

James Petras M.I.A

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Book Review: *Zionism, Militarism and the Decline of US Power* by James Petras.

James Petras has been cloned. Petras I is still reliable, if a bit creaky in his old age. He digs for information in Chapare, Chiapas, and elsewhere in the Latin American countryside, interviewing militants from the Venezuelan National Peasant Front Ezequiel Zamora, rural organizers from the Brazilian Landless Worker's Movements, syndicalists in Uruguay, and slum-dwellers in Argentine villas de miseria. He pores through primary resources in Portuguese and Spanish, clattering out endless reams of political journalism on the struggle of the dispossessed in Latin American, situating their struggles within the political economy of global imperialism. Petras I's analysis may be a little theoretically fuzzy, but he gets his hands dirty and deals with facts.

Then there's another Petras. Petras II is slightly off the rails. Still kind of coherent, he deploys Marxist sociological analysis in the pursuit of a highly idiosyncratic series of theses: that an interwoven complex of institutions called the Zionist Power Configuration has taken over the American government, that the ongoing aggression against Iraq emerged not out of Texaco, but out of Tel Aviv, and that the Iranian Green Movement was a bunch of Gucci revolutionaries from the posh neighborhoods of North Tehran. Both are busy, but especially the latter, who has been churning out pamphlets accusing Israel of allying with an American Fifth Column at the rate of one a year for the past half decade.

Petras II seems like he's been stealing copy from Anthony Giddens and post-9/11 Rudolf Giuliani. He writes of the "post-colonial ethos of the American people" and is concerned that Israeli irredentism is jeopardizing the "work and security of American businessmen and officials" as they day-in and day-out construct the economic and political filigree of empire. He also offers counsel to the American fighting forces as to how to carry out our imperial wars, noting that things have gotten so bad that an American general – he means David Petraeus – commented that "Israel's colonial dispossession of the Palestinian people has prolonged the war [in Iraq]...and undermined the capacity of the U.S. armed forces to successfully operate on multiple fronts to promote U.S. imperial interests."

This latter Petras poses difficult problems for the Left. Is it better that the U.S. armed forces aren't free to carpet bomb the Bolivarian Revolution because the Israeli Army's carpet bombing of Gaza and transformation of the West Bank into a set of cantons traversed by endless Jewish-only roads and peppered with illegal settlements inhabited by glaze-eyed *khasidim* from Williamsburg insistent that the Torah gives them the right to uproot olive trees, beat the crap out of Palestinian shepherds in the South Hebron Hills, and generally thrash and steal from the aboriginal population, is slowing down the American occupation army in Iraq? Or should the Left instead oppose Israeli settler-colonialism and seek to shatter the spine of the American Israel lobby that supports it, so the U.S. Army, having ripped Iraqi society apart, can move back to its normal safari grounds in Latin America? Petras II would have us destroying the societies Petras I has been protecting for half a century. Not on purpose – but once we remove the imperial foot soldiers from the Middle East, we know that they tend to get busy elsewhere.

The rub is that Petras I and Petras II are one. Revolutionary intellectual cohabits the same body with reactionary ideologue. The gist of Petras's argument – in this case, presented in a short pamphlet entitled *War Crimes in Gaza and the Zionist Fifth Column in America*, about 25 percent of it devoted to reprinting the Executive Summary of the Goldstone Report, a valuable service to those of his readers unfamiliar with the World Wide Web – is that Israel has “strategic domination” of the U.S. political system, and the “Zionist Power Configuration” controls the “mass media,” while “Americans have suffered major losses as a result of Israel's relentless pursuit of military-driven power in the Middle East.” Furthermore, “Israel's arrogance damages attempts by U.S. private investors to broker oil deals for multinational corporations.” The problem is an abusive “*relation between states*,” or as Petras quickly rejiggers the argument, a relationship between peoples in which one group, “Israeli Jews and their powerful one percent fifth column agents in the U.S.” imposes their bellicose, tribute-taking agenda on another group: “the American taxpayers, soldiers, workers and businesspeople.” His italics.

