

Abominable Warmongering on the Left

By Moshé Machover

In the cacophonous chorus of warmongers – among shrieks of hawks, howls of jackals and foul laughter of hyenas – the attentive ear discerns a distinctive discordant sound coming from the far left: it is the hoot of the AWL. The misleader of that group, Sean Matgamna, has published an article ('What if Israel bombs Iran?', *Solidarity and Workers' Liberty* vol. 3 No 136, July 2008) in which he argues that while an attack on Iran 'will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond', it would be wrong to object to it if it is undertaken by Israel.

He is not actually *advocating* or *endorsing* such an attack; oh no! Nor does he 'take political responsibility for it' – as if it would occur to anyone to hold SM or his little flock responsible for starting a major Middle-Eastern conflagration. No, no, no! He only refuses to say anything against Israeli aggression. Go ahead, Israel, bomb away, feel free to cause 'large-scale Iranian civilian "collateral" casualties'! SM will look the other way.

Here is why SM thinks 'that there is good reason for Israel to make a precipitate strike at Iranian nuclear capacity':

'Yet the plain fact is that nuclear bombs in the hands of a regime which openly declares its desire to destroy Israel are not something Israel will peacefully tolerate. They will act to stop it while it can still be stopped without the risk of a nuclear strike against Israel.

'Unless work on an Iranian nuclear bomb has definitively ended Israel will bomb Iran, with or without the agreement of the USA and NATO.'

This statement of alleged 'plain fact' contains two assertions which, far from being factual, are sheer flights of fantasy.

First, SM repeats the fabrication of the warmongering propagandists that the Iranian regime 'openly declares its desire to destroy Israel'. This is simply untrue: no such declaration is on record. Indeed, SM knows very well that it is a lie, because the only Iranian 'declaration' he himself dredges up is President Ahmedinejad's wishful statement:

'Thanks to people's wishes and God's will, the trend for the existence of the Zionist regime is [going]

downwards and this is what God has promised and what all nations want. Just as the Soviet Union was wiped out and today does not exist, so will the Zionist regime soon be wiped out.'

There is nothing here about an Iranian 'desire to destroy Israel'; nor even a wish to see that country destroyed by others. What is plainly expressed here is a wish for the disappearance of the Zionist *regime*. (On another occasion Ahmedinejad spoke about the 'regime that is occupying the Holy City [of Jerusalem]'.) This is made abundantly clear by the explicit analogy with the demise of the Soviet Union. Even SM must know the difference between destruction of a country and demise of a regime. And as even he must be aware, the Soviet Union was not destroyed as a *country*; rather, the Soviet *regime* imploded and collapsed under its internal contradictions.

Other warmongers have mistranslated Ahmedinejad's statements and misquoted him as saying that he advocates 'wiping Israel off the map'. SM chooses a different tack, of warmongering lite: he simply endorses a blatant inflammatory misinterpretation of the Iranian president's words, so as to justify his own failure to condemn Israeli aggression.

Let me make it clear: the reactionary theocracy of Iran is detestable. But this does not give anyone license to distort what its leaders actually say – especially when the distortion is designed to excuse an aggressive war.

The second fanciful idea contained in SM's 'plain fact' is that Israel might 'bomb Iran, with or without the agreement of the USA and NATO.'

Now, this is very strange indeed. It is universally acknowledged by Israeli politicians and commentators – both those who support an attack on Iran and those who oppose it – that Israel cannot possibly take such a step without an American 'green light'. This is also quite rightly taken for granted by all serious commentators outside Israel.¹

¹ Having written this paragraph, I took a coffee break and picked up today's (4 August 2008) *Guardian*. I found in it an article by the bourgeois journalist Max Hastings, entitled 'Negotiating with Iran is maddening, but bombing would be a catastrophe', in which he observes: 'Jerusalem and Washington are talking seriously about a possible Israeli strike, for which American collusion would be indispensable'. He goes on to observe that Israel would need not only the consent of the present lame-duck US president, but also that of his likely successor: 'Even if Obama does not yet sit in the White House, no Jerusalem government could lightly defy America's likely next president on an issue of such gravity.'

Of course, as SM rightly remarks, 'Israel is no state's puppet'. Only a simpleton would claim this. In fact, it is a junior partner, regional sub-contractor and the most intimate ally of US imperialism. And precisely because of this it cannot undertake a major military move without US approval.

