

PALESTINE, MARXISM, AND MORE¹

The horror in Gaza continues. All over the world, people are seeking ways to express their solidarity with Palestinians and to change the situation, if not the system. The common goal: a free Palestine. In this context, we ask more specifically what revolutionary Marxism can bring to the table. It is the question at stake in Joseph Daher's *Palestine and Marxism* (Resistance Books and IIRE, 2024).² The book provides a great introduction to the Palestinian issue together with a strong political argument for readers to further strengthen their solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. In short, Daher argues for the combination of resistance in Palestine and regional revolution as the only realistic way to liberate Palestine and all the peoples of the region. (p. 2) In a spirit of open debate and solidarity, we propose to discuss Daher's book, leaving aside its four annexes: a summary concerning the birth of Islam; a chronology of key events following the Oslo Accords; a short article on the slogan 'From the River to the Sea'; and a programmatic text on the Jewish question by Ernest Mandel.

Where To Begin?

Answer: by examining the beginning of the current oppression of Palestinians, namely the emergence of modern colonialism in Palestine. Daher thus points to the historical creation of Israel and accordingly describes the task ahead: "In examining the creation of Israel it is necessary to look at the history of Europe, including the campaigns of antisemitism, the rise of nationalism and the expansion of European colonialism." (p. 4) In other words, Daher moves away from the narrative of an eternal conflict between Jews and Arabs and instead situates the issue within the history of colonial oppression rooted in Europe. According to Daher, this history coincides with the history of modern or "scientific" racism, particularly nineteenth-century 'antisemitism' (a term coined in 1879).

A further study of the origins of antisemitism, and of its dialectical relationship with other forms of modern racism and oppression — all integral to modern/capitalist imperialism³ — would certainly be relevant. In examining the history of Europe, however, Daher places particular emphasis on the paradoxical role of antisemitism in the emergence of Zionism, a Jewish nationalism relying on the financial and political support of Jew-hating nations.⁴ The reason for this paradox relates to the material problem of the Zionist project. In short, the problem concerns the absence of a colonial

¹ Text written in June 2025, after 1.5 year of active participation in the solidarity movement with Palestine, both individually and with Solidarity, an intersectional Marxist project.

² Joseph Daher is a Swiss-Syrian activist and academic. His contract with Lausanne University was not continued after his participation in the occupation on campus in solidarity with Palestine. He is the author of *Syria after the Uprisings* (Pluto, 2019) and *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God* (Pluto, 2016). He is also the founder of the blog Syria Freedom Forever.

³ Modern imperialism is directly related to capitalism. It is both the last and first stage of capitalist development. It concerns the high concentration of capital in a few centers of power and global oppression, alongside the division and exclusion of the rest through the violent and genocidal dynamics of 'monopoly capital' (see Lenin's *Imperialism* [1917] on this last point). At the same time, modern imperialism constantly enables new cycles of so-called primitive accumulation and thus the renewal of capitalism, its 'revolutionary process' (see Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* [1848] and especially Marx's letter to Otechestvenniye Zapiski [1877], which helps clarify the final part of *Capital Vol. I* [1867] on that so-called primitive accumulation).

⁴ Theodor Herzl, the main theoretician of Zionism and author of *The Jewish State* (1895), wrote that 'honest antisemites must be assimilated into the project' and in his diary: 'antisemites will become our most loyal friends, antisemitic nations will become our allies'. (p.11)

metropolis that could provide military and economic support to a colonial project seeking to establish a Jewish state in a land where, around 1900, only 5 percent of the population was Jewish. The Zionist movement therefore had to find a country willing to play this supportive role. (p. 13) This is how Britain became the main supporter of Zionism, helping the Zionists to occupy Palestine, the strategically located lands over which Britain obtained an international mandate in 1920.

Daher then highlights a crucial element in the flourishing of Zionism from the 1920s onwards: “From the beginning of the settlement of Jewish immigrants in Palestine, the leaders of the Zionist movement, particularly its Labour political orientation, also made every effort to exclude Palestinians from as many areas of their daily life as possible. They indeed opposed the model envisioned by bourgeois Zionism based on the French colonization of Algeria with a minority of settlers owning most of the land and exploiting a majority of indigenous people to produce cheap consumer goods for export to Europe. Instead, they needed Jewish migration to Palestine in much greater numbers and the creation of colonial institutions under Labour Zionist dominations.” (p.17)

In other words, a whole colonial system of oppression was founded by Zionist socialism: trade unions designed to exclude Palestinian workers (e.g. Histadrut, founded in 1920); agricultural forms such as the kibbutz, which excluded Palestinian peasants; and militias used to control Palestinian life and suppress Palestinian resistance (the Haganah later became the Israeli army), etc. (pp. 18-19) The colonial roots of Zionist socialism are increasingly recognized by the international left. At the same time, they continue to shape the labor movement and the left in contemporary Israel.