In the process, the Left comes in for heavy abuse. Petras attacks the “Marxist...Zionist fellow travelers” of the American Left for not printing any “critical essays on Zionist power” in such journals as the *New Left Review* (British), *New Politics*, *Socialist Register*, and so on, especially upset that his and John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's books don't receive leftist attention.

The reaction to Walt and Mearsheimer is simply untrue. They were reviewed and responded to, if not always convincingly, and frequently far too dismissively. As for Petras, who can blame the Left? Most anyone not wearing a tinfoil hat would recoil from his conspiratorial gobbledygook. The Left in particular would tragically but correctly accuse Petras of whitewashing empire. Both reactions are too easy. Some of what Petras has been issuing in an unending stream over the past six years is correct. The Israel lobby – drop the “Zionist Power configuration” – is powerful. The mass-media does filter its news through a Zionist sieve. And it's true that there has been a “Zionist/Israeli influence in promoting U.S. war policies.” The lobby's power does hurt the many for the interests of the few. One can hardly find fault with Petras's assertion that it must be countered. And Petras is enough of a leftist that parts of his political program are welcome. We should support “the class and popular struggle against finance, real estate and insurance billionaires.” But other things do not follow. Against his insistence, it is hard to identify “U.S. wars for Israel in the Middle East,” and Petras's comment that the U.S. Left should organize under a banner with the legend, “ISRAEL DOESN'T TELL U.S. WORKERS WHO TO FIGHT” will not sit well with many leftists, having nothing to do with “Jewish ‘sensibilities’” as he writes and everything to do with the political and moral basis for left organization: that workers shouldn't be fighting in capitalist wars.

Petras identifies institutional politics oriented towards ethnically conceived interests as the knot of the problem. But the lobby, pace Petras, Walt-Mearsheimer, and others, is not a fifth column-esque force making America deviate from its “national interest,” a bit of metaphysics imported from the conceptual universe of international relations theory. Those concerned about Palestinian liberation should know this more than anyone. The autocratic Palestinian Authority kowtows to Washington and Tel Aviv and promises Tzipi Livni the “biggest Yerushalayim” ever in return for the aid inflows that construct a collaborator class willing to administer the cantons from penthouses in Ramallah so long as the cash keeps piling up in the PA's coffers. The children of the collaborator layer now have the freedom to puke in front of nightclubs just like in Western Europe, while their parents create employment for the underlying population in Palestinian industrial zones. Meanwhile Mohammed Dahlan's Vichy torture squad tortures *muqawama* for fighting for their people. There are no “national interests,” merely class interests that permeate porous national borders. Money knows no flag.

Yet too much of what Petras says is correct for to be simply brushed off along with the nonsense. Noam Chomsky may not be a “liberal Zionist,” as Petras accuses, but when the latter wrote in *The*

Fateful Triangle that “no pressure group [e.g. the lobby] will dominate access to public opinion or maintain consistent influence over policy-making elites unless its aims are close to those of elite elements with real power,” and in a later comment on the lobby wrote that what is at stake is weighing “(A) strategic-economic interests of concentrations of domestic power in the tight state-corporate linkage, and (B) the Lobby,” problems arose. It feels impertinent to type out the words, but Chomsky’s analysis was not entirely sound. The appropriate binary is not between “pressure groups” and “domestic power,” precisely because the lobby is not a “domestic pressure group,” but a component of class power. As Gabriel Ash comments, “the Israel Lobby should rather be a shorthand designation for a segment of the elites that fully participates in making U.S. imperialism happen” – an elite which traverses national lines.

The Israel lobby about which Petras is so pissed is precisely that: a class alliance between American and Israeli capitalists. It is more the outcome of Israel’s useful work as a regional Sparta and global arms merchant, dealing materiel to the terror states of Central America and the Southern Cone, to the Shah and Pretoria, than the cause of it. For that mercenary work of bloodletting amongst the brown people of Latin America and southern Africa, Israel got rewarded well: a couple billion dollars yearly since 1967. Given the links between the state and capital in Israel, that means Israeli elites got richly rewarded—chiefly, the *ahusalim*, or Ashkenazi founders of the state. While most of that money re-circulates back to the American military-industrial complex – the main role of Israeli political institutions in the political economy of American accumulation is to make the rich even richer – 25 percent is consistently allowed to stay in Israel, where it has built up a sizable domestic high-technology and military-industrial complex.