Indeed, of all Israel's many wars of colonial aggression, the only one in which it did not seek or get an American green light was the infamous Suez War of 1956. But in that case Israel conspired with Britain and France, the latter being at that time its main imperialist ally and senior partner.

While the Suez aggression was exceptional in this one sense, it is an instructive model in another sense: the scenario in which an initial Israeli attack serves as a prearranged pretext for the intervention of its imperialist senior partner(s). If Israel will indeed attack Iran, we shall witness a broadly similar scenario.

So why does SM go out of his way to cast doubt on what is so obvious to every person familiar with the facts? Is it ignorance, or is there another reason?

I think there is another reason: it is his unique position *on the radical left* as cheerleader for Zionism and the Israeli settler state. Unlike bourgeois warmongers, he has a need to deny the umbilical ties of Zionism and Israel to imperialism; he does not wish to be seen winking indulgently at an imperialist intrigue. So he prefers to appear ignorant.

Sean Matgamna's Straw Men

Instead of straightforwardly producing further arguments for his refusal-in-advance to condemn a future Israeli attack on Iran, SM has hit on a diabolically clever and startlingly original stratagem – he erects a set of straw men: counter-arguments as to why an Israeli attack supposedly *ought* to be condemned. As these arguments are all patently absurd, SM wins the debate with his straw alter ego by easy *reductio*: there is no need for him to contest the counter-arguments, as they are self-refuting. He evidently expects his readers not to notice that this glorious victory is achieved by a sleight of hand: the arguments he sets up against Israeli aggression are all *deliberately* dodgy.

Let us have a look at these counter-arguments, which are set up as a series of rhetorical questions.

'In the name of what alternative,' asks SM rhetorically, 'should we condemn Israel [if it bombs Iran]?'

- 'The inalienable right of every state to have nuclear weapons – and here a state whose clerical fascist rulers might see a nuclear armageddon, involving a retaliatory Israeli nuclear strike against Iran in the way a God-crazed suicide bomber sees blowing himself to pieces?'

Apparently SM believes that Israel, a non-expansionist and non-aggressive state, is not sufficiently God-crazed to forfeit its inalienable right to monopoly of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

Actually, the historical record shows that Israel has consistently acted in a much more ruthlessly aggressive and destructive way than Iran. The image of Iran's rulers as God-crazed fanatics, who would not mind incinerating their own country for the satisfaction of destroying Israel, is a pure invention of Western and Israeli warmongering propaganda, here recycled by SM. The truth is that these clerical leaders are clever, cautious, calculating bastards. Sadly, Western and Western-inspired adventurist aggression has repeatedly played into their hands.

And, just by the way, let me note that so far there is no evidence that Iran is about to develop nuclear weapons. We don't need to trust in the Iranian rulers' assurances that they are not planning to produce nuclear bombs; but neither should we believe the Western and Israeli warmongers' claim that Iran is engaged in such a project.

SM's next rhetorical question is:

- '[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel has nuclear weapons, and therefore the Arab and Islamic states should have them too?'

Here again SM implies that Israel has some God-given right to monopoly of nuclear weapons. Moreover, he maligns the leftist opponents of aggression by attributing to them the absurd idea that Arab and Islamic states 'should' possess nuclear weapons because Israel does. He slyly avoids turning the argument around: surely, no country should have nuclear weapons. And the only basis on which we can justly demand that Iran be forbidden to have them is to make the entire region free of nuclear weapons. This is the demand we must raise. Of course, Iran should not have nuclear weapons; but neither should Israel. And certainly we must condemn Israeli aggression designed to preserve its nuclear monopoly.

Next:

- '[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because we are unconditional pacifists? We think military action is never justified, and therefore Israel has no right to attack Iran, not even to stop it

acquiring the nuclear means to mount the ultimate suicide bomb attack on Israel?’

This is a deliberately silly question. But again we must turn it around. Iran has no nuclear weapons; and it has never threatened to attack Israel by nuclear or conventional means. On the other hand, Israel has a large nuclear arsenal, and it is known to have seriously considered using it against its Arab neighbours in 1967² and 1973³ and – as has been widely reported in the press – recently against Iran. So should we condone a preemptive bombing attack on Israel’s Dimona nuclear installation?⁴

And another silly rhetorical question:

- ‘[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because we would prefer to live in a world where such choices would not be posed, where relations between states and peoples are governed by reason, and strictly peaceful means?’

