

What is Israeli/Palestine clash about?

Part 4: US plan for Middle East 'Normalising' relations with Israel

The previous *Labour Bulletins* charted the history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and told how the Arab states abandoned Palestinian struggles in favour of a more profitable alliance with the US and Israel. In this final part **Chandra Kumar** tells how the US wants to make the Middle East, including Palestine, a neo-liberal free trade zone.

Several countries, such as Israel, Egypt, Oman and Bahrain have signed bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) with the US. They have agreed to open up to United States companies, and remove import restrictions that might help local industries.

The FTAs also make it harder for governments to provide services for the poor, because this is seen as discriminating against foreign companies that can provide services on the market – to those who can afford them. The bilateral FTAs say that Arab countries must promote economic relations and not boycott trade with Israel.

In 2003, the US introduced the Middle East Free Trade Area (Mefta). It aimed to make the region a free trade zone where the US would behave like a national state adopting privatisation programmes, allowing foreign ownership and cutting state spending on social services.

This neo-liberal vision sees Israel economically and politically integrated into the region. This is

what is meant by 'normalisation' of relations with Israel. Most of the popular and leftwing movements in the Middle East reject this 'normalisation'. They do not believe Israel is a 'normal' country as long as it denies Palestinians their right to a state and the right for refugees to return.

In Jordan and Egypt, there are now industrial zones that make goods for export to US markets. These zones bring together Israeli and Arab capital, and are integrated with US markets. They show what the US wants in the 'New Middle East'.

The goods made in these industrial zones can only be duty-free in the US if some inputs are Israeli. There are textile factories in the zones which are subcontracted to large US companies like Walmart and GAP.

The factories mostly employ migrant labourers from South Asia, who work in sweatshop conditions and cannot join unions. They are often paid two cents an hour and sometimes work 72-hour shifts.

They pay for their own travel expenses, and their passports are often confiscated until their contracts end.

But why is this relevant to the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination?

The answer is that the Mefta provides the framework that the US, Israel, Europe and Arab political elites want to put into the region. The Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank has also been trying to entrench this neo-liberal model in the Palestinian Occupied Territories (OPT).

NEO-LIBERALISM IN PALESTINE

The 2008 Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PDRP) was developed by the PA with institutions like the World Bank, the IMF and the British Department for International Development (DFID). The PDRP will privatise the economy, attract foreign investment and reduce public spending. These are the features of a neo-liberal policy often called 'globalisation'. The PDRP strengthens Israeli economic, political and military domination in the OPT.

The PDRP depends on Israel's policy of turning the OPT into Bantustans policed by the PA, through which regional capitalists can access a pool of cheap Palestinian labour.

With the PDRP, Palestinian elites join in as junior partners in the neo-liberal regime. The plan commits the PA to cutbacks in government spending that are worse than similar measures imposed by the IMF and World Bank on other states in the Middle East.

These cutbacks happen when poverty in the OPT is worse than ever. By 2008, 75% of households in Gaza and over 50% in the West Bank were poverty stricken. The attacks in 2009 on Gaza made the situation worse, with about 80% unemployment.

PALESTINIAN WORKERS

To make things worse, Israel has replaced many Palestinian workers in agriculture and construction with migrant workers from Asia and Eastern Europe. Since 1967, Israel has also made it impossible for Palestinian industries to expand and employ Palestinian workers. This is one way that Israel makes the Palestinian economy subordinate to its own.

The Palestinians have no control over water, electricity, phone access or other basic services. These services are supplied by Israeli companies through Palestinian middlemen, with the exception of a small amount of electricity generated in Gaza which was damaged by Israeli attacks in 2009. This means that Palestinian electricity bills are generally paid to Israeli companies.

The PDRP aims to use cheap Palestinian labour in industrial zones on the edges of the patchwork of Palestinian territories in the West Bank. Israel, Palestinian rulers and regional capital there will take advantage of low Palestinian wages. While some production is in traditional textiles, other zones focus on producing goods for high-tech sectors of the Israeli economy, where well-educated Palestinian labour are paid low wages.

The goods produced are exported to the US, European Union and Gulf states. The PA polices the several million reserve army of labour locked behind the walls and checkpoints of the Palestinian territories. In return, the PA leadership will wield the state, travel, move freely and earn profits that flow from the zones.

