

ISSUE 4

# Amílcar Cabral, Ghassan Kanafani, and the Weapon of Theory

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ENGLISH



## The Weapon of Theory



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twentieth century. In this essay I show that not only was there a significant overlap between their primary concerns, particularly revolving around the need for a

theoretical analysis of the limitations of the leadership of the first wave of independence movements, but also, a convergence with respect to their understanding of the importance of social analysis, and, more specifically, class analysis in the struggle for liberation from colonialism. In fact, one of the things that they wanted to point out when they claimed that the leaders of the first wave of independence movements did not develop an adequate ideology was that these leaders failed to understand the social structure of their own societies; in particular, they failed to understand that liberation from colonialism and neo-colonialism was not in the interests of all members of the colonized societies and that appeals to an amorphous entity called “the people” were likely to backfire. In fact, both Cabral and Kanafani pointed out that there were some classes in their respective societies who benefitted from colonialism and who therefore could not be expected to support the struggle against it.

Cabral argued that the failures and difficulties experienced by some African countries that had already attained independence stemmed, in part, from a lack of clear theoretical orientation: “the ideological deficiency, not to say the total lack of ideology, on the part of the liberation movements – which is basically explained by ignorance of the

historical reality which these movements aspire to transform – constitutes one of the greatest weaknesses, if not the greatest weakness, of our struggle against imperialism” (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 122). Of course, it is important to emphasize that Cabral is not making the claim that the ideological deficiency of the first wave of independence movements is the primary or only explanation of the failures and difficulties experienced by African countries like Ghana. Cabral was quite aware that there were global structural elements which contributed to these difficulties and failures. In fact, the leaders of the first wave were subjected to constant aggression from colonialists and neo-colonialists, aggression which both Cabral and Kanafani suffered from, and which eventually led to their assassination in 1973 and 1972, respectively. Nevertheless, Cabral is pointing out that at the ideological-theoretical level these global structural elements and their effects, including the creation of a comprador bourgeoisie, were not adequately grasped by the leadership of the first wave of independence movements and this theoretical failing was a contributing factor in the failures experienced by these movements.

This diagnosis was echoed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) with Kanafani

being a key figure in giving shape to the theoretical discourse of the PFLP. In the aftermath of the defeat of 1967, the PFLP held that the petty bourgeoisie led the progressive projects in Egypt and Syria. Kanafani described them as “petty military bourgeois governments” that were afflicted by a theoretical weakness which rendered them incapable of formulating an adequate strategy for waging a successful war for independence (Kanafani 2024 [1970a], p. 198). This was the case because they aimed at waging a conventional war (and a conventional war was the only way that they could keep their political position) without understanding that the vast developmental gap between Israel and its Western backers on the one hand, and Palestinians and their allied Arab states on the other hand, meant that the chances of winning a conventional war were quite slim (PFLP 2017 [1969], 96). Hence, they needed to adopt an alternative strategy: guerilla warfare following the example of Vietnam and, by extension, following the Maoist model (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 99; Kanafani 2024 [1971], p. 171 - 173). This Maoist influence was also reflected in the Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC)’s military strategy (Tomás 2021, p. 110).

Both Cabral and Kanafani were interested in how the social analysis of colonized societies in terms of class stratification can explain the history of liberation struggles. Their successes and failures were to be understood in terms of the class position of the leadership of these movements and the class position of the people who comprised the bulk of the combatants. The fundamental basis for comparison between Kanafani and Cabral is that both of them drew upon historical materialism to frame their analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the political movements responsible for the first wave of independence. Both of them also drew on historical materialism in order to analyze their own societies and the impact of colonialism on their respective societies with respect to social stratification. In fact, it is entirely plausible to hold that Cabral influenced Kanafani, given their convergence. While Kanafani does not mention Cabral explicitly, the works of Cabral were in circulation in Beirut during the 1960s (Traboulsi 2022, p. 274). Moreover, Cabral's work was known in international circles that Kanafani moved in, such as the Afro-Asian Writers' Association. Thus, we have *prima facie* grounds that point towards a possible influence of Cabral on Kanafani. Indeed, as I will show below, some of the social analysis presented in the theoretical writings of Kanafani seems to be entirely in accord with the

social analysis that Cabral provided in his famous speech in Havana during the first meeting of the Tricontinental in January of 1966.

