

# **Free Palestine!**

**Only the working class can end the carnage**

Black Flag Sydney

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2023 marks seventy-five years since the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli war, and the beginning of the Nakba – the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Arabs from their homes in Palestine, an ethnic cleansing enforced through brutal violence. The purpose of this was to make way for the state of Israel, a colonial ethnostate and imperialism’s most advanced outpost in the Middle-East.

The creation of Israel – supported by all Western nations, and the USSR – was the culmination of years of dispossession and violence that had the direct aim of expelling Arabs. Since 1948, Palestinians have been in a state of abject repression in nearly all the places they live.

Those remaining as citizens of Israel live as second class citizens, restricted from certain professions and the target of constant, systematic racism from the state and from the nationalist population. Those in the West Bank are at the mercy of a system of apartheid designed to cage them into shrinking patches of territory, in order to make room for Jewish settlers.

The Gaza strip, on the other hand, is simply an open air prison: a densely packed place of miserable poverty, enforced by sanctions so punitive that even before the outbreak of violence, hospitals couldn’t function properly, schools couldn’t operate and food imports could be restricted based on caloric intake. Gaza’s population, over and over again, has borne the brunt of Israeli violence; in the past twenty years, Israel has launched punitive strike after punitive strike. With violence from Hamas as the pretext, the Israeli military has killed hundreds of civilians and destroyed vast amounts of civilian infrastructure.

## **The latest clash**

This is the context in which Hamas decided to launch “Operation al-Aqsa Flood”, sending hundreds of militants into Southern Israel to attack military outposts and civilians. In a direct sense, they have scored the kind of propaganda victory that it has been craving for years. Most previous attacks consisted of firing off rockets indiscriminately in the direction of Israel’s southern territories. This, however, is unprecedented: hundreds of militants infiltrating Israel’s defences in broad daylight, capturing and killing both soldiers and civilians with hardly any shots fired in return.

They have managed to gather the Arab world behind their cause again after it looked like the Abraham Accords process would box them into a corner. Scuppering this sham process and the general Israeli-Saudi deal was likely the key motivation for Hamas in launching their operation. Whether this will work remains to be seen, but a message like no other has been sent.

The actions have garnered the support of Palestinians both within Gaza and in the West Bank, where dissatisfaction with the two-state process and the collaborationist Palestinian Authority government has never been more acute. Sympathy can be seen across the Arab region and the world generally. In Egypt, a man inspired by the attacks was inspired to take matters into his own hand and attack a group of Israeli tourists – the most tangible symbol of the Sisi government’s friendliness with the Zionist state.

Hamas’ violence against civilians is condemnable, and we should make no equivocations about that. Their aims and their methods have nothing to do with working-class politics. Don’t get us wrong: we are not pacifists. Violence is a necessary political tool. However, the history of working class rebellion from Russia to Spain demonstrates that this violence must be mastered by the working class itself – not by any other force. The post-colonial world is littered with ex-

amples where violent nationalist or religious armed struggle was, after victory, turned back on the working class that laid down their lives for it: Iran, Algeria, Vietnam, China, South Africa, Iraq...

The killings of Israeli civilians are terrible, which is why one has to be serious about where this violence comes from, and how to stop it. Selective moral outrage is now being used as the ideological counterpart to Zionist rule: a means of justifying the brutality of the Israeli state. For years, Palestinian civilians have been killed by Israeli military, police and settlers on a routine basis. In August, Human Rights Watch reported that thirty-four Palestinian children had been killed in the West Bank in that year alone.

Civilian after civilian dies, house after house is stolen, arrest after arrest is made, without Israel being harmed in return. In this context, we can see why “payback”, even when brutal, garners support. This is why the attitude of equivocating between both sides and declaring them equally bad needs to disappear.

The violence of the Palestinian side, regardless of how awful it can be, develops from the state of constant oppression Palestinians are placed in. The violence of the Israeli state, however, is directed at establishing, expanding and enforcing a brutal racial hegemony over an Indigenous people. While Hamas’ violence hurts civilians, it does not have the effect of seriously damaging Israeli society. Israel’s violence, on the other hand, has the effect of destroying enormous sections of Palestinian society.

## **The new phase of genocide**

Israel has responded with predictable and overwhelming brutality. Already, the number of Gazan civilians killed has gone past the number of Israeli civilians – certainly if you include the number of Palestinians killed in general this year alone. While the Hamas operation involved killings of civilians, the Israeli government is not content with simply giving it back in the same way. They are not just destroying Palestinian lives, but Palestinian society generally: schools, hospitals, apartment blocks are being levelled, contributing to the deaths of many more people than those who have been killed in direct military strikes.

