

Arab revolution and national problems in the Arab east

dimanche 14 juillet 2024, par [MACHOVER Moshé](#), [NICOLA Jabra](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 10 juillet 1973).

It is not our intention in this article to discuss the national question in general, or to develop the subject from first principles. Our general point of departure is the revolutionary Marxist position on the national question. Moreover, we are here concerned with this question only in so far as it is connected with the problematic of the Arab socialist revolution ; our main interest is the impact of the national question on the revolutionary movement in the Mashreq (Arab East). [1] The Arab East has, in fact, not one but several intertwined national problems.

Sommaire

- [The Palestinian Struggle](#)
- [The Problem of the Israeli \(...\)](#)
- [Israel and the Arab Socialist](#)

First of all, there is the national problem of the Arabs themselves, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population of that area. In addition, there are the problems of the various non-Arab nationalities living there.

Let us start by analysing the national problem of the majority - the Arab nation. Only a small part of this nation is at present subject to direct foreign domination and oppression : the Palestinian Arabs, living under Israeli occupation or exiled, by Israel. We shall return later to this aspect of the problem, which is of very great political importance although it involves directly only a small part of the Arab nation. With the above-mentioned exception, the Mashreq has achieved political independence - but under conditions of extreme balkanization. *The national problem of the Arab nation is thus primarily that of national unification.*

National unification is necessary not simply because the Arabs of the Mashreq share a long common history, a language and a cultural heritage. It is necessary primarily because the present political fragmentation of the Mashreq is a huge obstacle in the way of development of the productive forces, and facilitates imperialist exploitation and domination. In fact, the Arab East was in the first place balkanized by the imperialist powers, in their own interest. Dividing the region between them, they were able more easily to dominate each part separately and use one part against another. But from the point of view of economic development this fragmentation is an obstacle, because the various parts are mutually complementary, each lacking what the others possess in abundance. The main natural wealth of the region is oil. But most of the oil is concentrated in tiny and backward mini-states with small populations. (Even Libya, which looks vast on the map, is really small ; most of it is uninhabitable desert, and its population is about 1.5 million. The same is true of Saudi Arabia ; although its population is about 6 million, this is in a country over four times the size of France). These oil states are the most backward parts of the region, and have no economy to speak of other than that of oil. The huge oil revenues are shared between imperialism and a small ruling clique which spends its share on lavish luxuries. Hardly a penny of this fabulous wealth is invested in

building up the local economy. (What the oil sheikhs do invest, they invest not locally but in the West). When finally the time comes when the oil reserves are exhausted, the oil states will remain without any sort of productive economy, like an oasis whose spring has dried up. All the wealth that had been extracted in the meantime will have been wasted as far as the regional economy is concerned. On the other hand, countries like Egypt and Syria are forced, in order to develop their economy, to incur huge foreign debts-a bitter irony, in view of the fact that the annual oil profits would have sufficed to finance the building of three Aswan dams. A similar complementarity also exists in terms of availability of arable land in one Arab country and a surplus rural population in another.

All these historical, cultural and economic factors are vividly reflected in the consciousness of the Arab masses throughout the region. The aspiration for Arab national unification is one of the most deeply rooted ideas in the minds of these masses. But Arab national unification is impossible without a struggle to overthrow imperialist domination, which is the root cause of the present balkanization. And genuine anti-imperialist struggle means at the same time struggle also against the ruling classes in the Arab countries.

The political independence of the Arab countries was achieved as a result not of a victorious popular revolution, but of inter-imperialist rivalry and a compromise between the imperialist powers and the local ruling classes. As a result of this compromise, the local ruling classes have achieved the maximum concession they could get from imperialism. Direct foreign political rule was ended and has been replaced by a neo-colonialist arrangement, consisting of an alliance between imperialism and the local ruling classes in which the latter have become junior partners in exploiting the working masses of the region. Both sides are interested in keeping this alliance, since both are afraid of a socialist revolution which would put an end to their profits and privileges. Thus both imperialism and its local junior partners have a stake in the continuation of the status quo and are ready to defend it tooth and nail.