### **The Political Content of Afro-Arab Solidarity**

Both Cabral and Kanafani were active in a moment of heightened Afro-Arab solidarity. This solidarity would eventually culminate in increased African support for Arab states in their conflict with Israel in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as increased Arab support for African liberation struggles during the same period (El Tayyeb 1985). Cabral himself was in favor of both African and tri-continental solidarity movements. However, for Cabral, such movements could not be race based, since in Cabral's view racial uniformity does not guarantee political agreement. Nor was it simply based on the fact that the peoples in question were historically subjected to colonialism. For the bare fact that a given people were subjected to colonialism does not guarantee that they would adopt any particular political response. Furthermore, such a unity could not be based on an assumption of cultural uniformity or kinship. For two reasons: first, even from a purely African perspective there are "various African cultures" (Cabral 1979 [1970], p. 149). Second, there is the fact that even within a given society, culture itself has a "class

character” (Cabral 1979 [1970], p. 144).<sup>[1]</sup> The class nature of culture influenced how culture was used to respond to colonialism. Kanafani held the same view (Kanafani 2024 [1970b], p. 147).

Rather, for Cabral and Kanafani, the unity in question would have to be based on a particular political response to colonialism and neo-colonialism. This is, in fact, what happened historically. For example, in the African continent during the 1960s, the fundamental splits were at the level of political disagreements as opposed to racial difference. The countries in the Casablanca Bloc, which advocated a more forceful and anti-accommodationist approach to imperialism, were Morocco, Egypt, Guinea, Mali, Algeria, and Ghana. While the countries comprising the Monrovia Bloc were Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Senegal, Cameroon, and Nigeria. Thus, the split was not along racial, cultural, or even linguistic lines but rather on explicitly political lines (Sharawy 1984, p. 42).

For Cabral, the only unity worth having is that with other liberation movements which recognize that “so long as imperialism is in existence, an independent African state must be a liberation movement in power or it will not be independent” (Cabral 1979 [1972], p. 116). To be a liberation movement in

power is to recognize that it is through acting systematically in the interests of the classes who have the most vital interest in thwarting imperialism, namely the peasantry and the workers, that a liberation movement can maintain its independence. This is what Kanafani meant when he talked about class surrender as the auxiliary to nationalist surrender (Kanafani 2024 [1970b], p. 146). Thus, while Afro-Arab unity could be envisioned, it would have to involve a clear understanding of the basis for political agreement on the resolution of the problem of colonialism and neo-colonialism. This point is important for understanding, for example, the stand of various Arab and African states towards the genocide that is happening in Gaza. From the standpoint of the analysis offered by Cabral and Kanafani, it makes no sense to chide certain Arab states for betraying “their kin.” This moralizing language obscures the relationship between the class interests which dominate these states and their position on the Palestine question. Indeed, what would be surprising and in need of explanation is if the ruling classes in certain Arab states supported a struggle against a global order that protects their interests. In fact, if this were to happen, it would show that ethnic-cultural kinship does trump class interests and Cabral and Kanafani would be proven wrong.



## Cabral on Palestine

Cabral's own stance on Palestine was well known in the Arab world and it would not be surprising if Kanafani came to know him through his pronouncements on Palestine. Cabral was explicitly in favor of the Palestinian struggle for independence and he contended that the use of some forms of violence to attain that end was justified. As Cabral put it:

We are with the refugees, the martyred refugees of Palestine, who have been tricked and driven from their own homeland by the maneuvers of imperialism. We are on the side of the Palestinian refugees and we support wholeheartedly all that the sons of Palestine are doing to liberate their country, and we fully support the Arab and African countries in general in helping the Palestinian people to recover their dignity, their independence and their right to live (Cabral 1969 [1965], 82).

