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Guild Tripping: The Middle East Debate in the National Lawyers Guild

The National Lawyers' Guild was founded in 1937 as a radical alternative to the American Bar Association. Today, the Guild is an organization of about five thousand leftist attorneys, law students, legal workers, and jailhouse lawyers. A large plurality of the Guild members are Jewish.

The National Lawyers' Guild has always taken public positions on international issues. Over the last few years the Middle East question has been a topic of increasing debate. Chutzpah members and other radical Jews participated in this debate both individually and organizationally. What follows is a case history of the National Lawyers' Guild discussion of the Middle East, and of the relationship between radical Jews and a non-Jewish leftist group.

The Guild is a member organization of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, which is comprised of the official bar associations of most socialist countries and various alternative bar groups from around the world. In 1970 the convention of the IADL passed a resolution supporting the "Struggle of the Palestinians against Israel." The American delegation, led by the National Lawyers' Guild, abstained from the voting because the issue had not been discussed internally.

Since 1974, various resolutions supporting the Palestine Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) and condemning Israel have been proposed and discussed at National Lawyers' Guild meetings. They have been tabled and sent to chapters for further discussion and education. Some members have pushed for a position that would support the P.L.O., others have wanted to raise the level of discussion on the issue, and still others have felt that taking a position would cause many older (read: New York Jewish) members to resign. (They assumed, of course, that any position taken would be anti-Israel.)

Local Guild chapters took their commitment to Middle East education seriously. Chutzpah's first organizational contact with the Guild came in the spring of 1975 when we were invited to send two speakers to a midwest regional meeting in St. Louis.

We were originally scheduled to debate a member of the Iranian Student Association, but the other speaker never arrived. We were able to talk for a couple of hours about our Middle East position and we were asked good, substantive questions. A number of the Guild people were receptive to our ideas about Jewish peoplehood and self-determination. Most everybody was somewhat open to our point of view. We left the meeting feeling encouraged and supported by the Guild and by each other.

Our next encounter with the Guild came at the Chicago chapter meeting in June of 1975. This meeting, unlike the one in St. Louis, was called for the specific purpose of taking a chapter vote before the next meeting of the National Executive Board. The two issues were (1) should the Guild take a public position on the Middle East, and (2) if so, what should that position be?

A debate between a Chutzpah member and a Palestinian speaker was to provide the education and background prior to the vote. Our speaker was received courteously, but it was obvious from questions that not many people were seriously considering our position, which was for a two-state solution. The Palestinian never really dealt with the question of Jewish self-determination (a problem we were to encounter with most pro-P.L.O. speakers), and this omission was not questioned by the Guild members. It was obvious that most of the Chicago members were sympathetic to the P.L.O. and that the only real issue to be resolved was whether the Guild would take a public position.

Opposition to taking a position took three forms: (1) a number of people felt that the anticipated pro-P.L.O. position would "split" the Guild, (2) others thought that there had been insufficient education on the issue to warrant taking a position, and (3) many members objected to taking a position in areas where the Guild wasn't doing any actual work.

In retrospect it is quite discouraging that the articulated reasons for not taking a position were all essentially procedural. Outside of the Chutzpah

members, nobody even suggested that the Guild should refrain from taking a position because the general pro-P.L.O. sentiment might prove to be erroneous. Was nobody in the National Lawyers' Guild sympathetic to Israel? Did the Jewish Guild members feel that they had to hide their support behind the rhetoric of not taking a position? We never quite found out. The outcome of the vote, as expected, was a very strong resolution against taking a position, accompanied by an affirmation of support for the P.L.O. if a position was to be taken.

The August meeting of the Guild's national executive committee was held in Columbus, Ohio, and over three hundred people attended from around the country. Presumably, all of the Guild's fifty chapters had at least discussed the Middle East question and were prepared to take a vote on the National Lawyers' Guild position.

Two Chutzpah members who also belonged to the Guild attended the meeting. We met eight to ten people from other cities who were strongly committed to Jewish self-determination. This ad hoc caucus agreed that it would be good for the Guild to endorse a two-state solution; equal rights to self-determination for both Palestinians and Jews. We also agreed, however, that there was no possibility of such a proposal being adopted, so we decided to support the "no position" position. This may well have been a mistake, since it meant that we lost our opportunity to put forward our political ideas and spent our energy backing a position only distantly related to our own.

Before the debate in front of the whole body, the Middle East issue was discussed in a meeting of the International Committee. The language of the meeting was both fascinating and outrageous. The geographical entity under discussion was always referred to as "Palestine," as though the existence of Israel had already been erased. Progressive Israeli Jews were only referred to as "non-Arabs"; Palestinian "armed struggle" was applauded, while Jewish Defense League "terrorism" was decried. The Committee's deliberations produced a series of resolutions to be taken to the plenary meeting: that the Guild not take a formal position on the Middle East, but that the International Committee undertake a study of the oppression of the Palestinians. It was agreed that a formal position would be appropriate after further education and study. A Chutzpah member proposed a minority amendment which called for the additional study of Jews in Arab countries.

