

Zionism: Propaganda and Reality

by Moshé Machover

In the 24 July issue of *Solidarity*, organ of the AWL, Sean Matgamna published an article 'What if Israel bombs Iran?' in which he argued against an outright condemnation of Israel in case it launches an attack on Iran. I responded with a brief polemic against him in the 28 August issue of *Weekly Worker*: 'Abominable Warmongering Left'. SM has now come back in *Solidarity* of 11 September with a tediously lengthy response, written as a personal letter to me: 'Israel, Iran, and socialism'.

I shall not follow SM in using the form of a personal letter: I do not believe in personalizing political polemics. Nor do I intend writing a long reply: that would tax the reader's patience, and in any case is quite unnecessary. Instead of refuting each and every allegation that SM makes in his 'letter', I refer the reader to his original article and to my 28 August reply to it. The reader will find that SM's allegations and excuses are far-fetched or self-refuting. Here is just one example of many.

Matgamna's mild 'objection'

In his 'letter' he protests:

'I did and do "object" to [an Israeli attack on Iran], and said so a number of times in the short article!'

This seems clear enough. But then it transpires that his 'objection' is not really that much of an objection:

'My language expressed my determination not to join in with, or peacefully to tolerate, the outright condemnation of Israel that will most likely follow an Israeli attack, condemnation rooted in the "demon-Zionism" prejudice of the kitsch-left and in the view that Israel has no right to defend itself...

'I will not, in response to an Israeli strike at Iranian nuclear installations, adopt the viewpoint that there is something so incomprehensible in such a strike that Israel as such must be condemned outright.'

So he will 'object', but will not 'condemn outright'. Weasel words. I suppose his 'objection' will take the

form of a gentle wistful shaking of his head.

In order to explain away this 'objection' that is short of 'outright condemnation', he now tells us:

'I bracketed the possible "strike" I was discussing with the September 2007 Israeli attack on nuclear facilities in Syria, and the June 1981 on an Iraqi nuclear installation; there is therefore no reasonable ground for you or anyone else not understanding what sort of attack I was talking about.'

No reasonable ground? The 1981 Israeli bombing of Osirak and the 2007 bombing of the Syrian 'facilities'¹, were directed against single vulnerable and isolated targets, and the countries attacked were not in a position to retaliate. None of this is true of the intended attack on Iran: its nuclear installations – so far consistent with non-military use – are widely dispersed and dug deep underground, probably inaccessible to conventional (non-nuclear) bombs.² And Iran is well capable of massive retaliation, which means that the bombing will only be the start of a prolonged bloody conflict.

In fact, SM knows this very well, because at the very opening of his original article he told us exactly about what sort of attack he was talking:

'An attack on Iran will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond, as supporters of Iran resort to suicide bombings in retaliation. There might well be large scale Iranian civilian "collateral" casualties. An attack would strengthen the Iranian regime and license a smash down on its critics, including working class critics, inside Iran. It would throw Iraq back into the worst chaos.'

So we have every reason to conclude, despite SM's protestations, that it is this kind of attack for which he refuses to condemn Israel outright.

And so it goes. SM's ramblings are full of such inconsistencies and absurdities. It would take far too long and would be far too boring to list them here. I leave it to the reader to discover other gems of this sort, if s/he feels so inclined.

¹ These 'facilities' was in fact an unfinished and unused building, which may possibly have been originally intended for processing nuclear material, but was later abandoned – which explains why it was undefended and unguarded.

² See 'Excusing catastrophe', *Weekly Worker*, 4 September 2008.

I prefer to concentrate here on the core issue: SM's appalling apologetic position on Zionism.

The dream of 'demon-Zionism'

The fundamental fallacy in SM's lengthy 'letter' is his failure to come to grips with the nature of Zionism. In the whole of that tedious tract, the word 'Zionism' always appears in scare quotes, or in the dismissive-derisive combination 'demon-Zionism'. Anti-Zionism is referred to exclusively by the derogatory term '*absolute anti-Zionism*', as though opposition to Zionism were *per se* something distastefully fanatical.

