

What is the ‘free’ in ‘Palestine should be free’?

BO ROTHSTEIN 7th May 2024

The left has often been embarrassed by association with ‘liberation’ movements which became custodians of authoritarian states.



Protesters at the University of California, Los Angeles encampment last week—before it was violently attacked by counter-protesters and broken up by police (Ringo Chiu / shutterstock.com)

Huge protests against Israel’s warfare against Hamas in Gaza are taking place in many countries, especially on university campuses. A recurring slogan is ‘From the River [Jordan] to the [Mediterranean] Sea, Palestine shall be free.’

Some have criticised this expression as anti-Semitic, because it can be interpreted as meaning that the roughly eight million ethnic Jews who live in this area do not have the right to do so but must be expelled. This interpretation has some validity: in the run-up to the 1948 attack on the newly-formed Israel, the secretary general of the Arab League, asked about the Jewish state's forces, **responded**: 'We will sweep them into the sea.' Months earlier, he had **warned of** 'a war of extermination and momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacre and the Crusades'. In Germany, the slogan has been interpreted as anti-Semitic and banned.

I strongly support the protests against what Israel is doing in Gaza and the west bank—the current Israeli government is a corrupt and criminal organisation. Yet, regardless of whether the slogan 'From the river to the sea, Palestine shall be free' is anti-Semitic or not, there is a further question: how likely is it that a 'free Palestine' would genuinely be 'free', in the sense of issuing in a democratic society that respects human rights? What type of society can we expect if the Palestinians create their own state?

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What we already know is that the principle of democratic elections has been abrogated not only by Hamas in Gaza but also by the Fatah faction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which controls the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the west bank. Neither has subjected itself to the ballot box since the second legislative elections in 2006 to the Palestine National Council—deriving from the Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO—which Hamas won, subsequently wresting Gaza from the PA's control.

Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have reported numerous violations of human rights by Hamas and the PA. In a report before the murderous October 7th Hamas attack on Israel and the disproportionate Israeli reprisal, AI wrote: 'The authorities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip continue to unnecessarily restrict freedom of expression, association and assembly, often using excessive violence to disperse peaceful assemblies.'

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The courts in both locations are not impartial but are under direct political control. Arbitrary arrests of dissidents have been common, **as has widespread torture**. Opponents are persecuted and imprisoned without trial and **have even been beaten to death** by the PA police. In Gaza there was been a general climate of repression following a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests against the rising cost of living in 2019.

So-called 'honour' crimes of violence against women are usually not investigated and in 2020 the PA police stood by as a mob beat youths and children participating in a parade which included rainbow flags. The attack came amid a wave of incitement to violence and hate speech against LGBT+ individuals and feminists, which the authorities declined to investigate. In Gaza, the Hamas-controlled courts have increased the number of death sentences, which AI believes are carried out after 'grossly unfair trials'.

Democratic credentials

Some of the abuses of human rights in Gaza and the west bank can perhaps be blamed on the wider Israel/Palestine conflict and the offences against the Palestinian population by the Israeli army and the settlers. But contravention of universal norms is pervasive throughout the region: democratic freedoms and rights are not respected in Syria, Egypt, Jordan or any of the countries that support Hamas.

In democratisation research, the MENA (middle-east and north-Africa) region is considered an **anomaly** because the huge democratisation wave in the world after 1989 had no impact on it at all. The later 'Arab spring' also failed to install democracy and human rights—the **last hope** was Tunisia but, in practice, democracy has now been abolished there as well.

Across the region, the situation for LGBT+ individuals is again mostly very bad. HRW **describes** how the Egyptian police 'arbitrarily arrest lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people, imprison them in inhumane conditions, systematically subject them to ill-treatment including torture, and often encourage fellow prisoners

to abuse them'. There is no 'equality before the law' for LGBT+ people—they are systematically persecuted and subjected to discrimination.

In its benevolent endeavour always to support the weaker and oppressed party, the left internationally has endorsed, from a distance, political movements which, once ensconced in power, have turned out to be grossly undemocratic, ruling with utter disregard for fundamental freedoms. Examples include Robert Mugabe's ZANU movement in Zimbabwe, Eduardo dos Santos' MPLA in Angola, Hugo Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela and Daniel Ortega's *Sandinistas* in Nicaragua.

This has severely hurt the democratic credentials of the left. It is important that it not repeat this mistake, assuming its enemy's enemy must be its friend.

Dead-end strategy

Moreover, there is also the question of quite who is to be 'free' in a new Palestine. Will this be a state only for ethnic Arabs/Palestinians—as with the nationalistic political parties in Israel, which dream of a state where only ethnic Jews live? We have of course seen this before: the Third *Reich* was a Germany only for ethnic Germans.

The left should support not only individual rights but also social solidarity and demand that states treat all citizens equally, independent of their ethnicity. If anything, its slogan for Israel/Palestine should be: 'From the river to the sea, everyone should be free'. Allying with a thoroughly corrupt PLO and even—as with the former British Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn—the violent Hamas (and Hezbollah in Lebanon) is a dead-end strategy.

Let us try the thought experiment that Israel would leave the west bank—as it should have done long ago—and the Jewish settlers there would not be forced back to Israel but would instead be made citizens of the new Palestinian state (as more than a million Palestinians are now citizens of Israel). Would the left advocate that they be granted civil liberties and equal treatment by the new, 'free' state? Or would this be a state for one ethnic group only?

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