

# The palestine question analyzed in the light of marxist politics

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## A. Introduction

The main focus of this paper is the analysis of the Palestinian question as a problem in Marxist politics. The paper seeks to apply several major principles of Marxist politics to the debate regarding the two main approaches to this question in the Marxist left: 1) The two-state solution based on the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside of Israel; 2) The one-state solution based on universal citizenship of both Jews and Palestinian Arabs.

This debate has often surfaced at various international meetings of the social forums and other broad coalitions, creating obstacles to unity.

It is argued here that the principles of Marxist politics hold the key to evaluating the efficacy of the two contending positions. Marxist politics can be defined as the determination of political positions informed by class analysis, as well as support and identification with working people and the exploited masses. The position adopted must be based on an exact assessment of the given relations of forces and clear political realism.

No local or regional analyses can be considered adequate without close examination and integration of international processes and the broad interests of the world wide movements against war and capitalist globalization. This broad view must include a careful evaluation of the *relations of forces* in effect at all levels and lead to a position informed by a high level of *political realism*. These categories will be more closely defined as we proceed.

## B. Elements of Agreement in the Current Debate

Before surveying the present disputes, it is of critical importance to designate those important positions which are **not** in dispute in Marxist circles.

(1) Long after the break-up of the colonial system, the Palestinians are one of the few national entities denied elementary human rights and first and foremost their right to establish an independent sovereign state in their homeland. The most salient expression of this is the thirty-eight year old

occupation of the conquered Palestinian territories wherein some three million Palestinians suffer from brutal military oppression. Simultaneously, Israel the direct occupying power has made constant efforts to annex large and important sections of these territories with an eye to further territorial aggrandizement. The monstrous apartheid wall built by Israel "for security reasons" is just one of the many acts of expropriation and dispossession, humiliation and daily suffering to which the Palestinians are subject to under the occupation.

(2) The ruling circles in Israel, both on an ideological basis and to enhance their strength *vis- a-vis* the Palestinians and the Arab world, have forged a strategic military, political and economic alliance with the United States. This alliance is one of the kingpins of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East and the Arab world. The United States, for its part protects Israel from the wrath of international public and prevents its total isolation. Israel, on its part subjects its current politics and military strategy to the global and regional needs of the United States, serving as the potential gendarme for regional forces that might get out of line with U.S. interests.

*Despite these areas of agreement, there is a sharp, ongoing debate among supporters of the Palestinian cause on questions of principle.*

*The debate is between two central propositions, and is also recognizable as the debate between the two-state and the one-state solution.*

*It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the arguments in support of each approach and to elaborate a set of strategic principles for relating to this question. No attempt is made here to relate to the wider historical canvas. For our purpose it is sufficient to survey the historical debate between Marxists on the Palestinian issue.*

### **C. The Palestinian Question -Yesterday and Today – Marxist Perspectives**

No Marxist can really question that by any historically materialist interpretation, Palestine is an Arab country and that the Palestinian Arabs are a part of the larger Arab entity. The question posed by historical transformations is how to relate to the appearance and the development of another ethnic-national entity in Palestine.

Marxists, all of whom who rejected Zionist ideology in principle and practice, were in agreement as to the exclusively Arab nature of Palestine until WWII. The main outlines of the anti-colonialist struggle (1919-1939) were then the demand for independence from British rule, with assurance of democratically ensured civil rights for the Jewish minority.

The continued growth of the Jewish community in Palestine, and with it, increased class stratification, on the background of increased anti-Semitic activity in Europe, demanded a Marxist response. It might be said that at a certain point during WWII, and especially in the wake of the Nazi holocaust, there was a growing tendency in the Marxist left to recognize the existence of two national groupings, one Palestinian Arab and the second, Israeli Jewish. It should be said that Trotskyist groups rejected the idea that these changes were authentic or organic. The Trotskyist conclusion was that Palestine remained an Arab country. The Jewish minority could and should be assured of democratic civil rights, but the axis of the democratic struggle remained the call for an independent and undivided Palestine.

Under the impact of the results of the Nazi Holocaust and battle by the Jewish community in Palestine against British control and the bans on Jewish immigration, the Soviet Union (in the famous statement by Andrey Gromyko, May 14, 1948 at the United Nations) adopted the position that there being *two parallel national groupings in Palestine*, in circumstances of severe tensions, partition of the country was unavoidable. The existence of two national groupings in mandatory Palestine had been recognized previously in documents issued by the Communist Party of Palestine.