The local ruling classes have also developed their own localist economic interests, those of one country competing with those of another. This economic rivalry has led to political contradictions and conflicts, encouraged by imperialism. All these economic and political conflicts, as well as the fact that national unification requires an anti-imperialist struggle and a mobilization of the masses, make the local ruling classes not only incapable of achieving national unification, but actually opposed to it -though they pay lip-service to it in order to deceive the masses. It follows from all this that national unification-the main national problem of the Arabs in the Mashreq-cannot be achieved without overthrowing the present ruling classes, i.e. a socialist revolution.

In Europe, the solution of the national problem was part and parcel of the tasks of the bourgeois revolution. But in the third world, the local propertied classes have proved incapable of carrying out a bourgeois-democratic revolution. Therefore, the unfulfilled tasks of such a revolution have been left to the proletariat to solve in a socialist revolution. The coming revolution in the Arab East cannot be a national-democratic, but only a socialist one-led by the working class, relying on an alliance with the peasantry. Either a proletarian socialist revolution, or none at all.

By the very nature of its tasks, this socialist revolution can be conceived only as a revolution of the whole Mashreq. This does not mean that it must occur simultaneously in all parts of the region ; what it does mean is that even if it starts in one part of the region it must be conducted under the banner of an all-Arab revolution, because its immediate political aim will be to establish a united socialist Mashreq. Moreover, a revolution in one Arab country will draw an immediate intervention by the ruling classes of the whole region, supported by imperialism. (This is not merely a theoretical prognostication : in the pact establishing the so-called confederation between Syria, Egypt and Libya there is an explicit clause to this effect !). Under these circumstances there can be only two possible

outcomes-either a victorious revolution in the whole area, or a crushing of the revolution wherever it may start.

The revolution in the Mashreq is thus necessarily one and indivisible - it cannot have a preliminary separate national-democratic stage, and it cannot be victorious in each country separately. Its immediate outcome must be the establishment of a united socialist Mashreq.

The Palestinian Struggle

The Palestinian Arabs are the only part of the Arab nation which is under direct foreign rule. The Palestinian armed resistance movement which developed after the 1967 war regarded its task as confined to Palestine alone ; it saw itself as a national liberation movement of the Palestinians alone. Even those Palestinian left-wing groups that favoured the idea of a socialist revolution, relegated it to a separate second stage.

At the time we criticized this tendency, and pointed to the dangers inherent in it. In an article entitled 'The struggle in Palestine must lead to Arab revolution', published in *Black Dwarf* (14 June 1969), we said :

'The balance of forces, as well as theoretical considerations, show the impossibility of confining the struggle to one country. What is the balance of forces ? The Palestinian people are waging a battle where they confront Zionism, which is supported by imperialism ; from the rear they are menaced by the Arab regimes and by Arab reaction, which is also supported by imperialism. As long as imperialism has a real stake in the Middle East, it is unlikely to withdraw its support for Zionism, its natural ally, and to permit its overthrow ; it will defend it to the last drop of Arab oil. On the other hand imperialist interests and domination in the region cannot be shattered without overthrowing those junior partners of imperialist exploitation, the ruling classes in the Arab world. The conclusion that must be drawn is not that the Palestinian people should wait quietly until imperialist domination is overthrown throughout the region, but that it must rally to itself a wider struggle for the political and social liberation of the Middle East as a whole . . . The formula that restricts itself to Palestine alone, despite its revolutionary appearance, derives from a reformist attitude which seeks partial solutions, within the framework of conditions now existing in the region. In fact, partial solutions can only be implemented through a compromise with imperialism and Zionism.'

In the same article we pointed out why the Arab governments encouraged the attitude prevailing among the Palestinian groups, according to which they were to confine their struggle to Palestinian issues only :

'The very mobilization of the masses in the Arab countries- even if only for the Palestinian cause - threatens the existing regimes. These regimes therefore wish to isolate the Palestinian struggle and to leave it entirely to the Palestinians. The Arab governments - both reactionary and "progressive" - are trying to buy stability for their regimes with a ransom to the Palestinian organizations. Moreover, the governments want to use this financial aid to direct the Palestinian struggle along their own politically convenient lines, to manipulate it and to utilize it merely as a means of bargaining for a political solution acceptable to them. . . The four great powers are now meeting to reach

an agreed solution which will then be imposed on the region. If the Arab governments achieve their aim, through this solution, they will be prepared to desert the Palestinians, and even take an active part in a political and physical liquidation of the Palestinian movement. The four powers will probably insist on this as a condition for a political settlement.'

