

On Palestinian suicide bombings: letters to the WSWS and a reply by the editorial board

13 April 2002

Your bias, and that of the WSWS, is coming through loud and clear! You have become a voice for Arafat! Where is your indignation regarding the killing of innocents eating pizza and engaged in religious ceremony? ... You should be ashamed of yourself!

Sincerely,

GH

1 April 2002

Not one mention of suicide bombings in Patrick Martin's piece [Israel and Washington debate murder of Arafat, destruction of Palestinian Authority, April 1, 2002]. Dead Israelis aren't relevant to what is happening?

JS

1 April 2002

To GH and JS,

As a matter of fact, the *World Socialist Web Site* has on numerous occasions expressed its sympathy for the innocent civilians killed in suicide bombings and made it clear that we do not support terrorist attacks on noncombatants. We view such tactics as detrimental to the struggle against Israeli occupation and oppression. In our view, a just, democratic and socially progressive settlement of the Middle East conflict requires the development of a political program for uniting the Arab masses and Jewish workers in a common struggle against not only the Zionist state, but also the bourgeois Arab regimes in the region, with the aim of establishing a socialist federation of the Middle East.

We have, however, nothing in common with those who condemn Palestinian suicide bombers in order to justify the war crimes being committed by the Sharon government, with the support of the Bush administration, against the Palestinian people. When George W. Bush declares that suicide bombers are nothing more than murderers, intelligent people who sympathize with the plight of the oppressed are obliged to think well before they echo his preachments.

As tragic as the results of suicide bombings are, it is a perverse and cynical brand of moralism that equates them with Israel's indiscriminate bombing of densely populated Palestinian towns and refugee camps and the assassination of Palestinian political leaders. There is no equivalency between the desperate acts of brutalized youth and the use of the most powerful military hardware to ravage an entire population. It does make a difference that the former is carried out in an attempt, although politically misdirected, to achieve freedom from subjugation, and the latter to maintain oppression.

Decades ago Leon Trotsky pointed out that "history has different yardsticks for the cruelty" of the oppressed and the oppressor. "A slave-owner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning or violence breaks the chains—let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us that they are equals before a court of morality!" (Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours*). We fully subscribe to this sentiment.

Many people, particularly in the US, have been disoriented by a relentless and sophisticated propaganda campaign that presents the Israeli

regime as the innocent party, forced to react to Palestinian violence. The American government and the US media unanimously present the situation in this fashion.

The US media coverage moves within a narrow spectrum that extends from "Arafat is a mad dog" to "Israel has been forced to defend itself against Palestinian attacks." An iron-clad rule observed by US media commentators is to refer to all Israeli military attacks, no matter how bloody and indiscriminate, as *responses* to Palestinian terror attacks.

This pretence becomes more difficult to maintain when the Israeli military is lobbing missiles into civilian neighborhoods, destroying water, electrical and sewage facilities, rounding up thousands of Palestinian men and stamping their arms with identification numbers, using civilians as human shields, shooting at reporters to prevent them from exposing the results of Israeli actions to the outside world—in general, employing methods that recall those used by Nazi Germany against the Jews of Europe.

Nevertheless, the American media does its best. A recent example of what passes for objective commentary is an article by Serge Schmemmann of the *New York Times* ("The Method of This Madness," April 7, 2002). Schmemmann pretends to be even-handed, but the manner in which he refers to the two sides reveals all. He writes, "To the Israelis, the slaughter of the innocents becomes confirmation that the goal of the Arabs is to drive them into the sea. To the Palestinians, the anguished Israeli response becomes a confirmation that they will never willingly fulfill the Palestinians' longing." The Palestinians are not only the initiators of violence, they are cold-blooded killers of innocents. The Israelis merely respond, and do so with "anguish."

Certain facts, however, are not so easily buried. The Israelis are illegally occupying Palestinian land, not the other way round. The Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, has opposed the so-called peace process from its inception and heads an ultra-nationalist party that claims the West Bank as Biblical Judea, part of the God-given Jewish homeland. His military and political careers are marked by atrocities against Palestinian civilians, from the 1953 massacre in the West Bank village of Qibya to the 1982 invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut, which culminated in the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatilla camps—a war crime that ultimately led to Sharon's removal from the post of Israeli defense minister.

