

Bush backs Israel as Palestinians mark 60 years of exile and oppression

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US President George Bush addressed the Israeli Knesset Thursday, centering his remarks on Washington's alliance with the Zionist state in the "fight against terror and extremism" and declaring Israel a "homeland for the chosen people."

The American president, on a three-day visit coinciding with Israel's 60th anniversary, made only one fleeting reference to the Palestinian people, envisioning a Palestinian state—60 years from now. He offered no proposals for advancing the Israeli-Palestinian "peace process."

Instead, Bush used the speech to make a thinly veiled attack on the Democratic presidential front-runner Senator Barack Obama, comparing the call for talks with Iran and Syria to "appeasement" of the Nazis in the 1930s.

Three Arab-Israeli lawmakers were hustled out of the chamber at the beginning of Bush's speech after they unfurled a banner reading, "We shall overcome" and held up pictures of slain Palestinian and Iraqi children.

Meanwhile, two right-wing Zionist Knesset members stormed out in protest when Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in his introductory remarks referred to a "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian question, a remark that the media reported was met with general silence punctuated by nervous laughter.

Even as Bush and Olmert spoke, the Israeli government was giving the lie to its supposed quest for peace as it continued its brutal offensive against the Gaza Strip and sealed off the entire Palestinian territories.

Israel has laid siege to Gaza—the most densely populated area of the world—in an attempt to starve the Palestinians into submission. This illegal and cruel collective punishment is supposedly in retaliation for the firing of rockets into Israel which have killed 15 people in the last eight years. Only the most basic supplies are allowed into Gaza, and even these came to a complete halt in January. Ongoing cuts in fuel supplies by 70 percent have led to power cuts, sporadic running water, 40 million litres of sewage a day being dumped onto Gaza's beaches and tons of rubbish piling up in the streets. The stench is overwhelming.

More than 80 percent of Gaza's population relies on humanitarian assistance, with United Nations food aid going to about 1.1 million of its 1.4 million people. But even that is in jeopardy as the UN's Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was forced to stop distributing aid for several days last month, after its vehicles ran out of fuel. Even now, its operations are on a knife edge.

According to a World Bank report published last month, the percentage of Gazans living in "deep poverty" rose from 21.6 percent in 1998 to nearly 35 percent in 2006. Official unemployment was 29 percent before the closures that have led to the suspension of 95 percent of Gaza's industrial operations, so both unemployment and the deep poverty rate—defined as an inability to meet basic human consumption needs—are "certainly higher". The World Bank estimates that without remittances from abroad and UN food aid, the deep poverty rate in Gaza would rise to almost 67 percent.

At the same time, Israel has waged an unremitting military war against the Gaza Strip, assassinating its opponents and killing hundreds of Palestinians, including many civilians and children, injuring many more and demolishing their homes.

The World Bank describes a situation in the West Bank that is only marginally better, but destined to get worse. There, the US puppet Palestinian Authority headed by Mahmoud Abbas presides over a truncated entity, some 40 percent of which has been confiscated for current or future settlements that now house 450,000 Israelis, outposts, roads, closed military areas, municipal boundaries and settlement regional jurisdiction. These measures have sliced the West Bank into a series of isolated cantons, cut off from East Jerusalem, the West Bank's heartland and reputed capital of a Palestinian state, while its aquifers are used to sprinkle the settlers' lawns and fill their swimming pools, thereby depriving the Palestinians of their already limited water supply.

Palestinians without special permits are excluded from key agricultural areas in the Jordan valley, and producers are cut off from their East Jerusalem market. The Wall separating Israel from the West Bank and beyond which the Palestinians may not travel, is located well within PA territory, further displacing and impoverishing many Palestinians, particularly in East Jerusalem, who must choose between their home or place of work.

The five commercial entry points into Israel will, as in Gaza, use a back-to-back cargo transfer system which is incapable of transporting the 95 percent of Palestinian trade that goes through or is destined for Israel without huge delays and additional cost. This will further wreck the West Bank's economy and plunge the Palestinians further into grinding poverty.

In all, GDP in the Occupied Territories has declined by 14 percent since its peak in 1999. But with its population increasing by four percent a year, per capita GDP has fallen precipitously to 40 percent below its peak. Four million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have only survived because of loans, remittances from relatives working abroad and aid.

These crimes have passed without comment, much less criticism, from world leaders. A former US president, Jimmy Carter was one of the few to condemn what is happening in Gaza and to call it by its proper name. He insisted that "the world must not stand idle while innocent people are treated cruelly. It is time for strong voices in Europe, the US, Israel and elsewhere to speak out and condemn the human rights tragedy that has befallen the Palestinian people."

His plea naturally fell on deaf ears.

The crimes against the Palestinians began in the run-up to the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. While Israel celebrates its 60th anniversary, the Palestinians mark "the catastrophe", or *al-Nakba* to use its Arabic name. In the West Bank, there were rallies, sirens and the launching of thousands of black balloons, while in Gaza, Hamas organised a march toward a sealed Israeli border crossing.