This analysis and prognosis was proved to be correct to the letter by subsequent events, especially the smashing of the guerrilla forces in Jordan by the Hashemite regime in September 1970, with the complicity of the other Arab regimes and the support of imperialism and Israel. We can only reiterate the conclusion that we drew in that article. The Palestinian problem can only be solved through an all-Arab socialist revolution, and within the framework of a united socialist Arab East.

The Problem of the Israeli Nation

In addition to the national problem of the Arabs themselves, there exists also the problem of the non-Arab national communities living in the Mashreq : the Kurds in Iraq, the South-Sudanese and the Israeli Jews. The solution of this problem too is among the tasks of the coming all-Arab socialist revolution. It therefore should be considered in the context of the united socialist Arab East which that revolution will set up.

As for the Kurds and the South-Sudanese, there is a wide agreement throughout the Arab left that these, as oppressed nationalities, should be granted the right to self-determination. The case on which there is no such agreement is that of the Israeli Jews. The main arguments against granting them the right of self-determination are (a) that they are not a nation, and (b) that even if they are a nation, they are an oppressing one. Sometimes it is also argued that to grant them the right to self-determination means to accept Zionism and recognize the State of Israel.

The idea that the Israeli Jews do not constitute a nation is a myth, a piece of wishful thinking based on lack of familiarity with the actual facts. In reality, they satisfy all the generally accepted criteria for nationhood. First, they live concentrated on a continuous territory. It is true that they obtained this territory unjustly, by a process of colonization at the expense of another people. But there are many other nations which developed as such on a territory conquered from others. One can, and should, condemn such depredations ; but value judgements are irrelevant to the objective question of denning nationhood.

Second, they have a common language, Hebrew. It is true that Hebrew had been for centuries a dead language and has been revived artificially for political motives. But the objective result is nevertheless that the Israeli Jews have Hebrew as their common language, which they use both in literature and in daily life. In this language they have developed a new culture which is quite specific and different from the cultures of the various Jewish communities in East or West.

Third, the Israeli Jewish community has its own common socio-economic structure, with its own class differentiation, as in other capitalist societies. That the Israeli economy is heavily subsidized by imperialism does not change the basic fact that the Israeli socio-economic system exists as a real and specific entity.

Finally, all these factors have helped to create an Israeli national consciousness. It is true that Zionist ideology has helped the formation of this consciousness by artificially fostering a synthetic 'Jewish national consciousness', which is supposed to embrace not just the Israeli Jews but all Jews around the world. The means used by Zionism have been self-contradictory. It revived Hebrew in order to foster the attachment of the various Jewish communities to each other and to their ancient

history. But since this revival succeeded only in Palestine, the actual result was to sever the cultural ties of the Israeli Jews to the Jewish communities in their various places of origin. Similarly, in order to encourage the immigration of Jews to Palestine, Zionism struggled against the culture and mentality of the Jewish communities in the diaspora ; in this too it helped to create a separate Israeli culture and mentality. But since the aim of Zionism is the ingathering of all Jews into Israel, and since it needs the material and moral help of world Jewry, Zionism is at the same time doing its best to combat this feeling of separateness of the Israeli Jews and to strengthen their feeling of identity with all Jews around the world. Thus under the pressures of Zionist ideology on the one hand and the influence of their real material conditions on the other, the Israeli Jews find themselves in a psychological conflict between a Zionist all-Jewish 'national consciousness' and an Israeli national consciousness. When Zionism is defeated, the Israeli Jews will not lose all national consciousness ; while their synthetic all-Jewish 'national consciousness' will tend to wither away, their specific Israeli national consciousness will on the contrary tend to be reinforced.

It is sometimes argued that the Israeli Jews cannot be a nation, since there is a constant stream of immigration to Israel, so that at any given time a considerable proportion of the Jews there are new arrivals, with their own language, culture etc. But in this the Israeli Jews are no different from any other nation created by immigrant settlers. In all such cases, once the national character of the older settlers crystallized, the new immigrants were soon assimilated. Mass immigration did not have to be stopped before an American nation was created.

Israel and the Arab Socialist Revolution

As to argument (b) above, it is true that it is ridiculous to talk about granting the right to self-determination to an oppressing nation. An oppressing nation is in no need of being granted such a right : it has not only appropriated this right for itself, but is denying it to others !