This issue is fundamental because his basic argument is that if Israel will attack Iran, that would have nothing much to do with Zionism. Rather, it would be an act of preemptive self-defence, aimed at preventing the destruction of Israel by a future and hypothetical Iranian nuclear weapon. Here is a sample of his argument:

'In the case at hand, none of the demon-Zionism stuff is necessary to explain Israel's likely action; there is good reason, from an Israeli point of view, to refuse to stand by and let people who have said that they want to destroy Israel acquire the weapons with which they just might try to do that.

'... Some of what I wrote was explicitly an account of how Israelis would see nuclear-armed Islamist fanatics in Iran and clearly labelled as that. I used the tone and manner proper to one who thinks that Israel has a right to defend itself, against people on the would-be left whose starting point is that it doesn't, and, because of its origins, never could. To counter the demon-Zionism "explanations", I described how most Israelis see the prospect of an Iranian nuclear bomb.

'... My language expressed my determination not to join in with, or peacefully to tolerate, the outright condemnation of Israel that will most likely follow an Israeli attack, condemnation rooted in the "demon-Zionism" prejudice of the kitsch-left and in the view that Israel has no right to defend itself.'

This is perhaps how '*most Israelis*' see it. *Most Israelis* are brainwashed by Israeli propaganda – which SM himself has swallowed whole, and regurgitates to his readers.

But when members of the Israeli 'defence' establishment are engaged in serious discussion – rather than propaganda for the consumption of the deluded masses and willing dupes – they say something quite different. On 9

September 2008, the *Jerusalem Post* reported on a conference in Israel's Institute for National Security Studies. Here is the report:

'Iranian nukes mean end of Zionism'

'Iran's success in obtaining a nuclear capability will deter Jews from immigrating to Israel, cause many Israelis to leave and will be the end of the "Zionist dream," former deputy defense minister Ephraim Sneh said Tuesday.

"A nuclear weapon in Iranian hands will be an intolerable reality for Israel," Sneh said during a conference on Iran's nuclear program at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv.

"The decision-making process in Israel will be under constant [Iranian] influence – this will be the end of the Zionist dream."

'Former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy slammed Israeli political leaders for calling Iran's nuclear threat "an existential threat."

"There is something wrong with informing our enemy that they can bring about our demise," Halevy said. "It is also wrong that we inform the world that the moment the Iranians have a nuclear capability there is a countdown to the destruction of the State of Israel."

"We are the superpower in the Middle East and it is time that we began behaving like [a] superpower," he said.

'Iran's real goal, Halevy said, was to turn itself into a regional superpower and reach a "state of equality" with the United States in their diplomatic dealings.

'Sneh said that while the military option was not preferred, Israel needed to keep it on the table since such a possibility was the motivation for the international community's efforts to use diplomacy to stop Iran. Sneh added that he was confident that the IDF was capable of successfully carrying out a military strike against Iran.

"We grew up in a place that when the political echelon wanted something, the professional echelon knew how to do it," he said. "I believe this has not changed in 2008."³

³ 'Iranian nukes mean end of Zionism', *The Jerusalem Post Internet Edition*, 9.9.2008, <http://tinyurl.com/65jjb5>

We have just seen that SM attempts to explain – and excuse – an Israeli attack on Iran as a defensive measure in the face of an existential threat, rather than as motivated by ‘the demon-Zionism stuff’. Next time the INSS holds a conference, they ought perhaps to invite SM to lecture to the Israeli ‘defence community’ and tell them how wrong they are.

The two Israeli security bigwigs quoted above do not exactly see eye-to-eye with each other, but neither of them shares the view of the AWL expert on Israel’s motives. Both Ephraims evidently agree that the issue is not the survival of Israel. Unlike SM, they do not believe Israel faces a real threat of physical destruction. Halevy, former head of Mossad (Israel’s counterpart of the CIA or Britain’s MI6) does not seem too worried. General Sneh, who is a ‘defence’ politician and a bit of an ideologue, *is* worried; however, unlike SM, what he is worried about is not Israel’s existence, but the fate of the ‘Zionist dream’ – that very ‘*demon-Zionism stuff, none [of which] is necessary to explain Israel’s likely action*’, according to SM.