The physical plant stayed there, but the ownership did not. In a world of globalized capital movements, starting in the mid-1990s the “Israeli” MIC became decreasingly Israeli and increasingly American in ownership. Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler have calculated that the correlation coefficient between the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange (TASE) and the NASDAQ was .7 in the five-year span from 1996 to 2001 – meaning 70 percent of variations in the TASE were “explained” by variations in the NASDAQ. From 2002 to 2007, a nearly synchronous 92 percent of variations in the TASE were explained by movements in the NASDAQ.

The Israeli economy is a misnomer. There is an Israeli state with a constellation of institutions, not least among them an army, and an American state similarly poised, and between them flows of capital and flows of people with dual-passports, jet-setting from the Upper East Side to Eilat. The Israel lobby is certainly real. But it’s an expression of, and a complement to, material links. Ideology plays a role: the settlers’ American-abetted insistence on growing the Israeli state by nibbling away at the bits of land left for the Palestinian people, alongside the refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Palestinian nationalism that pervades the camouflaged hawks of the Israeli “peace camp.”

Petras and the lobby theorists hyperventilate about the settlement project endangering American interests, and they may be correct, even once one has reinterpreted “American interests” to mean the uneasy compromise between the decreasingly autonomous political apparatus operating as the executive committee of the ruling class and whichever fragments of capital propelled that elite into office. But they still ask the wrong questions, restricting their inquiries to the “fifth column.” That “fifth column” is just the American allies of the Israeli ruling class. They press on the U.S. government to facilitate settlement expansion because to cease or reverse settlement expansion runs the small but real risk of tearing Israeli society apart. No Israeli political leader would carry out such a task. And so Israel’s American allies, with billions of dollars in foreign investment in Israel, don’t push for it either, and they all shrug as messianic *payes*-sporting American and European Jews build up Judea over piles of Palestinian corpses. The lobby, deeply institutionalized in American politics, ensures that America does not exert pressure on Israel, while the PA skips happily along, gorging on aid inflows that will never develop the Palestinian economy. No one particularly cares.

Once one has sifted through the endless pages of bureaucratese and the self-deluded jargon of defense intellectuals, the lobby debate as it is conducted *on the right* is whether or not having Israel as an American ally is the best way to secure American capitalist interests in the Middle East. Petras, Mearsheimer, and Walt insist not. In juxtaposition with the “global hegemony strategy” called for by the Bush Administration and previous Republican administrations, they call for “off-shore balancing,” in which, as Walt writes, “the United States would intervene with its own forces only when regional powers are unable to uphold the balance of power on their own.” A part of this would be “giving Israel a choice: it can end its self-defeating occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and remain a cherished partner of the United States, or it can remain an occupying power on its own.” As he astutely notes, “This policy would undoubtedly be anathema to the different elements of the Israel lobby and would probably make some other Americans uneasy.” We get to the root of the issue: the lobby blocks the two-state settlement that would secure American regional interests.

Misunderstanding those interests, some claiming to be on the Left insist that *any* support of Israel irks the oil-rich Gulf sheikhdoms. Let Israel loose, they insist, and let’s be friends with the guys sitting on tremendous pools of petroleum. That analysis misunderstands the political economy of petroleum from the perspective of the oil majors and the state apparatuses they serially capture. Their sole interest is keeping prices elevated and controlling the flow of proceeds from those elevated prices. To do so, they need the sheikhdoms to be controlled by friendly regimes. Israel in that sense is a secondary issue, troublesome only to the extent that it incites popular pressure against the collaborator regimes, especially Aladdin’s cave – Saudi Arabia, capable of producing 10 million barrels of oil per day and sedulous about reinvesting the proceeds from its oil profits into American financial securities and American weapons systems. As Robert Vitalis comments, “For the region known as the Gun Belt, the Persian Gulf represents a critical market at a time of crisis in the arms industry,” keeping entire production lines going during lulls in Pentagon procurement.

