

Israel's war measures and the legacy of Zionism

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As US President Bill Clinton arrives in Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt to take part in an emergency summit aimed at halting two-and-a-half weeks of fighting, the policies of the Israeli regime increasingly resemble those of a military camarilla that has lost any sense of political reality. Despite the best efforts of the apologists of the Israeli regime to place the onus on Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Chairman Yassir Arafat, it is obvious from the circumstances leading up to the past two weeks of bloodshed that the violence was provoked by right-wing forces within the Israeli establishment, to which Prime Minister Ehud Barak capitulated.

The behaviour of the Israeli armed forces, which has left 3,000 Palestinians wounded and almost 100 dead, and has included the use of helicopter gunships to fire missiles into Palestinian villages, is symptomatic of a political leadership that has lost its head. Even Israel's allies in the US and Europe have been reduced to shaking their heads in astonishment. The sense of bewilderment in the highest circles of world imperialism was evidenced by a *Financial Times* editorial that characterised Israel's helicopter attack on Arafat's headquarters as "insane".

In politics, even what may appear to be insanity is ultimately dictated by a definite objective logic. To understand why events in the Middle East have taken their present course, one must, as always, begin with an examination of the historical background.

Western government and media circles generally portray the struggle now unfolding solely in terms of an Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or a struggle between Israel and a monolithic Arab bloc. But the editorialists who are hurling verbal thunderbolts at the Palestinians for revolting against military repression would be better served by a serious examination of the present state of Israeli society and the historical conditions that have produced it.

What is unfolding in Israel is the product of deep-rooted contradictions, both political and ideological, within the Zionist state. More than a half century has elapsed since Israel's establishment. Its foundation was rooted in the catastrophe that overtook European Jewry in the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the extermination of six million European Jews in the Nazi holocaust.

This was itself the horrendous consequence of the defeat of the European working class by fascism. The Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist International, and the Soviet bureaucracy's betrayal of the struggle for world socialism, were politically responsible for fascism's victory. Moreover, the Kremlin's repressive methods and the anti-Semitic overtones of its policies played a profound role in discrediting the belief in a socialist alternative amongst Jewish intellectuals and workers.

In the 1920s, Jews and Arabs in Palestine, inspired by the Russian Revolution, had come together to form the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) and advocate a unified struggle for socialism against both the nascent Jewish bourgeoisie and Arab feudalists. Throughout the Second World War, Jewish and Arab workers fought together against their

common foreign oppressor, leading to the creation of several joint labour organisations. The PCP could have mounted a successful challenge to the Zionists, but the divisive policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its manoeuvring with the imperialist powers prevented its healthy development. The PCP finally broke in two along ethnic lines before the end of the Second World War.

Zionism worked to channel the discouragement and despair produced by the near destruction of European Jewry into its campaign to secure a separate Jewish state, which was accomplished in 1948 through the partition of the British protectorate of Palestine.

The establishment of Israel was viewed with sympathy by millions around the world who were repelled by Nazism's crimes against the Jewish people. It was hailed as a new and progressive entity dedicated to building a democratic and even egalitarian home for the most terribly oppressed people of Europe and the world.

But the Zionist state could never fulfil such promises. Israel was established through a military struggle to wrest control of the land from its Arab inhabitants, beginning with a systematic campaign of terror and intimidation that drove more than three quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs from their homes. The founding principle of the Israeli state was the assertion of the ethnic and religious interests of Jews over those of Arab Muslims. Any criticism of this inherently anti-democratic and repressive standpoint was denounced by Israel's Zionist rulers and their apologists as an expression of anti-Semitism.

In order to justify Israel's creation, Zionist leaders for 40 years denied the very existence of a Palestinian people. Their central slogan was: "A land without people for a people without land." In official proclamations, the land that became Israel was portrayed as largely uninhabited prior to the arrival of Jewish settlers.

From the very day of its inception, therefore, Israel was at war with its Arab neighbours and was organically incapable of developing a genuinely democratic society. There existed no separation between the state and the Jewish religion, and therefore no concept of citizenship that extended equal rights to all. Israel quickly grew into a garrison state, a vehicle through which the US could exert its interests in the Middle East in return for massive financial subsidies, used primarily to build up Israel's military apparatus.