The issue that divides international progressive opinion still stems in large measure from the basic determination as to the nature of the people(s) of that country: whether there are two national groupings or one Arab nation and a Jewish minority. The "traditional" approach stands clearly on the basis of the proposition that the demographic and political changes in Palestine were imposed by force and violence and that the Jewish community in Palestine could not aspire to legitimate rights of a nation, especially the right of self determination.

The "modified" approach is based on the demographic transformation of the country, the existence of two separate class formations and the political divide between the two communities in reaching the important conclusion that there were two national groups in the country.

#### **D. Israel: A Question of Policy or Legitimacy**

There is no question that in the military struggle over control of the country the Jewish side was the winner. Israel's victory was a major catastrophe for the Palestinian Arabs. Israel did not lose too much time in lining up with the major imperialist powers.

The left opposition, mainly the Communist Party of Israel, fought government policy, carefully distinguishing between the question of Israel's legitimacy, which was not challenged, and Israel's policies which were condemned as being inimical to the interest of the country. This distinction was accepted by the international left associated with the Soviet Union and the Communist movement. This modification was considered a major and **unjustified** concession by Trotskyist thinking. And, of course, the legitimacy of Israel was challenged from the Palestinian and Arab standpoint.

These two lines of approach are reflected to this very day in our discussion, though not always in their "purer" forms, and continue to shape the political discourse on related subjects.

Ideological skirmishes between the two lines continue over the years. The falling prestige of the Soviet experience encourages the view that the Soviet-Gromyko (1948) input was basically episodic and opportunistic, a bad bet on Israel as an "anti-imperialist" force that never paid off. On the other hand, the attempts by the Arab world and the Palestinian leadership to promote policies negating Israel's existence were ultimately rejected by the Palestinian Liberation Organization and almost all the secular forces in the Arab world.

### **E. The Polarized Political Debate Today**

There is a nearly universal consensus that the status quo based on the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories acquired in the June 1967 war is unacceptable, immoral and illegal in terms of international law. In terms of *real politik*, the ensuing conflict is a source of tensions and instability, not to speak of the price in human suffering born chiefly by the Palestinians, but not only by them.

The Palestinian leadership (with the exception of the Islamic forces) along with the international community and public opinion overwhelmingly support the two-state solution. The contours of a settlement based on the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian state in the territories acquired in the June 1967 war are well known, as a result of a series of long and detailed negotiations. Such a solution requires the retreat of Israel to the 1967 borders, though exceptions can be negotiated on the basis of a 1-1 land swap. Jerusalem will be the capital of each state and sovereignty will be divided according to the composition of each neighborhood. The basics of an arrangement for the holy places have been worked out. This solution will take into account the rights of the Palestinian refugees, including serious material compensation for all refugees, the right to settlement in the new Palestinian state, citizenship rights for those who remain in their country of exile, immigration opportunities, and some degree of agreed repatriation to Israel on a humanitarian basis. This proposal for a final status agreement and peace between the two peoples has been accepted by the leadership of the Palestinian people and the Arab world, until the recent election debacle of the Fatah movement. It is this proposal which has been rejected by the ruling circles in Israel and their U.S. backers.

The proponents of the one-state solution proceed from the moral and legal rejection of any settlement based on the recognition of Israel. They assert that the Israeli settlement project and the illegal introduction of some 200,000 Israeli citizens into the occupied Palestinian territories has made partition a physical impossibility and insurmountable economic and financial obstacle.

The supporters of the one-state solution agree that their's is a solution based on long term processes without promise for the early amelioration of Palestinian suffering. Its virtue is that it avoids an agreement based the present detrimental balance of forces. The *ratio* of the one-state solution is the refusal to abandon demands which, though unrealizable in the current juncture, are central to the Palestinian cause such as the right of all refugees to return to their previous homes within Israel.

Advocates of the one-state solution argue that with the passage of time, Israel will find it harder to resist the adoption of voting rights for the entire population, which would mean a majority for the Arab voters.

At this point we have to ask ourselves how and on what basis should Marxists position themselves regarding this major issue.

### **F. The Impact of the Given Relation of Forces in Determining the Marxist Position on the Palestinian Issue**

It is in the nature of the current era that no single characterization of the social and revolutionary processes will be accurate for the entire world. The diversity of conditions is the major theoretical argument against any attempt to guide revolutionary activity from a single center.

The regions relevant to our subject are the major capitalist countries, the West and the Arab East. In this instance, the stormy developments in Latin America are inspirational, but far, very far from our own realities.

