Did Palestine divide 'the Movement'?: How US activists in the 60s and 70s grappled with the question of Palestine

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THE MOVEMENT AND THE MIDDLE EAST
How the Arab-Israeli Conflict Divided the American Left
by Michael R. Fischbach
312 pp. Stanford University Press $26

Michael Fischbach is a smart, committed historian who earlier made his name by publishing meticulous (and very important) studies of the U.N.'s own records of land ownership records in pre-1948 Palestine, and then of the many ways the peace process had failed to address the Palestinians' numerous still outstanding property claims against Israel. A few years ago, he turned his attention to another little-served area of historical research: the way that the big American social-reform movement(s) of the 1960s and early 1970s grappled with the Palestine Question. The result has been two significant volumes from Stanford University Press—"Black Power and Palestine: Transnational Countries of Color," which came out earlier this year, and this new volume, "The Movement and the Middle East," which was issued more recently.

It feels strange to have reached the age when the activities you engaged in as a young adult have now become the subject of academic historical research! So I came to my reading of "The Movement and the Middle East" with a huge degree of interest and found a wealth of engaging interview material and documents about the interactions that various strands of "the Movement" had with the Palestine Question, focusing on the years after the 1967 Israeli-Arab war. Here, for example, you can find an account of the visit that Nick Medvecky, a student attending Wayne State University on the GI Bill and also a leftist journalist, made to Palestinian guerrilla training camps in Lebanon and Jordan– and then to Israel!– back in 1969. Medvecky had originally been invited to visit Israel by "two Israeli military officers who were studying at WSU", who told him the Jewish Agency would cover his expenses. But he tacked on the earlier legs of the trip himself, in response to a suggestion from a member of the Organization of Arab Students at WSU. (I got so interested in Medvecky's trip that I found online versions of the dispatches he sent back from it. You can read them here.)

Thus, as early as 1969, the Israelis and their allies were reaching out to shower benefits, free trips, and their version of propaganda on politically active American students– even though some, like Medvecky, were able to subvert that plan a little. In 1970, Medvecky worked with a group of politically engaged returned Peace Corps volunteers to organize a group tour that was originally planned to revisit the countries he had made in 1969. Seventeen people (including three who were Jewish) went on the 1970 tour—pre-figuring the on-the-ground educational tours that groups like Eyewitness Palestine continue to organize till today. When the Palestinian hosts on the early legs of that trip learned that the group planned to visit Israel and that Medvecky had been there the year before, they were horrified. The group as a whole then expelled Medvecky. The three Jewish

members of the tour later issued a statement that began, “As revolutionaries of Jewish heritage in the United States of America, we take this opportunity to wholeheartedly support the Palestinian liberation movement.”

The book is full of vignettes like these, which underline that the roots of the politically progressive Palestinian-rights activism we see in today’s United States go very deep indeed. But I am sorry to report that overall, I found the book disappointing, at a number of levels. One shortcoming is the scarcity of coverage of the contribution that Arab-American activists were making to the Movement as a whole. Much of that material can, it is true, be found in Pamela Pennock’s “The Rise of the Arab-American Left: Activists, Allies, and Their Fight Against Imperialism and Racism, 1960s-1980s.” But it would have been nice to have it given a lot more consideration in this volume.

“The Movement and the Middle East” also does very little to systematically evaluate the role that differences over the Palestine question played in helping to build, expand, or weaken this Movement. Instead of providing any such evaluation, Fischbach ends the book with this stark warning:

> “Progressives fighting back against the agenda of President Donald Trump and his allies would do well to consider the weakening of the Left in the 1960s and 1970s due to its infighting about Israel/Palestine as a cautionary tale.”

It seems strange to take the relatively small phenomenon of the infighting that occurred in the movement over Palestine and to heap on it the entire blame for the weakening of the Left from the mid-1970s on. The historical record strongly indicates that it played only a small role in the Movement’s demise.

