the necessary Judeo-Israeli component in the struggle).

So it is the idea that no Palestine liberation is possible in the form of a military liberation from outside, for a series of reasons I don't think I have to elaborate and which concern the nature of the Israeli state. Israel isn't a colonial minority's state, it is a settlement colonialism based on expulsion of the indigenous population, and an over-armed State, including nuclear weapons, meaning that a strictly military perspective leads to an apocalyptic vision. It is a perspective that must also be ruled out from an internationalist outlook, obviously, if we think there are no real solutions to the question except in a socialist framework, we have a class outlook: if we think that there is no real solution to the question outside a socialist framework, we think of a class perspective. And a class outlook is transversal, horizontal, not only incorporating national divisions in pure form, but also in combination with social and class divisions. Whence the revolutionary programmatic perspective with a utopian dimension we stood for (and such a dimension is needed, to advance reflection, debate and education). Our perspective combined a revolution on an Arab regional level (insisting on the fact that Palestinians must take part in class struggles wherever they lived, counter to Fatah's outlook of Palestinian "non-interference" in Arab state affairs. We emphasized that the overthrow of the Arab regimes is an essential condition for the victory of the Palestinian struggle. Moreover we considered that the progress of the revolutionary movement on a regional scale had to create conditions for the emergence of a partner in Israel. In other words, the rise of a movement with an internationalist programme on the Arab side would create conditions favourable for the emergence of a partner on the Israeli side and thus the split needed within Israeli society. This split with Zionism and its State expression would occur on a social, class and pacifist basis. Dismantlement of the Zionist State, the dismantlement of its structures (a less frightening term than destruction) can or must be achieved through this combination.

In that context, the priority was a solution recognizing the Palestinian people's historical rights: the right to self-determination and return. It is thus in the context of a response to these rights, that we defend the possibility of maintaining an Israeli entity, although Marxists favour the elimination of all borders, as an indispensable guarantee offered to the Judeo-Israeli, or Israeli nation, within an internationalist approach: the possibility of maintaining its existence in a state form that can be reconciled with Palestinian rights.

This was a programmatic development converging with those of other Arab Marxists at the time. There were interesting texts by Sadiq Jal'Ål al-Azm, for example, strongly criticising a certain vision of right to return in which each person returns key and title in hand to recover the land or the dwelling where he or his ancestors lived. The author explained that "right to return" from a socialist standpoint means developing solutions not based on a private property perspective, but a substantial solution to the national question.

Thus, we combined this type of future programmatic perspectives with immediate demand for immediate, total and unconditional withdrawal of the Israeli army from the territories occupied in 1967. And we explained that opposing such a formula in the name of liberation of all Palestine, as Palestinian maximalism did at first, including Fatah itself – you can see the change over the years ! – was a gross error. There was the possibility of building a combined force, broad convergences on the question of the 1967 territories that had to be the object of an immediate struggle. Moreover this was an immediate need of population affected in the West Bank and Gaza. Thus we had to fight for withdrawal of the occupying army. Of course, this was not at the price of a capitulation as in the Oslo agreements, but in a total and unconditional withdrawal perspective. Of course those are struggle slogans, but I think they were correct and remain so.

Now I'll come to how the problem can be posed today.

I'll start out with the debate on "One State/Two States". Firstly, I think this whole debate is a considerable waste of time and energy, to a great extent. Why? Reflect a bit together, on the "One-State" perspective. It is obvious that in

the short term, independent of any other consideration, it is not possible. If it is a long-term solution, then we will find everything I said about the limits of the framework: Why Palestine within the borders set by the British Mandate, why not Palestine and Jordan, knowing that according to estimates approximately 60% to 80% of the Jordanian population, east of the Jordan, are Palestinians, from the region located between the Jordan and the Mediterranean.

