



## Marxism and Israel: Left perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Alan Goodman and Richard Rubin

*Last November Platypus hosted a roundtable discussion between Alan Goodman from The Revolutionary Communist Party USA, and Richard Rubin from Platypus entitled “Marxism and Israel: Left Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” at Hunter College in New York City. Panelists were asked to speak on the role the Left has played in the development of Israel, the Left’s analysis of the role of American intervention in the Middle East, and what a critical Marxian approach to the conflict currently looks like, compared to what it might look like. What follows is an edited transcript of the event. Full audio of the event can be found at:*

*<<http://www.archive.org/details/MarxismAndIsraelLeftPerspectivesOnTheIsraeli-palestinianConflict>>.*

**Alan Goodman:** I am a correspondent for *Revolution* newspaper, which is the voice of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA. I will be speaking to the questions, but in some ways “what are the questions?” is part of the problem. A special issue of *Revolution* undertook an in-depth exploration of the nature and role of Israel in the world today by asking the question whether Israel is a “bastion of Enlightenment or enforcer for imperialism?”<sup>1</sup> Even people who have profound disagreements with us actually agree that these are the accurate terms of debate, and I think that as we begin to think about the genesis of Israel, the question of legitimizing or delegitimizing Israel comes down to the fact that, objectively, Israel is not a legitimate state.

Let me start by sharing an experience I had at Columbia University: Someone who was selling our newspaper said “If you can tell me which state in the Middle East has nuclear weapons, I’ll give you a free copy of this paper.” My immediate reaction was alarm, wondering how we were going to pay for all the copies we would have to give away because Mordechai Vanunu (as well as Jimmy Carter) had long since confirmed that Israel had about 120 nuclear weapons. It was or is the world’s worst kept secret in a sense. Here is the awful part: many answered “Iran, I think.” We explained to them that Iran’s nuclear program is on the verge of developing weapons-grade nuclear material, while Israel has a sophisticated nuclear arsenal. And then the response was that many people felt a lot more comfortable knowing that Israel has 120 nuclear weapons than they were knowing that Iran might get one or two.

Our main article had a thorough argument that there wouldn’t be a viable Zionist movement as we know it, and certainly no Israeli state, were it not for the sponsorship of colonial and imperialist powers. Perhaps the biggest misconception that I find when I engage

with the international community around the history and nature of Israel is the general narrative that, due to the atrocities done to the Jews in World War II, they should have a country of their own where that can never happen again. There is a coincidental convergence between the end of World War II, the coming to light of some of the crimes of the Holocaust, and the founding of the state of Israel. The fundamental driving force behind the establishment of Israel was Great Britain. Sir Ronald Storrs, the first British military governor of Jerusalem, wrote that England's support for the Zionist enterprise was one "that blessed him that gave as well as him that took, by forming for England 'a little loyal Jewish Ulster' in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism."<sup>2</sup> This exemplifies how the world powers have looked at Israel, not being driven by a desire for justice.

Israel has carried out terrible crimes on behalf of U.S. imperialism, but very little is known about these crimes. In the 1980s Israel was a vital force behind the genocidal killing of up to 200,000 Guatemalan peasants at a time when the U.S. was grappling with Soviet-backed resistance movements in Central America. Perhaps a better known, but still generally kept secret, is Israel's tight relationship with apartheid South Africa. One can't understand the nature of Israel without understanding the nature of its global imperialist sponsors, first Britain and then America. Bob Avakian, the leader of the RCP has said that, "After the Holocaust, the worst thing that has happened to the Jewish people is the state of Israel." One of the things that is clearly underlying this is that Israel is something which was done *to* the Jewish people. In the introduction to our special issue of Revolution we pose this challenge: "The state of Israel is projected to the world as an outpost of democracy and tolerance in a sea of intolerant Islam bent on its destruction. To be considered a credible mainstream voice in U.S. politics, academia or the media, one must present Israel as a frontline of defense against Jihad and a critical fortress defending our way of life. What is the essential nature of Israel? How does one understand the paradox of a country founded to make up for a great crime, but that itself commits great crimes? Answering these questions is not about 'competing narratives'—the question here is, what is true, and what is just? To get into this, we will examine the history of Israel to understand the actual dynamics that led us to today's situation."

