

# Resolution of The Israeli–Palestinian conflict: A socialist viewpoint

By Moshé Machover

This article is not written as a polemic against Zionists, social-imperialists and purveyors of similar reactionary ideologies; nor is it aimed at a broad liberal or progressive audience. It is addressed specifically to genuine socialists. I can therefore take certain things for granted.

I will take for granted the analysis of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict I have expounded elsewhere: especially in my 2006 Amiel and Melburn Trust lecture.<sup>1</sup> But I would like to elaborate on the second part of that lecture, which dealt all too briefly with resolution of the conflict.

I will also take it for granted that we, socialists, reject not only any ideology of colonization and oppression, but also all nationalism, including the nationalist ideology of an oppressed people struggling for national liberation. This latter precept, while accepted in principle by all genuine socialists, is not always adhered to in political practice. It is all too easy to slide from support for a national liberation struggle – which is our unwavering duty as socialists – into accommodation with the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois nationalist ideology of the leadership of that struggle. Wishing – quite correctly – not to appear patronizing by preaching from afar to the oppressed masses how to conduct their struggle and presenting them with a pre-packed programme, socialists often forego an independent critical socialist viewpoint and are content to tail behind this or that brand of radical nationalism. Independent positions such as those advocated in the present article, which were formerly held and defended by significant sections of the revolutionary left, have been abandoned or simply forgotten. They need to be reaffirmed.

## ***Principles***

Let me start with the least controversial part: the principles on which a just and lasting resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict must be based, the minimal conditions it must satisfy.<sup>2</sup>

- The most fundamental element in a genuine resolution of the conflict is removal of its fundamental cause: the

Zionist colonization project must be superseded. This means not only de-Zionization of Israel, but also repudiation of the Zionist claim that the Jews at large, constituting an alleged 'diasporic nation', have a special right in – let alone over – the 'Land of Israel'. For this claim amounts not only to a retroactive legitimation of past Zionist colonization, but, in effect, demands an acceptance of an alleged persisting right to future further 'ingathering' – which implies further colonization and expansion. Such an impossible claim precludes a true resolution of the conflict.

This fundamental negative condition must be supplemented by the following positive ones.

- First and foremost, equal rights. This includes not only equal individual rights for all but also, no less important: equal collective rights, national rights, for the two national groups actually involved: the Palestinian Arabs and the Israeli Hebrews. We must insist on this as a minimal necessary condition because Socialists cannot ever tolerate any national privilege, any national inequality.
- Second, the right of return: recognition of the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland, to be rehabilitated and properly compensated for loss of property and livelihood. This is so self-evidently just that it needs no elaborate justification. Indeed, the only argument voiced against it is that it would jeopardize the 'Jewish character' of Israel, or, in plain language, its ethnocratic constitution as a settler state. But to accept this argument would amount to capitulation to Zionist ideology.

How can these principles be implemented? What political framework will be needed for this?

In addressing these questions I do not presume to offer the Palestinian masses unsolicited advice as to what they should be struggling for. I do not propose to emulate the habit of some leftist sects of self-appointed vanguards, who dispense from afar off-the-peg one-size-fits-all programmes to movements who have not asked them for this service.

But socialists cannot be content with echoing demands raised by this or that Palestinian national leadership. We must perform our own independent analysis of the problem and come to our own conclusion as to which resolution of the conflict we ought to uphold and which demands we should raise.

In particular, it is incumbent on us to be clear as to the relationship between the liberation of the Palestinian Arab people and the struggle for socialism. Are these two separate issues or are they connected; and if so, how?

### ***From one state to two, and back***

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was originally created in 1964 by the League of Arab States, and was an empty shell manipulated by the Arab regimes until February 1969, when it was taken over by Fatah (The Movement for the Liberation of Palestine), led by Yasser Arafat. Under Arafat's chairmanship, the PLO became an umbrella body of the secular Palestinian liberation movement, including Fatah and several other smaller groups.

From 1969 until 1974, the PLO's unambiguously called for the liberation of the whole of pre-1948 Palestine – including not only the West Bank and the Gaza Strip occupied by Israel since 1967, but also Israel itself – and establishing in it a unitary 'secular democratic state'.

