

The Gaza crisis and the failure of Palestinian nationalism

The editorial board
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The formation of a new government by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the declaration of a state of emergency, after a week of civil warfare in Gaza between Fatah and Hamas ended in the military victory of the Islamist movement, have consolidated the de facto political division between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The government that has been formed by presidential decree is under the direct tutelage of the United States and Israel and will be led by their agents, Abbas and his prime minister, Salam Fayyad, a former World Bank and International Monetary Fund official.

The first step is the establishment of a client regime under Abbas, charged initially with rooting out Hamas's political influence in the West Bank—beginning with the rounding up and imprisonment of its leading personnel. Fatah gunmen have stormed Hamas-controlled institutions in Ramallah and Nablus. Abbas has issued a series of presidential decrees outlawing Hamas's armed wing, the Izaddin Kassam, and its paramilitary Executive Force.

The US, Israel and the European Union have already indicated that they will provide financial backing to Abbas and lift the international sanctions for the West Bank. However, the trade and military blockade of Gaza, where a million and a half Palestinians face desperate poverty and food shortages, will worsen.

These moves are only a precursor to a political, economic and military campaign targeting Gaza.

Gaza's borders have been sealed off by Israel and Egypt, and Israel is threatening to halt fuel supplies.

On Tuesday, Israeli tanks moved into Gaza for the first time since fighting between Fatah and Hamas first erupted. The tanks moved through the Erez (Beit Hanoun) crossing, where some 500 fleeing Fatah supporters have been trapped for five days. An Israeli army bulldozer knocked down concrete barriers and there was an exchange of fire.

Israeli sources said that the tanks would be in Gaza only for a "limited time." But Britain's *Sunday Times* reported that Israel is planning a major attack within a matter of weeks.

The *Times* cited senior Israeli military sources detailing an offensive involving 20,000 troops that will seek to destroy "much of Hamas's military capability in days," probably "triggered by Hamas rocket attacks against Israel or a resumption of suicide bombings." Israel's defence minister, Labour's Ehud Barak, is said to have demanded detailed plans to deploy two armoured divisions and an infantry division, accompanied by assault drones and F-16 jets. A source close to Barak said, "The question is not if, but how and when" an attack will be mounted.

More ominous still are the constant references in the media to a "clash of civilisations," linking support for Israeli efforts to crush Hamas with demands for military action against Iran.

Hamas came to power in elections in January 2006, primarily as a result of widespread disaffection with the corruption and cronyism of Fatah, which was seen by many as the representative of a handful of multimillionaires and a local policeman for the US and Israel.

The Western powers refused to recognise the result of a democratic ballot and imposed sanctions with the aim of bringing down the government and installing one fully controlled by Abbas. The calculations of Israel and the US always depended on forcing Fatah and Abbas's substantial security forces to take on Hamas. Where they miscalculated was in their underestimation of the degree of popular animosity in Gaza towards Fatah and their overestimation of its fighting capacity.

Hamas benefits from the political opposition to Fatah's attempts to reconcile the Palestinians to the Bush administration's Road Map and a settlement with terms dictated by Israel—including the permanent annexation of much of the West Bank and the repudiation of the right of return for Palestinian émigrés.

But Hamas offers no viable alternative for the Palestinian people. Its perspective, with its espousal of religious fundamentalism, is essentially a more extreme form of nationalism. It articulates the interests of sections of the Arab bourgeoisie and not that of the workers and peasants.

Its advocacy of religious fanaticism, unrestrained anti-Semitism and terrorist attacks is opposed by vast numbers of Palestinians who have few illusions in Fatah. And it is deeply repugnant to the hundreds of thousands of Israeli workers desirous of peace with their Arab neighbours. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of policies better designed to prevent any possibility of a politically unified struggle between Jewish and Arab workers.

Moreover, despite its rhetoric and sporadic armed actions, Hamas does not seriously oppose the imperialist-dictated state system in the Middle East and is looking for its own deal with both the US and Israel.

These developments have brought a definitive end to the promise contained in the 1993 Oslo Accords for the eventual creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel—the so-called "two-state solution" signed up to by Fatah under Yasser Arafat. Palestinians now speak with bitterness of a "three-state solution."

More fundamentally, the split between Gaza and the West Bank represents the final shipwreck of the nationalist perspective upon which the struggle of the Palestinians against Israeli usurpation and repression has been based.

