



Palestine and Israel: two states or one state and the right of return?

Marcus Halaby Thu, 15/07/2010 - 13:15

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Marcus Halaby, from Workers Power, recently debated the Alliance for Workers Liberty on the question of Israel and Palestine. This is the speech he gave

The title of this debate, as I understand it, is two states and workers' unity or one state and the right of return. I'm going to try to stick to that subject, although I should start off by saying that I don't think that that's actually the real nature of our differences, but that it's become a sort of shorthand for more general, fundamental differences of approach.

I'm certainly not a rigid one-stater by any means. I think that, like all slogans stated on their own, and as an end in themselves, the slogan of one state has limitations, one of which is that it has nothing to say about the sphere of social relations, about which alliance of classes will be necessary to bring it about and what sort of state they would build on the basis of that; that it doesn't say anything about the context of the region, the social, democratic and national struggles of the other peoples of the region; and, finally, that it doesn't say anything specific on its own about the position of the Jewish-Israeli nation.

For those reasons, I would always have to add that a 'one state solution' would have to be a bi-national, workers' state, which would have to be brought about in the context of a regional workers' revolution, which would lead to a federation with equality of rights and autonomy for all, including the Jewish-Israeli nation.

I purposely say autonomy in this context, rather than separate statehood, because there isn't any way to neatly divide the country without having large minorities in one or the other or both entities. I therefore think the Jewish-Israelis themselves would be better off in a single entity with full freedom of movement, rather than trying to construct a non-Zionist, non-expansionist, non-colonising [Jewish] state in the small part of historic Palestine around metropolitan Tel Aviv, where they form a solid majority of 98 per cent, and where slightly more than half of them actually live.

I'm actually not opposed in principle to the idea that the Jewish-Israelis, as a nation, should have a state of their own? and maybe in that sense, I'm a two-stater as well. If I recognise that they are a nation, then it follows that I have to recognise that they have the right to a state. I don't advocate it, though, and I can't recognise their actually-existing nation-state as a legitimate expression of that right.

I also happen to think that two states is a legitimate position to hold in the movement. It's not one that I agree with, I think it's utopian and completely misguided in its motivation, but lots of people hold it. Including people like Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein, who still find it possible to support the right of the people of Lebanon and Gaza to defend themselves against Israeli aggression, regardless of who is leading the military aspect of that defense at a given point in time. Who still recognise the specific dynamics of Zionism, and don't conflate it with national chauvinism in general. Who still support the call for a boycott, and who still find it possible to condemn in advance an Israeli aggression on Iran without hedging it with bizarre equivocations.

What makes the AWL unique, in my view, isn't that it advocates two states, but that it does it in the context of an overall politics that confuses and disorganises the movement, including that part of it that also advocates two states.

Two states is also the position of George Bush and Tony Blair, most of their recent predecessors, and most of their likely successors – hypocritically, you might say, but it is the commonsense position of imperialist diplomacy, and bourgeois journalism. It is not a position that is unique to those who are opposed to Israel's occupation of the 1967 territories. Nevertheless, I think it is a legitimate position to hold within the movement for Palestinian solidarity. I don't agree with it, partly because I don't think that this conflict is a conflict about territory that can be solved by a division of territory, if it ever was.

It's about demography. Today there are 5.6 million Jews and 5.1 million Arabs between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. That's 3.8 million Palestinians under occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, and 1.2 million Palestinians living as a minority in Israel, where they are about a fifth of the country's citizens. Within our lifetimes, within the next 15 to 20 years, that is projected to change to 6 million Jews and 9.3 million Palestinians. Even without the return of a single refugee, the Palestinians are going to form something like three fifths of the population of their historic homeland within the near future.

This is the problem for Israel's rulers. This is the subject that they debate, not the question of what territory can they afford to concede, what security arrangements would be appropriate after its concession. No one expressed this more clearly, by the way, than Ehud Olmert did, the last Prime Minister, when he was defending the disengagement from Gaza and its extension to parts of the West Bank. He said that the issue was one of making sure that there were 'maximum Jews' and 'minimum Arabs' in a particular piece of land. It's a problem for them because they know that when the Palestinians realise that all that is ever going to be on offer to them is a joke Swiss cheese prison state, they'll abandon their demand for a separate state and they'll say, 'all we want is the right to vote'.

And, as Olmert himself put it, the day that Israel faces a South African style struggle for voting rights, the state of Israel is finished.

You should ask yourselves, what will you do when that situation arises? What will you do when the only people left advocating two states are open Israeli racists like Avigdor Lieberman and Fatah bureaucrats who want a state that they can loot?

All of the Israeli parties think about this demographic problem, obsessively. They all have their own particular solutions to it. Kadima's solution when they were in power was that they had to crush Hamas, boost Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority, persuade them to sign an agreement that allows them to keep most of the settlements on their side of the wall that they're building, and in that way maintain an artificial Jewish majority within an expanded territory.