However, from 1974 the PLO began to shift its position, and by the 1980s accepted a so-called 'two-state solution': an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank (including the eastern part of Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip, which would exist alongside Israel. Thus the PLO was resigned to giving up – at least for the foreseeable future – the Palestinian claim over 78% of the territory of pre-1948 Palestine, and making do with the remaining rump of 22%.

This led eventually to the 1993 Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel. These accords reflected the enormous disparity in the balance of power between the two sides. Although the impression created was that the accords would lead to the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state, this was not actually stated in the text, and in fact Israel made no such commitment. The accords merely established a 'Palestinian Authority' and Israel accepted an obligation to a staged withdrawal from an unspecified part of the territories it occupied in 1967. Agreement about the final borders, the status of Jerusalem and the issue of the Palestinian refugees was deferred to a later date. In the meantime Israel retained control over the vital water resources of the whole of Palestine, including the parts from which it would withdraw. It also retained control over the population of the areas administered by the Palestinian Authority: it continued to exercise a veto over who would count as a legitimate resident of these areas. Most crucially,

Israel made no commitment to halt its colonization of the occupied territories. In fact, the colonization of these territories (except for some areas administered by the Palestinian Authority) continued apace and even accelerated during the years of the 'Oslo process'.

Already before the assassination of Itzhak Rabin (November 1995), Israel stalled in fulfilling its part of the bargain and made no further withdrawal from the occupied territories. After his assassination, the Oslo Accords became a dead letter. The Palestinian Authority was reduced to impotence and its only remaining role is to police the Palestinian population on behalf of Israel.

By now, the Gaza Strip has been turned into the world largest open prison; and the ever accelerating Israeli colonization of the West Bank has cut it up into a series of separate Palestinian enclaves surrounded by blocs of Israeli settlements.<sup>3</sup> As there is little likelihood that any Israeli government in the near future will be willing and able to reverse these facts-on-the-ground, there is no longer any realistic prospect of a contiguous Palestinian state with true sovereignty even on the remaining 22% rump of Palestine. Any so-called Palestinian state that may be created in the present circumstances will in effect be no more than a series of Indian Reservations, under total Israeli domination.

This has led a growing number of Palestinians to revert to the idea of a unitary state in the whole of pre-1948 Palestine.

### ***The Palestine box***

Most socialists around the world – just like most liberal supporters of Palestinian rights – have been content to uphold either one of these slogans: some call for a 'two-state solution' in a partitioned Palestine, with a Palestinian Arab state alongside Israel; whereas others call for a 'one-state solution' in an undivided Palestine.

Supporters of either formula generally fail to think carefully through such questions as to whether, and under what circumstances, their favoured 'solution' is likely to be implemented in a way that provides a genuine resolution of the conflict. They are content to stay at a high level of abstraction.<sup>4</sup>

Thinking abstractly, it is indeed quite possible to visualize a just and equitable resolution in a 'two-state' as well as a 'one-state' framework.

As for a 'two-state' framework, it would have to be very different indeed from any settlement that has even a remotely serious prospect of being implemented in the

short or medium term. What is currently proposed and desultorily negotiated by the powers that be as a 'two-state' setup is really nothing of the kind. It is more like one-and-a-quarter states: a dominant Israel, possessing the lion's share of the land, controlling virtually all the vital water resources; and a disconnected set of Palestinian enclaves incapable of more than token sovereignty. This would provide no possibility for implementing the Palestinian refugees' right to return to their homeland. Nor would it address the racist nature of Israel: an ethnocratic Jewish state in which the Palestinian Arab minority (comprising about one fifth of the population) is severely discriminated and under-privileged.

But of course it is possible to visualize a totally different picture: two states of comparable size and equitable shares of resources, in which the Palestinian refugees attain their due rights, and national equality is implemented.

As for a 'one-state' framework, it is not currently a realistic option, except of course in the present extremely oppressive form in which one state, Israel, rules the whole of Palestine, with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under military occupation.

