

A Case for Israel: Who Needs It?

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The title of Walter Block and Alan Futerman's book—*The Classical Liberal Case for Israel*—contains two noteworthy elements that are all too often and too conveniently overlooked. First, making a case for a particular state is somewhat an odd task for intellectuals, especially when the case centers not on the state's policies or practices but on its very existence.

States, let it be noted, need to present neither a case nor a positive rationale for being. They exist not because they are morally approved by the international community (what a spectacular oxymoron) but simply because their public institutions are trusted by an immense majority of their citizens (in democracies) or effectively imposed by a ruling elite loyal to the tyrant (under dictatorships). There is one exception, of course: On a global highway teeming with drunk drivers, road-raging nutcases, fugitive mass murderers, and countless dead bodies bouncing around in trunks, Israel is the only state asked to pull over and show its statehood license. As you read this, the Chinese one-party regime has imprisoned hundreds of thousands of Muslim civilians in concentration camps and is subjecting them to physical and mental torture; Russia is conducting a deadly all-out military assault on Ukraine; and men in virtually all Arab states (the Palestinian Authority included) are free to exercise their perfectly legal right to rape their wives. Yet no respected intellectual has asked whether a Chinese state should have been established, no academic journal questions Russians' entitlement to a nation-state, and no Western university dares host a conference in which scholars are invited to debate whether Morocco, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, Sudan, Afghanistan, Libya, or Egypt are worth existing.

In an intellectually honest world where one set of rules applies to all participants, a work such as Block and Futerman's would have been turned down by any serious publisher. It's just too bizarre trying to explain to readers who inhabit multiple existing states why another existing state should exist. In fact, it's rather surprising that Zionist intellectuals agree to take part in this unfair game in the first place. After all, one can ask—but for some reason never does—what is the case for Spain? What is the case for Thailand or Ghana? What makes Venezuela, Turkey, Zambia, Belgium, Indonesia, Nigeria, Finland, Lebanon, Germany, Somalia, and Mexico's existence rightful, illegitimate, or plausible? What, in God's name, is the moral justification for the existence of Uganda?

The "right to exist" game is one that Israelis and Israel's sympathizers should utterly avoid, not only because

playing it sanctions intellectual madness but also because it is a game they can never win. Even if they articulate the case for Israel superbly and convince their readers of its legitimacy, as long as an issue remains debatable it always remains hovering like a Damocles sword. Therefore, Israel's "right to exist" is always only one book, or one lecture, or one adroitly communicated manipulation away from being refuted.

The second element in Block and Futerman's title that is not to be taken for granted is the classical liberal part. For the sake of argument, suppose Israel's legitimacy should indeed be questioned. Why should it be defended by a political theory or ideology other than plain Zionism? What is the communist case for Israel? What is the constitutional monarchical case for Israel? Does Israel need a well-articulated social democratic case for its existence? And if it does—what would that case be anyway?

How do these two elements stated above—constructing a case for Israel and doing it from a classical liberal point of view—interact? My claim is that the latter may reasonably be excluded from the former. Namely, it is not the case for Israel that I propose to defend here (or anywhere else) but rather the classical liberal case for Israel, for this is probably the only ideology in which arguing for Israel's existence is intellectually acceptable.

Before I plunge into this, however, I need to define a few terms. Block and Futerman are both Libertarians, who present a Libertarian case for Israel tailored to Libertarian readers. Yet they have left *Libertarianism* out of the title, and as a matter of fact quite fairly, for at least two reasons. First, classical liberalism and Libertarianism are in effect the same, as both share the same founding principles: the supremacy of individual freedom in any social structure and laissez-faire capitalism as its inevitable political implication. These two terms are divided by politics more than philosophy, by temperament more than substance. One can reasonably argue that classical liberalism is nothing but a more inclusive and practical form of Libertarianism, one that causes less restlessness among those who are none of the above, for it substitutes plain animosity to the state with a constructive search for solutions to its flaws in a way that would make it more individual-liberty-oriented.

