

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

## Part 3

Jean Shaoul  
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*This is Part three and conclusion of this three-part series. Part one was posted on July 5 and Part two on July 6.*

The fear that the revolutionary movement of the masses would escalate out of control led Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in December 1988 to formally accept the state of Israel and reject the armed struggle.

This announcement set in motion a protracted negotiating process to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict, culminating in the Oslo Accords in September 1993, as the first stage towards an independent Palestinian state. Such a state would enable the Palestinian bourgeoisie, who had amassed considerable assets in exile, to expand their wealth through the exploitation of wage labour guaranteed by their own state apparatus. From the perspective of US imperialism and the Zionist state, the Palestinian capitalists, through the vehicle of the PLO, would be tasked with policing the Palestinian working class and ensuring Israel's security.

In turn this meant that after December 1988, Hamas openly confronted the PLO over who should dominate the political processes. Hamas turned explicitly to terrorist actions against Israeli military and civilian targets, as a means of bolstering its standing amongst the masses. In May 1989, the Israeli authorities arrested several hundred Hamas supporters, including Yasin, for their involvement in terrorism. Nearly two years after the start of the uprising and one year after Israel had banned the PLO/UNLO committees, Israel finally declared the movement illegal.

By this time, Hamas had become the main opposition party, regularly coming second to Fatah in student and professional polls. When the PLO agreed in October 1991 to participate in the US-brokered Madrid talks to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel, Hamas called for "a full return to the military option" and demanded up to 50 percent representation on all PLO bodies. This was rejected amid accusations that Hamas was the plaything of Israel and the US, and intent on replacing the PLO as leader of the Palestinian movement.

At every stage, Hamas sought to undermine the negotiations with terrorist attacks against Israeli targets. Nothing illustrates more clearly its utterly repugnant and ultimately bankrupt perspective than the dispatch of its youth cadre, with bombs strapped to their bodies, to blow up their targets and themselves as martyrs for their cause. With reputed payments to their families of \$US30,000 for their martyrdom, these young men were worth more dead than alive.

Hamas' rejection of the state of Israel notwithstanding, its aim was less to scuttle the talks and a two state solution than to slow the pace of its implementation. It reasoned that the longer the delay, the greater the PLO's loss of support.

In 1991, Hamas mounted a series of demonstrations and strikes aimed at undermining Fatah and the PLO. From a struggle against the Zionist State, increasingly the Intifada became transformed into a struggle between rival

gangs of masked men. By July 1992, it had degenerated into running battles between Hamas and Fatah on the streets of Gaza that left 300 dead and 100 injured.

The Hamas campaign of terror bombings against Israel was aimed at provoking a right-wing Zionist backlash and torpedoing the incoming Labour government's plans to reach an agreement with the PLO. It, in fact, mirrored the Zionist extremists in its ideology and methods. While the right-wing Zionists claim all of Palestine as a Jewish state with no room for other peoples, Hamas proclaims the necessity of for an Islamic state with Jews and Christians excluded. Both repeatedly demonstrate their willingness to use terror to achieve these aims.

### After the Oslo Accords

The Oslo Agreement provided transitional arrangements to full statehood: an elected Palestinian Authority whose role was to replace Israeli military forces, guarantee Israel's security demands and crack down on Hamas and other opposition groups. Thus, Oslo's success depended upon the degree to which Hamas and other opposition groups supported the Palestinian Authority. Failure to do so threatened civil war between a Fatah dominated Palestinian Authority and any opposition. Continued support for Arafat depended on the extent to which the PA was embraced as a precursor to a Palestinian state and could bring peace and some alleviation of the Palestinians' desperate economic plight. Since Oslo gave some limited credibility to the PLO and brought international funds for its administrative and security networks that could be used as a source of political patronage, it limited Hamas' freedom of manoeuvre.

Accordingly, despite its oft-repeated rejection of Oslo, the Brotherhood soon reached a deal with the PLO on a *modus operandi*. Hamas and PLO prisoners in a Gaza jail signed an agreement banning violence as a means of settling their political differences. As long as the PLO agreed not to give an amnesty to Zionist collaborators in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, Hamas would not intervene. Later, in its search for an accommodation with Fatah, Hamas agreed to end "defamatory campaigns" and strike calls on different days "to lighten the economic burden of our people".

Publicly, Hamas also formed a bloc with 10 left groups, a Damascus based coalition that included the PFLP and DFLP, which both rejected Oslo and the two state solution. The agreement committed Hamas to nothing. More importantly, by making an agreement with their arch-enemies the left factions of the PLO reinforced Hamas' anti-imperialist credentials. In return, the Brothers compromised the Damascus coalition's

agreement when it suited them. While Hamas refused to take part in the national elections for the PA's institutions, it did participate in the local elections "because", as Yasin is reported to have said, "it wanted to have influence on the daily lives of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories". In other words, it would act as a loyal opposition until the time was ripe for it to strike out on its own.

That Hamas was still prepared to accept the Oslo principles provided that it was given a measure of political power is evidenced by the fact that it met with the Commander of the Israeli Defence Forces to discuss the pact. Labour's Shimon Peres, then Foreign Secretary, even floated the idea that Israel would release Hamas prisoners if it renounced terror. Its position in relation to the PA's 10,000 strong police force, whose task was to rein in any political opposition, was, "We welcome the Palestinian security forces as brothers".