Responding specifically to the question of the history of the Left and its relation to Israel, it hasn't been one of our better moments. Bob Avakian has done a lot of work to excavate the experience of Russia and China when they were socialist countries, during the brief, sixty-year period when one or both were socialist, and during that time those countries mainly supported national liberation struggles around the world. It's recently been documented by the UN that the Soviet Union actually helped supply arms to Israel. As part of what we refer to as Bob Avakian's "New Synthesis," we put a lot of emphasis on the need for the next stage of the world communist revolution to take a radically different approach to the relationship between the interests of existing socialist countries and the world revolution. You'll find throughout this synthesis, in economics and every realm, putting the world revolution first.

I am arguing two points. One, by objective standards of legitimacy, Israel was built on ethnic cleansing. The inhabitants of Palestine have been terrorized and driven out of their country. They have a right to have their country back. Secondly, the essential nature of Israel is that it is an instrument of, and an enforcer for, imperialism. The stakes of this in the world are tremendously high; many people are very upset and outraged by Israel's crimes. We have to appreciate that around the world there's a whole different perception than in the U.S. We here in America have to break the vicious cycle of "McWorld vs. Jihad" by taking a clear stand against our own government and starting to think, not like Americans, but in the interests of humanity.

**Richard Rubin:** My esteemed teacher and friend, the late Eqbal Ahmad, who was himself a close friend of Edward Said, once remarked many years ago when speaking on the difficulty of addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that the first thing one must bear in mind is that one is dealing with two communities of suffering. Furthermore, each is a symbolic representative victim of two great crimes. The Jews, although by no means the only victims of Fascism, are the archetypal victims of Fascism. The Palestinians, although by no means the only victims of colonialism, or even the worst victims, have also, like the Jews, with their particular fate, become the archetypal representative of a colonized people for many around the world. The intersection of these two communities of suffering leads to many pitfalls of discourse. I will not be addressing such issues here, however, and you must take my sympathy for all victims of oppression for granted. Rather I will address, as much as is honestly possible, the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Marxism. This is by no means a self-evident perspective, and it is one that is generally avoided even by professed Marxists who, when they speak on the issue, usually say things that are identical to what many non- and anti-Marxists say. So is there, then, a Marxist perspective on the Israel-Palestine conflict?

To begin to address this question, I will draw your attention to two articles that both purport to offer such a perspective, although they come to radically different conclusions. One is an article entitled "Bastion of Enlightenment or Enforcer for Imperialism?" that appeared recently in *Revolution*, the newspaper of the RCP USA, which we were just hearing about. The other is an article entitled "Israel and Communism" that appeared in the *Platypus Review* in issue 28, written by Initiative Sozialistisches Forum.<sup>3</sup> The latter, which is a translation from a German article that appeared in 2003, will strike most American readers as by far the more exotic and strange of the two. Indeed, to many it will seem not a document pertaining to the Left at all, but rather a manifestation of neo-conservatism. The deep origins of the Antideutsch current, from which the "Israel and Communism" article is written, are in German Maoism. The article is premised on an acceptance of Marxist categories and written in a Marxist language close to jargon. While superficially the "Antideutsch" article and the *Revolution* article appear to be polar opposites, I would like to claim that they actually stem from a similar methodology and misconception of the Left. To make this point more clearly, let me refer you to the following passage from the *Revolution* article: "In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S.

emerged at the top of the imperialist world order, in a position to dictate terms to both defeated rivals (like Germany and Japan), and allies (like Britain and France). Around the world, the U.S. moved to supplant old colonial powers and swallow up or encompass their spheres of influence. But other important forces also emerged out of World War II. For a short time, the Soviet Union and China formed a socialist camp that confronted the imperialist world. And another major factor on the post-war political stage was a powerful wave of national liberation struggles throughout especially Asia and Africa against the weakened colonial powers of Europe and Japan.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet in 1948, as we just heard, the Soviet Union under Stalin’s dictatorship supported the creation of Israel, and the socialist camp mentioned above provided significant, some would argue decisive, material aid to Israel. Furthermore, many articles appeared in the communist press at the time hailing the Israeli struggle as an anti-imperialist one. Arab communist parties, which were small, but which did exist in several countries—particularly Egypt and Iraq—loyally opposed the intervention of the Arab armies and supported partition. Additionally, the Israeli Communist Party took an extremely patriotic line during the war, at one point even criticizing Ben-Gurion in their newspaper, *Kol HaAm* (Voice of the People), for being an agent of British imperialism and not conquering even more Arab territory than he did. So in 1948 progressive and communist opinion was much closer to that of the Antideutsch article than to that of the RCP article. While nowadays anti-Zionist Jews are assumed to be on the Left (although in fact the largest group of anti-Zionist Jews are actually found among the ultra-Orthodox), this was not the case in the mid-century.

