

Theses on The New Intifada

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Theses, October 2000, and Discussion

These “theses” were written in October, 2000, shortly after the beginning of the new Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, and were posted on The Utopian website. Along with the theses, we are reprinting a comment by Wayne Price and my response, which were also posted on the site.

Since the theses were written, a good deal has changed. Hundreds more have died. The Barak government in Israel was voted out and a coalition headed by Ariel Sharon took office—strengthening what I see as Sharon’s strategy of blocking agreement on the establishment of a truncated Palestinian state. The Bush Administration in the U.S. backed Israeli positions somewhat more than the Clinton Administration did. Sharon engaged in a new policy of trickery—demanding a complete stop to any armed Palestinian action or even stone-throwing before negotiating. More dangerously, he launched a policy of assassinating Palestinian militants and invading Palestinian areas to destroy specific targets. So far he has withdrawn after a limited time but the raids serve to warn that he might try longer-term occupations or permanent conquest in the future. These aggressive trends intensified after September 11. So while in the introduction to the original Theses I could write that it wasn’t yet clear whether or not the new fighting would lead back to more negotiations, now not only do serious negotiations seem remote, but it is clear that the Israeli side has not yet accepted the fundamental right of the Palestinians to a territory of their own (see Thesis 9).

Despite these new developments, as I read over the theses I believe they are well worth reprinting because the issues they raise—both the basic questions in Palestine and the areas in which Wayne and I disagree—have not changed. On the former point, despite nearly a year of fairly continuous fighting, the focus of the struggle around independence in part of Palestine (that is, the two-state position) is even firmer. No major forces in Palestine are seriously talking about the old goal of destroying Israel; militants and even Islamicists are talking about how to force Israel agree to Palestinian independence alongside Israel. So the major issues remain for discussion. Only Thesis 11, on the “waning” of U.S. dominance, unfortunately seems way overblown.

As to the divergence between me and Wayne, those who publish *The Utopian* have agreed for many years that one should support national liberation struggles while not politically supporting the parties and personalities leading the struggles. Though some anarchists would disagree, there’s no difference between Wayne and me on this point. However, he has criticisms of what I wrote, as I do of his comments. Rather than characterizing the disagreements here I’ll just say that the issues don’t seem to have been altered by the passage of time, so the exchange is still worth reading.

On one point, Thesis 12, no one has commented at all, and this is unfortunate. Very many young people—I believe, observing and talking to them—don’t want a world of hate and violence. This attitude can lead to strongly held feelings that Palestinians and Israelis are equally at fault. I disagree with this view but it’s true that war and violence, even violence against injustice, are not the way we want to organize the world. We need to be sure we see violence, when we do approve of it, as an evil necessity—that we don’t believe in the morally cleansing nature of violence, a twentieth-century myth. If resistance to injustice, including violent resistance, are necessary, peace and tolerance—with justice—are also positive values. I hope these thoughts don’t seem like empty clichés. We have to address people’s correct and passionate belief in peace in all that we do or say about Palestine and other issues.

—Christopher Z. Hobson

Theses on the New Intifada (October 2000)

By Christopher Z. Hobson

Introduction: Since September 28 [2000] a second “Intifada,” or Palestinian rebellion, has been going on in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory and to some extent in Israel itself, among Israeli Palestinians. More than ninety Palestinians have laid down their lives in struggle against Israeli troops, or simply have been shot by them, like the twelve-year-old boy, Muhammad al-Durra, who was gunned down as his father desperately shouted for the Israelis to hold their fire. These events have captured the world’s attention. The brutal murder of a little boy, captured on television, has caused horror and revulsion among people who have not paid much attention to the ongoing Palestinian struggles. Like many other people, I have watched these images and thought much about where the new Intifada is going and what its occurrence means for the power of U.S. imperialism, which has seemed unassailable since the old Soviet system fell apart in 1989–91. The theses that follow represent my own point of view, though they result from some limited consultation among people working on The Utopian. Like all political “theses,” they try to state conclusions in a complicated political situation rather than to offer a full argument for the conclusions. I and The Utopian staff invite visitors to this site to comment on or criticize them. It is possible that the new Intifada will turn out to be another episode of fighting that brings Palestinians and Israelis back to negotiations; or it may lead to a struggle without negotiations. Either way, the collapse of the peace negotiations (at least temporarily) and the return of struggle in the street seems to have put all the basic questions on the table again—hence this effort to state some overall views.

