

Palestine's Great Flood: Part I

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Abstract

This is the first part of a two-part article which considers the US-Israeli attack on Palestine in general and the Gaza Strip in particular in a world-historical and regional context. In contrast to a range of theories which resort to liberal international relations theory, economism, or methodological nationalism when theorizing accumulation in general or Arab region accumulation in particular, the article argues that the Arab-Iranian region is under a regime of US-imposed de-development which seeks to dismantle strategic obstacles in the region through war and sanctions. The article argues this process encountered an obstacle amidst Iranian-linked regional militia and standing armies, and that these forces need to be understood by revisiting thinking about the role of political sovereignty in emancipatory transitions.

Keywords

Iran, Palestine, resistance, imperialism

Introduction

The October 7 Hamas-led military operations against Israel were events of world-historical importance.¹ Palestine contains the world's most active

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armed anti-colonial national movement. Israel is the world's least consolidated settler state, forced into brutal, constant counter-insurgency to defend settler property rights and imperialist domination of the Arab working classes. Furthermore, the operation brought into explosive combination yet larger forces, outside the territory of historic Palestine: The United States and the US-allied neo-colonial states alongside Israel, against regional republicanism, mass-mobilizing popular militia, and Iran.

The Palestinian insurgency has brought the national question back to the table (Moyo & Yeros, 2011). As with other anti-systemic experiments, like Zimbabwe amidst agrarian reform, and Venezuela under Chavismo, it has polarized not merely its surrounding state system, where Palestine has been the compass orienting any resolution to the Arab national question, but the world system. Indeed, Palestine crystallizes nearly every contradiction within the current order. Although Zimbabwe and Venezuela confronted the racial distribution of world power, the Palestinian question spills far beyond questions of class and nation internal to historical Palestine's boundaries. Amongst its myriad complexities: "one section" of the Palestinian people "exists under a racist, fascist entity," namely Israel, supported by imperialist powers, while the latter also turns "feudalist, tribalist, reactionary and puppet regimes in the Arab world into mediators in the ongoing plunder of the Arab revolution and the Arab toiling classes." Thus, "the issue of struggle against these regimes indirectly becomes a Palestinian front as well" and raises, beyond the puppets, the nature of struggles to deepen popular democracy and resistance capacity within those regimes' enemies (Kanafani, n.d.; PFLP, 1969).

Moreover, the question of Palestine is not merely a question of national oppression, but poses Israel's uniqueness: a condensation of Western colonial and imperial power, a world-wide symbol of Western perfidy, a state which physically cleaves Africa and Asia, a merchant and mercenary of global counter-insurgency, all melded in a manticore of death and destruction. Indeed, the harder and stronger Palestinians fight for liberation, the more, like lightning bolts of ever-increasing luminosity, they bring the relief of the world system into clearer view: the impotence of the United Nations; the imperialist contempt for international law; the complicity of the Arab neo-colonial states with Western capitalism; the fascist racism at the heart of modern European and US capitalism, as murderers and maimers operate in Western capitals; the neo-colonial structures of the Arab and Third World; and the hollowness of Western liberal democracy and its constellation of civil society institutions.

This two-part article restores self-defense to its proper place at the center of social reproduction and accumulation. It analyzes the historical

and contemporary utility of Israel to US imperialism and dynamics of resistance to this project, in an era when the violence associated with US-Israeli practice in the Arab region is presented as “surplus,” or irrational from the perspective of monopoly capital, as in the “Israel lobby” hypothesis. This first part uses the historical reconstruction of the US-Israeli Special Relationship to illuminate broader dynamics of accumulation-by-waste, the imperialist agenda in the Arab region, and those resisting it. It revisits the theory of national liberation and the national question, recontextualizing Fanon and Cabral to understand the uses to which they intended their theories. It uses the framework of national liberation to assess Arab-Iranian resistance to the United States, including a survey of the national projects of the standing Arab-Iranian armies and asymmetrical resistance forces. It discusses their military logic and interprets their defense of the deteriorated fabric of regional political sovereignty as having an anti-systemic character in the face of patterns of accumulation which feed on the carcasses of waste, de-development, and state collapse.

The Special Relationship

The Israeli and imperialist connivance to balkanize, de-develop, intimidate, and occupy the Arab region never cleaved war from “economics,” rejection of sovereignty from control of the development process, or either from broader imperial politics. Nor was Arab development ever shorn from questions of sovereignty and defense by its champions, as defensive armoring and industrialization were inseparable in the eyes of planners, rebels, army officers and statesmen whose formative experience was seeing Palestine fall to settler-colonial avarice, a microcosm of Arab underdevelopment and subjugation to imperialism.

Israeli implantation in the Arab region was a project sold by its makers as “a part of the bulwark that protects it [Europe] from Asia. We would serve as an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism” (Herzl, 2012), at the high noon of European franchise and settler colonialism, but only accelerating after the implantation of Europe’s other African-Asian colonies. It attracted considerable British Jewish ruling class investments, while broader British support for Zionism reflected strategic and economic interests (Rifai, 2016; Shafir, 1989). The British were central in the militarized evaporation of the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial revolt of 1936–1939 (Kanafani, 1972; al-Saleh, 2022). By 1948, as Israel consolidated settler-capitalist property structures through its great war of primitive accumulation—Al-Nakba, the disaster—the US began to

reassess the newly-born settler state. As military leadership stated (cited in Gendzier, 2015, 284), “[f]rom the viewpoint of tactical operations, Israel’s territory and its indigenous military forces... would be of importance to... the Western Democracies,” otherwise, if not in the grasp of the NATO alliance, it would risk falling into the red hands of the Soviet Union. After its war of conquest, Israel’s major ally and armorer was the French state, at that time fending off guerilla armies across the Maghreb fighting for national liberation (‘Abd Allah, 1976). Hostility to Arab nationalism in North Africa and Nasserism in Egypt bonded the settler-state to its colonial patrons. They allied in their failed bid to reverse Egyptian nationalization of the Sinai through the 1956 Tripartite Aggression. In turn, France gifted Israel with advanced Mirage fighter-jets, while Israel gifted the world counter-revolution its assistance with the assassination of Moroccan revolutionary and convener of the Tricontinental, Mehdi Ben Barka (Anon, 2015; Heimann, 2010).

