

# ***The SWP's new petition on Israel-Palestine***

## **● Backing "two states": good!**

## **● Calling on the British state to bring it about: bad!**

**T**HE SWP has launched a new campaign initiative on Israel-Palestine, circulating a petition produced through the Campaign for Palestinian Rights.

It marks a big and welcome step forward in accepting the only consistently democratic and realistic policy for the conflict: the right of self-determination for both nations. The nation now denied self-determination, the Palestinians, should have their own independent state alongside Israel — "two nations, two states". That the SWP now accepts this is a big step forward from previous SWP petitions headlined "Two states solution, no solution".

The petition's first point is that the Israeli army must withdraw from the Occupied Territories. Good! Inside the Socialist Alliance the SWP has voted down repeated proposals to make "Israel out of the occupied territories" a main slogan for the Alliance. But "Israel out of the occupied territories" is the key immediate demand of the Palestinian people and the Israeli left. 100,000 Israelis marched under that slogan on 12 May. People in Britain active in solidarity with the Palestinians should also make it our first demand.

"Two nations, two states", or an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, follows immediately from "Israel out of the occupied territories". The Palestinians have already made it very clear that they will set up a state of their own as soon as the Israeli army gets off their backs.

The petition accepts that implication by arguing "that the Palestinians have an equal right to Jerusalem, whether it be the capital of their separate state (East Jerusalem) or that of a single, democratic, secular state". In other words, it indicates that the acceptable

outcomes from Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories are either an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, or a single democratic secular state merging both nations, Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Arab.

Socialists want to see the whole world united in a socialist federation. We want to see the whole Middle East united in a socialist federation which could deploy the huge oil wealth now monopolised by kings, emirs and despots to create economic security for all. But the merger of different nations into a single state can be democratic only if it is by free consent of all nations involved.

The sooner that comes, the better. But as yet the merger even of Scots and English into a single state is problematic; and attempts in the 1960s to form a United Arab Republic collapsed amid resentment against perceived Egyptian domination. The Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Arabs are not going to be the first pair of nations in the world to merge together.

"Single democratic secular state" is either a proposal for the far future, when the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become a distant memory, or top-dressing for a policy of conquering the Israeli Jews and forcing them into a "single" state. That "single" state would not be democratic. And it too could come about only in the far future, probably only if the USA somehow switched to supporting Arab conquest of Israel.

By listing as acceptable outcomes both "two states" (possible in the near future, presupposing only a shift in the political balance within the two peoples) and "democratic secular state" (possible only in the far future), the petition effectively accepts and proposes "two states" as its practical, active

policy.

The second point of the petition nails down the implication by calling for Israel to dismantle the Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories. That makes sense only if the now-occupied Territories are to become an Arab state alongside the Jewish-majority state.

The way the petition puts it, however, has problems. It says "Britain should call on Israel to dismantle the settlements in the Occupied Territories". Now in fact if Israel is forced to withdraw its army from the Occupied Territories, it is a near-certainty that it will dismantle the Jewish settlements as it goes. Israeli socialists spell that out, explaining that the settlements are not a matter of individuals living where they want but of deliberate Israeli policy to strengthen its control in the Occupied Territories. An independent Palestinian state would have the right to disarm the Jewish settlements — or even to expel them, though socialists would surely not advocate that.

All that is different from us calling on the British government to tell Israel to get the Jews out of the Occupied Territories. Imagine the phone call if Blair

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decides to go along with the petition! "Hello! Is that Ariel Sharon? British government here. Britain, you know – the former colonial power in Palestine. We organised and officered the armies of what were then the British Empire's Arab semi-colonies, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan, to try to drive you into the sea in 1948. We failed that time, but we do have a lot of experience in keeping Jews out of places. We passed our first Aliens Act in 1904 to keep out persecuted Jewish asylum-seekers from Russia and Eastern Europe. When Hitler came to power in 1933, we closed the doors of Britain to Jewish refugees. In 1939, just before the Holocaust, we banned virtually all Jewish migration to Palestine. You must remember! Well, there's a bit more work to be done in keeping Jews out of places. Get those Jews out of the West Bank!"

A democratic "two-states" solution is possible only by Arab and Jewish workers uniting on a programme of mutual recognition of rights. Even a halfway workable approximation to a democratic solution — something that, though socialists could not endorse it, would provide openings for progress — can only be achieved by some measure of free agreement and democratic dialogue between the two peoples.

It could not be imposed by an external imperialist power, and it is particularly grotesque to suggest it be imposed by Britain. The Arabs, who had to wage large struggles to win independence from British and French rule; who, in Palestine especially, faced repeated double-crossing and bloody repression by British power — they have just as much reason to despise British imperialism as the Israeli Jews have.