In various government posts, Sharon spearheaded the confiscation of Palestinian land and expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank—a policy of "changing the facts on the ground" designed to strengthen the Israeli grip on the occupied territories and undermine Palestinian strivings for an independent state.

Sharon incited the latest eruption of violence in the occupied territories by staging a visit in September, 2000 to Al-Haram al-Sharif in East Jerusalem (called the Temple Mount by Israelis) with a retinue of 1,000 armed Israeli soldiers. Following his election as prime minister in February 2001 he launched a campaign of assassinations aimed at destroying the political infrastructure of the Palestinian national

movement. This is the political context in which the phenomenon of Palestinian suicide bombings has emerged.

As a widespread phenomenon, it is of recent vintage. Until the past year or so, such actions were relatively rare and were generally the province of Islamist groups. Among those allied to the secular nationalist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), suicide bombings were generally spurned as a method of resistance. That they have proliferated now must reflect social and political conditions of extreme oppression, and a general sense among Palestinian youth that the old methods and leaderships have failed to offer a way out of the nightmare existence imposed by Israel and the US.

The US media, the Bush administration and the Zionist establishment proceed as though the latest suicide bombing were the starting point for understanding the widening conflict in the Middle East. A serious approach to the situation, however, does not begin with events in 2002 or 2001. To understand the crisis in the Middle East, one must grasp it as a historical whole.

The genocidal destruction of European Jewry in the Nazi Holocaust created the political climate in which the Zionist movement, until World War II a minority tendency among Jews, could win the sympathy of millions around the world, Jew and non-Jew alike. It is a tragic irony—rooted in the nationalist program of Zionism—that what was presented as the salvation of the Jewish people, the establishment of a Jewish state, was based on the dispossession of another oppressed people—the Palestinians.

In 1948 the Zionist regime drove out 700,000 Palestinians and destroyed 400 of their villages. In 1967 the Israelis seized more territory. One hundred and fifty Jewish-only settlements and eleven exclusively Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem have been built in the occupied territories since that time. Some 400,000 Jewish settlers (200,000 on the West Bank, 200,000 in East Jerusalem) are illegally using land and water resources taken from the Palestinians.

Since the Oslo “peace” agreement in 1993, the number of Jewish settlers has increased by 70 percent. The Israeli authorities have demolished 2,600 Palestinian houses in the past 15 years. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians continue to live in squalid refugee camps.

Those living in Palestinian areas on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have been subjected for 35 years to the indignities and humiliations of an occupied population— checkpoints, border closures, arbitrary acts of violence and repression. The “right of return” of Palestinians is denied, while large numbers of Jewish immigrants are given stolen land to settle and live on.

Since September 2000, Israel has imposed a near total economic blockade and travel ban on the occupied territories, depriving hundreds of thousands of Palestinians of their livelihoods, breaking up families and enforcing prison-like conditions on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

This is the general framework that makes Palestinian outrage inevitable and fully justified. The specific conditions that have given rise to the phenomenon of Palestinian suicide bombings are bound up with the failure of bourgeois nationalism, even in its more militant forms, to offer a viable perspective for realizing the democratic, national and social aspirations of the Palestinian people.

First and foremost is the treacherous role of the Arab bourgeois regimes in isolating the Palestinian movement and subordinating it to the intrigues of US imperialism. Like all bourgeois ruling classes in countries with a late capitalist development, the Arab elites are organically incapable of maintaining a position of genuine independence from the imperialist powers. They are fundamentally hostile to a revolutionary movement of the Palestinian masses against Israel and US imperialism, because such a movement would inspire revolt by the workers and oppressed masses within their own borders. Hence they have repeatedly sought to contain and emasculate the Palestinian resistance.

The high-water marks of this process were the Camp David peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1978, where for the first time an Arab government recognized the legitimacy of the Zionist state, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, when the Arab states stood by while Israel laid siege to Beirut and expelled the PLO from Lebanon.

These betrayals exposed the fundamental unviability of the nationalist perspective of Yasser Arafat and the PLO itself. No one can doubt the personal courage of the PLO leadership and cadre, including Arafat. The PLO’s founding and its stated intention of regaining the Palestinians’ land and establishing a democratic, secular state electrified the region. The movement won massive support, particularly among the youth, and not only among the Palestinians.