But first, let us attempt some general comments on the world scene. Assuming the relevance of the Marxist analysis on the contradictions of world capitalism, it is always necessary to analyze and characterize the given relationship between the forces striving for socialist transformation on the global scale and the fortresses of world capitalism that have to be disarmed and conquered. Given the demise of the Soviet Union and the state system around it, it is quite clear that from the early 1990's – if not before that – the forces of socialism had suffered a major retreat.

Unquestionably, all the ideological and theoretical calls for 'liquidationism' characteristic of periods of strategic retreat must be firmly rejected. The world is still very much characterized by dynamic processes and sharp international contradictions. But it would be totally incorrect and even dangerous to refuse to see that we are, in the relevant regions, in a period of regrouping, a period of the construction of new complex networks of revolutionary energies. We are in a period of a 'war of position' (Gramsci) and our strategic conceptions must take this into account..

The Middle East, for its part, has witnessed over the last decades a retreat in the strength of the Arab national liberation struggle. There were hopes during the height of Nasserism, during the early nineteen sixties, that the rising tide of independence and reform might curtail imperialist domination of the region and its resources. However, hopes that progressive transformations in the Arab world would come to the aid of the Palestinians is a thing of the distant past. The analysis that the 'Palestinian revolution' could serve as the beachhead for deep changes in the area proved illusory.

The Palestinian struggle cannot build on a perspective of imminent revolutionary upheavals. On the other hand, there are important, powerful currents of support in the international community and the Arab world that can be mobilized to overcome the insufferable status quo.

There are indications of growing internal contradictions in Israeli economic domination of the Palestinians. The class nature of early Zionist settlement decked itself out in a camouflaged version of social-egalitarianism, which was also an efficient mechanism for expropriation and exclusion of the indigenous Arab population. The class essence of this painful satire revealed itself when the new Israeli state started an enduring romance with foreign capital and launched a permanent alignment with the imperialist forces in the region against the Arab movement for national liberation.

In 1967, the occupation added a neo-colonialist dimension of social and economic subjugation of the Palestinian economy to Israeli needs. The present set-up has clear advantages for some sections of Israeli capital (especially those interested in the Palestinian market and cheap labor). Even so, there are indications that the more sophisticated capitalist elements in Israel are priming themselves to dominate the Palestinian economy via more refined neo-liberal mechanism such as regional U.S. sponsored 'free trade' areas – without the often embarrassing need for direct military control and subjugation.

The class significance of the Israeli-U.S. alliance is much broader and deeper than any of the particular class relationships in any Middle East country or countries. This alliance is a major strategic factor in safeguarding neo-liberal domination. U.S. unilateral support for Israeli aggression and expansionism is a lynch pin in the Middle East status quo. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its related tensions are a major resource for U.S. domination. The fight for Israeli-Palestinian peace and the weakening of Israel's special status and privileges is an important step in isolating the Bush administration. This is the central strategic front for the forces fighting U.S. neo-liberal hegemony.

### **G. The Role of Political Realism in Determining the Marxist Position Regarding the Palestinian Issue - Realism in Marxist Politics**

The revolutionary essence of Marxist theory and the militant organization in pursuit of revolutionary goals gave rise to misconceptions within as well as outside the revolutionary movement. The essence of this misconception is that Marxist dialectics and its emphasis on the potential of changes and shifts tend to ignore the real situation and real relationship of forces at any given moment.

Marxist practice is, or at the least should be, based on the "concrete analysis of the concrete situation." This dictum is especially relevant in stormy periods of revolutionary transformation when there is a natural tendency to depend on factors that have not yet come into being. The two paradigm cases are of course, first, the Brest-Litovsk negotiations when Lenin rejected the slogan of revolutionary war against the Hohenzollerns because of his analysis of weaknesses in the revolutionary camp.

In addition, the retreat to the New Economic Policy, a form of 'market socialism' was, in addition to policies required to solve urgent economic disruptions (and hunger in the cities) a result of the clear stabilization in the European social and class arena. Goals and vision nurture the revolutionary spirit but hard and cold analyses guide revolutionary strategy, and deviation from this rule is always costly.

Speaking to the subject at hand, there is no basis to envisage a sharp change in the military relationship of forces between Israel and the Palestinians, even with the Arab world at their side. Military struggle against the existence of Israel is in the realm of fantasy, not to speak of its highly questionable desirability. There is also the concrete danger that elements linked with Arab or Islamic reaction will attempt to raise the 'anti-colonialist' banner for the destruction of Israel for purposes totally unrelated to the cause of the Palestinian people.

Fortunately, progressive forces can and should point out that no level of Israeli military superiority can achieve for Israeli chauvinism a military victory over the Palestinian cause.