Ephraim Sneh’s worry may be excessive, but it is not irrational. Unlike SM, he knows very well that Zionism is an ongoing expansionist colonizing project. It requires an ever-growing Jewish population in order to colonize more and more Arab land and to neutralize the ‘demographic threat’ of being ‘swamped’ by the Palestinian Arab population. He is afraid that if Israel is deprived of its exclusive hegemonic position in the Middle East, then it may lose some of its appeal to Jewish immigrants and induce some of its existing Jewish population to leave. Moreover, a nuclear Iran may well impose constraints on Israel’s political options: its ‘decision-making process... will be under constant [Iranian] influence [and] this will be the end of the Zionist dream.’

In fact, if you read the *Jerusalem Post* report carefully, you will realize that Iran’s nuclear programme (whose military purpose is as yet purely hypothetical) is from Israel’s point of view only part of a larger issue. What Israeli leaders and planners find ‘intolerable’ is *any* threat to Israel’s regional hegemony and its privileged status as ‘the superpower in the Middle East’: because it is this status that allows it to proceed with the Zionist project of colonization without serious let or hindrance.

Let me make myself very clear. Socialists everywhere, and the Iranian working class, have very good reasons to oppose the theocratic repressive regime of Iran, and to condemn any plans it may have for acquiring nuclear weapons (if it transpires that has such plans). But

concern for the 'Zionist dream' – let alone the spurious existential threat to Israel – are not among these good reasons.

Recycling Israeli propaganda

This is just one of several instances of MS gullibly lapping up and recycling the crassest Israeli propaganda, while ignoring what Israeli political analysts and military chiefs say when they are not in propaganda mode.

Here is another example. In my 28 August article I pointed out that in 1967 and 1973 Israel seriously considered using nuclear weapons against neighbouring Arab countries. In his 'letter' SM retorts:

'It is not good that Israel has nuclear weapons; but the idea that Israel would use nuclear bombs in any situation other than a perceived immediate threat of being overwhelmed by Arab or Islamist forces is, I suggest, on the same plane as what the Weekly Worker's front-page text and picture attributed to me.

'Your own cited cases when Israeli leaders supposedly discussed using nuclear weapons, or the threat of nuclear weapons – "it is known to have seriously considered using it against its Arab neighbours in 1967 and 1973" – were situations of such perceived immediate threat.'

Perceived by whom? Admittedly, this was the perception spread about by the Israeli propaganda machine. But the reality was quite different. Both 1967 and 1973 wars were fought entirely outside the Green Line (Israel's de facto border from 1949 to 1967). It is true that in 1967 the task of Israel's disinformation campaign was made easy by Gamal 'Abd an-Nasser's foolish sabre rattling. But the Israeli leadership knew very well that this was mere posturing. General Ezer Weizman, member of the inner circle of the Israeli military and political establishment, who served as defence minister and eventually became President of Israel, affirmed that in 1967 'there was never any danger of extermination'.⁴ And the respected Israeli soldier and scholar General Matityahu Peled put it even more strongly: 'To pretend that the Egyptian forces massed on our frontiers were in a position to threaten the existence of Israel constitutes an insult not only to the intelligence of anyone capable of analysing this sort of situation, but above all an insult to the IDF [= the Israeli armed forces]'.⁵

⁴ *Ma'ariv*, 19 April 1972.

⁵ *Ha'aretz*, 19 March 1972. Both Weizman and Peled are quoted in

I wonder what the late Gen. Peled would have said about the intelligence and analytic capability of Sean Matgamna.

All serious historical research published since then – much of it by Israeli historians – confirms the assessment of Generals Weizman and Peled.

The situation in 1973 was actually more transparent: it was an attempt by Egypt and Syria to regain the parts of their national territories occupied by Israel in 1967. Israel within the Green Line was not even remotely threatened.

What was really threatened was not Israel's existence but its position of absolute regional military supremacy. This was felt by the Zionist leaders of Israel to be 'intolerable', as it would have jeopardized the 'Zionist dream' of ongoing colonization. This is why they considered seriously using nuclear weapons: in order to prevent Egypt and Syria regaining their occupied lands *by military means*. In the event, this proved unnecessary, as Israel was able – thanks to a massive airlift of conventional weapons from the US – to push back both Arab armies, and even occupy briefly additional Egyptian territory, in Africa itself, west of the Suez Canal.