As the political sovereignty regime dawned in the Arab region in the shadow of Soviet power, global capitalist powers fought wars of movement where necessary and wars of position where possible to dampen redistribution, divert the surplus to arms, and dilute the drive to agrarian reform. The “waste” element of accumulation was constrained by the existence of Communist powers and the role of Communism as worldwide legitimizing ideology for sending resources to popular reproduction and social infrastructure (Ajl, 2023b; A. Kadri, 2023).

Meanwhile, in reaction to the Arab military defeat in 1948 and the loss of Palestine, Arab nationalism mutated beyond its romantic and elitist origins. It spiraled in mass-mobilizing, republican, and populist directions, fusing bread at home with guns pointed at the author of the 1948 catastrophe. Varied projects of national renaissance sought sovereign industrialization, defensive capacity, socialism, unity, and independence, and moved beyond the cultural and economic debility that marked the ancient regimes. Amidst the regional magnetism of Arab nationalism, its adherents ruled the state or the street. These swept from the Syrian Ba’ath fusion of “Marxist-Leninism to Arab nationalism” (Hinnebusch, 2004, 46) in the palaces to the threat of Nasserism amongst the publics of Lebanon and Jordan (Aruri, 1972), to the beacon of Egyptian anti-colonialism and arms flows to millenarian and Marxist Arab nationalist guerillas in Tunisia and Algeria (Azzouz, 1988; Gruskin, 2021), to the 1958 Revolution in Iraq and its aftershocks (Wolfe-Hunnicut, 2021), leading to nationalization of foreign land, infrastructure, and industrial plant, and taking steps to shatter monopolist agrarian structures, improving social protection, increasing longevity, building up

health and housing, and partially industrializing (Kadri, 2016). The United States deluged Arab monarchies and republics in developmental aid to constrain deeper redistribution and confrontation with Israel. Such soporifics did, in places, help dull the drive to deeper redistribution and to building more internally articulated industrial fabric (Chaieb & Dahan, 1981; Samir, 1982), but could not induce the needed paralysis.

The Arab Republics were too radical for the imperialists and not radical enough to resist the imperialist typhoon (Hafiz, 2005). The United States effectively gave a green light to Israel to slam the Arab frontline states in 1967, through its war of aggression (Stork, 1994). That war, compounding Saudi-stoked revanchism in North Yemen prompting Egyptian intervention (Abdalla, 1994), destabilized Nasserism (Zabad, 2019) and Ba'athism, beclouding prospects for combining anti-Israeli warfare and social redistribution from above and alchemizing the states into corporatist class compromise and partial confrontation with Israel. Increasingly, this left the radical option of people's war to Palestinian guerrillas (Higgins, 2023, 330–420) and radicals radiating region-wide. In Arab states such as Iraq and Libya (First, 1974; Wolfe-Hunnicut, 2011), further from the struggle and less impacted by the violent defeat of Arab republicanism amidst its prioritization of rigidity and protection from Israel against the plasticity needed for people's wars, the defeat catalyzed radicalization. The war also led to the occupation-to-annexation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, turning them into fresh frontiers for Israeli colonialism, captive markets for Israeli goods, and cheap labor reserves for the Israeli petty bourgeoisies, while putting their land at the service of state and capital alike (Farsakh, 2002; Samara, 1992).

Israel's success against the frontline states impressed the US political and military establishments. Following the war, the United States opened the spigot of military "aid," with the unique provision that 25% of such aid could feed the industrial infrastructure of geographical Israel, the remainder flowing back to the Pentagon system. The United States viewed Israeli incubation of its own military-industrial sector favorably, allowing for the state to better balance its accounts and for the United States to slightly sidestep Arab ire at its arming of Israel. Alongside considerable private investment from the United States, the Israeli defense industrial system rapidly metastasized from 1967 onwards, becoming a major sector of the Israeli economy: arms exports totaled 10% of total exports in 1970 (Lockwood, 1972). Extensive armoring of Israel went alongside diversions of Arab wealth to weaponry, sometimes through aid, more often through sales, always with the proviso that Israel would maintain a "qualitative military edge" (El Nabolsy, 2021). In the

republics, arms build-ups were defensive. Egypt, Iraq, and Syria spent between 10% and 17% of gross domestic product (GDP) on arms during the 1970s and 1980s.² The oil-rich republics and monarchies spent smaller proportions of their GDP, but diverted tens of billions of dollars from potential regional-popular development to weaponry. Such weapons served equally as buffer from US-Israeli aggression, domestic counter-insurgency, subsidy for the US industrial base, and as assistance to play the role of regional Sparta, as with the Iranian Shah's support for reactionary counter-insurgency in Dhofar.