We want a democratic "two-states" solution. To call on the British government to enforce it makes even less sense than, for example, calling on the British troops in Afghanistan to enforce women's rights, democracy, and secularism.

The petition is spoiled by its slant of "calling on Britain to sort Israel out". That continues in its last point — saying Britain should impose trade sanctions on Israel. We can and obviously should oppose British arms sales to Israeli without demanding such sanctions. In the 1970s left-wing Iraqi exiles used to call on Britain to impose sanctions on Iraq in order to get Saddam Hussein to ease his repression of socialists, trade unionists, and the Kurds. Experience since shows that powers

like Britain impose effective sanctions only when it fits their imperialist interests, and in pursuit of those interests.

Arguably the call for British trade sanctions, since it is clearly focused on Israel and not Jews in general, is less bad than the more common demand to "boycott Israeli goods", a demand which finds its main practical expression in pickets of... not any Israeli enterprise, but Britain's best-known Jewish-linked business, Marks and Spencer. Both do more harm than good to the Palestinian cause.

Another element of confusion is the last-but-one point of the petition, saying that Britain should support UN Resolution 194. That resolution was passed by the UN General Assembly in December 1948, in the midst of the war between British-sponsored Arab armies and the Israeli state declared by Palestine's Jewish community in May 1948.

Towards the end, in point 11, the resolution said that "the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so" or receive compensation. It referred to about 700,000 Arabs who had been driven out of or had fled the area which is now Israel.

If the Arab states had been willing to negotiate a comprehensive peace deal with Israel, the "right of return" of those 700,000 might have been secured as part of a settlement which would involve some redrawing of borders and Arab acceptance of the Israeli Jews' right to a state. There are no guarantees — the Israeli leaders, with the memory of the Holocaust fresh in their minds, were in no mood for trust and compromise — but it was possible. It did not happen. The Arab states deliberately kept those Palestinians as refugees, neither negotiating their return nor granting them rights to gain equal citizenship or rights to employment in other Arab countries. That is a crime against the Palestinian people for which both the Arab states and Israel are responsible.

It is 54 years on. Those 700,000 are dead or elderly. What does Resolution 194 mean today? In Arab nationalist rhetoric it means the right for about four million Palestinians officially recognised as refugees — children and grandchildren of the 700,000 — to repossess their ancestors' lands in what is now Israel.

That sort of collective "return" and repossession is quite different from the freedom of movement across borders for individuals which socialists advo-

cate. If Germany were still advocating that the areas of western and north-eastern Poland from which over ten million Germans were driven out after World War 2 should be made German again, then obviously there could be neither peace between Germany and Poland, nor an open border between Germany and Poland for individuals. Socialists should prefer peace and an open border — between Germany and Poland, and between Israel and a Palestinian state.

The mass collective "return" made sense only as part of a political programme in which Palestinian rights would be gained by way of the Arab states conquering Israel. That programme was never any good for the Palestinians. From the mid-1970s left-wing Palestinians started advocating "two states"; in the course of the first intifada, in 1988, the whole PLO officially adopted "two states" as its policy. Palestinian representatives have repeatedly explained that in practice what they now seek for the refugees is some Israeli agreement to pay compensation and resettle limited numbers.

Even if the SWP has effectively accepted "two states" not because of any real change of heart, but only because it recognises that its private policy of "no compromise" with Israel is a non-starter for any serious discussion in the working class, it is still a welcome move. The next steps should be for the SWP to discuss the implications — and to join with others to build a broad, active movement of solidarity, explicitly secular, explicitly democratic, and clearly focused on the demand to get the Israeli army out of the Occupied Territories and allow the Palestinians to create their own state alongside Israel.

**The petition text: We call on the British government to break with the United States' unqualified support for Israel through the following:**

- 1. The British government should call on Israel to withdraw its army from the Occupied Territories,**
- 2. Britain should call on Israel to dismantle the settlements in the Occupied Territories.**
- 3. The British government should call on Israel to accept that the Palestinians have an equal right to Jerusalem, whether it be the capital of their separate state (East Jerusalem) or that of a single, democratic, secular state.**
- 4. Britain should make a public commitment to supporting UN resolution 194 calling on Israel to grant the refugees, the Palestinians displaced by them, the right to return to Israel. Alternatively, the refugees have a right to compensation if they choose not to return.**
- 5. Britain should impose trade sanctions on Israel, including an arms embargo, until the above demands are met.**