Is Zionism a kind of nationalism?

Underlying SM's blundering assessment of the true motives of Israel's past and present policy, which may drive these leaders to attack Iran, is his abysmal failure or deliberate refusal to recognize what Zionism is all about. I have heard SM accused of actually being a Zionist. I don't think this is quite true; but he has gulped a great deal of Zionist propaganda, of the kind concocted specifically for the Western left. A key element of this propaganda is the plea: *'Don't demonize Israel and Zionism; Israel is just a normal nation state, and Zionism is a common-or-garden nationalism'*. SM parrots this propaganda, including the use of the scare term 'demon'.

SM repeatedly characterizes Zionism as 'nationalism', which according to him socialists should repudiate no less, but also no more, than they repudiate any other bourgeois nationalism.

But here he gets a little confused: he is unable to decide which *nation* it is that Zionism is supposed to be the *nation-ism of*. Sometimes he speaks of Zionism as synonymous with 'Israeli nationalism'; for example:

'Key Historical Events: 1967 War (5-10 June 1967)',
<http://electronicintifada.net/bytopic/675.shtml>

'Israeli nationalism is like any other nationalism, concerned with those it considers its own and downgrading and dismissive of others. ...

'Israeli nationalism, "Zionism" – as I'm sure you know far better than I do – faced tremendous opposition...'

But almost immediately he changes his mind and refers to Zionism repeatedly as 'Jewish nationalism'.

These two descriptions of Zionism cannot both be correct: not all Israelis are Jews, and only about one third of all Jews are Israelis. I will now show that *both* descriptions are in fact *incorrect*.

'Israel' is the name of a state, not of a nation; strictly and legally speaking,⁶ 'Israeli' denotes citizenship, not national affiliation. However, the majority community of Israel, the *Hebrews* (aka the 'Israeli Jews') do indeed possess all the *objective* attributes of a nation, in the modern sense of this word: territorial contiguity; a complete class structure (similar to that of other modern capitalist nations); a common language of everyday discourse (modern Hebrew, which is unique to them!); and a secular culture, both highbrow and pop.

Most Hebrews do subscribe to Zionist ideology, which is relentlessly inculcated into them by the Israeli state. So can Zionism be described as Hebrew (or 'Israeli-Jewish') nationalism? Not really. Because the last thing that a nationalist ideology (as normally understood) can ever do is deny the very existence of the nation of which it is the nation-ism. But Zionism does adamantly deny the existence of a distinct Hebrew nation – that settler nation that has in reality come into being as a result of the Zionist colonization of Palestine! As a consequence, the Hebrew nation is but dimly self-aware of its being a distinct nation.

For according to Zionist ideology, all the Jews around the world constitute a single nation. The homeland of this alleged nation is the Biblical 'Land of Israel', which is considerably larger than Palestine of the British Mandate.⁷ According to Zionist ideology there is no Hebrew nation but merely members of the worldwide Jewish nation who have already 'returned' to their homeland, an advance guard of their brethren in the Diaspora, who have a right – indeed a sacred duty – to follow the vanguard and be 'ingathered' in the Land of

⁶ That is, according to Israeli law!

⁷ Its limits are fuzzy, but they include in any case not only Israel and the Palestinian and Syrian territories occupied by it since 1967, but also parts of Jordan and Lebanon.

Israel.

Zionism portrays itself as the national movement of this worldwide alleged nation. But this self-description cannot seriously be taken at face value. Zionism cannot really be regarded as 'Jewish nationalism', except in a very far-fetched and highly paradoxical sense, for the simple reason that world Jewry is not a nation in any recognizable modern sense of the term: it lacks *all* the objective attributes of a nation. A British Jew living in London and, say, an Iranian Jew living in Tehran have nothing in common except religion: the religion practised by themselves; or (if they are 'secular' Jews) residual memories of the religion practised by their parents or grandparents. Needless to say: *nationhood* in the modern sense (at least since the French Revolution) is a secular concept, unrelated to religion.