What is more important still is that even on the Palestinian side – beyond the fact that from the Israeli side this is obviously a prospect refused – it is not at all certain that Palestinians want to live in the same State as Israelis. If we take South Africa as a model; even without taking into account the huge difference of proportions between Whites and Blacks in South Africa and Palestinians and Israelis in a state that would include both of them, how could Palestinians tolerate, after decades of such strong oppression, to live under Israeli domination, akin to white domination remaining in all fields – economic, social, etc. – with the exception of political structures, in post-apartheid South Africa? It is not a perspective that corresponds to Palestinian aspirations.

But those who now call for “One State”, arguing that the “Two-State” solution is no longer possible, most often base their case on the idea that Zionist settlement in the West Bank is irreversible. Of course we can't accept such an argument because that means we would have to stop struggling for dismantlement of the settlements. If, on the other hand, their argument is that a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza is not viable, that is a correct argument, but we've been saying that in the region since the 1970s. From that standpoint we could even converge with the PFLP'S historic leader Georges Habache, when he said Amman should be the Palestinians Hanoi, implying both that the monarchy must be overthrown and that there are similar complementarities between what is called Jordan and Palestine, as between North and South Vietnam, these were both one land and the British cut in half.

But the problem becomes clearer still from the standpoint of rights and struggles, to say what Sergio had said, starting out from rights: what political translation can a state programme now have? The only political expression I can see as making sense is the Lambertists . I don't know if there are still any in Israel, but in any case in the 1970s they called for the election of a Constituent Assembly for all the territory between the Jordan and the Mediterranean: that was their watchword: voting rights for all in British Mandate borders Palestine. Yet thinking that Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza will demand voting rights in the Knesset , even if it is rebranded as the Constituent Assembly, is simply dreaming, that is not at all the context Palestinians locate themselves in.

The immediate aspirations of Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza, who are the first concerned today, the top priority – not the only one, I'll get back to that in a moment – have been expressed in well-known demands: withdrawal from the 1967 occupied territories, destruction of the wall, dismantlement of the settlements. These demands are calls for the utter reversal of the process begun in 1967. This is what Palestinians are fighting for today, and they have not reached the point of saying “We can't get rid of the occupation any more, so we'll have to demand to live in a single state alongside the Israelis”, in other words call for their lands to be annexed to Israel! In any case in this entire debate, whatever the programmatic perspectives we put forward, and what we have to be clear on is the Palestinians' right to self-determination, thus it is their right to determine what they want. And the Palestinian consensus today, as expressed in the “Prisoners' document”, for example, including the modified version accepted by all Palestinian organisations from Hamas to Fatah (with the sole exception of the Islamic Jihad): is this 1967 territories priority. There is a Palestinian consensus on this that we must support: the struggle against the occupation, the against the wall, and against the settlements.

This perspective can be achieved. That does not mean it is for tomorrow. But I mean it is not to be confused with the historical conditions required to dismantle the Zionist State, which is a far more long-term perspective, which we all keenly hope for. The immediate objective on which there is the broadest Palestinian consensus can be achieved on the basis of the force of the struggle of Palestinian masses, combining their struggle with international support, and a split between hawks and doves within Israeli society. This is also why at a certain point the Palestinian leadership, the PLO leadership, understood the importance of paying attention to what is going on in Israel. For Hamas there are no such considerations, thus their suicide bombings targeting civilians, which flow from a religious vision of the

conflict and everything else, and which have produced very negative results by strengthening the dialectic between Hamas and the Zionist right. Hamas' strategy runs counter to the real conditions for deepening the split within Israeli society, which is a necessary condition for Palestinians to achieve their ends.

I repeat, beyond, the question of the West Bank and Gaza cannot be dissociated from the struggle of Palestinians elsewhere, starting with Jordan. From that standpoint, the historical attitude of the PLO's Arafat leadership is frankly criminal in terms of the Palestinian people's interests. And the silence on the Jordanian question is a silence that cannot be justified by the fact that a long time ago Sharon said that Jordan was the Palestinian state and should be sufficient for the Palestinians. The fact that Sharon said that does not mean we must not aim for the overthrow of the regime in Jordan. Jordan is part of Palestine, and the Palestinian people need their Hanoi – to take up the Popular Front slogan on this point. An independent Palestinian State would not be viable unless it included Jordan as well as the West Bank and Gaza: you need merely look at a map of the region to understand that.