The second reason to favor *Classical Liberalism* over *Libertarianism* in the title is one that expands on the first. One of the few things Libertarians of all kinds can agree on—a less consensual notion among people who see themselves as "only" classical liberals—is that rights can never be applied to the many, be they social classes, ethnic groups, races, peoples, etc.; rather, they are a concept valid only for individuals. Hence, since it goes without saying that for Libertarians no state has a right to exist, making the case for Israel's existence is a task that requires excessively complicated rhetorical acrobatics. Rothbardian anarchists are exceptions even among Libertarians for holding that no state is even legitimate. Unlike most of their fellow anarchists, Block and Futerman are honest enough to address this challenge while discussing Israel. In their introduction, they assert that "In this work, we adopt a minarchist limited government position" (Block and Futerman 2021, p. xxvii). What they really mean is that a pure Rothbardian ethical and political language sometimes stands impotent in portraying real issues in the real world. Therefore, they have no choice but to put aside the no-state position and carry on using the small-government, or "night watchman state," or classical-liberal-state stance.

The main reason why a Libertarian case for Israel should not be dismissed as sanctioning madness is that it's the nature of the Libertarian intellectual tradition to take nothing for granted and doubt just about everything. While the answers Libertarians come up with may not always sufficiently correspond to reality, their questions always do. Where do rights come from? What is the moral basis for private property and self-ownership? What is the moral justification for the existence of a centralized and coercive apparatus such as a state? What makes taxation—the legal robbery of a person's own labor, skills, and talents—a civilized institution? While conservatives or liberals may often enough come with better answers, the Libertarians always win in setting the questions. Hence, when statist intellectuals argue that the concept of citizenship is based on a social contract, the Libertarian, who takes contracts very seriously, kindly asks them to show them his signature on the bottom of the page. That is, what makes a contract legal or moral if it is signed by only one party? What is the true meaning of the Jeffersonian notion of "consent of the governed" if no living governed in the last two and a half centuries has voted on the US constitution?

Questioning everything means not only that in Libertarian eyes no aspect of public life such as crime, drugs, immigration, race, environment, abortion, education, national security, and foreign affairs is left untouched, but that each one of these is an invitation to a literally endless debate—not with conservatives or liberals (that would be too easy) but with fellow Libertarians. Walter Block himself has spent decades questioning every sociological taboo, some of which were too much even for some of his associates. In his celebrated 1976 book, *Defending the Undefendable*, he made a case for the economic merits of pimps, blackmailers, slumlords, drug pushers, and almost every other noxious dirtbag known to man; in his recent works he has made the case for the total privatization of oceans, rivers, roads, and highways, and left Earth behind to argue that private property, under Lockean homesteading principles, should also be applied to outer-space real estate such as the moon, the planets, comets, and asteroids.

Considered *in toto*, hard-core individual-rights principles can take you much farther than outer space. In his *The Ethics of Liberty*, the summation of his political philosophy, Murray Rothbard—known since the 1970s as “Mr. Libertarian”—came up with a question that probably no “Mr. Conservative” or “Mr. Liberal” has ever troubled himself with, not to mention troubling others—a question that drew many theoretical rejoinders and debates across the Libertarian spectrum: Should a mother be allowed to starve her infant child to death? Rothbard argued that while a mother is definitely not allowed to actively kill her child by initiating force upon the little one, she should have the legal right not to feed her children and thus starve them to death because compulsory feeding would entail a positive act coerced upon her, depriving her of her rights and violating her sacred self-ownership for the sake of another individual (Rothbard 1982, pp. 100-107). If so, maybe Israel’s right to exist is not such a bizarre question after all.

The Libertarian movement has been obsessed with Israel for decades. Since the 1970s, countless articles, essays, book reviews, letters to the editor, and covers focusing on Israel have been circulated on a monthly and sometimes a weekly basis in almost every prominent Libertarian magazine—a tendency that only intensified since the turn of the present century by propagation through official websites, blogs, and social networks. Since the American Libertarian movement is highly decentralized both philosophically and institutionally, divided into endless groups and sub-groups, each advancing a different aspect of the Libertarian thought and often contradicting one another, one might expect mapping the movement’s sundry positions toward Israel to be almost impossible. Actually, it is a surprisingly easy task. These positions fall into three groups: a very influential minority of enthusiastic anti-Zionist anarchists, a not very influential minority of pro-Zionist Objectivists, and a vast care-nothing-for-Zionism majority systematically indoctrinated by the anti-Zionist position that has ruled the roost for years.

