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Israel, the European Left and the Complexity of the Middle East

Colin Shindler

- 1 The approach of the European Left towards the Arab Spring is still a work in progress. Opinions are divided. There were initial comparisons to the year of revolutions 1848, the Prague Spring of 1968, the Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and even the Protestant Reformation. Significantly this idealistic imagery by mainly social democrats and liberals began to disappear dramatically by 2012 as the initiative of the Google generation of Tahrir Square was overtaken by the determination of the seasoned activists of the Muslim Brotherhood. They in turn were displaced by the return of the military under the command of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2013. The army coup a year later crushed the Muslim Brotherhood and its incompetent government. But it also restored the 'ancien regime'. The well-meaning elite of Tahrir Square was back to square one. Politics had stood still. The elite were essentially silenced by the realisation of the forces that they had to confront. They were squeezed mercilessly by a twin-headed hydra. The European Left was perplexed by this ever-changing turn of events. They were plunged into an ideological maelstrom.
- 2 This double displacement by the Islamists and the military in Egypt disorientated the European Left. A belief in progress in the Arab world was called into question. There were now some in the Left who understood that the Israel-Palestine conflict was similarly complex and not simple. The Middle East was not Europe.
- 3 For European Marxists, the idealism of the Arab Spring offered originally the opportunity to recruit. It was a focal event which would inspire many into a left wing commitment. An analogy with the invasion of Iraq was drawn: they opposed western intervention or support for pro-NATO factions in Libya; they supported Assad in Syria because the Baathists opposed US imperialism and the regime was a bulwark against the 'Zionist entity'
- 4 Some saw the unfolding events in Cairo as a template for a Hamas revolt against Mahmoud Abbas in Palestine. However the rapid demise of the Muslim Brotherhood isolated Hamas. It had originally ditched Iran in favour of its ideological big brother, the

Muslim Brotherhood – and discovered that it had jumped on the wrong train. Instead it forced them into an accommodation with Fatah. Yet the rise of Palestinian Islamism during the last twenty years had been seen as a progressive force by many on the European Left. The Oslo Accords, on the other hand, were viewed as a betrayal by Palestinian nationalists. The very acceptance of Israel, it was argued, was a subterfuge to move the region into the global market. It also opened up the markets of the Islamic world to Israel.

- 5 With the rise of Islamism in the Arab world, there were other areas of common agreement. Islamists and Trotskyists opposed both East and West – as witnessed by the reaction to both the Soviet and American presences in Afghanistan. Moreover both superpowers had been instrumental in the establishment of Israel in 1948.

Palestinian Nationalism and Islamism 1933-1945

- 6 The cause of Palestine never had a good name in Britain or France after 1945. This derived from the bitter struggle of the British and the French to stop Hitler and the suffering endured under Nazi occupation. In the Middle East, German legations had consistently reported to Berlin demonstrations of unbridled enthusiasm for a National Socialist Germany. Regardless of Nazi ideology, Hitler clearly opposed the enemies of Arab nationalist movements – the British, the French and the Jews. Political movements such as the Baath party, the Syrian Socialist Nationalist party, the Lebanese Kataeb, Young Egypt and the Iraqi Futuwah movement all integrated elements of German National Socialism and Italian fascism. *Mein Kampf* was translated into Arabic and circulated widely in the Arab world.¹ There were also exceptions. In Egypt, for instance, the intellectuals who contributed to the liberal cultural journal, *al-Risāla*, vehemently opposed Nazism and anti-Semitism.²
- 7 In view of this background, it was therefore not unexpected that in 1948 the rise of Israel provoked nationalist attacks on Jews per se – on communities that lived in the Arab world for millennia. In Iraq a community that had existed since Nebuchadnezzar ruled the land was stripped of its worldly goods and forced to emigrate *en masse* to Israel. This took place even though its leaders had publicly distanced themselves from Zionism. Even anti-Zionist Jewish Communists were instructed to leave. In Aleppo at the end of 1947, a pogrom and the destruction of synagogues coerced half the city's Jewish population to leave. In Egypt, nearly 40% of the Jewish community had fled by 1950 due to arrests, killings and confiscations. In Kuwait, the minuscule number of Jews was expelled. In Libya, Algeria and Morocco, there were periodic outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence.
- 8 Both Islamists and nationalists realised the significance of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. The Mufti of Jerusalem and an assembly of notables had expressed their admiration for the new Germany and its anti-Jewish policies at a meeting with the German Consul at Nebi Musa shortly after Hitler's accession to power. The Arab world like Germany saw itself as a victim of the Versailles deliberations. This was keenly felt by the Palestinian Arabs who viewed the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate in that light. Unlike Britain and France, Germany, stripped of its colonies, had no presence in the Arab world. Moreover Germany was deeply aggrieved over the loss of its imperial status. There was, for example, a considerable resentment in forcing the German inhabitants of South West Africa to take British citizenship in 1924.

