

The Struggle for Liberation in Palestine

An interview with Richard Boyd Barrett

IMR: Could we start by asking how you became so committed to the Palestinian cause. Is it true that as a younger person you were a bit of a hippie; that you went to a squat in London and then decided to go to Israel as there was a kind of trendy notion about the kibbutz at that time. If so, could you elaborate on your experience there?

13

RBB: Well, first of all, I certainly wasn't a hippie, but I was very interested in the punk music movement, which was quite political. I would have gone to gigs for the miners and supported campaigns to stop the left wing Greater London Council being closed down in the eighties. The punk music scene was a bit political and would have pushed me a little bit to the left. But, yes, I was in London in 1987 squatting and working on building sites, building council houses actually. And we just wanted to go somewhere hot. We had no idea of the politics of the situation, really. Anyway, we got one-way tickets to Tel Aviv, and we ended up there. They wouldn't let us on the kibbutz. I don't know why. Maybe they didn't like the look of us, so we ended up working in these things called moshav's (collective farms) down in the Negev, the desert in the south of the country, basically on the border with Jordan.

And when I arrived, it became very obvious, very quickly, that this was not some sort of utopia. The place was heavily militarised, surrounded with minefields and military watchtowers. And coincidentally, we arrived a few weeks before what turned out to be the first Palestinian Intifada.

So, we arrived in October, the Intifada broke out in November, and within a day or two I was working with Palestinian day labourers who used to be brought down on a bus from a refugee camp in Hebron. They were treated appallingly, but they would still come every day, several hours journey through the desert to work in these fields. And they started to explain to me the plight of the Palestinians. And then, as the Intifada broke out, they were giving me accounts ... and not long after that, I managed to get away from the moshav for a few days. I didn't tell the farmer I was working for where I was going, but I got through the military cordon into Al Fawwar refugee camp near Hebron, where the Intifada was in full flight. There were barricades. There were pitched battles going on with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). And I was very quickly acquainted with the history of the Palestinians. The family I was staying with had been expelled from what is now called Israel in 1948 and have been living as refugees ever since. So that was basically how I got involved in politics. I was just so shocked at what I saw, so inspired by the Palestinian resistance, and then when I got back, which was about a year later, I started to get involved in politics.

IMR: That was a real baptism of fire. Could you explain your thoughts on Zionism today? Could you paint a picture in more detail of what it means for Palestinians living inside the current state of Israel?

RBB: The most obvious point is that Israel was, and is, an absolutely racist state. And that Zionism is the racist ideology that

underpins the whole thing. That became very apparent just in the way that average Israelis like my employer, all the farmers in the place, just talked about Arabs. They just talked about them in racist terminology. I mean, they would say things like, 'the only good Arab is a dead Arab'. There was institutionalised wage discrimination against the Arabs, and they were treated absolutely shockingly. And then you looked at the conditions they were living in. Like I said, the family that I became particularly friendly with had been driven out in the Nakba ethnic cleansing in 1948 and lived in a refugee camp ever since. They suffered brutal oppression, and it was evident that racism and Zionism went together and that this was a very dysfunctional country.

It wasn't a situation where you would expect hardcore racists to be a minority and most people to generally not identify with racism or at least admit to it. It was the opposite in Israel. The people who weren't racist against the Palestinians among the Israeli population were a tiny minority. So, it was very obvious that this was a state that was built on systematic racism since its foundation and a state that used extreme brutality and military force to crush any Palestinian demands for equality or self-determination.

IMR: You have previously stated that when you first went to Palestine, there was no Hamas. Hamas didn't exist and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) dominated politics. Could you say a bit about how Hamas emerged as the leading voice in Gaza and as a growing voice in the West Bank these days?