But again it is possible to visualize a very different undivided Palestine, in which the conflict is truly resolved. Some people have indeed attempted to produce a detailed blueprint of this kind, including a draft constitution of a future undivided Palestine.

Here it must be pointed out that the 'secular democratic state' as proposed by the PLO in 1969/70 would not provide a genuine lasting resolution of the conflict. Some of those who repeat this formula as a mantra don't stop to think about the strange and apparently redundant combination 'secular democratic'. How could a democratic state be anything *but* secular? Surely, a theocratic state cannot be democratic. But the bourgeois nationalist Fatah ideologues who coined this formula meant something very specific by the adjective 'secular'. What it was intended to convey is the vision of an Arab Palestine, in which 'Jews' (along with Christians and Muslims) would be accorded equal individual status and freedom of worship as a *religious denomination*, but would not be recognized as a nationality. This was the meaning encoded by 'secular': it was counterposed not to 'theocratic' but to 'bi-national'.<sup>5</sup> So the formula was designed to evade the reality of the Hebrew nation.

However, it is quite possible to imagine an undivided Palestine in which both national communities are recognized and enjoy equal collective rights as such.

## ***An instructive analogy***

In my opinion both formulas – the so-called ‘two-state solution’ and ‘one-state solution’ – are misguided, and socialists should refrain from echoing either of them.

In arguing for this thesis I would like to invoke an analogy. I do so not to clinch the argument: analogies cannot settle anything conclusively. Rather, I hope that it will make it easier for socialists to follow the analogous *logical structure* of my argument.

All genuine socialists (which of course excludes Stalinists) understand that the slogan of ‘socialism in one country (Russia)’ was disastrous. In fact it was used as cover and justification for some of the most monstrous atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; but even without having foreknowledge of this, it was a grave error for socialists to uphold this slogan when it was first raised.

But why? What was wrong with a vision of a socialist Russia, even if it was isolated? Surely, socialism in one country is preferable to no socialism anywhere?

Well, of course there was nothing wrong with that vision *as such*, and it would have been very good to achieve socialism even in an isolated Russia – if such a thing were possible. But it was *not* possible; it was from the start a purely Utopian formula, and because of this any attempt to implement it was bound to end disastrously.

Socialism in one country, Russia, was a doomed Utopia for two inter-connected reasons.

First, the socio-economic level of development and the balance of class forces within the Russian empire were adverse to the establishment of a socialist order there.

Second, capitalism is in any case a global system, which cannot be overthrown in a single country, but only – at the very least – in a large region of the world.

Now, the analogous argument I wish to put forward is that both the ‘two-state solution’ and the ‘one-state solution’ to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict are fundamentally flawed. Although each of them, in a suitable version, may present an acceptable and even attractive vision, they are equally abstract and Utopian, because no just and lasting resolution of the conflict is possible within the confines of pre-1948 Palestine.

Whether re-partitioned into two pieces or reconstituted as a single piece, the Palestine box itself is not a container within which the conflict can be justly and lastingly resolved. This is so for two inter-connected reasons.

First, the balance of power within pre-1948 Palestine – between the two nationalities, the Hebrew settlers and the indigenous Palestinian Arabs – is adverse to any just resolution of the conflict.

Second, in any case the conflict is deeply imbedded in the regional context of the Arab East, and cannot possibly be resolved in isolation from it and in the absence of a profound transformation of the entire region.

### ***The internal balance of power***

Let me put it very bluntly. Socialists must not accept without protest, let alone uphold, any unjust arrangement or project. But proposing a just blueprint that is purely Utopian is of little use, and may well be irresponsible.

So it is incumbent on anyone proposing a just resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to provide, or at least to outline, a strategy for getting both nationalities to abide by it. By far the more problematic is the stronger side, the Israeli Hebrews.

In a much-quoted account, Thucydides reports the Athenians' chilling remark to the Melians: 'The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must'. We may question the second half of this statement if it means accepting oppression without struggle, without resistance; even the weak can take defensive action. But the first half is undoubtedly true.

How may the Hebrew nation, or a majority of it, be induced to give up its present oppressive privilege and overwhelming dominant position? What means of coercion or persuasion, what combination of pressures and promises, what sticks and carrots can achieve this?