To keep weapons purchases whirring along, excuses are helpful, even if the arms themselves sit in warehouses in the peninsula’s deserts. Israel provides the best excuse: the U.S. government’s legally-binding commitment to Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge ensures that it must have the latest weapons systems at all times. When Lockheed Martin wants customers for the F-35, apparently an over-sophisticated under-engineered ostrich of an airplane that can barely get off the ground, it looks to Israel. Israel obliges, with American taxpayers footing the bill. Israel thus equipped with the latest gewgaws out of Bethesda, U.S. death-merchants can sell the F-15 to Saudi Arabia, this time with dollars extracted from American taxpayers not through the IRS but at the gas pump. Meanwhile Israel’s itinerant bombing runs destabilize the Middle East, part of the consequence of creating what Chaim Weizmann called an “Asiatic Belgium.” Israel was envisioned as foreign irritant and plays precisely that role. The result is constant conflict. The Middle East has been aflame non-stop from 2001 to 2009. BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, and Shell made 876 billion in profits during that span. Coincidence, surely.

Misunderstanding this point, Petras, like so many of Walt and Mearsheimer’s epigones, also insists on casting the Iraq War as a tremendous failure for America, with American oil companies now not even bothering to place winning bids for development of Iraqi oil fields and with Iraqi oil production still trickling out at its pre-war levels, with the national interest crumpled somewhere between Fallujah and the Green Zone. Their mirror-images on the “Left” like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri vacuously rumble about the inadequacy of thinking that U.S. military actions are “primarily directed at a specific economic advantage...Such specific goals are secondary...*Military force must guarantee the conditions for the functioning of the world market.*” The dual metaphysics of capital and national interests explain everything – and nothing. Hardt and Negri are so scared of the accusation of vulgar economism that they miss the basic correlation between war and conflict in the Middle East – 1973, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1991, 2001, 2003 – and elevated profits for the oil companies

and the arms merchants that sell their wares to the petro-states seeking something to do with the freshets of capital pouring into their bank accounts, while the rightist neo-populists and realists don't ever look at capital accumulation and don't see that the oil companies do just fine while Israel mucks around with dense inert metal explosives in the Middle East and Gaza burns.

They benefit because when the embers of instability are banked, burning steadily but hotly, gas and oil prices remain elevated. Petro-dollars gush into the coffers of the oil majors as well as the Gulf States, who then spend their cash on arms—overwhelmingly, American arms. Most of the rest provides the circulatory flows keeping the FIRE sector flush with cash. People make money off suffering and death in the Middle East, and they can easily hide behind the Israel lobby. Something strong enough to both hide and legitimate immense power, while contributing to American militarism in the Middle East, has a lot of power itself, and for that reason, the lobby is no pushover.

Precisely for that reason, the lobby must be confronted. It is a component of ruling class power, and to deny its influence will not fly. But behind and among it are blood-merchants, and none of them care about Palestinians – nor, one suspects, do Palestinians' latest allies among the “realist” policy intelligentsia. American capital barely cares enough about Israeli militarism and occupation to dump its money into J Street, let alone to crash the hammer down on Zionist malfeasance in the Middle East. They do not and will not care about Palestinians until their interests are threatened more directly. The way to do that is simple. It's by linking demands with others threatened by Israeli militarism, by American imperialism, and by capitalism more broadly, and making the costs of maintaining an Israeli client state in the Middle East higher than the costs of giving it up. Misguided fairy tales like Petras peddles simply won't do in forging the political project that can lead to freedom in the Middle East. Perhaps at this hour it's time for some realism. Which doesn't mean defeatism. Just because the enemy is big does not mean we can't bring it down.

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P.S.

* From Jacobin, Max Ajl, Spring 2011:

<http://jacobinmag.com/archive/issue2/ajl.html>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.maxajl.com/>