“The Movement and the Middle East” suffers from a number of structural problems. The most glaring of these was the decision to split this material off into a volume quite separate from the material Fischbach used in his “Black Power and Palestine.” Given the fact that the Black Power campaign in its various forms, had a much longer and deeper history in the United States than the various other campaigns that came together with it in the mid-1960s to form what Fischbach calls “the Movement”, excising the Movement’s foundational civil rights/ Black Power component leaves, in his telling, only a complex series of morsels behind.

Fischbach evidently realizes this. He devotes only one of the book’s twelve chapters to examining attitudes toward Palestine/Israel within the specifically antiwar part of the movement; but there, given the crucial role of Black leaders in building and sustaining the antiwar campaign, he is forced to include significant amounts of material about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In “Black Power and Palestine,” he had already provided an intriguing, chapter-length account of the cautious and pro-Israeli way in which Dr. King approached the Palestine Question. In the chapter on the antiwar movement in his latest book, he revisits Dr. King’s caution on Palestine with new and intriguing evidence culled from the FBI’s now-available surveillance tapes on King, writing that after the (Israeli-initiated) outbreak of the June War of 1967 King,

> “was deeply concerned that the June War was sidetracking the antiwar movement and felt it gave President Lyndon Johnson some breathing room, inasmuch as public attention was focused on the Middle East[…] He also worried that the big peace march he was planning for August of that year would need to be postponed or cancelled ‘until this situation is cleared up,’[…] His aides opined that the Movement was ‘suffering badly’ because Jews who were prominently represented in it, had become hawks when it came to the Middle East. [King’s aide Stanley] Levison, Jewish himself, agreed that the war was a ‘real monkey wrench’ in the Movement’s activities, saying that King’s hopes of a big march were now unlikely to be realized. King cancelled the proposed march a few

> days later."

Another structural problem "The Movement and the Middle East" suffers is its lack of any powerful organizing chronology, such as would help the reader better understand the broad sweep of what was happening in those years. Fischbach opens both his Prologue and Chapter 1 with strong references to the outbreak of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. But actually, both the two major strands of the Movement—the Black Power strand and the antiwar strand—had histories that went back considerably earlier than 1967. A reader needs to be told, or reminded of, this upfront. What happened was (as indicated in the King episode noted above) that the outbreak and subsequent course of the June 1967 War caused reverberations within both those pre-existing strands of the Movement, that were particularly sizeable within the antiwar strand because of the leading role that many Jewish intellectuals and organizers played within it. Large-scale, public protests against the war—most of them centered on or emanating from college campuses—had been a feature of U.S. public life for a couple of years already before the Israelis stunned the world in 1967 by preemptively striking their neighbors' air forces and then marching in to seize control of massive swathes of their neighbors' land. (At the time, of course, the vast majority of the U.S. corporate media did not describe the war that way. They described it more like, "plucky little Israel, when facing a terrible threat from those really scary Arab countries around it, somehow magically came out on top, just proving once again how backward those Arabs really were…")

Many of the Jewish leftists then active in the antiwar movement had grown up in strongly Zionist homes. Fischbach provides numerous great, illustrative quotes from Jewish activists from those days, including this one, from the (now-pro-Palestinian) novelist Hilton Obenzinger:

> "I stayed up one night during the [1967] war, upset about it, and in the early dawn sat… to read the NY Times, weeping. Wasn't Israel sort of socialist? Weren't they advanced, democratic and progressive? Why did the Arabs want 'to push the Jews into the sea'?
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> My moment of awakening was in 1969 when Moshe Dayan went to Vietnam on a fact-finding tour and offered complete support for the US war. This was cognitive dissonance in a big way – and I either had to be consistent with my principles or begin fudging them out of some sense of ethnic loyalty."

