

# Israel, the Palestinians, and Iran: a debate between Moshe Machover and Sean Matgamna



*"Two nations, two states" in Israel-Palestine, or "death to Israel"?  
Oppose "mullahs' bomb", or wait for "nuclear-free Middle East"?*



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Workers' Liberty, P O Box 823, London SE15 4NA.  
[www.workersliberty.org](http://www.workersliberty.org)  
[awl@workersliberty.org](mailto:awl@workersliberty.org)  
+44 (0) 20 7207 3997  
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# AWL: "Abominable Warmongering Left"

By Moshe Machover

*Weekly Worker 734, 28 August 2008*

In the cacophonous chorus of warmongers - among the shrieks of hawks, howls of jackals and foul laughter of hyenas - the attentive ear discerns a distinctive discordant sound coming from the far left: it is the screech of the AWL. The misleader of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Sean Matgamna, has published an article in which he argues that, while an attack on Iran "will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond", it would be wrong to object to it if it is undertaken by Israel ('What if Israel bombs Iran?' Solidarity July 24).

He is not actually advocating or endorsing such an attack - oh no! Nor does he "take political responsibility for it" - as if it would occur to anyone to hold SM or his little flock responsible for starting a major Middle Eastern conflagration. No, no, no! He just refuses to say anything against Israeli aggression. Go ahead, Israel - bomb away; feel free to cause "large-scale Iranian civilian 'collateral' casualties"! SM will look the other way.

Here is why SM thinks that "there is good reason for Israel to make a precipitate strike at Iranian nuclear capacity": because "the plain fact is that nuclear bombs in the hands of a regime which openly declares its desire to destroy Israel are not something Israel will peacefully tolerate. They will act to stop it while it can still be stopped without the risk of a nuclear strike against Israel. Unless work on an Iranian nuclear bomb has definitively ended, Israel will bomb Iran, with or without the agreement of the USA and Nato."

This statement of alleged "plain fact" contains two assertions which, far from being factual, are sheer flights of fantasy.

First, SM repeats the fabrication of the warmongering propagandists that the Iranian regime "openly declares its desire to destroy Israel". This is simply untrue: no such declaration is on record. Indeed, SM knows very well that it is a lie, because the only Iranian 'declaration' he himself dredges up is president Ahmadinejad's wishful statement:

"Thanks to people's wishes and god's will, the trend for the existence of the Zionist regime is [going] downwards and this is what god has promised and what all nations want. Just as the Soviet Union was wiped out and today does not exist, so will the Zionist regime soon be wiped out."

There is nothing here about an Iranian "desire to destroy Israel"; nor even a wish to see that country destroyed by others. What is plainly expressed here is a wish for the disappearance of the Zionist regime (on another occasion Ahmadinejad spoke about the "regime that is occupying the holy city" of Jerusalem). This is made abundantly clear by the explicit analogy with

the demise of the Soviet Union. Even SM must know the difference between destruction of a country and demise of a regime. And, as even he must be aware, the Soviet Union was not destroyed as a country; rather, the Soviet regime imploded and collapsed under its internal contradictions.

Other warmongers have mistranslated Ahmadinejad's statements and misquoted him as saying that he advocates 'wiping Israel off the map'. SM chooses a different tack, of warmongering lite: he simply endorses a blatant inflammatory misinterpretation of the Iranian president's words, so as to justify his own failure to condemn Israeli aggression.

Let me be clear: the reactionary theocracy of Iran is detestable. But this does not give anyone licence to distort what its leaders actually say - especially when the distortion is designed to excuse an aggressive war.

The second fanciful idea contained in SM's "plain fact" is that Israel might "bomb Iran, with or without the agreement of the USA and Nato".

Now, this is very strange indeed. It is universally acknowledged by Israeli politicians and commentators - both those who support an attack on Iran and those who oppose it - that Israel cannot possibly take such a step without an American green light. This is also quite rightly taken for granted by all serious commentators outside Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, as SM rightly remarks, "Israel is no state's puppet". Only a simpleton would claim this. In fact, it is a junior partner, regional sub-contractor and the most intimate ally of US imperialism. And precisely because of this it cannot undertake a major military move without US approval.

Indeed, of all Israel's many wars of colonial aggression, the only one for which it did not seek or get an American green light was the infamous Suez war of 1956. But in that case Israel conspired with Britain and France - the latter being at that time its main imperialist ally and senior partner.

While the Suez aggression was exceptional in this one sense, it is an instructive model in another: an initial Israeli attack served as a prearranged pretext for the intervention of its imperialist senior partner(s). If Israel does indeed attack Iran, we will witness a broadly similar scenario.

So why does SM go out of his way to cast doubt on what is so obvious to every person familiar with the facts? Is it ignorance, or is there another reason? I think there is another reason: it is his unique position on the radical left as cheerleader for Zionism and the Israeli settler state. Unlike bourgeois warmongers, he has a need to deny the

umbilical ties of Zionism and Israel to imperialism; he does not wish to be seen winking indulgently at an imperialist intrigue. So he prefers to appear ignorant.

Instead of straightforwardly producing further arguments for his refusal-in-advance to condemn a future Israeli attack on Iran, SM has hit on a diabolically clever and startlingly original stratagem - he erects a set of straw men: counter-arguments as to why an Israeli attack supposedly ought to be condemned. As these arguments are all patently absurd, SM wins the debate with his straw alter ego by easy reductio: there is no need for him to contest the counter-arguments, as they are self-refuting. He evidently expects his readers not to notice that this glorious victory is achieved by a sleight of hand: the arguments he sets up against Israeli aggression are all deliberately dodgy.

Let us have a look at these counter-arguments, which are set up as a series of rhetorical questions.

"In the name of what alternative," asks SM rhetorically, "should we condemn Israel" if it bombs Iran?

"The inalienable right of every state to have nuclear weapons - and here a state whose clerical fascist rulers might see a nuclear Armageddon, involving a retaliatory Israeli nuclear strike against Iran, in the way a god-crazed suicide bomber sees blowing himself to pieces?"

Apparently SM believes that Israel, a non-expansionist and non-aggressive state, is not sufficiently "god-crazed" to forfeit its "inalienable right" to a monopoly of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

Actually, the historical record shows that Israel has consistently acted in a much more ruthlessly aggressive and destructive way than Iran. The image of Iran's rulers as religious fanatics, who would not think twice about incinerating their own country for the satisfaction of destroying Israel, is a pure invention of western and Israeli warmongering propaganda, here recycled by SM. The truth is that these clerical leaders are clever, cautious, calculating bastards. Sadly, western and western-inspired adventurist aggression has repeatedly played into their hands.

And, just by the way, let me note that so far there is no evidence that Iran is about to develop nuclear weapons. We do not need to trust in the Iranian rulers' assurances that they are not planning to produce nuclear bombs; but neither should we believe the western and Israeli warmongers' claim that Iran is engaged in such a project.

SM's next rhetorical question is: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel has nuclear weapons, and therefore the Arab and islamic states should have them too?"

Here again SM implies that Israel has some god-given right to a monopoly of nuclear weapons. Moreover, he maligns the leftist opponents of aggression by attributing to them the absurd idea that Arab and islamic states "should" possess nuclear weapons because Israel does. He slyly avoids turning the argument around: surely, no country should have nuclear weapons. And the only basis on which we can justly demand that Iran

be forbidden to have them is to make the entire region free of nuclear weapons. This is the demand we must raise. Of course, Iran should not have nuclear weapons; but neither should Israel. And certainly we must condemn Israeli aggression designed to preserve its nuclear monopoly.

Next: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because we are unconditional pacifists? We think military action is never justified, and therefore Israel has no right to attack Iran, not even to stop it acquiring the nuclear means to mount the ultimate suicide bomb attack on Israel?"

This is a deliberately silly question. But again we must turn it around. Iran has no nuclear weapons; and it has never threatened to attack Israel by nuclear or conventional means. On the other hand, Israel has a large nuclear arsenal, and it is known to have seriously considered using it against its Arab neighbours in 19672 and 19733 and - as has been widely reported in the press - recently against Iran. So should we condone a pre-emptive bombing attack on Israel's Dimona nuclear installation?4

And another silly rhetorical question: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because we would prefer to live in a world where such choices would not be posed, where relations between states and peoples are governed by reason, and strictly peaceful means?"

Well, yes, of course we would prefer to live in a world where such choices would not be posed. But so long as we live in today's world, where they are posed, we should make the right choice: oppose imperialist attacks - whether direct or by proxy - even when mounted against a detestable regime. Because today US imperialism is humanity's worst enemy, and its global hegemony poses the greatest danger to humanity's future.

And yet another one: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because for choice we would live in a world where the workers of Israel, Iran, Iraq were united in opposition to all their rulers, and strong enough to get rid of them and bring to the region an era of socialist and democratic peace and understanding?"

Ditto; see above.

Now Matgamna slightly changes tack; his next rhetorical question is: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel would in attacking Iran be only an American imperialist tool, against a mere regional power; and that cancels out the genuine self-defence element in pre-emptive Israeli military action against Iranian nuclear weapons?"

As I have pointed out, the idea that Israel is "only an American imperialist tool" is a red herring. On the contrary, the fact that Israel will not be acting as a mere American imperialist tool makes it even worse, and is all the more reason for condemning and opposing its aggression. Because in addition to acting for its imperialist sponsor, Israel will at the same time be acting to maintain its own regional hegemony, nuclear monopoly and ability to oppress the Palestinian people and colonise their lands.

In this connection let me again recall the Suez war of 1956. It would have been bad enough if Israel had acted as a mere tool of French and British imperialism. But it was actually worse than

that: Israel had its own special agenda of annexation and expansion. I am old enough to remember hearing Ben-Gurion's chilling message to the Israeli forces in Sharm al-Sheikh, at the tip of occupied Sinai (November 6 1956), in which he proclaimed the creation of the new and much expanded "third kingdom" of Israel (he was obviously oblivious to the sinister World War II connotation of this term).

Needless to say, on that occasion too the Israeli pretext was 'self-defence'. Israel's 1956 attempt at expansion was short lived - only because the US, which had not been consulted and had not given the tripartite aggression a green light, compelled the three unruly conspirators to withdraw, just to show them who was boss.

We have a few more clever rhetorical questions to get through. Here is the next one: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel has no right to exist anyway, and therefore no right to defend itself? (This will in fact be the underlying attitude of most of the kitsch left.)"

Dear SM, please pull the other one. As we have just seen, the pretext of 'self-defence' has a very long white beard. I have already pointed out that what Israel would be 'defending' are its indefensible privileges and interests as a colonial settler state and imperialist sub-contractor.

One more thing. I suppose I must belong to what SM so cutely calls the "kitsch left", because I do think that Israel has no right to exist as presently constituted or in anything like its present form: a colonial, expansionist, ethnocentric-racist settler state, a junior partner of imperialism, to which it is structurally and inseparably allied. And I also think that those who advocate that so-called 'right' are fake leftists.

The reader may be losing patience with SM's ever-so-clever rhetorical questions. Please bear with me: there are just three left. Here is the next one: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because the Iranian government, islamic clerical fascist though it is, is an 'anti-imperialist' power and must be unconditionally supported against the US, Nato, Israel?"

This is a transparent pretext. SM himself knows very well that opposition to US-Israeli aggression against Iran in no way implies 'unconditional support' for the Iranian regime. In fact, he himself has told us at the very beginning of his article that an "attack would strengthen the Iranian regime and license a smash-down on its critics, including working class critics, inside Iran". Quite right! But, since an attack on Iran would strengthen the Iranian regime, this is all the more reason why left opponents of that regime ought resolutely to condemn any such attack.

Incidentally, this rhetorical gem reveals what really goes on in SM's mind. As the reader may have noticed, in all SM's previous excuses for an attack on Iran he assumed explicitly or implicitly that the attacker would be Israel, acting in 'self-defence'. But this latest rhetorical question provides an argument for not opposing an attack by the US or Nato. Inadvertently, SM has given us an illustration of the fact that you cannot consistently be soft on the Israeli state without being also soft on its imperialist sponsor and close senior partner.

Let me also note in passing that SM is doing here what no serious Marxist should do: for the second time in this article he is using 'fascist' as a mere invective rather than as a precise political term. He should know better.

SM's penultimate pretext is a real beauty: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel refuses to dismantle the Jewish national state peacefully and agree to an Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have religious but not Israeli national rights, and therefore socialists, 'anti-racists' and anti-imperialists must be on the side of those who would conquer and destroy it, even, in this case, with nuclear weapons?"

The oh, so subtle rhetorical legerdemain here is to smuggle past the reader a false alternative: either you accept Israel as "the Jewish national state" or else you must accept an "Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have religious but not Israeli national rights". SM implies that there is no other choice. And, moreover, he threatens his reader: if you reject the former - "the Jewish national state" - then ("and therefore ...") you must resign yourself to Israel's destruction "even with nuclear weapons".

I have already dealt with the hogwash of the threat of nuclear destruction of Israel. It is the old whine about 'poor little Samsonst:'. In fact it is Israel which is the menacing regional nuclear superpower. The threat that it faces is not destruction, but the possible loss of its regional hegemony.

### **Equal national rights**

But let us pick apart this "Jewish national state", which is what SM wants us to accept. According to Zionist doctrine - which is the official ruling ideology of Israel - Israel is not the state of its actual inhabitants, irrespective of ethnicity. Rather, it is supposed to be the homeland of all Jews, wherever they are. For, according to this ideology, all the Jews around the world constitute a single nation.

The true homeland of every Jew is not the country in which s/he may have been born and in which his or her family may have resided for generations. The homeland of this alleged nation is the biblical land of Israel, over which it has an ancient, inalienable - indeed god-given - national right. Non-Jews living in the Jewish homeland are mere foreign interlopers. Past, present and future Zionist colonisation is justified as 'return to the homeland' - a right possessed by Jews, but denied to those foreign interlopers, the Palestinian refugees, who have been legitimately evicted from the Jewish homeland.

Socialists must surely reject this supremacist, ethnocentric-racist, colonising ideology. Israel as a "Jewish national state" - in the actual way I have just explicated - is unacceptable.

But the alternative to this is not an "Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have religious but not Israeli national rights", as some bourgeois Palestinian Arab nationalists have proposed. Why should socialists confine themselves to the false choice offered to us by SM: between Zionism and bourgeois Palestinian nationalism? Rather, the alternative supported by

true socialists is a settlement based on equal rights: not only equal individual rights for all, but also equal national rights for the two actual national groups of Palestine/Israel.

Who are these two groups?

First, the indigenous people, the Palestinian Arabs, including the refugees ethnically cleansed by Zionist colonisation, who surely must have the right to return to their homeland. Second, the Hebrew-speaking settler nation that has come into existence in that country. (They are often referred to as 'Israeli Jews'; but this real national group must be distinguished from the alleged worldwide Jewish 'nation'.)

No other kind of settlement is acceptable to socialists. But this clearly means the rejection of the "Jewish national state" in the present Zionist sense; and indeed it requires the overthrow of Zionism.

We are coming to SM's final rhetorical question: "[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because we don't deal in vulgar practical choices but in pure historical essences such as 'anti-imperialism'?"

It seems that SM has run out of pretexts, because here he is clearly repeating himself. So I can pass on this last one.

### **Faustian deal**

In conclusion, let me make an observation. From its very beginning, the Zionist project of colonisation was based on a Faustian deal with whatever imperialist power was dominant in the Middle East. The Israeli settler state - which is both the product of that colonising project and an instrument for its ongoing metastatic expansion - is structurally allied to imperialist domination of the region: not as a mere tool, but as a regional colonial power with a malignant agenda of its own.<sup>5</sup>

For this reason, let me repeat: you cannot consistently be soft on the Israeli state without also being soft on its imperialist sponsor and close

senior partner. Indeed, we have seen that SM himself, in at least one of his fake rhetorical questions, inadvertently provides an argument for acquiescing not only in an Israeli attack on Iran, but also in one by the US and Nato.

Those on the left who persist in supporting Zionism and its settler state end up as shamelessly open outright social-imperialists. Comrades of the AWL should wake up to the danger of the slippery slope down which SM is misleading them.

### **Notes**

1. Having written this paragraph, I took a coffee break and picked up a copy of The Guardian (August 4). I found in it an article by the bourgeois journalist, Max Hastings, entitled 'Negotiating with Iran is maddening, but bombing would be a catastrophe', in which he observes: "Jerusalem and Washington are talking seriously about a possible Israeli strike, for which American collusion would be indispensable." He goes on to observe that Israel would need not only the consent of the present lame-duck US president, but also that of his likely successor: "Even if Obama does not yet sit in the White House, no Jerusalem government could lightly defy America's likely next president on an issue of such gravity."
2. 'How Israel's nuclear secret just slipped out' The Age July 23 2005: [tinyurl.com/684co4](http://tinyurl.com/684co4)
3. Warner D Farr, LTC, US army The third temple's holy of holies: Israel's nuclear weapons; The Counterproliferation Papers, 'Future warfare' series No2, USAF Counterproliferation Center, Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, September 1999: [tinyurl.com/25jppwp](http://tinyurl.com/25jppwp)
4. For a fascinating virtual 3D tour of this installation, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf39qkvwOhU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf39qkvwOhU)
5. For detailed analysis of Zionism, see my article 'Israelis and Palestinians: conflict and resolution', downloadable from [www.iran-bulletin.org/palestineisrael.htm](http://www.iran-bulletin.org/palestineisrael.htm)

# Israel, Iran, and socialism

By Sean Matgamna

*Solidarity 3/138, 11 September 2008*

Comrade Machover: You are someone for whom I have long had a certain regard and even affection. I regret that you have chosen to join in the bizarre heresy-hunt, entirely Stalinist in conception, purpose, and execution, around my discussion article "What If Israel Bombs Iran?", *Solidarity* 3/136.