Cabral clearly understood that Israel played a key role in a global imperialist order and that its purpose was

to enforce the dictates of the United States of America by functioning as a weapon aimed at any liberatory developments in the Arab region and on the African continent more generally:

We have as a basic principle the defense of just causes...On this basis we believe that the creation of Israel, carried out by the imperialist states to maintain their domination in the Middle East, was artificial and aimed at the creation of problems in that very important region of the world. This is our position: the Jewish people who follow the Jewish religion have the right to live and have lived very well in different countries of the world. We lament profoundly what the Nazis did to the Jewish people, that Hitler and his lackeys destroyed almost six million during the last World War. But we also understand that this does not give them the right to occupy a part of the Arab nation. We believe that the people of Palestine have a right to their land. We therefore think that all the measures taken by the Arab peoples, by the

Arab nation, to recover the Palestinian Arab homeland are justified.

In this conflict that is endangering world peace we are entirely in favor of and unconditionally support the Arab peoples. We do not wish for war; but we want the Arab peoples to obtain the freedom of the people of Palestine, to free the Arab nation of that element of imperialist disturbance and domination which Israel constitutes (Cabral 1968, 125 quoted from George n.d., 22).

There are several points to note in Cabral's discussion. First, there is the claim that the Palestinian cause should be understood in terms of the right of a colonized people to self-determination, meaning that they have the right to be able to make their own history collectively without the obvious impediment of colonialism. The fact that Israel was established in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when colonialism seemed to be on the way out, did not confuse Cabral, even though it confused many others during this

period, as Fayez Sayegh pointed out (Sayegh 1970). Second, there is the claim that all the measures which are taken by the Palestinians and allied peoples to overcome the colonial situation are justified. Although Cabral says that “all measures taken by the Arab people are justified,” it is quite implausible that he thinks that every conceivable measure that could be taken by them is justified, more likely he means that the measures which had been taken so far (up to the time of the speech in 1968) are justified including, of course, violent commando operations carried out by the Palestinian resistance. Cabral himself believed that even in wars of liberation there are norms that ought to be upheld, as evidenced by his treatment of Portuguese prisoners of war in Guinea-Bissau (Cabral 1969 [1968], p. 127 – 130).

Nevertheless, the point remains that, according to Cabral, the use of certain forms of violence to overcome the colonial situation is justified. Cabral does not expand upon this claim, but we can reconstruct his reasoning by paying close attention to the context. First, Cabral is clearly not in favor of suffering and violence in general or of violence for the sake of violence. However, one could argue that in a colonial situation where systematic violence is uninterrupted, it is not infrequently the case that concentrated (even spectacular) violence is necessary

in order to overturn the status quo and bring about a less violent mode of socio-political existence. Indeed, this was what the historical experience of Algeria had taught many anti-colonial intellectuals and leaders by the 1960s (Young 2001, p. 293 – 307). Cabral held that it is incoherent to claim that someone has a right to some thing while denying that they have a right to the sole means which would enable them to acquire that thing.<sup>[2]</sup> Moreover, the justification for violence is not premised on the promise of some future utopia which will come about in the post-colonial situation. Rather the justification is premised on the fact that violence and the threat of violence by the colonized party in a colonial situation can often immediately alleviate systematized colonial violence and dispossession by forcing the colonizer to make concessions.

Furthermore, Cabral and other intellectuals involved in the Tricontinental were aware that while non-violent independence movements were able to achieve gains in certain places (e.g., Ghana and India), the adequacy of non-violence as a means was dependent on the response of the colonizer and the existing legal structures in the colony. For example, the repeated rejection of petitions submitted by the Palestinian elite to the officials of the British Mandate led some elements of the Palestinian

leadership to recognize that, in their situation, “without violence, politics was useless” (Hughes 2019, p. 96). Speaking more generally, it is important not to conflate the fact that an occupying or oppressing force chooses to negotiate with the non-violent faction of a resistance force (which also includes violent elements), with the claim that such a non-violent faction would, by itself, have succeeded in bringing the occupying or oppressing force to the negotiating table, had there not been other violent elements or factions struggling to overturn the situation. Moreover, even if there are no violent factions in a given liberation movement, it would be naïve to think that the response of colonial authorities in one society does not reflect their awareness of the existence of violent movements for independence elsewhere. For example, the independence of India should be seen not just as the outcome of Gandhi’s non-violent movement but also as the product of the pressure exerted by violent disturbances taking place on the sub-continent itself as well as the weakening of the British Empire through World War II and the series of violent uprisings across the British Empire that started with the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 (Losurdo 2015, p. 106 – 107). We cannot simply assume, without a compelling argument, that we can abstract from all of these factors and present Gandhi’s non-violent

movement as having been sufficient for winning India's independence.