The *Nakba* led to the forced exile and dispersion of half the Palestinian

population and the expropriation of their property. It was a brutal example of ethnic cleansing.

From being a majority in Palestine, they became a persecuted minority in their own country, reduced to eking out a wretched existence in refugee camps or to seeking exile abroad. The Zionist movement advanced as the solution to the persecution of European Jewry and the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, the Holocaust, not the struggle for the democratic and social rights of the Jewish people but their separate existence in a new state, Israel. It was to be established on part of one of the patchwork of states that Britain and France carved out of the old Ottoman Empire after World War I.

In the aftermath of World War II, the establishment of Israel was viewed with sympathy by millions of people around the world who were appalled at the catastrophe that had befallen the Jews. This, plus the political calculations of the major powers, led the United Nations to vote in 1947 for the partition of Palestine into two states on May 15, 1948, when Britain's League of Nations Mandate to rule the country expired: one for the Jews, half of whose population would be Palestinian, and one for the Palestinians. It would be a theocratic state based upon religious exclusiveness.

The establishment of Israel and the ensuing war led to the forced expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homes, as Israel secured for itself 80 percent of the land controlled by the British under the Mandate. King Abdullah of Transjordan, Britain's client state, seized the West Bank, and Egypt took control of Gaza, both of which became home to many of the refugees forced out of Israel.

It was one of the largest forced migrations in modern history. Many were expelled at gunpoint, others fled in terror. Israel portrays these expulsions as retaliation for hostile Palestinian actions and the war that broke out on May 15, 1948 when Israel's Arab neighbours attacked the nascent state, as well as a few aberrant massacres by Zionist terrorist groups, such as that at Deir Yassin, in April 1948.

Israeli historians have demonstrated that this was not the case. Ilan Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, explains that nearly 300,000 expulsions took place before the war; that they were deliberate and conceived as a way of forcing a war that would enable Israel to acquire more land than that allocated by the UN. The Zionist leadership openly declared in March 1948 that it would take over the land and expel the indigenous population by force under its infamous Plan Dalet.

Those who fled were not allowed to return to Israel. They became refugees, living in tented cities and slums in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and dispersed throughout the world. According to the UN, the original refugees and their descendants now number four million.

The expulsion of the Palestinians, the take-over of their land without compensation, and the revocation of their citizenship and right of return were the essential prerequisites for the establishment of a Jewish majority. In addition Israel immediately sought to encourage immigration and passed the Law of Return in 1950 and the Citizenship Law in 1952, granting every Jew throughout the world the right to immediate citizenship upon arrival.

The dispossession continued after 1948. Of those Palestinians who remained in Israel, many were expelled from their own homes and resettled elsewhere within Israel. Always second-class citizens, they were subject until the 1960s to military laws established by Britain during the Mandate period.

Arabs in Israel, who now form 20 percent of the population, face constant discrimination. They are barred from marrying Palestinians outside Israel and bringing their spouses to live with them. They find it almost impossible to get jobs in industries proclaimed as "strategic," such as electricity and water, or to lease land from the Jewish National Fund, despite a Supreme Court ruling in their favour. Their cities, towns, and villages get less financial support from the state budget.

Israel could only ever have survived because it functions as a garrison state with Great Power support—first from France and Britain, and later from the US. Washington uses Israel to police the oil-rich region in pursuit of its own geopolitical interests. From the US perspective, the Palestinians and the Arab working class and rural poor as a whole, constitute a threat. Israel has thus always been given a free hand to expand its territory and to suppress the Palestinians.

In 1967, after the defeat of the Arab states in the June war, Israel became master of East Jerusalem, West Bank and the Gaza Strip, thereby controlling the whole of Palestine, as well as Syria's Golan Heights and parts of Egypt, leading to another population transfer. About 250,000 of the 1948 refugees who had lived in refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza for 20 years, fled. In subsequent years, as conditions deteriorated, many thousands left the Occupied Territories to study and seek work abroad, particularly in the Gulf. They are all now denied the right to return to their homeland. According to Israeli sources, the number of Palestinians leaving the West Bank and Gaza between 1967 and 2003 was 414,800.

Today, the original refugees and their descendants, as well as those who became refugees after the 1967 war registered with UNWRA, now number around 4.5 million in the Occupied Territories, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. But, as well as the registered refugees, there are a further 5.2 million Palestinians living abroad, nearly 3 million of them in Jordan, 1.7 million in other Arab countries and a further 600,000 in Europe and the Americas.

This terrible oppression resulted in a mass political movement for the national liberation of the Palestinians. But the experience of this national project has proved to be a dead end.

For an extended period, the liberation of Palestine was conceived as part of the wider project of Arab nationalism that would achieve the overthrow of imperialist domination in the region, under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser. But after the defeats of 1967 and 1973, the pretensions of Arab states such as Syria, Jordan and Egypt to be the sponsors of the Palestinian struggle against Israel faded away.

In 1968, Yasser Arafat and his Fatah faction assumed the dominant role in the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and tried to conduct its own independent struggle. Although it was a popular and radical mass movement, it was essentially a bourgeois movement. Its perspective was a democratic secular state—a capitalist state where the Palestinian bourgeoisie would be free to exploit its own working class.