The PLO, however, has never gone beyond the limits of bourgeois nationalism. It first allied itself with the USSR, attempting to win concessions by balancing between imperialism and the Soviet Stalinist regime. Following the PLO’s expulsion from Lebanon, Arafat turned to the Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak, by then a full-fledged client of the American CIA and State Department.

The alliance with Cairo paved the way for the PLO to repudiate its opposition to the Zionist state and embrace the policy of two states—Israeli and Palestinian. This retreat was formalized in the Oslo accord of 1993, which initiated the so-called “peace process.” Arafat’s White House handshake with then-Israeli Prime Minister Rabin signified that the PLO, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, had placed itself firmly under the wing of Washington.

The entire “peace process” was a political deception on a grand scale, whose essence was to transform the PLO into a police force for repressing the Palestinian masses, while Israel continued to expand its settlements and ensure that any future Palestinian state would be nothing more than an Israeli protectorate. That the “peace process” was incompatible with the needs and aspirations of the Palestinian masses became manifest at the Camp David summit in the summer of 2000, when US President Clinton told Arafat in no uncertain terms that Washington would never sanction the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homes, or the formation of a viable, unified Palestinian state with Arab Jerusalem under Palestinian sovereignty.

There followed Sharon’s September 2000 provocation in East Jerusalem and a brutal Israeli crackdown against the resultant Palestinian protests. The American reaction to Israel’s tactics were muted at best—meaning Israel’s turn to repression and provocation had tacit US support.

The outrage and desperation of the Palestinian youth have been fueled by the exposure of the “peace process” as a cruel hoax, and their disillusionment with the policies of the PLO. Since its establishment in the aftermath of the Oslo agreement, the Palestinian Authority has been able to do nothing to improve the lives of the Palestinian masses. If anything, their circumstances have worsened in the impoverished Palestinian areas of Gaza and the West Bank.

These are the conditions that have given rise to the phenomenon of suicide bombings. These acts are less the product of a worked-out program of political terrorism than acts of desperate resistance.

There is a huge element of hypocrisy in the declarations of Zionist leaders deploring terrorism. Jewish history is replete with examples of freedom fighters who resorted to terrorist tactics against overwhelming odds. Leaving aside Moses, Joshua, Samson and others who killed tens of thousands of innocents, according to the Old Testament, in the pursuit of Jewish liberation, there are historical figures like the Maccabees, who, as Israeli journalist Uri Avnery notes, “were terrorists who went around killing Hellenized Jews.” The Zionists themselves, as Avnery also points out, put bombs in the Arab markets in Jaffa and Haifa, blew up the King David Hotel and shot at Arab buses.

How would the world have viewed terrorist acts by Jews, even against civilian centers, within Nazi Germany or occupied Europe? Is there any

doubt the attackers would have been regarded as heroes? How would we remember the courageous inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto if they had fought their way out during the uprising in 1943 and killed innocent Poles, as well as German soldiers? That same year the Nazis lost one thousand supply trains a month due to partisan attacks. Not all of the victims of the train wrecks were in uniform.

Jewish nationalism, in the form of Zionism, has created a nightmare, and not only for the Palestinians. That Jews are engaged in mass roundups, collective punishments, political assassinations and other brutal forms of repression is one of the most terrible ironies of our time. The democratic and freedom-loving traditions of the Jewish people have been dragged in the mud and defiled by Zionism. Indeed, the single most dangerous source of contemporary anti-Semitism is the manner in which Israeli depredations against the Arabs implicate, in the minds of many millions around the world, the Jewish people as a whole.

Israel's final moral destruction has been brought about by the Sharon regime and its campaign of terror. Such is the reactionary logic of any state built on national or religious exclusivity—Jewish, Islamic or any other. The question confronting Jews today is how to emerge from this catastrophe.

We are convinced that there is widespread and growing opposition within Israel to the assault on the West Bank, even though it goes almost entirely unreported by the US media. There are Israeli citizens who deplore the suicide bombings, yet are able to identify the ultimate source of such actions in the policies of their own government. Many thousands have braved Israeli police and troops to demonstrate their opposition, and hundreds of military reservists are refusing to serve in the occupied territories. This alone gives the lie to the smear that all opponents of Sharon are pro-terrorists and anti-Semites.

The recent events demonstrate that there will be no peace until the Zionist state and ideology have been repudiated, all the reactionary borders drawn up by imperialism abolished and a secular, democratic and socialist answer found to the crisis of the region.

By the editorial board
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