I would have said that your chief trait, and sometimes fault, is an obstreperous pedantry rather than the sloppy-mindedness of those with whom you now run in a pack. I would also have expected from you an instinctive resistance to mob hysteria.

Most — not all — of your contribution is a perfectly legitimate piece of polemic against what I actually wrote. But if you lie down with dogs, you get fleas; and if you frolic with pigs, you get splattered with mud. You too, comrade Machover!

You radically misrepresent me as saying: "While an attack on Iran 'will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond', it would be wrong to object to it if it is undertaken by Israel".

This is simply a lie! Something that I would not have expected from you, but everyday fare for the *Weekly Worker*.

Four weeks before your article [3], the *Weekly Worker* had a front page picturing the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion and the words: "AWL's Sean Matgamna: excusing an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran".

There is no ambiguity there, and therefore no legitimate resort to attempts to "explain" the headline by way of tricky wording inside the paper. The headline was plain invention about me. It was also a piece of extra-malignant demonisation of Israel. ("Threat of Israeli nuclear attack on Iran horribly real" was the next issue's headline). It is not good that Israel has nuclear weapons; but the idea that Israel would use nuclear bombs in any situation other than a perceived immediate threat of being overwhelmed by Arab or Islamist forces is, I suggest, on the same plane as what the *Weekly Worker's* front-page text and picture attributed to me.

Your own cited cases when Israeli leaders supposedly discussed using nuclear weapons, or the threat of nuclear weapons — "it is known to have seriously considered using it against its Arab neighbours in 1967 and 1973" — were situations of such perceived immediate threat (and it is not at all certain that Israel had a nuclear option in 1967).

I don't know whether you have even read recent issues of the *Weekly Worker*, though your text suggests that you have. But, coming into such a discussion late, you have, I think, a responsibility to read everything important that is in play in it.

Don't you?

Unless you explicitly dissociate, the implication is that you associate with and endorse the loony-tunes politics of the libelling paper in which you publish, and of the not-quite-reconstructed Stalinist clique who control it.

Where do you stand on the Stalinist hysteria? Do you want to assert that I "excused" an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran? Or be associated by implication with that assertion? If that claim was in your view true to any extent at all, then why does your comprehensive article ignore it?

Your article has the merit that it is an attempt to discuss systematically what I wrote; and you bring a startling new formulation into the discussion: "the USA is the main enemy of mankind".

## What I wrote

But before discussing your article it will be worth while establishing what I did and did not say.

I was discussing something over which the left could have no influence. Talk of the working class in the area reshaping the situation within the time span in which an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear installations is likely — between the US presidential election on 4 November and 20 January 2009, when a new US president takes office — is simply childish, and I notice you do not engage in such talk.

The thing that concerned me was the response of the would-be left. We can be sure that everyone within earshot of us, including the British government, will oppose an Israeli strike. That is not the difficult bit. The difficulties start elsewhere. Most leftists will measure how "left" they are by how much they manage to raise the pitch and tone of the condemnations of Israel that will appear in the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, etc.

Because of the dominance on the British left of what someone aptly named "absolute anti-Zionism", they will go in for wild root and branch condemnation of Israel and everything Israeli. The action will be depicted as a function of the basic nature of "Zionism" or "Zionist imperialism", or as a matter of Israel acting only as a tool of the USA, as something without any other sense and no possible upfront reason.

The crazy nonsense in which you have enlisted has been licensed by the question, in my article: "in the name of what alternative would we condemn Israel?"

I also said, and more than once in the short article, that "we do not advocate an Israeli attack... nor will we endorse it or take political responsibility for it... [we] should not want it and

cannot support it..."

After a discussion in the Solidarity office of possible misunderstandings to which my article might give rise, I listed in its first paragraph some likely bad consequences and by-products of such an attack — that is, reasons for being against it. That first paragraph did not end with a sentence saying: "For these reasons we oppose an attack...", but only because neither I nor anyone else in the Solidarity office thought our readers would include a sizeable number of idiots.

The approach of asking — "in the name of what alternative would we condemn..." — is not new.

It is, I suggest, an indispensable question for socialists, enemies of the capitalist powers that dominate the world, to ask in every situation. It is the question that stops you backing, in recoil from "imperialism" into de facto support for reactionary forces that find themselves at odds with advanced capitalism. In the Falklands war (1982) we said that the Falkland Islanders had a right to self-determination and the Argentinian invaders should get out — but we did not support the British expeditionary force or the war.

In 1990, AWL's predecessor said Iraq should get out of Kuwait (Iraq's invasion was the cause of the conflict), but we did not back the Americans and British in the war.

In 1999 the AWL said the Serbian army, which was engaged in a giant pogrom against the Albanian population there, should get out of Kosovo, but we did not back NATO's war. Specifically we did not give political confidence or trust to those who controlled the NATO forces. (We did not join in the calls to "stop the bombing" because in the circumstances that call implicitly sided with the Serb would-be genocidalists).

In the case at hand, none of the demon-Zionism stuff is necessary to explain Israel's likely action; there is good reason, from an Israeli point of view, to refuse to stand by and let people who have said that they want to destroy Israel acquire the weapons with which they just might try to do that.

Some of what I wrote was explicitly an account of how Israelis would see nuclear-armed Islamist fanatics in Iran and clearly labelled as that. I used the tone and manner proper to one who thinks that Israel has a right to defend itself, against people on the would-be left whose starting point is that it doesn't, and, because of its origins, never could. To counter the demon-Zionism "explanations", I described how most Israelis see the prospect of an Iranian nuclear bomb.

You, and quite a few others, insist that to do that was to justify, to "excuse", perhaps to advocate an Israeli attack. Never mind that I stated my opposition to an attack, in terms of both principle — my basic viewpoint, which is that not of an Israeli nationalist but of an international socialist — and of the immediate likely consequences in the Middle East.

"Our point of view is not that of Israeli or any other nationalism. We want Israeli, Palestinian, Iranian and other workers to unite and fight for a socialist Middle East..."

My language expressed my determination not to join in with, or peacefully to tolerate, the

outright condemnation of Israel that will most likely follow an Israeli attack, condemnation rooted in the "demon-Zionism" prejudice of the kitsch-left and in the view that Israel has no right to defend itself.

I identified the word "condemn" with the language that the kitsch-left would use against Israel. I used "should not want", "can not support", etc. to indicate rejecting an Israeli nationalist viewpoint and being against an Israeli strike.

Is there a meaningful difference between "not wanting" an attack, and "condemning" Israel root-and-branch? I think there is.

But the difference is not about being for or against an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. It is about how you assess such a strike in relation to the nature of Israel and of Israel's relationship with its near and distant Islamic neighbours.

I reject the settled "condemnation" of Israel which, for example, you express in your article. I will not, in response to an Israeli strike at Iranian nuclear installations, adopt the viewpoint that there is something so incomprehensible in such a strike that Israel as such must be condemned outright.

And for myself, I will use whatever words I choose to express and nuance my own ideas. Nobody — least of all participants in an attempt to mob me and shout me down — will tell me what words I must and must not use.

Of course, the choice of words is to some extent personal, and to some extent arbitrary and a matter of non-conscious selection. In general, I wouldn't choose to quarrel about words. To express the real arguments now about Israel and Iran by proxy, in the form of an argument about what exact words should be used to express being against an Israeli strike — is "not want" too weak, should we have "oppose" or "condemn" instead? — is a waste of life, foolishness.

Denunciation of me for my choice of words is either a piece of scholastic foolishness, or an attempt at Stalinist bullying, or an obscurantist proxy for the real arguments about the broader issues that led me to my choice of words.

### **Working back from conclusions?**

If one tries to spell out the hard realities, and notes such things as "good reason for Israel to make a precipitate strike at Iranian nuclear capacity", then are you advocating such a strike? Even if you add immediately: "Socialists should not want that and can not support it..."?

To answer yes is to rule out intelligent exploration and discussion of the world. It is to say that in order to avoid "advocating" the military strike I discussed, one would have to deny some key facts. In fact, the only reason for ruling out such an assessment here is to allow maximum condemnation of Israel, to depict what it does as a product of pure evil, pure "Zionism", pure "imperialism".

Indeed, it is implied in your own and other comments that we have a revolutionary duty to do that; and to deny uncongenial, jarring facts in

general; to work backwards, so to speak, and draw one's picture of reality from one's political conclusions.

In this case we would be duty-bound to deny or obscure the large fact that an Islamic-fundamentalist regime, whose leaders openly call for the destruction of Israel, armed with nuclear weapons, would present Israel with a special problem.

Such an approach to politics would rule out anything but the most blinkeredly narrow, partial, one-sided, blindly partisan view of any reality! It is to advocate the politics of the ideological blind-fold, of viewing the world only through ideological spectacles, of only admitting that part of reality that suits you. It is to advocate a medievalist scholasticism — or Stalinism — in the approach to reality. It is one of the great banes and one of the worst diseases of the kitsch left, one of the legacies of Stalinism. It is "apparatus Marxism".

The truth is that unless you are very simple minded — or very stupid — or dealing with straightforward things like workers' strikes for improvements, or resistance to racism, you form your political responses and positions by surveying all the facets of reality and then deciding which aspects are decisive and which not.

The idea that you trim your picture from which you have to form political judgments in advance, selecting it to fit prior conclusions, has as little in common with Marxism as it has with any other rational approach to the world. And it has the drawback that if the closed-eyes self-righteous citizen starts looking at the whole reality, then he or she will go over not to our Third Camp independent working class politics, but to Israeli chauvinism.

### **Misrepresentation**

You, comrade Machover, go through the motions of a reasoned point-by-point discussion of what I wrote; but you start off your reply with a straight lie and a radical distortion, stating that I argue: "while an attack on Iran 'will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond', it would be wrong to object to it if it is undertaken by Israel". I did and do "object" to it, and said so a number of times in the short article!

There is radical distortion in the usage — it is repeated again and again in your piece — "an attack", without specification. A military strike would surely be "an attack", but to substitute here the general term "an attack", which might mean every and any offensive action up to full-scale land invasion, or even a nuclear assault, for a limited, specific bomb raid on nuclear installations, from the air, which is what I discussed, is to radically misrepresent not only what I wrote but also what the discussion should be about.

I bracketed the possible "strike" I was discussing with the September 2007 Israeli attack on nuclear facilities in Syria, and the June 1981 attack on an Iraqi nuclear installation; there is therefore no reasonable ground for you or anyone else not understanding what sort of attack I was talking about.

You quote me once, in passing, as talking about a bomb-strike on Iranian nuclear installations, but generally you use the portmanteau term "attack"; and you do that after the paper in which you publish your article has accused me, with lunatic abandon, of advocating an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran.

You deliberately get in step with the Stalinist-level liars who run Weekly Worker! What else could explain your usage?

You say that I "refuse to say anything against Israeli aggression. Go ahead, Israel — bomb away; feel free to cause 'large-scale Iranian civilian 'collateral' casualties'! SM will look the other way". The framing of the direct quotation in radically misleading polemical bumpf is constructive lying. In political terms, it is simply unserious.

### **A duty to whitewash the mullahs?**

Beginning with your fourth paragraph, you come out as someone who thinks that opposition to an Israeli attack on Iran requires of you that you do public-relations work for the Iranian regime. You criticise that regime once, and in passing, but you say that the Iranian rulers do not "openly declare their desire to destroy Israel".

You repeat the 2006 declaration from Ahmadinejad which I cited.

"Thanks to people's wishes and God's will, the trend for the existence of the Zionist regime is [going] downwards and this is what God has promised and what all nations want. Just as the Soviet Union was wiped out and today does not exist, so will the Zionist regime soon be wiped out".

But you "interpret" that passage to claim that the clerical-fascist regime is not as bad as it seems.

You seem to be governed by the belief that to oppose an attack you must defend those likely to be attacked and refute what is said about them — irrespective of what is true.

Your approach here would have led the left — and during the Stalin-Hitler pact did lead the Communist Parties — to insist that Hitler was not all that bad. It led people like Tony Benn and the then editor of Tribune to do PR work, side by side with George Galloway, for Saddam Hussein in 2003. It led the SWP to apologetics for the Taliban (Socialist Worker 1 October 2001).

Serious socialists tell the truth about both sides.

There is nothing, you say, in Ahmadinejad's 2006 declaration "about an Iranian 'desire to destroy Israel'; nor even a wish to see that country destroyed by others". Your attempts to reassure, on Tehran's behalf, are obviously heartfelt. God, how they have been misrepresented, these benign Iranian clerical fascists!

Your own assessment of the declaration is wilfully foolish! You write that what Ahmadinejad "expressed here is a wish for the disappearance of the Zionist regime (on another occasion Ahmadinejad spoke about the 'regime that is occupying the holy city' of Jerusalem)". You insist

that there is a “difference between destruction of a country and demise of a regime”.

You take Ahmadinejad’s analogy with the demise of the USSR — “just as the Soviet Union was wiped out” — to mean that Ahmadinejad merely wants a change of government in Israel.

You feel obliged, in your opposition to an Israeli “attack”, to go surety for the good intentions of the Iranian mullahs! This, at best, is wishful thinking.

What “regime” — government? state structure? — rooted in the existing Israeli population will, in the foreseeable future, be other than “Zionist” in the broad and basic sense?

For all I can know, you may be using “Zionist” to mean extreme Israeli chauvinism. It is one of the surest things in politics that that is not what the Islamist chauvinists ruling Iran mean by “Zionism”. You get in your own light, comrade Machover!

In fact there is no shortage of quotations making clear Ahmadinejad’s meaning. Take this from August 2006: “this sinister regime is the banner of Satan.... all the people are shouting a single cry... Death to Israel”.

They really meant “Death to the Israeli government!”?

### **Israel “has no right to exist”?**

I suggest you make yourself incapable of understanding what Ahmadinejad might mean because you yourself are against the existence of the Israeli Jewish state.

You say it plainly enough: “I suppose I must belong to what SM so cutely calls the ‘kitsch left’, because I do think that Israel has no right to exist as presently constituted or in anything like its present form”. You specify what you mean: “a colonial, expansionist, ethnocentric-racist settler state, a junior partner of imperialism, to which it is structurally and inseparably allied”.

You add that “those who advocate the so-called ‘right’ of the existing, or anything-like-the-existing Israel, to exist, are “fake leftists”. There can be no question of Israel defending itself, because in fact, always, “Israel would be ‘defending’... its indefensible privileges and interests as a colonial settler state and imperialist sub-contractor”.

I would agree that Israel has no “right” to continue occupying the West Bank and building Jewish-colonist settlements there. By that I mean: I don’t want Israel to go on doing that, and I’m on the side of the Palestinians in the post-1967 Occupied Territories and of those Israelis, Jewish and Arab, who want that to stop and fight to stop it.

What do you mean? That Israel does not have a right to exist at all, so long as it does “anything like” those things? That the Israeli Jewish nation has no right to self-determination unless and until it changes its attitudes and physiognomy beyond recognition?

And? And therefore you back those who want to help Israel “as presently constituted” stop “existing”? It is not clear why you wouldn’t.

## **Imperialism**

Israel, a junior partner of imperialism? Of the USA? To deny the right of a nation to exist because of its international alliances smacks just a little too strongly of the Stalinist policy of assessing nations as good or bad — and, in some instances, worthy of the right to exist or not — according to their “role” in international affairs.

The short answer is that the Israeli nation and its state have a right to exist irrespective of their international alliances. In any case, Israel’s international alignment, like the rest of its history, cannot be understood apart from the attitude to it of its neighbours — five of which greeted its foundation in 1948 with invasion, and some of them (Egypt) under the slogan “Drive the Jews into the sea!”

“Structurally and inseparably allied” to “imperialism”? That Israel has had a heavy economic dependence on the USA since 1967 is fact: that it is inseparable isn’t. How an Israel at peace with its neighbours, including a Palestinian state that had begun to develop economically, would evolve is an open question.

You use the expression “structurally and inseparably allied” illegitimately, to assert that Israel is only an outcrop of US imperialism, and to strengthen, by asserting the impossibility of Israel separating from the USA, the argument that Israel should not be allowed to go on existing. (Elsewhere in the article, you say that in so far as Israel is more than an outcrop of the USA, it is worse: not just “a mere tool, but... a regional colonial power with a malignant agenda of its own”).

### **Iran’s “right” to nuclear bombs?**

I asked: “But if the Israeli airforce attempts to stop Iran developing the capacity to wipe it out with a nuclear bomb, in the name of what alternative would we condemn Israel?” I meant: in the name of what alternatives available to an Israel facing the prospect of Iran developing nuclear weapons?

You comment, mysteriously and in terms of my text impermissibly: “Apparently SM believes that Israel, a non-expansionist and non-aggressive state, is not sufficiently ‘god-crazed’ to forfeit its ‘inalienable right’ to a monopoly of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.”

