

The Middle East Conflict

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The problems posed in analyzing the situation in the Middle East from a Marxist point of view derive from the fact that this crisis has its roots deeply imbedded in the long history of this region, and in the fact that it is thoroughly complicated by the aggravation of conflicting interests and claims in the area by the pernicious influence of capitalist imperialism. The matter is made far more difficult by the vast amount of propaganda that daily passes for news on this subject generated by the capitalist media. Here we will attempt to present the barest possible factual background requisite for any understanding of this situation before we begin our analysis.

First, we should point out that the geographical area that we are dealing with here is the heartland of the Arab world, which includes the area encompassed by Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Libya and Saudi Arabia (including Yemen, Oman, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates).

Second, we also point out the fact that what we are discussing here under this very general heading is the Arab-Israeli conflict from the point of view of the interests and outlook of the world proletariat and the proletariat of the area regardless of its ethnic makeup. It should be made abundantly clear at the very outset that the Socialist Labor Party views this entire situation and all of its ramifications solely from the point of view of what is in the best interests of the proletariat in its historical march toward world socialist revolution and that the only identity that we recognize as truly important in this case is that of the class identity of the parties to this conflict.

Historical Background

The Middle East has throughout its long history been the scene of one vicious struggle for control after another because of its strategic

value. Consequently, it has repeatedly changed hands from one conqueror to another throughout history.

The Jewish people have had a nexus with this region since Old Testament times, particularly in the area formerly called Palestine and now called Israel. The last substantial settlement of Jews in this area prior to the turn of this century was destroyed and dispersed by the Roman Empire in 70 A.D. In Jewish history this is known as the Diaspora or dispersion of the Jews. While this dispersion was quite comprehensive, it was not complete and substantial numbers of Jews remained in Palestine after this time and throughout history, albeit making up a small percentage of its total population.

Between the second and the seventh centuries, the area of Palestine was at one time part of the Byzantine Empire and at another subjected to temporary control by local princes. At this time the Arabs were an obscure nomadic people concentrated in the area of the Arabian Peninsula.

The rise of Mohammed and Islam during the early seventh century provided the impetus for one of the most phenomenal expansions by military conquest that any people has ever experienced. The Arabs suddenly burst upon the stage of history and quickly conquered the entire region that we are discussing here, including Palestine.

The Arab Empire, which at one time included the entirety of the Middle East as defined above, all of North Africa and all of Spain, and which reached as far as northern France in the west and central Europe in the east with its outposts, disintegrated into a number of petty and great local powers as quickly as it had arisen. During this period the Arabs ruled over a domain that included a number of ethnic, racial, religious and cultural groups, including the Jews.

Under Islamic law—there being no civil law of any kind—the religious affiliation of individuals affected, among other things, their tax rate. The lowest rate was paid by members of the Islamic community. The highest rate was paid by the non-Islamic conquered peoples. A median rate was paid by converts to Islam (called Malawi). Consequently, contrary to Christian propaganda, the Islamic rulers had little interest in forcing the conversion of the non-Islamic peoples over

which they ruled by conducting a religious persecution of these peoples. Thus, toleration was the norm in the Islamic Empire under both Arab and later Turkish rule. In fact, both of these imperial authorities extended special protective status, called Dhimmis, to certain of their subject minority groups and the Jewish community consistently held this privilege.

Consequently, during periods of vicious religious persecution in Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Jews fled to the Mideast in order to escape this menace. Throughout this period of history they represented a flourishing and powerful commercial interest in the Middle East.

After the decline and final collapse of the Arab Empire, this region was subjected to violent turmoil and conquest by various Turkish tribes and European Christian crusader armies. During the period of brief Christian control of Palestine, the Jews of that area were subjected to a vicious religious persecution that was finally terminated by an Arab reconquest of the region. It was the Arab armies that were greeted by the Jewish communities of Palestine as liberators from European persecution.

It should be made clear here that the factual information given thus far is designed to explode the myth propagated by Zionists that the enmity between Islam and Judaism or between Arab and Jew is of ancient origin. This is obviously not in accord with historical fact.

With the final conquest of this entire area by the Ottoman Turkish Empire in 1517 came a period of relative stability and growth for the area in general and the Jewish community of Palestine in particular. From this point on in history and right on through the 19th century, the question of Palestine must be viewed within the context of the overall development of Arab nationalism and the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East.

