

Moshé Machover review: The intersemitic crisis

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Moshé Machover

"The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man" - Zionist observers' cable to Vienna, 1897, on the suitability of Palestine as the site for a revived Jewish state.

"No man has the right to set bounds to the march of a nation" - Charles Stewart Parnell

The veteran Israeli socialist, Moshé Machover, has just brought out a wonderful collection of writings, chiefly his own, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is no exaggeration to say that this book is the best possible introduction to the topic for English-speaking readers. Its inestimable virtue is that it affords a historical overview of the whole Zionist enterprise, without which it is impossible to situate the struggle in any meaningful sense, much less reach a conclusion as to how it might successfully be resolved. Machover does both these things, and the result is a volume which Anglophone socialists *must read*.

Roots of Zionism

Zionism originated as a response to discrimination against Jews operative in the declining phases of European feudalism and the rise of imperialist nationalism in the

final quarter of the 19th century. Rejecting assimilation into non-Jewish societies, Zionists began to agitate for the creation of a separate Jewish state. Benjamin Ze'ev (Theodor) Herzl (1860-1904) is generally regarded as the principal proponent of that idea. In June 1895 Herzl wrote in his diary (reports Moshé Machover) as follows:

The private lands in the territories granted us we must gradually take out of the hands of the owners. The poorer among the population we try to transfer quietly outside our borders by providing them with work in the transit countries, but in our country we deny them all work. Those with property will join us. The transfer of land and the displacement of the poor must be done gently and carefully. Let the landowners believe they are exploiting us by getting overvalued prices. But no lands shall be sold back to their owners (p87).

Machover goes on to quote from Herzl's book *The Jewish state* (1896) to the effect that "for Europe we shall serve there [in Palestine] as part of the rampart against Asia, and function as the vanguard of civilisation [sic] against the barbarians. As a neutral state we shall keep our ties with all the European nations, who will guarantee our existence there" (p184).

John Rose has observed that, "while Herzl was not the first person ... to formulate the 'Zionist solution' to anti-Semitism, he was the first to link it deliberately to European imperialism, of which he was a great admirer, as the only means of withdrawing the Jews from Europe."¹

Thus the Zionist project, whilst recognising that "another man" was married to "Eretz Yisrael", nonetheless determined to wrest the same from that man - *just because* it was "Eretz Yisrael": ie, rightfully the possession of Jews, not Arabs.

Moshé Machover emphasises this point:

The Zionist state was never meant to belong to its inhabitants, whoever they may be. Zionism did not base its claim over Palestine on the right of self-determination - and it could hardly do so, because during most of the period when it was colonising the country the Arabs were the majority. Its claim is based on the Divine Right of the whole of the Jewish people over the Promised Land to which they should eventually immigrate. This, from the Zionist standpoint, is necessary to solve the Jewish problem ...

As for the Arabs, they may at best be tolerated, and even then only in small numbers. Otherwise, Zionists are terrified by the Arabs' relatively high rate of natural population growth ...

To justify the state of Israel in its present (Zionist) form in terms of self-determination is a cynical mockery. The only context in which self-determination for the Hebrew-

speaking nation makes any sense is that of a socialist revolutionary Mashreq [east] - which presupposes the overthrow of Zionism, as well as that of Arab reaction (p183).

If we look up the biblical passage on which all this is based we read: “Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates” (Genesis xv, 20).

And there you have it. A Palestinian activist, Ghada Karmi, has commented appositely:

“The history of mankind is littered with the movement of peoples and tribes from place to place, with changing patterns of habitation and repeated migrations. No-one, other than the Zionists and their supporters, suggests that reversing this history would be either workable or desirable.”²

Imperialist designs

The criminal thieving classes represented by the governments of Great Britain, France and Italy cast their greedy eyes on the Turkish empire, which was allied with the Central European powers in World War I. The initial expression of this was the so-called Sykes-Picot agreement of 1915-16, negotiated by French diplomat François-Georges Picot and his UK opposite number, Sir Mark Sykes.