The current Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman, he advocates solving the same problem in a different way, by expelling Arabs in Israel, by redrawing the border, by handing over the 'Little Triangle' – one of the major concentrations of Israel's Palestinian minority – to the Palestinian Authority, and stripping its inhabitants of their citizenship; by requiring an oath of loyalty to the state as a condition of citizenship for the Palestinian minority in the rest of Israel; and by putting off an agreement with the Palestinian Authority for a state for as long as possible. His argument in favour of that is, we have to do that because otherwise two states means one and a half states for the Arabs, and half a state for the Jews, one where the Arabs are a large minority.

You shouldn't think this is an aberration. Israeli society has moved to the right, and surveys show that something like half of Israel schoolchildren – 40.5 per cent of them religious, 59.5 per cent of them secular – advocate that Israel's Palestinian minority shouldn't have equal rights, that 56 per cent of them believe that Israeli Arabs shouldn't be allowed to run for Parliament, and 48 per cent of them say that they would disobey orders to evacuate the settlements. Or, to put it another way, two fifths of Israel's population within its 1967 borders, want to remove one fifth of the same population and/or strip it of its rights.

Benny Morris, an Israeli historian who's been associated with left-wing parties like Shinui and Meretz, has actually said that in the context of a major regional war, the expulsion of Israel's Arab minority as well as of the Palestinians

under occupation, could be a legitimate act.

You'd have to ask yourselves, in what sort of state would simple demographic changes, of the sort that take place in all countries, pose such a threat to the national character of the state that such drastic solutions have to be thought of?

To do that you'd have to look back at history ? and I agree with you that there's an issue about narratives ? you'd have to look back at Israel's origins, and its present day dynamics, and draw the conclusion that the problem isn't just the occupation alone, but that the occupation is the most visible feature in the present day of Israel's character as a settler colony.

Now, I know that some people are squeamish at certain words like ?colonial? and ?settler?. I don't see why they should be, given that the Zionists themselves aren't, except when they're talking to western liberals. States like that have existed before in history ? in Canada, in the United States, in Argentina, in Australia. Israel does have all of their usual features, like having a higher standard of living for its privileged colonist citizens than the countries that they originally came from ? which you'd expect, because otherwise it would be difficult to persuade them to live there.

They often have higher standards of bourgeois democracy for their privileged settler citizens than in the countries that they originally came from, going alongside a national ideology that describes the country as a refuge from persecution and as a land of opportunity ? and Israel, with its cult of the Holocaust, and its tendentious historiography of European anti-Semitism, certainly has that.

They generally have a hierarchy of racial oppression, one based not just on the common oppression of the natives but on which particular group of immigrants arrived first. Israel does have that.

In general, they are dependent on an imperialist power and part of its grand designs. That doesn't mean that they are a puppet ? Argentina wasn't a puppet of British imperialism [when it was colonising Patagonia and when it was engaged in various] wars in the 19th century, but they do have a strategic dependence on it which is conditioned by common strategic interests.

The one defining characteristic that they all have is one of constant expansion, and constant colonisation, one that allows them to solve their social problems and maintain an internal class peace at the expense of the natives, until it reaches the objective limits of geography and military superiority. That's what happened in Australia, that's what happened in the United States and Argentina and so forth.

States like that become normal nation-states by annihilating the natives, and by absorbing their shattered remnants as a sort of racially oppressed caste. I think it's obvious that no socialist should want Israel to become a normal nation-state in that way. It hasn't been able to so far, not because they've been any more or less civilised than previous groups of colonists, who, by the way, have never had subjectively bad intentions, ever ? they've always been fleeing from persecution or from economic catastrophe or something.

Not because of that, but because they've had the bad luck to be the last colonial project in history, so they can't adopt the methods of their predecessors without provoking an outcry that their predecessors didn't have to deal with. Because they've had the bad luck that the natives that they confronted weren't a scattered assortment of tribes that never experienced anything like capitalism before, and who had barely come into contact with each other, by the time the colonists came into contact with them, but the first colonised people to actually confront their colonisation with something like a nationalist form of resistance, right from its inception.

You, for your part, you want Israel to normalise itself by drawing a border, by saying that expansion across that border is now done with, that's the end of that process, and by giving the Palestinians a state on the other side of it. And that's fine, I'd actually agree with you, if it wasn't for the fact that Israel's expansion and its colonisation, isn't just a bad policy that's oppressive to the Palestinians and counter-productive for Israelis, and it's not just a matter of ideology. It's the material foundation of the state.

They can't stop doing it, not because they're bad people, or a 'bad nation', but because if they stopped doing it, all of the class and ethnic and religious tensions that lie at the heart of their society now, and which are kept within reasonable limits, would suddenly come to the fore.

In order to be the Jewish State, in order to maintain its Jewish majority, and achieve its ambition of gathering the world's Jews onto its territory, Israel has to settle Jewish immigrants from across the world, it has to do it at the expense of Palestinians – because we live in a capitalist society where property is private – and therefore it has to expand its territory. It's a state that's only capable of having a dynamic stability in that sense.