Nothing I wrote depends on such a view of Israel! Many things I’ve written elsewhere (a very large volume of it by now — the AWL’s pamphlet *Two Nations, Two States* is readily available) says the opposite: the AWL demands of Israel that it should vacate the 1967-occupied territories and agree to an independent Palestinian state. I do not advocate an Israeli monopoly of nuclear weapons. I am against Israel having nuclear weapons.

And you? Do you want to replace Israel’s monopoly of nuclear weapons in the region with a duopoly of Iran and Israel having nuclear weapons? So long as Israel still has nuclear weapons, should we acquiesce in the spread of nuclear weapons? In the Iranian mullahs acquiring

nuclear bombs? I think that is what you say later. I'll come back to it.

What is your point here? Either what you write is a trivial, misleading, and irresponsible debating point, and in fact you agree with me that an Iranian nuclear arsenal, moreover one in the hands of an Islamic fundamentalist regime, is undesirable. Or you want the Israeli "monopoly of nuclear weapons" to be broken by the Iranian mullahs.

Which is it, comrade Machover?

Again: do you believe, do you want to say, that Israel is so "god-crazed" that it can be equated with Iran?

You then undertake to champion the case that in "the historical record" Iran has been less "ruthlessly aggressive and destructive" than Israel has.

"The image of Iran's rulers as religious fanatics, who would not think twice about incinerating their own country for the satisfaction of destroying Israel, is a pure invention of western and Israeli warmongering propaganda, here recycled by SM".

It is "pure invention"? The regime installed by Iran's "Islamic Revolution" in 1979, and still in power (even if loosened a little over three decades), is not run by religious fanatics?

I'll resist the temptations of demagoguery here, though it would be easy enough to list some of the social atrocities and horrors which the regime has inflicted on the peoples in the Iranian state, and especially the women, for three decades now.

Plainly the Iranian regime is an Islamic-fundamentalist one, a "theocracy" as you call it.

Yes, as you say, the leaders, or some of them, are "clever, cautious, calculating bastards". The point, I think, is that the "clever, cautious calculation" of these "bastards" includes calculations about God and heaven, and the relationship of this world to the other, imaginary, world. They see this world as a mere antechamber to the other.

It may be that here you get in your own light. Being yourself a rationalist (maybe), you can't grasp that the religious mindset of such people is a major part of them and a regulator of what they do. You want to dismiss their religio-political beliefs as play-acting, stuff that they don't really believe. A central part of the reality I see is that they do believe in their own religious nonsense.

You are sure that there is no possibility that they — or some of them, or some group emerging within the regime — will never let the attractions of a sudden trip to bordello-paradise overwhelm what you would think of as "clever, cautious calculations" about this world. I'm not.

You're sure that their "clever" this-world calculations will never lead any of them to calculate that Israel would not survive a nuclear conflict, but the enormously bigger Iran would?

The idea that Israel should be denounced for not trusting and sharing in your confidence about the "clever calculations" of these "bastards" can only be grounded in an unreasoning animosity to Israel, or the sort of reactionary anti-imperialism that sees the Iranian regime (and similar regimes or movements) as automatically "better" than

"imperialism" because they are at odds with the USA.

The idea that states always act rationally and according to the economic interests of the ruling class was always childish, barebones, economic-reductionist pseudo-Marxism. Hitler and the Nazis, for example, dragged Germany down to utter destruction. Trotsky in 1938 compared what the bourgeoisie was doing, in entrusting power to the fascists, with "tobogganing with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe". That can't happen in Iran?

You accuse me of sleight-of-hand, conjurer-style intellectual trickery, sophism, "rhetorical legerdemain". You aren't so bad yourself at such ideological "cloak-work"!

### **An Arab-Islamic nuclear armoury?**

Should we condemn Israel "because Israel has nuclear weapons, and therefore the Arab and Islamic states should have them too?"

You "cleverly" turn it round. To object to Iranian nuclear weapons, you suggest, "implies that Israel has some god-given right to a monopoly of nuclear weapons". Eh? I don't want the existing situation made worse by a proliferation of nuclear weapons... so that means I think Israel has a "god-given" right to a monopoly!

Turn that thought round once again, and it is the idea that because Israel has no "god-given right to a monopoly", therefore we should not oppose other states having nuclear weapons, because that would make us "defend" that monopoly. Is that what you are saying?

But you want it both ways. Having waxed demagogic over my "implied" belief that Israel has a "god-given right to a monopoly of nuclear weapons", you draw back from your own logical conclusion by accusing me of "malign[ing] the leftist opponents of aggression by attributing to them the absurd idea that Arab and Islamic states 'should' possess nuclear weapons because Israel does".

Actually, no. I listed that view — that "the Arab and Islamic states should have [nuclear weapons] too" — as one of the absurdities I was dismissing, as an absurd implication of the sort of outcry against Israel which I anticipated. "Least of all should we back Ahmadinejad, or argue, implicitly or openly, that homicidal religious lunatics have a right to arm themselves with nuclear weapons..."

I dealt there with what I thought was likely to be implicit in the probable outcry — a sort of *reductio ad absurdum*. When I wrote that, I didn't appreciate to what extent that attitude was already widespread. I knew Workers' Power explicitly supported the "right" of Iran to have nuclear weapons; for the rest, I thought I was warning against possible absurd implications in what they would say.

However, you yourself share the attitude, or something approaching it. You express it like this: "The only basis on which we can justly [!] demand that Iran be forbidden to have [nuclear weapons] is to make the entire region free of nuclear weapons. This is the demand we must raise. Of

course, Iran should not have nuclear weapons; but neither should Israel. And certainly we must condemn Israeli aggression designed to preserve its nuclear monopoly". Ah!

Arguing with you here is like waltzing on ice with an india-rubber man! You seem to say that "just" opposition to Iranian nuclear weapons should depend on Israel not having them, and on the creation in the region of a nuclear-free zone. "This is the demand we must raise".

Of course socialists should be against Israeli nuclear weapons. But to make opposition to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons depend on Israel surrendering those it has — that is to excuse the mullahs' drive to acquire nuclear weapons. To insist that the only demand we can raise is: "a regional nuclear-free zone", cannot but soften specific opposition to the Iranian regime acquiring nuclear weapons, which would, at best, mean the emergence of a nuclear balance of terror in the region.

### **One-sided "pacifism"**

I asked whether Israel should be condemned "because we are unconditional pacifists? [Because] we think military action is never justified, and therefore Israel has no right to attack Iran, not even to stop it acquiring the nuclear means to mount the ultimate suicide bomb attack on Israel?"

You say this "is a deliberately silly question". (No, comrade Machover. Believe me, if it is silly, it is inadvertently so).

"Again we must turn it around... should we condone a pre-emptive bombing attack on Israel's Dimona nuclear installation?"

This is one of the few serious points in your would-be ferocious but light-weight polemic. In reality the situation is not symmetrical. Would such an Iranian strike surgically "take out" Israel's nuclear-weapons capacity as Israel apparently "took out" Syria's in 2007 and Iraq's in 1981? I doubt it.

An Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear installations could be limited to that objective; an Iranian attack on Israel in order to eliminate Israeli nuclear weapons would in practice have to be part of a general Islamist assault.

You are careful to lead up to your question about Israel's nuclear centre by asserting once again that "Iran has no nuclear weapons" (true); "and it has never threatened to attack Israel by nuclear or conventional means" (not true; or true only on a "benign" interpretation of all the chants about "Death to Israel").

### **"Humanity's worst enemy"**

You respond to my question whether we should condemn Israel "because we would prefer to live in a world where such choices would not be posed, where relations between states and peoples are governed by reason, and strictly peaceful means" with the statement that so long as we live in "today's world", "we should make the right choice: oppose imperialist attacks — whether direct or by proxy — even when mounted against a detestable

regime. Because today US imperialism is humanity's worst enemy, and its global hegemony poses the greatest danger to humanity's future".

First of all, you work a revealing sleight of mind here. I discussed an Israeli attack. You seem to say — here, anyway — that such a thing is impossible: Israel will only act as a proxy. Elsewhere in your article you say it very plainly: "Israel cannot possibly take such a step without an American green light... [Over Suez in 1956] Israeli attack served as a prearranged pretext for the intervention of its imperialist senior partner(s). If Israel does indeed attack Iran, we will witness a broadly similar scenario".

An air attack on Iranian nuclear installations now — which is what we are supposed to be discussing — will be the equivalent of 1956, when Israel's invasion of Sinai on 29 October was a (prearranged) pretext for French and British invasion of Egypt (on 5 November, after bombing from 31 October)? It can only be the start of a full-scale US invasion of Iran? Just like the September 2007 Israeli attack on a Syrian nuclear installation was part of an American invasion of Syria?

What you do here is substitute a different situation for the situation I discussed.

Is it that Israel has no autonomy at all? It can only act as a catspaw of the USA? That is a point of view; but not one you stick to. Elsewhere you say that Israel can indeed act on its own concerns, and when it does so it is worse than US imperialism. This is just wriggling, comrade Machover!

My argument was not based on generalities about Iran's regime being "detestable", but on what its development of nuclear weapons would or might mean for Israel.

But what is the formulation about "US imperialism" being "humanity's worst enemy... the greatest danger to humanity's future" doing in a supposedly political document? It has the ring to it of religious denunciation!

It is cut from the same cloth as the a-historical condemnation of Israel. I have not seen anything like such a formulation, about a country or regime being the main enemy of humanity, outside of the early 1950s magazine of the US Communist Party, which I looked at a while back — Stalin's supporters, stranded on the "wrong" side of the world divide, and hysterically whipping themselves up to back the USA's enemy in a nuclear war.

Politically, what follows, surely, is that any regime, no matter how "detestable", no matter how especially dangerous with nuclear weapons, is better than, less of a threat to humanity than, US imperialism the "main enemy of humanity" — and its proxy, Israel.

And therefore? What appears to follow is that you will line up with any conceivable opponent of the USA — and with the pixillated kitsch-left idiots who see Islamist clerical-fascism as better than the USA. Which is what you are doing.

The "main enemy of humanity" formula is metaphysics, not politics. It is all too reminiscent of Third Period Stalinism, with its arbitrary schematics and subjective definitions.

It is an example of what I have mind in the name-tag "kitsch-left": inorganic, subjective,

arbitrary orientation on the world. And if it is true that “US imperialism” is “humanity’s worst enemy”, then the prospects for humanity are very bleak indeed. Not least of the faults of this formula is that it dismisses the US working class, as this line of thinking usually also dismisses the Israeli working class.

It is a millenarian view of the world tightly sprung, and of an early, if not imminent, showdown between the forces of good and evil. It is a secularisation of the world-view of political Islam, focused on the “Great Satan” of the USA and its allies and “proxies” overseas. Isn’t it?

### “Pabloism”

The post-Trotsky Trotskyist movement was derailed by its Third-Period-Stalinist style belief in a World Revolution that was coming to the final clash, the “lutte finale” of the great song. It was to be a clash between “Imperialism” and the “World Revolution”, which, for now, was embodied in the Stalinist states, the Stalinist movements, and the Stalinist-led revolutions in the Third World.

The would-be Trotskyists were led by their notion of a predetermined World Revolution within a very short time scale, and the identification of Stalinism as its embodiment for now, in the first stage, into a fantastic view of reality, made up of negativism towards capitalism, and of (mistaken) positive identification with the bureaucratically staid economies of the USSR and its allies. (See the introduction to *The Fate of the Russian Revolution*: [www.workersliberty.org/fate](http://www.workersliberty.org/fate)).

Today the kitsch left is in the grip of analogous politics, but with none of the seeming justification and seeming rationality of those post-Trotsky Trotskyists, the “Pabloites”.

The kitsch left now sees the world as caught up in an apocalyptic battle between good and evil — between “humanity’s worst enemy” and... the others.

As in 1951, at the Third World Congress of the Fourth International, Stalinism was written into the role of adversary of US imperialism in the “final battle”, so also today the “anti-US” forces are written into the scenario for the climactic battle: the Tehran regime, the Taliban, Al Qaeda. and... whom?...

As in the early 1950s, this leads to out-and-out nonsense — identification of black as white and vice versa by a process of arbitrary, negative selection. And without any of the twisted sense which the idea of progressive Stalinism, on one side, and totally reactionary imperialism, on the other, had.

Comrade Machover, here you are led to the side of reaction by such notions as “humanity’s worst enemy”, defined in terms of power politics. How do you wind up after six decades as a Marxist articulating a thinly secularised version of Muslim eschatology?

### Israel worse than the “worst enemy”?

I asked whether Israel should be condemned “because Israel would in attacking Iran be only an

American imperialist tool, against a mere regional power; and that cancels out the genuine self-defence element in pre-emptive Israeli military action against Iranian nuclear weapons”.

You comment: “The fact that Israel will not be acting as a mere American imperialist tool makes it even worse, and is all the more reason for condemning and opposing its aggression. Because in addition to acting for its imperialist sponsor, Israel will at the same time be acting to maintain its own regional hegemony, nuclear monopoly and ability to oppress the Palestinian people and colonise their lands.”

Here everything is blended and mixed into a muddy political paste! And the paste is very messy.

Israel is bad when it is the proxy for “humanity’s worst enemy”; and when it is not — you concede it is not, or not entirely, or not always — it is “even worse”! Not only is there a power that is “humanity’s worst enemy”; there is also a power that is an even worse enemy of humanity than “humanity’s worst enemy”. The US is the worst enemy, but Israel is the worst, worst enemy of humanity.

And why? Israel has “regional hegemony” and “acts to maintain it”. It has a “nuclear monopoly” and (therefore?) “ability to oppress the Palestinian people and colonise their lands.”

This jumble is an example of where reasoning around a fixed demonological view of a state and of a people can lead you! In what “region” does Israel have “hegemony”? In the Occupied Territories, to be sure. But that does not depend on Israel’s nuclear weapons. In the wider region of the Middle East, Israel obviously does not have “hegemony”. And nor does its nuclear monopoly hand it status in that region.

Only if Iran or some other power hostile to Israel had nuclear weapons, only then, would Israel’s status or even its ability to stand up to the threat of nuclear annihilation depend on its having nuclear weapons.

Washing around in your subconscious here seems to be a half-formed notion that it would be good if Israel were faced with another power in the Middle East able to brandish nuclear weapons.

### Unconditional support for Iran?

Should we condemn Israel “because the Iranian government, Islamic clerical fascist though it is, is an ‘anti-imperialist’ power and must be unconditionally supported against the US, Nato, Israel?”

Here, you don’t reply at all, though you go through the motions. You say I know “very well” that “opposition to US-Israeli aggression against Iran in no way implies ‘unconditional support’ for the Iranian regime”.

I did not discuss “US-Israeli aggression”. That is your definition, not mine. Why did I write “unconditional”? Because there is something of “on their side, no matter what” in supporting (even by implication) Iran’s “right” to nuclear weapons; and that is your substantive position, comrade Machover!

But you don’t know when to leave well alone, do

you? You build further on my rejection of the idea that “the Iranian government, Islamic clerical-fascist though it is, is an ‘anti-imperialist’ power and must be unconditionally supported against the US, Nato, Israel”. You comment: “Inadvertently, SM has given us an illustration of the fact that you cannot consistently be soft on the Israeli state without being also soft on its imperialist sponsor and close senior partner.”

You’d be better engaged, comrade Machover, in sifting through and defining, first for yourself, what is really going on in your own mind!

Because I reject the idea that Iran is an “anti-imperialist power” (as distinct from a regional imperialism: isn’t that what you’d say it is?), and reject the argument that for that reason (for supposedly being an “anti-imperialist power”) it should be supported against the US, Nato, and Israel, therefore....?

Therefore... my “rhetorical question”, you say, “provides an argument for not opposing an attack by the US or Nato” (emphasis added).

You can’t oppose a US attack without positively supporting Iran? So you seem to say. In fact, Iran is a small imperialist power. Saying that, and rejecting the idea that we should side with it against the bigger imperialist powers, would not hinder us from opposing an attack — any more than defining Iraq for what it is, a regional imperialist power, hindered us from opposing the US-British invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The idea that we should define the smaller and weaker imperialism as “anti-imperialist”, and positively support it, is political and intellectual gibberish. It isn’t new, however. There were many people in Asia, and many black people in the USA, who saw Japan as a progressive anti-imperialist power, a “coloured” power, an “Asian” power, in World War Two. Japan exploited that, for example, in Burma. The US Trotskyists had to make special educational efforts to try to wean black people in the USA from such ideas (in Labor Action, for instance).

The idea that you side with the weaker imperialism, and accept its “anti-imperialist” postures as good coin, would have led to supporting Japan against the USA in 1941, and the USSR against the USA after 1945!

### **Fascists?**

You add: “Let me also note in passing that SM is doing here what no serious Marxist should do: for the second time in this article he is using ‘fascist’ as a mere invective rather than as a precise political term. He should know better.”

I wrote not of “fascist”, but of “clerical fascist”. And I did not use it as “mere invective”. Here, once again, we have your irrepressible tendency to let arid pedantry override your sense of reality and of history.

I agree that “fascist” should not be used as mere insult. The Trotskyist movement, and, of course, the working class itself, paid a high price for the idiotic Stalinist habit of flinging the word “fascist” about in that way.