The Sykes-Picot agreement ... arranged that the Fertile Crescent should be divided into four areas - two to be directly administered by France and Britain respectively, while the other two should be administered by Arab governments under the guidance and protection of France and Britain respectively. France's direct share was to be the Syrian coastlands and Cilicia, while her protectorate was to consist of the hinterland of Syria, including the *vilayet* [province] of Mosul.³

British troops in fact occupied the Mosul *vilayet* in 1919, and Lloyd George persuaded the French prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, to give up the French claim to this oil-rich area in exchange for acquiring the German 25% share in the Turkish Petroleum Co, which became the Iraq Petroleum Co, with the promise of a quarter share for France in the output.⁴

The French occupied Syria, detaching the Lebanon from it and ruling that as a separate country - which, basically, is the reason why it is still independent. The British occupied Iraq and Palestine, installing their protégés as rulers of Iraq. In 1922 the League of Nations awarded the UK a mandate to govern Palestine and adjoining territory: this latter area subsequently emerged as the separate British-protected emirate of Transjordan (whence today's Jordan). Italy acquired only the Dodecanese islands off the coast of Anatolia, which she ruled from 1912 to 1945.

A not insignificant sub-plot in all this was the British plan to facilitate Jewish colonisation in Palestine. Foreign secretary Arthur Balfour famously declared that the British government was ready to promote the creation of a “Jewish national home” in Palestine. The thinking behind this move was disclosed by Sir Ronald Storrs, a British diplomat who later became governor of Jerusalem, when he welcomed the Zionist project as leading to the emergence of “a little loyal Jewish Ulster” among the Arabs.⁵ Balfour added: “In Palestine we do not propose to even go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants.”⁶

No account of the Zionist colonisation of Palestine could ignore the question of relations between Zionism and German fascism, and Machover duly discusses this. His treatment of it is by no means exhaustive, but nevertheless he states that all Zionist efforts gave priority to strengthening the colony in Palestine. Hence in 1935 the Jewish Agency set up a special commission to examine the plight of German Jews, but “it was the main job of this commission to organise the famous ‘transfer’ deal, the trade contract between the Zionist movement and the Hitler government, according to which the money and property of German Jews were transferred to Palestine in the form of German goods, thus breaking an anti-Nazi economic boycott organised by anti-fascist forces” (p194).

As for emigration from Germany, the Zionists made it clear that their sole interest was in Jewish emigration *to Palestine*, not anywhere else.

With the end of World War II the British empire was in retreat globally, and its hold on Palestine was coming under pressure. A UN plan was therefore proposed, which awarded 55% of Palestine to a Jewish state, despite the fact that Jews constituted only 30% of the population. The great powers supported this initiative, but no Arab state voted in favour. The upshot was a short war, which led to the creation of the state of Israel and the expulsion from their homes of large numbers of Palestinian Arabs.⁷ The Palestinian exodus basically took place because the Zionist leadership around David Ben-Gurion sensed that there was a good chance of achieving an ethnically ‘pure’ Jewish state. Hence, although no formal order was given, “Local military commanders ... were made aware of the general design, and were relied upon to do their bit in implementing it. For the most part (with few exceptions) they were willing to do what was expected of them. The majority of Palestinians in areas under Israeli control were terrorised into flight, and in many areas physically driven across the lines” (p236).

Machover does not mention this in his book, but the Trotskyist Fourth International opposed the establishment of the state of Israel on the grounds that it undermined the joint struggle of Arab and Jewish workers against capitalism and imperialism.⁸

The solution

Some Jewish Labour supporters emphasise the UN resolution, passed by the UN general assembly in the aftermath of the Six-Day War in 1967, which called for peace between the combatants on the basis of a withdrawal by Israel back to the territories it had

occupied prior to the war (the Israelis overran the West Bank and Gaza). But, as Moshé Machover notes, the resolution misses the essential point: it is not the borders of the state of Israel which are the fundamental problem, but the integration of Jewish settlers into the Middle East on a basis acceptable to majority Arab opinion (pp64-65).