European Imperialism and Zionism

The imperialist powers of Europe stood in indecision throughout the 19th century waiting for the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire while the Ottomans held on to the bare thread of tenuous life that their

empire possessed. Within its borders the various ethnic groups of this polyglot feudal monarchy began to stir under the impetus of fast-rising nationalist aspirations. Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, Kurds and others were all influenced to some degree by this nationalism, the greatest social force of the century.

It was at this time that the Zionist movement was ushered upon the stage of history. It was a movement programmatically founded upon the demand that the imperialist powers of Europe support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine (see the Basle Program of 1897) with a view toward receiving in return the support and vassalage of this state. The Zionist program and movement were the brain child of a group of Jewish European intellectuals and professionals led by Theodore Herzl. These founding fathers of Zionism were all bourgeois, assimilationist Jews (i.e., those who had achieved a certain degree of ethnic anonymity in the European community) who recognized a vague Jewish cultural identity. At this time the Jewish population of Palestine did not exceed 8 to 10 percent of the total.

It is interesting to note at this point that Zionism did not immediately settle upon a policy of migration to Palestine, despite later protestations to the contrary. Other possible areas were considered by the Zionists as sites for a Jewish state, including Uganda, Argentina, Cyprus and Syria.

As World War I threatened the total destruction of the Ottoman Empire, the British Zionist Organization entered into negotiations with the British government on support for the Jewish settlement of Palestine after the war. In 1917 Lord Balfour, the British foreign secretary, issued the Balfour Declaration, which was a limited guarantee of British support for this venture.

The end of World War I brought the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the ruthless carving up of Arab territories by the British and French imperialists. It appears that while the British government was assuring the Zionists of support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, they were also guaranteeing certain Arab leaders of support for the creation of an independent Arab state in the Middle East and at the very same time entering into an agreement with France and other

imperialist powers on the division of the spoils in this region once the war was over.

At the conclusion of the war, the entire Middle East became the preserve of the British and French imperialists. And all of this was cloaked with bourgeois legality by the so-called League of Nations through its mandate system. Palestine became a British mandate and, in keeping with the Balfour Declaration, Jewish immigration under the auspices of the Zionist organization's Jewish Agency was expanded.

What occurred at this point was the progressive displacement of one culture and people, the Arabs, by another totally alien to the region, that of European Jewry. There can be no serious argument on this point, and it speaks volumes on the nature of Zionism as a movement.

It also should be noted here that while it is true that the Jewish Agency purchased large parcels of land in Palestine during this period, in perfect compliance with local laws, it did so from absentee Turkish and Arab landlords who had for years merely collected rent from its Palestinian occupants without ever trying to assert real control over them. The significant fact of the matter is not this compliance with the rules of bourgeois legality, but the mass eviction of Arabs from the land by a people who could be considered nothing more than foreign interlopers. And all of this occurred under the watchful eye of a British imperialist overlord.

What followed over the next three decades was the natural product of this phenomenon called Zionism and that was interminable and ever-intensifying warfare.

Two facts that can be added here will conclude this survey.

The first of these is that the Zionist organization pursued a totally ruthless course in its march toward the creation of a Jewish state which very often exposed the Jewish people to more suffering and tragedy than was necessary. An example of this was the pressure exerted upon the Truman administration not to push for the lifting of the immigration restrictions that prevented millions of Jews in displaced persons camps all over Europe from entering the United States, so that these unfortunate people would be forced to choose Palestine as a place of refuge.

The second of these facts is that at the time of the establishment of a Jewish state in May 1948, the Jewish population of Palestine did not exceed 35 percent of the total.

The Nature of Zionism

The Zionist movement cannot be viewed as a valid nationalist movement in any sense of that term. It was from its inception an inverted distortion of the nationalist ideal devoid of any true nationalist content in that a) it did not arise from the indigenous Jewish population of Palestine; b) it was the contrivance of a small group of foreign intellectuals for the imposition of a Jewish settlement upon Palestine and its Arab inhabitants under the auspices of an imperialist power; and c) as such, it became a medium of imperialist domination in that area of the world.