The Libertarian anarchists, most of whom are close friends or disciples of Rothbard’s (and often both), have always been the most devoted anti-Zionists around. Lew Rockwell, Justin Reimondo, Joe Sobran, Sheldon Richman, and of course Rothbard himself are fountainheads of the most coherent and brutal anti-Zionist texts one can find anywhere outside the Muslim world. Their decades-long crusade is all about making the case for the Arab and Palestinian narratives, deeming the Zionist state an imperialist project based upon barbarous dispossession and slaughter of the legitimate owners of the land (Rothbard 1967, 1978, 1982, 1993; Raimondo 2001; Richman 2019), occasionally while openly flirting with anti-Semitic sentiment (Rothbard 1990; Weber 1986; Sobran 2002). As the head counselor in this camp, Rothbard opposed any peace initiative that would leave Israel on its feet. He denounced the Egypt–Israel peace treaty as an Egyptian betrayal of the Palestinians (Rothbard 1978) and fifteen years later, after the signing of the Oslo Accords, he brought the same accusations against Yasser Arafat for the very same reason (Rothbard 1993).

The Rothbardian anarchists’ polar opposites—in so many respects, including the Zionist question—are the Randian Objectivists. Notably, the Objectivists, dogmatic followers of Ayn Rand’s philosophy, don’t see themselves as Libertarians and the latter essentially don’t see the former as such either. This mutual enmity is mainly a consequence of the schismatic personalities of the founders of these two cliques, Rand and Rothbard. Practically, though sectarian and zealously separatist, Objectivism is a camp within the Libertarian movement. In this way or another, in respect to Israel, Objectivists are known for their ardent pro-Zionism. They see Israel as a beacon of light in the Middle Eastern darkness, bringing reason,

individualism, capitalism, liberty, Western progress, and the creative mind into a region ruled by religion, collectivism, tyranny, oppression, and primitive parasitism (Biddle 2015-2016; Journo 2018). Taking the Israeli side is not enough for most Objectivists; since the 1990s they have been passionately advocating for the hawkish wing of the Zionist Right. Just like the Rothbardians, the leading Objectivist intellectuals spare no effort to express their contempt with the Oslo Accords, but for very different reasons of course. They see them as shameful moral bankruptcy by the Israelis, who instead of defeating terrorism certify it and grant it legal recognition (Peikoff 1996).

Most Libertarians are neither anarchists nor Objectivists but men and women who just want to keep government out of their lives and don't necessarily have a Libertarian rabbi, dead or alive, to go to whenever a moral problem comes up. (It is not coincidental that while still having plenty of respect for Rand and Rothbard, middle-of-the-road Libertarians are somewhat intimidated by the hard moral lines they have drawn. After all, most Libertarians believe you can be a perfect advocate for liberty even without celebrating selfishness or mothers' rights to starve their babies—and therefore find themselves more comfortable with the economist giants of this movement, such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman.) For many years, however, the anti-Zionist position was the only one available to them that carried a Libertarian seal of approval. Robert Nozick and Milton Friedman, for instance, both highly appreciated by moderate Libertarians (and extremely despised by many Rothbardians), were great supporters of Israel but never produced an analytical, moral, or even economic pro-Zionist text as a rejoinder to the stream of anti-Zionist opuses that kept piling up on the Libertarian bookshelf and newsstands during the 1970s as a result of anarchists' fruitful efforts. It was not until the 1990s that a moral pro-Israeli response started to circulate in the movement, although only on its aloof Objectivist fringe, which has practically no influence on the Libertarian mainstream.