1. In the event of war between Israel, Palestine, and/or any combination of Arab nations over the issue of Palestine, I believe we should urge all people to support Palestine.
2. I for one believe it is unfortunate that the “peace process” fell apart. Despite its weaknesses and the illegitimate role played by the U.S. and the Israeli government in limiting Palestinian rights, the first Intifada and the years of back-and-forth negotiations it led to prompted a slow shift in world opinion to recognizing the justice of the Palestinian cause and the moral right of Palestinians to live in their own state. In my view the overall blame for the collapse lies squarely on Israel and its partner, the U.S., for consistently stalling and working to minimize any concessions to legitimate Palestinian rights. And the blame for the current struggle in my view is divided between the Israeli right with its leader, Ariel Sharon, who staged his “visit” to a joint Muslim-Jewish holy site as a provocation to derail the peace talks, and the gutless Barak government and the majority of Israeli Jews, who failed to stand up to Sharon and the right.
3. In the present confrontations between the Israeli government and many Jewish Israelis on one side, and Palestinians in the occupied territories and Israel on the other, Palestinians are in general fighting for the just goals of Palestinian self-determination and independence as well as Palestinian equality within Israel. As I see it, the Palestinians are doing no more than defending their rights and existence, in the face of an Israeli government that even today—thirteen years after the original Intifada starting in 1987—claims the unilateral “right” to decide whether or not there will be an independent Palestine and where its capital shall be. On their side there is no doubt many Israelis are terrified, but in large part theirs

is the terror of the powerful who legitimately fear the violence of the less powerful. Their efforts to deny Palestinian outrage, to distort the uprising into a mere tactic by Arafat, and even to justify killing teenagers by blaming the teenagers for fighting betray their own bad consciences. The brutal fact is that Israeli soldiers and mobs have killed more than ten times as many Palestinians (in Palestine and Israel) as Palestinians have killed Jewish Israelis. Even mob executions like the Palestinian killing of two Israeli army reservists are moments of uncontrolled fury in a struggle by poorly armed oppressed people to fight back against superior force.

4. The rights of Palestinians to have their capital in Palestinian Jerusalem and to exercise Palestinian sovereignty over Palestinian parts of Jerusalem are part and parcel of the right of self-determination. The Israeli government has no right to a veto in this matter.
5. Anarchists' ultimate goal in Palestine (as elsewhere) should be a society of equal rights for all peoples and religions, without a state. But in my view such a society can-not be called into being by wishing for it or by refusing to work with others who are struggling for their own democratic goals. The struggle for Palestinian independence is an unavoidable step on the road to a future in which Palestinians and Jewish Israelis can live peacefully together, either in one society or two. Concretely this is going to mean a Palestinian state.
6. Supporting Palestinian independence does not mean sup-ported any particular form of government or supporting the Arafat (or any other) leadership. As I see it, we support a Palestinian state simply as part of the Palestinian people's just demands. We are free to attack any particular policy of a Palestinian government or the government as a whole. Any time we support other people's demands we do so from our own independent perspective.
7. In two articles in *The Torch/La Antorcha*, newspaper of the Revolutionary Socialist League, in 1989, I argued that a "two-state" policy—Palestine alongside Israel—was the best short-term goal on the way to a secular, inclusive Palestine. I continue to believe this, even though it involves some real compromises. Zionists settled in Palestine from the 1880s to 1948 with the aim of creating an exclusively Jewish state, and forced tens of thousands of Palestinians from their homes to do so. These facts make a struggle for a single Palestine—expelling the present Israeli state from Palestine—a just fight. Nevertheless this would be, even if successful, a long and horribly bloody conflict that would leave another dispossessed nation in the world. In my eyes a Palestinian and Israeli compromise, accepting an independent Palestine in part of Palestine and leaving an Israeli state in the rest, is a better way to move toward peace between the two peoples. A "two-state" policy is not in any way an overall long-term solution. The resulting Palestinian state would be weak, dependent on outside aid, and economically and militarily dominated by Israel. However, semi-peaceful relations between two entities, with cultural, political, and economic contacts across the borders, are at least no worse than decades of war as a basis for struggling for a future single, nonreligious Palestinian society.
8. In the same articles I argued, and I continue to believe, that even though Israel's creation resulted from unjust aggression, the present-day Israeli people have a right to live in Palestine, and to have a state of their own; but only if they accept the right of Palestinians to independence and settle all relations between the two peoples on a basis of equality. In

my perspective, anarchists should not favor an Israeli Jewish state but should recognize that nearly all Israeli Jews do favor it. Therefore acceptance of such an Israeli state is part of the compromises making peaceful relations possible, provided that the acceptance goes both ways, i.e., also from Israel to an independent Palestine.