Inevitably, the contradictions that existed between official propaganda and social and political reality had to emerge. The Arab-Israeli war of 1967 was a turning point in Israel's evolution, and its ramifications are still being felt in the events that are unfolding today. Israel's claim that it was the underdog, forced to defend its borders against more powerful neighbours, was decisively exposed by its occupation of lands belonging to Jordan, Syria and Egypt—the West Bank of the Jordan River, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip. Jewish settlements were established in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. The official pretext was that the settlements were a temporary defensive barrier, but the right-wing opposition Likud party demanded their incorporation into Israel—a

position they maintain to this day. The Zionist state was thus openly recast as an aggressively expansionist entity.

The need to cultivate an extreme right-wing Zionist settler population within the Occupied Territories has had a lasting impact on Israeli society and politics. Together with the ultra-orthodox groups encouraged by the propagation of pseudo-biblical justifications for Israeli expansion, they have become the social and political bedrock for the emergence of semi-fascist tendencies within the political and military establishment.

The settlers constitute a militant and vocal faction whose social interests are intimately bound up with Israeli rule of the captured territories and the perpetuation of the country's military machine. These layers have been reinforced by a wave of immigrants first from the US and later Russia, who were attracted to Israel on the basis of the explicitly anti-socialist and chauvinist perspective which it has projected ever more openly since 1967.

Over the past two decades social and political tensions within Israel have grown due to a widening gap between rich and poor, fuelled by rising unemployment and falling wages. To the extent that the majority of people became alienated from official politics, the state increased its reliance on right-wing settlers and extreme nationalist religious zealots. No party can today form a government without their support. For over a decade they have thwarted every attempt to reach a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, even though the Israeli bourgeoisie and Washington came to see such an agreement as essential to the continued survival of Israel.

The Palestinian masses never reconciled themselves to their permanent refugee status. The emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organisation after the 1967 war expressed their strivings for a just solution to their predicament and the demand for their own homeland. The Zionists responded by denouncing the PLO as terrorists and agents of foreign powers, and intransigently refused to recognise the existence of a Palestinian people.

Israel's oft-repeated claim that its military actions were dictated by the necessity to defend its borders against hostile Arab powers was irredeemably exposed by its decisive victory against Egypt, Syria and other Arab powers in October 1973. The outcome of that war left Israel the undisputed military power in the region. Ever since, all of Israel's wars have been targeted directly against the Palestinians.

The central plank of Zionist strategy was blown apart by the *intifada* that erupted in 1987, an embryonic revolutionary movement Israel could not suppress without seeking the aid of the PLO, while promising concessions and ultimately some form of Palestinian homeland.

The revolutionary threat posed by the *intifada* coincided with global economic changes that rendered inviable any notion of preserving by force of arms an economically and politically isolated Israeli state. The Israeli ruling class had long faced punishing economic and social costs associated with the occupation, both in terms of military expenditures and the pariah status Israel had acquired throughout the Arab world and elsewhere. The impasse over the occupied territories had frozen the growth of Arab-Israeli economic ties, considered essential for the development of Israel's economy in an era when corporations had of necessity to carry out the production of commodities across national boundaries and sell their products on the world market.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US set about establishing a new set of relations with formerly pro-Soviet Arab regimes in order to ensure its own hegemony and preserve stability within the oil-rich region. The initial fruits of this policy were realised in the tacit support of most of the Arab regimes for America's war against Iraq in 1991.

The US left Israel in no doubt that unless they realigned themselves with the post-Cold War realities in the Middle East and reached an accommodation with their neighbours, Washington would not continue

indefinitely underwriting their budget. Israel's rulers were thus faced with the necessity of participating in the US-brokered talks to seek a rapprochement with their Arab counterparts, and granting some limited form of recognition of the Palestinians.

However, from Oslo in 1993 to Camp David this year no Israeli government has been either prepared or capable of arriving at a genuine democratic settlement of the Palestinian question. To the extent that any concessions, however limited, have been offered to the Palestinians, such proposals have opened up deep political chasms within the Israeli state and society.