What has remained structurally constant however, despite this great shift in loyalties among progressive public opinion, is the insistence of stating the question in terms of which nationalist cause to support. That is, the essentially internationalist character of revolutionary Marxism has been subordinate to the logic of national liberation, even by those who claim to be revolutionary Marxists. This is true just as much of those who claim to be in an anti-Stalinist or Trotskyist tradition as it is of Maoists. I would argue that if there is any political lesson to be learned from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is that national liberation for oppressed peoples can be a delusion. After all, the deeply tragic character of Zionism stems from its Janus-like character. To the Palestinians it was and is a colonial settler movement, but to the Jews Zionism presented itself as a movement of national liberation for an oppressed people. It is customary to focus on one side of this (the colonial settler side) to delegitimize Zionism, and the other (the national liberation movement) to legitimize it. But I am emphasizing that both are integral to it.

Conversely, it will be argued that I am neglecting the distinction between the respective nationalisms of the oppressed and the oppressor. To this response one must simply pose the question of whether the nationalism of the oppressed can actually liberate the oppressed people. There is the sentimental notion that oppressed peoples, through their resistance to oppression, liberate themselves. Posed in this way, one has little need to think about the politics of resistance, only to support resistance. In fact, however, resistance, even heroic

resistance, cannot end oppression unless the material and social forces to overcome it are present. It is questionable, for example, whether in the whole history of humanity there has been more than one successful slave revolt. It was neither John Brown nor Denmark Vesey who ended chattel slavery in the U.S. but the Union Army of the northern bourgeoisie. It was not the Warsaw Ghetto uprising or the heroic struggles of Jewish partisans that ended the Holocaust, but the material superiority of the Allied armed forces, particularly the Red Army. Israel is a successful advanced capitalist state with hundreds of advanced nuclear weapons and an immense economic and military superiority to the Palestinians. Only a politics that bridges the national divide and breaks the loyalty of masses of Israeli Jews to “their” state can in fact bring liberation to the Palestinians. To pose the need for such a politics will in the present moment seem utopian. It is counterposed to all the political forces on the ground in Israel-Palestine: the Israeli state, of course, but also the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Nor, truthfully, does it resonate with any but a handful of Israelis or Palestinians. At present, all politics around the issue are formulated in terms of the acceptance of the bourgeois nation-state. This is true not only of the explicitly right-wing politics (in both Jewish and Arab versions) but also of the so-called “two-state” and “one-state” solutions. In a deep sense, 1948 is the last and deepest legacy of 1848.

### Panelists' Responses

**AG:** I definitely want to respond to what Richard said, because I don't agree with it. We live in a country where we can discuss all kinds of things, but our standard of living is built on a system that ravages the rest of the world. Those cars outside are fuelled because regimes like that of the Saudis cut off the hands or the heads of people who protest. There's a tremendous amount of resentment around the world and it's not because they hate us for our freedoms, it's because every time Uncle Sam shows up you have Abu Ghraib, you have mass graves, you have torture chambers, and Israel plays a foundational role in propping up that world system, in particular on behalf of the United States. There are challenging questions in terms of understanding the nature of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and there are different class forces among Palestinians. In Benny Morris's book *1948* he describes some Zionist atrocity and then he'll say “But a crowd of angry Arabs clubbed a Jew to death.” You can't understand the world that way; that is relativism and there is both a methodological and a moral problem with that. Let me pose the moral question another way: You're living in Tony Soprano's house, and there's some screaming in the backyard because Tony's out there beating somebody. Now, do you say to yourself, “Maybe the guy Tony's beating is kind of a thug himself?” Or do you say, “This house is built on gangsterism that kills and tortures people?” So my point is that we have to confront the nature of the world we live in, and what responsibility that poses to us. These are basic questions of both epistemology and morality.

**RR:** I would argue, again, that the relationship between imperialism and Zionism is a complicated one, as seen in the case of British imperialism and Zionism, for example. Theodor Herzl originally imagined that he could “buy” Palestine from the Ottoman Empire, which was naïve of him, because he didn’t really understand Ottoman politics. The support for British imperialism and an alliance with imperialism was of course crucial to the success of the Zionist enterprise. However, the relationship was somewhat fraught and there was a kind of mutual betrayal on both sides. When the British spoke of a “little loyal Jewish Ulster,” they did not really foresee an independent Jewish state. So ultimately Zionism did in fact come into conflict with British imperialism. There were two rebellions against British imperialism: There was the Arab revolt, which you could call the first intifada in 1936–1939, in which the Zionists sided with the British in helping to suppress it. While that is a legitimate anti-imperialist revolt, one also has to realize that it had a very right-wing and problematic leadership. Then there was the Zionist revolt. After the Palestinian leadership had been largely crushed by the defeat of their revolt, there was a Zionist revolt against the British in the immediate aftermath, which led the British to turn Palestine over to the UN—the partition resolution.