Sadly, no such combination exists; no sufficient means are available within pre-1948 Palestine, which is at present entirely under Israeli rule.

In order to make this point clearer, let me contrast the situation there with that in South Africa towards the end of the apartheid era. Elsewhere I have analysed the differences between the two models of colonization and settlers' state in terms of their fundamentally different political economies.<sup>6</sup> This underlying difference has entailed profound consequences regarding the balance of power.

South-African colonialism, based on exploiting the labour power of the indigenous people, resulted in the settlers emerging as a quasi-class of exploiters, a small minority of the total population. The oppressed were the overwhelming majority. The liberation movement did engage

in some armed resistance; but this did not play a critical role in ending apartheid. In a sense, it didn't need to. The huge numerical superiority of the non-Whites was in itself a massive if implicit threat that the settlers could not indefinitely ignore or hope to defeat. Moreover, the latter depended on the labour power of the former. Despite the pretensions of apartheid, the colonial conflict was *internal*, within the South-African socio-economic system. Economically, the settlers could not exist on their own. Thus they were vastly outnumbered by a population that could not indefinitely be suppressed but was economically indispensable. In this situation, the settlers' leaders could not refuse the generous deal offered to them by the liberation movement.

In contrast to South Africa, Zionist colonization deliberately chose not to rely of the labour power of the indigenous people; instead they were to be excluded and whenever possible ethnically cleansed. As in other countries where a similar model of colonization was pursued, the settlers emerged not as a relatively small quasi-class but as a new settler nation, with its own class structure similar to that of other modern capitalist societies.

During the 1947-9 war, the majority of the Palestinian Arab inhabitants of what became Israel were ethnically cleansed, so that within the Green Line (Israel's de facto borders from 1949 to 1967) Palestinian Arabs are a minority (at present about 20% of the population). In the entire area currently ruled by Israel, there is rough numerical parity between the two nationalities: the Israeli Hebrew settlers and the indigenous Palestinian Arabs.

Israel has been colonizing the best lands in the occupied West Bank, whose Palestinian Arab population has been isolated in several enclaves. Israeli policy aims to contain and control these, as well as the separate densely populated enclave of the Gaza Strip. Wherever possible, this is done by proxy, using a compliant elite of collaborators. The people confined in these enclaves have little or no economic leverage against Israel, as they play no significant part in the Israeli economy, except as a captive market.

The prospect facing these enclaves is, at best, to be declared a nominal 'Palestinian State'; at worst, Israel will use any suitable opportunity to ethnically cleanse them.

To a considerable extent, Israel has been able to *externalize* its conflict with the Palestinians, so that it can be managed using its vastly superior physical force. Palestinian resistance - whether armed or non-

violent – may be able to put up a defensive struggle, but *on its own* it has no realistic prospect of inducing Israel to give up the Zionist colonizing project and share Palestine on equal terms, be it in two states or in one.

Given the great disparity of internal forces, a major section of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois Palestinian leaders have put their hope and trust in external pressure, to be applied on Israel by the big powers. Actually, the only big power that could conceivably apply decisive pressure on Israel is the US, the hegemonic world power, whose influence in the Middle East is unrivalled, and on whom Israel depends for vital economic, political and military support.

As advance payment for pressure on Israel, these Palestinian leaders have sought American patronage and have become US camp followers. But the returns have been very meagre indeed. This is no accident: Israel is the main henchman of the US in the Middle East, a junior partner and regional enforcer, who helps to keep the regimes of the Arab East in abject subservience to American imperialism.<sup>7</sup> Given this relationship between the US and Israel, the former may prevail on the latter to make a few relatively minor concessions; but these will fall far short of giving up Israeli domination and accepting Palestinian rights, without which the conflict cannot be resolved.

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that all schemes for resolving the conflict within the narrow confines of Palestine are exercises in futility. They are also historically myopic.