But in fact there are quite a few different sorts

of fascism in history. The Francoist movement was an amalgam of smallish fascist organisations, the Spanish army, and the Catholic church: it was a Catholic crusade.

There were clerical fascist movements in many European countries, differing more or less seriously one from another. In Ireland in the early mid 1930s, Blueshirt clerical fascism mushroomed into a mass movement for a while: it had among its peculiarities the fact that most of it (unlike any other clerical-fascism I know, anywhere) was less nationalistic and less narrowly chauvinist than its “mainstream” rivals, the De Valera government and its unofficial IRA supporters.

Clerical fascism, in relation to Iran, means mass mobilisations motivated by religious or religio-social ideas and feelings, for Islamist totalitarian-political goals. The feelings it builds on include feelings of alienation from capitalism which, in more favourable circumstances, could lead some of the people involved to revolutionary communist conclusions: but that is a feature of all fascist movements.

You describe Iran as a “theocracy”, but that is a complementary designation, not one that excludes the description “clerical fascism”. There were large elements of theocracy in fascist Spain and Portugal. There were very large elements, perhaps larger than in fascist Spain or Portugal, of theocracy in bourgeois-democratic Ireland for many decades (when the bishops could call in a minister and simply tell him what to do, and be obeyed; and often would not even deign to give reasons for it: see the memoirs of the one-time minister, Dr. Noel Browne, “Against the Tide”).

Granted that there is imprecision in it, “clerical fascism” will do to be getting on with as a description of authoritarian-totalitarian Islamist politico-religious movements.

### **Machover’s “third way”**

You continue: “SM’s penultimate pretext is a real beauty: “[Should we condemn an Israeli attack] because Israel refuses to dismantle the Jewish national state peacefully and agree to an Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have religious but not Israeli national rights, and therefore socialists, ‘anti-racists’ and anti-imperialists must be on the side of those who would conquer and destroy it, even, in this case, with nuclear weapons?”

“The oh so subtle rhetorical legerdemain here is to smuggle past the reader a false alternative: either you accept Israel as ‘the Jewish national state’ or else you must accept an ‘Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have religious but not Israeli national rights’. SM implies that there is no other choice. And, moreover, he threatens his reader: if you reject the former — ‘the Jewish national state’ — then (‘and therefore ...’) you must resign yourself to Israel’s destruction ‘even with nuclear weapons’.”

“The false alternative”? You have a third alternative to offer? An Israel that is not a “Jewish national state” (with rights for minorities), but in which nonetheless Jews would have national

rights? Or an Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have national rights?

"SM implies that there is no other choice"? But you have a revelation to offer? The reader perplexed by the complexities of the Jewish-Palestinian conflict will have felt his or her pulse quicken. A Moshe has come to judgement!

Before your revelation, you spend a lot of words rehashing discussions, to my mind largely pedantic, discussions about Israel's definition of a citizen and so on. Any national state will be to some degree or another nationalist; socialists work against the nationalism, and to win fully equal rights for minority groups in the state; but we are for the right to self-determination of nations as they are, not just of nations as they are in textbook definitions. These considerations apply to all nations, and they apply to Israel too. Socialists in Israel should fight for entirely equal rights for all minorities there; in the foreseeable future, any Israeli state will have some degree of nationalism and discrimination.

Your revelation, when it comes, is less than convincing. It appears to be a singularly undefined version of a bi-national state. "The alternative supported by true socialists is a settlement based on equal rights: not only equal individual rights for all, but also equal national rights for the two actual national groups of Palestine/Israel.

"Who are these two groups? First, the indigenous people, the Palestinian Arabs, including the refugees ethnically cleansed by Zionist colonisation, who surely must have the right to return to their homeland. Second, the Hebrew-speaking settler nation that has come into existence in that country... This clearly means the rejection of the 'Jewish national state' in the present Zionist sense..."

You give no explanation of what sort of Jewish national state could be regarded as an exercise of the legitimate national rights of the "Hebrew-speaking nation", except of course that it must not be "anything like" Israel. This is what I meant above by defining you as a mere phrasemonger. Your stuff here juggles possibly attractive things that simply have no purchase on reality, and have nothing to offer in the way of telling us what we do to get from the situation in the Middle East now to one in which Jews and Arabs relate to each other in a friendly and cooperative way.

There are three distinct things to be sorted out here. First, there is what we would like — what socialists would prescribe, if we had god-like powers.

Second, there is what can be done politically with what exists, by people (socialists) who lack god-like power. At present, we have the singular lack of power of people with small influence and smaller organised forces, in the Middle East or elsewhere. And it seems to me certain that even if there were a mass revolutionary Marxist movement embracing Jewish and Arab workers, it would still not be able at will to wipe out and reconcile the national antagonisms of generations simply by decreeing the merging of nations. It would still need a democratic national programme, some variant of two states. The Bolsheviks needed

such a policy after the workers had taken power in the old Tsarist Empire.

Third, the actual role in politics of the bandying-about of phrases and detached fine sentiments by socialists like you who refuse to seek solutions in the world that exists. You act as a cover for Arab and Islamic reaction!

Few socialists would disagree with the generalities of what you call the policy of "true socialists": "not only equal individual rights for all, but also equal national rights for the two actual national groups of Palestine/Israel". But how could it be done?

Jews and Palestinian Arabs should merge into one people? The idea is utterly fantastic that peoples can do that at will, especially peoples with their actual history.

The proposal that over four million Palestinians, the descendants of refugees, should "return" to pre-1967 Israel is a proposal for the abolition of the Jewish nation. So it is seen, and for sixty years has been seen, by both sides. There is no way it can be made acceptable to Israel; and in fact, no way in which its realisation would be compatible with the existence of the Jewish nation.

Talk about "racism" here is ideological blackjacking. Nobody would think that the amalgamation of the Germans and the French in the territory now occupied by one of them could be brought about, even after the old antagonisms have been enormously reduced. There is also a great deal of scapegoating in blaming Israel alone for Arab refugees. Almost as many (600,000) Jewish refugees made their way in the years after 1948 from Arab countries to Israel. The Arab states deliberately refused to try to integrate the Palestinian refugees, ancestors of today's 4.6 million. They did it in part for political reasons.

### **Israel: "ethnocratic-racist"?**

You say that Israel is an "ethnocratic-racist" settler state. Here you wallow in the political equivalent of fashionable psychobabble! Even if your epithet were justified, it would be irrelevant to what we are talking about. It is not justified.

Israeli nationalism is like any other nationalism, concerned with those it considers its own and downgrading and dismissive of others. Nationalisms loosen up, become less tight in their definitions-in, less aggressive to those defined-out, the less pressure they are under, the less opposition they face to their cherished claims.

Israeli nationalism, "Zionism" — as I'm sure you know far better than I do — faced tremendous opposition, and arose in a political world which persecuted Jews and, in that persecution's most intense form, denied the right of Jews even to live, anywhere.

Israel's right to exist is still not recognised by most of its neighbours sixty years after the state's foundation!

Of course Jewish nationalism under pressure has been and is edgy, aggressive, inclined to ignore or deny competing "claims" that stand in the way of its own. Of course, since the Holocaust it has been seized by a spirit of ruthless

determination.

Jewish nationalism, at the time that it gripped most Jews — which was not until the mid 20th century — was and is now, still, the nationalism of a people which had come close to extermination. In your lifetime and mine, two thirds of the Jews in Europe were exterminated.

Of course Jewish nationalism is often bitter, assertive, self-righteous, ruthless, unscrupulous. That is... nationalism. A major feature of the nationalism of oppressed or once-oppressed peoples is that, when demanding their own claimed rights, they are often indifferent to the rights and claims of minorities within their claimed territory. That is the nature of nationalism.

Take Ireland. We have colonised the globe more, probably, than Jews, Chinese, Indians, or Anglo-Saxons, and faced discrimination, prejudice, and inhospitality. In a vile recent example of Irish chauvinism and racism, a referendum voted overwhelmingly to deny Irish passports to Irish-born children of immigrants!

And therefore? Britain should never have left? Britain should reconquer this “racist” society?

Should socialists apply tests of moral worthiness to nations claiming self-determination, and recognise only those who themselves apply the golden rule — do unto others as you would have them do to you — as worthy of our support? I can't think of any nationalist-minded oppressed or once-oppressed people who would pass such a test.

The truth is that there is everywhere a continuum between nationalism, militant nationalism, chauvinism, and racism. There is no impassable barrier between the stages in that continuum.

Calling racist in the Israelis what in other peoples is nationalist or chauvinist is a dishonest attempt to damn Israeli nationalism — and the Israeli nation — by equating it in its entirety with the vilest form in the continuum. It is a form of political character-assassination and moral blackjacking.

There is also in it a savage injustice. A large part of the well-deserved odium in which “everyone” today holds “racism” derives from the Jews not as racists but as the supreme victims of racism in recorded history. The moral worth of such blackjacking is summed up in the fact that the attitudes of the implacable enemies of Israel, Arab-chauvinist or Islamist, even the clerical fascists among them, are not denounced as “racist” or even chauvinist, but classified as legitimate nationalism and splendid “anti-imperialism”.

### **Phrasemonger**

I don't classify you, comrade Machover, as “kitsch-left”. Old and well-worn terms exist to describe your politics here, pretty exactly. Lenin's term “phrasemonger” is, as I've already said, what I have in mind.

You concern yourself with formal classifications (settler state, imperialism, etc.) rather than with the living political questions.

You denounce the existing Israel for not being

the opposite of what it actually is — a Jewish state with a Palestinian Arab minority — and you do that in tandem with allies and supporters of Islamist clerical-fascism.

You combine anarchist-utopian severity of judgement on Israel, in the same article, with playing the role of understanding “interpreter” of Ahmadinejad, a couple of phrases about the Iranian rulers being “reactionaries” and “bastards” notwithstanding.

You can think yourself thereby a revolutionary politician and a highly moral man.

It is a delusion. You think you are a leftist on the Middle East, but that too is a delusion. The politics you purvey here are right, not left, wing.

Some of what you say about Israel has some use as a description. Israel is undoubtedly a settler state. It exists as a result of most of its people — or, now, their parents or grandparents — fleeing persecution and settling there over the last hundred years.

But you mean the description as automatic and outright condemnation, and use it as the basis for a denial of Israel's right to go on existing and of the right of the Jewish nation in Israel to self-determination. Don't you?

You use the expression “settler state” to assert that Israel is essentially the same as the old white Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), or apartheid South Africa, and to brush aside what distinguishes Israel from them — that it was not and is not fundamentally built on the exploited or super-exploited labour of Arabs, and that its Jewish citizens are the very big majority (80%) of its population.

You condemn Israel as expansionist. I believe that the dominant political forces in Israel want to keep as much of the post-1967 Palestinian territory as they can; they allow or encourage expanding Jewish settlements on that territory. If that's what you mean, yes, expansionist.

When you talk ominously of Israel's “own special agenda of annexation and expansion”, what are you talking about here, beyond Israel's domination of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories? If that is what you are talking about, then you should not present it as if you are saying a lot more.

I have no idea what grandiose ideas may be in the head of this or that Israeli politician. But in the world as it is, as distinct from fantasies derived from the Bible, there is no possibility of Israeli expansion beyond the West Bank.

Of course, we (AWL, and the writer) oppose the real Israeli expansionism and condemn it. We are for a fully independent Palestinian state in contiguous territory, side by side with Israel. We back those in Israel, Arabs and Jews, and in the Occupied Territories, who oppose the “expansionism” and counterpose to it “two states”.

And you? What do you propose? The abolition of the Jewish national state! You make putting an end to “Israeli expansionism” conditional on and identical with putting an end to Israel! You propose to replace one injustice to the Palestinians, with another to the Israeli Jews, the forcible abolition of Israel. That is what it comes

down to.

You don't advocate a just solution, but the reversal in the Palestinian-Jewish relationship of the roles of victors and vanquished.

### Consequences

The role in actual politics of irresponsible ultra-left phrasemongering like yours — whose good will I do not question — is the opposite of what you think it is.

You invoke socialist and liberal values and aspirations. You criticise Israel, often justly, in the light of those standards. You conclude that only your "maximalist" settlement is tolerable, and, short of fitting in to that, Israel has no right to exist.

You invoke high ideals and "reject" the existing Israel with the disdain of a "historical" snob. In doing so, you are not, though you want to be, a friend of the oppressed Palestinians: you urge them to reject what is possible, a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and to aim for the impossible.

You counterpose to the "two states" policy an ideal rearrangement that will tidy up the history of the last 100 years; but involves self-liquidation of Israel or its conquest by the Arab states. The only conceivable "instrument" able to destroy Israel is the Arab or Islamic states. That is where your anarchoid phrasemongering leads you — now, implicitly at least, to backing or half-backing Iran's drive for nuclear weapons.

You function as an ideological confusionist, an outrider or skirmisher, operating not to help the socialist and left-wing ideas, values, and ideal choices win support and be realised, but as an inadvertent helpmate of the right, of people like the clerical fascists in Iran. You act as an outrider, and unashamedly so for those on the would-be left who are more directly outriders of the Iranian and other clerical fascists.

I suggest that the way forward is two states, and Israelis, Jews and Arabs, working within Israel for change.

### Siren song!

To conclude. You and I are trapped on the fifth story of a building that is burning beneath us, flames coming out of the windows on three sides. I look around and suggest; "Let's tie these two ropes together, put some knots in them for handholds, and climb down. The ropes are not long enough, and we will have to jump the last storey.

We may get hurt a bit, or break a leg or two, but we will survive".

You say: "No! We'll most likely rope-burn our hands on the way down. One sort of burn is as bad as another. There is no difference!

You say: "You have fallen in love with the fire, haven't you? You want to compromise with fire and smoke and soot by running from it, by accepting its 'definition' of you! You are a pyromaniac! A filthy sootist!

"I know what to do. We should grow wings now and fly out of the window, rise and soar above it all, free of the fire and the soot and the filthy contamination with pyromania".

I reply: "Moshe, I'd love to grow wings, but genetic engineering hasn't got that far yet. We simply can't grow wings in time. The only solution to our dilemma is to climb down. We must move carefully, a step at a time".

You reply: "Don't be silly! I know a great Yiddish song about wings. Let's sing that. I know the lessons of Jewish history. We must learn to fly. It's the only thing". You start to sing:

"On a wagon bound for market/  
Sat a calf with a mournful eye./  
High above him flew a swallow/  
Winging swiftly through the sky".

I love that song — my son and I used to sing it when he was small — and I'm tempted to join you. But I resist, and go on preparing the ladder.

Then you sing another song:  
"If I had the wings of an angel/  
Over these walls I would fly".

I love that too. My father used to sing it when I was small. But I resist. I join in the singing, but I tie the ropes and knot them. I know that singing the song won't help you sprout wings. "Come on, comrade Machover. We can sing about wings as we climb down". You say: "F\*\*\* off, soot-monger". As I go out of the window, you continue to sing fine songs.

As I descend, I hear you, fainter now. "I shall not, I shall not be moved..." Another song I like.

I don't know when humankind will learn to "fly" — outgrow nationalism and other such things. For sure, "singing" for it — phrasemongering counterposed to real possibilities — won't speed the process.

The AWL advocates working-class unity across national divisions. For that we have more than preaching and fine songs. For sure, Arab and Jewish workers in Israel, and Israeli and Palestinian workers, will not make peace with each other without the "rope ladder" of a democratic programme — two states.

# Zionism: propaganda and sordid reality

By Moshé Machover

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In the July 24 issue of *Solidarity*, organ of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Sean Matgamna published an article, 'What if Israel bombs Iran?', in which he argued against an outright condemnation of Israel in case it launches an attack on Iran. I responded with a brief polemic against him in the *Weekly Worker* ('Abominable Warmongering Left', August 28). SM has now come back in the *Solidarity* of September 11 with a tediously lengthy response, written as a personal letter to me: 'Israel, Iran, and socialism'.

I shall not follow SM in using the form of a personal letter: I do not believe in personalising political polemics. Nor do I intend writing a long reply: that would tax the reader's patience, and in any case is quite unnecessary. Instead of refuting each and every allegation that SM makes in his 'letter', I refer the reader to his original article and to my August 28 reply to it. The reader will find that SM's allegations and excuses are far-fetched or self-refuting. Here is just one example of many. Matgamna's mild 'objection' In his 'letter' he protests: "I did and do 'object' to [an Israeli attack on Iran], and said so a number of times in the short article!"

This seems clear enough. But then it transpires that his 'objection' is not really that much of an objection: "My language expressed my determination not to join in with, or peacefully to tolerate, the outright condemnation of Israel that will most likely follow an Israeli attack, condemnation rooted in the 'demon-Zionism' prejudice of the kitsch-left and in the view that Israel has no right to defend itself ... "I will not, in response to an Israeli strike at Iranian nuclear installations, adopt the viewpoint that there is something so incomprehensible in such a strike that Israel as such must be condemned outright."

So he will "object", but will not 'condemn outright'. Weasel words. I suppose his 'objection' will take the form of a gentle, wistful shaking of the head.

In order to explain away this 'objection' that is short of "outright condemnation", he now tells us: "I bracketed the possible 'strike' I was discussing with the September 2007 Israeli attack on nuclear facilities in Syria, and the June 1981 attack on an Iraqi nuclear installation; there is therefore no reasonable ground for you or anyone else not understanding what sort of attack I was talking about."