The relationship between Zionism and imperialism is such that Zionism structurally needed an external ally because the alliance with Britain was always fraught. If you look at the Israeli attitude, for example, during the Suez crisis, there was still a lot of hostility between the Israelis and the British. It’s worth bearing in mind that the commander of the Jordanian Army who was later fired was in fact a British officer. There was a direct connection there, and this was part of the way progressives justified to themselves that the Israelis were fighting against British imperialism. All of this shows how one needs to problematize these narratives of anti-imperialism and national self-determination. As a patron of Israel, the U.S. has been, clearly from the Israeli standpoint, the most beneficial because it is the one with which there is the least conflict. It is an alliance that especially deepened after 1967 and 1973. In other words, what I want to emphasize here is not the specifics of the narrative but the fact that, in a structural perspective, I think that U.S. support for Israel is, overall, rational. Having said that, it does not follow that the craziness that goes on in Hebron every day is simply a manifestation of imperialism. Not everything in the world that goes on is directly a manifestation of imperialism. For example I don’t think the U.S. pushed Israel into the 1967 war, just as I don’t think the Soviet Union pushed the Arabs into that war. That war happened because of specific local circumstances, and it turned out to be a great success for Israel.

I don’t think that the U.S. or Israeli lifestyles are actually built on the fact of imperialist oppression. That is, that the majority of the population in these countries materially benefit. It’s not the case that the majority of Israeli Jews materially benefit from the oppression of Palestinians. There are a lot of Israeli Jews who are preoccupied with many other political questions than Palestine. So there is a similar class conflict to that which exists in other advanced capitalist countries. I don’t think one can just say that the people living in Sderot are economically privileged, or that they’re better off than people in Gaza. The total logic of capital



doesn't explain, for example, what goes on in Hebron, nor does it explain the shift in Palestinian politics from secular nationalism to Islamism and the rise of Hamas. There are many ideological factors than can operate within the totality of capital, and I think Marxism poses that capitalism generates opposition to it. People are not totalitarian robots programmed into capitalist ways of thinking. So, this idea of totalitarian capital, I don't see how one could understand it this way.

## Q & A

*Since when does Marxism talk about morality? Richard gives a fair reply to Alan's problematic history of what is happening in Israel, and Alan responds by giving a loaded argument about how we're supposed to be anti-Zionist. I don't see how this perspective is Marxist in any way.*

**AG:** Morality has always been part of Marxism, but it is a hallmark of what Bob Avakian and the RCP are bringing forward to put more emphasis on morality. Frankly, the experience of the Marxist movement up to now has been a bit expedient on questions of morality. And a lot of what Avakian has argued is that there has to be a struggle to objectively define a morality that corresponds to the interests of humanity, and then to hold ourselves to it when it appears to get in way of our objectives. By analogy, if one sees a woman getting raped, one doesn't ask, "How do I understand this without taking sides?" If you understand it, you will take sides. There's a distinction between the people who have suffered the most and the people who are oppressing and exploiting them. I think it's valuable to deconstruct it because through this process we can actually understand the nature of Israel as coming down to morality. It is a basic point of Marxism that the economic foundation of capitalist society defines societal morality. The society we live in perpetuates a dog-eat-dog dynamic, which is an expression of economic relations. When Marx and Engels talk about religion they describe it as the "soul" of a soulless world, and in a lot of their writings they talk about the reflection of economic relations in how people look at their relationships with others. I find it rather incredible that we don't seem to have some common perception that the reason we're walking around with iPhones has something to do with the wave of suicides in the plants that make them. Marx came about at a time when the peasants got driven off the land, and a class arose that represented, historically, the potential for humanity to transcend class society. Now, our critique is that Marx saw that too mechanically by equating proletarians with the historic mission of the proletariat as a class. But from that perspective, if it all boils down to the Maoist "right to rebel against reactionaries" then it's not counter-productive to try to understand the role that Israel plays in the world today. I think if we can't start from, "What is Marxism and how to apply it?," we have to start from what's real and what's true. If Marxism turns out not to be true, then so be it.

