

What would it take to win in Palestine?

Thursday 25 January 2024, by [CAMFIELD David](#), [POST Charles](#) (Date first published: 2 January 2024).

David Camfield and Charlie Post argue that Palestinian liberation requires a regional revolutionary strategy based on the politics and methods of socialism from below.

In the face of Israel's renewed settler-colonial violence—the genocidal ethnic cleansing of Gaza—the primary task for socialists inside imperialist countries is building a movement in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. First and foremost, this means building an effective movement to force an immediate and permanent ceasefire. Winning what most of the global Left sees as the “floor” demand will allow us to revive a movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) and to organize to end the over \$5 billion the U.S. state gives to Israel annually. These struggles will require creating new “infrastructures of dissent”—democratic spaces where activists, new and old, can educate themselves politically, debate strategy and tactics, and organize actions in solidarity with the struggle of the Palestinian people for national and social liberation.

Building a movement in unconditional solidarity with the Palestinians will put revolutionary socialists in dialogue with activists, here and globally, about what would be required to win a free Palestine. On the Palestinian, Mideast and North African (MENA) and global Left, there are different strategic and tactical perspectives for this struggle. Supporters of socialism from below need to engage in these discussions and put forward an answer to the question, “What would it take to uproot Zionist settler colonialism and achieve Palestinian liberation?” Our answer must be based in both a realistic analysis of the region and our overall strategic vision of working class and popular self-organization and self-emancipation. What follows is an attempt to address the key elements of such an analysis.

We need to be honest with ourselves and others that the Palestinians find themselves in a uniquely difficult situation for a colonized people—a situation that explains why their extraordinarily steadfast struggle for liberation hasn't achieved more since the first Nakba. The Israeli state rules over the entire territory of historic Palestine. In that territory there are two nations: the Israeli-Jewish oppressor nation and the oppressed Palestinian nation. The Israeli state uses the collaborationist Palestinian Authority to control the West Bank and until recently has relied on Hamas to manage Gaza. Members of the Israeli-Jewish nation make up just over half of the population of historic Palestine.

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Zionism has created a distinctive, perhaps unique, form of settler-colonialism. Zionist colonization is fundamentally different from franchise colonialism, like that of Britain in India or the French in Southeast Asia. In those colonies, the colonizing population was small and the vast majority of the colonized people was exploited, either as peasants or wage workers, by the colonizers. As a result, the colonizers did not develop as a distinct *nation* in the colonized territory. At the center of the Zionist project, from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, is the expulsion of the Palestinian population and the creation of an Israeli-Jewish working class, capitalist class and middle class. Israel is also different from a settler colony like Algeria, where the French *pieds-noirs* were about ten percent of the population and had the option of moving back to France if they didn't want to live in an Algeria freed from colonial domination. Israeli-Jews have, for the most part, no "exit strategy" and should be accorded the right to live in Palestine, not as oppressors, but as equal citizens of a single binational society.

The Israeli-Jewish working class is not just ideologically committed to Zionism and permeated with anti-Palestinian racism (as journalist Amira Hass [observes](#) "We have profound racist contempt for the Palestinians, which we developed to justify, both cognitively and psychologically, our trampling over them"). It's also not just that Zionist settler-colonial capitalism has constituted the Israeli-Jewish working class in a way that confers advantages (privilege) on its members. What is distinctive about the situation—unique in the world today—is the character and magnitude of these advantages, which have deprived this working class of any interest in fighting to dismantle the social order at this time. Israeli-Jewish workers' advantages in access to employment, housing, social benefits and land depend on the *ongoing* expropriation and exclusion of the Palestinian population. These advantages are underwritten by U.S. aid to the Israeli state, which allows the Zionist ruling class to wage permanent war against the Palestinians without having to impose austerity on "their" working class. ¹

Asking, "What would Israeli-Jewish workers have to give up if settler colonialism was uprooted?" helps us to see this. How they'd be affected would depend *enormously* on whether the new society was still capitalist or whether there'd been a break with capitalism and the start of a transition to socialism. If they along with Palestinian workers had taken power, their lives would get better in vital ways. But in any imaginable scenario in which settler colonialism was ended, Israeli-Jewish workers would have to give up a lot. In a decolonized Palestine in which the two nations coexisted on the basis of equality, many Israeli Jews would have to move in order to share the land with Palestinians, including Palestinians living in the diaspora who chose to exercise their right to return. They would no longer have much better job opportunities than Palestinians and access to far superior public services.