### ***Creation of the Palestine box***

Palestinian bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalist ideology fetishizes the Palestinian homeland as a Lost Paradise, to be regained. But the prosaic historical fact is that Palestine, as a separate entity, is itself a major part of the problem. The *Nakba*, the Palestinian catastrophe, occurred in the 1947–9 war, with the botched *partition* of Palestine. But its roots go back to the imperialist *creation* of Palestine in two earlier acts of partition. This half-forgotten history is of crucial importance, and I must recapitulate it briefly.

From late antiquity until the First World War, 'Palestine' – from the Latin *Palæstina* – was a term used almost exclusively by European Christians.

During 12 centuries of Muslim rule,<sup>8</sup> Palestine did not exist as a distinct geographic or administrative, let alone political entity. It was an integral part of Syria

(*al-Sham*); even the name *Filastin* (Arabized form of Palæstina) was very rarely used.<sup>9</sup> In the final period of the Ottoman Empire, roughly the southern half of what would later become Mandate Palestine was a separate district (*sanjak*) of Jerusalem, directly under the Sublime Porte in Istanbul; the northern half consisted of two districts, subdivisions of the province (*vilayet*) of Beirut. All three districts, together with what are now Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, were part of a single country (*eyelet*): Greater Syria or *Şam* (pronounced *Sham*).

Following the First World War, the British imperialists reneged on their promise to allow the former Arab provinces of the defeated Ottoman Empire to unite (as demanded by the nascent Arab nationalist movement). Instead, they and the French imperialists carved up and rearranged the former Ottoman possessions according to their own interests and designs. In particular, Greater Syria was partitioned into two parts. In 1922 the League of Nations was 'persuaded' to grant France a mandate over the northern part (present-day Syria and Lebanon); while Britain was granted a mandate over the southern part, which was christened 'Palestine'. ('Christened' is apposite here, as the name, and the very concept of a country of this name, were part of a European Christian tradition, not a local one.)

This was the first fateful partition. But at that point Palestine still included also a sizable, albeit mostly arid, territory east of the River Jordan – Transjordanian Palestine.

It is important to note that the resolution of the League of Nations, adopted on 24 July 1922, granting Britain a mandate over Palestine, specified explicitly that Britain was to facilitate Zionist colonization. In the text of the resolution, the Balfour Declaration was quoted verbatim. In fact, the whole text reads as though a principal purpose of the Mandate – and by implication the creation of the country referred to as 'Palestine' – was the establishment of a Jewish 'national home'.<sup>10</sup>

However, Article 25 of the Mandate makes an exception of Transjordanian Palestine: there 'the Mandatory shall be entitled, with the consent of the Council of the League of Nations, to postpone or withhold application of such provisions of this mandate as he may consider inapplicable to the existing local conditions...'

Based on this exception, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, one Winston Churchill, partitioned Palestine in May 1923.

This was the second act of partition. The Transjordanian part was made into a separate Emirate (principality) of

Transjordan under Britain's protégé Abdullah bin al-Husayn. This is the present Kingdom of Jordan. The remaining (Cisjordanian) part – consisting of only 22.6% of the short-lived greater Palestine – to which the Mandate's provisions of Zionist colonization fully applied – was henceforth referred to exclusively as 'Palestine' *tout court*. That imperialist creation, carved and trimmed expressly as the domain of Zionist colonization – existed as a single country, under the British Mandate, for a mere 25 years: 1923–48. Ironically, this is what is sometimes referred to, with astonishing lack of historical awareness, as 'historical Palestine'!

The *Nakba* of 1947–49 is indelibly seared into Palestinian collective memory. But the *ad hoc* imperialist territorial arrangements that were imposed on the region a mere generation earlier and prepared the ground for the *Nakba* should also not be forgotten. Talk of 'historical Palestine' tends to foster the false impression that it was an authentic entity sanctified by long duration.

### ***Arab national unification***

So, the creation of Palestine was part of the imperialist dispensation following the First World War, which deliberately prevented the unification of the Arab East, thus reneging on promises made by Britain during that war. A divided Arab world suited the interests of the imperialist powers: a divided nation is easier to dominate and exploit.