When asked why Libertarians have been so obsessed with Israel, Tom Woods (2016), the Rothbardian author and activist, blamed it on the disproportionate pressure that the Israel lobby places on Washington in its demands for financial and military support and maintained that if the Azeri lobby applied that much pressure, Libertarians would be equally obsessed with Azerbaijan. There is a measure of truth in this claim, as probably the only thing Libertarians oppose more than funding their own big government is funding a foreign big government. However, Woods' point spectacularly skips over a few crucial facts: First, no Libertarian—even the most diehard pro-Zionist Objectivist—approves of giving American taxpayers' money to Israel or to any other foreign country. This is just beyond any debate for any Libertarian. It means that you can have a genuine dislike for the Israel lobby and still hold that in the authoritarian Middle Eastern hell, Israel is as close as one gets to a Libertarian state. Second, at any given moment since Israel was established, the U.S. has invested much, much more money and troops in other places—starting with Western Europe, continuing through Korea and Vietnam, and onward to the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Third, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has not made itself an organic part of the all-Libertarian discourse. It is essentially an obsession of one man—Mr. Libertarian—who, thanks to his charismatic personality and brilliant mind, welded it into his anarchist followers' agenda. They, in turn, as the most energetic and vocal faction in the movement, towed the Libertarian mainstream into this obsession with considerable success. It is fair to say that most Libertarians show no interest in Israel whatsoever but, fueled with the Rothbardian anti-Zionist obsession, do indeed focus more attention on the Israel lobby than on the invisible lobbies of the U.S.-funded, not-so-Libertarian hereditary monarchy of Jordan, or not-very-Rothbardian Arab Republic of Egypt, or not-quite-individual-rights-driven regime in Ethiopia.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has the very solid Libertarian characteristic of being essentially a dispute over property. For Libertarian observers, it is a useful case with which to sharpen every instrument in their ideological toolbox: the non-aggression principle, homesteading, property rights, collective rights, statism, and coercion—each of which has a tangible and ongoing representation in a defined area smaller than the state of New Jersey. In fact, it is not hard to make a well put Libertarian argument that acknowledges the tribulations of many Palestinian individuals since the emergence of Zionism and particularly during the 1948 war. When families are fleeing their homes in the midst of a war, forced to leave their homes

by their leaders, or driven out of their homes by the enemy—as has happened, essentially, in every civil war in modern times and undoubtedly happened in many cases in this one, too—it is something not to be taken lightly by anyone, least of all by Libertarians. Nevertheless, considering the nature of the Libertarian approach toward Israel, one must ask: Is it individual rights of Palestinians that makes this conflict so appealing to Rothbard and his followers? Or is it something else?

The thing that motivated Rothbard's three-decade obsession with Israel—and was amplified many times over by his admirers—is not pure Libertarian-anarchist theory but rather pure Libertarian-anarchist politics. By raising the anti-Zionist flag as high as it can possibly get, he sought to distinguish himself and his movement from his personal and political antagonists: his erstwhile partners on the American Right, organized bipartisan American Jewry, and what one may call the fusion of these two, the Neoconservatives—who, to be fair, are no strangers themselves to obsessions with Israel. Between his *War Guilt in the Middle East* (1967) and his death in 1995, Rothbard published dozens of anti-Israeli texts, virtually all starting or concluding with a sarcastic reference to his old foes. In the 1982 Lebanon War, when the IDF crossed Israel's northern border to hunt down PLO terrorists, and when Christian Phalangists infamously massacred Palestinian civilians in Sabra and Shatilla as Israeli troops disgracefully did nothing to stop it, he called it a *Blitzkrieg* and a *holocaust*, respectively—terms carefully chosen, of course (Rothbard 1982). A decade later he expressed his contempt for the Oslo Accords, stating that “There is only one enjoyable aspect of this accord betraying justice: the extreme discomfiture of our friends the American neocons, who are more hawkish on Zionism and the Arabs than are three-fourth of the Jewish population of Israel” (Rothbard 1993).

The Rothbardianism on which the movement's obsession with Israel rests reflects the fact that with very, very few exceptions (Halbrook 1981), the Libertarian discourse on Israel has very little to do with Libertarianism. In fact, many anti-Zionist Libertarians judge the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by standards they would never apply to other issues. Supporting the Palestinian side over the Israeli as a monolithic, tribal account means that Zionist pioneers who legally purchased thousands of acres in the 1920s and homesteaded them for generations according to the Lockean manual will never be fully entitled to their property, because in some cosmic collective sense it will always remain Palestinian. It is worth noting that since there is no Libertarian theory of collective property rights, there can be no Libertarian theory of collective blame for infringing on these putative rights. Furthermore, pointing at the 1948 war as grounds for proclaiming Israel's existence illegitimate amounts to a call for overturning the results of a war because the side that initiated it is dissatisfied with its consequences. The non-aggression principle—the most fundamental pillar of Libertarian thought, holding that no physical force may be used against anyone who did not initiate the use of force—seems strikingly flexible when it comes to the Palestinian leaders who, backed by an armed militia and the armies of six Arab states, waged a campaign of ethnic cleansing meant to make Palestine Jew-free (viz., *Judenfrei*, as Rothbard might have called it in a parallel universe).

