

Opposition to Zionism: The core strategy of a solidarity movement

By Roland Rance

The root of the Palestine conflict is the alliance of Zionism with western imperialism and Arab reaction. Together, these forces act to prevent any moves towards real democracy in the Arab world, or the use of the resources of the region for the benefit of the peoples of the region.

In this alliance, Zionism is more than an ideology and a powerful propaganda network. It is a well-organised political movement, with real power and influence on the ground. Before 1948, the Zionist movement built the institutions which became the infrastructure of the state of Israel. Since 1948, the Zionist bodies have been in effect part of the structure of the state of Israel, in alliance with the Israeli government. However, they are answerable, not to the people of Israel – not even to the Israeli Jews – but to the fictitious “Jewish people”.

Any strategy for the liberation of Palestine, or for solidarity with the Palestinian people, has to confront the reality of Zionism. A solution to the conflict will require dismantlement of the Zionist structures of the state of Israel, and the redress of the wrongs committed against the Palestinian people; in particular, the return of the Palestinian refugees and their compensation.

Such a transformation will not be brought about through the benevolence of the western states who have sponsored Israel’s war crimes, nor of the Arab regimes who have failed to mobilise their resources in support of the Palestinians. An effective solidarity movement must be built in alliance with those forces in the west who are challenging the roles of their own states, and in practical solidarity with forces in Palestine who are daily confronting Zionism.

A few weeks ago, I was at another discussion about Zionism in this same hall. Some of you were probably here too, when the author Alan Hart introduced his new book “Zionism: The Real Enemy of the Jews”. As it happens, I found the meeting very disappointing – a failed opportunity. There was no real sense that participants (except for Israeli historian Ilan Pappé) recognised that Zionism was a political movement, operating in the material world, rather than something going on inside people’s heads. Admittedly, Hart did attempt to draw a false distinction between what he saw as “acceptable” spiritual Zionism, and unacceptable Political Zionism, but even in this misleading schema, political Zionism was reduced simply to an ideology and a propaganda network.

In order not to fall prey to delusions similar to those of Alan Hart, it is worth recalling a comment by Amos Oz. Although often presented in the west as “Israel’s conscience”, Oz is in reality an accurate reflection of the politics of Israel’s Zionist mainstream. Some twenty years ago, he was interviewed on Channel 4’s “Book Programme” by Hermione Lee, who asked him about the distinction between Labour Zionism, religious Zionism, cultural Zionism and revisionist Zionism. Oz’s response was “Listen, all these terms are personal names, which we use within the family. Our family name is Zionism, it is as a family that we address the world, and that is how we expect you to address us”.

So we need to identify and locate Zionism politically if we are to stand any chance of confronting, and eventually defeating it. If we just lump together everything we dislike and oppose about Israel’s presence and behaviour in the Middle East, and label this “Zionism”, then the term ceases to have any specific meaning, and is no longer a useful description. Our starting point must be the recognition that Zionism is an active political movement, with real influence on events on the ground in Palestine. We need to look at how Zionism, in alliance with the forces of western imperialism and Arab reaction, has acted to transform Palestine into Israel, to prevent any moves towards real democracy in the Arab world, and to ensure that the resources of the region are not used for the benefit of the peoples of the region.

The Arab world has been divided by imperialism, in its own interests, into states with no material historical, geographical, economic or social basis. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, 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 the promises which they made, nor even of observing US President Wilson’s famous “Nineteen Principles”. This has served to dissociate the peoples of the region from its 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, with its vast oil reserves; while 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.

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, because, unlike other regimes in the region, Israel has no option than a strategic alliance with imperialism.

This strategic imperative was recognised by both parties. Herzl 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 it been the unshakeable ally of imperialism, and a 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, and has encouraged the establishment throughout the region of reactionary regimes, who have for the most part seen their own populations as a greater threat than Israel or imperialism.

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, but is the only way that we can break the spiral of oppression and violence, and begin to consider how to use the region’s resources for the benefit of the people of the Middle East.

The Zionist movement set itself three major tasks: the colonisation of Palestine, the recruitment of the Jews to bring this about, and gaining an imperial sponsor. In all three of these aims, it has been remarkably successful.

When we now face the organised Israel/Zionist lobby, which does not hesitate to throw accusations of “anti-Semitism” at anyone who has the temerity to challenge Israel and Zionism, it is all-too-easy to forget that historically Zionism represented a small minority of Jewish opinion. We have heard already the arguments of religious Jews against Zionism. It was also opposed by liberal Jews (such as Edwin Montagu, the only Jewish cabinet minister at the time, who described the 1917 Balfour Declaration as “the Anti-Semitism of the Present Government”), by socialist Jews (who correctly saw that Zionism, in alliance with reactionary European governments, was undermining the revolutionary position of many European Jews), and even ultimately by many early Zionists themselves (notably Ahad Ha’am, who wrote after a visit to Palestine “If this is the Messiah, I do not want to live to see his arrival”).

In the thirty years before the First World War, when the Tsarist regime sponsored pogroms and racism against Jews in order to deflect the anger of the Russian masses away from the government, some two million Jews fled Eastern Europe for safety. Of these, only about 50-60,000 actually went to Palestine, and half of these left soon after. Zionist parties had little success in communal elections in Eastern Europe. In fact, it was not until the end of the Second World War and the establishment of the state of Israel, that Zionism began to acquire its hegemonic status among Jews.

The colonisation of Palestine was carried out through what the Zionists referred to euphemistically as the “conquest of the land” and “the conquest of labour” – or, in plain English, through appropriation of land, expulsion of its residents, and their exclusion from the economy. It’s worth noting that the Hebrew word for conquest, Kibush, is also used in Hebrew to refer to the 1967 Occupation. So when as anti-Zionists we stand in Israel shouting “Down with the Occupation”, for some of us this is an explicit slogan against the entire Zionist project; the occupation did not begin in 1967.