As these words are written, it is marshalling its vast military resources for a ground and air attack on Gaza, the likes of which might be unprecedented. Israeli politicians are openly speaking of a genocidal war, of levelling Gaza. Israeli politicians openly speak of a “second Nakba”. One MK even demanded Netanyahu nuke Gaza. When the Israeli defense minister announced that Gaza would be placed under total siege, with food, electricity and other essentials blocked, he stated that Israel was dealing with “human animals”, and that the country will “act accordingly”. The US has sent an aircraft carrier to the region to lend support, and the rest of the west has given it a carte blanche to do what it likes.

The pseudo-opposition within Israel has shown its true colours, yet again: the anti-Netanyahu parties have joined a wartime unity coalition to see the war through to the end, and the draft resisters opposing the Likud judiciary reforms have signalled the end of their campaign. The anti-Netanyahu figurehead Benny Gantz, who once boasted of his promise to send parts of Gaza “back to the stone age”, is now standing hand in hand with his adversary. Their criticisms of Netanyahu only centre around a belief that he will not “win the war” as well as they would.

Only Hadash and the Arab parties voice continuing opposition within the Knesset, and only the Arab population and the far-left maintain active, street-level opposition to Zionist crimes. Israeli chauvinists point to the existence of Arab politician representation and “toleration” of the far-left as proof that their state is liberal and democratic. As the years go by, this façade becomes less and less believable.

As with all democracies, the opposition will only be tolerated up to a point, when it has utility. Mansour Abbas’ *Ra’am* party was brought into government in order to break parliamentary deadlock; it was brought in by exchanging its opposition to the Israeli state for an enormous package of social funding. When Israel no longer has a need or desire to present itself as democratic, it will do away with its limited political rights for dissidents altogether. In the wake of this massive escalation of its war on Gaza, this moment may come sooner than we think.

## The future of Palestine

The future of the Palestinian cause is totally bound up with the cause of the working class in the region generally. From the moment of the Nakba, when hundreds of thousands of Arabs were ethnically cleansed to make way for the settler state, Palestinians have lived as a people on the margins. Dispersed across the Arab world, living as non-citizens in refugee camps, cheap human material ready to be killed at a moment’s notice should the political situation demand it.

Within Gaza, the working class is a brutalised and marginalised force, reflecting the strangled nature of the society there generally. Within the West Bank, and within Israel’s formal borders, the working class is a cheap and disposable labour force for Israeli capitalists and their Palestinian collaborators, held down by both the IDF and the bourgeois puppets of the Palestinian Authority.

All the states surrounding Palestine are controlled totally by forces that would not be able to defeat Israel in a military conflict – and they don’t want to, anyway. Egypt and Jordan are the most noted regional collaborators of Israel, and they have been for some time. Ever since Sadat took power after Nasser and realigned the country with Israel and the United States, it has been a willing accomplice in the Zionist project; the dictator al-Sisi is simply the most shameless of them all.

Jordan’s collusion with Israel stretches back *before* Israel was even established, when King Abdullah I conducted friendly diplomacy with the Zionist leaders to carve up the territory in a mutually beneficial way. Though large numbers of Palestinians have assimilated into contemporary Jordan, the political leadership is still a close friend with the Israeli government, with whom it collaborates on economic and military matters.

The Gulf states are moving closer and closer to a full-scale rapprochement with Israel. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates led the way in breaking down the barriers that prevented making the already implicit political ties explicit. While Hamas is trying desperately to stop it, a Saudi-Israel deal may still be on the cards.

Lebanon itself would never threaten Israel, and Hezbollah is unlikely to commit to a full scale conflict soon. Ditto with Syria and Iraq, which are both in unstable reconstruction periods that may last quite a while.

All of this is in spite of the fact that the most popular cause in the Arab world, by far, is the Palestinian one. In fact, a pretty good litmus test to see whether an Arab state is remotely

democratic is to check whether it is friendly with Israel. If it is, then you know it doesn't represent its population.

The clash between popular pro-Palestinian sentiment and the collaborationism of Arab rulers turns the Palestinian cause from a simple national conflict, into a cause that may have the power to knock over the regional dictators and the artificial borders, remaking the Middle East. It may set in process a social revolution that could go very far indeed. In addition, a revolution in the Middle East could well be the only thing that breaks apart the "golden chains" tying Jewish workers in Israel to the brutal state.

In the early 2010s, it looked like the Arab Spring might do this: a grassroots Pan-Arabism was back on the agenda in a real way. However, the movement quickly devolved into warfare between bourgeois factions, which led only to further repression and the wholesale slaughter of the region's workers.