The floor proceedings on the Middle East question

began with a debate between two speakers. The pro-P.L.O. speaker's talk contained more rhetoric than content, and he concentrated on the evils of Zionism and the "correct" nature of the Palestinian struggle. Our representative was an older lawyer from New York, who gave a low key well-reasoned talk on why it was inappropriate for the Guild to take a position, stressing that the Middle East question was almost completely divorced from the organization's daily work. He did not outline the two-state solution.

The ensuing floor discussion was well organized and tightly structured. Many of the pro-P.L.O. speakers were astoundingly ill-informed—one was unaware that there were any Christian Arabs; another thought that the P.L.O. was the primary advocate of a two-state solution. At least half of the pro-P.L.O. speakers were Jewish, but this did not prevent them from presenting the same simplistic points (often tinged with latent anti-semitism) as the others. Their basic argument was that it was necessary for the Guild to support the P.L.O. in order to keep working with Third World revolutionary groups. This position was long on form and short on analysis but it was raised over and over again.

The Guild does have good working relationships with many Third World organizations, and one reason for this is probably that the National Lawyers' Guild has seldom hesitated to take independent political positions even when they were in conflict with these groups. However, many Guild members have managed to develop twin blind spots; some Third World groups are considered to be beyond criticism, and the issue of anti-semitism is never raised.

At the end of the floor discussion the resolution to not take a position passed by an overwhelming vote. The resolution to undertake the study of the oppression of Palestinians passed unanimously. The minority amendment, calling for the additional study of the oppression of Jews in Arab countries was again proposed. In the short debate that followed, the proposition was denounced as "a well-known Zionist ploy." Such open disregard for the safety of the Jews was blatantly anti-semitic, but it didn't even draw a ripple of response. The amendment was defeated by a two-to-one margin.

National Convention

The Guild's National Convention, held in Houston in February 1976, was a different ball game. Close to a thousand people attended, but the Middle East discussion was rather small. Only about thirty people

attended the presentation on the merits of the U.N. resolution equating Zionism with racism—probably because it was scheduled to conflict with two other presentations on “hotter” subjects. In any event, it was pretty clear that most people there had already made up their minds.

The pro-P.L.O. speaker was a Palestinian-American lawyer who did an excellent job of presenting statistics and legal documentation showing that many Israeli government policies and institutions are racist. However, he never justified the leap to “Zionism is inherently racist.” He repeatedly spoke of Jews as being only a “religious group.”

Our originally scheduled speaker was ill and had to be replaced by a last minute substitute. Given the difficulty of his position he did a good job of outlining the origins of Zionism, the Holocaust, and anti-semitism.

During the question-and-answer period we were surprised by the appearance of an older “superhawk” Zionist lawyer, who essentially denied the very concept that the Palestinians were oppressed people. Since we had misgivings about attacking another Jew in a hostile setting, we were unsure of how to deal with him and his arguments. Instead, we tried to emphasize the national rights of the Jews and to point out the inadequacy of the P.L.O.’s demand for a “democratic, secular state.” As usual, the P.L.O. supporters never dealt with these issues.

The Middle East discussion in the National Lawyers’ Guild did not end in Houston. As the debate continues, in the Guild and in other organizations, we will participate in it. Hopefully, we will be able to use our experience with the Guild to make ourselves more effective advocates of our position in the future:

What We Learned

We learned two important lessons. First, upholding a position with so little support among people whose political judgment usually matters a good deal to us, has been very isolating, frustrating, and painful. Issues that are both morally and politically basic to us made no sense at all to those around us. As a result, we were often hesitant—or even frightened—to express them. Obviously, while ours is such a minority position, this cannot be completely avoided. But we must build mutual support into our efforts to work with the non-Jewish Left—work and speak in teams rather than as isolated individuals, and make a point of establishing contact with other positively-identified Jews in Left organizations, offering them our support.

The second and most important lesson that we

learned was not to underestimate ourselves or our ideas. We hold a well-reasoned, humane and progressive position on the Middle East—and we can support it with more information and understanding than was possessed by most Guild members. Yet because we always felt that we were on the defensive, we did not make the most of our opportunity to put forward our support for self-determination for all the peoples of the Middle East. Even our best presentations may never make a dent in the hard-liners’ romance with their own misconceptions about the P.L.O.; but there are many people on the Left who recognize that they don’t have all the facts and who will be receptive to our ideas. And there are many Jews in Left organizations like the Guild who still need encouragement to assert their Jewish identity.

It is not only possible for us to build support for the two-state position, it is essential. Not only is it rewarding for us to create bonds with other Jews in the Left, it is crucial. If nothing else, our experience with the National Lawyers’ Guild taught us the absolute necessity for organization, support, and above all else, a firm and outspoken conviction of our solution for a just peace through self-determination for all peoples in the Middle East.