

# The political failure of the PLO and the origins of Hamas

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In September 1993, the Oslo Accords were hailed as the basis for ending the decades long Israeli-Palestinian conflict and for establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel within five years.

That vision is now in tatters. Israel's Likud-Labour coalition, with the backing of its US sponsor, has sent in the tanks to reoccupy the territories seized in the 1967 war and dismantle the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Sharon government has used the wave of suicide bombings by Hamas, the political Islamic group, and other militant groups as the pretext for tearing up the accords and dubbing the PA a terrorist entity.

These suicide bombings targeting innocent civilians are desperate and horrific acts by young people influenced by political tendencies that have no progressive perspective upon which to base their opposition to Israeli oppression. Designed to slaughter innocent civilians, they do not advance the interests and aspirations of the Palestinian people one iota.

One of the most prominent of the groups claiming responsibility for the terrorist tactics is Hamas, which is also the most prominent opponent of Yasser Arafat's Fatah leadership with its perspective of a secular Palestinian state. To date Hamas has been the main political beneficiary of the failure of Arafat's efforts to secure a political accommodation with Israeli and US imperialism. Indeed Arafat's continued efforts to prostrate himself before President Bush, even after Washington has declared him a pariah, serves to recruit desperate young workers to the Islamic fundamentalists as a seemingly militant alternative to the PA leadership.

But Hamas' reactionary ideology, combining as it does religious obscurantism with crude anti-Semitism, offers no way out of the present impasse. It seeks the establishment of an Islamic state in Palestine, with Jews and other non-Muslims excluded; to be achieved by sending its youth cadre on suicidal terrorist missions. That such a movement has risen to prominence and presently commands the support of an estimated 25 percent of Palestinians can only be understood and politically combated through an historical examination of the failure of secular Arab bourgeois nationalism and the stifling by Stalinism and its ideological offshoots of a genuinely socialist political alternative for the working class.

## The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Palestine

Founded in 1988 shortly after the outbreak of the last Intifada in the Gaza Strip, Hamas—the Islamic Resistance Movement—is affiliated to the Gaza Muslim Brotherhood; the political Islamic movement.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza is one of a number of Islamic movements in the Arab world that owes its origins and *modus operandi* to the revival of Islam, the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood and its transformation into a political party in neighbouring Egypt in 1928. The

Brotherhood sought to restore Islam to its pre-existing dominant status in society, and to make Egypt an Islamic state based on Sharia law. From this it followed that the Brotherhood would recognise as legitimate rulers only those who acted in accordance with Sharia law and oppose the imperialist powers that dominated Egypt.

It combined this with the advocacy of corporatism and paternalism on the part of the landowners and employers, as a counterweight to the class struggle. Its social programme necessarily impacted on every sphere of social life. While women would be educated and allowed to work, they would be kept separate from men; religion would provide the core of education; and the economy would be based upon the principles of the Koran. To this end, the Brotherhood set up a network of schools, clinics, factories and mosques. It also built up a network of paramilitary groups, and after World War II, an assassination squad that murdered the Egyptian Prime Minister in 1948.

Above all, it used religious sectarianism and anti-Semitism in a conscious attempt to combat secularism and the growing influence of the socialist and communist left—many of whom were Jewish—within the national movement, and to divide the working class. This was particularly evident in the industrial city of Alexandria which was ethnically very diverse. The Brotherhood's anti-working class axis thus blended nationalism and religion with a reactionary social programme.

Originally supportive of the Free Officers Coup in 1952 that brought Gamal Abdul Nasser to power in Egypt, the Brotherhood was outlawed in 1954 after a failed attempt on Nasser's life, and some of its leaders and supporters left for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

While illegality undoubtedly weakened the influence of the Brotherhood, its political decline was mostly due to the growing popularity and prestige of the secular nationalist movements in the Middle East, most importantly the Nasserite project and later the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). For the next 30 years, the Brotherhood's influence in Egypt and Gaza was minimal.

Egypt's struggle against the former imperialist powers in the region, Britain and France, brought Nasser into conflict with Israel in their joint campaign against Suez in 1956. Nasser was transformed into a hero after the British and French pullout from Suez. From then on, he took the leading role against Israel on behalf of the Palestinians and turned to the Stalinists in Moscow for economic and military support.

The progressive social, economic and political reforms carried out by his authoritarian regime—the limited secularisation of the state and break up of the large estates, nationalisation of basic industry and the development of education and basic services—won him popular support. He promoted political illusions in secular Pan-Arabism as a political alternative to communism throughout the Middle East. But Nasser's ill thought out brinkmanship with Israel in 1967, in which the Soviet Union played a cynical role, led to the disastrous defeat of the Arab forces in the June war.

The war created more refugees as Palestinians fled the West Bank for

Jordan and resulted in Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and annexation of East Jerusalem. Far from liberating Palestine, it was an unmitigated disaster. The war demonstrated the impossibility of achieving any unity of purpose and action under the leadership of the various divided and antagonistic bourgeois cliques in the region.

The Arab defeat and the discrediting of Nasserism paved the way for two opposed political developments—the creation of various guerrilla organisations, which believed that the Palestinians should wage their own independent military campaign for the liberation of Palestine, and the rebirth of political Islamism.

