"We Are Against the Government that Will Persecute the Palestinian People": Clarifying the Position of the Black Panther Party in Huey Newton’s To Die For The People

Huey Newton, with Bobby Seale, was cofounder of the Black Panther Party (BPP). According to the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), a campaign by the state to disrupt domestic radical political organizations, the BPP was said to be one of the major threats to American national security in the twentieth century. In their battles against white supremacy and empire, the BPP throughout its history (1966-1982), was more accurately a profound threat to the American ruling class.

The Panthers, as an autonomous Black liberation organization, embodied for many both the independent validity of the expression of revolutionary Black nationalism, and the need to forge principled multi-racial united fronts to fight injustice. Organizing armed community patrols to fight police brutality, breakfast for children, independent media, and community health programs; the Panthers for a time forged a socialist ethic of popular self-management through direct action among urban working class African American communities, and became an international inspiration toward a free society. The BPP had many linkages to insurgent national liberation movements and defiant communist regimes in Vietnam, Cuba, China, Algeria, and Mozambique, to name merely a few.

Perhaps the international solidarity linkage most overlooked and relevant to contemporary battles against empire is the Panthers' solidarity with Palestine. The following is an examination of the BPP's stance on Palestine through one historical text, Huey Newton's communiqué “On The Middle East” (1970) in his volume of collected writings, To Die For The People (1972, 1995). It is beyond the scope of this essay to comprehensively document historical opinion of the BPP as a whole, which should not be confused with the ideas of one of its major leaders. To do so, it would be necessary to examine views of many of the thousands of members and local chapters nationwide. Rather, the following is an analysis of this one statement by Newton for insights to contemporary struggles for building Palestine solidarity with a particular concern for African American linkages, accusations of anti-Jewish bigotry, and opposing not any particular policy of Israel, but this colonial settler state as a whole.

On September 5, 1970 the BPP called a press conference in response to media allegations, and a memo spread internationally through embassies, that there was a Panther delegation in Jordan led by Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) promoting the interests of the Black Power movement's solidarity with Palestine “against the Jewish people.” Stokely Carmichael was a major leader of Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a multi-racial organization famous for using direct action in the Jim Crow South to register Black folks to vote. He became famous for leading the transformation of SNCC into a black nationalist organization. Huey Newton repudiated this news item about Carmichael and the Panthers as incorrect for two reasons before explaining in more general terms the BPP's philosophy toward Palestine solidarity in a climate of numerous accusations that the Panthers were “anti-Semitic.”

First, the Panthers did not have a delegation in Jordan. They did have an authorized international chapter based in Algeria, led by Kathleen and Eldridge Cleaver, and these Panthers were in “daily contact” with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Second, Newton distanced the BPP from Carmichael, who was briefly associated with them after the decline of SNCC, continuing a series of unwise destructive exchanges discussing their political differences in public. Admittedly “without evidence”, but under the pressure of COINTELPRO tactics of disruption, Newton sadly accused Carmichael of being a CIA agent, largely over strategic differences in the African American liberation struggle. However, their political differences, as discussed by Newton, are worthy of our attention. Not because he fairly characterized all of Carmichael's positions at that time, or in view of history Carmichael's evolving political philosophy in comparison with his own. Rather, because Newton asserts certain principles critical to Black and by extension Palestinian liberation.

Newton took issue with the BPP being reported as doing solidarity work under the banner of “Black Power,” a slogan originally closely associated with Carmichael. Carmichael in these years inconsistently advocated socialism and saw the highest stage of Black Power as Pan-Africanism. Newton was critical of ethnic capitalism as the collective economics of liberation, illustrated a similarity between Stokely Carmichael’s and Richard Nixon’s opportunistic support for “black capitalism.” Further while expressing his support for African liberation struggles against imperialism, Newton could not support Pan-Africanism because too many advocates of this philosophy were African governments which in fact aligned themselves with U.S. imperialism.