RBB: Yeah, well, exactly. This is why I find it sort of ridiculous, the narrative which tries to blame Hamas for the current level of violence, or more generally tries to blame Hamas for the fact that there is violence between Palestinians and Israelis. Actually, like I said, I was a firsthand witness to this popular revolt. I never heard of Hamas while I was there. My understanding is that they existed as a sort of social welfare organisation that was founded around that time, but they didn't develop a military wing until the early 1990s. The Hamas we know today did not exist at all. And in fact, even Fatah and the PLO were not really present. They weren't orchestrating the first Intifada. They had been exiled and were in Tunisia at the time. They had been forced into Lebanon and then to Tunisia. So, the first Intifada was a popular grassroots revolt of young people who just weren't willing to be treated as third class citizens anymore and began to take to the streets. It was very much a popular revolt. That first Intifada exposed the oppression of Palestinians to many around the world. It put pressure on the international community, the United States, and to some degree, Israel itself, to move towards what would become the Oslo peace process. But that peace deal was, in fact, a humiliation of the Palestinians, which the PLO signed up to, because it was going to give the Palestinians only 22 percent of historic Palestine, and the status of Jerusalem was left completely undecided.

It soon became very clear that Israel had very little intention of actually handing over parts of Jerusalem to the Palestinians. There was also no right of return for millions of

Palestinians who had been exiled and were living in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. It was pretty clear that Israel was never going to grant that right to return through the Oslo process. So, it was a pretty humiliating deal. And like I said, Hamas didn't feature at that point. That was a deal that was struck by the PLO, by Arafat.

Although Oslo was never popular among Palestinians, it was grudgingly accepted for a period. But almost immediately, after the deal was signed, and was being lauded and trumpeted all around the world, Israel began to accelerate the illegal settlements of Palestinian territory. So, it became fairly clear, fairly quickly, that Oslo was a ruse to defuse the first Intifada; to pretend the Israelis were interested in some sort of 'Two State Solution', but actually to just provide cover to accelerate illegal settlements in the West Bank. And it was really that growing awareness among Palestinians that they had been hoodwinked and that the PLO had gone along with a humiliation and increasingly were acting as policemen for Israel, that gave rise to Hamas. People's identification with Hamas was not particularly with their Islamist ideology, so much as Hamas began to articulate a sense of the deal as a humiliation. They said what people were thinking – that it offered no way forward; that it wasn't a serious effort for peace or justice. And therefore, support for Hamas as the people who were going to continue to resist the occupation began to grow against that background.

IMR: One of the most inspiring things about the Palestinian movement today, is

the way it consciously challenges Zionism as a racist ideology. But what would you say to those who charge Hamas with their own reactionary ideas around women's rights and LGBTQ liberation?

RBB: Well, first of all, if you look at some of the leaders of Israel, the far-right guys aren't particularly sympathetic to gay people. It's also not true that Israel is socially progressive. Some of its far-right elements are absolutely as reactionary as you could get. But I think our own history is useful to look at here. We all understand that the Irish revolution gave birth to a reactionary state in the South, dominated by right wing religious forces. But nobody would draw the conclusion from that, that we shouldn't have tried to kick Britain out. It's exactly the same in Palestine. Of course, we have serious disagreements with the social ideology of Hamas, but the starting point must be standing with a brutally oppressed people. They can't even begin to struggle for LGBT rights or women's rights while they are under the jack boot of an absolutely brutal colonial occupation and a system of apartheid. So, the precondition for beginning the fight for wider social rights, women's rights, LGBT rights, is to end the occupation of Palestine, to dismantle the apartheid system.

And, of course, we've had big political battles to separate church and state in Ireland, to push back the dominance of the Catholic Church. No doubt such battles would emerge in a liberated Palestine. So, your starting point must be to oppose the brutal system of apartheid and occupation and indeed a system that is inherently

genocidal. I mean, what's happening now is the logical working out of the colonial racist campaign that began in 1948 with the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. The inherent logic of the Israeli state is to kill Palestinians, to try and eliminate them, to wipe them from the map. So, if you don't take that state on, you're not going to be talking about any kind of liberation for anybody.