## **H. Against the Occupation – A Victorious Strategy**

In such circumstances, the contradictions between capitalist countries and all other forms of political differentiation in the camp of capital are of critical importance. The Middle East is both an arena of intense exploitation by all the major capitalist powers and a constant source of tension between them as they jockey for advantages and in order to exploit the weaknesses of their rivals.

These contradictions are vital in constructing a broad front against the Bush-Cheney command center of international reaction and cannot be ignored. With all the importance of local contradictions, we cannot afford, for even a minute, to refuse to seek out the political strategy and tactics which can isolate our main enemy.

Progressive public opinion has justly and understandably rallied around the cause of the Palestinian people. In the broadest of terms this solidarity is an expression of opposition to the suffering of the Palestinians under occupation and for a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The argument that justice requires the reconstitution of all of Palestine as an Arab state or the dismantling of Israel as a Zionist state, whatever its merits, can only emasculate the international movement for solidarity with the Palestinian people and alienate huge sectors of the movement who are not ready to question the legitimacy of Israel's existence. This is the reason that the overwhelming majority of Palestinian public opinion and the secular political parties in the occupied Palestinian territories and the great majority of the left in Israel have adopted a strategy for a historical compromise with Israel within the framework of two independent states.

[It is still too early to reach conclusions regarding the victory of Hamas in the recent Palestinian elections. Many observers stress Hamas' pragmatic turn, namely its strict observation of the cease fire with Israel negotiated by the Palestinian Authority and its willingness to participate in the elections, actually sponsored by the international community, under conditions of occupation. There is a general opinion that Hamas's main gains stemmed from disappointment with the lack of achievement by the

PA and the wide spread corruption of the Fatah party. Hamas' policies after its unexpected rise to power depend very much on the understanding and sensitivities of the international community and its own decisions about the responsible use of its newfound prestige and strength. At any rate, it becomes harder and harder to keep the Palestinian question in deep freeze.]

Reactionary Zionist politicians, especially those allied to the Bush administration monitor every criticism of Israel to seek out a phrase or a concept on which they can pin the label of anti-Semitism. Policies challenging the existence of Israel, unreal in the terms of the relations of forces and morally problematic in and of themselves are grist to the mill of these circles. Bush, for his own selfish reasons, would prefer to appear as the defender of Israel's "endangered" right to exist rather than being forced to admit his collusion in the continued brutal violence of the occupation. The mobilization of the broadest front against the occupation and the Israeli-U.S. axis requires clear disassociation from those who see the eventual dissolution of Israel as their immediate political program.

The one-state solution is the utopian-liberal perspective designed to challenging the legitimacy of the existence of Israel. Palestinian "rejectionism" – the political line that opposes any recognition of Israel - once drew inspiration from revolutionary perspectives, and the hope that a victorious (armed) Palestinian revolution would establish a unitarian, secular, democratic state. In the clear and decisive absence of such a perspective, it is currently suggested that eventually Israel will have to agree to grant equal rights to all residents in Palestine and on this basis Israel will cease to exist as a Jewish state and Palestine will reappear as an Arab country with a Jewish minority. Hence, the main support for the one-state solution comes from circles which reject the idea of any kind of compromise with Israel.

One can understand the deep sense of dispossession and frustration that shape this position. One must not forget for a second that the refusal to recognize Israel, even as a *fait accompli*, has been nurtured by long years of Palestinian degradation and suffering at the hands of Israeli neo-colonialism. Therefore, the 'rejectionist' position can be understood, but not justified. By refusing to build their struggle within the parameters of the given relation of forces and political realism, the proponents of the one state solution desert the arena of realistic politics and political activity, based on a perspective of practical goals in the given juncture.

No Marxist sees a victory in any concrete political struggle as the end of history and a 'final' resolution of historical processes. Just as it would be a serious political mistake to ignore the urgency and importance of a concrete achievement by the Palestinian people in the consolidation of a two state final status, it would be equally mistaken to see such a settlement as the end of all historical contradictions. Israel must still settle accounts with its colonialist heritage, and find its way to moral citizenship in the Arab East. It is hoped that this may be done without further violence and bloodshed. We can and should remind ourselves that the region, as a whole, does have a date with its socialist destiny.

Thus, **in the present circumstances**, the battle for an end to the occupation and the establishment of an independent, sovereign Palestinian state along side of Israel is the best way to expose the workings



of the U.S. –Israel 'special relation.' This progressive battle plan leans on the widest international support and assists in the further isolation of the Bush-Cheney drive for absolute hegemony. This battle must be at the center of a Marxist political position **at this stage of the struggle** to mobilize the broadest coalition for peace and justice for the Palestinian people.