Once again, Herzl was explicit about the nature of these “conquests” at the beginning of the Zionist project. In June 1895, he wrote in his diary “We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it employment in our country. The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly”.

Israel’s apologists often attempt to justify the acquisition of land before the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, by claiming that it was purchased. This claim is at best misleading. It ignores the complex nature of land ownership in Palestine, and throughout the Ottoman Empire, where land was rarely owned by the families who had traditionally farmed it and lived on it for generations. Land was indeed frequently purchased from absentee landlords, who treated their tenants as goods to be bought and sold. But, in a breach with customary practice, the peasants themselves would then be removed, often with brutality. For some early examples, you can read the descriptions in the diaries of early Zionist officials, which I translated for Uri’s book on the Jewish National Fund.

A clash with the indigenous population was thus not only inevitable, but foreseen and planned for. In many ways, Zionism is a classic colonial-settler movement, analogous to the Dutch and British settlers in South Africa, the British in Kenya, and many others. However, it had certain distinct features. One of the most significant is that, unlike these other colonisatory projects, Zionism did not intend to exploit, but rather to supplant and replace, the indigenous Palestinian Arab population. It is this feature which has led Moshé Machover to suggest that a closer analogy than South Africa would be the US elimination of the Native Americans.

The Zionist project could only be carried out with the support of a major imperial power.

The Zionist political movement is embodied in serious political institutions. The central one of these is the World Zionist Organisation, which was originally established by Theodor Herzl at the Basle Congress in 1897. The WZO continues to meet regularly; the 35th Congress took place last week in Jerusalem. I haven’t yet seen the voting figures, but among the dozens of resolutions there were calls for “immediate action” in a “unified strategy to struggle against assimilation”; for “legislation that will outlaw anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism and Holocaust denial”; and for “the nations of the world to act aggressively and immediately to remove the Iranian threat”.

The WZO, and its affiliated bodies including the Jewish Agency for Israel, the Jewish National Fund/Keren Kayemet le'Israel, and the Keren Hayesod/ United Israel Appeal, is officially and explicitly allied to the state of Israel through the 1952 WZO Status Law, and the later covenant with the state of Israel. In fact, given the position of the WZO within Israel's political infrastructure, it would not be an exaggeration to describe it as an extra-territorial part of the state of Israel, parallel to the government, but not answerable, even in theory, to the citizens and residents of Israel; not even, in fact, to the Jewish citizens of Israel.

It is through the constitutions of these bodies, rather than any explicit Israeli law, that residence on over 90% of the land in the state of Israel is permitted to Jews alone. It is through the networks of these explicitly discriminatory bodies that much health, educational and welfare provision is made available for Jews in Israel, but not for non-Jews – without any need for the government to make explicitly racist decisions. This is what Zionism means in practice – dispossession and exile for most Palestinians, discrimination and impoverishment for those remaining on their lands as citizens of Israel (some 20% of the population of Israel).

When anti-Zionists talk of dismantling the Zionist structure of the state, it is this that we are referring to. The history, ideology and mythology are important, but secondary. A resolution of the Palestine conflict must address precisely these issues, and must bring about an end to the exile of the Palestinian refugees, the partition of the Palestinian people as much as the land of Palestine, and the institutional discrimination of the Zionist state.

It is an illusion to believe that this will be achieved through lobbying and persuading the western states to alter their policies. Support for Israel is not accidental, and the possibility of a free Palestine, with control over its own resources and coexistence among its peoples, is as unwelcome to the US as is a free Iraq.

This has obvious implications for the building of a solidarity movement in Britain. The explicit demands must be for the return of Palestinian refugees, for the dismantlement of the Zionist structure of the state of Israel and the abolition of the Zionist institutions, and for a unitary democratic and secular Palestine. These demands are the minimum required in order to achieve justice and coexistence in the Middle East; all attempts to resolve the conflict without redressing the effects of the Zionist project are ultimately certain to fail. But they are not demands which the British government is likely to accept or adopt until forced to do so.

In raising these demands, our most dependable allies will be those forces fighting for their own freedom and liberation, whether political, social or economic. The oppressed minority communities, the labour and trade union movement, anti-imperialists and supporters of other liberation movements all experience the reality of the British state and its alliance with the USA. The support for Palestinian rights shown by the massive movement against the war in Iraq is one example of the forces that we could mobilise through adopting an explicitly anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist position.

Our solidarity should also be expressed through direct support for those forces confronting Zionism daily inside Palestine. The recent growth of the twinning

movement, which has led to direct contact between Palestinian communities and organisations, and their counterparts in Britain, is one positive development. We should also consider how we can support the work of, for instance, Ta'ayush (<http://www.taayush.org>), “a grassroots movement of Arabs and Jews working to break down the walls of racism and segregation by constructing a true Arab-Jewish partnership”, which has been organising material support for besieged Palestinian communities, while also demonstrating against the ongoing oppression. And we should also do whatever we can to support and encourage the burgeoning movement of draft resistance inside Israel. We don't have to agree with the expressed political positions of all of the resisters; what is important is to recognise that they are refusing to take part in the repression of the Palestinian people, and exposing the deep – and ultimately irreconcilable – contradictions within Israeli society.

Once we recognise that Zionism – as a political movement as well as an ideology – is at the heart of Israel's oppression, and that it can be confronted politically on the basis of respect for universal human values, then we can begin to reconstruct an effective movement in solidarity with those daily confronting Zionism in practice.

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