IMR: What people are witnessing on their television screens is absolute brutality, nothing less than genocide against an entire population. Can you explain why America supports the Israeli Defence Forces with its guns and bombs? And maybe you could address the argument made by people like John Mearsheimer that this all happens because there's a powerful Jewish lobby in America, which is the tail wagging the dog. How do you explain why America, which presents itself as a bastion of human rights, is backing this genocide?

RBB: Those who think the US supports Israel because of AIPAC, or the Jewish lobby, have a fundamentally mistaken analysis. I mean, the initial sponsors of Zionism, were the British Empire and many of the leading architects of the campaign to promote Zionism were antisemitic themselves. They didn't like Jewish people. So, the reason Britain first, and then later America sponsored, supported, and armed the Zionist movement was for its own colonial and imperialist purposes, which was to dominate that region. And to put it bluntly,

even if there were no Jewish people in the United States, America would still sponsor Israel. In fact, Joe Biden put it very well, - in sort of a rare admission, of the real relationship between American imperialism and Zionism - when he said that if Israel didn't exist, the United States would have to invent it. He went on to say that without it America would have to station tens of thousands of US troops in the Middle East.

That was a very frank admission of the real relationship between the American Empire and Zionism. America essentially views Israel as a military outpost in an area it wants to dominate, a key weapon to prevent the mass of the Arab people actually having democracy or genuine self-determination, not just in Palestine but in that region generally. A region which the British Empire first and later the American Empire see as central to their interests, driven by the desire of western oil companies to control the oil resources, the most important resource in the history of capitalism.

So that was, and is, the real relationship. And that's why they continue to support Israel in its genocidal campaign. And it's only through the resistance of the Palestinian people and pro-Palestine movements in the United States and in the western world, that we will actually see the road to Palestinian liberation.

IMR: Netanyahu has said the IDF are close to ending their ground operation. But on the other hand, they're also talking about widening the conflict. The European Union High Commissioner on

Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, is likewise warning of an escalation because of a possible Israeli attack on Hezbollah. What's your own opinion about what is going to happen next?

RBB: Well, first of all, this genocide that we've witnessed in Gaza has been going on for nearly ten months. In that time, the massive protests in the United States, in the western world, and throughout the globe have really exposed the double standards, the hypocrisy and the rotten agenda of western imperialism in supporting a regime capable of committing this genocide. In response, Biden and his European allies have felt forced into pretending they're interested in some sort of peace. But in actuality, they have continued to let the Israelis carry on the slaughter. They feel the need to say words like 'ceasefire' because it has been dragged out of them. They have no intention of reining Israel in - what they want to do, is smash the Palestinian resistance. They want to smash any resistance to Israel or to western interests in that region. Now there's probably an internal debate going on within the American establishment about the possibility of it all getting out of hand. There has always been a tension in American foreign policy between those who want to essentially bomb the Arabs into submission and another wing that thinks, well, if you go too hard, you may actually see revolution in the Middle East. So, there is that sort of tension and contradiction.

But the dominant tendency in US imperialism and in Western imperialism is to try and pound any resistance to Israel or

Western interests into submission, through the use of brutal violence. So, Biden might warn against escalation, but then say in the next breath: we will continue to back Israel no matter what. And I think that's the truth of it. US and Western support for Israel will only end when the people of the West rise up. Or the scale of mobilisation in the Middle East itself begins to challenge the regimes in that region who are also collaborating with Israel and with the US and with the West.

IMR: Could you say a few words about this collaboration? We recently spoke to a Jordanian about the Houthis in Yemen who are blocking Israeli ships coming up the Red Sea. And he was telling us that Jordan is helping the cargo to get through to Israel. So, can you spell out what these regimes do? How exactly do Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia collaborate with the Israelis?

RBB: Just before the beginning of the current genocidal assault on Gaza, there were moves to normalise Saudi relations with Israel. That would have been a terrible betrayal of the Palestinian struggle, but that was what they were planning to do, and the process was at quite an advanced point. Egypt previously came to terms with Israel and accepted its right to exist. The Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian regimes see it as beneficial to be in bed with the United States in particular. And so, they pay lip service to the Palestinian cause because of the mass support for the Palestinians among their own population. But in actuality, they're just capitalists and pretty brutal and

undemocratic ones, that oppress their own people. So, yeah, I think they speak out of both sides of their mouths.