Meanwhile, US military interventions, "security assistance," arms sales, black operations, and developmental aid—in fact, developmental counter-insurgency, meant to soften the edge of hunger and want and consolidate a social base amongst portions of the middle classes or the state bureaucracy for neo-colonialism—secured US power and neutrality towards Israel amongst a range of royalties and republics. Petrodollar flows from oil prices which the US connived in pushing up (Oppenheim, 1976) gushed from US, European, and Japanese consumers, the primary purchasers of refined petroleum, first to the coffers of the Gulf states and then to the Pentagon complex and US treasuries and securities (Spiro, 1999). Israel was the machine's central turbine, forcing defensive and justifying offensive arms purchases, some of which laid idle in arid warehouses: pure waste.

Furthermore, the cultivation of the Israeli defense plant soon yielded fruits for worldwide repression. Israel grew as an organic component of the worldwide capitalist offensive, neo-colonial counter-revolution, and colonial rearguard. And it operated in theaters where the United States preferred not to, or could not, tread. Throughout Latin America, Israel armed and trained genocidal anti-revolutionary counter-insurgency, from the Contras to Pinochet's Chile to the sub-fascist junta in Argentina. It supported Portugal in colonial counter-revolution against popular liberation forces in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, and trained and funded the forces of repression in Central African Republic, Somalia, Togo, and others. It supported the Mobutu regime in then-Zaire and effectively circumvented UN-imposed sanctions against the former Rhodesia, feeding it with arms, and did the same in South Africa (Beit-Hallahmi, 1987; IJAN, 2012). In the Arab region, Israel propped up the Iranian Shah against Communist activists, worked against the Lebanese National Movement during the Civil War, assassinated Ghassan Kanafani, backstopped Jordanian regime repression of the Palestinian Revolution (Higgins, 2023, 334–433), and grinded away at Egyptian development under Sadat through war and militarization in the Sinai (Arab Republic of Egypt, 1978).

Reaction and Revolution in the Regional State System

Arab republicanism was born buffeted by war and the securitization of politics. It soon saw a descent into authoritarianism and the consolidation of capitalist intermediate classes (Mansour, 1992), amidst the slow Saudi and US extirpation and de-legitimization of radical republicanism, revolution, and Communism. Its allure as developmental alternative grew tarnished as Arab leaders stabilized their welfare states but ceased more aggressive redistributions, and lost capacity to confront Israel. A US-arranged peace treaty, one amongst many, lubricated by military and economic aid, levered Egypt in 1978 into normalization with Israel. And the tarnish spread amidst serial US-Israeli military defeats, social regression, and sanctions (Capasso, 2020). In Libya, US attacks chipped away at Qadhafi's legitimacy, and the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war, which the United States stoked on both sides, damaged the Islamic Republic at nearly the moment of its birth and immolated tremendous surpluses in each state. By 1991, the bell tolled on Arab republicanism. As the Soviet Union fell, there was a regional surrender of hope in the face of capitalist advance (Fergany, 2000). The dominos started falling: Iraq was militarily defeated, then economically besieged, erasing it as a possible regional developmental pole and a state capable of staving off Palestinian surrender. Egypt assented to full entrance to the Western camp through forgiving of its debt in exchange for its support for the war on Iraq. With regional military and economic powers isolated, weakened, warrened off from influence, Palestine was left nearly isolated despite its mass-based popular intifada from 1987 to 1991. The Oslo Accords soon followed.

But isolation was relative, not total. Parallel to the waning of Arab nationalism was the waxing of a new anti-systemic alternative. The last major Jacobin-style revolution of the last millennium, the 1978–1979 revolution in Iran, marked a turning point in the history of the region. Mass-mobilizing the population (Kurzman, 2004), it drew on a mix of Marxism, dependency theory, liberation theology, and Arab republicanism (Sohrabi, 2018), fusing them into an anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist revolution (Ahouie, 2017), which moved “to create a full-fledged welfare state,” (Abrahamian, 2009) while securing space for the market and the private sector domestically, even while bristling at foreign capitalist activity within Iran (Pesaran, 2008). Amidst the mass-mobilizing needs of a state at war and influenced by the legitimating ideology of its revolution, Iran turned to widespread social welfare investments and nationalization of private productive forces, creating a large state-owned industrial sector

(Harris, 2017). Looking outward, it ruptured the Israeli “periphery doctrine,” expelling the US Embassy and breaking the petrodollar-weapons flow which had bound it to US imperialism. Furthermore, it took up the banner of solidarity with Palestine and opposition to US imperialism (Orinoco Tribune, 2023). Throughout the 1980s, Iran supported Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad militarily, politically, and technologically. Syria and Iran shared anti-Zionist alignments, and although they had friction in Lebanon, shared opposition to the US war on Iraq in 2003—the second major regional inflection point, which laid bare to Ansar Allah in Yemen the perfidious global role of the United States. By the early 2000s, Iran’s doctrine of “strategic depth” merged with ideological commitment in layers of the state to anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism, and increasingly it became a semi-industrialized semi-periphery.