A divided Arab nation is also a vital interest of the Zionist project; and it is this common interest that lies at the basis of the close alliance between Zionism (and the Zionist state) and its successive imperialist sponsors and senior partners. This was clear from the very beginning. In his famous article *The Iron Wall* (1923), the right-wing Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky wrote:

'Arab nationalism sets itself the same aims as those set, say, by Italian nationalism before 1870: unification and political independence. In plain language, this would mean expulsion of England from Mesopotamia and Egypt, expulsion of France from Syria and then perhaps also from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. For us to support such a movement, even remotely, would be suicide and treachery. We are operating under the English Mandate; in San Remo France endorsed the Balfour Declaration.<sup>11</sup> We cannot take part in a political intrigue whose aim is to expel England from the Suez Canal and the Persian

Gulf, and totally annihilate France as a colonial power.'

Preventing Arab national unification has been a cornerstone of Israeli political-military strategy. This is why Israel did its damndest to defeat secular Arab nationalism, led by Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, who had raised the anti-imperialist banner of Arab unification, enthusiastically acclaimed by the Arab masses.

In reflecting on the Sinai Campaign – Israel's name for the 1956 Suez War – David Ben-Gurion, then, as in 1948, Israel's Prime Minister wrote:

'Another aim of the Sinai Campaign was to diminish the stature of the Egyptian dictator, and the importance of this should not be underestimated. Being in charge of security since before the foundation of the state, one grave worry preyed on my mind. We know about the inferior state and corruption of the Arab rulers, which is one of the main causes of their military weakness. But I was always concerned that there might arise an exceptional man, as there had arisen for the tribes of Arabia in the seventh century, or for Turkey following its defeat in the First World War, Mustafa Kemal, who uplifted the spirit of the nation, increased its self-confidence and made it into a fighting nation. This danger still persists, and it seemed as though Nasser was that man. It is no simple matter that in various Arabic-speaking countries the children hold his portrait aloft. And diminishing Nasser's stature is a great political deed. His stature has been diminished in his country as well as in the other Arab countries, and in the Muslim countries and throughout the world.'<sup>12</sup>

In actual fact, Israel failed to achieve this aim in 1956, but tried again and succeeded in 1967.

However, the failure of petty bourgeois Arab nationalism to unify the Arab nation cannot be entirely blamed on Israel. The experience of the short-lived and ill-fated attempt to unify Egypt and Syria – the United Arab Republic (UAR), 1958–61 – illustrates the inability of the Arab middle classes to lead a truly democratic lasting unification.<sup>13</sup>

Thus national unification, which in Europe was achieved by bourgeois revolutions, remains to be accomplished in the Arab world (along with other democratic tasks) by a future revolution, to be led by the working classes.

Unification is prescribed not only by past history, by the fact that the Arab world constitutes a single, albeit diverse, linguistic-cultural domain, whose cultural unity

is already a reality, greatly reinforced by modern media of communication. It is also a vital economic necessity, as the Arab world in its present divided and fractured state suffers from an uneven distribution of population and resources, which need to be brought together to provide the basis for balanced development, realizing the enormously rich potential of this region. By the way, in the coming era of gradual depletion of light and easily extracted oil, the value of the region's large remaining deposits will go on increasing.

It is of course impossible to foresee the exact form that Arab national unification may take. But some general predictions can be made. It is quite clear that a democratic Arab union must be fairly decentralized and have federal structure, with a suitable measure of local autonomy. This is so for two reasons.

First, notwithstanding all the historical, linguistic and cultural features common to the entire Arab world, there is in it a great deal of local diversity, on which a centralized state structure cannot be superimposed democratically. For this reason, too, the union may have to take the form of a confederation linking two distinct sub-federations: one of the Arab East (*Mashreq*) and the other of the North-African Arab West (*Maghreb*).

Second, there is a great disparity in population size between the various Arab countries. The population of Egypt alone is 82 million (and counting...) – constituting about one third of the population of the whole Arab East. The population of Sudan is about 40 million. Thus roughly one half of the population of the Arab East (and about one third of that of the entire Arab World) are concentrated in and around the Nile Valley. On the other hand, some Arab countries, with their own dialects, customs and history, have small populations. A centralized state structure would therefore be unacceptably lopsided, overwhelmed and dominated by one great population centre, and inevitably resented by other regions. The miscarriage of the ill-conceived UAR is a cautionary object lesson.