There is an immensely tragic dimension to the fratricidal conflict among the Palestinians, who have struggled for six decades against expulsion and military occupation. But the collapse of the Palestinian national project will inevitably encourage Palestinian workers and youth, as well as their Israeli counterparts, to look for a way out of the cycle of oppression, death and violence that have plagued the region since the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state.

It is imperative that the political lessons be drawn from the historic failure of Fatah and its transformation into a pliant tool of Washington. At its heart, the debacle inflicted on the Palestinian masses is not the result of corruption, but flows from the impossibility of securing their democratic rights and social aspirations on the basis of Fatah's bourgeois nationalist perspective.

The current impasse demonstrates the impossibility of securing the democratic rights and social needs of the Palestinian masses apart from a program to unite the Arab and Jewish working people in a common struggle for a socialist Middle East against the entire imperialist setup and all of the regimes that uphold it—the Arab bourgeois states as well as Israel.

Fatah came into the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organisation representing the most radical of the various contending national movements. It established a mass popular base amongst broad sections of the Palestinian people due to its determined advocacy of armed struggle against Israel.

But its perspective of establishing a secular, democratic Palestine could never provide the basis for the unification of Jewish and Arab workers that is required for the overthrow of Israel as a Zionist state. Such a fundamental political struggle must of necessity be based on the perspective of socialist revolution, setting as its goal the liberation of not only the Palestinians and the Jews, but all the peoples of the Middle East from both imperialist and class oppression.

The Israeli bourgeoisie is only one local agent through which imperialism has exercised its domination over the Middle East. There are as well the various Arab states that enforce their own despotic rule over the masses.

But Fatah and the PLO as a whole could not mount an independent political mobilisation of the working class and peasantry against the Jewish and Arab bourgeoisie. Although it contained disparate social elements and a large working class and peasant cadre, Fatah was ultimately dominated by and became the political representative of the Palestinian bourgeoisie in exile.

Despite the glorification of the “armed struggle” by a host of radical tendencies, the PLO’s military campaign, including its resort to terror, was mounted with the aim of arriving at negotiated settlement with imperialism that would secure a place for the Palestinian bourgeoisie within the imperialist-dominated system of states in the Middle East.

Fatah’s opposition to imperialism was always conditional on preventing the development of any movement in the working class that would threaten the dominance of capital. To this end, the PLO insisted on its position as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people” and the principle that the national struggle excluded all other conflicts amongst Palestinians. Its charter insisted that it would “cooperate with all Arab states,” would “adopt a neutral policy among them” and “not interfere in the internal affairs of any state.”

The PLO’s refusal to challenge the Arab ruling elite made impossible the development of a class-based anti-imperialist movement cutting across all national, ethnic and religious divisions—above all between Jews and Arabs. Instead, for all the heroism and self-sacrifice demonstrated by Arafat and his closest allies, Fatah was reduced to a policy of constantly manoeuvring for the support of the various Arab regimes to place the “Palestinian question” at the centre of their territorial conflicts with Israel.

Bitter historical experience was to demonstrate that the subjugation of the Palestinian people was maintained in large measure thanks to the Arab bourgeoisie.

On a world scale, its nationalist perspective made the PLO dependent on the manoeuvres between the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy and US imperialism to determine who would dominate the oil-rich Middle East. Ultimately, the ability of the Arab states to challenge Israel depended either on military backing from the Soviet Union or their ability to place pressure on the US based on the threat of growing Soviet influence.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War proved to be a turning point in Middle Eastern and world politics—and therefore in the political fortunes of the Palestinian national movement. After initial military successes by Egypt and Syria, the US moved decisively to prevent the defeat of Israel. For its part, in order to preserve the “balance-of-power” in the Middle East and

internationally, the Soviet Union came in behind Washington in insisting on a ceasefire that was to leave Tel Aviv in control of the territories it had occupied following the 1967 Six Day War (the West Bank and Gaza).

Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat concluded that the defence of Israel was now the cornerstone of US policy in the Middle East and direct conflict with Israel could no longer be seriously contemplated. He pioneered the recognition of Israel with the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978 and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979.