These processes fertilized the embryos of a new regional Cold War. It arrayed Iran and its allies, which would crystallize into an “axis of resistance,” against the neo-colonial US allies, Israel, and behind them, the United States. Whereas the previous Cold War pitted republican redistribution and anti-Zionism, the banners carried by complementary and clashing Arab nationalisms, against the reactionary US and British-backed monarchies and satraps, the new Cold War emerged as the US sought to evaporate any independent global poles of capital accumulation and dismantle the regional political sovereignty regime, which was being defended by armed mass-mobilizing militia. This process was inseparable from, and, indeed, articulated through—as with the previous Arab Cold War—the “Arab-Israeli” conflict (Kerr, 1971). By the 1990s, Arab normalization, long *de facto* in Jordan, became *de jure*, opening the way for an economic peace alongside free trade zones. Within Palestine, the Oslo Accords sought to erect a neoliberal and hybrid neo-colonial/collaborator class, enmeshed in economic normalization, administration of selected monopolies, buttressed by West Bank and exile Palestinian capital flows, especially Gulf-linked but also Lebanese, as with the Cyprus Construction Corporation (Rabie, 2021). This cold peace was frost-bite for resistance forces: the political face of this dynamic was the “terror lists,” as remaining Palestinian and Arab rejectionist forces, including Hamas, Hezbollah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Islamic Jihad were placed on lists sanctioning any material support for them, a component of broader post-Soviet encirclement operations against remaining Communist armed guerrillas (Ajl, 2023a). “Terror lists” deprived organizations of material support and created ideological over-compliance, leading to ideological and political isolation. But sanctions and terror lists forced their own delinking. As political organizations were “maximally” coerced and quarantined, they made mutual linkages. Delinking led to a type of regional

collective self-reliant security doctrine, architecture, and technological and military coordination. Imperialism built an inadvertent scaffolding for its opponents' ideological and political goals.

National Liberation and Social Reproduction

To understand the anti-systemic character and limits of the axis of resistance we revisit the theory of national liberation, the national question, and how to interpret each under various stages of imperialism. The “classical” approach to the national question developed during the age of monopoly capital and formal colonialism, divvying up the world into looting grounds for each colonial power based on colonial super-exploitation and income deflation (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021). Accordingly, Lenin took the leap of supporting nationalist movements, even if they had a non-socialist character, as a move to deepen democracy (Lenin, 1965b, 1965a). National liberation had an anti-imperialist character because the victory of the national movements attacked the political architecture of colonial accumulation, which depended on extra-economic colonial force for its reproduction. Furthermore, almost no such struggle reached only for purely formal rights. And finally, struggles for formal political rights mattered since they were potential mechanisms for redistributing material assets—which required emancipatory movements.

Fanon and Cabral offered the classical criticisms of bourgeois nationalism. Although now their dissections of neo-colonialism, the national bourgeoisie, and national consciousness are used to attack states and nationalist movements willy-nilly, their dissents came from within. They emerged during a shift in the coordinates of imperialism imposed by the national movements on recalcitrant colonial empires, as monopoly capital in the late 1950s and 1960s was shifting to its neo-colonial stage (Nkrumah, 1974).³ The existence of the Soviet Union and later, Communist China, forced most bourgeois nationalist states, helmed by a wavering petty bourgeoisie, to implant some level of social protection within their development projects, minimally stopping colonial famine (Davis, 2002). Furthermore, emblazoned on the banners of the national movements were commitments to the wellbeing of their people. These were promissory notes that the post-independence leadership had little choice but to respect and, indeed, often did their very best to honor.

Fanon and, even more so, Cabral situated their critiques in a periodization of accumulation, noting that monopoly capital was the source of imperialism and that post-colonial states were entering neo-colonialism,

often in linkage with one another. They attacked the nationalist movements for theoretical and organizational weaknesses and for inability to deliver on the promises of the anti-colonial struggle: redistribution, land, bread.⁴ They clarified that the “new” bourgeoisies incubating in newly-decolonized nations were transmission belts for the reproduction of foreign monopoly control over the development of the productive forces (Cabral, 1979). For Cabral (1979, 141), the issue was neo-colonial or colonial “violent usurpation of the freedom of development of national productive forces.” Although they wished to unmask the barren ideology of the new leaderships, they were not illusioned. While they argued that the political forces helping the state ought to radicalize, commit “class suicide,” they understood that the decision to assimilate to the emerging new international order was less deviation than destiny (Fanon, 1963, 99). They knew the pressures to conform to neo-colonialism were overwhelming.

Yet, the critique had a background assumption: the legitimacy of the political sovereignty regime which had been broadly achieved, was in imminent crisis, as the prime target of anti-colonial parties and movements. Fanon defended the intrinsic merit of the struggle for decolonization and political sovereignty (1963, pp. 40, 51). But Fanon and Cabral inadequately theorized sovereignty. This was not without reason: over-focus on its merits would have been gratuitous. Within the national movements it had become basically universal that political decolonization was a boon (but see Awan, 2024). Their major works were of their place and time. They carried a whiff of polemic and entreaty. If they underplayed the achievements of decolonization and the acquisition of political sovereignty, they did not do so to imply that those achievements were nothing but gewgaws for the new bourgeoisie and state managers. Rather, with their words Cabral and Fanon were fighting intellectual warfare, arming the national movements with better tools to help them fill the shell of political sovereignty with emancipatory programs for working peoples. Cabral in particular theorized culture as a weapon for national liberation. And both drafted communiques to the national movements to organize, build mass accountable parties, for the intellectuals and statesmen to forego the fat of administering the apparatus of state for their own interest and instead to serve the people. It is unimaginable that Fanon and Cabral could not see that in Tunisia or India suddenly the hungry had fuller bellies, but they also would have known full well that they still needed land—hence Cabral’s focus on reacquisition of the productive forces.⁵

Their critiques were necessary in the sense that monopoly and colonial capital, while still defending a wide range of settler-states in Africa, was plastic, malleable, morphing. Thus, the critique of neo-colonialism

or bourgeois nationalist outcomes was a critique of the form of appearance of the new stage of monopoly capital, marked increasingly by a widening of the market to enfold sectoral import-substitution or export-oriented industrialization and more extensive proletarianization in a nascent and new international division of labor (Dowidar, 1973; ‘Abdallāh, 1976).