That is why it is very interesting when you see Palestinians asking where the Arab leaders are? Their anger is, to a very significant degree, directed at the Egyptian government, the Saudi government, and the Jordanian government for abandoning them and colluding with Israel. If you want an Irish comparison, it's a bit like the way Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael often talk up their Republicanism and talk in favour of a United Ireland - Fianna Fáil in particular. But in actuality they were hell bent on trying to suppress the Republicanism that was challenging the Northern state. So, playing a double game to be popular with the mass of people who support a United Ireland, they talk up Republicanism, but in actuality, they are very much part of the system and want to be part of the club with British capitalism and European capitalism. And that's the same sort of double game that the regimes in the region play in terms of lip service to the Palestinians. But, in actuality, cooperating and colluding with the system that subjugates the Palestinians.

IMR: But not all Arab regimes are so blatant. You mentioned Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, but, for example, Syria is part of the Rejectionist Front, and says it stands up to Israel. There's an Arab expression: 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', so people in the pro-Palestinian movement might also look to Iran as an ally and a friend. How does that compute with the demonstrations people have had

in places like Iran over ‘Women, Life and Freedom’ and indeed, in Syria with the massive rebellion against the Assad regime?

RBB: I think there are many Palestinians, who, given the brutal oppression they suffer, are glad of the assistance they get from Iranian backed groups. But I also think we have to be honest and say that the Iranian regime is very oppressive in terms of its own population, particularly its treatment of women. And while we obviously oppose moves by the West to militarily attack Iran or indeed to impose sanctions, we've got to stand with the Iranian people against the attacks of their own state. The same is true in Syria. We oppose all US and Western interference, but we should not paint the Syrian regime in progressive colours because the truth is, they pretty brutally crushed the Arab Spring in their country. The Iranian regime does, and has, crushed movements demanding women's rights or more democracy. And I think we have to say that openly. We have to tell the truth, and we also have to say it's a mistake, frankly, for those that are opposing imperialism to then line up with regimes like Putin's brutal regime in Russia, or for that matter, the Chinese regime.

I think ultimately, it's a mistake to align yourself with other imperial powers that are themselves guilty of brutal oppression and warmongering and imperialism. And I think we've been right to say that at the very outset. I think to some degree, we helped set a very important narrative when Putin invaded Russia. We absolutely condemned it

as a brutal imperialist action, but we went on to expose the hypocrisy of the West in condemning Putin but then saying nothing, or worse, actively colluding in the oppression of the Palestinians. And I think we essentially have to be consistent in opposing all imperialism and exposing the double standards of imperial powers, whether it's the United States or whether it's Russia or other regimes that align themselves with imperial powers. And that is a harder road. You know, it's the road of genuine internationalism and international solidarity and revolution. But I think that's the only real road to liberation.

IMR: **You've been to the fore in talking about the double standards on Ukraine and Palestine. And, if you remember, People Before Profit were the only group in the Irish parliament that refused to applaud the Ukrainian leader, Volodymyr Zelenskyy when he spoke there. Could you explain why and draw out the contrast between the treatment by the EU of resistance in Ukraine and its approach to Palestine? Could you spell out what that double standard actually involves?**

RBB: Well, it's absolutely shocking. We drew attention to it long before the current horrific escalation by Israel against Gaza. When Zelenskyy addressed the Dáil, we were not willing to applaud the alliance he was promoting with NATO. I mean, we absolutely stand with the right of the Ukrainians to resist what is a brutal, unjustifiable, imperialist attack by the Russian empire. But we think it's a huge mistake that Zelenskyy has sought to align

himself with NATO, who themselves have an imperialist agenda to expand NATO and to ratchet up military competition with Russia in a dangerous way.