**RR:** I think that there is a moral dimension to Marxism. I've never been a Zionist, and as such am very much aware that the Palestinians are oppressed. I've been to Palestine and I've seen that Hebron is a hellish place. I'm also very much aware of the history of Jewish oppression. I know people personally who have undergone extreme suffering, both Palestinians and Jews, and removing oneself from a moral position is a way of trying to understand that. Opposition to imperialism is not a moral category, but a political and analytic category. Israel as an "apartheid" state is framed moralistically. So the question is not, "Is Israeli oppression of the Palestinians as bad as apartheid?" To me that's not the question. What is objectionable about that terminology is that it's very bad sociology, since the political and economic logic of apartheid and that of Zionism are radically different. Therefore talking about it loosely in terms of the "struggle" is confusing.

I think one of the things this has shown about specifically Marxist points of view on Israel-Palestine is how easily the discussion gets formulated in terms that really have nothing to do with Marxism. In terms of the question of morality, it's the question of how one conceives of political strategy. I'm not so interested in behaving morally—I'm interested in the possibilities for human liberation for Israelis and Palestinians, but also human beings in general, because you can't separate these 10 million people who are Jews and Palestinians from everyone else on the planet.

Concretely, the situation in Israel-Palestine is miserable and it's getting worse. If it's not heading towards an immediate catastrophe, it could, down the road, lead to regional nuclear war, or worse. There really isn't a revolutionary Marxist politics in Israel-Palestine aside from a handful of intellectuals, as is the case everywhere. Currently, the formulation of the politics is within a liberal context, but the liberal context and the way it's formulated around the one-state solution won't triumph. If, for example, a one-state solution were to be taken seriously, we would have to stop calling for an independent Palestinian state, and the Palestinians would have to say to the Israelis, "Annex us, give us full citizenship rights," and thereby try to transform the state of Israel into a bi-national state.

*I would like Richard to expand on what he identified earlier as the bourgeois nation-state, in terms of the one-state or two-state solutions.*

**RR:** In terms of the one-state solution, a lot of one-state politics are just fraudulent: people talking about a one-state solution who don't even really believe in it. But to the extent that you take it seriously, the advocates are talking in terms of the bourgeois nation-state. People like Ali Abunimah are anti-Marxists. I'm not saying that pejoratively—Edward Said was an anti-Marxist, and that's the proper analytical description of their liberal political positions. The only context in which a one-state program might succeed would be in the context of a radical transformation of social relations, in other words, if it were framed in a Marxist context. But the question of one-state vs. two-state is really not the issue, because if you have a bi-national political movement committed to Arab-Jewish socialist co-existence and the abolition of



existing social relations, then whether you end up with a federation or two socialist states or one bi-national state is a secondary consideration.

I wouldn't say it's the question of taking one side or another. It's erroneous to understand it as just Israelis vs. Palestinians. The problem is with formulating a radical response, but even Palestinians and Israelis who believe in genuine equality and co-existence formulate their positions not in a radical context, but an essentially liberal context. One can say that's very understandable given the circumstances in which they operate. Part of the problem, however, is that I'm trying to formulate a politics that really can't exist, because there aren't the people on the ground to formulate such a politics. I'm not arguing about which is the oppressor nation, and which is the oppressed. The question is how you understand that fact of an oppressed nation and an oppressing nation politically, which I think is what the real difference is. If we are really talking about the way the world is set up, then there is the specific history of capitalism in its organization of the nation-state, and the fact is that some nation-states have played an unequal role in terms of the development of capitalism. It has not developed equally across the planet. But if you're talking about a revolution in the United States or western Europe, then that would abolish the world capitalist system, and one consequence would be the abolition of the nation-state. The same does not apply to the possibility for socialist revolution in a third-world country. I think we have a false opposition: the totality of capitalism vs. the theory of imperialism; that is, Alan's claim that our standard of living in the U.S. is directly dependent on the exploitation of third-world countries. | **P**

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1. See "Bastion of Enlightenment... or Enforcer for Imperialism: The Case of Israel," *Revolution* 213, October 10, 2010. Available online at <<http://www.revcom.us/a/213/israel-en.html>>.
  2. Tony Cliff, "The Jews, Israel and the Holocaust," *Socialist Review* 219, 1998. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1998/05/israel.htm>>.
  3. Initiative Sozialistisches Forum, "Communism and Israel," *Platypus Review* 28 (October 2010). Available online at <<http://www.platypus1917.org/2010/10/08/communism-and-israel/>>.
  4. "Bastion of Enlightenment ... or Enforcer for Imperialism."