That's why every Israeli government has expanded the settlements, even and especially when they've been in negotiations. It's why Israel from its current position of strength, as Workers' Liberty often puts it, can't and doesn't and won't grant the Palestinians anything like a meaningful state in the West Bank. It's why working class Israelis are more likely to vote for right-wing pro-settler parties – and more likely to actually be in the settlements – than their middle class counterparts. It's why most West Bank settlers are what you and I would recognise as relatively ordinary Israelis, and not the stereotypical religious zealots who form the vanguard of that settlement. It's why the peace movement is so weak and isolated, why it doesn't have a political party of its own, and why it has been unable to find any material force whose interests it can link its struggle to. And it's also one of the reasons why a boycott is necessary.

I know that Workers' Liberty has observed that most Israeli activists oppose it, and I don't doubt it, but the call for a boycott enjoys support from a broad range of Palestinian organisations, and I think we should be taking our cue from them. Because, unfortunately, regretfully, I think it will take a series of defeats for Israel to shake the confidence of Israel's working class in Zionism's ability to provide them with security, with prosperity, with continued democratic rights, and with peace and normality. Even if you restrict your demands to two states, it will take a series of quite serious defeats to do that.

Now, we might be lucky. They could learn from their defeats quickly enough that they avoid a complete catastrophe for themselves. They could even learn quickly enough that a section of them provide useful allies to the struggle. But one thing I'm not willing to do is to advise the Palestinians to make their struggle strategically dependent on winning over the Israeli working class.

Israel's colonising character is also another reason why it's necessary to defend the right of return. This isn't a matter of collective repossession, but the only possible guarantee of the Palestinians' current and future rights; because for the Palestinians, their Nakba, the catastrophe of their expulsion, wasn't a single event in the past that they could choose to forgive and forget if the conditions were right for it. It's something that's still happening now.

It's something that happens every day, with each Jerusalem resident who's denied the right to return to their country after working or studying abroad; with each villager who's cut off from their lands by a new settlement; with each new war that Israel threatens to exploit to push more Palestinians out. And it is a collective, national right, a component of their right to national self-determination, precisely because their expulsion has been the chief mechanism by which that right has been denied. What will you say after the next war, to the next batch of Palestinian refugees? At what point will you tell them that their right to return to their country takes second place to Israel's right to maintain a Jewish majority on the territory from which they were expelled?

Do the Palestinians require strategic allies? Yes, certainly. But I don't believe that they should look for them in isolation, in the colonial era boundaries of British Mandatory Palestine. They should link themselves with the social and democratic and national struggles of the masses of the region, primarily of the surrounding Arab countries, but also of countries like Turkey and Iran, precisely the arena where Israel exercises its role as imperialism's enforcer in the region most visibly, and where for the most part the mass of the Israeli people support their government's adventures.

That's a struggle that will necessarily have to be directed in the first instance against the Arab regimes. But it's one that will inevitably come into conflict with imperialism. And it will mean wars; it will mean wars, as imperialism's Israeli and Arab agents try to intervene [in it]. To wage that struggle will therefore require all sorts of alliances, with all

sorts of bourgeois forces.

Are there other states that we propose to 'abolish' in the course of this struggle? Are there other states that we quite simply don't think could continue to exist in their current [national] form? Well, let's see: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Gulf statelets, the artificial Hashemite monarchy in Jordan ? I can't see them having much of a future in a Middle East where there is a regional revolutionary struggle for democracy and for socialism.

This requires a strategy of actually trying to bring the working class to the head of the struggles for democratic rights and for national rights and so forth. And in order to compete with the existing leaderships of those struggles, with the nationalists and the Islamists and others, in order to wrest the leadership of those struggles out of their hands, you have to take part in those struggles. There's no other way.

The Islamists, rather like their close cousins, the nationalists, are just as likely to be on the opposite side of the barricades at any point in time, as they are to be on the same side. But when they are on the same side, it's necessary to expose them, by pointing up the necessity of an alliance between the workers' movement and all those who are fighting for the defense of their country against military aggression and so forth. Where they refuse it, which, 9 times out of 10, in the absence of any mass pressure from their own mass base [they will], where they refuse it, [we should] use that to expose them.

By reducing the complex history of Islamism to 'clerical fascism', I think what you're actually saying is that you don't want to compete with them for the leadership of the national and democratic movements. You don't want to wrest the leadership of those struggles out of their hands. You'd actually prefer to disavow movements that they have the leadership of; because they can't necessarily be that progressive if they have the leadership of them.

But then I don't think the intention of Workers' Liberty's overall position ? not two states, specifically, but its general rejection of the idea of the anti-imperialist united front ? I don't think its intention is to provide an operative programme for militants in the Middle East and for the region.

I think it's primarily a programme for Britain ? that's what I think the problem is. And that's why I say that for me the problem with your position isn't two states, but the disorganisation and the confusion that it brings to the movement of those who want to show solidarity with the Palestinians, and with other forces in the region that are fighting imperialism, including those who also advocate two states.

Camilla Bassi's speech can be found online [here](#)[1]

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