Post-1991, the pattern of accumulation shifted. As the Soviet Union fell, income deflation globally accelerated (Banerjee, 2020; Patnaik, 2007), registering a decline in per-capita access to foodgrains and absolute rural immiseration, the widening and deepening of global labor reserves, pervasive semi-proletarianization (Yeros, 2023), and existential threats to social reproduction on a world scale (Ossome & Naidu, 2021). Global restructuring of commodity chains deepened, enfolded ever-more of the Third World within the capitalist system, including a partially re-incorporated China which yet retained massive state control over the accumulation process (Smith, 2016; Suwandi, 2019). Homogenization and financialization of food supplies spread. The dollar became weaponized, hand-in-gauntlet with US assaults on remaining strategic obstacles to the entry and exit of hot capital flows, pressuring countries through attacks on their sovereign credit to de-socialize social reproduction under the threat of financial blackmail or bombs (Gowan, 1999). The escalation of semi-colonization (Yeros & Jha, 2020) and wars of extermination and encroachment became the norm (Kadri, 2014).

Global labor reserves became so massive as to be redundant from the perspective of worldwide accumulation. Capital benefited from the amputation of lives via war, lessening the quantity of use values required for the reproduction of labor power on a world scale (A. Kadri, 2023). This logic of accumulation is systemic, with income deflation applied as policy through sanctions and negative growth in Iran and Venezuela. Yet it is concentrated in the Arab region, which is historically articulated into the global law of value through the monopolies of oil and weapons, finance, the petrodollar and securities purchases, and war. The Arab region is the world’s most war-prone, reflecting its centrality to global accumulation yet obscured through discussion of dictatorship and terrorism. The Arab world has been an experiment in this mode of accumulation via waste: as Colombian President Gustavo Petro stated, “[w]hy have large carbon-consuming countries allowed the systematic murder of thousands of children in Gaza? Because Hitler has already entered their homes and they are getting ready to defend their high levels of carbon consumption and reject the exodus it causes” (Fadul, 2023). The US agenda for the Arab region is an augury for the future. In that region,

capital as imperialism allows for dependent industrialization and agricultural specialization for export among its closest regional allies and within stable securitized neo-colonies woven into global production chains (Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia; on the latter, see Mullin, 2023). Within the stabilized monarchies of the Gulf, it allows the development of real estate, finance, oil and gas, and secondary processing hubs. And capitalist advance has gone hand-in-hand with advancing normalization with Israel, as one Arab monarchy after another signed normalization agreements with Israel.⁶ But in those nations with a history of republican *coup d'état* or existing para-state militia or standing armies, as in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, the US agenda is immolation, and reduction of developmental levels. The goal is the weakening or destruction of the state sponsors and allies of regional militia which challenge US-Israeli domination.

In Syria, for example, Hamas was able to train its personnel. The 2000s saw Iranian-Syrian strategic cooperation, and Syria was a transportation hub for arms shipments to Hezbollah. It also harbored Imad Mughniyeh, one of Hezbollah's major military tacticians until the joint CIA-Mossad assassination in 2008. Indeed, the origins of the US war—carried out through subcontractors and effective proxies in the Gulf states, Turkey, Israel, and the Future Movement in Lebanon—lay in the US arming, training, and ideologically indoctrinating sectarian militia through their “redirection” (Hersh, 2007) to shatter state sponsors of Hezbollah, while overall US and Gulf neoliberalism weakened the state sufficiently so as to render it vulnerable to its attempted dismantling by the United States which accelerated in 2011 (Donovan, 2023). Such incitement and arming operations widened into a war whose substance was an attack on the Syrian state as even a theoretical container for popular policies, and as a non-theoretical attack on its role as a structural support base for regional anti-Zionist militia. By 2011, the attack—sponsored by the Gulf monarchies as well as the United States—cozened Hamas political bureau chief Khalid Meshal to leave to Qatar and, in 2012, for the movement to openly disavow the government, while Palestinian Islamic Jihad retained relations with the Syrian government and the armed wing of Hamas, Al-Qassam, maintained friendly relations with its sponsors (Skare, 2021).

The war set back Syrian developmental levels to the 1950s. It razed forest cover, decimated popular access to electricity, and reduced GDP by two-thirds (al-Asadi, 2020; Gaafar, 2021; Hatahet & Shaar, 2021). This assault has proceed not merely through kinetic attack but sanctions which amputate and warp the body of state sovereignty itself: by illegalizing

political representatives (through the “terror lists”) and by preventing the state, a central economic actor in all modern societies, from engaging in the day-to-day operations of capitalist exchange and getting needed goods on the market (Capasso, 2023; Doutaghi, 2024; Doutaghi & Mullin, 2022). US sanctions dismantled pharmaceutical and agricultural production chains (Aita, 2020) and even hemorrhaged into the humanitarian section due to sanctions over-compliance. Similarly, in Iraq, “Oil for Food” unbundled the sovereignty of the Iraqi state and remitted it to an imperialist-sponsored United Nations program (Gordon, 2010), hollowed out industry and its melding with national defense by prohibiting “dual use” imports; Iraqi oil proceeds continue to be held in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

Those wars of encroachment rest on negations of, or attacks on, political sovereignty. The wars burn up the social surplus, the values crystallized in social infrastructure or defensive militarization, requiring yet further, or constant, re-composition of defensive industrial bases and the use of skilled labor-power for industrial militarization and less-skilled labor power for national armies and guerilla forces. Or they must use scarce monies to import defensive armaments burned up in war. Countries must devote national productive labor merely to maintain and protect rather than add to their capital stock. Thus, the defense against imperial or colonial wars of encroachment, the hardening of the armistice line against such wars (Lebanon) or the active “forward defense” against such wars (Iran) has an anti-systemic character. Furthermore, the mass-mobilizing popular wars countervail the sense of defeat imperialism sows in the Arab world. We now turn to an analysis of the political forces waging these wars in the Arab-Iranian region.