## **Fatah and the PLO**

The PLO had been founded in 1964, but was dominated by the Palestinian notables that Nasser had installed for his own purposes. Yasser Arafat's Fatah group soon emerged as the most important guerrilla organisation. It amended the charter to assert the programme of armed struggle, and, under Arafat's leadership, took control of the executive committee in February 1969.

Apart from its commitment to armed struggle in pursuit of democratic and secular nationhood, the PLO articulated no political or social programme for the Palestinian workers and peasants. It operated as a Popular Front coalition, within which, according to Article 8 of its charter, "The phase in their history, through which the Palestinian people are now living, is that of national (*watani*) struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Thus, conflicts among the Palestinian forces are secondary and should be ended for the sake of the basic conflict that exists between the forces of Zionism and of imperialism on the one hand, and the Palestinian Arab people on the other." On this basis, the PLO as a whole was declared to be the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people, and the political domination of the bourgeoisie, through its party, Fatah, was ensured.

With regard to the Arab ruling elite as a whole, the charter proclaimed that the PLO "shall cooperate with all Arab states, each according to its potentialities; and will adopt a neutral policy among them in the light of the requirements of the war of liberation; and on this basis, it shall not interfere in the internal affairs of any state."

The PLO could never overcome the political impasse into which the Palestinian masses had been led by the perfidy of the Arab regimes because, though it was a genuinely popular movement and contained within its ranks diverse social tendencies, its programme served to cover over the class issues and subordinate them to the national question. Notwithstanding its heroic and often desperate struggles, it represented the interests of the Palestinian bourgeoisie, which sought a national framework in which to exploit its own working class.

In effect the PLO arose phoenix-like out of the dying embers of secular nationalism and as a truncated expression of a movement that had already failed on the larger arena of the Middle East.

For the next 20 years, Fatah was synonymous with the PLO and the PLO was synonymous in the eyes of the world with revolution and the struggle for a democratic and secular state of Palestine. Arafat, as chairman of Fatah and the PLO coalition symbolised the PLO and he became known as Mr Palestine. But it was to suffer repeated betrayals at the hands of the very Arab regimes on which it depended and which it refused to politically challenge.

The defeat of the Arab armed forces in the October 1973 war, despite the rearming of Egypt and Syria by the Soviet Union, led Egypt to cut a deal with Israel in return for US aid, isolating the PLO.

The PLO soon came up against the opposition of the regimes of the

countries from which it launched its operations against Israel. In both Jordan in 1970-71 and later Lebanon, the PLO was unable to put forward a social and political programme for the Palestinian and Arab masses that could stop the advance of the Israeli forces. Its military campaigns and parades served only to antagonise the Lebanese nationalists. Their initial support turned to hatred, paving the way for the PLO's defeat and exile at the hands of Israel in 1982.

Within a few years of taking control of the PLO, Arafat himself was ready to recognise the state of Israel and accept a "two state" solution—for a mini- and non-contiguous state of Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza alongside Israel. While various plans were put forward, these were always rejected by Israel and its US backers.

It was the Intifada, the spontaneous uprising, in December 1987, of Palestinian workers and youth in the Occupied Territories that drove the PLO into the arms of US imperialism. It not only shook the Israeli but also the Palestinian bourgeoisie and US imperialism. They feared that the revolutionary movement of the masses would escalate out of control, not just in Palestine, but elsewhere in the oil rich region.

In December 1988, in a statement dictated word for word by the US State Department, Arafat guaranteed the security of Israel, accepted that a peace settlement with Israel was a "strategy and not an interim tactic" and renounced all forms of terrorism, "including individual, group and state terrorism". In frank acknowledgement of his humiliation, Arafat said, "What do you want? Do you want me to do a strip tease? It would be unseemly" when asked at a press conference to declare his acceptance of Israel.

## **Modern Political Islam**

Israel's destruction, in the space of six days in June 1967, of the Arab armies discredited the secular nationalist regimes of Egypt and Syria, and their backers in the Soviet Union. They had proved incapable of reconciling their differences, of taking even the most elementary precautions to protect their equipment and installations from surprise attacks by Israel, much less defeating Israel.

The 1967 war not only led to the emergence of the PLO, but also spawned the revival of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar forces throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The Islamic forces benefited from the crisis of secular nationalism and were to some extent able to fill the political vacuum created by the insistence of the Stalinists that the working class had no independent political role to play.

While the PLO sought a democratic and secular nation state, the Brotherhood opposed both—seeking instead an Islamic state in each country that would exclude other religions as a prelude to the creation of a wider Islamic entity.

Within Egypt, Anwar Sadat, Nasser's successor, started to reverse the secularisation of the state in order to widen his own base of support. He amended the constitution to acknowledge Sharia as a main source of law. He recruited Muslim Brothers and Islamic student activists in his campaign against those Nasserites and lefts who opposed him. Finally, in 1980, he made Sharia the main source of legislation. He thereby played a crucial role in creating the conditions for an Islamic opposition tendency to develop. As well as a re-energised Muslim Brotherhood, other militant Islamic groups emerged such as Gama'at Islamiyya, which spawned the splinter group, Islamic Jihad, in Gaza.

*To be continued*



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