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Attacks on Israel Ignore the Long History of Arab Conflict

Murray Bookchin

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There is certainly much one can criticize about Israeli policy, particularly under the Likud government which orchestrated the invasion of Lebanon. But the torrent of anti-Israeli sentiment that has surfaced in the local press and the virtual equation of Zionism with anti-Arab racism impels me to reply with some vigor.

For years I had hoped that Israel or Palestine could have evolved into a Swiss-like confederation of Jews and Arabs, a confederation in which both peoples could live peacefully with each other and develop their cultures creatively and harmoniously.

Tragically, this was not to be. The United Nations resolution of 1947, which partitioned Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, was followed by the invasion of the country by Arab armies, notably the Egyptian, Syrian, and highly trained Jordanian "Arab Legion," with direct or indirect aid from Iraq and other Arab nations.

In some cases these armies, particularly the Arab irregulars who accompanied them, took no prisoners in their assaults on Jewish communities. Generally, they tried to systematically obliterate all

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Jewish settlements in their paths until they were stopped by furious and costly Jewish resistance.

The invasion and the annihilatory combat it created set a terrible pattern of fear and bitterness that is not easy to erase from the minds of Israeli Jews. That a desperate lunatic element of Jewish zealots behaved in kind before it was stopped by the newly formed Israeli military forces should not allow us to forget the Jewish men and women who were slaughtered by stalwarts of Arab nationalism even after they had raised white flags of surrender.

I have seen very little mention of this fearful pattern of “combat” which stained the Arab invasions of Palestine and so profoundly influenced Jewish confidence in the value of “truce negotiations” and the predictability of peace agreements with Arab irredentists. Indeed, the partition lines that were eventually established after the 1948 invasions were the product of bloody warfare — literally the give-and-take of battle — not of “imperialistic” or “land-grabbing Zionists,” to use the language that is so much in vogue these days.

Nor do I hear any longer of the earnest attempts by the Haganah — the Jewish citizens’ militia of the partition era — to encourage Arabs to remain in their neighborhoods and towns, of the Israeli vehicles with loudspeakers that went through the streets of Jaffa, for example, urging Arabs not to succumb to the feelings of panic engendered by battle conditions and by extremists on both sides of the conflict.

That many Arabs remained in Israel clearly challenges the myth that Israeli Jews tried to rid the country of its Moslem inhabitants. What seems to be totally ignored is the certainty that there would have been an Arab state in Palestine side-by-side with a Jewish one if Egyptian armies in the south, Syrian in the north, and Jordanian in the east had not tried to seize both U.N.-partitioned lands with imperialist interests of their own and, when this failed, used the Palestinian refugees as pawns in future negotiations with the Israelis and their western supporters.

There is another myth that must be removed: that the present volatile situation in the Middle East has its source in Israeli-Palestinian conflicts; indeed, that the relationship between the Jews and Arabs was “beatific” until it was poisoned by “Zionist ambitions.” Leaving aside the simplistic image of Middle East problems that this notion fosters, the extent to which it is a sheer distortion of Jewish-Arab relations in the past verges on the unspeakable.

Are we to forget that Arab persecution of Jews, while less genocidal than European, has a centuries-long history of its own with the exception of Moslem Spain and Ottoman Turkey? That Arab pogroms against the Jews accompanied the Jewish settlement of pre-World War II Palestine, culminating in the extermination of the ages-old Jewish community of Hebron (once the seat of the Hebrew tribal confederacy) in the late 1920s? That the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in the 1930s (the precursor of Yassar Arafat two generations ago) was an avowed admirer of Hitler and called for a “holy war” of extermination of Palestinian Jews up to and into World War II? That Jordan’s “Arab Legion” systematically leveled the old Jewish quarter of Jerusalem in 1948 and stabled horses at the Western Wall of Herod’s Temple, defiling the most sacred place of world Judaism?

Are we to forget that General Hafez Assad, the so-called “president” of Syria (elected by a “majority” of 99.97 percent of the Syrian “electorate”) slaughtered between 6,000–10,000 people in Kama in February 1982, for daring to challenge his leadership of the country?

One wonders why there was no storm of protest when Amnesty International in 1983 declared that “Syrian security forces have practiced systematic violations of human rights, including torture and political killings, and have been operating with impunity under the country’s emergency laws”? Why is there no concern over Syrian imperialism notably Assad’s fantasy of absorbing Lebanon and Palestine, including Israel, if you please, into a Syrian Empire

— a goal every objective expert on the Middle East knows to be Assad’s Arabic version of Rabbi Kahane’s insane version of a “Greater Israel” — a notion that has been vigorously denounced by responsible Jewish and Zionist organizations in Israel and abroad?

If the “core problem” of the Middle East, to use Miriam Ward’s words in her Vermont Perspective of April 27, is the confiscation of Palestinian land by Israel, what would the whole area look like if Israel and its Jewish population magically disappeared from the scene? Would Syria be less of a police state than it is today and would its Sunni Moslem majority feel less dominated, exploited, and manipulated by General Assad, who tends to speak for the Alawite Moslem minority of the country?

Would Saudi princes cease to squander much of their country’s wealth on limousines, palaces, jewels, and real estate abroad, much less bring a modicum of freedom to their own people at home? Would Egyptian landowners, living in lavish opulence amidst incredible squalor, return a fraction of their landholdings to a starved Egyptian peasantry? Would Iraq free its Kurdish population, to speak only of its most vocal and rebellious minorities, or meet their demands for genuine equal autonomy?

Would the Iraq-Iran war come to an end, a war that has already claimed a million lives in the past few years? Would Colonel Khadafy cease to be a strutting militarist who has been trying to eat away at the territories of many of his neighbors? Would Khomeni and Moslem fundamentalism, whose main thrust is against any form of modernity and western culture, give equality to women and freedom to critics of Iran’s present-day theocratic regime?

What is so disquieting about many persistent attacks on Israel is that they help to completely obfuscate what is really a “core problem” of the Palestinian people. This abandoned people is being used in the most unconscionable manner by the Arab states to conceal deep-seated economic, social, and cultural problems in their own lands and in the Middle East as a whole. That the differences between the Israelis and Palestinians have to be resolved equitably

such that both people can live with a sense of security that resolves their fears of what has happened in the past and achieve a constructive harmony with each other goes without saying.

I am not sure what that solution will be. But it certainly will not be achieved by acts of PLO-related terrorism against independently minded Arab mayors who are trying to negotiate a settlement between the two peoples at one end of the spectrum or lunatics like Rabbi Kahane at the other end who are trying to expel the Palestinians from their landholdings and communities.

But crucial as such a settlement surely is, we should not bury the real “core problem” of the Middle East as embodied by its cynical politicians, landowners, oil barons, military juntas, fanatic clerics, and imperialistic predators in the welter of tragic problems that have emerged between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Given this background, it would be wise to remember that both peoples have more interests in common than they have differences. It would be a splendid example of political independence if people who raise a justifiable hue about military juntas in Latin America would remind themselves that they are confronted with an exact parallel in the Middle East — from Colonel Khadafy to General Assad.

Murray Bookchin is a teacher and lecturer and author of many books social and environmental problems.