No reasonable ground? The 1981 Israeli bombing of Osirak and the 2007 bombing of the Syrian 'facilities'[1] were directed against single vulnerable and isolated targets, and the countries

attacked were not in a position to retaliate. None of this is true of the intended attack on Iran: its nuclear installations - so far consistent with non-military use - are widely dispersed and dug deep underground, probably inaccessible to conventional (non- nuclear) bombs.[2] And Iran is well capable of massive retaliation, which means that the bombing will only be the start of a prolonged bloody conflict.

In fact, SM knows this very well, because at the very opening of his original article he told us exactly about what sort of attack he was talking: "An attack on Iran will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond, as supporters of Iran resort to suicide bombings in retaliation. There might well be large-scale Iranian civilian 'collateral' casualties. An attack would strengthen the Iranian regime and license a smash-down on its critics, including working class critics, inside Iran. It would throw Iraq back into the worst chaos."

So we have every reason to conclude, despite SM's protestations, that it is this kind of attack for which he refuses to condemn Israel outright.

And so it goes. SM's ramblings are full of such inconsistencies and absurdities. It would take far too long and would be far too boring to list them here. I leave it to thereader to discover other gems of this sort, if s/he feels so inclined.

I prefer to concentrate on the core issue: SM's appalling apologetic position on Zionism.

## **The dream of 'demon-Zionism'**

The fundamental fallacy in SM's lengthy 'letter' is his failure to come to grips with the nature of Zionism. In the whole of that tedious tract, the word 'Zionism' always appears in scare quotes, or in the dismissive-derisive combination, 'demon-Zionism'. Anti-Zionism is referred to exclusively by the derogatory term, 'absolute anti-Zionism', as though opposition to Zionism were per se something distastefully fanatical.

This issue is fundamental because his basic argument is that if Israel attacked Iran that would have nothing much to do with Zionism. Rather, it would be an act of pre-emptive self-defence, aimed at preventing the destruction of Israel by a future and hypothetical Iranian nuclear weapon. Here is a sample of his argument:

"In the case at hand, none of the demon-Zionism stuff is necessary to explain Israel's likely action; there is good reason, from an Israeli point of view, to refuse to stand by and let people who have said that they want to destroy Israel acquire

the weapons with which they just might try to do that. "... Some of what I wrote was explicitly an account of how Israelis would see nuclear-armed Islamist fanatics in Iran and clearly labelled as that. I used the tone and manner proper to one who thinks that Israel has a right to defend itself, against people on the would-be left whose starting point is that it doesn't, and, because of its origins, never could. To counter the demon-Zionism 'explanations', I described how most Israelis see the prospect of an Iranian nuclear bomb.

"... My language expressed my determination not to join in with, or peacefully to tolerate, the outright condemnation of Israel that will most likely follow an Israeli attack, condemnation rooted in the 'demon-Zionism' prejudice of the kitsch-left and in the view that Israel has no right to defend itself."

This is perhaps how "most Israelis" see it. Most Israelis are brainwashed by Israeli propaganda - which SM himself has swallowed whole, and regurgitates to his readers.

But when members of the Israeli 'defence' establishment are engaged in serious discussion - rather than propaganda for the consumption of the deluded masses and willing dupes - they say something quite different. On September 9, the Jerusalem Post reported on a conference in Israel's Institute for National Security Studies. Here is the report, headed 'Iranian nukes mean end of Zionism':

"Iran's success in obtaining a nuclear capability will deter Jews from immigrating to Israel, cause many Israelis to leave and will be the end of the 'Zionist dream', former deputy defence minister Ephraim Sneh said on Tuesday.

"A nuclear weapon in Iranian hands will be an intolerable reality for Israel,' Sneh said during a conference on Iran's nuclear programme at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv. 'The decision-making process in Israel will be under constant [Iranian] influence - this will be the end of the Zionist dream.'

"Former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy slammed Israeli political leaders for calling Iran's nuclear threat 'an existential threat'. 'There is something wrong with informing our enemy that they can bring about our demise,' Halevy said. 'It is also wrong that we inform the world that the moment the Iranians have a nuclear capability there is a countdown to the destruction of the state of Israel. We are the superpower in the Middle East and it is time that we began behaving like [a] superpower,' he said.

"Iran's real goal, Halevy said, was to turn itself into a regional superpower and reach a 'state of equality' with the United States in their diplomatic dealings.

"Sneh said that, while the military option was not preferred, Israel needed to keep it on the table, since such a possibility was the motivation for the international community's efforts to use diplomacy to stop Iran. Sneh added that he was confident that the IDF was capable of successfully carrying out a military strike against Iran. 'We grew up in a place that when the political echelon wanted something, the professional echelon knew

how to do it,' he said. 'I believe this has not changed in 2008.'" [3]

We have just seen that SM attempts to explain - and excuse - an Israeli attack on Iran as a defensive measure in the face of an existential threat, rather than as motivated by 'the demon-Zionism stuff'. Next time the INSS holds a conference, they ought perhaps to invite SM to lecture to the Israeli 'defence community' and tell them how wrong they are.

The two Israeli security bigwigs quoted above do not exactly see eye to eye with each other, but neither of them shares the view of the AWL expert on Israel's motives. Both Ephraims evidently agree that the issue is not the survival of Israel. Unlike SM, they do not believe Israel faces a real threat of physical destruction. Halevy, former head of Mossad (Israel's counterpart of the CIA or Britain's MI6), does not seem too worried. General Sneh, who is a 'defence' politician and a bit of an ideologue, is worried; however, unlike SM, what he is worried about is not Israel's existence, but the fate of the 'Zionist dream' - that very "demon-Zionism stuff, none [of which] is necessary to explain Israel's likely action", according to SM.

Ephraim Sneh's worry may be excessive, but it is not irrational. Unlike SM, he knows very well that Zionism is an ongoing, expansionist, colonising project. It requires an ever-growing Jewish population in order to colonise more and more Arab land and to neutralize the 'demographic threat' of being 'swamped' by the Palestinian Arab population. He is afraid that, if Israel is deprived of its exclusive hegemonic position in the Middle East, then it may lose some of its appeal to Jewish immigrants and induce some of its existing Jewish population to leave. Moreover, a nuclear Iran may well impose constraints on Israel's political options: its "decision-making process ... will be under constant [Iranian] influence [and] this will be the end of the Zionist dream."

In fact, if you read the Jerusalem Post report carefully, you will realise that Iran's nuclear programme (whose military purpose is as yet purely hypothetical) is from Israel's point of view only part of a larger issue. What Israeli leaders and planners find "intolerable" is any threat to Israel's regional hegemony and its privileged status as "the superpower in the Middle East": because it is this status that allows it to proceed with the Zionist project of colonisation without serious let or hindrance.

Let me make myself very clear. Socialists everywhere, and the Iranian working class, have very good reasons to oppose the theocratic, repressive regime of Iran, and to condemn any plans it may have for acquiring nuclear weapons (if it transpires that it has such plans). But concern for the "Zionist dream" - let alone the spurious existential threat to Israel - are not among these good reasons.

### **Recycling Israeli propaganda**

This is just one of several instances of SM gullibly lapping up and recycling the crassest Israeli propaganda, while ignoring what Israeli

political analysts and military chiefs say when they are not in propaganda mode.

Here is another example. In my August 28 article I pointed out that in 1967 and 1973 Israel seriously considered using nuclear weapons against neighbouring Arab countries. In his 'letter' SM retorts:

"It is not good that Israel has nuclear weapons; but the idea that Israel would use nuclear bombs in any situation other than a perceived immediate threat of being overwhelmed by Arab or Islamit forces is, I suggest, on the same plane as what the Weekly Worker's front-page text and picture attributed to me.

"Your own cited cases when Israeli leaders supposedly discussed using nuclear weapons, or the threat of nuclear weapons - 'it is known to have seriously considered using it against its Arab neighbours in 1967 and 1973' - were situations of such perceived immediate threat."

Perceived by whom? Admittedly, this was the perception spread about by the Israeli propaganda machine. But the reality was quite different. Both 1967 and 1973 wars were fought entirely outside the Green Line (Israel's de facto border from 1949 to 1967). It is true that in 1967 the task of Israel's disinformation campaign was made easy by Gamal Abd an-Nasser's foolish sabre-rattling. But the Israeli leadership knew very well that this was mere posturing.

General Ezer Weizman, member of the inner circle of the Israeli military and political establishment, who served as defence minister and eventually became president of Israel, affirmed that in 1967 "there was never any danger of extermination".[4] And the respected Israeli soldier and scholar, general Matityahu Peled, put it even more strongly: "To pretend that the Egyptian forces massed on our frontiers were in a position to threaten the existence of Israel constitutes an insult not only to the intelligence of anyone capable of analysing this sort of situation, but above all an insult to the IDF [Israeli armed forces]."[5]

I wonder what the late general Peled would have said about the intelligence and analytic capability of Sean Matgamna. All serious historical research published since then - much of it by Israeli historians - confirms the assessment of generals Weizman and Peled.

The situation in 1973 was actually more transparent: it was an attempt by Egypt and Syria to regain the parts of their national territories occupied by Israel in 1967. Israel within the Green Line was not even remotely threatened.

What was really threatened was not Israel's existence, but its position of absolute regional military supremacy. This was felt by the Zionist leaders of Israel to be "intolerable", as it would have jeopardised the "Zionist dream" of ongoing colonisation. This is why they considered seriously using nuclear weapons: in order to prevent Egypt and Syria regaining their occupied lands by military means. In the event, this proved unnecessary, as Israel was able - thanks to a massive airlift of conventional weapons from the US - to push back both Arab armies, and even

occupy briefly additional Egyptian territory, in Africa itself, west of the Suez Canal.

Is Zionism a kind of nationalism?

Underlying SM's blundering assessment of the true motives of Israel's past and present policy, which may drive these leaders to attack Iran, is his abysmal failure or deliberate refusal to recognise what Zionism is all about.

I have heard SM accused of actually being a Zionist. I do not think this is quite true; but he has gulped a great deal of Zionist propaganda, of the kind concocted specifically for the western left. A key element of this propaganda is the plea, 'Don't demonise Israel and Zionism; Israel is just a normal nation-state, and Zionism is a common-or-garden nationalism.' SM parrots this propaganda, including the use of the scare-term, 'demon'. SM repeatedly characterises Zionism as 'nationalism', which, according to him, socialists should repudiate no less, but also no more, than they repudiate any other bourgeois nationalism.

But here he gets a little confused: he is unable to decide which nation it is that Zionism is supposed to be the nation-ism of. Sometimes he speaks of Zionism as synonymous with 'Israeli nationalism'; for example:

"Israeli nationalism is like any other nationalism, concerned with those it considers its own and downgrading and dismissive of others ...

"Israeli nationalism, 'Zionism' - as I'm sure you know far better than I do - faced tremendous opposition ..."

But almost immediately he changes his mind and refers to Zionism repeatedly as "Jewish nationalism".

These two descriptions of Zionism cannot both be correct: not all Israelis are Jews, and only about one third of all Jews are Israelis. I will now show that both descriptions are in fact incorrect.

'Israel' is the name of a state, not of a nation; strictly and legally speaking,[6] 'Israeli' denotes citizenship, not national affiliation. However, the majority community of Israel, the Hebrews (aka the 'Israeli Jews') do indeed possess all the objective attributes of a nation, in the modern sense of this word: territorial contiguity; a complete class structure (similar to that of other modern capitalist nations); a common language of everyday discourse (modern Hebrew, which is unique to them!); and a secular culture, both highbrow and pop.

Most Hebrews do subscribe to Zionist ideology, which is relentlessly inculcated into them by the Israeli state.

So can Zionism be described as Hebrew (or 'Israeli-Jewish') nationalism? Not really. Because the last thing that a nationalist ideology (as normally understood) can ever do is deny the very existence of the nation of which it is the nationalism. But Zionism does adamantly deny the existence of a distinct Hebrew nation - that settler nation that has in reality come into being as a result of the Zionist colonisation of Palestine!

As a consequence, the Hebrew nation is but dimly self-aware of its being a distinct nation. For, according to Zionist ideology, all the Jews around the world constitute a single nation. The homeland

of this alleged nation is the biblical 'Land of Israel', which is considerably larger than Palestine of the British mandate.[7]

According to Zionist ideology, there is no Hebrew nation, but merely members of the worldwide Jewish nation, who have already 'returned' to their homeland, an advance guard of their brethren

in the diaspora, who have a right - indeed a sacred duty - to follow the vanguard and be 'ingathered' in the Land of Israel.

Zionism portrays itself as the national movement of this worldwide alleged nation. But this self-description cannot seriously be taken at face value. Zionism cannot really be regarded as 'Jewish nationalism', except in a very far-fetched and highly paradoxical sense, for the simple reason that world Jewry is not a nation in any recognisable modern sense of the term: it lacks all the objective attributes of a nation.

A British Jew living in London and, say, an Iranian Jew living in Tehran have nothing in common except religion: the religion practised by themselves; or (if they are 'secular' Jews) residual memories of the religion practised by their parents or grandparents. Needless to say, nationhood in the modern sense (at least since the French Revolution) is a secular concept, unrelated to religion.

So Zionism is not the nationalism of the real Hebrew ('Israeli-Jewish') nation, because Zionist ideology denies the existence of this nation. And it cannot rightly be the nationalism of the alleged worldwide Jewish nation, because such a nation does not really exist.

For the same reason Israel, as presently constituted, is not a nation-state. It is certainly not a state of all its citizens - which is the demand raised by the Arab and Hebrew democratic forces in that country, and should be supported by all progressive people everywhere. But it is not even the state of its real majority nation, the Hebrew nation. It is officially the self-declared state of a non-nation: world Jewry. This is enshrined in Israeli legislation, most prominently in the Law of Return, which grants every Jewish immigrant automatic Israeli citizenship. These immigrants are encouraged to colonise lands expropriated from Palestinian Arabs. At the same time, Israel denies the right of Palestinian Arab refugees to return to their homeland, from which they have been ethnically cleansed.

This is why the call for the overthrow, the de-Zionisation, of the deeply discriminatory Israeli state is an elementary democratic demand.

### **What is Zionism?**

The above discussion is not a mere formal quibble; rather, it is a needed clarification, before I go on to explain what Zionism is in fact all about.

I will do so in bare, brief outline. The reader can find a fuller analysis, with supporting quotes from Zionist documents, in the transcript of my lecture, 'Israelis and Palestinians: conflict and resolution'. [8] (I referred to that lecture also in my August 28 article, but SM evidently did not bother

to look it up, for in his 'letter' he poses to me questions that I addressed there in some detail.)

Zionism arose in the latter part of the 19th century as a false response to the so-called 'Jewish problem': the persecution of Jews in many European (mainly east- and central-European) countries. A minority of European Jews, predominantly bourgeois and petty bourgeois, came to believe that it is pointless to combat anti-semitism, because it is inherent in the gentile (ie, non-Jewish) psyche. In fact, these founders of Zionism accepted the main premise of anti-semitism: that Jews ought not to live among gentiles, but should go away and live among their own kind.[9]

That was the era of surging mid-European nationalism and the heyday of imperialist colonialism. So the Zionist ideologues declared that the Jews were a nation, albeit a dispersed one; and concluded that 'going away to live among their own kind' meant in practice colonising some dependent territory in what was later called the 'third world' and transforming it into a Jewish nation-state. The indigenous population was to be ethnically cleansed, as indeed was standard practice in many settler states. This would ensure that the Jewish colonisers would form a decisive majority in their projected nation-state. All this is very clearly stated in seminal Zionist writings.

After some hesitation as to the best territory to be colonised, the Holy Land was chosen because of its powerful emotional appeal as the cradle and spiritual focus of Judaism.

That left only one problem: in order to colonise Palestine, the Zionist project needed the protection and sponsorship of whichever imperial power was dominant in the region. In Zionist parlance, what was needed was an imperial 'charter' for colonising Palestine. The Zionists understood perfectly well that in exchange for imperial sponsorship, the future settler state would have to serve as a western bastion in the face of the 'Asiatic barbarism' of the entire region. This too is stated clearly and explicitly in seminal Zionist writings.

Towards the end of World War I, the British government issued the longed-for charter, known as the Balfour Declaration. The idea was that the Zionist settlers would serve Britain by 'forming for England a little loyal Jewish Ulster in a sea of potentially hostile Arabism'.

The rest is really and truly history. The Faustian pact between the Zionist colonising project and Britain worked well, until the former expanded and outgrew its utility to British imperialism by clashing with other British designs and interests in the region.

By that time British global power was declining in any case. So Zionism - true to its long-term strategy - found a new patron: the US, which replaced Britain as the new global super- power and overlord of the oil-rich Middle East.

Now let us get back to the position put forward by SM. His claim that Zionism is simply a regular kind of nationalism is untenable not only because, as I have shown, there is no real nation of which Zionism is the nation-alism, but because it ignores

and suppresses the very essence of what Zionism is in actual reality: a colonising project, structurally and inseparably allied to imperialism.