- 9 Although the Mufti pressed for a policy which would keep Jews away from Palestine, Hitler allowed a large enough emigration to simply get rid of Germany's Jews. This stopped in 1937 when the Nazis realised that the Peel Commission had recommended the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a state with a Jewish majority. Nazi ideology then took precedence over the expediency of emigration. Hitler's racist disdain for Arabs and his unwillingness to interfere in matters concerning the British Empire, ensured that no practical support was extended. This led to a refusal to provide arms for the Palestinian Arabs despite the repeated pleas of figures such as Fawzi Qawukji.³ The Mufti addressed a letter to Hitler on 20 January 1941, declaring the readiness of the Arab world to participate in the struggle against the common enemy, Britain. The Mufti's private secretary was dispatched to Berlin where he proposed Axis recognition of the independence of all Arab countries under the British and French Mandates as well as 'British protectorates in the Persian Gulf and South Arabia'. It also requested recognition of the right of all Arab countries.
- 10 To solve the question of the Jewish elements in Palestine and the other Arab countries in a manner that conforms to the national and ethnic interests of the Arabs, and to the solution of the Jewish question in... Germany and Italy.⁴
- 11 Yet even after the outbreak of war, Hitler was very reticent to go beyond expressions of sympathy for the Arab cause for fear of upsetting the colonial interests of his allies, the Italians and the Vichy French in the Middle East and obstructing negotiations which could bring Turkey into the war on the Axis side. The Mufti argued that National Socialism and Islam shared a common weltanschauung. He was not averse to extracting teachings from the Koran and adapting them to fit Hitler's latest pronouncement.⁵ Moreover his involvement in the destruction of the Jews during World War II stretched beyond anti-British militancy and anti-Zionism.⁶
- 12 If Italy's forces had been successful in September 1940 and entered Cairo, they would have been welcomed as liberators by the Egyptians. Anwar Sadat commented, 'except for ill-luck, we would have joined forces with the Axis, struck a quick blow at the British, and perhaps won the war'.⁷
- 13 Had it not been for the allied victory at El Alamein in 1942, SS Obersturmbannführer Walter Rauff would have ordered his einsatzkommando to liquidate the Jews of Palestine. Moreover, the Nazis expected local participation in their actions.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Britain

- 14 As the twenty first century beckoned, such an ideological background, tainted by the Palestinian leadership's association with Nazism was half-forgotten and relegated to the history books. Although the European Left made strenuous attempts to confront populist, obscurantist and quasi-fascist movements in Europe itself, such an approach was not applied in the Arab Middle East. The cause of anti-imperialism and the desire to overturn local dictators took precedence. The crudeness of Hamas in resurrecting anti-Semitic stereotypes or recommending the Tsarist forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was glossed over. This contrasted with Arafat's attempts to distance himself from the Mufti's pronouncements a half a century earlier.
- 15 In Britain, the London based spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood established the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) in 1997. The MAB soon joined the Muslim Council of

Britain which had been established at the behest of the British government as a central address for British Muslims. The MAB was perhaps the most politically aware of all the Muslim groups and given its ideological origin was keen to assist Hamas in its struggle during the al-Aqsa Intifada.