The chief obstacle to a solution of the conflict is precisely Zionism. Hence our immediate demands must include an end to Israeli military occupation and threats against the West Bank and Gaza, plus, as and where appropriate, measures in support of an independent Palestinian state: "World public opinion, civil society everywhere, must be mobilised in defence of the Palestinian people, by subjecting Israel to boycotts, disinvestments and sanctions. Socialists have a special role in mobilising the workers' movements to lead this campaign" (p296).

As for the long-term solution, what is vitally necessary is to recognise that the conflict is not resolvable within the confines of the Palestinian "box" - that is to say, the borders of the 1923-48 mandated territory. Moshé describes the requisite approach eloquently and succinctly as follows:

the numerical, political and technical relations of forces are such that the Palestinian people on its own, even if fully mobilised, are highly unlikely to be able to achieve the total overthrow of Zionism. Nor are the Arab states, under their present regimes, able to do so.

The overthrow of Zionism will become possible only through a deep social and political transformation of the Arab world, or at the very least the Mashreq, which will not only unite it, but also infuse it with new revolutionary social energies.

Moreover, because of the partnership between Zionism and western, particularly American, imperialism, and because of the political, financial and military protection that the former receives from the latter, the overthrow of Zionism is inseparable from the uprooting of imperialist domination over the Arab world.

Also this points to the conclusion that an ultimate thorough solution of the Palestinian problem can be achieved only as part of a socialist revolution throughout the entire region, leading in particular to the overthrow of Zionism. Socialists who fail to make this conclusion clear, and who support various bourgeois nationalist formulas that obscure it, are guilty of gross dereliction of duty and are indeed acting in a self-defeating way.

A socialist programme must therefore be along the following lines. A united, socialist Arab world - or at least, in the first instance, Arab east - with a federal structure, reflecting the two-tier structure of the Arab nation. The Palestinian problem would be solved within this union by incorporating in it a part of Palestine as one or more autonomous Palestinian Arab cantons. The remaining part of Palestine will also be incorporated in the union, as one or more autonomous Hebrew national cantons. Thus the whole of Palestine's territory is to be included in the union, but as two or more cantons rather than as one country. The boundaries between the Palestinian Arab and

Hebrew cantons are to be determined not on the basis of the present or past borders of Israel, but according to economic, geographical and demographic criteria, a principal criterion being which national group - Palestinian Arab or Hebrew - is the majority of the population in a given district.

Naturally, the socialist union is to be formed in a democratic way, by voluntary accession rather than by coercion (pp51-52).

Lack of space prevents consideration here of the many further fascinating and illuminating comments by Moshé Machover in the book on various other aspects of the situation, historical and contemporary. Readers are urged to examine his conclusions in detail. But the main message is clear: socialism and Zionism are incompatible; nations must be held within bounds, otherwise they harm other nations.

The verdict on the Zionist project must be along the lines of the prophet, Isaiah, in his parable of the vineyard, where he says: "The vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgement, but, behold, a scab; for righteousness, but, behold, a cry" (Isaiah v, 7).

Notes

1. J Rose *Israel: the hijack state* London 1986, p29.
2. G Karmi *Married to another man* London 2007, pp72-73.
3. G Kirk *A short history of the Middle East* London 1964, p162.
4. *Ibid.*
5. R Storrs *Orientations* London 1943, p345 (quoted by Machover on pp184-85).
6. See FO 371/4183/2117/132187, quoted by J Rose *Israel: the hijack state* London 1986, p32.
7. See S Flapan *The birth of Israel: myths and realities* London 1987; and I Pappé *The ethnic cleansing of Palestine* London 2006.
8. See 'Against the stream' *Fourth International* (organ of the US Socialist Workers Party, May 1948); reprinted in *Workers Action* March-April 2002.