Seven years of negotiations have been repeatedly frustrated by the eruption of right-wing opposition within Israel. Every diplomatic effort has stumbled on the need to reconcile the Palestinian masses with the exigencies and demands of the Zionist regime, and force them to acquiesce in the denial of their own basic democratic rights. The depth of opposition to any significant concessions explains why Israel's negotiating position has largely consisted of confronting Arafat with demands that he assume direct responsibility for the repression of the Palestinian people. In the end, these demands have only served to discredit Arafat amongst broad sections of the Palestinian masses.

The politically dominant right-wing sections of the Zionist elite have consistently demonstrated that they regard any concession to the Palestinians to be tantamount to treason. Their first blow to the Oslo Accord came with the assassination of its signatory, Labour Party Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in November 1995 by a religious extremist. In the elections that followed, the Likud Party under Benjamin Netanyahu came to power by whipping up anti-Arab sentiment and fears amongst Israeli Jews. Netanyahu spent the next three years trying to sabotage any final settlement with the PLO.

The landslide election victory of Ehud Barak in May last year gave expression to a growing sentiment for peace amongst ordinary Israelis. But his government, relying as it did on religious parties and desperate to avoid accusations of a sell-out, was crippled from the day it came to power.

No democratic settlement with the Palestinians is possible without making Jerusalem an open city, allowing all Palestinians to return to their ancestral homes and establishing joint Arab-Jewish sovereignty over the entire holy land. Such a proposal is anathema to Israel. The actual proposals made by Barak evaded all of these critical issues. Hamstrung from the start by his fear of unleashing right wing opposition, he could not even risk bringing the Arab-Israeli parties that command the support of 20 percent of the population into his government as this would have lost him the support of his Orthodox coalition partners. Under the whip of Likud, and with US backing, he demanded that Arafat agree to proposals that would have constituted a death warrant for the PLO.

Leading up to the negotiations at Camp David, Israel's reluctance to make any significant concessions to the Palestinians became hostage to a deliberate wrecking operation by the right-wing extremist elements fostered by Israel's entire history, especially the post-1967 period. Under pressure from these layers, Barak's government fell apart through defections from his own party and as well as defections by right-wing coalition partners. Disillusionment grew amongst those Israelis who had hoped Barak would bring peace.

With the US establishment preoccupied with the presidential election campaign, Likud decided that the time was ripe to scupper any chance of a settlement. Likud leader Ariel Sharon made his provocative visit to Temple Mount under heavy armed guard, and the killing of Palestinians by Israeli forces began.

Barak refused to denounce Sharon's provocation and instead foisted the blame for the spiralling violence on Arafat. Both the Barak government and Likud appear to have calculated that rioting would ensue from Sharon's action, which they could then use as a weapon against Arafat.

They collectively miscalculated the strength of the anger and opposition that ensued, but Barak's response has been to throw in his lot fully with Likud.

The overnight transformation of Barak's public posture from that of peacemaker to warmonger demonstrates that no section of the Israeli political establishment is capable of putting aside the methods of police repression and military violence that have characterised the Zionist state since its inception. Neither does diplomacy brokered by the Western powers offer a means of ending Zionist atrocities. It is not possible to reconcile the existence of states based on ethnic, racial or religious exclusivism with the existence of genuine democracy. Imperialism's efforts to maintain such a state in Israel while appealing for it to grant limited democratic rights to the Palestinians has proved futile.

The fundamentally reactionary character of the nationalist perspective of Zionism has instead found its most finished expression. After almost a decade of the so-called "peace process", Israel is closer to all-out war with the Palestinians than at any time in recent history, and could yet spark a conflagration encompassing the entire Middle East. Israeli society itself is threatened with disintegration and a possible civil war. There are growing signs that Israeli Arabs, who make up one fifth of the population, may be drawn into conflict alongside the Palestinians for the first time.

In Israel, the responsibility for opposing a descent into further bloodshed rests with the workers movement, democratic rights activists and socialist intellectuals. All those who are committed to peace with their Arab neighbours must recognise that this cause is incompatible with support for either the Zionist state apparatus or the nationalist ideology that give birth to it. Whatever illusions these layers may have harboured in the past, the Israeli state has proven that it differs in no fundamental respect from the old Apartheid regime in South Africa.

The choice is a stark one: either hand the political initiative fully to Sharon and his ilk and prepare for a military catastrophe and bloody civil war, or seek to unite Jews and Arabs on a democratic, secular and socialist basis—for a United Socialist States of the Middle East in which all of the region's people can live together in harmony.



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