A third problem the book suffers—and I am not sure whether this is structural or more purely esthetic—is that Fischbach provides almost zero information about what subsequently became of any of the people whose 1960s-era struggles over the Palestine Question he so painstakingly records. Rather than being real-life, flesh-and-blood participants in an ongoing national drama, his subjects are presented as historical specimens, apparently trapped forever in the glowing amber of the 1960s. But this, they certainly were not. Hilton Obenzinger went on to become a thoughtful, steadfast supporter of Palestinian rights. (Fischbach had even taken the quote above, with footnoted attribution, from an interview with Obenzinger that was published in Mondoweiss!) Then, there is Carl Gershman. Fischbach devotes two sizeable chunks of his text to detailing the complex cognitive acrobatics the young Gershman engaged in in the late 1960s as he worked hard both to serve his employers in the Anti-Defamation League and to being a mover and shaker in a succession of far-left groupuscules. But it would have been really informative for readers to be told (or reminded) that Gershman went on to found and head one of the major pillars of Washington's "soft-power" imperial project, the National Endowment for Democracy. (Thus, he started out defending and serving one small settler-colonial state with imperial ambitions to playing a leading role in the machinery of the American empire… Interesting, huh?)

Many other former leftists went on, of course, to travel even further and more speedily to the right

than Carl Gershman. These were the neoconservatives whose rapid lurch from former ultra-leftists to freshly-minted ultra-rightists has been amply described in numerous other books. (Soggier leftists like myself had our own theories about that phenomenon, many of them referring to people with authoritarian or narcissistic personalities. Be that as it may…) But what is notable is that this lurch happened on a broad scale in the late 1960s, and disproportionately—though not exclusively—affected Jewish people. The emotions excited by the June War certainly played a massive role in that. "The Movement and the Middle East" has a helpful small section on the lurch into neoconservatism. It includes a quote from neocon Seymour Martin Lipset who wrote, "Some see in the [1967] Israeli defeat of the Arabs, the one example of an American ally which has decisively defeated Communist allies in battle."

Fischbach notes that, "There was a significant Jewish shift away from liberals and the Democratic Party and toward the Republican Party in the four years since 1968, when the New Left was at its height. Nixon received 35 percent of the Jewish vote in 1972, nearly triple the amount he got in 1968." He mentions the possibility that this shift had some causes other than the difference—specifically, some forms of anti-Black racial fears. But he also writes that some people felt that "Nixon had proven himself to be a trustworthy ally of Israel since becoming president in 1969." Again, some more robust chronological anchoring of the text would help readers sort out possible causation issues here, since by the time of the 1972 elections Nixon had also made his breakthrough visit to China and had negotiated a framework for a settlement with North Vietnam. So is it not possible that voters, Jewish or otherwise, who were concerned about the need to rein in the carnage of the Vietnam War were supporting him (or choosing not to oppose him) on those grounds, too?

Back in the 1960s, leftist activists in the United States who wanted to understand the Palestine Question faced two other challenges to which Fischbach pays insufficient heed. One was that the Palestinians' own self-organizing and autonomous political action did not erupt onto the Middle Eastern and world scenes until after the victory the *fedayeen* groups scored in the 1968 Battle of Karameh… and even then, the political nature of the *fedayeen* groups was unclear and disunified. When considering events in Vietnam, it was fairly straightforward for activists to see that what was happening there was a decades-long struggle for national independence in which the nationalist side was represented by a single disciplined organization, the NLF. But Palestine? Was it even a thing? And who were these Palestinian fighters? What was Fateh? What was the PFLP? What were the myriad other smaller groups that separated from them? What was the PLO? Few people within the Middle East were able to answer these questions with much clarity, let alone those outside it. The *fedayeen* groups and even the PLO itself (which the *fedayeen* took over in 1969) had publicity departments that were rudimentary at best, chaotically counter-productive at worst. There were two fairly widely known fedayeen leaders: Fateh's hyper-active, gun-toting Yasser Arafat and the PFLP's super-charismatic George Habash. They seemed plenty swashbuckling—especially the PFLP, when it carried out daring hijackings of airliners in 1970 (though those did lead to the Jordanian government's brutal expulsion of all the *fedayeen* in 1970.) But what did all those groups stand for? Few people inside the United States knew.