"Taking the campaigns for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) and against U.S. aid to Israel to new levels is vital. Even more crucial is the possibility of a new wave of workers' struggles across the MENA region, including an uprising in Palestine similar to the First Intifada of the late 1980s that combined mass mobilizations with armed self-defense against the IDF and Zionist settlers." The First Intifada, Gaza, December 1987: In a scene repeated throughout the Occupied Territories, young Palestinians square off against the IDF. Image by [Efi Sharir](#).

It's true that perpetuating settler colonialism ties Israeli-Jewish workers to their own exploiters, to a capitalist system that threatens the future of humanity, and to an oppressive social order in Palestine that fosters monstrous behaviour among the members of their nation. Commitment to Zionism is self-destructive for Israeli-Jews. But unfortunately, the forces that bind Israeli-Jewish

workers to Zionist settler colonialism are very strong. This means there is [no prospect](#) in the foreseeable future of significant numbers of Israeli-Jewish workers joining with Palestinians in joint struggle against settler colonialism. As a result, those who stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people cannot subordinate their efforts, including agitation for BDS and the end of U.S. aid to Israel, to attempts to win any substantial minority of Israeli-Jewish workers to anti-Zionism.

Palestinian courage and determination rightly inspire people fighting against exploitation and oppression around the world. However, Palestinian workers and peasants alone don't have the power to win national liberation—in the form of either a democratic, secular capitalist state in historic Palestine or a social revolution that breaks with capitalism and begins a transition to socialism. Why is this? First, the Israeli ruling class has consciously reduced its dependence on Palestinian labor. As a result, Palestinian workers, unlike the Black South African working class, do not have the social power to end apartheid. Second, the Israeli state—supported as it is by a massive amount of U.S. funding and other assistance—has the military capacity to defeat Palestinian uprisings even if these were supported by armies from neighbouring Arab states. The Arab ruling classes have shown for decades that they neither have the capacity nor the willingness to support the Palestinian struggle in any serious way.

Are there any forces within Israel that could undermine its ruling class? As veteran Israeli-Jewish revolutionary socialist Moshe Machover [argues](#), the Palestinian minority within Israel is too small to overthrow settler colonialism. What about the rest of Palestine? The Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs):

are economically dependent on Israel much more than Israel's economy depends on them. For Israel, the OPTs are mainly a lucrative market and a testing ground for its military and "crowd control" hardware and expertise, which are an important part of its exports. Widespread labour and civil unrest, which could gravely cripple the South African economy, would not have such a serious effect on Israel's.

Machover [concludes](#) that "I cannot see any way of overthrowing the Zionist regime without the consent and participation of the Hebrew [what we've been calling Israeli-Jewish—D.C. and C.P.] working class."

Socialists must face this difficult reality when we assess strategies and tactics in the struggle against Zionist settler colonialism. To be clear, we are not arguing for limiting the Palestinian struggle, at home and globally, in order to drive a wedge between the Israeli ruling and working classes. Our solidarity with Palestine is *unconditional*—our opposition to settler colonialism across historic Palestine is a socialist principle. Nor does it mean wishful thinking about winning many Israeli-Jewish workers to opposition to settler colonialism in the foreseeable future. It does mean, though, that as Matzpen, the pathbreaking anti-Zionist revolutionary socialist group with both Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian members, [argued](#) in 1978:

We think that it is possible to tell the goals of a struggle according to the ways, methods and means used in order to achieve them, and about these we disagree with those in the Palestinian liberation movement who claim that they stand for coexistence of Arabs and Jews, but use ways, means and methods that do not bring them or us closer to this goal.

From this perspective, planned or unplanned attacks on Israeli-Jewish civilians are a strategic issue as well as an ethical problem. 2 The killing of non-combatants, although a thoroughly

understandable form of the justified rage of the oppressed, does nothing to advance the liberation struggle. Instead, such actions end up causing the grip of settler-colonial ideology to become even more suffocating within the oppressor nation—they bind the Israeli-Jewish masses to their exploiters, rather than, at the minimum, neutralizing them. They are incompatible with the “ways, means and methods” of an anti-colonial socialism from below politics.