### Ridiculous errors

Failure - or refusal - to grasp the essence of Zionism leads SM to all sorts of ridiculous and dangerous errors. Some of these I have pointed out above: his childish naive recitation of the crassest claims of Israeli propaganda, in total disregard even of serious analysis by high-ranking members of the Israeli establishment.

His original article and subsequent 'letter' are replete with such nonsense. For example, he assures us: "I would agree that Israel has no 'right' to continue occupying the West Bank and building Jewish-colonist settlements there. By that I mean: I don't want Israel to go on doing that, and I'm on the side of the Palestinians in the post-1967 occupied territories and of those Israelis, Jewish and Arab, who want that to stop and fight to stop it."

Implicit in this generous 'agreement' is the absurd idea that Zionist colonisation began in 1967. It ignores and suppresses the ethnic cleansing of 1947-49 and the right of the refugees of that war to return to their homeland. It also ignores the racist settler-state character of Israel within the Green Line, whose Palestinian Arab minority (those who escaped the ethnic cleansing of the majority in 1947-49) have been deprived of most of their lands (which were expropriated and given over to Jewish settlers), and denied equal civil rights, let alone rights as a national minority.

All that SM wants Israel to do is to stop building new settlements in the West Bank -- which by now is already heavily colonised and torn into small fragments that are worse than Bantustans: more like Indian reservations.

He only has to look at an up-to-date map of Israeli colonisation of the West Bank to realize that the "AWL demand of Israel that it should vacate the 1967-occupied territories and agree to an independent Palestinian state" is not remotely realistic without removal of the 'facts on the ground' created by Israel, including some half a million settlers. None of this can happen without a fundamental change within Israel, amounting to the overthrow of its Zionist regime. But SM does not seem to be interested in maps or facts on the ground. He is quite happy just repeating the inanities of 'leftwing' Zionist mantras.

Another astoundingly ridiculous claim made by SM is that Israel might "bomb Iran, with or without the agreement of the USA and Nato". I am not sure what Nato - which is itself a largely American instrument - has to do with all this, but the very idea that Israel might bomb Iran without US consent is patently absurd.

As readers may recall, in 1982, when Britain wanted to regain the Falklands - which (moral considerations aside) were in international law sovereign British territory - it needed the consent of the US. How can SM possibly imagine that Israel may take a step that will surely have a

profound effect on US interests without an American green light? Besides, in order to reach Iran, Israeli bombers will need to overfly Iraq, which is under US occupation. If the overflight is not prearranged, the bombers may well be shot down. Israel will also need a fresh supply of appropriate weapons from the US.[11]

SM commits such a silly error because he fails - or refuses - to grasp the true nature of the tie between the Zionist settler state and its imperial senior partner.

In his 'letter' he compounds this absurdity by claiming that if Israel does attack Iran then "We can be sure that everyone within earshot of us, including the British government, will oppose an Israeli strike."

He is sure, is he? What grounds does he have for such certainty? In 2006, when Israel invaded and bombed Lebanon, murdering over a thousand Lebanese civilians and leaving behind a million cluster bomblets, Britain's poodle government followed the US lead in studiously refraining from even calling for a halt to hostilities, let alone condemning Israel. And now he believes that Britain would oppose an Israeli attack - an attack that, I repeat, will be unthinkable without overt or tacit US approval!

Enough! Let me conclude with Heywood's famous couplet, taken from his 1546 Dialogue of proverbs:

Who is so deafe, or so blynde, as is hee,  
That wilfully will nother here nor see l

### Notes

1. These 'facilities' were in fact an unfinished and unused building, which may possibly have been originally intended for processing nuclear material, but was later abandoned - which explains why it was undefended and unguarded.
2. See 'Excusing catastrophe' Weekly Worker September 4.
3. 'Iranian nukes mean end of Zionism' Jerusalem Post internet edition, September 9: <http://tinyurl.com/65jib5>.
4. Ma'ariv April 19 1972.
5. Ha'aretz March 19 1972. Both Weizman and Peled are quoted in 'Key historical events: 1967 war (June 5-10 1967)': <http://electronicintifada.net/bytopic/675.shtml>.
6. That is, according to Israeli law!
7. Its limits are fuzzy, but they include in any case not only Israel and the Palestinian and Syrian territories occupied by it since 1967, but also parts of Jordan and Lebanon.
8. Downloadable from [www.iran-bulletin.org/palestineisrael.htm](http://www.iran-bulletin.org/palestineisrael.htm).
9. For a discussion of the affinity, and occasional collaboration, of Zionism with anti-semitism, see 'Zionism and anti-semitism' - originally a chapter in A Bober (ed) The other Israel: the radical case against Zionism New York 1972. This chapter is reproduced online (alas, with many typos) and can be downloaded from <http://matzpen.org/index.asp?u=other&p=chap3-11>.
10. A serious contender was the highland part of Uganda, which was subsequently torn away from Uganda by the British imperialists and joined to Kenya. This temperate area was regarded as suitable for European settlers, and indeed was used for this purpose by Britain.
11. See, for example, report in The Daily Telegraph September
12. 'Iran is a threat, but the west can't afford to have Israel bomb it - yet': <http://tinyurl.com/3gogrb>.

# Israel and the "essence of Zionism"

By Sean Matgamna

*Solidarity 3/139, 25 September 2008*

Comrade Machover,

My understanding of a personal letter is of something private, as distinct from the open letter I wrote you (*Solidarity 3/138*), which is intended, or mainly intended, for other readers. So I'll continue as I started.

My "tediously lengthy" response - "if I were as tedious as a king", as a famous corrupter of words once put it, I would be happy to bestow it all on you, comrade Machover, and on your not-quite-reconstructed-Stalinist close comrades.

Initially, you repeated the libellous nonsense of the Weekly Worker's campaign, lying about what I had said. You summed up my position thus: "while an attack on Iran 'will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond', it would be wrong to object to it if it is undertaken by Israel".

"[SM] just refuses to say anything against Israeli aggression. Go ahead, Israel - bomb away; feel free to cause 'large-scale Iranian civilian 'collateral' casualties'! SM will look the other way". That was flatly untrue - a lamentable fit of demagogy.

In your second article, you have changed the story. Your complaint is that my "'objection' is not really that much of an objection... He will 'object', but will not condemn outright'."

That is not quite true either, but it is considerably nearer the truth than what you wrote first time out. Your two different versions - that I thought it "wrong to object", that I said "go ahead Israel, bomb away!"; and that I "will object" - can't both be true. In which statement are you mistaken, or sloppy, or knowingly repeating Weekly Worker lies?

Why waste your time, and mine, on such puerile nonsense?

If what you are doing in your second article is retracting what you said first time round, shouldn't you do it explicitly, and shouldn't you give some account of how you came to perpetrate a gross misrepresentation?

In any case, the new version isn't much of an improvement. You write: "he will 'object', but will not 'condemn outright'..." Will object to but not condemn what?

You run together two distinct things. I "objected" to an Israeli (conventional) military attack on Iranian nuclear installations; I refused to "condemn outright" Israel as such.

Why, comrade Machover, if you are as sure of your case as you want to appear to be, do you need such a tricky - and, to put it in plain words, dishonest - conflation? Those sentences of yours, as an illustration of literary and political vice, might have been taken out of George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language"!

You were strangely silent about the major Weekly Worker lie - the Goebbels-level lie! - that I had "excused" an Israeli nuclear strike on Iran. By ignoring it, you tacitly went along with it. Now you quietly try to sustain and justify it on the ground that Iran's nuclear installations are so well shielded as to be "probably inaccessible to conventional (non-nuclear) bombs". Therefore, an Israeli nuclear strike is an immediate possibility; therefore, that is what I was writing about; that is what I was (your first version) not objecting to, or (your second version) objecting to only weakly.

And that justifies the Weekly Worker's flat page-one charge, accompanied by a full-page picture of a nuclear explosion, that I "excuse" an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran?

## Essence of Zionism?

You base most of your argument in the second article on the claim that any Israeli raid on Iran would be yet another manifestation of the workings of "Zionism", of the evil logic of an idea a century coined over a century ago.

My "basic" error, you say, is to think "that if Israel attacked Iran that would have nothing much to do with Zionism". So: any Israeli raid on Iranian nuclear installation would be very much "to do with Zionism", and with the "essence of what Zionism is in actual reality: a colonising project, structurally and inseparably allied to imperialism".

"What Israeli leaders and planners find 'intolerable' is any threat to Israel's regional hegemony and its privileged status as 'the superpower in the Middle East': because it is this status that allows it to proceed with the Zionist project of colonisation without serious let or hindrance".

Exactly what this means is not clear: that Israel wants to bomb Iran in order to plant Jewish settlements there? Your triumphantly-presented overview of the "essence" of Zionism conflates Israel today, and the history of the Israeli Jewish people and of the European Jewry in the 20th century, with extrapolation from (chosen strands of) an ideology.

You suggest there are goals and aims and objectives, a hidden "essence", discernible only to those like you who can see through the mere appearance of things to the hidden "real" Zionism? That the true story was not one of many strands in the broad Zionist current - in the thinking, hopes, fantasies, fears of world Jewry - including people and groups who wanted a Jewish state stretching to the Euphrates, or wherever - but instead of a single "Zionism", with at its centre people pursuing such goals, using all the different "Zionists" with lesser ambitions as makeweights,

tools, dupes, and "brainwashing" them as you say the Jews of Israel now are brainwashed about the danger from Iran?

I showed in my first reply that you seem to be in the grip of a thinly secularised Muslim eschatology; here you seem to subscribe to some variant of the doctrine of history, or Middle East history anyway, as shaped by a "Zionist" conspiracy.

This may be the result of your confusing a system of ideas, an ideology, Jewish nationalism, Zionism, with a movement of people set in motion by events such as the coming to power of the Nazis.

Your dissertation about Zionism is a piece of sheer obfuscation, erected on the self-evidently erroneous starting point of identifying a nation with an ideology. Nations are formed (and dissolved, if they dissolve) in history by many factors, of which ideology is only one, and one that is varying in its power from case to case, and in each case from point to point.

However big a part Zionist ideas, in their different dialects, played in shaping Israel, they would have achieved nothing without the work of the genocidal, and the lesser, anti-semites of Europe. The masses of Jewish people who went to Palestine in the 1920s and the 30s were mostly not motivated and set in motion by an idea, but by the impossibility of going on as before: that is how the project of a Jewish state came to make sense to large numbers of people. Now Israel exists, a tiny state with an overwhelming Jewish-Hebrew population.

Your logic-chopping sword-dance with definitions - of nations, of Israel, of Zionism - is a fine display of both (irrelevant) mental dexterity and intellectual and political decadence. It all amounts to saying that "common-or-garden" Israeli nationalism is a mere veil for the "essence" of Zionism, an insatiable "colonising project, structurally and inseparably allied to imperialism".

It is easy enough to construct continuous chains of ideas - like the one I cited last time: from nationalism to chauvinism to racism - or liberalism to anarchism; left liberalism to mild "socialism" to working-class revolutionary socialism; advocacy of female equality to the belief that normal male-female sex is rape; and so on, and so on.

The conclusion, however, that the less "extreme" are mere tools of the most "advanced" is the stuff of paranoid delusion. In reality, many things intervene to break up the neat, logical continuum. In reality, those neatly put side by side in your head and growing into one another in the mental construction, often make war on each other. Don't they?

Israel is locked into certain geographical, geopolitical, demographic, military, etc. frameworks. That, not the wishes of the most "extreme" Zionists, shapes what can happen.

That there are strong, even dominant, forces in Israel intent on annexing as much of the West Bank as they can, intent on delaying or preventing any deal with the Palestinians that would put an end to new settlements and uproot at least some of the "facts on the ground" - that is plain and

obvious. I oppose that. You oppose that. But you present yourself as seeing, knowing, more than that when you talk about Zionism.

### **Demonisation**

I ask myself: doesn't he know where he is, what's going on around him? Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is detestable; it should be condemned in its detail, and in its totality, by counterposing to it the creation of an independent Palestinian state in contiguous territory.

But the detestation of Israel on the ostensibly revolutionary left, and way beyond it - in the Guardian "liberal left", for instance - is out of all proportion to what Israel does, as compared to other evils in the world.

The bias, the eagerness to condemn, is surely something you don't need pointing out to you.

Consider, for example, the 60th anniversary of Israel's foundation, on 15 May this year. Tribune, representing opinion slightly to the left of the Guardian, marked the occasion with an article denouncing Israel root and branch, with no suggestion of any element in Israel's foundation other than gratuitous vindictiveness against the Palestinian Arabs.

The Guardian had several articles, with the tone set by the following headlines: "Palestinians commemorate Nakba day"; "Palestinians mourn 60th anniversary of 'the Catastrophe'"; "Expulsion and dispossession can't be cause for celebration"; "Palestinians mourn Israel's 60th anniversary".

A young person coming in to left-wing politics will naturally, healthily, side with the Palestinians. That young person will "tap into" a culture on the left in which the most vociferous people link all criticism of Israel's action to the idea that Israel has no right to exist, never had and never can acquire such a right.

He and she will be plied with selective, one-sided, grossly biased, and, yes, demonising, accounts of the 20th century history of the Jews of Palestine.

He and she will be educated in "demands" on Israel that amount to requiring that Israel abolish itself, or be utterly condemned for not doing so - such as the demand for the "return" of four or five million descendants of the 750,000 Palestinians who were expelled or fled during the 1948 war.

That "education" will naturally align the newcomer with any force that is against Israel - the more militantly, murderously, implacably hostile the better - Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah...

Into this you bring your "I know the Zionists" nonsense, and its heavy implication that there is some "essence-of-Zionism" conspiratorial grand design, in which the present Israel is only a staging-post for ever-expanding Jewish colonisation of the Middle East.

### **National rights**

Benignly, you let me off the charge, of which you have "heard", that I am "actually... a Zionist". I'm an international socialist, not any kind of

nationalist. But, of course, socialists are for the fullest possible national rights for peoples deprived of and claiming them.

On the kitsch-left, "Zionism" is used as a swear-word, not too different from "racist" or "fascist"; the usage is an artefact of ideological terrorism, used to stop people thinking about the issues. One shouldn't be afraid of words. So, comrade Machover, call me a Zionist, if you like. I am for Israel's right to exist and its right to defend itself: for what I understand as the core "Zionism".

Frederick Engels, towards the end of his life, said that there were two peoples, then, who had a "duty" to be nationalist before being internationalist - the Poles and the Irish. I'm less than sure that he was right about the Irish, even then - Engels was a bit of a romantic Irish nationalist - but, in any case, it ceased to be true of us in 1922. It remained true of the Poles up to the collapse of the Stalinist empire.

I'm inclined to think it was true of those who set up the Jewish state in the 1940s. True, the Zionist project did not avert, and could not have averted, the Nazi butcheries. But neither did we, the international socialists, the assimilationists, avert them. Two-thirds of European Jews were killed. The Jews who got to Palestine might have been killed, too, had the Germans occupied Palestine even temporarily; but in fact they survived. A Jewish state would surely have been able to offer refuge to a lot of those who perished in Europe.

Had the proposal of the Peel Commission in 1937 to partition Palestine between Jews and Arabs not been blocked by the British government under Arab pressure, a lot more European Jews would have survived. Partition was, I think, the only way forward.

I know of no reason why the 30% Hebrew minority in Palestine - in fact there had been a Jewish minority there before the big migrations - did not have the right to self-determination and the right to "let in" as many of the people whom they considered their own, fleeing for their lives, as they could. Nor do I know of any reason why, in the 1930s and after, Palestinian-Arab rights overrode those of the Jewish population, or why socialists should accept that they did.

What conception of Palestinian Arab rights could lead anybody to say or imply that it would have been better if those Jews who got to Palestine in the 30s and the first half of the 40s had stayed in Europe and died instead? (Though Tony Cliff implicitly said it 20 years ago, in an interview with the SWP's magazine *Socialist Review*, no.100). The Palestinian Arab chauvinists, such as the Mufti of Jerusalem, who went to Bosnia to raise a Muslim army to fight for Hitler, thought that; but socialists?

Arab or Islamic chauvinism, such as that of the Mufti, does not become any better because it is purveyed by people who call themselves socialists and Marxists and Trotskyists; indeed, if held to with hindsight, it is a great deal worse.

## Programme

The answer, the counter, to the real Israel expansionism is the democratic political programme of two states, a Palestinian state alongside Israel - what was stipulated in the 1947 UN partition resolution. (Jordan and Egypt seized most of the territory designated for the Palestinian state, including the West Bank, which Israel did not occupy until 1967; Israel seized some). An independent Palestinian state with contiguous territory - that is clear, defined, policy, and can conceivably be realised (though, if it is not realised soon, it may well disappear from history as an option).

Poisonously, you combine cloudy hints and half-thoughts and "aha! I know what they are really up to" intimations of something like a hidden "Zionist" conspiracy with rejection of any conceivable solution. You back up the demand for the abolition of Israel with that "aha! I know" conspiracy stuff. (Give them an inch and they'll take your hand...?)

All your proposals to replace Israel (or "anything like" it) pose two alternatives. Either Israel will voluntarily cease to exist. Its citizens will dismantle their state, disarming themselves in face of the bitter enemies of a century of conflict.

Or, they will not do that. No people in comparable circumstances ever has. Then? Then, Israel must be forcibly disarmed and dismantled, and its Hebrew citizens deprived of national rights.