Despite its heroism, the PLO was incapable of leading a successful struggle against Israel and its imperialist backers.

Arafat sought the support of Arab states such as Jordan and Syria, attempting to utilise their own conflicts with Israel as well as the global struggle for influence between the Soviet Union and the US to provide him with room to manoeuvre and a degree of independence. Several Arab states had their own factions within the PLO.

But while the Arab leaders were on occasion ready to provide limited sponsorship to the Palestinians in order to secure a measure of popular support for their corrupt regimes and to apply pressure on their Israeli rival, their over-riding concern was to maintain their trading relations with the imperialist powers to which they remained subordinate. Above all, they did not want to unduly antagonise Washington and were determined to avoid the contagion of dissent and revolution spreading amongst their own working classes and peasantry.

One after another, Arafat's supposed friends betrayed him, always with tragic consequences. For two decades, the PLO suffered repeated bloody attacks by the Arab regimes, most notably the 1970 "Black September" massacre of Palestinians by Jordan, Syria's complicity in the Lebanese Falange's slaughter at the Karantina and Tel al Zaatar camps in 1975 and the Sabra and Shatilla massacres in 1982 in Lebanon.

Against the background of the final days of the Soviet Union and the

drive towards capitalist restoration, and with the Stalinist bureaucracy under Mikhail Gorbachev having declared itself in favour of a political solution to the conflict with Israel and pledged to reduce its supply of arms to its Middle East clients, the Arab regimes (with the sole exception of Libya) lined up with Washington against Iraq in 1991.

In December 1988, Arafat signed a statement dictated by the US State Department, guaranteeing the security of Israel, accepting that peace with Israel was a “strategy and not an interim tactic,” and renouncing “terrorism.” In 1993, he signed the Oslo Agreement—officially renouncing the PLO’s original perspective of freeing the whole of 1948 Palestine and agreeing to the eventual creation of a Palestinian state on just 22 percent of the land, alongside the state of Israel, whose security the Palestinian state was pledged to defend.

Once the Palestinian Authority was established under the Oslo agreement, the real class nature of the PLO became evident. The PA became the vehicle for the Palestinian bourgeoisie to exploit the working class and become fabulously wealthy. It had the largest per capita police force in the world. Fatah became associated with the corruption, waste and inefficiency that even Arafat could not disguise.

While Arafat himself balked at acceding to Washington’s most draconian demands, his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, on behalf of the corrupt layer of millionaires that he represents, has no such scruples.

The political beneficiary has been Hamas, which has won support not only because of the PLO’s inability to overcome the national oppression of the Palestinians and its corruption, but because of the PA’s inability to resolve the most pressing social questions. To the extent that there were any social facilities in the PA, these were mostly provided by Hamas, courtesy of the Arab kingdoms.

The Oslo process that began with such fanfare in 1993 has ended with the Palestinians confined in virtual prison camps. It demonstrates that the PLO’s perspective of forming a new capitalist state through a further division of the Middle East has proved incapable of realising the strivings of the Palestinian workers and oppressed masses for freedom and equality. Hamas offers no alternative, with its call for the creation of an Islamic state based on the same economic foundations. Its rise represents a retrograde development within the Palestinian national movement—the price paid for the political failure of the PLO. Its perspective is not a secular, but a religious state that mirrors that of the Zionist extremists, who claim all of Palestine as a Jewish state with no room for other peoples.

No national movement was more radical than Arafat’s PLO. But this only underscores the significance of its disintegration. The cause is to be found not simply in the betrayals of individual leaders, but in the failure of a historical perspective of the national bourgeoisie being able to secure the liberation of the Arab masses.

It is only possible to understand the fate of the Palestinian national movement from the standpoint of Leon Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution which took as its starting point not the economic level or internal class relations of a given country, but rather the world class struggle and the development of an international capitalist economy.

In the backward and former colonial countries, this perspective demonstrated that the bourgeoisie—subordinate to the major imperialist powers that dominate the world’s economy and fearful of its own working class—was no longer in a position to make its own democratic revolution, or to put an end to imperialist domination.

This task could only be carried out by the independent political mobilisation of the working class, leading behind it the oppressed peasant masses in the struggle for power. The permanent character of this revolution lay firstly in the fact that the working class, having taken power, could not limit itself to democratic tasks, but would be compelled to carry out measures of a socialist character. Secondly, the limitations on the construction of socialism imposed by the low level of economic

development can only be overcome through the development of the revolution by the working class in the advanced capitalist countries, culminating in the socialist transformation of the entire world.

If an end is to be brought to six decades of bloody strife, the task facing Arab and Jewish workers is to forge a common struggle against all the region’s imperialist-backed bourgeois elites and for the building of a socialist society, as part of the struggle for a United Socialist States of the Middle East. This would remove the artificial borders dividing the peoples and economies of the region, and enable the vast natural and human resources of the region to be utilized to meet the essential needs of all its peoples.



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