Nearly 20% of jobs in the West Bank are connected with industrial zones where Israeli and Palestinian labour laws, wage levels, environmental regulations and other workplace conditions do not apply. The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions is not allowed to represent workers and workers will need to comply with Israeli military orders.

Palestinian workers and grassroots activists reject the neo-liberal programmes of the PA. They do not believe that it will bring peace and an end to the occupation.

ONE AND TWO STATE SOLUTION

The Palestinian struggle is central to any anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggle in the Middle East. Because 'New Middle East' needs to have normalisation with Israel, any movement that challenges imperialism also challenge Israel's apartheid rule in Palestine. This includes the plight of Palestinian refugees. Their rights to return to the land is often put on the back-burner, because a Palestinian majority conflicts with the idea of a 'Jewish state'.

This is one good reason to reject the idea of a 'Jewish state'. There is a growing movement *favouring one democratic state in all of Palestine* instead of the two-state solution backed by the United Nations. This was the original PLO position which shifted to a two-state position in the mid-1970s.

One state, where the rights of all are respected may be the best solution to the conflict and it would make it easier for refugees to return.

Since Israel uses an apartheid form of control over Palestinians, the Palestinian struggle is not just an anti-occupation struggle, but also *an anti-apartheid struggle for equal rights within the same territory* as the Jews.

Many argue that it is impossible to separate Jews and Palestinians, just as it was impossible to separate blacks and whites in South Africa. The population of Israel is already 20% non-Jewish (mostly Palestinian but also Bedouin), and there is a large Jewish population illegally settled in the OPT.

The two-state solution however already has the backing of the international community in the UN and from the US and Israel. There is also strong backing in international law for the two-state solution and against colonial occupation.

The one-state solution does not have this backing, but that is changing. Recently even the US Central Intelligence Agency predicted that eventually there will be a one-state solution in Palestine. There is growing support for this in the Arab countries and a recent OPT poll indicated this as well.

Moreover, Israel has now taken over more than 80% of Palestinian land and continues to do so daily



Soap-making has been at the heart of the Nablus economy since the 1930s. In 2001, soap accounted for 41.5% of exports. Volume has steadily declined as Israeli occupation forces destroyed three soap factories during Operation Defensive Shield. The destruction of economies such as these make way for a neo-liberal economic agenda.

Cosatu resolution on Palestine

Cosatu expresses its solidarity with the peoples of the Middle East. We will campaign for the end to the aggression of the US, Israel and their allies in the region. We call for the release of Palestinians, Iraqis, and others held unjustly and without charge. We call on Cosatu members to boycott Israeli goods and to demonstrate at the embassies of the US and Israel. Our government should withdraw its ambassador from Israel and the Israeli ambassador to South Africa should be expelled.

Cosatu also welcomes the adoption of the Goldstone report by the UN General Assembly following a two-day debate, which ended with 114 countries voting in favour with 18 opposed including Germany, Israel and the US and 44 abstaining, including Britain, France and Russia. China voted in favour. The resolution calls on Israel and 'the Palestinian side' to undertake credible investigations into the report's charges on Israeli war crimes.

Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian UN observer, called the resolution 'an important night in the history of the General Assembly and the history of fighting against impunity and seeking accountability.'

This confirms our view that the world cannot be bullied by the US and Israel into accepting Israel's lies of self-defence as a pretext for continuing to occupy and brutalise the people of Palestine. Cosatu reaffirms its view that Israel is an apartheid state and apartheid is a crime against humanity.



Under Barack Obama the US favours a two-state solution, and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu says that a two-state solution is 'unlikely'.

with illegal settlements. Israel has also built a massive wall around small pockets of Palestinians to divide them from Israel. This makes a two-state solution physically impossible under current conditions.

It is up to the Palestinians to decide which course to take. The role of the BDS (Boycott Disinvestment Sanctions) and Palestine solidarity movements is to support them in their struggle for self-determination in the way they want to be supported.

SOLIDARITY

In Israel's attack on Gaza over three weeks in January 2009, more than 1 300 Palestinians died. Only 14 Israelis were killed and most were soldiers killed by 'friendly fire'.