## **In Australia**

Australia is more entwined with the conflict than people may immediately think. The Australian government provides crucial diplomatic support for Israel. While the United States is willing to support the apartheid state with billions of dollars in military supplies and liquid capital to further its own regional interests, Australia is also willing to be an accomplice to these war crimes. In past decades, the government has been a supporter of virtually all Israeli actions, with the only criticism being tepid requests to align with international law.

Though the Albanese government has walked back some of the more extreme decisions of its Coalition predecessor – like, for instance, the reversal of the decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel – there have been no major changes. In the wake of the escalation in the conflict, it's likely the government will head even further in the direction of mindless support for Israel.

Together with other Western governments, the federal Australian government and the state New South Wales government have signalled that it will use whatever legal powers it can to crack down on pro-Palestinian protestors. None of us should hesitate to resist this.

There are wider affinities between Israel and Australia: both are settler colonial states, nations whose histories have been written through capitalist genocide, the ethnic cleansing of indigenous peoples. The survivors and descendants of this genocide are relegated to a position at the bottom of the class scrapheap, forced to resist in order to secure their wellbeing.

As always, our slogan when it comes to foreign policy is that *the main enemy is at home*. As workers living in Australia, our foremost obligation is to oppose the rotten policies of our own government, that we are best placed to affect.

The upsurge in the conflict has created a tidal wave of anti-Arab sentiment, both from the media and the general public, but it has also galvanised a Palestinian solidarity movement that has been slowly building its strength for years. There is now a renewed opportunity to build this movement into something even more effective.

There is no shortage of demands for the movement to coalesce around, and previous campaigns can provide a sense of direction. The BDS campaign in Australia has been running for a number of years. In 2022, arts workers led a boycott of the Sydney Festival, in response to the festival receiving funding from the Israeli embassy. This campaign involved a number of arts

workers taking informal industrial action, declining shifts and wearing pro-Palestinian material on duty. Even though their union only provided very weak support, they were able to trigger change: later in the year, the Sydney Festival management decided to suspend funding from overseas embassies.

The Israeli military-industrial complex has links here, too. The defense megacorporation Elbit Systems has a number of contracts with the federal government and with the Victorian state government. Elbit – which is reasonably suspected of producing illegal cluster munitions – sells our ruling class a number of products, from surveillance equipment to drones. RMIT in Melbourne maintains a research partnership with the company worth millions, a move protested by students and comrades based there.

Beyond this, other Israeli military contractors are active: Rafael Advanced Defense Systems has partnered with the Australian firm Varley Group in order to produce anti-tank guided missiles. Israel Aerospace Industries works with a number of firms here to produce drones and surface-to-air missiles for the ADF. There are likely more companies operating whose contracts are not made public.

An effective campaign could also have Australia's extensive diplomatic ties with Israel in its sights. We could ensure the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador, the reversal of pro-Israel votes at the UN, and a number of other political changes that would have the effect of further bringing Israel to heel.

## **The way forward: the working class**

All successful working class campaigns are built from the ground up and this is no exception. The upsurge in support for Palestine among disparate groups – like the Arab community, Muslim communities, church groups and so on – can lead to the temptation of taking a shortcut in organising.

In relating to this upsurge, we need to be sure to avoid the flaw of “popular fronts”, even when their advocates think of them as united fronts. We need to build a substantial independent base among rank and file unionists, students, Arab workers in Australia, anti-Zionist Jews and other groups, rather than organising on the basis of alliances with religious leaders, community leaders and political parties, in the hope that they will provide the movement with a ready-made audience.

The Israel-Palestine conflict is not simply a national conflict, but a manifestation of the class war that is integral to capitalism globally. A working-class solution to it is not something for the far off future, but something that has to be developed in the here and now, and this cannot be done through alliances with people who fundamentally represent Middle Eastern capitalists – not Middle Eastern workers. This is particularly the case when said religious and community leaders represent right wing politics.

An effective Palestine solidarity movement is one that would relate to wider working class politics and related causes. Already, the Palestine solidarity movement in Sydney has distinguished itself in the way it has built links with the Indigenous movement. These links can be deepened further and expanded to cover other causes, embracing radical demands that would drive the movement further politically, just as the queer movement has been furthered by groups like Pride in Protest standing for police abolition.

While Australia is our starting point, it is not our end point. Solidarity movements like the one we hope to see develop in response to this conflict are not just valuable for their own goals, but for the way they can break workers here out of a narrow, national focus, linking their class interests with the interests of workers overseas.

It is true that the working class in the Middle East is at a low ebb, as we stated before: it has managed to only sporadically coalesce into a serious force. In the context of the total counter-revolution that came after the Arab Spring, the desire for revolution has never been so risky – but it's genuinely the only alternative, and the seeds can be laid both in Palestine and in the rest of the world.



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