- 16 The political atmosphere after 9/11 in Britain and the disaffection of second and third generation British Muslims provided this relatively obscure organisation with the opportunity to act as the vehicle for protest by a younger generation of the offspring of immigrants who came mainly from the Indian sub-continent. The MAB expressed the anger of British Muslims at a broader political scenario beyond the Israel-Palestine imbroglio. Such disaffection, however, coincided with the al-Aqsa Intifada and Sharon's military initiative against both Arafat and his Islamist opponents. This circle was expanded further just before the invasion of Iraq when Labour party supporters, liberals and an array of leftists in Britain joined together with a broad mobilisation of Muslims in the UK and demonstrated in February 2003 in London in probably one of the largest demonstrations since the halcyon days of the Vietnam war. Conversely, others on the European Left viewed Muslim workers as a new proletariat to be cultivated and won over. In Islamic history, it was argued, there were periods of religious intensity, marked by a reoccurring theme of a return to the spiritual purity of the times of the Prophet. Such periods were characterised by revolutionary endeavour against oppressive establishments. One leading British Trotskyist argued as early as 1994 that:

Traditionalist Islam is an ideology which seeks to perpetuate a social order which is being undermined by the development of capitalism. There is a corruption of Islam by cultural imperialism.⁸

- 17 Historically, the feeling that the creation of Israel in 1948 was a grave error grew in an age of decolonisation and rising Palestinian nationalism. Forgotten was Soviet support for a two state solution despite the imprisonment of Zionists in the USSR itself. Indeed if it had not been for Stalin, would UN Resolution 181 of 29 November 1947 - which endorsed the partition of Mandatory Palestine - have attained the statutory two thirds majority?
- 18 A perplexed leading member of the Palestine Communist Party, Emile Touma, the editor of *al-Ittihad* in Haifa, had just returned from a conference of Communist parties in London in where he had opposed partition. When he heard about the Soviet about-turn in the spring of 1947, he wrote:

I cannot understand in particular the attitude of the Soviet Union delegation (at the UN session on Palestine) to the Palestine problem. The major point which is troubling our people is the significance of Gromyko's justification of the Jewish aspirations for a national home. Does this not help the Zionists to strengthen their hold on the Jewish masses and is this not a justification of Zionist ideology? Further, what is the significance of Gromyko's clear statement on the solutions of the Palestine problem. I cannot understand the reference for a bi-national state nor his reference to partition as a possible solution.⁹

- 19 Touma said that Gromyko's statement was not welcome and that partition was 'an imperial danger threatening peace and stability'. Such a sentiment was harboured by many who looked the other way and then quietly followed the Soviet line.
- 20 This sense that Israel was an artificial creation, fuelled by superpower rivalry and the activism of a majority of Jews world-wide, reached a watershed with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1991. The removal of the USSR was the removal of a psychological obstacle and an inconvenient historical truth. It meant that any recognition that the Jews had a right to national self-determination could similarly be consigned to the rubbish dump of

history. It also meant that there were now few restrictions in aligning with the position of the Arab Left that Israel in its current form had no right to exist. And this logically produced an about turn in the uneasy relationship between Marxists and Islamists.

- 21 How did such a situation evolve? The legacy of colonialism in Britain and France is clearly a major factor. It divides those who believe that the struggle over Palestine is a contest between two liberation movements, resulting in partition from those who understand it as an anti-colonial struggle against European imperialism, resulting in one state.
- 22 Significantly Eastern Europe which experienced regimes which espoused Marxism-Leninism was hardly involved in colonialist and imperialist enterprises in the developing world projects a different world view about Israel.