Short of an end to settler colonialism, the struggles of Palestinians and their allies internationally can win gains that reduce the crushing weight of oppression. Taking the campaigns for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) and against U.S. aid to Israel to new levels is vital. Even more crucial is the possibility of a new wave of workers’ struggles across the MENA region, including an uprising in Palestine similar to the First Intifada of the late 1980s that combined mass mobilizations with armed self-defense against the IDF and Zionist settlers. Such an uprising, combined with an end to U.S. and global economic support for Israel, could lead to a significant section of the Israeli-Jewish working class embracing or at least accepting anti-colonial reforms, which could seriously weaken settler colonialism. In the long run, the possibility of victory for the Palestinian national liberation struggle depends on the development of conditions that make it possible to win over at least a sizeable minority of Israeli-Jewish workers to the struggle for a new society.

Half a century ago Palestinian revolutionary socialist Jabra Nicola [argued](#):

The development of a mass revolutionary movement in Israel depends on the rise of the Arab revolution, both politically and as a material force, that is on the growth of an Arab movement of increasing credibility of actually being able to impose its will, based on a program that is both absolutely intransigent toward all Zionist institutions and recognizing the national rights of the Israeli Jews. This latter point will become significant in Israel only when a movement of revolutionary socialism in the Arab countries begins to gain mass influence so that Israel’s revolutionaries can point to it as an actual real program on which the Arab masses are fighting.

Put simply, the struggle to end Zionist settler colonialism should be treated as part of a *regional revolutionary strategy*.

This perspective is not shared by any significant section of the Palestinian movement today. The secular nationalists of Fatah, the dominant group in the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), pursued a military and diplomatic strategy. They believed that a combination of Palestinian urban and rural guerilla warfare against Zionist colonization, combined with the hope that the Arab regimes would not only arm the Palestinians but would take military action against Israel, could end Zionist settler colonialism. The failure of that strategy led them to progressively abandon the minimal demand of a single, democratic and secular capitalist state in historic Palestine. In 1993, they signed onto the Oslo Accords in the hope of creating a Palestinian mini-state alongside a Zionist Israel. Instead, as the government of the Palestinian Authority (PA), they became Israel’s willing collaborators in policing Palestinians in the West Bank, while Zionist colonization progressively reduced the territories under their control. The organizations of the Palestinian Left failed to build a powerful alternative to Fatah and ended up tailing them politically.

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[The Islamist party Hamas](#) emerged as an alternative leadership to Fatah and the Palestinian Left groups in the post-Oslo period. Their willingness to continue to confront the Israeli military and settlers and their promise to reform the PA allowed them to win the second PA election in 2006. Despite their demonization as “militants,” Hamas remains trapped in the same strategy as the secular Palestinian forces. As Syrian-Swiss socialist Joseph Daher [argues](#):

Hamas, just like the rest of Palestinian political parties, from Fatah to the Palestinian Left, look not to the Palestinian masses and the regional working classes and oppressed peoples as the forces to win liberation. Instead, they seek political alliances with the region’s ruling classes and their regimes to support their political and military battles against Israel. So Hamas leaderships have cultivated alliances with monarchies in Gulf states, especially Qatar more recently, and Turkey, as well as with the Iranian regime. Rather than advance the struggle, these regimes restrict their support for the cause to areas where it advances their regional interests and betray it when it doesn’t.

While Hamas has continued to carry on military resistance to Israeli aggression, it too has [retreated from the demand](#) for a single Palestinian state and conditionally offered Israel the prospect of a “two-state” solution, without diplomatic recognition of Israel.

To advance a regional revolutionary strategy, as Daher argues, Palestinian socialist forces “committed to self-organization from below” must be built “within historic Palestine and the region. They cannot do that alone but must do so [through collaboration](#) with socialists from Egypt to Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Algeria, and all the other countries.” Socialists outside Palestine must do whatever we can to start developing political relationships with the [new left elements](#) of the Palestinian movement that have emerged.

David Camfield and Charlie Post

P.S.

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