Well, yes, of course we would prefer to live in a world where such choices would not be posed. But so long as we live in today’s world, where they are posed, we should make the *right* choice: oppose imperialist attacks – whether direct or by proxy – even when mounted against a detestable regime. Because today US imperialism is humanity’s worst enemy, and its global hegemony poses the greatest danger to humanity’s future.

And yet another one:

- ‘[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because for choice we would live in a world where the workers of Israel, Iran, Iraq were united in opposition to all their rulers, and strong enough to get rid of them and bring to the region an era of socialist and democratic peace and understanding?’

Ditto; see above. Now he slightly changes tack; his next rhetorical question is:

- ‘[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel would in attacking Iran be only an American imperialist tool, against a mere regional power; and that cancels out the genuine self-defence

² ‘How Israel’s nuclear secret just slipped out’, *The Age*, July 23, 2005: <http://tinyurl.com/684co4>

³ Warner D. Farr, LTC, U.S. Army, *The Third Temple’s Holy of Holies: Israel’s Nuclear Weapons*, The Counterproliferation Papers, Future Warfare Series No. 2, USAF Counterproliferation Center, Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, September 1999: <http://tinyurl.com/25jppw>

⁴ For a fascinating virtual 3D tour of this installation, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf39qkvwOhU>

element in pre-emptive Israeli military action against Iranian nuclear weapons?'

As I have pointed out, the idea that Israel is 'only an American imperialist tool' is a red herring. On the contrary, the fact that Israel will *not* be acting as a mere American imperialist tool makes it even worse, and is *all the more reason* for condemning and opposing its aggression. Because in addition to acting for its imperialist sponsor, Israel will at the same time be acting to defend its own regional hegemony, nuclear monopoly and freedom to oppress the Palestinian people and colonize their lands.

In this connection let me again recall the Suez War of 1956. It would have been bad enough if Israel had acted as a mere tool of French and British imperialism. But it was actually worse than that: Israel had its own special agenda of annexation and expansion. I am old enough to remember hearing Ben-Gurion's chilling message to the Israeli forces in Sharm al-Sheikh, at the tip of occupied Sinai (6 November 1956), in which he proclaimed the creation of the new and much expanded Third Kingdom of Israel. (He was obviously oblivious to the sinister Second-World-War connotation of this term.) Needless to say, on that occasion too the Israeli pretext was 'self-defence'. Israel's 1956 attempt at expansion was short lived – only because the US, which had not been consulted and had not given the tripartite aggression a green light, compelled the three unruly conspirators to withdraw, just to show them who is boss.

We have a few more clever rhetorical questions to get through. Here is the next one:

- '[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel has no right to exist anyway, and therefore no right to defend itself? (This will in fact be the underlying attitude of most of the kitsch left.)'

Dear SM, please pull the other one. As we have just seen, the pretext of 'self-defence' has a very long white beard. I have already pointed out that what Israel would be 'defending' are its indefensible privileges and interests as colonial settler state and imperialist sub-contractor.

One more thing. I suppose I must belong to what SM so cutely calls 'the kitsch left', because I do think that Israel has no right to exist *as presently constituted or in anything like its present form*: a colonial expansionist ethnocratic-racist settler state, a junior partner of imperialism, to which it is structurally and

inseparably allied. And I also think that those who advocate that so-called 'right' are fake leftists.

The reader may be losing patience with SM's ever-so-clever rhetorical questions. Please bear with me: there are just three left. Here is the next one:

- '[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because the Iranian government, Islamic clerical fascist though it is, is an "anti-imperialist" power and must be unconditionally supported against the US, NATO, Israel?'

This is a transparent pretext. SM himself knows very well that opposition to US/Israeli aggression against Iran in no way implies 'unconditional support' for the Iranian regime. In fact, he himself has told us at the very beginning of his article that '[a]n attack would strengthen the Iranian regime and license a smash-down on its critics, including working class critics, inside Iran.' Quite right! But since an attack on Iran is going to strengthen the Iranian regime, this is all the more reason why leftist opponents of that regime ought resolutely to condemn such an attack.

Incidentally, this rhetorical gem reveals what really goes on in SM's mind. As the reader may have noticed, in all SM's previous excuses for an attack on Iran he assumed explicitly or implicitly that the attacker would be Israel, acting in 'self-defence'. But this latest rhetorical question provides an argument for not opposing an attack by the US or NATO. Inadvertently, SM has given us an illustration of the fact that you cannot consistently be soft on the Israeli state without being also soft on its imperialist sponsor and close senior partner.