Confusion within the French Left'

- 23 For the French Left, emerging from the German occupation, the question of Israel after 1948 evolved into a highly perplexing topic. Jean-Paul Sartre was scarred by the memory of what had happened to the Jews in France, following the defeat in 1940 – the discrimination, the betrayals, the deportations, the exterminations. He recognised the struggle of the Jews in Palestine as early as 1947 and argued that, following the withdrawal of British troops, the UN should have armed the Jews. In 1949, he commented that the establishment of the state of Israel was one of the few events 'that allows us to preserve hope'.¹⁰ His solidarity with the Jews stemmed from the time of the Nazi occupation.
- 24 Sartre also supported the Algerian struggle and was a proponent of Nasser's programme for 'Arab socialism'. His solidarity with the Arabs grew out of the Algerian war.
- 25 Sartre was of a generation that had experienced the past. The mindset of the succeeding generation in France did not have that experience. Its ideological agenda was forged through the struggle of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) in Algeria and the NLF (National Liberation Front for South Vietnam) in Vietnam. By the 1960s, socialist advocates for Israel such as Leon Blum were long dead. The mentors of the post-war generation were Frantz Fanon and Régis Debray. The icons of the French New Left were Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh.

The PCF (*Parti Communiste Français*) during World War II

- 26 Marxism historically was never able to explain the survival of the Jews throughout millennia. It was easier to bend the Jews to fit theory rather than the other way around.
- 27 In addition, the Nazi occupation of Europe and the misguided prioritisation of the national interests of the Soviet Union led to a non-linear ideological approach towards Jews and Jewish nationalism – and later towards the state of Israel. Thus Jewish Marxists such as Eric Hobsbawm automatically supported the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939. Polish Jews could sadly be sacrificed for the greater good of the survival of the USSR. In part many on the British and French Lefts – both Stalinist and Trotskyist – depicted the war against Nazism as one of rival imperialisms, cast in the mould of World War I. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was set in the template of the prolonged negotiations at Brest-Litovsk in

1918 whereby Trotsky held off a German invasion of Russia. Moreover the memory of World War I and its senseless slaughter in the trenches was recalled by many. The death and destruction of that conflict had resonated down the decades.

- 28 This deflating of opposition to Nazism in the aftermath of the Molotov-Ribbentrip Pact was accentuated when Hitler, following the conquest of Poland, held out an olive branch to Britain and France in a speech to the Reichstag in early October 1939. The Belgian Communist party responded with the slogan, 'Neither London Nor Berlin' and initiated a diversionary campaign for higher pay for the mobilised conscripts. With Stalin pushing behind the scenes, the secretary-general of the PCF, Maurice Thorez, left the French armed forces as quickly as he had joined – and decamped for the USSR. In November 1939, the party's paper, *La Voix du Peuple* was banned.¹¹ This was followed by the banning of *Ce Soir* and *L'Humanité* and then the party itself. The PCF now even opposed conscription.
- 29 Some regarded the struggle against domestic capitalism and its 'unwanted' war as of a higher priority. Why fight fellow workers? This mindset led logically to sabotaging the war effort against Nazi Germany. They collected classified information from supporters and sympathisers about weapons and military operations.¹² In France, a powder factory at Sorques, an arms manufacturer at Bourges and an aeroplane motor plant at Boulogne were also sabotaged during the phoney war.¹³
- 30 In France, prominent figures in the PCF such as Florimond Bonte and François Billoux petitioned the Vichy regime to be permitted to testify against the socialist leader, Leon Blum, at his trial.¹⁴ What would have happened if England had been invaded in 1940? Would the German army have been welcomed by local Communists as workers in uniforms?
- 31 All this changed with Hitler's invasion of Soviet Russia. Local Communists performed political somersaults without blinking. Such ideological flexibility was also demonstrated in 1947 when after three decades of persecution of Soviet Zionists, Stalin instructed Gromyko to support the notion of a two state solution at the United Nations. Local Communist parties abruptly changed their line towards the emergence of a state with a Jewish majority within historic Palestine. In May 1948, the PCF organised a mass rally in support of the new state of Israel in the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris.
- 32 With the show trials and late Stalinism's persecution of Jews and especially the depiction of Zionist machinations, hand-in-glove with international Jewish capitalists, the line changed once more. By January 1953, the PCF dutifully followed the Soviet line on the Doctors' Plot. French intellectuals such as Pierre Hervé were enlisted to support the Kremlin's charges against the Jewish doctors.¹⁵ Anti-Zionist Jews such as Maxime Rodinson¹⁶ and Francis Crémieux did the same.¹⁷ Annie Kriegel was asked to point out that it was quite possible that Jews like other human beings were capable of terrible crimes. Louis Le Guillant responded in an article in a party journal whereby he compared the behaviour of the Soviet doctors to their Nazi colleagues in Dachau.¹⁸ In *L'Humanité* ten eminent medical experts requested that the convicted defendants should be put in a place where they could no longer harm anyone.¹⁹
- 33 By 1956 the twin events of Hungary and Suez symbolised the bankruptcy of the old ideological order. Guy Mollet, one of the architects of the Suez fiasco was a social democrat. For the adherents of Communism and its fellow travellers, the convoluted explanations which were offered for the invasion of Hungary, were an ideological and