So Zionism is not the nationalism of the real Hebrew ('Israeli-Jewish') nation, because Zionist ideology denies the existence of this nation. And it cannot rightly be the nationalism of the alleged worldwide Jewish nation, because such a nation does not really exist.

For the same reason Israel, as presently constituted, is not a nation-state. It is certainly not a *state of all its citizens* – which is the demand raised by the Arab and Hebrew democratic forces in that country, and should be supported by all progressive people everywhere. But it is not even the state of its real majority nation, the Hebrew nation. It is officially the self-declared state of a *non-nation*: world Jewry. This is enshrined in Israeli legislation, most prominently in the Law of Return, which grants every Jewish immigrant automatic Israeli citizenship. These immigrants are encouraged to colonize lands expropriated from Palestinian Arabs. At the same time, Israel denies the right of Palestinian Arab refugees to return to their homeland, from which they have been ethnically cleansed.

This is why the call for the overthrow, the *de-Zionisation*, of the deeply discriminatory Israeli state is an elementary democratic demand.

What is Zionism?

The above discussion is not a mere formal quibble; rather, it is a needed clarification, before I go on to explain what Zionism is in fact all about.

I will do so in bare brief outline. The reader can find a fuller analysis, with supporting quotes from Zionist documents, in the transcript of my lecture 'Israelis and

Palestinians: conflict and resolution'.⁸ (I referred to that lecture also in my 28 August article, but SM evidently didn't bother to look it up, for in his 'letter' he poses to me questions that I addressed there in some detail.)

Zionism arose in the latter part of the 19th century as a false response to the so-called 'Jewish problem': the persecution of Jews in many European (mainly east- and central-European) countries. A minority of European Jews, predominantly bourgeois and petty bourgeois, came to believe that it is pointless to combat anti-Semitism, because it is inherent in the gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) psyche. In fact, these founders of Zionism accepted the main premise of anti-Semitism: that Jews ought not to live among gentiles but should go away and live among their own kind.⁹

That was the era of surging mid-European nationalism and the heyday of imperialist colonialism. So the Zionist ideologues declared that the Jews were a nation, albeit a dispersed one; and concluded that 'going away to live among their own kind' meant in practice colonizing some dependent territory in what was later called the 'third world' and transforming it into a Jewish nation-state. The indigenous population was to be ethnically cleansed, as indeed was standard practice in many settler states. This would ensure that the Jewish colonizers would form a decisive majority in their projected nation-state. All this is very clearly stated in seminal Zionist writings.

After some hesitation as to the best territory to be colonized,¹⁰ the Holy Land was chosen because of its powerful emotional appeal as the cradle and spiritual focus of Judaism.

That left only one problem: in order to colonize Palestine, the Zionist project needed the protection and sponsorship of whichever imperial power was dominant in

⁸ Downloadable from <http://www.iran-bulletin.org/palestineisrael.htm>

⁹ For a discussion of the affinity, and occasional collaboration, of Zionism with anti-Semitism, see 'Zionism and Anti-Semitism' originally a chapter in *The Other Israel: The Radical Case Against Zionism* (edited by Arie Bober), Doubleday, 1972. This chapter is reproduced online (alas, with many typos) and can be downloaded from <http://matzpen.org/index.asp?u=other&p=chap3-11>

¹⁰ A serious contender was the highland part of Uganda, which was subsequently torn away from Uganda by the British imperialists and joined to Kenya. This temperate area was regarded as suitable for European settlers, and indeed was used for this purpose by Britain.

the region. In Zionist parlance, what was needed was an imperial 'charter' for colonizing Palestine. The Zionists understood perfectly well that in exchange for imperial sponsorship, the future settler state would have to serve as a Western bastion in the face of the 'Asiatic barbarism' of the entire region. This too is stated clearly and explicitly in seminal Zionist writings.

Towards the end of the First World War, the British government issued the longed-for charter, known as the *Balfour Declaration*. The idea was that the Zionist settlers would serve Britain by 'forming for England a little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism'.

The rest is really and truly history. The Faustian pact between the Zionist colonizing project and Britain worked well, until the former expanded and outgrew its utility to British imperialism by clashing with other British designs and interests in the region.