Although Israel stopped journalists from entering Gaza, human rights groups, doctors, UN workers and media outlets in Gaza made the information public. There were also massive demonstrations around the world. Yet most governments did nothing to stop the attack until Gaza was almost wiped out. Then the UN

Security Council called for a 'ceasefire' as if there were two armies fighting each other. In reality, one of the most powerful armies in the world was attacking a defenceless civilian population.

Further, while Israel maintains its blockade of Gaza, Western officials and Egypt agreed to stop the Palestinian Hamas government from getting weapons through the borders between Gaza and Egypt.

Hamas is called a terrorist organisation as its militants fire primitive home-made rockets into Israel. It is true that Hamas is engaging in terrorism which is defined as violence against civilians for political purposes. But the apartheid regime and the US also called the ANC a 'terrorist' organisation when it was struggling against apartheid.

The problem for Israel is that people do not like to be ruled by foreigners, or by elites collaborating with foreigners. They will find ways to resist. The resistance may fade, but it will rise again, as it did in the first and second Intifadas or uprisings in 1987-1993 and 2000-2005.

Through 60 years of violent dispossession and oppression, the Palestinians have not given up their

Swedish Dockworkers Union blockades Israeli ships

The Swedish Dockworkers Union gave notice on 3 June 2010 that their blockade of Israeli ships and cargo to and from Israel will take place from 15 to 24 June. This was based on the Israeli attack on the Freedom Flotilla of which a Swedish Ship to Gaza was a member; an action contrary to international law.

The union had previously decided to support the humanitarian project Ship to Gaza. Another component of the blockade was a demand that Israel lifts its illegal blockade of Gaza.

The employers' association Ports of Sweden threatened to take action against union members taking part in the blockade. It said that participation in the blockade violates employees' contracts. The union believes that such an action by the employer instead constitutes a violation of freedom of association and constitutes a political position.

Later the union withdrew its notice in order to put forward a reformulated one, with a limited timeframe.

United Palestinian trade unions have requested sympathy blockades against Israel to every port workers' union in the world.

The Swedish union's action has an additional purpose which is that the Israeli blockade of Gaza has led to unparalleled unemployment levels for the people of Gaza. The blockade will start on 22 June and last until 29 June 2010. It will coincide with the Norwegian port workers' blockade of Israeli ships and cargo that comes into effect on 15 June and lasts for two weeks.

Stockholm, 11 June 2010

ITF supports Palestinian workers

The International Transport Workers Federation executive board voted for stronger action in support of Palestinian workers and against the blockade of Gaza..

Following the decision, Israel's Histadrut trade union centre adopted a new statement that described the blockade as 'unsustainable, from the economic, political and humanitarian perspective' and that it 'therefore supports the lifting of the restrictions in the shortest possible time, in conditions of achieving the two-state solution.'

15 June 2010

fight for self-rule. They have refused to submit, despite destruction, torture, deprivation and humiliation.

More and more people around the world can see the Palestinian cause is just, despite propaganda denouncing them. Solidarity with the Palestinian struggle is important because Palestinians are an oppressed people living under a racist occupation and also as part of a broader struggle in the Middle East and the 'globalised' capitalist world we live in.

The struggle for Palestinian rights and a viable state is also a struggle against 'normalisation' of trade and other relations with Israel. And because the Middle East is crucial for US global dominance, what happens there is important for everyone, including South Africa.

Solidarity means engagement and mutual support in the struggle against injustice and oppression in the working-class movement. Solidarity is not limited to single nations or single movements, it crosses borders and between organisations and struggles.

In various countries, unions, student groups, universities, artists, municipalities, churches and grassroots organisations have supported the BDS campaign. After Israel's attack on Gaza, the governments of Venezuela and

Bolivia cut off diplomatic ties with Israel.

The South African government does not boycott Israel. The most it does is criticise Israel when it blatantly violates Palestinian human rights but that is better than most governments. South Africa can lead an African BDS campaign against Israel.

Unlike our government, South African trade unions *have* endorsed the 2005 Palestinian call for a BDS campaign. During January 2009, dockworkers from the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union refused to offload a ship with Israeli cargo in Durban.

Anyone with a sense of justice will want to stand in solidarity with Palestinians. The best way is to support the BDS campaign. Through their unions, workers need to find ways to boycott Israel and pressurise the government to do the same. In South Africa there is a special reason to do so: Israel is an apartheid state. LB

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