The war to subjugate Israel could not conceivably result in a situation in which the Jewish citizens of Israel would be allowed to merge peacefully into an Arab state, even if they wanted that - because the only conceivable agency for the subjugation of Israel would be an alliance of Arab or Islamic states.

Your prerequisites for a settlement have, in turn, as their prerequisite, the conquest and disarming of the Israeli Jews. Who is going to do that? How? When?

I don't think it should happen, but in any case it is not going to happen. And if it did happen, the last thing you'd get from it would be fair and equal treatment for the Israeli Jews.

I have great difficulty in believing that you really think it is going to happen - and therefore great difficulty in understanding what you think you are doing. The most charitable interpretation I can put on it is that you are being self-indulgently irresponsible: you are stamping your feet at history, shouting utopian slogans.

## Iranian nuclear weapons

One of the most important things in your first piece was that you understood your responsibilities as an opponent of Israeli or US war on Iran to include being an apologist for the existing Iranian regime.

True, you called the Iranian leaders "bastards", but, for example, you insisted that they wanted only to remove "the Zionist regime" - in the sense of the Israeli government? - rather than destroy Israel.

In your reply you accused me of "malign[ing]"

the leftist opponents of aggression by attributing to them the absurd idea that Arab and Islamic states 'should' possess nuclear weapons because Israel does". I agree the idea is absurd. Unfortunately, that doesn't necessarily mean that no idiots can be found on the kitsch left to champion it, clearly or implicitly.

I replied: "You yourself share the attitude, or something approaching it. You express it like this: "The only basis on which we can justly [!] demand that Iran be forbidden to have [nuclear weapons] is to make the entire region free of nuclear weapons. This is the demand we must raise..."

The formula of "a nuclear-free Middle East" can, in the circumstances, not fail to be a justification or - if I dare use the word - excuse for supporting (or "not condemning") Iranian nuclear weapons. You make opposition to Iranian nuclear weapons, vocal opposition anyway, conditional on prior Israeli nuclear disarmament.

It is an old formula for tacitly justifying something which one wants to evade explicitly justifying - by changing the subject. It means: if Israel won't give up nuclear weapons and create a nuclear-free zone, then the fault is Israel's if Iran acquires nuclear weapons. If this is not political "outriding" for the Iranian regime, what is it? What else can talk of 'the only just demand' mean here?

Second time round, you cite Israeli bigwigs to prove that Israel does not believe that there is any threat of an Iranian nuclear attack. But your quotations show nothing of the sort. What you quote concerns how the bigwigs think, not about the probability of a real Iranian nuclear threat, but about how the Iranian threat should be presented publicly, and what its existence might mean for immigration to Israel.

You quote the Jerusalem Post reporting, under the headline "Iranian nukes mean end of Zionism", former deputy defence minister Ephraim Sneh, at a conference of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, states the opinion that: "Iran's success in obtaining a nuclear capability will deter Jews from immigrating to Israel, cause many Israelis to leave and will be the end of the 'Zionist dream'... A nuclear weapon in Iranian hands will be an intolerable reality for Israel. The decision-making process in Israel will be under constant [Iranian] influence - this will be the end of the Zionist dream".

You also quote, from the Jerusalem Post, former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy, who "slammed Israeli political leaders for calling Iran's nuclear threat 'an existential threat'... There is something wrong with informing our enemy that they can bring about our demise... It is also wrong that we inform the world that the moment the Iranians have a nuclear capability there is a countdown to the destruction of the state of Israel. We are the superpower in the Middle East and it is time that we began behaving like [a] superpower".

"Iran's real goal, Halevy said, was to turn itself into a regional superpower and reach a 'state of equality' with the United States in their diplomatic dealings".

What do you think this proves? You say: "When members of the Israeli 'defence' establishment are

engaged in serious discussion - rather than propaganda for the consumption of the [Israeli] deluded masses and willing dupes - they say something quite different" from what I had said "most Israelis" see in the prospect of an Iranian nuclear bomb.

After the quotations, you claim that they contradict: "SM[']s attempt to explain - and excuse - an Israeli attack on Iran as a defensive measure in the face of an existential threat, rather than as motivated by 'the demon-Zionism stuff'." You add: "Both Ephraims... agree that the issue is not the survival of Israel. Unlike SM, they do not believe Israel faces a real threat of physical destruction... General Sneh... is worried about... not Israel's existence, but the fate of the 'Zionist dream'."

This is an inverted pyramid of large conclusions balanced on a very small space. It is an example of using spuriously "expert", "insider" knowledge as sand to throw in the eyes of the reader.

If, as you seem to say, Iranian nuclear weapons would not be a threat to Israel, why would they do what Sneh says - deter immigrants, and prompt others to leave?

Sneh's talk here of "the Zionist dream" means a vastly expanded Jewish state? So it might, for all I knew on first reading, and for all most of your readers will know.

I discover on checking that in fact Sneh is the leader of a Israeli-Labour split-off, "Israel Hazaka", one of whose four "principles" is: "To pursue with sustained determination the end of the conflict with the Palestinians on the basis of a two-state solution".

Plainly Sneh meant just Israel, the Zionist dream.

From what you cite, Halevy is evidently concerned that talking too much (too candidly) about Israel being wiped out will encourage Iran. He insists that Israel can still do something about the risk, and fatalism and resignation are not called for.

You quote Halevy that "Iran's real goal" is to be a regional superpower, to reach equality in diplomatic dealings with the USA. And you are saying that Iran as a nuclear-armed regional superpower would not be; might not be; could never be, a nuclear threat to Israel?

You say "Both Ephraims... agree that the issue is not the survival of Israel. Unlike SM, they do not believe Israel faces a real threat of physical destruction". Maybe that is so - but it is not what your quotes tell me. If Ephraim Halevy does not think Israel is under threat, it is, according to what you quote, because he thinks Israel doesn't have to let the threat develop.

Halevy is an embattled politician, one of the most vehement opponents in Israel of a strike on Iran.

If your point, with the quotes, is that an Israeli strike would not be a pure act of self-defence, with no other implications or motives, then I agree.

But isn't the real meaning of what you write that you yourself think a nuclear-armed Iran and a regional balance of terror would be a good thing - checking "Israeli expansionism"? When you say that Israel fears an Iranian nuclear bomb because

it would checkmate "Zionist expansion", aren't you also saying that it would be all to the good? You expect positive benefits from a nuclear-armed Iran. All you see threatened in Israel is "Zionist expansionism"; and here is the agency to deal with it.

I wrote in my open letter: "Washing around in your subconscious here seems to be a half-formed notion that it would be good if Israel were faced with another power in the Middle East able to brandish nuclear weapons". In fact, I was mistaken: it is not only in your subconscious.

Why is the reader not entitled to conclude:

(1) That, obsessively hostile to Israel and "Zionism", you are now immersed in calculations of regional power politics as the answer to those evils;

(2) That, despite saying you don't, you do actually want Iran to have nuclear weapons (as a way to checkmate "Zionist expansionism");

(3) That you look to power-politics and a nuclear balance of terror to curb an Israel which you can't see being curbed otherwise;

(4) That you have abandoned all concern with working-class politics as the alternative to those regional power politics.

*Appendices*

# What if Israel bombs Iran? A Discussion Article

By Sean Matgamna

*Solidarity 3/136, 24 July 2008*

An attack on Iran will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond, as supporters of Iran resort to suicide-bombings in retaliation. There might well be large scale Iranian civilian "collateral" casualties. An attack would strengthen the Iranian regime and license a smash down on its critics, including working class critics, inside Iran. It would throw Iraq back into the worst chaos.

Yet the plain fact is that nuclear bombs in the hands of a regime which openly declares its desire to destroy Israel are not something Israel will peacefully tolerate. They will act to stop it while it can still be stopped without the risk of a nuclear strike against Israel.

Unless work on an Iranian nuclear bomb has definitively ended Israel will bomb Iran, with or without the agreement of the USA and NATO.

In the last reckoning here, Israel is no state's puppet. It has pressing concerns of its own, and will act on them.

In 2007, Israel attacked a nuclear weapons site in Syria. It attacked nuclear installations in Iraq in the 1980s, when the US was backing Saddam against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, eliminating Saddam's attempt to develop nuclear weapons.

In Israeli eyes the facts and alternatives here are stark.

Recall what the Iranian leader Ahmedinejad said in December 2006:

"Thanks to people's wishes and God's will, the trend for the existence of the Zionist regime is [going] downwards and this is what God has promised and what all nations want. Just as the Soviet Union was wiped out and today does not exist, so will the Zionist regime soon be wiped out".

Israel, the Jewish state as such, is clearly what "Zionist regime" means here. In the context of Iran being close to having nuclear weapons, he is talking about the nuclear obliteration of Israel. That is how most Israelis took it.

Israel will act to stop this Muslim fundamentalist regime acquiring the possibility of inflicting nuclear death on the Jewish nation (and the Israeli Arab minority which would also be victims of a nuclear attack).

We as socialists want Ahmedinejad to be sent to hell not by the Israeli and American armies and airforces, but by the Iranian working class and the oppressed nations in the Iranian state. We would like to see the Israeli ruling class go on the same trip as Ahmedinejad.

We do not advocate an Israeli attack on Iran, nor will we endorse it or take political responsibility for it. But if the Israeli airforce attempts to stop Iran developing the capacity to wipe it out with a nuclear bomb, in the name of what alternative would we condemn Israel?

The inalienable right of every state to have nuclear weapons — and here a state whose clerical fascist rulers might see a nuclear armageddon, involving a retaliatory Israeli nuclear strike against Iran in the way a God-crazed suicide bomber sees blowing himself to pieces —?

Because Israel has nuclear weapons, and therefore the Arab and Islamic states should have them too —?

Because we are unconditional pacifists? We think military action is never justified, and therefore Israel has no right to attack Iran, not even to stop it acquiring the nuclear means to mount the ultimate suicide bomb attack on Israel —?

Because we would prefer to live in a world where such choices would not be posed, where relations between states and peoples are governed by reason, and strictly peaceful means —?

Because for choice we would live in a world where the workers of Israel, Iran, Iraq were united in opposition to all their rulers, and strong enough to get rid of them and bring to the region an era of socialist and democratic peace and understanding —?

Because Israel would in attacking Iran be only an American imperialist tool, against a mere regional power; and that cancels out the genuine self-defence element in pre-emptive Israeli military action against Iranian nuclear weapons —?

Because Israel has no right to exist anyway, and therefore no right to defend itself —? (This will in fact be the underlying attitude of most of the kitsch left.)

Because the Iranian government, Islamic clerical fascist though it is, is an “anti-imperialist” power and must be unconditionally supported against the US, NATO, Israel —?

Because Israel refuses to dismantle the Jewish national state peacefully and agree to an Arab Palestinian state in which Jews would have religious but not Israeli-national rights, and therefore socialists, “anti-racists”, and anti-imperialists must be on the side of those who

would conquer and destroy it, even, in this case, with nuclear weapons —?

Because we don't deal in vulgar practical choices but in pure historical essences such as “anti-imperialism” —?

The harsh truth is that there is good reason for Israel to make a precipitate strike at Iranian nuclear capacity.

Socialists should not want that and can not support it. Our point of view is not that of Israeli or any other nationalism. We want Israeli, Palestinian, Iranian and other workers to unite and fight for a socialist Middle East.

However, least of all should we back Ahmedinejad, or argue, implicitly or openly, that homicidal religious lunatics have a right to arm themselves with nuclear weapons — and that those they say they want to destroy should be condemned for refusing to stand idly by while they arm themselves to do the job.

The latter, expressed in duff “anti-imperialism”, pretend, one-sided, pacifism and hysterical appeals to “international law” and “the UN”, will be the response of the kitsch left to an Israeli attack.

International socialists should have no truck with it.

The left needs to discuss these issues in advance, while a comparatively calm discussion may still be possible ...

## "How I came to advocate an Israeli nuclear strike on Iran"

By Sean Matgamna

*Workers' Liberty website, 3 August 2008*

On July 31, the “Weekly Worker” appeared with a full page picture of a nuclear explosion on its front page and the words in large white letters against the black of the picture:

“AWL's Sean Matgamna: excusing an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran”.

Supposedly a reference to a “discussion article” which I published in the last issue of “Solidarity”, the words on WW's front page were a straightforward lie.

No reasonable (or even unreasonable!) “construction” on what I wrote could license or justify those lying words.

Nor can any “cock-up” in the print-shop explain away the front page and the words as unintentional and a freak happening that was not intended — the picture and the words match exactly.

What appeared was, plainly, exactly what was intended.



I wrote:

“An attack on Iran will most likely lead to great carnage in the Middle East, and beyond, as supporters of Iran resort to suicide-bombings in retaliation. There might well be large scale Iranian civilian 'collateral' casualties. An attack would strengthen the Iranian regime and license a smash down on its critics, including working class critics, inside Iran. It would throw Iraq back into the worst

chaos.”

“Yet the plain fact is that nuclear bombs in the hands of a regime which openly declares its desire to destroy Israel are not something Israel will peacefully tolerate. They will act to stop it while it can still be stopped without the risk of a nuclear strike against Israel.

“Unless work on an Iranian nuclear bomb has definitively ended Israel will bomb Iran, with or without the agreement of the USA and NATO. In the last reckoning here, Israel is no state’s puppet. It has pressing concerns of it’s own, and will act on them.

“... Israel will act to stop this Muslim fundamentalist regime acquiring the possibility of inflicting nuclear death on the Jewish nation (and the Israeli Arab minority which would also be victims of a nuclear attack)”.

I wrote: “The harsh truth is that there is good reason for Israel to make a precipitate strike at Iranian nuclear capacity.”

I also wrote: “We do not advocate an Israeli attack on Iran, nor will we endorse it or take political responsibility for it. But if the Israeli air force attempts to stop Iran developing the capacity to wipe it out with a nuclear bomb, in the name of what alternative would we condemn Israel?”

I asked from what point of view, in principle, could the “Left” condemn action by Israel to stop an Islamic fundamentalist regime, religious lunatics who deny Israel’s right to exist, acquiring the means to make a nuclear strike against it?

My starting point of course was that in principle Israel has a right to defend itself; I was discussing the responses of a “left” which in the main does not accept Israel’s right to exist, let alone defend itself.

I wrote: “ Our point of view is not that of Israeli or any other nationalism. We want Israeli, Palestinian, Iranian and other workers to unite and fight for a socialist Middle East.

“However, least of all should we back Ahmedinejad, or argue, implicitly or openly, that homicidal religious lunatics have a right to arm themselves with nuclear weapons — and that those they say they want to destroy should be condemned for refusing to stand idly by while they arm themselves to do the job.

“The latter, expressed in duff ‘anti-imperialism’, pretend, one-sided, pacifism and hysterical appeals to ‘international law’ and ‘the UN’, will be the response of the kitsch left to an Israeli attack. International socialists should have no truck with it.”

The assertion that I explicitly or implicitly “excused” an Israeli nuclear strike on Iran is doubly and triply nonsensical. Even if I “excused” or advocated a military strike, which I didn’t, to assume that I would see no difference between that and a preemptive nuclear war on Iran would be nonsense on stilts.

And where does the idea that Israel might nuclear-bomb Iran come from? It is preposterous to assert that Israel might make a nuclear strike on Iran in any situation other than an “armageddon” in which Israel’s existence was under immediate and overwhelming threat:

indeed, it is more than a little lunatic. There is no calculable reason I know of to think Israel will do that. The effect of the nonsense though is

a) to demonise Israel just a little further than is common on the anti-Israeli left, and

b) to “excuse” Iran’s drive to acquire nuclear weapons. The Weekly Worker is strangely “soft” on the Iranian clerical-fascist regime...

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, AWL believes that there should be an independent Palestinian state in contiguous territory alongside Israel — the so-named “Two States” solution.

We defend Israel’s right to exist and, logically, its right to defend itself. That does not necessarily mean agreeing with anything specific which the Israeli state does. It does mean utterly rejecting the typical Kitsch-Left automatic rejection of everything Israel does or might do in its own defense.

It means rejecting the prevalent idea on the “left” that Israel is, always was, and in all future situations will be, the source and embodiment of all evil in the middle-East.

We criticize Israel for oppressing the Palestinians, and for not using its present position of strength to reach a settlement with those in the Arab and Islamic world with whom a settlement can be reached, in the first place, the Palestinians.

All this is very much a minority position on the left, which in the main advocates an Arab state in all of pre-1948 Palestine, with religious but not national rights for the Jews of Israel who would be left in the Palestinian state.

Such a thing is inconceivable on any basis other than the conquest and destruction of Israel. We reject and oppose that and fight in our publications against the a-historical demonisation of Israel and Zionism — and in some cases “the Jews” — that goes with it, and on which it is grounded.

The idea of an imminent Israeli nuclear strike against Iran is as bonkers as I’d have to be to think of such a thing with anything except unqualified horror.

Our views are not, to understate it, popular on the left. We ourselves tend to be demonized for it. Much of the hysteria triggered by my article is a direct manifestation of the prevalent mass hysteria on the left about Israel and the Palestinians. We are “Zionists”. “pro-imperialists”, “racists” even.

I have the honour — and that is how I regard it — of being singled out for special abuse and demonisation. (It’s reached the stage that sometimes these days I’m afraid to go into a room alone, lest I perpetrate some “Zionist” atrocity against myself!).

