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Israel in Lebanon: a New Labour Consensus?

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Israel made a series of incursions into Lebanon. The 1982 invasion was the most controversial, unleashing an unprecedented level of international condemnation. Although the attempted assassination of Shlomo Argov, the Israeli ambassador to London, was the pretext for the strike, Israel’s real aims were to undermine the PLO’s military and political base in the country, to forge links with its Lebanese allies and to improve its border security (Lesch and Tessler, 1989, p. 63). The government believed that a heavy military blow to the PLO would render it incapable of carrying out terrorist activities and erode its support among moderate Palestinians (ibid., pp. 36–7). In September the Lebanese Christian militia massacred Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in Beirut. The massacre took place within the sight of the Israeli army (ibid., p. 63), creating the view that Israel’s decision to send the militia into the camps rendered it responsible for the subsequent events.

The invasion and the massacre dramatically undermined Israel’s international standing and drew attention to a new form of left-wing anti-Zionism, found mainly within new and far left groups and the women’s movement (see Chapter 1). How did the social democratic left react? In this chapter I look at the way in which the British Labour Party responded to Israel’s policy towards Lebanon. The first section illustrates the shift in the party’s attitudes and the second considers the reasons for this shift. The third section explores the emergence of anti-Zionism and the fourth investigates the intra-party conflict resulting from the policy change and the leadership’s subsequent efforts to moderate the party’s position as part of the 1987 policy review process.
The collapse of the pro-Israel consensus

The 1982 war in Lebanon precipitated a wave of Labour grass-roots condemnation of Israeli policy and revealed how far the party’s activists had moved in the direction of the Palestinian national cause. Local parties in London and Scotland spearheaded the campaign against Israel and in favour of the Palestinians. In London, Hackney North and Stoke Newington, Brent South, Paddington and St Pancras North actively championed the Palestinian cause.\(^1\) Later on the Chipping Barnet CLP endorsed a pro-PLO motion (Alderman, 1989, p. 136). In Scotland, Aberdeen South, Dundee East, Dundee West and West Renfrewshire were the main pro-Palestinian CLPs. The Dundee CLP was especially active. It forged links with Palestinian activists studying at Dundee University such as Yousef Allen, who later became the British representative of the Palestinian Trade Union Federation.\(^2\) It also organised meetings that were open to the general public and addressed by PLO representatives.\(^3\)

Although particular CLPs in London and Scotland dominated the pro-Palestinian campaign, a more general shift was taking place. At the annual party conference, held immediately after the Sabra and Chatila massacres, forty-six emergency resolutions were passed condemning Israel.\(^4\) Grass roots’ sympathy for the Palestinians escalated during the 1980s and reached a peak in the late 1980s. By this time nearly all the constituency parties in the Greater London region and the south were consistently turning down the LFI’s offers of speakers for their meetings.\(^5\) Conference decisions reflected the trend. At the 1988 conference the pro-Palestinian motions won the two-thirds majority needed to become policy (Table 5.1).

A similar development took place in some Labour councils. Both the GLC and Brent began actively to promote Palestinian national rights. In the May 1982 borough elections the Jewish Labour candidate for Cricklewood (Brent), Alf Filer, declared that Israel should become a secular state (Alderman, 1989, p. 126). In the 1980s the GLC embarked on a number of measures to promote the Palestinian cause. County Hall became the base for the Labour Committee on Palestine (LCP). In 1984 the Council launched an anti-racist year and the Ethnic Minorities Unit (EMU) provided funding to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) for a conference on racism against Arabs (ibid., pp. 130–4).\(^6\) Dundee District Council played an important part in campaigning for the Palestinian nationalist cause. The council was twinned with the West Bank town of Nablus and