And it was something we pointed out again before the current round of escalation of violence in Palestine. It was pretty terrible that Zelenskyy essentially identified with Israel against the Palestinians. The hypocrisy of that is stunning. And the hypocrisy of Western governments who are falling over themselves to give weapons to people in Ukraine saying, you have the right to resist, and to say Russia is committing war crimes, all of which is true, but then the Palestinians, who've been suffering oppression and colonisation and a brutal apartheid regime for decades, are accused of being terrorists if they even dare to resist militarily against this regime.

So, you know, we have called that out from the beginning. When Ursula von der Leyen came and was applauded by the government and the opposition, we were the ones who challenged her and said, how can you possibly talk in terms of international law and supporting the right of determination when it comes to Ukraine? And then you go to Israel, stand with Netanyahu, and make it clear that you support Israel unconditionally, no matter what it is doing to the Palestinians. And we were the ones who called out that hypocrisy and the double standards. But I think that has now been seen by tens of millions and hundreds of millions of people across the world. So, I think our calling out of the hypocrisy of the Western powers has been very much vindicated and it is an idea

that has been taken up by hundreds of millions of people across the world.

IMR: That is an important development and leads nicely onto the Irish context. Very few, with the exception of Fine Gael, now back Ursula von der Leyen but what about the Irish government's role more generally? It is often held up internationally as a friend of the Palestinians but is that an accurate description of its role overall.

RBB: Well, the Irish government's rhetoric is better than most European governments in relation to Palestine. But that is absolutely a testament to the enormous solidarity that exists in Ireland for the Palestinian cause. And it's the result of years of campaigning, but also a sort of instinctive identification that Irish people have had with the Palestinians because of the strong parallels between our own struggle against British colonialism, the penal laws, and the apparatus of colonisation, which was actually very consciously exported from Ireland, often by some of the same people, to Palestine. So, I think there is a historic identification with the Palestinian struggle. Plus, there's been years of campaigning by the likes of us and others who've been building that movement of solidarity with Palestine. So that has put the Irish government under pressure and therefore their rhetoric is better.

But I don't think we should be fooled into thinking that they are serious about actually challenging the complicity of the European Union or the United States with the crimes of

Israel. I mean, they've been forced to do certain things, but you think back to the early days when the Israeli assault was happening in Gaza, effectively, the Irish government were justifying Israel's actions as a sort of legitimate reaction to what had happened.

And they haven't actually imposed sanctions themselves. We've been calling for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador. They've set their face against that. They had even before the current escalation of violence in Gaza. They have also frustrated the passage of the Occupied Territories Bill, that would have imposed fairly minimal sanctions on goods in the occupied territories. And of course, they're very reluctant to seriously challenge the United States over its role and continue to facilitate US troops at Shannon, even when the United States is brazenly arming the Israeli genocide. So, the Irish government's position is characterised by hypocrisy, but you know, they're clever and their rhetoric is a bit better because they're under an awful lot of pressure from Irish people and that's where the protests do matter. And if Ireland has been pushed into slightly better positions, that is ultimately a tribute to the masses of people who've taken to the streets again and again over the last few months and for many years in this country.

IMR: In its recent pamphlet, 'From the River to the Sea', People Before Profit argue for the one state solution. Insofar as conventional political leaders talk about a solution after Gaza, they return to the idea of two different states. The left argues for one state solution. Can you explain to us what that is about?

RBB: Yeah, I mean, the government, the European Union, international leaders and indeed the Palestinian Authority talk again and again about the two-state solution. But first of all, the Oslo process was the most developed attempt to try and implement that, and it was a complete failure. I mean, that deal was a humiliation for the Palestinians and Israel was never serious about it anyway. And the problem with the two-state solution is that it accepts and institutionalises apartheid rather than dismantling it and uprooting it. It is copper fastening the idea that there will be a Jewish state, an ethno-state, and then separate, there'll be a Palestinian state. Rather than actually challenging the whole logic of apartheid and colonisation, which has characterised the Zionist movement from the start.

I think huge numbers of Palestinians and possibly even a majority now - and it was the historic position of the Palestinian liberation movement in the late, fifties and sixties - think you need a single state that would uproot the apartheid system completely, like was done in South Africa with the system of apartheid that subjugated the black population.