9. I believe the responsibility for making a “two-state” solution possible—and ultimately making peace between the peoples possible—now rests squarely with Israel’s government and its Jewish people. Most Palestinians in the occupied territories and in Israel have long since accepted this policy. But time and again, the Israeli government, backed by the U.S., has balked at taking the reciprocal step. The responsibility is with Israelis to accept Palestinians’ right to independence. If they do not, struggle by any and all means for Palestinian independence either within the West Bank and Gaza or in Palestine as a whole (i.e., the destruction of the Israeli state) is justified.
10. While supporting the Palestinian struggle as a whole, I believe anarchists and democrats should condemn the few instances of destruction of Jewish religious sites by Palestinians. Palestinians should distinguish between Jewish religious sites and sites and agents of Israeli state oppression, even if some Israeli citizens and officials negate the distinction by using religious sites for provocations and attacks. Provocations and attacks should be answered; religious sites should be respected. Though this principle may at times be difficult to apply in practice, the principle is valid, and, I believe, largely accepted by Palestinians.
11. Despite the real danger of war and/or another protracted period of killing, I welcome the failure of U.S. efforts to impose its own version of a Palestinian settlement on Palestine and the resumption of direct struggle by the Palestinian people to determine their future. It is the right of Palestinians to make use of U.S. or any other mediation or pressure to move closer to self-determination. Nonetheless, such mediation reflected and reinforced the U.S. position as the world’s imperialist master. Events as diverse as the anti-globalization protests, the revolution in Yugoslavia (against a U.S. enemy but led by a critic of the U.S.), and the mass gas price protests in Europe show that this stranglehold may be weakening. The failure of U.S. settlement efforts reflects the waning ability of U.S. imperialism to dictate to the world’s people, increases oppressed people’s ability to struggle for justice, and is a sign of hope in the current world situation.
12. “Why,” my young friend said, “does everyone hate so much? It seems there is no limit to hate.” That is a real truth. But the absence of hate has to be based on social justice. In fact, absence of justice creates hate: defensive, repressive hate on the part of the oppressors and beneficiaries of oppression (in this case the Israeli right wing and much of the Israeli public), and rebellious hate on the part of the oppressed. However much hate they may show and however unjustified some specific action may be, the Palestinians have right on their side; Sharon, Barak, and the majority of Israeli Jews who are now self-righteously judging whether they have “partners for peace” (for the continuation of their power) are wrong. I continue to favor a compromise based on social justice, if the Israelis can wake up and accept it; but the fight for justice is fundamental. Forward through social justice to a world without hate.

Further Comment on the New Intifada

By Wayne Price

I agree with almost everything Chris writes but I think something more needs to be said, which he may or may not agree with.

The current rebellion by the Palestinians and the repressive reaction of the Israelis demonstrates something important. There is a great need for a revolutionary socialist-anarchist movement in the Middle East. When I say “movement,” I am including the need for an anarchist organization to spread anti-authoritarian ideas.

The dominant ideas of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, on both sides, are nationalist. By “nationalism” I do not mean a feeling of place and a respect for one’s people, its traditions, the democratic and rebellious aspects of its history, or its contributions to world culture. Both the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs have much to be proud of in their histories. This is a sense of “nationality,” which I am distinguishing from the program of “nationalism.” (This may seem arbitrary, but the terms do not matter; it is the concepts which are important.)