### ***Framework for resolution of the conflict***

A successful Arab revolution, and the national unification that it must bring about, offers the one prospect for changing the balance of power, radically redressing its present inequality. It is Zionism's nightmare. The settler state will no longer be facing a fragmented Arab world, ruled by corrupt and abject elites subservient to Israel's own imperialist patron. Instead, it will find itself in the very midst of – and almost surrounded by – a united Arab nation. The enormous energy

latent in the Arab masses will have been released and mobilized in solidarity with the captive Palestinian section of the Arab nation. The closest and most ardent ally of the Palestinian masses is the great Egyptian working class as well as the working classes of Iraq and other Arab countries. This giant, unchained, will be a formidable force.

It is not a matter of dealing Israel a decisive military defeat. Even if this were possible, it would not by itself bring about a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We know from historical experience that a defeated nation which is offered no better prospect than extirpation or subjugation can go on resisting almost indefinitely. That would not resolve the conflict, merely invert its terms.

Nor is an actual shattering military defeat necessary for fatally undermining the Zionist project. Rather, it will be sufficient to achieve a position of equilibrium, when Israel is no longer a hegemonic local power able to dominate the region. When this point is reached – well before crushing Israel militarily can even be contemplated seriously – the Israelis, and primarily the Israeli working class, can be attracted by an offer they would be foolish to refuse: since you cannot beat us, join us and share with us in the great things we can achieve together.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict can then be resolved by accommodating both national groups within the regional federal union. The Palestinian Arab people will take its place alongside the other components of the Arab nation. And the Israeli Hebrews can be offered equal membership with full national rights, on similar terms as the other non-Arab nationalities located within the Arab world (Kurds, South-Sudanese).

Will the disposition envisaged here be a one-state or a two-state setup? It will be both and it will be neither. It will be a one-state setup – in the sense that both national groups will be accommodated, as federated members, in one state. But that one state will not be Palestine; it will be a regional union. And it will be a two-state setup in the sense that each of the two national groups will have its own canton (in the Swiss sense) or Land (in the German Federal sense), where it constitutes a majority of the population. However, no purpose will be served by interposing between these cantons and the federal state an intermediate political entity – let alone one whose borders are those of the so-called 'historical' Palestine, created by the British imperialists in 1923. The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not recreate that ill-starred

territory as a unitary or binary entity, but will supersede it – as it will also supersede the Zionist State of Israel.<sup>14</sup> The true liberation of Palestine cannot be accomplished short of a regional revolution – which will liberate ‘historical’ Palestine by consigning it to history.

As for borders, it would a pointless premature exercise to attempt to draw them now; but they need not coincide with any demarcation lines that have existed so far. When the time comes, they will be determined democratically according to economic, demographic and administrative considerations operative at that time.

It may be objected that this vision puts off the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to a distant time horizon. If so, the ‘fault’ lies not with the vision but with objective reality. Shortcuts proposing liberation within the box of Palestine are illusory.

This is by no means a predicament unique to this conflict or to the Middle East. Revolutionary socialists surely realize that the most fundamental problems in all part of our present-day world, including some conflicts that inflict untold suffering and stunt many millions of human lives, can only be resolved by a socialist revolution that cannot triumph in a single country. Easy fixes are an ideological con; and shortcut solutions are a reformist illusion.

### ***And in the meantime...***

This does not mean that we have nothing to do now but wait with folded arms for a regional revolution led by the working class.

An immediate task is to mobilize solidarity and support for the Palestinian people’s struggle against the extreme oppression and atrocities to which it is subjected. In the short and medium term, this is essentially a defensive struggle, but vitally important for all that. What is at stake is no less than preventing the worst: ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian Arab people, which remains a strategic aim of the Zionist settler state. World public opinion, civil society everywhere, must be mobilized in defence of the Palestinian people, by subjecting Israel to boycotts, disinvestments and sanctions. Socialists have a special role in mobilizing the workers’ movement to lead this campaign.