You uproot it altogether and you give equal rights to all people, regardless of religion or nationality, whether they're Muslim, Jew or Christian, or people of no religion. And you have a state which is built on equality. And I think that is actually the only viable solution, anything else is just a cover for a continuing campaign of apartheid and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. The whole idea of two states reinforces the logic of apartheid and of

ethnic cleansing. And it isn't that things got better, even incrementally, after Oslo; they got worse and worse and worse. It didn't slow down the ethnic cleansing, it accelerated the ethnic cleansing. It didn't lessen conflict, it escalated conflict. So, I think the two state solution is a mirage and a dangerous mirage, whereas making the comparison with the struggle against apartheid and colonialism in South Africa, is the sort of model that we should be looking

IMR: The revolutionary left often says that the way to get to this solution is the road through Cairo. You might explain how the Arab street might intervene in terms of bringing about a one state solution.

RBB: Well, as I was saying earlier on, the vast, vast majority of the Arab street, the vast majority of the population of that region identify with the Palestinian struggle and are appalled at the collusion of their own governments. But they're often very intimidated by the brutality and authoritarianism of those governments. Periodically you see the issue of Palestine acting as a catalyst for revolt. We saw it most dramatically with the Arab Spring, where we literally saw revolution spread across the region. But it was dealt with quite brutally, and there's no doubt the United States were, behind the scenes, very actively colluding with these regimes to help crush the Arab Spring. But that showed the potential. And if regimes like Egypt or Saudi or Jordan, completely ceased all cooperation, broke off all trade, economic ties, isolated Israel, it would be very difficult for Israel to sustain

at. Or indeed Ireland. I mean, there's very few people, republicans or, certainly, socialists in this country that would say a two state solution is the solution to the Irish conflict. It has perpetuated sectarianism. Most people would say, actually, you've got to end colonialism and dismantle partition because it perpetuates sectarian violence. And I think that same argument applies absolutely to Palestine. In fact, even more so in Palestine.

itself. Israel is intricately linked with the wider architecture of imperial control of that region. So, yeah, the revolt of the mass of ordinary people in the region against regimes that have collaborated with Israel, with the United States, is a key part of that road towards the liberation of Palestine and the liberation of the entire region.

IMR: Finally, you came at this through your own personal experience of going to Israel, but a lot of young people today want to read and learn about the history of Zionism and what's happening in Palestine today. What literature would you recommend that people access in terms of finding out more about the politics of the area?

RBB: Well, one of the first things I read, was an absolutely fantastic short pamphlet by John Rose called *Israel: the Hijack State*¹. Ilan Pappé's, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*² is a fantastic account by an Israeli historian of the actuality of the Nakba, of how the Zionist state was first established and of the inherent colonial and apartheid

logic, and indeed, genocidal logic of the Zionist movement. Noam Chomsky's *The Fateful Triangle*³ is a very good book on the relationships between Israel, Palestine, and the United States.

John Rose also wrote a book called *The Myths of Zionism*⁴, which went into some of the mythology around the claim that Zionism should be equated with Judaism. And that's a very important part of this conversation, to say that Zionism is a political movement. It's not an expression of Judaism or of the political traditions of Jewish people more generally.

In fact, there's a tremendous tradition of Jewish anti-Zionism, particularly from left wingers, Marxists, and socialists. And I think it's important for us to emphasise that revolutionaries have always played an important role not only in understanding Zionism but also in challenging it. And this is my hope for younger people who read this material today – that they will resist imperialism as they come to understand it.

¹ John Rose. 1986 *Israel; the Hijack State*. Bookmarks, London. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/mideast/hijack/index.htm>

² Ilan Pappé. 2006 *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. London. Oneworld

³ Noam Chomsky 1999 *The Fateful Triangle*. <https://archive.org/details/NoamChomskyFatefulTriangleF>

⁴ John Rose. 2004 *The Myths of Zionism*. London, Pluto Press.