By “nationalism,” I mean thinking in bloc concepts: the Jews versus the Arabs. If one is Jewish, then you think of all Jews as the Good Guys to be supported against the faceless wall of Arab opposition, which is regarded as continuing, in a straight line, the world’s anti-Semitism, including the Nazis’. If one is a Palestinian Arab, you see all the Jews as a faceless unity, the “Zionist entity,” while wishing all the Arabs to be a united enemy of the Israelis. Such bloc thinking is very useful for authoritarian leaders. The people identify with the leader and are urged to rally around. Arafat, despite his disastrous policies, is still respected by many Palestinians because he is, after all, “their” leader. Israelis are urged to form a national government of unity, bringing into the government the very people who precipitated the current conflict. Nationalist thinking justifies the state. People feel they need the national state to protect “us” against “them.” Meanwhile the ruling elite in each nation uses the state to oppress the majority of each nation.

The problem with nationalism is that it papers over the very real splits and conflicts within each bloc. Revolutionary anarchists wish to make these conflicts clear to all. Within Israel, these include the conflict between the workers and the capitalists, the secularists and the Orthodox, male chauvinists and women, war hawks and peaceniks, European Jews and Arabic Jews (Sephardim)—as well as Russian Jews and African Jews, and all the Israeli Jews versus the Israeli Arabs.

Among the Arabs, there are the conflicts between the Palestinians and the various other Arab nations and their governments (Palestinians having taken part in internal wars inside Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, and elsewhere, as they have been sold out repeatedly by their “brother Arab” rulers). There are the various Palestinian parties, which have at times fought it out; the parties represent various views: secularist, theocratic-Islamicist, capitalist democratic, nationalist socialist, nationalist Marxist. There are differences between the Palestinians who stayed within Israel, the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, and the Palestinians outside of Israeli controlled land. Most importantly, from our point of view, are the conflicting interests of the mass of Palestinians and the capitalists, the landlords, the police, and the bureaucrats, represented by the PLO’s politicians. Arafat has set up a de facto new state, with all the trappings of power and corruption, lacking minimal democratic rights. Meanwhile the workers and peasants, the refugees and small merchants, have gotten virtually nothing.

It is in the interests of the working people, the poor and oppressed, on both sides to get rid of the politicians and capitalists who rule them. This is true for the Palestinians, whose leadership has given them seven years of negotiations which have won virtually nothing in permanent gains. This is also true for the Israelis, whose Zionist rulers have led their people into a dead end, alienated from the people of their region, unable to “win” safety by some final war but unwilling to negotiate a lasting peace.

While opposing all the states and statisms of the Middle East, anarchists should participate in the struggles of the oppressed and support their democratic demands. Right now the vast majority of the Palestinians accept a two-state solution. Anarchists should defend their right to win this demand, because we believe in democracy and self-determination. But we should not cease to point out the limitations of any form of states and of any sort of capitalist arrangement. We advocate a federation of non-state self-governing socialist communities throughout the Middle East, with mutual recognition of the rights of all national communities.

Similarly we should criticize the Oslo treaty, agreeing with people like Edward Said and Hanan Ashrawi that the specific treaty was a sell-out. But we support the right of the Palestinians and their representatives to make treaties with the Israelis, and the need for some sort of compromise if there is ever to be real peace. So long as the treaty was in place and the majority of Palestinians seemed to accept it, anarchists should not have tried to overthrow it (which would have meant an alliance with Hamas). There are alter-natives to either armed uprisings or passive acceptance of whatever the bosses negotiate. These include mass organizing and education (which has been done but only by secular nationalists and by Hamas), demonstrations, rallies, strikes, active alliances with peace-minded Jews, nonviolent resistance campaigns, among other possibilities.

There will be future ups and downs in the Middle East, with further rebellions, military conflict, and periods of negotiation. What the latest uprising reminds us is that neither peace nor liberation will be achieved by deals brokered by bourgeois politicians. Peace and freedom require continued popular struggle from below.

Reply

By Christopher Z. Hobson

Wayne, like me, is trying to think through a complex situation; neither of us has all the answers. Let me first state what I know Wayne and I agree on: being an anarchist, and therefore against the state as an institution, does not mean one can't be for national independence (which means creation of a new state) in some circumstances. We can work for our goal of a stateless world and still be for various interim goals, if they are genuine steps forward and if we tell the truth about their dangers. This attitude separates Wayne and me from some in the anarchist tradition. But though we agree on this, it appears that Wayne and I may have real differences, which I will try to state as clearly as I can.