The PA cracked down on Hamas after it launched three separate attacks killing 25 Israelis and injuring 50 in support of its demands for the release of prisoners, including Shaikh Yasin, held by Israel and for the PA to stop supplying information on Islamists to the Israeli authorities. Later in 1994, the PA police arrested more than 300 Hamas activists after the kidnapping and death of an Israeli soldier. For the next two years, Hamas lost support as the belief that Oslo would produce results held sway.

Within a couple of years it became evident that the peace negotiations were not yielding any tangible benefits. The dreadful social conditions facing the majority of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza went from bad to worse as Israel continued its land grab, supposedly outlawed under Oslo, and tightened its hold over the Palestinian economy. Under constant pressure from Washington and Jerusalem, the PLO-dominated PA was forced to crack down on Hamas and other opposition groups. Many came to regard the PA as a corrupt and undemocratic institution that was often little more than Israel's puppet, benefiting only a thin layer of functionaries and businessmen. To all intents, the Israeli authorities retained full control over the so-called autonomous areas.

Hamas benefited not only from the PLO's inability to overcome the national oppression of the Palestinians, but from the inability of the PA to resolve the most pressing social questions. To the extent that there were social facilities, these were largely provided by Hamas, courtesy of the Arab kingdoms. It thus became more aggressive in its opposition to the PLO and stepped up its militant actions against Israel.

In the spring of 1996, after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination by right-wing Zionist zealots opposed to any deal with the Palestinians, and just prior to elections in Israel, Hamas initiated a wave of bombings that killed 60 Israelis and wounded hundreds. Its aim was to bring the right-wing Likud to power and thereby scupper the Oslo peace process. To this day its aim has been to provoke a right-wing Israeli backlash in the belief that the inevitable and brutal retaliation will drive the Palestinians to desert the PLO and embrace Hamas' perspective. As the *Haaretz* journalist, Danny Rubinstein, wrote after Oslo, "Hamas' terrorist activities contain two main political messages. The first—to Arafat and the PLO—is do not dare to ignore us; the second—to the state of Israel—is that negotiations with the PLO do not constitute the final word and that Hamas must also be taken into account." Indeed, Yasin himself made statements in which he indicated the willingness of the Brotherhood to negotiate with Israel about a Palestinian state.

As long as the Oslo process offered the prospect of some benefits, the PA was able to rein in Hamas and other militant groups. The collapse of the Camp David talks in July 2000 turned on Arafat's inability to sell the miserable gruel on offer from Israel to his people. This he could not do. The collapse of the peace process meant in turn that the political institutions and mechanisms set in place after Oslo could not survive. The Palestinians' pent up frustration finally exploded in September 2000 at Sharon's provocative visit to the Muslim Holy places in the old City of Jerusalem surrounded by hundreds of soldiers. But the uprising that

followed was as much against the PA as against Israel.

Recent polls suggest that more than half the Palestinians consider the suicide bombings an appropriate response to Israel and that Hamas would get 25 percent of the vote in any forthcoming elections in which they were to field candidates.

### **The working class needs a progressive alternative to nationalism**

The most striking feature of the present crisis in Israel/Palestine and throughout the Middle East where similar tendencies exist is the lack of a genuine revolutionary alternative for the working class, be they Arab or Israeli.

Under such conditions, the anger and frustration of Palestinian workers and youth can find no progressive avenue of struggle. The most reactionary and racist Zionist elements in turn exploit the despair and anxiety of Israelis in the face of suicide bomb attacks to demand ever more oppressive measures against the Palestinians, including fenced Bantustans reminiscent of apartheid era South Africa, and population "transfers"; a euphemism for ethnic cleansing.

In the final analysis, the phenomenon of political Islamic groups such as Hamas and their Zionist counterparts is the price that the working class has paid for its subordination to the various national bourgeois organisations, however radical, which were organically incapable of leading any independent struggle against imperialism along a progressive and democratic route. The liberation of the Palestinian people from imperialist oppression cannot be accomplished by the Palestinians alone. Nationalism, whether secular or religious, serves only to divide the working class from the forces most able to help them, their international brothers and sisters, and subordinate it to the interests of capitalism.

As long as the Israeli political elite is able to continue to corral the working class behind the defence of the "Jewish homeland" and reactionary outfits like Hamas can channel the independent struggle of the Palestinian working class down the blind alley of an Islamic state, this conflict will assume ever more savage and tragic forms. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is rooted in nearly a century of intrigue by successive imperialist powers to divide and exploit the working class in one of the most strategically important regions in the world. At its heart, the tragedy unfolding today in Israel/Palestine represents the bitter legacy of a nationalist perspective, and the ideological confusion and political disorientation that prevents the working class from adopting an alternative to exploitation by their own ruling class and imperialism.

The answer lies in the fight to unite Arab and Israeli workers in a combined struggle to defend their common interests against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression and establish the United Socialist States of the Middle East. Such a solution requires the building of a new revolutionary leadership based on the programme of socialist internationalism.

*Concluded*



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