"In other words, these governments are saying that if the United States will let us exist as a class to oppress our African people then we will cooperate; in other words Black oppressing Black...We know that without the support of the United States imperialism no reactionary government can exist. So we are very careful when we start supporting a government that has relationships in support of the United States."
Newton was seeking to demonstrate “the Black Panther Party [was] internationalist,” and this meant not just international solidarity with all peoples oppressed by white supremacy but international resistance against all whom he understood to be the bodyguards of capital.[10] He did not think the establishment of socialism would automatically eliminate white supremacy but that “the only way to start changing the racist nature of the society is to revolutionize or transform the institutions” of society.[11]

Huey Newton in this statement “On the Middle East” had to preface it with an acknowledgement the Panthers were being attacked for being anti-Semitic, that individual members had in the past said some hurtful, inappropriate things towards Jews which could be publicly cited by enemies of his party, but the official position of the BPP was not anti-Semitic.[12] The Panthers were in the whirlwind of national media incidents where Black Power was in conflict with Jewish Americans.[13] Capitalist economic relations, marked by white racism and ethnic competition for and control over scarce resources, explains, not excuses, some pejorative epithets against Jews by some Black community activists.[14] However, it was also a fact that the FBI’s COINTELPRO program was using Black-Jewish tensions as a wedge to disrupt sympathy for the Panthers including manufacturing conflicts which had no material basis.[15] Emerging out of this difficult climate Newton stated the following: “As far as the Israeli people are concerned we are not against the Jewish people. We are against that government that will persecute the Palestinian people. We have to admit that there is something wrong in the Middle East. The Palestinian people are living in hovels, they don’t have any land, they’ve been stripped and murdered; and we cannot support that for any reason.”[16]

Huey Newton then explains he recognized the “shortcomings” of what was supposed to be the progressive United Arab Republic, and the inability or lack of desire of other Arab nation-states, to consistently defend Palestine.[17] He believed that everyday Palestinian people were in the forefront of liberating the Middle East, and that he was in solidarity as well with the few Israelis “who were working to see that the Zionist government of Israel is transformed into a secular people’s state” instead of one which privileged those of a certain religion.[18] Newton said Israel was based on “the height of chauvinism and ethnocentrism” and contrasting the Panther viewpoint with Israel’s claim as representative of every Jewish person he stated: “We are chiefly interested in the survival of our people, but not at the expense of other people.”[19]

After implying African Americans have a shared history of racial and colonial oppression with Jews and Palestinians and thus a tendency towards solidarity with both, Huey Newton then shares a comparative view on Jewish autonomy, as supposedly represented by the state of Israel, and the hope for Black self-determination in America. It has an immediate relevance to the struggle for Palestinian autonomy as well. “We have a long history of being enslaved and murdered. We have wrestled with the question of nationalism and we have concluded we have a moral right to embrace nationalism. We have a moral right to choose separatism, just as the Jewish people have that moral right. But we realize that the United States will not allow us to separate and live side by side with United States imperialism. It’s obvious that we cannot become self-determined because the United States will not let countries exist 15 million miles away in freedom…so they will certainly not let us exist in a separate state in North America in freedom. So the question can be put into the future.”[20]

Newton in this statement causes the reader to ask why has the US embraced the nation-state of Israel as representative of Jewish autonomy when it allows no other nationality of historically oppressed peoples to be self-determining miles away or within its own borders? Newton exclaims “our central task is the overthrow of the ruling circle, who will not permit the question of self-determination to exist in this world.”[21] This transformation can only take place by wiping out United States imperialism and establishing a new earth, a new society, a new world. So politically and strategically the correct action to take is not separation but world revolution in order to wipe out imperialism. Then people will be free to decide their destiny. Self-determination and national liberation can not really exist while United States imperialism is alive. That is why we don’t support nationalism as our goal.”[22]

“In some instances,” Newton explained he did support revolutionary nationalism, such as some aspects of the Palestinian national liberation struggle, “as a strategy.” This is because: “The motives are internationalist because the revolutionists are attempting to secure liberated territory in order to choke imperialism by cutting them off from the countryside. [However,] when the motive for national liberation is solely to create a capitalist state so that the ruling circle of that capitalist state can align itself with [U.S.] imperialism, then it is reactionary nationalism and cannot be supported by revolutionaries.”[23]

Unfortunately, this conservative motive for national liberation, which fairly characterizes Zionism, overlords Palestinian national liberation as well to this day led by Yasir Arafat, once their defender and ally of the BPP, now a dictator.[24] This is true whether the U.S. rulers characterizes him as such or imagine still he is their best hope for a dependent pawn as head of an oppressive future Palestinian regime.

