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Against imperialism, without exception

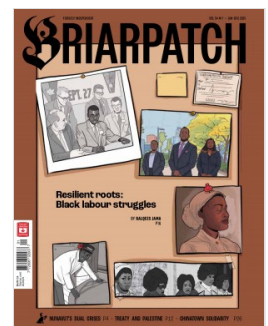
by David Camfield

Mar 4, 2025

5 min read



Since Israel launched its genocidal war on Gaza in October 2023, hundreds of thousands of people around the world have taken action to support Palestine. For many this has been their first experience of a social movement.



Like all experiences of collective action large and sustained enough to deserve to be called a social movement, the Palestine solidarity movement involves a lot of learning as well as action. When people mobilize to change society, we inevitably face questions about how to understand what we're up against and how to shift it. This hunger for knowledge among people within a social movement is the best kind of learning, one driven by the desire to make change, not to pass a course.

Since autumn 2023 many people have been learning about the history of Palestine, the creation of Israel, Zionism, and settler colonialism. We've also been confronted with the question "how does Israel get away with so much violence?" Regrettably, some people have bought into the idea that a Zionist lobby has been able to get Western states to back Israel against the interests and will of those states. The line of thinking that lobby groups can influence supposedly neutral states is a staple of mainstream political science and, in this case, can easily slide into the anti-Semitic idea of powerful Jews wielding malign influence.

Fortunately, plenty of people have also been encountering explanations that root Western support for Israeli state violence and settler colonialism in how global capitalism is organized: theories of imperialism.

Political economist Adam Hanieh puts it well: pointing to the influence of the Israel lobby is "a false and politically dangerous viewpoint that gets the relationship between Western states and Israel

This article originally appeared in the January/February 2025 issue of Briarpatch.

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fundamentally wrong.” Instead, “the unstinting support of the U.S. and leading European states for Israel” stems from how settler-colonial “Israel has been crucial to the maintenance of Western imperial interests – notably those of the U.S. – in the Middle East. It has performed this role alongside the other major pillar of U.S. control in the region: the oil-rich Gulf Arab monarchies, principally Saudi Arabia. The **fast-evolving relationships** between the Gulf, Israel, and the U.S. are essential to understanding the current moment, especially given the relative weakening of American global power.”

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powers or governments in conflict with them.

Speaking to the U.S. Congress in 1986, Joe Biden was frank: “Were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interest in the region.”

It’s vital to recognize that Western support for Israel is so strong because of how the U.S. and other governments can rely on Israel to act against movements and governments that might challenge their interests in an important oil-producing region. It’s also crucial to see where this piece fits in the puzzle of a capitalist world that’s organized in a **hierarchy of states** locked in both economic and geopolitical competition.



The Honduran Election Crisis



“That’s how we protect one another”



Interview with Colonialism No More - Regina Solidarity Camp



Distinct histories, shared solidarity

The U.S. sits at the top of this imperialist order. Below it are other imperialist states including the U.K., Germany, France, China, Russia, Canada, and Australia. Below them are sub-imperialist states with regional power, followed by most of the countries of the world.

But some explanations of imperialism that people encounter have a major flaw: they deny that there are imperialist powers outside “the West.” They fail to grasp that, as the recent book *China in Global Capitalism* demonstrates, China is a rising imperialist rival to the United States. Russia, as well, while economically much weaker than China, still has considerable military might.

In a recent interview, feminist and socialist Barbara Smith, a member of the Combahee River Collective in the U.S. in the 1970s and co-author of its influential statement, talks of trying “to

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Believing that only Western powers are imperialist fits with the outlook that “**the enemy of my enemy is my friend**,” which appeals to some supporters of Palestine. That outlook leads people to bad places. One such place is refusing solidarity with or even empathy for people who’re oppressed by states whose rulers clash with the United States. Instead, we should side with oppressed people everywhere without politically supporting either Western powers or governments in conflict with them.

Take the case of Ukraine. It’s reasonable to point to the hypocrisy of Western governments that oppose Russia’s war and occupation in Ukraine while backing Israel to the hilt. There’s also nothing wrong with questioning uncritical portrayals of the Ukrainian government, which is

neoliberal, pro-NATO, and pro-Israel. Or with opposing how Western governments are using Russia's war to justify higher military spending. Or with criticizing how the U.S. has used the war to try to weaken Russia.

But none of this should get in the way of taking sides: we should be in unconditional solidarity with Ukrainian resistance to Russian imperialism, as with all resistance to imperialism. As one slogan puts it, "From Ukraine to Palestine, Occupation is a Crime!" In both cases – as in all struggles against injustice – we can be in solidarity with the oppressed without endorsing the political forces that lead them.

In a **recent interview**, feminist and socialist Barbara Smith, a member of the Combahee River Collective in the U.S. in the 1970s and co-author of its influential statement, talks of trying "to practise solidarity without exception" rather than "selective solidarity." "We can and must oppose occupation from Ukraine to Palestine as part of a common struggle for collective liberation," Smith insists. This is the approach we should take in a world in which rivalry between imperialist powers is growing more intense.

David Camfield is a supporter of socialism from below. His next book, ***Red Flags: A Reckoning with Communism for the Future of the Left***, will be published in 2025 by Fernwood. He hosts the podcast ***Victor's Children*** and is

a member of **Tempest** and of the editorial board of **Midnight Sun**. His website is prairiered.ca.

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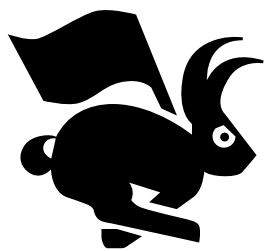
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