By that time British global power was declining in any case. So Zionism – true to its long-term strategy – found a new patron: the US, which replaced Britain as the new global super-power and overlord of the oil-rich Middle East.

Now let us get back to the position put forward by SM. His claim that Zionism is simply a regular kind of nationalism is untenable not only because, as I have shown, there is no real nation of which Zionism is the nation-ism, but because it ignores and suppresses the very essence of what Zionism is in actual reality: a colonizing project, structurally and inseparably allied to imperialism.

Ridiculous errors

Failure – or refusal – to grasp the essence of Zionism leads SM to all sorts of ridiculous and dangerous errors. Some of these I have pointed out above: his childishly naïve recitation of the crassest claims of Israeli propaganda, in total disregard even of serious analysis by high-ranking members of the Israeli establishment.

His original article and subsequent 'letter' are replete with such nonsense. For example, he assures us:

'I would agree that Israel has no "right" to continue occupying the West Bank and building Jewish-colonist settlements there. By that I mean: I don't want Israel to go on doing that, and I'm on the side of the Palestinians in the post-1967 Occupied Territories and of those Israelis, Jewish and Arab, who want that to stop and fight to stop it.'

Implicit in this generous 'agreement' is the absurd idea that Zionist colonization began in 1967. It ignores and suppresses the ethnic cleansing of 1947-9 and the right of the refugees of that war to return to their homeland. It also ignores the racist settler-state character of Israel *within* the Green Line, whose Palestinian Arab minority (those who escaped the ethnic cleansing of the majority in 1947-9) have been deprived of most of their lands (which were expropriated and given over to Jewish settlers), and denied equal civil rights, let alone rights as a national minority.

All that SM wants Israel to do is to stop building new settlements in the West Bank – which by now is already heavily colonized and torn into small fragments that are worse than Bantustans: more like Indian Reservations.

He only has to look at an up-to-date map of Israeli colonization of the West Bank to realize that the 'AWL demand of Israel that it should vacate the 1967-occupied territories and agree to an independent Palestinian state' is not remotely realistic without removal of the 'facts on the ground' created by Israel, including some half a million settlers. None of this can happen without a fundamental change within Israel, amounting to the overthrow of its Zionist regime. But SM does not seem to be interested in maps or facts on the ground. He is quite happy just repeating the inanities of 'left-wing' Zionist mantras.

Another astoundingly ridiculous claim made by SM is that Israel might 'bomb Iran, with or without the agreement of the USA and Nato'. I am not sure what Nato – which is itself a largely American instrument – has to do with all this, but the very idea that Israel might bomb Iran without US consent is patently absurd.

As readers may recall, in 1982, when Britain wanted to regain the Falklands – which (moral considerations aside) were in international law sovereign British territory – it needed the consent of the US. How can SM possibly imagine that Israel may take a step that will surely have a profound effect on US interests without an American green light? Besides, in order to reach Iran, Israeli bombers will need to overfly Iraq, which is under US occupation. If the overflight is not prearranged, the bombers may well be shot down. Israel will also need a fresh supply of appropriate weapons from the US.¹¹

SM commits such a silly error because he fails – or refuses – to grasp the true nature of the tie between the

¹¹ See, for example, report in the Daily Telegraph of 12 September 2008: 'Iran is a threat, but the West can't afford to have Israel bomb it – yet'. <http://tinyurl.com/3gogrb>

Zionist settler state and its imperial senior partner.

In his 'letter' he compounds this absurdity by claiming that if Israel does attack Iran then '[w]e can be sure that everyone within earshot of us, including the British government, will oppose an Israeli strike'.

He is sure, is he? What grounds does he have for such certainty? In 2006, when Israel invaded and bombed Lebanon, murdering over a thousand Lebanese civilians, and leaving behind a million cluster bomblets, Britain's poodle government followed US lead in studiously refraining from even calling for a halt to hostilities, let alone condemning Israel. And now he believes that Britain would oppose an Israeli attack – an attack that, I repeat, will be unthinkable without overt or tacit US approval!

Enough! Let me conclude with Heywood's famous couplet, taken from his 1546 *Dialogue of Proverbs*:

*Who is so deafe, or so blynde, as is hee,
That wilfully will nother here nor see?*