### **The Prism of Class: Unity and Fragmentation**

Both Kanafani and Cabral emphasized the importance of understanding the historical trajectory of resistance against colonialism in terms of class analysis. This is evidenced by Kanafani's study of the Revolt of 1936 and Cabral's analysis of the social structure of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. Kanafani made the point that the bulk of the fighters in the uprisings of 1929 and 1933, which preceded the Revolt of 1936, were peasants with smallholdings who often had to sell their land to large Arab landholders in order to buy weapons and ammunition. Kanafani indicates that in some cases the large Arab landholders in turn sold the land to Jewish settlers (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 34). Thus, Kanafani dissects the manner in which certain classes in Palestine had interests which were antagonistic to the interests of the small peasantry and their struggle for liberation from colonialism. Moreover, Kanafani shows how, during the 1936 Revolt, the fact that the traditional Palestinian elite leadership (drawn from large landowners and merchant families with an urban base) was operating from exile in Damascus, meant that "the role of the local leadership whose

social origins is to be found in the poor peasantry was greater than in the previous period, and this local leadership was closely connected to the peasantry” (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 92 – 93). This is significant because Kanafani argues that in the “entire history of the Palestinian struggle the popular armed revolution was never closer to success than it was during the months between the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1939” (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 93).<sup>[3]</sup> This is quite a radical claim; Kanafani is maintaining that it is only when the leadership was drawn from the smallholding peasantry, or their educated children who formed the revolutionary segment of the petty bourgeoisie, that the armed struggle, waged as a Maoist people’s war with the aim of encircling urban centers from the countryside, seemed to have a good chance at succeeding.<sup>[4]</sup>

Kanafani’s analysis is remarkable because unlike some of his contemporary (non-Marxist) Arab thinkers he did not fixate on a moralizing analysis (e.g., the Islamist analysis of failure in terms of turning away from God), rather he explained the ability of the local leadership to mobilize the peasantry in terms of their social origins. The revolt failed because the British mounted a tremendously brutal and effective counterinsurgency campaign and because the local leadership of poor peasant origins



was unable to free itself entirely from its organizational ties to the leadership in exile constituted by the traditional Palestinian elite. Furthermore, the Arab monarchies systematically undermined the revolt in coordination with the British (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 88), a role that they would continue to play into the crucial decade of the 1960s (Kanafani 2024 [1970c], p. 247 – 259) and up to the present.

For Kanafani, the analysis of the reasons for the successes and failures of the Revolt of 1936 was not purely academic, it provided an insight into the contemporary situation. Thus, in the PFLP's *Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine*, which Kanafani helped draft along with George Habash and Basil al-Kubeisi (Barakat 2024), a prime place was accorded to what were called the forces of "Arab reaction": "in a real liberation battle waged by the masses to destroy imperialist influence in our homeland, Arab reaction cannot but be on the side of its own interests, the continuation of which depends on the persistence of imperialism, and consequently cannot side with the masses" ( PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 36). Like Cabral, the PFLP was faced with Arab opposition to the idea that a class analysis is suitable for understanding Arab societies. The PFLP, with Kanafani playing a leading intellectual role, responded to such claims by arguing