moral somersault too far. This sense of disillusionment with the expounders and justifiers of both Suez and Hungary created a third space for a New Left.

Post-1967 attitudes

- 34 On the eve of the Six Day war in 1967, amidst talk of another massacre of the Jews – the imagery in France was that of the emaciated Jew in the striped pyjamas and his post-war liberated successor, the socialist kibbutznik who made the desert bloom. During the war, the image of the jackbooted Jewish conqueror emerged, seemingly aided and abetted by a coordinated Jewish lobby which was centrally pulling the political strings in a multitude of countries. Which image was correct? Was Nasser a third world liberation hero, struggling to liberate his people from the colonialist past or an expansionist reactionary nationalist who had crushed his progressive rivals? Moreover, the US strongly supported Israel but was deemed responsible for waging war in Vietnam. Yet Ho Chi Minh was an inveterate Stalinist. There was a belief that even if some aspects of liberation movements were reactionary, they generally belonged to the movement of progressive anti-imperialism. *L'Humanité* selected the images which accorded with the PCF's policy in supporting De Gaulle's pro-Arab stance in 1967 and thereby attempted to connect Israelis with Nazis and with the war in Vietnam. The Six Day war whipped up all these conflicting images into an emotional whirlwind: Wartime anti-Nazism against contemporary anti-colonialism.

Anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism

- 35 This led on to a contemporary attempt to make a distinction between law abiding Jews, members of valued communities in multi-cultural Europe, from 'the Prussian aggression of the Zionists' in Israel. However a majority of Israelis just happened to be Jews. This was also related to the relationship between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. While anti-Zionism especially amongst Jews has a long pedigree, can anti-Zionism never be anti-Semitic?
- 36 Anti-Semitism on the French Left stretches back to the early nineteenth century. Charles Fourier commented in the mid-1840s:
- Has there ever been a nation more despicable than the Hebrews who have achieved nothing in art and science, and who are distinguished only by a record of crime and brutality which at every page of their loathsome annals makes you sick.²⁰
- 37 His disciple, the utopian socialist, Alphonse Toussenel wrote *Les Juifs, rois de L'époque* in 1845. He referred to 'Londres-Juda' in the belief that the English enemy worked together with the Jews to destroy revolutionary France.
- 38 The idea that accusations of anti-Semitism were merely a cover to deflect criticism of Zionism appeared as early as November 1952 during the Slansky trial in Prague. The majority of the defendants were Jewish Communists, falsely accused of being Zionists. Jewish Communists were mobilised by local parties in Western Europe to publicly denounce the protests of Jewish communal organisations. There was a concerted attempt to separate accusations of anti-Semitism from denunciations of Zionism. Jacques Duclos of the PCF refuted the accusation that anti-Semitism had played a part. Instead he

pointed to the indictment of the atom spies, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as a true example of anti-Semitism.²¹