The demands to be raised in this campaign are: an immediate and unconditional end to the Israeli military occupation; and removal of all impediments preventing the exercise of Palestinian self-determination.

A further demand is the abolition of all discrimination against the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, and turning it from an ethnocratic Jewish state into a democratic state of all its citizens.

It would be unrealistic to expect these demands to be satisfied to a truly significant extent so long as the present balance of power is not radically changed. Any Israeli military withdrawal is likely to be nominal rather than real. And any Palestinian independence or autonomy is unlikely to be more than a sham. Also, so long as Zionism is not overthrown, Israel will continue to be discriminatory. Nevertheless, raising these demands is important – as a benchmark against which to measure and criticize actual conditions.

Beyond these demands, socialists must proclaim and uphold the principles (outlined earlier in this article) that must govern any genuine resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: de-Zionization; equal individual rights for all; equal national rights for the two national groups directly involved; the right of return of the Palestinian refugees.

Finally, Arab and Israeli socialists have a special historical responsibility. A revolution doesn't happen by itself; and when it does break out it can take a disastrous turn if it is hijacked by regressive forces. In order to ensure that an Arab revolution can resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the benign way envisaged here (along with the other great problems of the region), we must start working and organizing now in a democratic and non-sectarian way. We must closely coordinate our thinking, strategy and activity; and form organizational links on a regional scale, prefiguring the future in the present.

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<sup>1</sup> *Israelis and Palestinians – Conflict and Resolution*, downloadable from <http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/trustinfo/conferences.htm> or <http://www.iran-bulletin.org/palestineisrael.htm>

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, Section 2.1.

<sup>3</sup> See website of the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, *B'tselem*. Maps <http://www.btselem.org/English/Maps/Index.asp> and analysis [http://www.btselem.org/english/Settlements/Map\\_Analysis.asp](http://www.btselem.org/english/Settlements/Map_Analysis.asp)

<sup>4</sup> One of the rare exceptions is Jack Conrad, 'Zionist imperatives and the Arab solution', *Weekly Worker* 753, January 22 2009. Conrad supports a two-state configuration, but in a very different form from that proposed by the US-led so called 'international community'; and he addresses the question of

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the circumstances and forces needed for implementing it. See <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/753/zionistimp.html>

<sup>5</sup> See 'Towards the Democratic Palestine', *Fateh* (English-language newspaper published by the Information Office of the Palestine Liberation Movement), Vol. II, No. 2. This official programmatic article explicitly rejected the idea of a bi-national Palestine as a 'misconception': '[t]he call for a non-sectarian Palestine should not be confused with ... a bi-national state'. Moreover, the article stresses that '[t]he liberated Palestine will be part of the Arab Homeland, and will not be another alien state within it'; and looks forward to '[t]he eventual unity of Palestine with *other* Arab States'.

<sup>6</sup> See *Israelis and Palestinians – Conflict and Resolution*, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> For a brief account of Israel's services to US interests, see Appendix of *Israelis and Palestinians – Conflict and Resolution*, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> From 630 to 1918, interrupted by Christian Crusader rule from 1099 to 1187.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, for example, the great 14<sup>th</sup>-Century Arab traveller Ibn Battutah does not mention Palestine by that name, although he visited it. He refers to Gaza as 'the first of the towns of Syria on the borders of Egypt'.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, the British imperialists had larger strategic reasons for wishing to rule that country.

<sup>11</sup> This refers to the San Remo conference of April 1920, in which the victorious imperialist Entente powers (Britain, France, Italy and Japan) decided the fate of the Middle East.

<sup>12</sup> David Ben-Gurion, '*Al mah lahamnu, madu'a pinninu, mah hissaghu* (What we fought for, why we withdrew, what we achieved), pamphlet published by the Central Committee of MAPAI, March 1957. MAPAI is acronym for the Hebrew name used at that time by the Israeli Labour Party.

<sup>13</sup> For a brief outline of this abortive attempt and the causes of its failure, see Jack Conrad, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Of course, there is no reason why the Palestinian-Arab canton should not be called 'Palestine' and the Hebrew canton 'Israel'. Both names have been used in antiquity for variously and variably defined domains.