that while it is true that the classical picture of classes in metropolitan societies does not apply to Arab societies, it is nevertheless true that there are obvious class divisions in Arab societies in general and in Palestinian society in particular. This is evidenced by the fact that “the overwhelming majority of combatants are the children of workers and peasants” (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 45). These classes, according to the PFLP, “form the majority of the Palestinian people and physically fill all camps, villages and poor urban districts” (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 47). Kanafani himself, in describing the trajectory of the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) from progressive Arab nationalism to the Maoist inflected Marxism-Leninism of the PFLP, notes how experience and historical reflection taught them that “they could not win the war against imperialism unless they relied on certain classes: those classes who fight against imperialism not only for their dignity, but also for their livelihood” (Kanafani 2024 [1972], p. 28). Kanafani’s class analysis of the 1936 Revolt was always geared towards making a political point about the present situation. A very similar analysis could be made of the position of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah vis-à-vis the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Indeed, just as the children of the camps carried the weight of Palestinian revolt in the 1930s and 1960s,

the children of the camps in Gaza and Jenin continue to do the same today.

Like Kanafani, Cabral claimed that the lack of adequate class analysis explained the setbacks suffered by the first generation of the leaders of independence movements. For example, in Cabral's homage to Kwame Nkrumah he emphasizes Nkrumah's stature as an icon of African independence, but he also asks "what economic and political factors made the success of the betrayal of Ghana possible despite Nkrumah's personality, courage, and positive action" (Cabral 1979 [1972], p. 116). More specifically, Cabral insists that we must ask:

Just how far would the success of the betrayal of Ghana have been linked or not to the questions of class struggle, contradictions in the social structure, the role of the Party and other institutions, including the armed forces, in the framework of a newly independent state? Just how far, we wonder, would the success of the betrayal of Ghana have been linked or not linked to the question of a correct definition of that historical entity, that

craftsman of history, the people, and to their daily action in defense of their own conquests in independence? (Cabral 1979 [1972], 116).

It is clear that Cabral is essentially posing the same question that Kanafani posed with respect to the Revolt of 1936, namely the question of whether, in fact, it makes sense to speak of the people as a whole as involved in the struggle against colonialism and whether all classes in a colonized society have an interest in the termination of the colonial condition. Cabral is possibly alluding to Nkrumah's flirtation with African Socialism as a social and political theory which denied the existence of classes in African societies and the relevance of class analysis for African societies (El Nabolsy 2023). Nkrumah himself after the coup that deposed him denounced African Socialism (Nkrumah 1967). Cabral, like Kanafani, was thus indicating that the lack of adequate social analysis was an impediment to liberation movements. Moreover, Cabral, like Kanafani, identified the forces of liberation as being comprised of an alliance between the peasantry, the workers, and what Cabral calls the "revolutionary sector" of the petty bourgeoisie, meaning, the

progressive intelligentsia such as Cabral himself (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 135). The petty bourgeoisie, for Cabral, refers to engineers, lawyers, doctors, schoolteachers, and the like. Yet, Cabral was also aware that this petty bourgeoisie could turn on the liberatory project. For according to Cabral, state power ultimately rests on the economic power of the ruling class, and the petty-bourgeoisie insofar as it lacks economic power can never become a ruling class (although it can become the governing class). As Cabral puts it: “history shows that whatever the role (often important) played by individuals coming from the petty bourgeoisie in the process of a revolution, this class has never possessed political power. And it never could, since political power (the State) has its foundations in the economic capacity of the ruling class” (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 136). So, if the petty bourgeoisie can lead the anti-colonial revolution, but cannot become the ruling class, what is its fate? To answer this question, we have to first answer the following question: who, in the colonial and neo-colonial situation, has or can have the kind of economic power that is at the foundation of political power? According to Cabral the answer is that economic power is “retained in the hands of two entities: imperialist capital and the native classes of workers [and peasants]” (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 136). Consequently, the petty bourgeoisie has no

option but to side with one of these two entities. According to Cabral the petty bourgeoisie can either choose to commit “suicide as a class” (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 136) by abdicating state power in favor of the peasantry and the workers or it can choose to ally itself with “imperialist capital.”

What is especially remarkable is that Cabral thinks that this choice cannot be articulated except in moral terms. As he puts it, “if national liberation is essentially a political question, conditions for its development stamp on it certain characteristics that belong to the sphere of morals” (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 136). In one sense, we could say that Cabral recognized that an appeal to self-interest was not enough to ensure that the petty bourgeoisie would not turn into agents of imperialism.<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, while Cabral was wary of moralistic explanations in general, he does concede that on a fundamental level there is no escaping from key moral questions in the case of the liberation struggle.