Clearly, the right to self-determination is meaningful only in the case of a nation which is denied, or in danger of being denied, such a right.

At present, the Israeli Jews are an oppressing nation. This is so because of certain conditions : the domination of Zionism, its connections with imperialism, the aggressive and colonizing role it is playing in the Mashreq. But what is being discussed here is not the right of self-determination for the Israeli Jews now, in the present context. What is here under discussion is the programme of the socialist Arab revolution. A victorious Arab socialist revolution implies the overthrow of Zionism and of the entire Zionist state structure, together with the liquidation of imperialist domination in the Mashreq. Under such circumstances the Israeli Jews would not remain an oppressor nation ; they would become a small national minority in the Arab East. The question which we are raising, and which all revolutionaries of the region must raise, is how this national minority should be dealt with.

There are only three possibilities : expulsion from the region, forcible annexation or, finally, granting them the right to self-determination. As socialists, we are totally opposed to the first and second possibilities. There remains only the third possibility : self-determination. To deny them this right would *in itself* reduce them to the status of an oppressed nation, and the maintenance of a proletarian state is not compatible with the oppression of national minorities.

It should be stressed that the status of being oppressed or an oppressor is not immutable ; being oppressed is no guarantee against becoming an oppressor. The Jews have been oppressed, but those of them who have immigrated to Palestine have become part of Zionist oppression. Similarly the Arabs, who are now oppressed, would by denying the Israeli Jews' right to self-determination become themselves oppressors.

It must be clearly understood that self-determination does not automatically mean separation. What it does mean is that the decision whether to separate or to remain in the same state is to be taken by the minority nation, not imposed on it by the majority. In the specific case of the Israeli Jews we do not recommend a Jewish state separate from the socialist Arab union. Such a separate state would not in fact be viable economically, militarily or politically. If Israel has existed so far, that is only thanks to imperialist support. Liberated from Zionism and imperialism, the Israeli Jews will have no viable alternative other than to integrate (preserving only some degree of autonomy) in the socialist union of the Mashreq. But in our view, the chances for a successful integration of this kind will be considerably increased if the decision about it is left to the Israeli Jews themselves. Conversely, denying them the right to self-determination will tend to strengthen their separatism and create a problem of an oppressed national minority struggling for separation. The task of struggling for integration is primarily that of the revolutionaries of the national minority. The revolutionaries belonging to the national majority should not try to enforce a decision on the minority.

Our position is not abstract, it does not consider the national problem per se, but is completely determined by our understanding of the strategy of the socialist revolution in the Arab East. The inclusion of the right of self-determination to the Israeli Jews in the programme of the revolution will help the course of that revolution. It presents to the Israeli masses an alternative to Zionism, and thus makes it possible to attract sections of these masses to the side of the revolution. It is true that it is not impossible for the socialist revolution to triumph in the Mashreq even without the support of any section of the Israeli masses. But without such support, the course of the revolution will certainly be much more difficult and bloody. Denying them the right to self-determination will push all Israeli Jews to the side of counter-revolution : they will fight to the bitter end because they will not see any acceptable alternative to Zionism.

Finally, does not granting the right of self-determination to the Israeli Jews mean accepting Zionism and recognizing Israel ? On the contrary, it means just the opposite. Such a right can only be granted, will only become meaningful, when Zionism and the present Israeli state are overthrown.

But what about the borders within which the Israeli Jews will be allowed to exercise their right to self-determination ? And does not this right conflict with the rights of the Palestinian Arab refugees ? The answers to these two questions are inter-connected. Of course, the Israeli Jews' right to self-determination must not infringe the right of the Palestinian Arabs to be repatriated and rehabilitated. But even after their repatriation and rehabilitation, there will still be a continuous territory inhabited by an overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews. In that territory they will exercise the right to self-determination. The right of self-determination has nothing to do with the borders of Israel, or with any other borders that can be drawn on the map at this moment.

July 10, 1973

A. Said (Jabra Nicola) and M.Machover

P.-S.

<https://matzpen.org/english/1973-07-10/arab-revolution-and-national-problems-in-the-arab-east-a-said-jabra-nicola-and-m-machover/>

Published in The International, Summer 1973.

Notes

[1] By the 'Arab East' or 'Mashreq' we mean the Arabic-speaking world east of Libya, i.e. the old historical Mashreq plus Egypt