- 39 Yet the prison interrogator of Artur London, one of the defendants during the Slansky trial, told him that Hitler was right about the Jews and ‘we will finish what he started’. London was astounded:

These words were uttered by a man who wore the party badge in his buttonhole, before three other men, in uniform who tacitly agreed. What did this anti-Semitism, this pogrom spirit, have in common with Marx, Lenin and the party? This was the first time in my adult life that I was insulted because I was a Jew and was held to be a criminal because of my race – and that by a man from State Security of a socialist country, a member of the Communist party. Was it possible that the mentality of the SS had arisen in our own ranks? This was the mentality of the men who shot my brother, Jean in 1941, who deported my mother, my sister Juliette and her husband, and dozens of my family to Auschwitz and sent them to the gas chamber. I had concealed my race from the Nazis, should I do the same thing in my own socialist country?²²

- 40 In a celebrated court case in Paris in 1973, an edition of the Soviet Embassy publication, *URSS*, was shown to be based on Tsarist anti-Semitic literature. Grigory Svirsky, a recent Soviet emigrant to Israel, submitted as evidence a pamphlet by the Okhrana and ‘the Black Hundreds’ in 1906. Svirsky demonstrated that the ‘quotations’ from the Talmud and other religious tracts which had been published in *URSS* were taken ‘word for word, including spelling mistakes, from the 1906 anti-Semitic pamphlet. There was only one change: the term ‘Zionist’ had been substituted for the word ‘Jew’.²³

- 41 There was also a prominence of non-Jewish Jews in public campaigns against Israel. Ronnie Kasrils, a founding member of Umkhonto we Sizwe, a government minister in the new South Africa and a leading member of the country’s Communist party strongly promoted his Jewishness when opposing Israeli policies. Yet such zeal often led into unsavoury characterisations. In 2006, he commented in a *Guardian* interview:

Israelis claim that they are the chosen people, the elect of God and find a biblical justification for their racism and Zionist exclusivity.²⁴

- 42 The substitution of ‘Jews’ for ‘Israelis’ and ‘Jewish’ for ‘Zionist’ sounded remarkably familiar to comments from far Right politicians of the early twentieth century.
- 43 Sartre argued that the Left was unable to take a position between the rights of two national liberation movements and that it was up to the Jews and the Arabs to resolve this seemingly intractable situation through discussion. Sartre rationally therefore tried to create a space for a dialogue between the Arab Left and the Israeli Left. Succeeding generations, however, seem to have lost his understanding of the complexities of history. The ideological contortions of the European Left over Israel led some of its adherents into some very dark places indeed. While adhering to the ideals of universalism, such acrobatics made many Jews circumspect about the ideological opportunism of certain sections of the Left. The trauma and tragedies of the twentieth century induced caution.
- 44 Such feelings were similarly aroused when sections of the European Left embraced the upsurge of Islamism in the Middle East as a redeeming angel which would overthrow dictators and set free the people. What would it mean for the cause of liberal democracy? As this drama unfolds, it seems that such circumspection and caution expressed back in 2011 was not unfounded. It appears that the choice is between a hardline military regime and an illiberal Islamist one. Not between democracy and its absence. In the world of realpolitik, Israel has continually chosen the military because of the inbuilt hostility of

Islamism to Israel. Many on the far left in Europe, however, find it easier to react to an identifiable military regime, friendly to the west and to gloss over the inadequacies of an Islamism which coats itself with a veneer of anti-colonialism.

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ABSTRACTS

The reaction by the Left in Britain and France to the Arab Spring was one of both joy and opportunity in 2011, but had descended into a muffled and confused embarrassment by 2014. Yet this tentative alliance with Islamism mirrors past ideological mishaps such as a belief in Stalinism or the initial acceptance that World War II was essentially a war between rival imperialisms. This confusion in parts of the European Left is further mirrored by their historic lack of understanding of the complexity of the Israel-Palestine problem.

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