Beyond this, there is also the question of the Palestinians remaining in the lands seized by Israel in 1948, whose objective was formulated by Azmi Bishara, among others, as the transformation of Israel from a "Jewish" State to a "State of all its citizens". This is a way of demanding the de-Zionisation of the State of Israel, because "A State of all its citizens" means a non-Zionist state, a state not based on an ethnic definition and an ethnic Right of Return. A state for all its citizens is the antithesis of Lieberman's and Yisrael Beiteinu's logic, considering the "Jewish" nature of the State threatened by the birth rate of current Arab citizens of the State of Israel. This perspective of a "State for all its citizens" formulated by Azmi Bishara is the fairest and most central watchword for the 1948 Palestinians.

As for the rest of the Palestinian Diaspora, I'll mostly take the case of Lebanon, where there is an acute problem, because in Syria Palestinians have a much better situation than in Lebanon or even Jordan. We must struggle for equal rights for Palestinians in Lebanon. Whether they are called "Lebanese" or "Palestinian" on their papers is a secondary issue for me. But they are entitled to full citizenship rights acquired a long time ago, just as Palestinian emigrants were able to become citizens in Canada, Australia or elsewhere. There is no reason they should not have full citizenship in Lebanon where they have been living since 1948 if they were not born there. We must speak out against the hypocrisy of the Lebanese political class, from Geagea to Hezbollah, who all converge on a "no" stance on Palestinian "settlement." This is the only common denominator among all fractions of the political class in Lebanon. And behind this idea, they are transforming the Palestinian right to return into an obligation to return – that is how it is experienced in Lebanon – for example as soon as there is, for example, a Palestine-Israeli agreement with the formation of a rump State (suppose Oslo had not led to an impasse) the Palestinians would have to be sent there en masse. In terms of such an outlook, we must explain that we are utterly opposed: Palestinians who are the children of parents born in Lebanon themselves, since we have already reached the third or fourth generation of Palestinians living in Lebanon and they certainly have the right to remain there. They certainly have the right to return to Palestine, but they must also be entitled to Lebanese citizenship. It is all the more intolerable that they are refused citizenship given that Palestinians and Lebanese are part of the same original cultural matrix while even in countries such as Australia, Canada, in Europe or elsewhere they can become citizens. Furthermore in Syria they have equal rights, while in Jordan the majority of Palestinians have citizenship... so we must fight the reigning hypocrisy in Lebanon, also shown by the fact that for example, at the time of the Lebanese army assault on the Nahr Al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon, all political forces supported the assault at first, and nobody raised a finger to stop it afterwards. Hezbollah could certainly have stopped it, if only because of their weight within the army itself, but they didn't do it, although their attitude has improved. At first they actually fell in line with the general consensus. Afterwards they understood that it was an operation that could fall under enforcement of UN Security Council resolution 1559 which targets them as well, thus the definition of a "red line" not to be crossed. But the Lebanese army was able to carry out its destruction of the camp to the end, without any real impediment to this operation.

One last thing to conclude. Whatever the types of solutions put forth, if the right to self-determination means anything, it certainly means that there is no possible solution without the Palestinian people decide themselves

through a referendum of Palestinians, and not only in the West Bank and Gaza, but also in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, with the participation of all Palestinian refugees. Agreements concluded with the State of Israel by an organisation such as PLO, which defines itself as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people cannot be seen as acceptable until they have been ratified by a vote of the Palestinian people. For the right to self-determination to be meaningful, we must defend the Palestinian people's right to vote democratically on any settlement concerning them.

Beyond the interest in having programmatic bases, our priority is not endless debates on theoretical solutions, but struggling for the most immediate needs I have referred to, as well as for Palestinians' right to self-determination, including the right to return.

Transcription by Bernard Imahaus