Ideological sensibilities also tend to be fairly selective for many Libertarians when they observe the Middle East of today or of recent history. When Hamas officials confiscate privately owned backyards in Gaza with neither warrant nor compensation for use in launching rockets into Israeli cities, it is never an “individual rights” or a “big government” issue. When Iran established a revolutionary Islamic army in Lebanon to take over the country—winning the hearts of millions by bombarding Israeli cities repeatedly for decades—it was never “imperialism” or “expansionism.” When hundreds of thousands of Palestinian men, women, and children were expelled from Kuwait in early 1990s in retaliation for the PLO's empathy with Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War—well, most anti-Zionist Libertarians have never heard about it anyway. It is just one of those non-Israel-to-blame-things that are useless for trolling Neocons or American-Jewish Liberals. Besides, of course Kuwait is really wrong in this case, but no state is perfect, right?

Block and Futerman come away with two main achievements in their book. First, they get the Libertarian discourse on Israel back on board the Libertarian truck. This is not to say that their account is nothing but Libertarian. The first chapter, for instance, that provides evidence for Judea being Jewish since antiquity, addresses the national sentiment and is not the most obvious point of departure for anyone who reads this book through pure Libertarian lenses. (This cosmic-historical-collective sense is a trap into

which Objectivists never fall when advocating for Israel.) When they talk pure Libertarian language, however, they are superbly convincing. They build their case for Israel using strong references to the ethics of the indispensable philosophers of the movement's canon: Locke's homesteading principle, Rothbard's interpretation of it, Nozick's entitlement theory, and even implied Randian concepts of rational and creative Western values that Zionists brought to this land, affording generations of Palestinians a higher standard of living than they could have achieved on their own or under any other Middle Eastern rule.

The Libertarian nature of this book is evident not only in its substance but also in its character: In the Libertarian intellectual tradition, formulating a positive argument through evidence alone is never enough; previous Libertarian analyses must be fought and refuted as well. Therefore, a worthy Libertarian text is one that enriches not only the understanding of its subject but also Libertarian thought *en bloc*. Block and Futerman's thorough rebuttal of Rothbard's *War Guilt in the Middle East* is invaluable not only because this 1967 essay is the ground zero of the Libertarian anti-Zionist obsession, but also because it is a great personal drama. Turning against a mentor—in Block's case also a beloved friend—is one of the main factors that keep Libertarianism intellectually alive.

Turning against a mentor over his views on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is something that no Rothbardian anarchist has ever done before, and this is the second achievement of the book. The Libertarian perspective on the Middle East, as manifested at both opposing poles of the movement, is astonishingly monolithic. All leading Objectivist figures—in fact, it is very hard to find exceptions even among junior ones—are pro-Zionists who see Israel as a liberatory agent, a Randian-rationalist-capitalist outpost in a region where these values are needed the most. In many cases, their use of rigid Objectivist vocabulary and concepts alienates mainstream Libertarians, not to mention anarchists. Antipodally, it is hard to find hardline anti-Zionist Libertarians (as opposed to merely determined critics of the Israel lobby) who are not Rothbardian anarchists or, alternatively, Rothbardian anarchists who are not anti-Zionists at least to some extent. Therefore, a book that presents the contra-Rothbardian argument, co-written by unquestionably one of the top two or three living personalities in the Rothbardian intellectual ecosystem, is a game changer in the Libertarian discourse on Israel because it brilliantly uncouples anarchism from anti-Zionism or, to be more accurate, refutes Rothbard's embarrassing obsession-driven assertion that in the Middle Eastern slaughterhouse Israel is a uniquely pernicious state (1982, p. 6). Yes, it is indeed the worst state in the Middle East, say Block and Futerman as true Libertarians—except for all the others.

“Rothbardianism is not a cult. His followers, such as we the present authors, are allowed to disagree with the master,” they argue, echoing a common spiteful claim among Libertarians, according to which Objectivism is a cult that denies its members the right to free independent thinking. However, by hitting Ayn Rand's disciples below the belt, the authors make it clear that defending Israel and Zionism from a Libertarian/classical liberal perspective does not necessarily make you an Objectivist. Thus, the perpetual cold war between Rothbardians and Randians is still on.

It would be fair, it seems, to evaluate *The Classical Liberal Case for Israel* as follows: if you place it on the bookshelf that you've reserved for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, you've sanctioned madness: existing states simply need no justification. Alternatively, if you put it on the *Libertarianism* shelf, you've got yourself a perfectly crafted work that applies complex ethical and political theories to an issue that has been abused for years by sheer obsession, one that may be further studied using books borrowed from a totally different section of the library.

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