Consequently, the Zionist movement, while it has held itself out to the Jewish people as the embodiment of a solution to anti-Semitic persecution, has in reality been the yoke that has bound the Jewish proletariat to the Jewish state and its capitalist rulers. It has blinded Jewish workers to their own class identity and interests, aggravated the division between Jewish and Arab labor in Israel and reduced the Jewish state to a client and tool of imperialism.

Arab Self-Determination

There can be no question that the division of the Arab Mideast into artificial, semifeudal dependencies by world imperialism following World War I and thereafter, and the facilitation of a Zionist occupation of Palestine by British imperialism, constitute some of the greatest crimes of the capitalist system and its imperialist corollary in this century. The conquest of Palestine by the Zionist movement, the creation of the Jewish state and the resulting expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs, causing a second Diaspora, was the direct result of this imperialist intervention in this area of the world.

As Marxian Socialists, we cannot ignore the legitimate claims of the Palestinian Arabs, both within and without Israel, to a recognition of their rights within its territory. However, as will be made clear below, we cannot support any nationalist demand made within the context of a

severely limited program for the establishment of a bourgeois democratic secular state. With this proviso in mind, the Socialist Labor Party supports the right of the Palestinian people driven from their homeland to repatriation.

The Jewish Nation

Despite the perverted nature of Zionism and its lack of validity as a true nationalist movement, there can be no argument with the observation that a Jewish nation now actually exists in Israel. The past three decades have witnessed the development of a definitive national identity among the Jews of Israel.

There also can be no argument with the observation that the vast majority of this Jewish population, as well as the Arab community, is of the working class. Consequently, we cannot accept any alleged solution to the crisis situation in this area that calls for the expulsion of the Jewish people from the region. To do this would be tantamount to taking up a position against an element of the working class.

Basis for Working-Class Unity

The development of political organizations in Israel that are opposed to Zionism and that are made up of both Jews and Arabs, the development of Jewish working-class resistance to capitalist exploitation in the form of strikes and protests, and the development of a peace movement within Israel in recent years, as well as the existence of Arab resistance to Zionism, all indicate a basis for unity among Jews and Arabs along working-class lines against capitalism, the Zionist state and its imperialist supporter, the United States. Both Jewish and Arab workers have in common their working-class status and as such their common class enemies are the Israeli ruling class, its government and U.S. imperialism. In the light of this common class interest all other differences—religious, racial or ethnic—are inconsequential.

Consequently, the Socialist Labor Party views as a progressive step for the proletariat of Israel the formation of a working-class movement that transcends ethnic lines of division among Jews and Arabs and that is based upon a program of opposition to Zionism, the Zionist state, capitalism and imperialism. Such a movement, however, must have as

its positive objective the creation of a wider unity in the Middle East along the same class lines and the creation of a socialist society (i.e., one wherein the means of production are under the democratic control and management of the proletariat).

Palestine Liberation Organization

The Palestine Liberation Organization at the present time is the only organized voice for the Palestinian Arab. It is basically a united front organization of several different groups, and its program calls for the establishment of a bourgeois democratic secular state.

In effect, as far as the Arab working class is concerned, this is no program at all, because it fails to address itself to the root of this problem. It does not pose a working-class perspective upon or resolution to this situation. It adheres to a narrow nationalism that can lead only to the creation of a bourgeois rump state that will be the client of one or another of the imperialist powers. This is so because the Arab bourgeoisie has been stunted in its development by the imperialist context in which it has evolved and is simply too weak to be an independent force in this region.

In addition to this programmatic weakness, the PLO is also seriously limited by its dependence for its very existence upon the support of reactionary feudal monarchies like that of Saudi Arabia and backward military dictatorships like that of Libya. These regimes represent reactionary forces that are little more independent of imperialism than is the Zionist state and that have consistently opposed the interests of the Arab masses throughout the Mideast at every turn.

In order for any solution to be even attempted within the Israeli context what is required, in addition to working-class unity and action within Israel, is a mass movement of Arab workers in the Arab nations of the Mideast along class lines in struggle against their own feudal or semifeudal militaristic states and their own ruling classes.

It is understood by the Socialist Labor Party, however, that the ultimate resolution of this crisis situation will be found in a socialist revolution in the developed imperialist nations, which will destroy the capitalist source of imperialism once and for all time.

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