(1) I myself support a two-state policy (it is not a solution) as the best partial step forward in the present circumstances, and as providing a better basis than unending war on which to work for a future stateless, secular Palestinian society (my theses 7, 8, and 9). Wayne appears to support this only as a concession to Palestinians' limited conceptions. He states, “Right now the vast majority of the Palestinians accept a two state solution. Anarchists should defend their

right to win this demand, because we believe in democracy and self-determination.” This seems to mean Wayne does not think an independent Palestine alongside Israel is a good step forward in the present situation, but perhaps he hasn’t formulated clearly. I would like to know whether Wayne agrees with my view or whether he would prefer that there be no peace agreement and no creation of a truncated independent Palestine while anarchists slowly persuade everyone to favor a stateless secular federation.

(2) Wayne and I also appear to have differences about how we evaluate Palestinian nationalism. Wayne uses symmetrical formulas to show that all nationalisms are equally bad: “If one is Jewish, then you think... If one is a Palestinian Arab, you see...” (paragraph 4); “Within Israel,[there is a] conflict between... Among Arabs, there are conflicts between...” (paragraphs 5–6); “This is true for the Palestinians... This is also true for the Israelis...”(paragraph 7), etc. Wayne seems unwilling to agree that there are differences in character between Zionism, Israeli nationalism, and Palestinian nationalism. In my opinion, Zionism, the ideology that supports a religiously-ethnically based Jewish state in all of Palestine, is what got us into this mess. Zionism taught its believers that they were right to steal the land, expel its inhabitants, treat those who remained as third-class citizens, and, today, balk at allowing a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Israeli nationalism, in the context of Israeli politics, is a more liberal trend that believes territory, not ethnicity and religion, should be the basis for citizenship; therefore it advocates a non-Jewish Israeli state with equality for Palestinian Israelis, and is at least more open to the idea of a Palestinian state. Palestinian nationalism, finally, contains a core of struggle against Israeli oppression and for self-government, a positive goal. I believe we should support and identify with this struggle, but still keep the goal of a secular, stateless Palestine. Overall, I believe I may see the struggle for an independent Palestine as more positive than Wayne does. If you say an independent Palestinian state will be authoritarian and repressive, I agree; if you say this proves that independence is a meaningless trap, I don’t agree. It is an interim goal, not the final goal, but it is worthwhile all the same.

(3) Wayne seems to me particularly off-base in seeing a rise in “thinking in bloc concepts” by both Palestinians and Israelis as the great danger today (paragraph 4). In reality, most Palestinians have already taken the impressive political step of accepting the Zionist conquest of half of Palestine as an accomplished fact that they are prepared to live with, if Israelis can reciprocate. I wish Wayne would understand that this is an impressive step, instead of feeling impelled to warn against “thinking in bloc concepts.” At least until recently, Palestinians did make the distinction between Israel and Jewish people, and between the rights of Jewish people in general, however reluctantly conceded, and the so-called “right” of Jews to settle in Palestinian areas and take them over for Israel. To illustrate this Palestinian attitude from another angle, let me refer to a conversation among Palestinian students some years ago that was reported recently in the New York Times. The Palestinians agreed generally that they, not Jews, were native to Palestine and that “the Jews don’t belong here.” But when asked if that meant the Jews should leave, they said no: “Israelis don’t have any other place to go” (Oct. 15, 2000: 4:1). This was in 1993; recently there has been a rise in outright anti-Semitism and this seems to be the fruit of Israelis’ stubborn refusal to recognize Palestinian rights. Even so, it is notable that the demand Palestinian local leaders threw back at Arafat after the summit [August 2000] was for continuing the struggle for a state in the West Bank and Gaza. “We will not stop it [the intifada] until there is sovereignty and independence for the Palestinians... the only solution to this conflict is an end to Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people,” says Marwan Barghouti, the anti-Arafat West Bank leader

of Fatah (New York Times, Oct. 17, 2000:A19). Clearly he means independence in and for the Territories. Even if this view is in part a concession to greater power, I continue to be humbled by the political realism and even the humanism with which Palestinians are ready to accept Israel, if only Israel will take the equivalent step. Similar attitudes are not unknown on the Israeli side, either. But in its great majority, the Israeli side has yet to say, "Palestinians don't have any other place to go." This is why I feel it is inappropriate to lecture Israelis and Palestinians equally on the need to avoid bloc thinking.

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