The Resistance Axis

The resistance axis refers to those states and militia antagonistic to the US-Israeli agenda. The axis’s critical element is post-revolutionary Iran, which from 1979 has supported a proliferating set of armed movements and states which have taken up arms or offered material infrastructure for anti-Israeli resistance: Syria, Hezbollah, Palestinian armed groups, Yemen (Ansar Allah), and the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Internally, since the revolution, Iran has embarked on continuous—if frustrated—efforts towards endogenous industrialization, the technological basis for an increasingly self-reliant military-defense capacity (Czulda, 2020; Hashim, 1992). This, in turn, has been the foundation for regional

sharing of technology, alongside operational training, dispatch of its elite forces to assist in the defense or reclamation of state sovereignty within nearby Arab states, and sharing of technical and logistical expertise. This defense-and-deterrence strategy emerges out a *mélange* of ideological conviction, enmity to Israel and the US, desire to defend the revolution, and the urgency of avoiding hot wars on Iranian cities. Its existence should force us to reconsider the concept of “self-defense” as necessary to understand the regional landscape. Yet, this strategy is used to paint Iran as a regional dybbuk, spreading terrorism, imperialism, and dominance. At least two narratives are central, and they converge on the axiom that self-defense is not a valid explanation for Iranian activities. We survey some of those explanations and their indicators, then put forward a theoretical explanation for Iranian regional policies.

A common narrative within mainstream and heterodox social science focuses on the resistance axis from an economic perspective: lacking a socialist ideology and bound up with bourgeois projects, the axis expresses imperialist, sub-imperialist, hegemonic, or domestic bourgeois class projects. These formulations rest on a reductive, formalist, and Eurocentric analysis of accumulation, considering war epiphenomenal to the accumulation process rather than as constituent of it. A symmetrical error from International Relations (IR) theory or mainstream security studies considers the resistance axis reducible to geopolitical containers struggling against their counterparts in a zero-sum game.

The first set of arguments rely on mis-readings of Ruy Mauro Marini’s (1969) concept of “sub-imperialism,” echoing its use for the BRICS. He argued that sub-imperialism was a stage in the development of capitalism within semi-peripheral countries when economic power concentrates in monopolies, fusing with finance. Productivity massively increases through the implantation of imported technology. Yet, super-exploitation constricts the domestic market, forcing the sub-imperialist power to secure export markets for realizing the value of products (Higginbottom, 2010). Furthermore, this occurred amidst “antagonistic cooperation” as an empowered national capitalist sector sometimes battled and sometimes broke bread with the imperialist capitalist sector (Valencia, 2017, 76–77). In the case of Iran, although reference is made to its own “imperialism” or “sub-imperialism” (Collective, 2019), occasionally with vague gestures to the country’s economic interests in Iraq and Lebanon, trade statistics do not constitute a political sociology of sub-imperialism. They are empiricist indicators of capital movements within a capitalist system, including the resistance axis—a characterization denied by almost no one (Kadri, 2019). Iranian exports to Lebanon are dwarfed by economic support to Hezbollah.

Iran's exports to Yemen and Palestine are almost non-existent. Exports to Iraq are significant, but increased only after 2003, with the fraying of Iraqi productive fabric and US sanctions (Guzansky, 2011, 92–93). Meanwhile, Iranian support for domestic military actors in Iraq—the Popular Mobilization Forces—was a direct response to the takeover of a third of the country by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Arif, 2019).

As with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iranian force projection occurs against colonial, sectarian, and imperialist-backed violence.⁷ It shatters the concept of sub-imperialism to equate anti-systemic and pro-systemic power projection by intermediate states within the world system, or to suggest that Iran has “antagonistic cooperation” with the US. Furthermore, Marini's argument linked domestic super-exploitation with realization of production abroad. While Iran is capitalist, domestic wage compression has been linked to the maximum-pressure sanctions regime (Nosratabadi, 2023), and Iran's total national capital faces suppression from the US through sanctions. Stretching “sub-imperialism” to Iran distorts the concept beyond meaning, vacating it of the historical processes from which it was abstracted and re-tooling it as essentially a Marxist-sounding pejorative. Meanwhile, IR theory cannot assess the different class interests within the black-box nation-states it uses as a unit of analysis. It analytically equates wars of national defense or liberation, which seek to liberate productive forces from imperialist control or protect them from destruction, with wars of offense and occupation.

Iranian action needs a better explanation than sub-imperialism, a resort to liberal or “realist” IR relations theory which sees classless national blocs battling for hegemony in zero-sum games, or simply “rival capitalisms” engaged in zero-sum struggles over relative shares of world accumulation. Accumulation is the piling up of surplus value. Abstractions can be used to theorize accumulation but accumulation is not abstract. Still less can it be reduced to expanded reproduction. Primitive accumulation, or the use of extra-economic force to affect patterns of production within a given social formation (Patnaik, 2017), is part of historical capitalism. Expanded accumulation is, furthermore, a historical moment in the evolution of capital, but it is a moment which does not occur everywhere; neither “backwardness” nor permanent primitive accumulation are historical stages prior to expanded reproduction but constitute it in its essence (Moyo et al., 2013; McMichael, 1990). Violation of state sovereignty through wars of encroachment is constitutive of accumulation via waste. Imperialism as a sociological phenomenon rests on the concrete practices of arms factories, counter-insurgency, surveillance, and the physical land bases and attendant stability needed for those processes (Capasso & Kadri, 2023).