It is quite clear that Cabral was describing the decision that many liberation movements faced in the aftermath of independence. Furthermore, he was describing the situation that the petty bourgeoisie in Palestine faced and continues to face. Kanafani and the PFLP also reflected on the problems that stem

from the fact that it is a segment of the petty bourgeoisie which is leading the alliance of workers and peasants against Israel. Indeed, the analysis offered by Kanafani and the PFLP is almost identical to Cabral's analysis which was offered three years earlier in Havana:

...the reason for the existence of the petit bourgeoisie at the head of the Palestinian national movement is that, during the stages of national liberation, this class is one of the classes of the revolution, in addition to the fact that its numerical size is relatively great and that, by virtue of its class conditions, it possesses knowledge and power. Consequently, in a situation where the conditions of the working class from the viewpoint of political awareness and organization are not developed enough, it is natural that the petit bourgeoisie should be at the head of the alliance of the classes opposing Israel, imperialism and Arab reaction (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 54).

Cabral also indicates that the national movement has to be led, at least initially, by the petty bourgeoisie because it is the only class with an interest in terminating the colonial condition which is able to grasp the nature of the situation by virtue of its “higher standard of living than that of the masses, more frequent humiliation, higher grade of education and political culture” (Cabral 1979 [1966], p. 135). For Cabral, the peasantry is the social group that “has the greatest interest in the struggle,” but, on its own, it is unable to recognize this fact (Cabral 1969 [1964], p, 60). Kanafani would also register the outsized role played by the intelligentsia in the history of revolts in Palestine before the foundation of the state of Israel in similar terms (Kanafani 2014 [1972], p. 48). However, as Cabral indicated, and as Kanafani and the PFLP were aware, the petty bourgeoisie is a vacillating ally, hence they warned against deferring to the leadership of this class (PFLP 2017 [1969], p. 53 – 55). According to Kanafani the surrender of leadership to this class or to the comprador bourgeoisie would involve the liquidation of the nationalist project in its entirety: “when revolutionary theory confesses that class surrender is the auxiliary of [Arab] nationalist surrender, and that nationalist surrender provides the conditions to impose class surrender, then the organization cannot



avoid ascribing priority to its worker and peasant extensions” (Kanafani 2024 [1970b], p. 146).

Cabral and Kanafani’s articulation of the choice facing the petty bourgeoisie turned out to be prescient for Palestine. On the one hand, you have members of the petty bourgeoisie such as Kanafani and Habash who can be said to have chosen to commit class suicide. On the other hand, you have other members of the petty bourgeoisie who can be said to have chosen to serve as agents of “imperialist capital” by proxy through working as enforcers for the Israeli occupation as leaders and functionaries in the Palestinian Authority (Ajl 2024). To this extent, Cabral and Kanafani’s writings remain important not only for understanding the development of Tricontinental Marxism in the 1960s, but also for understanding our contemporary moment. Afro-Arab solidarity is indeed possible, but it must have a clear political and social basis beyond talk of a common victimization by a racist imperialist international order.

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[1] This is spelled out in much greater detail in (El Nabolsy and Ltifi 2021).

[2] For an articulation of the stakes involved here and for a defense of this principle, see (Honderich 2007).

[3] The translation from the original Arabic is made by the author.

[4] In fact, it was only during this period that the situation in Palestine approximated the conditions that were modelled in theories of guerilla warfare in the military texts associated with the Chinese and Vietnamese Revolutions, meaning, the numerical preponderance of the colonized and the possibility of encircling urban settlements through control of the countryside. As Kanafani notes, after 1948, that these conditions were no longer present, and they could only be replicated by conceiving of the struggle as an Arab-Israeli struggle as opposed to a purely Palestinian-Israeli struggle (Kanafani 2024 [1970b], p. 136). In other words, using the Vietnam analogy, the Hanoi in question would be Arab and not Palestinian.

[5] Although, of course, the appeal to self-interest is arguably a form of moral discourse as well.



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