Meantime—and I believe this is an important part of the broader story—back in the 1960s and 1970s and for a good period thereafter, most of the people in the United States who were prepared to challenge the Israeli narrative were either Black… *or they were Republicans*. There were various reasons for the Republican thing. Some of those people had had dealings with the large U.S. oil-business complex in the Arab Gulf countries, and had gotten to know Palestinian exiles who worked in the oil complexes. Maybe some of those republicans had some anti-Semitism in their thinking? But back in those days, there was also a broad array of Republicans prepared to look at the Palestine Question on its merits. There was still, after all, an active wing in the GOP who were old-school,

Midwestern liberals; the evangelicals were still far from having taken over the whole party.

Bottom line for some White (especially Jewish) people in the movement was they probably felt they had to consider whether, regarding Palestine, they wanted to align themselves with a bunch of Midwestern Republicans on that issue, or whether they should stick to the more comfortable and allegedly more lefty tradition of siding with Israel.

So, back to that key month of June 1967 with which Fischbach opens his book. He identified two transformative things that happened that month: the Arab-Israeli war and the launching in San Francisco of the Summer of Love, which was—in his telling—an iconic moment in the emergence of the Movement. Yes, the Movement did have a strong strand of sexual liberation/libertinism in it, along with a more serious strand of women's liberation, the antiwar strand, and the Black Power/civil rights strand. In all those ways, it had a large effect on the culture of the United States. But whether it had much serious, lasting effect on the country's politics is a different question, and one that Fischbach never really addresses. Today, looking back from 50 years later, we could say that on all those fronts, there has been serious pushback from supporters of the conservative status quo. The campaigns for sexual liberation and women's liberation won the federally guaranteed right to abortion in 1974, but that has been the target of very serious pushback ever since. (Though in the realm of sexual liberation, the whole movement for LGBTQ rights has made advances in the past 15 years that few of us could have dreamed of back in 1970.) The antiwar campaign succeeded for around two decades in infecting the United States' body politic with a war-aversion that military people came to call the "Vietnam syndrome." But in 1991, Pres. G.H. W. Bush and Colin Powell started to push back seriously with their launching of Operation Desert Storm. The rest of the '90s saw a series of U.S./NATO military adventures in various places; and then the events of 2001 unleashed a massive tsunami of American bellophilia that we are still having to live with today. As for the Black Power movement, it had already won its most signal victory—the Voting Rights Act—back in 1965 and it then won a few more in the years that followed; but for nearly all the past 30 years African-American communities have been subjected to hostile gerrymandering, voter suppression, and large cutbacks in basic social services.

So how much of a real political phenomenon, as opposed to a treasured set of memories of our youthful engagements, was the Movement? And what are the key lessons that today's social-justice activists can take from its record? In his Epilogue, Fischbach argues (as noted above) that today's progressives should seek to avoid the kinds of split over Palestine that plagued the Movement back in the 1960s and '70s; and he claims—bizarrely, in my view—that Middle Eastern politics "present progressive Americans with the same kinds of challenges they did in the 1960s." I would argue (as I did here, some months ago) that the exact opposite is the case. Things are much more clear cut today regarding Israel and Palestine. Israel has lurched deeply to the right over the past 50 years and is more clearly aligned with the rightwing forces in this country than ever before. Palestinian-Americans and their allies are a real force in many parts of the American discourse. No-one today can seriously claim there is anything socialist about Israel's society or politics… Yes, there is still a non-trivial wing of the Democratic Party here that continues to swear strong (and nicely funded) fealty to Israel. Yes, we can certainly expect Zionist billionaires like Sheldon Adelson to pour huge amounts of money into creating splits, distrust, and fabricated allegations of anti-Semitism inside the Democratic Party, just as they have been doing inside Britain's Labour Party. But how many actual American political progressives are torn at all these days on issues to do with Israel? Compared with the 1960s and 1970s, very, very few.

"The Movement and the Middle East" turned out to be a frustrating volume. It contains a wealth of engaging anecdotes and some very valuable documentation. But at the level of the broad historical narrative or the possible lessons for today? That work has yet to be done.

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