Wars of national sovereignty against imperialism are pro-working class. Because the law of value proceeds through encroachment, sanctions, destruction of social infrastructure, burning up lives, and shortening lifespans, defensive wars partially disrupt its mechanics in the Arab region. They expand the realm of formal and democratic rights, which the colonial and neo-colonial powers disrespect. Such wars dismantle the machinery—the gears, pulleys, and levers—which make the engine of accumulation run. Weakening Israel weakens imperialism.

Sufficiently armored state frontiers and the evaporation of forces like Israel, whose logic of militarized and imperialist settler expansion, undermine the non-economic processes needed for accumulation. Socialist transition cannot be reduced to national sovereignty and anti-imperialism, but nor is it possible without those processes. They are necessary but not sufficient. Furthermore, Iranian arming cannot be compared to the EU-US arms trade or aid. The latter buttress imperialist accumulation directly through the commodity circuit, through their deployment to shorten the lives and kill the working class on a world scale and to reduce the combativeness of labor by inculcating defeat. Iranian weapons and training are free, representing “the possibility of access to weapons for the poor” (Moussaoui, 2023, 179). Indeed, their blueprints are often open-access or freely shared from Iran to its state and sub-state partners, another way in which they qualitatively differ from US and Israeli arms-dealing: Iran distributes these types of use values whereas the US and Israel commodify them. They also extend life by preventing or beating back military assault against those countries which bear them. And when deployed in practice, they dissipate the sense of defeat which has been the central achievement of US-Israeli regional action.

Thus, capacity to resist wars of encroachment and primitive accumulation has a class content on a world-scale, given it is often needed to secure social reproduction and provide the basis for expanded accumulation. Resistance on multiple geographical scales is the hardened shell around state capacity. It is not necessarily the warm cradle of working-class social reproduction, but the latter presupposes state capacity to operate hospitals, schools, trash collection, the basic institutions of statistics-gathering and bureaucratic decision-making, and the physical institutions which organize skilled and unskilled labor in the service of social well-being—all of which imperialism dismantles as it levels Arab targets (see Alhaffar & Janos, 2021; Anon, n.d.; Lafta & Al-Nuaimi, 2019). Within any state, sovereignty is central to regulating, democratizing, and embedding accumulation to provide use values to popular classes. Diversion of surplus to the military capacity of a nation or its

allies cannot be separated from domestic social reproduction. As Farnia (2023) argues for Iran, this is not reducible to “authoritarianism” but connected to a domestic welfare state (Harris, 2010) and investment in research and development linked to aerospace, nuclear utilization, and pharmaceuticals. Similarly, Syria, in the face of military defeat and Gulf-channeled re-penetration of capital after the successful Ba’ath nationalization and redistribution policies (Ajl, 2019; Matar, 2016) still retained critical capacities for endogenous food production and sectoral self-subsistence and comparatively superior health outcomes (Sen, 2019).

Beyond states, the second element of the region-wide resistance project are the mass-mobilizing popular militia or standing armies in Yemen and Lebanese Hezbollah. The latter developed from the 1980s onwards through substantial Iranian assistance, as Syria permitted Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC) to set up training camps in the Lebanese South in the 1980s. It grew further within the framework of the Lebanese confessional system and sectarian-capitalist state apparatus, the child of French colonialism and the US-supported Ta’if Accords which created cold neoliberal peace after the hot externally-stoked war (George, 2019; Wakim, 2021). Hezbollah led a guerrilla insurgency against the Israeli occupation of the South, harrying the Zionists into full withdrawal by 2000, sowing great interest amongst regional occupied and colonized peoples in the military option to confront colonialism and imperialism. Domestically, the party built up a network of social services, a para-state in the South, which especially targeted working-class Shia constituencies (Cammatt, 2015; Love, 2010). By 2006, through logistical, technological, and organizational upgrades alongside a pronounced up-take of people’s war (Matthews, 2011), Hezbollah was able to confront and defeat an Israeli incursion into Lebanon, overpowering Zionism and behind it, the United States.

In Yemen, Ansar Allah emerged initially from complaints about “marginalization” amongst Yemenis belonging to the Zaydi religious group in underdeveloped Saada, spurring an armed insurgency (Forster & Kinnear, 2023). Husayn Al-Hūthī, their leader, initially focused on politicizing an already-existing cultural revival movement. His sermons focused on how Israel and the United States were degrading and disempowering Muslims. Alongside this largely culturalist response to Zionism and the United States, the enemy was painted in often religious terms. Paired to this was an early admiration for Iranian steadfastness and perceived self-reliance in the face of the Western threat, and to Khomeini himself for sowing rancor against the United States and Israel in all fields of Iranian society (Alblosi, 2016). The US war of aggression against

Iraq further radicalized, broadened, and more acutely politicized Ansar Allah, giving their mobilization a more overtly anti-imperialist hue—in ways not dissimilar to the politicization induced by the Nakba and the alchemization of Arab nationalism into a republican and mass-mobilizing ideology (Al-Hardan, 2015; Al-Kubaisi, 1971).