Huey Newton characterizes accurately an appropriate standard for anti-racist solidarity with Jewish, Arab, and Muslim individuals and communities as historically oppressed peoples. Do they allow their nationalism to be a pawn for imperialism? Do they oppose not merely some policies of the state of Israel but the Zionist government as a whole? Israel was created by Western imperialism and maintained by Western fire power. The Jewish people have a right to exist [there] as long as they exist to down the reactionary expansionist Israeli government. [The African American] situation is similar in so many ways; we say that morally perhaps, the Jewish people can make a case for separatism and a Zionist state based upon their religion for self-defense. We say morally perhaps we could accept this, but politically and
strategically we know it is incorrect. In the first place it is perpetuating nationalism...if nationalism is reaction, and I think the United States proves this by using nationalism to rape the world and dominate everyone else. In other words, it went from nationalism to the natural conclusion which is empire or imperialism. So the Jewish people must be careful not to be an agent of imperialism."[25]

Huey Newton concludes this communiqué “On the Middle East” with acknowledgement of two positive developments which he saw emerging three decades ago and a sharp declarative statement. First, Newton felt there was emerging a vocal minority of Jewish people struggling against the racist tactics of the Zionist Israeli government. He expressed the Panthers’ solidarity as evidence they were not anti-Semitic. Second, Newton thought it was a great development that the Arab and Muslim nation states were showing their true colors; their “contradictory” incapacity to defend Palestinian freedom, for to do so compromised the relative privileges of their rulers with American imperialism and inspired visions of freedom among their own subjects.

Finally, Newton took a clear stand against the perpetual assault by Zionist Jews, who insist to be opposed to the state of Israel is to attack the Jewish community as a whole:“We realize that some people who happen to be Jewish and who support Israel will use the Black Panther Party’s position that is against imperialism and against the agents of the imperialist as an attack of anti-Semitism. We think that is a backbiting racist underhanded tactic and we will treat it as such. We have respect for all people, and we have respect for the right of any people to exist. So we want the Palestinian people and the Jewish people to live in harmony together. We support the Palestinian’s just struggle for liberation one hundred percent. We will go on doing this, and we would like for all of the progressive people of the world to join our ranks in order to make a world in which all people can live.” [26]

Footnotes
- Perhaps another international BPP solidarity alliance neglected, related to this story, beyond the scope of this article, but deserving of its own in light of Palestine solidarity is the story of the Black Panther Party of Israel, an organization of “oriental Jews” fighting discrimination against the European-dominated Zionist state. See Deborah Bernstein’s “Conflict and Protest in Israeli Society: The Case of the Black Panthers of Israel.” Youth and Society. 14 (1984) 129-151.
- Newton, 191.
- An older text worth examining on the emergence of “black capitalism” as a political force which clearly illustrates how populist ethnic entrepreneurial schemes undermine the class struggle within national liberation movements is Earl Ofari Hutchinson’s The Myth of Black Capitalism. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970.
- Newton, 192.
- Ibid. 192.
- Ibid. 193.
- Ibid. 193.
- These included other Black Power groups support of Palestine, such as SNCC’s and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers’, as well as the Ocean Hill-Brownsville (Brooklyn, NY) public school strike for Black community control which clashed with the predominantly Jewish teachers’ union.
- An interesting argument is made that one source of Black resentment towards Jews is consistent with African resentment to middle or model minorities such as Koreans, South Asians, and Arabs. See Vijay Prashad’s Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity.
- The Jewish Defense League (JDL) was invented with the help of the FBI to disrupt Black liberation struggles in NYC. See Robert I. Friedman’s The False Prophet: Rabbi Meir Kahane, From FBI Informant To Knesset Member. Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1990. 96-97.
- Newton, 193-194.
- The United Arab Republic was a nominal Pan-Arab secular federation of nation-states which was led by Gamal Nasser’s Egypt in unity with Syria and for a time Iraq. Defense of Palestine was often the populist basis for this union. Appearing a strong presence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and decimated in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, by 1970 the U.A.R. was proven a myth as a serious opponent of Israel.
- Newton, 194.
- Ibid. 194.
- Ibid. 194.
- Ibid. 195.
- Ibid, 195.
- Ibid, 195.
- Newton, 195-196.
- Ibid, 196.