Let me also note in passing that SM is doing here what no serious Marxist should do: for the second time in this article he is using 'fascist' as a mere invective rather than as a precise political term. He should know better.

SM's penultimate pretext is a real beauty:

- '[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel refuses to dismantle the Jewish national state peacefully and agree to an Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have religious but not Israeli national rights, and therefore socialists, "anti-racists", and anti-imperialists must be on the side of those who would conquer and destroy it, even, in this case, with nuclear weapons?'

The oh, so subtle rhetorical legerdemain here is to smuggle past the reader a false alternative: *either* you accept Israel as 'the Jewish national state' *or else* you must accept an 'Arab Palestinian state in which Jews

would have religious but not Israeli national rights'. SM implies that there is no other choice. And, moreover, he threatens his reader: if you reject the former, 'the Jewish national state', then ('and therefore...') you must resign yourself to Israel's destruction 'even with nuclear weapons'.

I have already dealt with the hogwash of the threat of nuclear destruction of Israel. It is the old whine about 'poor little Samson'. In fact it is Israel which is the threatening regional nuclear superpower. The threat that it faces is not destruction, but the possible loss of its regional hegemony.

But let us unpack this 'national Jewish state', which is what SM wants us to accept.

According to Zionist doctrine – which is the official ruling ideology of Israel – Israel is not the state of its actual inhabitants, irrespective of ethnicity. Rather, it is supposed to be the homeland of all Jews wherever they are. For, according to this ideology, all the Jews around the world constitute a single nation. The true homeland of every Jew is not the country in which s/he may have been born and in which his or her family may have resided for generations. The homeland of this alleged nation is the Biblical Land of Israel, over which it has an ancient inalienable – indeed God-given – national right. Non-Jews living in the Jewish homeland are mere foreign interlopers. Past, present and future Zionist colonization is justified as 'return to the homeland' – a right possessed by Jews but denied to those foreign interlopers, the Palestinian refugees, who have been legitimately evicted from the Jewish homeland.

Socialists must surely reject this supremacist ethnocentric-racist colonizing ideology. Israel as a 'national Jewish state' – in the actual sense, which I have just explicated – is unacceptable.

But the alternative to this is not an 'Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have religious but not Israeli national rights' as some bourgeois Palestinian Arab nationalists have proposed. Why should socialists confine themselves to the false choice offered to us by SM: between Zionism and bourgeois Palestinian nationalism? Rather, the alternative supported by true socialists is a settlement based on equal rights: not only equal *individual* rights for all, but also equal *national* rights for the two actual national groups of Palestine/Israel. Who are these two groups? First, the indigenous people, the Palestinian Arabs, including the refugees ethnically cleansed by Zionist colonization, who surely must have the right to return to their homeland. Second, the Hebrew-speaking settler nation that has come into

existence in that country. (They are often referred to as 'Israeli Jews'; but this real national group must be distinguished from the alleged worldwide Jewish 'nation'.)

No other kind of settlement is acceptable to socialists. But this clearly means rejection of the 'national Jewish state' in the present Zionist sense; and indeed it requires the overthrow of Zionism.

We are coming to SM's final rhetorical question:

- '[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because we don't deal in vulgar practical choices but in pure historical essences such as "anti-imperialism"?'

It seems that SM has run out of pretexts, because here he is clearly repeating himself. So I can pass on this last one.

In conclusion, let me make an observation. From its very beginning, the Zionist project of colonization was based on a Faustian deal with whatever imperialist power was dominant in the Middle East. The Israeli settler state – which is both the product of that colonizing project and an instrument for its ongoing metastatic expansion – is structurally allied to imperialist domination of the region – not as a mere tool, but as a regional colonial power with a malignant agenda of its own.⁵

For this reason, let me repeat, you cannot consistently be soft on the Israeli state without being also soft on its imperialist sponsor and close senior partner. Indeed, we have seen that SM himself, in at least one of his fake rhetorical questions, inadvertently provides an argument for acquiescing not only in an Israeli attack on Iran, but also in one by the US and NATO.

Those on the left who persist in supporting Zionism and its settler state end up as shamelessly open outright social-imperialists.

Comrades of AWL should wake up to the peril of the slippery slope down which SM is misleading them.

⁵ For detailed analysis of Zionism, see my article 'Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict and Resolution', downloadable from <http://www.iran-bulletin.org/palestineisrael.htm>