Ansar Allah started to intermix a populist class analysis and rhetoric of revolution into its ideology, as the baton passed from Husayn to Abd el-Malik Al-Ḥūthī after the former's assassination. State-building sought a "revolutionary model of republican government," and he spoke of "oppression in all its forms whether individual, racial, class, or regional" and the wider scope of a "liberatory revolutionary project," whose keystone was "total independence in its decision making"—a populist vision of sovereignty (Cited in Schmitz, 2022, 199). For him, too, Iran was a beacon: "[a]re not those (the Iranians) who secure life and produce men and build nations?" Furthermore, he affirmed the Iranian role in taking up the vanguard of national liberation rooted in "dignity and glory"—a task previously under the aegis of Arab radical republicanism. From 2014 to 2019, the Houthi social vision solidified through notions of just taxation, price engineering for basic commodities, and government protection for social reproduction (Abdulfali & Root, 2020). The 2019 National Vision Document, prefaced by the martyred leader Saleh Ali al-Sammad, called for a modern, "strong" and "just" state overseeing a mixed economy, committed to sovereign industrialization through import-substitution, in situ transformation of national resources, self-subsistence and ecological transitions in agriculture, and broadening healthcare provision (Republic of Yemen, 2019).

Militarily, Ansar Allah has developed from a guerilla group to a national army, merging with elements of the official national armed forces. They have benefited from technological upgrading through synergy with Hezbollah and the IGRC, including training in anti-tank and anti-ship weapons, and endogenous industrialization to strengthen military capacity, including landmines, missiles, and drones (Moussaoui, 2023, 222). Hezbollah and Iran also offer military training and propaganda crafting (evidenced in the convergence of media strategies in the 2023 war). In relation to anti-colonial and anti-imperial practice and vision, from 2015 onwards Ansar Allah fought a war of national liberation against what they called the "Saudi-American" attack which systematically targeted agriculture and other productive sectors in a war of genocidal counter-insurgency and depopulation (J. Kadri, 2023; Mundy, 2017). The Yemeni armed forces understand themselves as fighting a mass mobilizing peoples' war, based on ideological hardening of troops

and sophisticated tactics to neutralize technological superiority, learned during their apprenticeship with Hezbollah (Moussaoui, 2023, 222–226).⁸ Yemeni armed capacity, buttressed by Iranian logistical and material investment in the defense of Yemen, forced the Saudis and the Emiratis to sue for peace in the face of threats to their oil and gas infrastructure, refining, and shipment points if their aggression continued—another manifestation of the dialectical relationship between technological upgrading, defensive industrialization, and armed defensive capacity to secure the space for expanded reproduction in peripheral or embattled nation-states.

Conclusion, Part One

This set of regional forces has allied with Palestinian asymmetric militia in their guerrilla war against Israeli settler-colonialism, and particularly the siege on the Gaza Strip. We consider their post-October 7 activities, as well as the Palestinian militia, in more detail in Part II of this article. These forces have distinct orientations and internal disagreements regarding models for economic development but converge on the active defense—or achievement—of political sovereignty as necessary for the well-being of the region’s peoples. We have argued that the current strategies of US imperialism make it necessary to re-visit the theory and practice of national sovereignty and the role of self-defense in socialist construction. Given that the US is carrying out a policy of state collapse and de-development in major Arab population centers, which is a testing ground for broader US methods of income deflation, destabilization, de-development, and de-statization, forces defending state sovereignty cannot simply be dismissed as “bourgeois nationalist,” “state-capitalist” or using kindred typologies. Such descriptions may have elements which are formally correct. But they block from view the strategic landscape which is contoured by the current stage of US accumulation, wherein “waste” is an input into accumulation. The systematic attacks on Iranian-Arab state capacity, the policy of de-development, and the military, political, and legal encirclement ought to be understood as part of accumulation-through-waste and the attack on working peoples on a world scale.

Reconsidering contemporary accumulation strategies allows us to understand the conjunctural role of defense of state sovereignty in the current context, as a positive good in and of itself, and as providing a platform for planning policies which can lead in the direction of expanded accumulation

(as with Yemen's 2019 national document). While the limits of such visions can and should be explored, any such critique must depart not from fancy but facts: US-Israeli operations only allow national capitalist development on certain terms within countries fully integrated into their security and financial umbrella. In that context, the contemporary axis plays a limited but real liberatory role in staving off state collapse in the countries near and around Palestine and shielding populations' social reproduction and popular well-being against the reaper of accumulation-through-development.

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Notes

1. The Ali Abu Mustafa brigades of The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Al-Aqsa Martyrs brigades of Fateh, the Omar al-Qasim forces of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Mujahideen brigades also participated in the attack.
2. Calculated from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) database (www.sipri.org/databases).
3. A revisionist strain of European economic history argues that decolonization was essentially welcomed by European capitalism; see the following refutations by Depelchin (1992) and Saul (2016).
4. Consider not merely the content but the tone of Cabral's critique of Nkrumah in this context. Thanks to Zeyad el Nabolsy for clarifying this point to me.
5. On internal dissent within the planning schemes in India and the United States and the difference between "full bellies" and the implementation of those plans, see Ajl and Sharma (2022).
6. In 2020, normalization agreements were signed by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

7. It is now openly admitted that France, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, whether their states or their nationals, have backed or financed ISIS. It stretches belief to argue that the United States has not been aware of those financial flows.
8. See the unmistakable influence of East and Southeast Asian Communist people's wars in this military assessment (Matthews, 2011). Thanks to Patrick Higgins for clarification on this point.

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