Egypt was denounced by various Arab powers for doing so, but aside from the conflict with Syria over control of Lebanon, after 1973 Israel never again faced a serious challenge by the Arab states. Instead, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Saudi Arabia confined themselves to noisily opposing recognition of Israel, organising opposition tendencies within the PLO such as the Rejectionist Front (against initial moves by the PLO towards advancing a “two-state solution”).

This posturing was in flagrant contrast to the complicity of the Arab regimes with Israel’s persecution of the Palestinians, and direct attacks they made against the PLO, including the 1970 “Black September” massacre of Palestinians by Jordan and Syria’s complicity in the Lebanese Falangist slaughter of Palestinians at the Karantina and Tel al Zaatar camps in 1975.

In 1982, when Israel, backed by the US, invaded Lebanon in order to expel the PLO, the Syrian bourgeois regime did nothing and the PLO was forced into exile in Tunis and left defenceless. The price paid by the Palestinian refugees for this treachery was the massacres at Sabra and Shatilla.

It was the turn by the Stalinist bureaucracy towards capitalist restoration and the subsequent liquidation of the Soviet Union that brought a definitive end to any possibility of the PLO standing out against agreement with Israel. Against the background of the Intifada—the spontaneous uprising of Palestinian workers and youth in the Occupied Territories due to the appalling conditions they faced—Arafat made a last desperate gamble: a bid to secure support from Washington itself in securing an agreement with Israel.

The Clinton administration responded by forcing Arafat to sign up to a 1998 statement guaranteeing the security of Israel, accepting that a peace settlement with Israel was a “strategy and not an interim tactic,” and renouncing all forms of terrorism. When asked at a press conference to declare his acceptance of Israel, Arafat famously asked, “What do you want? Do you want me to do a striptease?”

Arafat’s acceptance of US dictates paved the way for the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) by the Oslo Accords of 1993—signed by Abbas and witnessed by Arafat. It created an entity entirely dependent on Israel, charged with policing the Palestinian masses but leaving Israel in sole charge of foreign policy, defence, protection of Israeli settlements, and control of borders and crossings into Israel.

The PA was characterised by unbridled cronyism, as the Palestinian bourgeoisie sought to enrich itself—in particular, by monopolising international loans and aid—amidst the appalling poverty and degradation suffered by the workers and peasants. Ever more stringent demands were placed on the PA to end any and all opposition to Israel, which, combined with the resentment generated by official corruption, created a political vacuum that Hamas was able to fill.

Abbas emerged as the favoured representative of the US and Israel, which worked to marginalise the more radical elements within Fatah. This centred on a vicious campaign to denigrate and isolate Arafat because of his refusal to suppress his own people and sign up to the ever more stringent conditions for final acceptance of a nominal Palestinian state, including the abandonment of the right of return and any claim to East Jerusalem.

When a second Intifada erupted in September 2000, Abbas called for it to end and was duly backed by Israel and the US in his bid to become

prime minister in 2003. In contrast, amidst repeated military incursions by Israel, Arafat was kept imprisoned in his government compound until his death, under still unexplained circumstances, in November 2004. Abbas succeeded him as president in January 2005. His period in office has culminated in a civil war and the imposition of a virtual one-man dictatorship on the West Bank.

The Palestinian tragedy is at the same time central to the unfolding tragedy for the Israeli working class. The perspective of nationalism has proved to be no less disastrous for the Jews than it has for their Arab counterparts. The Israeli ruling elite is utterly bankrupt, having no perspective other than ever more reckless and incendiary military provocations.

The creation of Israel through the expulsion of the Palestinians was a crime that has determined its entire subsequent history and evolution. Viewed with enmity by its neighbours, it has developed as a state founded on discrimination against non-Jews and responsible for decades of brutality within the Occupied Territories and Lebanon. Economically unviable, it functions to this day as a garrison state, a military bastion of the US, dominated politically by right-wing and ultra-religious tendencies deeply hostile to the social and political interests of the working class.

Only the perspective of socialist internationalism can provide a way forward out of the historic impasse facing the masses in the Middle East. The working class must unite behind it the rural poor in a common struggle against imperialism and its bourgeois agents within the Arab and Israeli elites.

A United Socialist States of the Middle East, as a component part of the struggle for world socialism, must become the essential programmatic goal of the working class, through which Arabs, Jews and all the other ethnic and religious groups can live in harmony and share the benefits of the region's rich resources. It is to this perspective that the International Committee of the Fourth International is dedicated.



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