

HOUSE ORGAN

Zionism and Empire

It is late-August, 2006, and a tenuous cease fire in Lebanon has been punctuated with news of Israeli war crimes. These include the sowing of some 100,000 made-in-the-USA cluster bombs, 90 percent of which were dropped on the population in the three days between the announcement of the cease fire and its implementation; the creation of the largest environmental disaster in the history of the Eastern Mediterranean thanks to the wanton bombing of fuel depots; and other violations too numerous to list.

Quite a rambunctious nation-state, this off-shoot of the West forcibly implanted in the midst of hundreds of millions of Muslims bound to hate it to eternity, for which they are denounced as congenital terrorists and barbarians and placed in the cross-hairs of pre-emptive aggression. Thanks to immensely powerful and vindictive lobbies that have given it effective control over the United States government, Israel has been granted an unprecedented degree of impunity, and to speak critically of it is to bring down upon one's head a hailstorm of accusations of anti-semitism. But the stakes have become too high to mince words; for impunity is the enabler of aggression, and those who do not speak out against Israel are complicit in what it does.

This is enormous in scope, as Israel is both a serial human rights abuser and an incendiary factor in the wars wracking the Middle East. From the moment of its birth, war has been the condition of the Zionist state, which presently is gearing up to take on Iran and Syria, after absorbing its worst defeat ever against irregular forces in Lebanon. We have no brief for the Islamic governments, which like states everywhere are corrupt instruments of class rule, here made worse by the influence of theocracy. But the standard evocation of Israel as peace-loving victim is a spectacular lie. The truth of the matter is that Zionism cannot know peace; its very nature is to seek a "homeland" on another's land, to mystify this with false entitlements, to deny aggression with evocation of victimhood, and to identify itself with the logic of imperialism and militarism. This has been the condition of its survival from the days of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 to the latest complicity between the Israeli and United States governments.

It would take a very long time to detail the intricacies of this bond and the abuses that result from it. Here we only mention two reasons why the immunity of Israel from serious criticism cannot be tolerated.

First, Israel's wars need to be seen in the context of strategic control of hydrocarbon fuels and not simply as part of a struggle for national security. The tendency is inherent in the geostrategic location of the Zionist state. In a fascinating analysis of the relationship between Middle East hostilities and what they call the "petro-core," which is to say, the fraction of capital dedicated to oil and the military control thereof, economists Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler found that from the mid-sixties to the early nineties, whenever the rate of profit of the petro-core fell below the mean value for the 500 leading American corporations, perception of the danger of oil scarcity as the cause of this would supervene, until armed conflict broke out and a kind of restabilization took place. They have graphed

this with intriguing correlations affecting the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, as well as the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the subsequent Iran-Iraq war, and the first Gulf war of 1990-91.

The latter war occurred as the Soviet Union collapsed, signalling a new era dominated by a single superpower and increasingly shadowed by the ecological crisis. The second Bush administration, more or less completely controlled by the petro-core itself, has manifested this in a peculiarly hyperaggressive form. The Cheney energy report issued in the Spring of 2001 made clear that the danger of oil scarcity was now tied to the perception of “peak oil,” that is, of the flattening and incipient decline of hydrocarbon reserves seen against the backdrop of an inevitable—because it is driven by the accumulation of capital—rise in consumption of energy. Thus the issue was no longer a direct function of differential petro-core profits but emerged out of the more fundamental dangers posed by the ecological crisis to the entire regime of profit driven by the hydrocarbon economy.

From this emerged a President driven by religious absolutism and whose political base, the Christian Right, manifested the “fundamentalism” inherent in his historical conjuncture. A radically deeper convergence of the Israeli and United States war machines was another consequence, this mediated by the accession of ultra-Zionist neoconservatives to power in the second Bush administration. The altered political climate following 9/11 permitted the flowering of this malignancy into the calamities of the last five years: the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the latest nightmare in Lebanon, and now an impending war with Iran and Syria.

The spate of aggression has been politically mediated by apocalyptic and messianic visions drawn from the Old Testament roots underlying both Zionism and the crackpot Puritan eschatology embraced by George W. Bush and the Christian right. In the event, the role of Israel has been markedly enhanced from that of a dependant client state and useful instrument to an integral part of the apparatus of aggression, so much so as to raise legitimate questions as to whether it played a formative role, through its powerful lobbies, in the invasion of Iraq.

From the standpoint of what sets the machinery of empire into motion—namely, the active mass of capital and its militarization—this cannot be the case. At this level, the United States ruling classes are definitely in control, while Israel can be no more than a junior partner. But this is only part of the picture and overlooks the real world of a ruling class where different visions are fought out within the state. In fact, the invasion of Iraq was hotly contested. A powerful faction of so-called foreign policy “realists,” which included many members of the first Bush administration, opposed invasion in 2002 for the same reason they had scotched it when in power in 1991, namely, that it would prove catastrophic. Needless to say, they lost out; and the faction that triumphed was comprised of unilateralists and neoconservatives deeply aligned with Zionist ideology (which also stresses unilateralism, as the province of a Chosen People) and functionally allied with the Israeli state, which was zealously beating the drums for invasion. From this it may be concluded that the immediate responsibility for the decision to invade Iraq must lie in some degree with the State of Israel—just as the occupation of Iraq has been to a significant degree carried out, torture and all, according to lessons taught America by Israel from its experience in the Occupation of Palestine. The antiwar left tends to ignore this; but in so doing it reveals a crippling

internalization of Zionist principles and values. In any case, anyone opposing U.S. imperialism is morally as well as intellectually bound to extend their criticism to the State of Israel.

The **second** reason it is necessary to criticize Israel and Zionism is closely related: for nothing worthwhile will be done in the Middle East, or more generally, throughout the entire arc of contestation between the West and political Islam, unless the problem of Zionism is confronted and overcome. I do not mean, the problem *between* Israel and Palestine, as though there were some kind of effective parity or moral equivalence between the sides. Again, it is a question of differentiation, to distinguish between the particular events on the ground, in regard to which there is an equivalence, viz., Hizbullah fires rockets at Israeli civilians; Israel drops bombs on Lebanese civilians. Both are war crimes, no matter that more destruction is done by the one side than the other. But there is an entirely different, and crucial, category of transgression: the question of who is the historically efficacious agent. *Which side set this into motion? Who invaded whom? Who occupies whom? Who expresses the expansive force of the dominant world system, and who is the object of that system and its victim? Where is the justice?* All the tedious Zionist legalisms, justifying, denying, projecting one's hostility onto the other, cannot address this question, which is as simple as can be and admits of a plain answer. The terrible cycle of revenge, continually widening and threatening civilization, cannot be broken unless the dominating ideology that stirs up endless hatred is overcome.

—Joel Kovel

Addendum

We are grateful to Ariel Salleh and the *CNS* ecofeminist group for organizing and editing the symposium on ecofeminism which comprises most of this issue. An outcome of our meeting in Toronto in July, 2005, and almost entirely written by *CNS* editors, the collection affirms the centrality of ecofeminism in radical discourse concerning the ecological crisis. It is also a living reminder of the power of dialectic, in the original meaning of that term, as a gathering of contrasting views in fruitful argument.

Murray Bookchin passed away in August. A major figure in the radical ecology movement, he figured prominently in the pages of this journal over the years, often as the subject of controversy. The obituary below was written by Brian Tokar, a close associate. We are in process of preparing a symposium of varying views on Murray for a future issue.