So how should Israel be understood? It is a state founded in 1948, the year of the Nakba, when the ethnic cleansing of Palestine became more intense, more systematic, taking on the character of ‘apartheid’. “The Nakba is not an accident of history or war, but the result of several decades of struggle for the implementation of a policy of exclusion by the Zionist movement.” (p. 20) Daher then summarizes the course of a few key historical events in the development of Palestinian resistance and the consolidation of Zionism: the Six-Day War, the First Intifada, the Oslo Accords, and the Second Intifada. In the next chapter, he further examines several central features of Zionism, including apartheid, the increased support of the United States since the Six-Day War, and the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism.

The fourth chapter is the longest of the book and focuses on the regional politics and ideology. The chapter starts as follows: “The main strategic value of the Middle and North Africa (MENA) region is the concentration of energy resources, which to this day generates the interest of the great world powers. Some have talked of an ‘oil curse’.” (p. 38) Daher additionally notes: “Between 1940 and 1967 American companies significantly extended their control of oil in the MENA region from 10 percent to almost 60 percent.” (p. 40) However, the US was not able to continue its policy of using ‘proxy’ states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially after the 1973 boycott by the OPEC and the 1979 overthrow of the Shah of Iran. Hence, the US developed an offensive ‘oil imperialism’ in the region, where today over 30,000 military personnel are stationed. (p. 41)

Yet, it is important to note that imperialism does not operate independently from the regional political context. On the contrary, it has historically worked through the ideological confrontation between Islamic fundamentalism — primarily driven by Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood — and Arab nationalism, inspired in particular by the Egyptian leader Nasser and decolonization. It was through this dynamic that the US originally secured its interests, cultivating alliances with the fundamentalists, which it saw as a bulwark against the left and nationalist forces challenging Western imperialist dominance. Daher discusses the historical material conditions that gave rise to these ideological currents. In passing, Daher makes an interesting political point on how to approach Islamic fundamentalism in the region today: “It is possible to imagine unity in action with gradualist trends in specific contexts for precise and short-term objectives. Socialists could and did work with

the Brotherhood in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the eighteen days of mass mobilizations against Mubarak. It is, however, simply impossible to envisage similar collaborations with Al-Qaeda and IS. In Syria, these groups attacked activists for raising non-sectarian and democratic slogans.” (p. 59)

Daher adds further political clarifications: “At the same time, socialists should not pursue long-term political alliances with gradualist trends of Islamic fundamentalist movements, especially when they are much larger.” (p. 60) And, in addressing Islamophobia, he emphasizes: “Socialists should be careful not to conflate Islam and Islamic fundamentalism.” (p. 60) He concludes: “It is thus necessary for Marxists to analyse Islamic fundamentalist groups by looking at the contemporary socio-economic dynamics that produce them and see their programme as their attempt to provide reactionary solutions to real problems in society.” (p. 61) In sum, this requires a careful analysis of the dominant ideological and political forces in the region today — particularly Islamic fundamentalism — in their diversity of currents and organisations. Such an analysis must avoid reducing these movements to Islam as such, and instead situate them historically using a historical materialist method. This method, in turn, is grounded in active participation in all struggles that constitute class relations and capitalist society in the MENA region. Accordingly, Daher proceeds with a brief analysis of the class base (notably the petty bourgeoisie), the neoliberal policies (often combined with charity), and the forms of identitarian politics (understood as modern products rather than cultural traditions) characteristic of organisations such as Hezbollah, the Tunesian Brotherhood, the Iranian fundamentalists, etc.

Strengthening the historical materialist method, it would have been important to include a brief analysis of the social position of women and the construction of gender under contemporary Islamic fundamentalism in the region, especially in relation to the struggle for Palestinian liberation. As Marx and Engels already remarked in *The German Ideology*, “the first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children.” In this sense, the earliest forms of class division — and, by extension, class struggle — emerged through kinship structures such as the family and the tribe (‘gens’), which organize relations of production and reproduction, and thereby structure exploitation through gendered roles. In short, the analysis should be expanded to include other forms of class struggle, particularly those rooted in the family and in the social reproduction of labour, where gendered hierarchies are reproduced in ways that amount to ‘gender apartheid’.⁵

Resistance and Strategy

After this broad historical and regional contextualization of modern colonialism in Palestine, Daher turns in the fifth chapter to the Palestinian national movement. In the early years following the Nakba, the most significant organization in raising national consciousness among Palestinians was the Arab Nationalist Movement. Subsequently, other organizations emerged: Fatah in 1959, the PLO in 1964, the PFLP in 1967, etc. Hamas (the Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement) was founded only in 1987, at the outset of the First Intifada. One thing should be absolutely clear: “Like any other population under colonial occupation and apartheid, the Palestinians have the right to resist, including by military means. Likewise, we should not condemn the weapons sent to the Palestinian resistance from authoritarian states; on a tactical level, this contribution to the resistance is useful and indisputable. The discussion here is about the strategic choices of Palestinian organizations.” (p. 75) That is, Daher seeks to politicize the question of resistance rather than to moralize.

⁵ Daher does discuss the question of gender in his other books as well as in the article ‘On the origins and development of Hamas’ (2023).

In this light, the use of weapons and other military tactics are merely a continuation of politics — a progressive politics of national liberation. Military resistance is necessary in facing the violence collectively suffered by Palestinians. Daher thus insists that the Palestinian people have an inalienable right to resist apartheid, colonization, and genocide. And any critique of resistance strategies cannot come at the expense of this right. (p. 77) In this sense, political discussion only becomes meaningful when this right is fully affirmed, allowing for constructive disagreement over strategic orientations. Daher is unambiguous in his position: “Support for the right to Palestinian resistance should not be confused with support for the political perspectives of different Palestinian political parties. None of these parties — Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, the DFLP and others — offers a political strategy capable of leading to the liberation of Palestine.” (p. 78)

Daher then criticizes the PLO (and the Palestinian Authority), Hamas, and segments of the Palestinian left for their strategy of collaboration with the regional ruling classes, as well as for their strategy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of regional oppressive regimes (for instance, the PFLP’s relations with both the Iranian theocracy and the Egyptian dictatorship). According to Daher, this approach leads to isolation and opportunism, making it impossible to build coherent revolutionary regional alliances. Instead, he argues for a ‘strategy based on regional solidarity from below’: “That means opposing the Western states and Israel on the one side while also opposing regional authoritarian states — Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, UAE, etc. — and the political forces linked to them. This strategy, based on class struggle from below, is the only way to win liberation for the popular classes of the Middle East from regimes held up by the imperial power of the United States, Russia and China.” (p. 86)

Clearly, regional state-based strategies and US-brokered peace deals are dead ends. But Daher also warns against exaggerating the power of the Palestinian working class. For instance, Palestinian workers do not have the means to shut down the Israeli economy through strikes as the Black workers in South Africa did. Yet, the workers’ struggle remains a central component of Palestinian resistance, which is far from powerless within Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. (p. 90)

In general, the question of strategy requires a realistic assessment of the situation on the ground — particularly the forms of resistance — and the choice of a clear perspective from which to advance revolutionary change. Daher argues that the Palestinian working class and other social movements need the solidarity of workers, peasants, and oppressed peoples. Accordingly, “the question is to whom Palestinians should turn in order to obtain a secular democracy in historic Palestine.” (pp. 91-92) Palestinians remain absolutely central, insofar as national liberation is the necessary starting point, but the solidarity of others is equally necessary to achieve such liberation. Such solidarity is what allows the struggle to develop its radical and even revolutionary character. And ultimately, it is the struggle itself that will determine the potential allies of Palestinian liberation. Daher therefore does not offer a definitive resolution to this question, but instead develops it further in the following chapters. He does, however, acknowledge that even progressive sectors of the Israeli working class — which are rare — could participate in building forms of regional solidarity from below. At the same time, he rejects the idea that a general strategy of anti-Zionist working-class unity between Israeli and Palestinian workers is realistic. (p. 93) In sum, the revolutionary strategy proposed aims at a Palestinian — and more broadly regional — democratic revolution, without losing sight of the centrality and internal divisions of the working class.

The question of strategy is further analysed in the two following chapters on the development of Hamas — the main political force on the ground leading the Palestinian resistance — and revolutionary politics in the MENA region, thereby making the broad revolutionary perspective more concrete. Daher begins by reiterating that any serious and honest criticism of Hamas must be grounded in clear opposition to Israel and clear support for the right of Palestinians to resist. It is only

from this standpoint that criticism becomes politically meaningful. Hamas is then analysed in its various dimensions: its origins in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its initial opposition to the PLO; its gradual institutionalisation and military organization, especially after the Second Intifada; its political programme, which should be clearly distinguished from the politics of IS or Al-Qaeda; its broad popular base (which includes internal criticism); the bourgeoisification of its leadership (though less pronounced than in other Islamic fundamentalist movements); its capitalist and Islamic policies; its authoritarian practices; and its regional alliances with Qatar, Turkey, and especially Iran; etc. Daher concludes: “The conservative nature of Hamas, however, should not prevent the Left locally and internationally from supporting the Palestinian struggle against a colonial and racist apartheid regime supported by Western imperialism. To say we should support only communist-led or leftist-led resistance would be a grave mistake and demonstrate a profound lack of internationalism. This is in fact an old ultra-left position on the national question, which Lenin strongly criticized. We should support legitimate struggle against foreign occupation regardless of the nature of its leadership. Likewise, we do not condemn Palestinians seeking weapons from authoritarian states.” (p. 112)

Daher then turns to what he identifies as ‘the key’ for developing a more effective strategy for liberation: situating Palestine within its broader regional context. (p. 113) A crucial factor is the presence of millions of Palestinian refugees across the MENA region, which links together struggles across different countries and peoples. “This is why there is a dialectical relationship between the struggles; when the Palestinians fight, this triggers a regional liberation movement, and the regional movement in turn fuels that of occupied Palestine.” (p. 113) Accordingly, Daher importantly adds that Palestinian groups and movements must abandon the policies of non-intervention in the internal affairs of regional states. He illustrates this perspective through several historical examples of regional solidarity from below: the class struggle in 1960s and 1970s sparked by the Palestinian movement; the Second Intifada leading to the “Democratic Spring” (aka the ‘Arab’ Spring); the uprising of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon combining with the broader Lebanese uprising in October 2019. Daher stresses that more collaboration should take place, particularly between the Palestinian and Kurdish liberation movements. Finally, Daher suggests that, following the two major waves of regional popular uprisings in 2010/2011 and 2018/2019, ‘a third wave is on the way’. (p. 115)

A few remarks are in order. Firstly, we are very sympathetic to the strategy of regional solidarity from below and the prospects of a next wave of popular uprisings in the MENA region.

Secondly, it is somewhat regrettable Daher does not further develop the examples he provides, especially considering that they are presented as central to ‘the key’ of regional solidarity from below. His suggestion to bring the Palestinian and Kurdish movements into closer alignment is a very interesting one, but also raises difficulties in light of the historically complex — and at times hostile — relationship between Arab and Kurdish nationalisms.⁶ Our suggestion would be to place greater emphasis on feminist movements in the region, in particular ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ — an originally Kurdish slogan that mobilizes peoples all across the region and the world, also the popular masses challenging the Iranian regime, Israel’s sparring partner and Hamas’s main sponsor.

Thirdly, while Daher insists on not losing sight of the working class and repeatedly refers to class struggle in the region, it remains somewhat unclear what this concept concretely entails in his framework. This raises the question of how class struggle should be understood in the context of a democratic revolution. We think that a closer analysis of workers’ struggles during the ‘Democratic

⁶ For instance, Hamas has an intimate relationship with Iran which oppresses the Kurds, while the PYD leadership in Syria has remained open to developing relations with the Israeli regime. It is worth noting, however, that the PFLP and the PKK did cooperate against Israel during the Lebanese Civil War and in the early phase of the PKK insurgency in the 1980s.

Spring’ (or the wave of regional protests beginning in 2018) would be useful here. Of course, we remain wary of a workerist approach to class struggle. Nevertheless, radical mass action by workers — such as spontaneous strikes — and forms of self-organisation, including democratic unions or workers’ committees, provide important indicators of emerging political class consciousness. It is also important to stress that democratic revolution does not end with the establishment of a secular democracy, but requires that the popular masses and working class democratically seize power in order to extend the transformation of capitalist social relations across the region and beyond. For this reason, the analysis should not be confined to the moments of 2011 or 2018/2019, but should instead trace how processes of social revolution unfold within and beyond the initial time and place of democratic struggles.⁷

In short, it is not enough to anticipate a third wave of regional uprisings and or to project a future opening for Palestinian national liberation. Instead, it is necessary to actively advance the revolutionary power of the region’s — and world’s — popular masses and working classes, which, as we understand it, necessarily entails the defeat of Zionism and the realization of a free Palestine.

One Solution: Permanent Revolution?

In the eighth and last chapter, Daher presents what he calls a ‘solution to the Palestinian question and the Jewish question’, consisting, first and foremost, of (1) ‘the dismantling of the colonial, apartheid and occupation state of Israel’ and (2) ‘the establishment of a democratic, social and secular state in historic Palestine of 1948 for all’ (which includes a right of return for all Palestinian refugees). (p. 116) He further argues that the liberation of Palestine must also involve its reconstruction, implying an agrarian revolution and comprehensive economic development. (pp. 116-117) From an internationalist perspective, Daher defends a broader regional horizon, envisioning the integration of Palestine into a regional socialist federal framework. (p. 117) From standpoint, “defending, today, the right to self-determination of Israeli Jews is either reactionary or absurd.”⁸ (p. 117) Finally, Daher advances a significant political message: “The most important task for those outside the region is to win over the left, unions, progressive groups and movements to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel.” (p. 118) It is the last point made by Daher, accompanied by a direct call for an academic boycott.

We agree, but this is not enough. BDS is a very important tool, but it is debatable whether it should be considered ‘the most important task’ for those outside the region. As Daher rightly states, “the BDS campaign puts the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people at the centre of the concerns of the Palestine solidarity movement.” (p. 118) But doesn’t the movement need further organization in order to sustain and deepen its struggle? In this sense, we would argue for an irreducible diversity of tactics, allowing for an irreducible diversity of peoples around the world to organize further, especially the masses in the so-called Global South. By engaging in such a diversity of tactics — where BDS remains a very important tactic — different forms of collective action can contribute to

⁷ In this context, we would like to quote Cédric G  r  me in *The People Want to Overthrow the System: Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Tunisia (2010-2013)*: “This book argues that in the tumultuous weeks following the overthrow of Ben Ali, and again during the revolutionary conditions of 2013, elements of ‘dual power’ emerged in the country. This means that outside and in opposition to the capitalist class and its state machine, the revolutionary process initiated the creation of local grassroots structures, the seeds of a new state built by the masses themselves: self-defence and neighbourhood committees, and in some cities also popular councils. Once in motion, the masses were not content with the departure of degenerate and parasitic rulers.” (p. 17 in the Dutch translation)

⁸ On this point, Daher approvingly cites Matzpen, an Israeli anti-Zionist Marxist party that was active until the 1980s.

processes of democratic self-organisation, massification, and radicalisation of political struggles. In sum, this would strengthen not only the Palestine solidarity movement, but more broadly the international working class. It is indeed necessary to build the revolutionary capacity of the working class through and within processes of democratisation, which include Palestinian national liberation, but also Congolese liberation, women's liberation, Black liberation, ecological struggles, and others. Within this perspective, the tactics of feminist and queer movements engaged in the struggle for Palestinian liberation may differ from those of ecologists, anti-racist movements, trade unions, peasant organisations, students, consumers, workers, or elected representatives. These differences should not be reduced to a single tactical form such as BDS. From an *intersectional* Marxist perspective, the aim is to raise a working class consciousness that will allow us to achieve liberation from all forms of oppression, which means liberating Palestine in such a way that everyone would become necessarily free.⁹

To be clear, we do not view the working class as a monolithic socio-economic block, but as an inherently diverse political force that produces and is shaped by capitalist society. The working class determines the capitalist mode of production, but is also determined by the laws of capitalism. It is, therefore, the force capable of radically transforming the system — by transforming itself. Only through a process of democratization can the working class come to realize its inherently diverse political force. This is the intersectional revolutionary struggle we are engaged in. Democracy is not a set of formal rules to maintain unity among workers. Democracy are the lived political struggles for anti-capitalist empowerment: the working class liberating itself — and capitalist society — from all forms of oppression and exploitation.

Is this what Trotsky called 'permanent revolution'? First of all, Trotsky spoke of a 'theory' of permanent revolution. That is, a theory of the revolutionary development of society: "Thus there is established between the democratic revolution and the socialist reconstruction of society a permanent state of revolutionary development."¹⁰ But a theory of revolution is just a theory. In other words, the actual revolution does not pass through Trotskyism. It passes through all the struggles of the masses and the working class everywhere on earth, and clearly, through Palestinian liberation.

⁹ Accordingly, our 'review' of Joseph Daher's book diverges slightly from the helpful reviews by *Révolution Permanente* — which advances a workerist perspective — and *The Tempest Collective* — which offers a more critical but somewhat unclear argument on class struggle. Daher himself touches on the issue of intersectional class struggle in his article 'Solidarity with Palestine Means Struggling Against our Own Ruling Classes' (2024) and further develops his argument in his latest book *Gaza : un génocide en cours* (2025). I would like to thank Joseph for bringing these important points to my attention and for his continued, invaluable contribution to the struggle.

¹⁰ The key to this state of development are the laws of uneven and combined development — laws of history most famously discussed by Trotsky in the preface to his *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930).