There is a fundamental issue of current politics involved in all this Stalinist dung- pile, into which the WW has pulled AWL and the present writer:

Is it possible to have a rational discussion on the Middle-East and Israel — or on anything? — in the existing “left”? This doesn’t involve only the WWG, which is insignificant in its ideas, size, influence (it is “significant” only as the producer of a “left” gossip sheet). But the WWG gives it a sharp, indeed a loony, expression.

The WWG is a strange political formation with a very strange history and political “practice”. Over

nearly 30 years they have produced a paper under three titles — the “Leninist” (!), “Daily Worker” (It wasn’t a daily, anymore than the miniscule WWG is the “CPGB” — and the “Weekly Worker”). Their main asset is that the paper passes for a well-informed source of information amongst those who don’t themselves know much about the affairs of the left.

In fact it’s a highly unreliable and capricious gossip sheet. The front page about my “excusing” [you are meant to read, “advocating”, “supporting”, “backing”] an Israeli nuclear attack on Iran shows anyone interested in having a measure of their reliability, just how reliable their “reports” are — they are spectacularly unreliable. They are capable of startling lies, like the one I’m discussing, when it suits their malice or their calculations of advantage. Or both. [After all an early Stalinist training must count for something!] They lie and invent or make hysterical and maliciously constructions on facts and factoids, and present the result as fact, as the “truth”.

WW’s idiotic libel is motivated immediately by the desire to recruit some young members — in one case re-recruit — from AWL. Their technique

is the Stalinist technique of the heresy-hunt and the big — in this case preposterously big — lie.

This libel, when anyone can research the truth by looking up what I wrote, on the internet, shows something important about the 2 or 3 people who make up the hard core of the Weekly Worker Group. Their hysteria. Though they are most of the time very cynical manipulators, able nicely to calculate and control what they do and say, sometimes the underlying nuttiness breaks through. Here, I think they have overreached themselves a little.

I urge readers concerned with truth and with the moral hygiene of the left to circulate the statement and the other relevant documents, all of which are on the internet.

I demand a public and unequivocal apology from the Weekly Worker Group [the “CPGB”] prominently displayed in their paper; I demand the same space as that taken by their libellous fantasy-piece about me, to reply.

I also challenge them to agree to debate with me publicly on the Israel-Palestine question, at a meeting presided over by a commonly agreed Chair.

# The Weekly Worker group ("CPGB"): Under the Sign of the Oxymoron

By Sean Matgamna

Workers' Liberty website, 22 January 2003

Trotsky, describing it in himself, called it "geographical cretinism". He'd have found a less flattering name for my version of it. I get lost easily.

*Author's Doppelganger: Oh, a metaphor! You are about to confess your political sins - why you get lost so often?*

No, not a metaphor. I can go out to the corner shop and get lost coming back, go in the wrong direction up a street I've been in before, etc. So I ask directions.

A few weeks ago, late in the evening, I did that while making my way through the centre of Oxford toward the railway. I made the mistake of asking a middle aged woman standing in front of a cash machine: "Is the station this way?" Before I'd finished speaking, she started shouting at the top of her voice: "No! No! No! Go away! I'm sick of it! Go away! Go away! Go away! I'm sick to death of it! Just go away!" She thought I was about to ask her for money.

*Doppelganger: Perhaps you should dress better?*

Perhaps. But she didn't turn round before she started shouting. Clearly a woman under pressure,

ready to go off. I am reminded of that incident by the series of articles in the Weekly Worker "replying" to a document, "Critical Notes on the CPGB/WW", which I put on the internet last September. There too, I seem to have triggered something that was waiting to go off.

Five pieces at about 5,000 words each, a sixth at half that length, and at least one more instalment to come in what the author, Jack Conrad, leader of the Malvolio Tendency of the Weekly Worker group (the "CPGB"), describes as "this short series". Titles have included: "Bourgeois Revolution and Walter Mitty polemics", "National Questions and the AWL Patriarch", "Sectarianism and the World of Sean Matgamna", "Matgamna's Platonic Republic", etc. Earlier, there had been two (or was it three?) one-page pieces replying to my "Critical Notes" by Mark Fischer, the Weekly Worker group's National Organiser. Between them, Mark Practice and Jack Theory have so far devoted the equivalent of an entire 16-page paper "replying" to my analysis of their politics.

*Doppelganger: You've upset them, then?*

No, not at all. Each instalment has reminded

the reader that my "shambolic", "tedious", etc, "Critical Notes" arouse in them nothing but disdain. One way in which they express their disdain is by quoting only severely trimmed little snippets of it.

A proportion of each article is given over to stuff like this (from part 6): "...Sean Matgamna - the patriarch of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty - clumsily, perhaps cynically, categorises our approach as 'formed' in, and 'still' displaying, 'patterns of Stalinist politics'...He can of course, faultlessly, almost miraculously, prove that contention in his surreal inner world. There he revels in the status of an intellectual titan. But, poor man, he is unable to deliver anything of substance in the harsh, unforgiving external world. Comrade Matgamna might imagine himself as the modern day Leon Trotsky. To the rest of us he resembles Walter Mitty. Only for unthinking devotees and the oafishly naive do comrade Matgamna's polemics have any worth. Sad".

*Doppelganger: Patriarch? I like it! There is a lot of this sort of stuff? Let's have some more.*

"Point by point we have shown that when it comes to [the Weekly Worker group] Comrade Matgamna's polemics are a bumbling concoction of hyper-sensitive petulance, burlesque fabrication.... It is quite conceivable that [he] is actually proud of the tedious, sloppy nonsense that he has written...[But] far from being put on the defensive, as he presumably expected, we simply, almost effortlessly, turned the tables..."

*Doppelganger: Almost effortlessly! That "almost" is unexpected - a needless concession to modesty.*

Yes, with one "almost effortless" bound Jack was free. This is typical of the war-dance, smoke-coming-out-of-the-shaman's-ears, witchdoctor-having a-loud-nervous-breakdown style of these pieces. Like the lady at the cash machine, Jack Conrad was waiting to go off. Why?

His grouping is wracked by tensions that arise from the impossible political contradictions it has accumulated within itself as it has half-moved away from its disreputable Stalinist past.

It originated as a small, still ultra-Stalinist, offshoot from the New Communist Party, which was a stone-age Stalinist breakaway from the real CPGB in 1977.

They were called "Tankies" because, as their critics justly said of them, they believed in a "Russian Tanks Road to Socialism". The Tankies first emerged as a distinct segment of the Communist Party in August 1968, when they loudly supported the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia to put down Alexander Dubcek's attempt to create "socialism with a human face" there. The CP, opposing the Russians for the first time in its 48-year history, had condemned the invasion.

The founding leaders of the NCP were third rank bureaucrats of the old Party. They created was a grotesque miniaturised theme-park of the previous 50 years of Stalinism. They would, for example, organise a small demonstration outside the Czech embassy to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Russian invasion!

Their paper, the New Worker, glorified the USSR, and backed up whatever the Russians were doing or saying. They engaged in silly, malevolent and dishonest polemics against the "Trotskyites", something which the official party did very rarely by that time and never in its big-circulation press. When USSR dissidents such as Anatoly Sharansky - now the Israeli politician, Nathan Sharansky - and Vladimir Bukovsky were "tried" and found guilty amidst an outcry in the bourgeois press, the New Worker carried a triumphant headline: "Guilty!". When in 1980 the Polish workers seized the factories in one of the greatest working-class movements in history, confronting the Stalinist police state and facing the threat of a Russian invasion like that in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Hungary twelve years earlier, the New Worker carried big headlines: "No concessions! No compromise!" No concessions to and no compromise with... the Polish working class! A decade earlier that approach had meant that hundreds of striking workers were shot down at the Gdansk shipyards (December, 1970).

When the Russians invaded Afghanistan during Christmas 1979, the next New Worker carried a big headline across the front page: "Afghanistan tastes a new freedom".

Their brains switched off, entirely devoid of socialist or democratic instinct, the irredeemably stupid backwoodsmen of the old party gleefully enacting a witless parody of what Stalinism was in, say, the late 1940s - that is the nearest I can come to summing them up. Jack Conrad was National Organiser of the NCP for a period. (He organised the picket to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia.)

He - and three or four other people, I guess - broke with the NCP and formed a new group, The Leninist, under the influence of a faction of the Turkish Communist party (the Workers' Voice) which tried to develop a revolutionary strain of Stalinism, and made some limited criticisms of the Stalinist parties, including those in power.

It was an eclectic mixture. It had a subjectively revolutionary drive; but, in basic political culture, it remained entirely Stalinist - a dialect of the general NCP tankie culture I have described. Indeed on issues like Solidarnosc and Afghanistan it added a hysterical vehemence all its own.

The Leninist were Stalinists not because of a special devotion to the memory of Stalin himself - neither they nor the Turks, though they would occasionally write pointedly of "Comrade" Stalin, were Stalinist in that sense - but because they sided squarely with the bureaucratic ruling classes against the workers. They did that because of their conception of socialism; of the relationship of the revolutionary party to the working class; of the relationship of society to the state under socialism; and the political tradition to which they adhered - all of them entirely Stalinist.

Incoherent eclectics and devout oxymoronists in all things, The Leninist simultaneously called for "democracy" in the Stalinist states, continued to support the suppression of Solidarnosc, and opposed independent trade unions in the Stalinist states. Admitting that there were defects in those

states, they looked for solutions to their "comrades" of the ruling parties and the police state unions there.

By democratisation they meant that their comrades of the ruling communist parties should reform, and lead the working class safely to democracy. When the chips were down, they invariably backed the ruling Stalinist party, the cartel of the ruling oligarchy. In their calls to the corrupt bureaucrats, they were a species of utopian socialists, appealing to sections of the ruling class - to "the communists" amongst them.

Their paper served up the typical Stalinist mix of agitation about the wrongs of workers and others in capitalist states, combined with an opposite attitude towards similar things in the Stalinist states. They could be indignant as Prime Minister Thatcher brought in the first of a series of anti-union Bills, and at the same time cheer on the police state ban on the Polish trade union, Solidarnosc.

They were substitutionists. The CPs everywhere were the working class in politics. Deficient they might be, in many or most cases, but they were the elect, the preordained communist leadership.

"The party" could substitute for the working class, in Afghanistan, in Poland, in the USSR - everywhere. Against those parties any "spontaneist" or "economistic" working class movement was counter-revolutionary.

Wherever the working class, or a whole nation, came into conflict with a ruling Stalinist party, the party had a right to suppress them, and should be supported in doing it by "internationalists" such as themselves. Thus the attitude to Czechoslovakia, and, in retrospect, to Hungary a dozen years before - and to Afghanistan.

They supported the Russian invasion of Afghanistan to shore up one faction of the Stalinist party that had taken power there twenty months earlier in a freakish military coup. They backed the suppression of the Polish trade union Solidarnosc (while criticising their "Polish comrades" for having lost the "leadership" of the working class). Right up until the collapse of the USSR, they opposed the formation of independent trade unions there - that was dangerous "spontaneism" and "economism", a labour movement outside the control of those whom they never, right up until the collapse in 1991, ceased to call their "comrades" of the "Communist Party of the Soviet Union".

While recognising that it was no long-term solution, they expressed relief in 1991 when it looked as if a Stalinist coup against the reforming Russian President Gorbachev had been successful. They called on their "comrades" of the ruling class cartel there, the misnamed Communist Party of the Soviet Union, to take action to secure the socialist future!

In other words, for most of its existence, politically this group did not quite dwell on mother earth.

In the mid and late 1990s - under new names, CPGB and Weekly Worker - they seemed to evolve away from such politics. A measure of how far they still have to travel from Stalinism is the plank in

their current platform in which they still express their substitutionist-Stalinist conception of the revolutionary party and its relationship to the working class. "Without such a [Communist] party the working class is nothing; with it everything". Through most of the two-decades life of the group, ideas like this were not harmless gobbledegook, but a political philosophy that lined them up against the working class in the Stalinist states. It made them avid supporters of the war of colonial conquest in Afghanistan in which the Russians did what the USA did in Vietnam, the French in Algeria and the Nazis in Poland and the Ukraine. One and a half million of Afghanistan's 18 million people were killed, and six million of them driven over the border as refugees.

Early in 1999 there was a controversy in Weekly Worker around the true description of Russian workers under Russian Stalinism as "slaves of the state" by a prominent member of the group, Anne McShane. One was left with the impression that this view, or something very close to it, was now shared, very belatedly to be sure, by the whole leadership of the group - that it had finally, if still only partially, emerged out of the Stalinist stone age.

I would have guessed that they would be as ashamed of some of their past politics as I am for having let myself, aged 17, be persuaded by the Pablo-Mandel "Fourth International" that the Chinese assumption of active control in Tibet in 1959 should be supported as an "extension of the Revolution". I would have been wrong.

Late in 2001, WW 403 republished an excerpt from a book on Afghanistan written in 1982 by the Turkish Stalinist Emine Engin. She praised and defended the Stalinist coup of 1978. Engin was endorsed in a long introduction by Mark Fischer.

It is impossible to square the democratic politics the group now says it stands for with what they say about Afghanistan's 1978 "revolution" and Russia's nine-year war there. The Critical Notes put it like this:

"You are still shaped and still marked by your Stalinist past, and you have not yet fully shed your old Stalinist baggage. You still operate in recognisable Stalinist patterns... Afghanistan shows it.

"On the one hand, you go on about 'democracy'. You are born-again ex-Stalinist democrats... In practice your operational politics are confined to "democratic questions", and your 'communism' is, for operational purposes, reduced to a thing of shibboleths, symbols, fetishes, nostalgias, mummeries and self-designation. It is the theory of your self-identity rather than what you are in practice...

"But on the other hand, though vociferous born-again ex-Stalinist democrats, you seem still to support the Afghan Stalinist coup of 1978, and, astonishingly still describe it as a real revolution! These things just don't go together."

The political crisis of the Weekly Worker group takes the form of an accumulation of contradictory positions. Evidence of this is rampant throughout Jack Conrad's "short series". They have moved to pick up new positions, shifting sometimes 180

degrees from what they used to think - but they drop nothing!

For example, they used to be conventional green nationalists on Ireland. Then they took from AWL the idea that the Northern Irish Protestants are a national minority on the island and are entitled to the rights of a national minority. The conflict in Northern Ireland is not primarily a matter of legitimate Irish nationalism against British imperialism, but an intra-Irish conflict. Most of what the IRA has done has been done against other Irish people.

If that is true, then it shapes everything else. The WW accepts it is true, but see no reason to modify their old view, in which the IRA was fighting a simple anti-imperialist war of liberation. They are both for a democratic resolution of the intra-Irish conflict and supporters of the Catholic-sectarian IRA!

They have also learned from us to understand that the Jews in Israel have a right to national self determination, where before they vehemently denied it. They now support a Two States solution to the Palestinian-Jewish conflict. In part 3 of his Great Work (WW460) Jack Conrad writes: "To call for Israel's abolition is unMarxist. Such a programme is either utopian or genocidal".

But, having picked up the new position, Conrad can't see that logically he has to lay down its opposite. He wants to combine Two States with their old slogan of the Palestinian "right of return" - collective repossession - which for over fifty years has, to Jews and Arabs alike, implied the opposite of Two States: the dissolution, in one way or another, of the Jewish state.

"Two States" and "right of return" are starkly at odds with each other. The Jewish state and the right to collective resettlement of millions of Palestinians in Israel - right of return - are incompatible. Recognition of the Jewish state established in the 1948 war, and trying to reverse the outcome of that war, are mutually exclusive.

How does Jack deal with the contradiction? He

defines it out of existence. The Palestinians as a "collective" would only "return" if they were forced at gun-point to do so. "Even by dint of some kind of remarkable historical reversal and an Arab conquest of Israel no serious Marxist could imagine the Palestinian diaspora as a "collective" giving up their livelihoods and packing up their bags in order to move to Palestine. How could it be "collectively" imposed upon them?" There is no problem. Both Arabs and Jews have gone on about for half a century because they can't see what he sees: the problem does not exist! Hysterical denial is not a Leninist way of dealing with political issues.

On Afghanistan, while seeming to accept or half-accept that the USSR was a slave state for its workers, Jack Conrad sees no reason to look afresh at his long-time politics of supporting the expansion of that slave state, or the attempt of their Afghan understudies to impose such a system on the peoples of Afghanistan. The WW tendency remains as eclectic and incoherent as its earlier self and its Turkish mentors.

Jack Conrad thinks it is possible to re-elaborate a revolutionary politics for the 21st century on the basis of shreds and rags of the Stalinist tradition embodied in the old CPGB, garnished with bits and pieces from other traditions. He sings karaoke Leninism. He proclaims himself an "extreme democrat", yet retains the substitutionist conception of the revolutionary party he had when he was an unreflecting and unashamed Tankie Stalinist.

But now he has no tanks. The body of the Cheshire cat of Stalinism has faded, leaving Jack with only... not the smile, but the snarl, the shriek, the style of exhortation. One example to conclude: Jack anathematising the "Trotskyite" idea of transitional programme,

"So say it. Say 'minimum programme (say it out loud till the fear vanishes). Leave behind atavistic prejudice and take up the militant struggle for a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales".