The Palestine papers and the dead-end of nationalism

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The Palestine papers released this week by Al Jazeera provide documentary confirmation of what is becoming plain to millions of Palestinians: the nationalist project of building an independent Palestinian state in the occupied territories has become transformed into a new means of their oppression.

These documents provide a graphic account of the "peace process"—a two-decade-long fraud perpetrated by Washington upon not only the Palestinians, but the entire world.

The US-brokered talks were initiated in 1988, when Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yassir Arafat agreed to recognize Israel, guarantee its security, and renounce the armed struggle with which the PLO had been long identified. The "process" was further institutionalized with the Oslo Accords of 1993, which set out the "two-state solution" to the Palestinian-Israeli question and laid the foundations for the Palestine Authority (PA). That year saw the infamous hand-shake with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, when Arafat protested that he was being ordered to perform a "striptease" on the White House lawn.

From the outset, US imperialism pursued these negotiations not out of some commitment to ameliorating the conditions confronting millions of Palestinians crushed under Israeli occupation or relegated to poverty and statelessness in the refugee camps of Lebanon and Jordan. Rather, the aim of successive administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, has been to facilitate US intervention in the Middle East and groom a section of the Palestinian leadership as an instrument for suppressing the struggles of the Palestinian masses.

As the newly released documents verify, Washington pursued its "peace process" strategy with utter ruthlessness and violence, backing every crime carried out by its Israeli ally and treating Palestinian negotiators with unconcealed contempt.

For their part, the Palestinian negotiators loyal to PA President Mahmoud Abbas were prepared to capitulate completely on all the issues that the Palestinian movement had once described as "red lines." This included ceding virtually all of East Jerusalem to Zionist settlements, renouncing the right of return for all but a token 10,000 of the five million Palestinian refugees, and agreeing to support the ethnic cleansing of tens of thousands of Israeli Arabs slated for removal in order to guarantee a "Jewish state."

Among the documents are transcripts of discussions between Israeli and Palestinian Authority officials on the targeted assassination of individual Palestinian resistance fighters, including members of the Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, aligned with the ruling Fatah faction.

Saeb Erekat, the PA's chief negotiator, boasted of this collaboration in a meeting with Obama's deputy Middle East envoy David Hale in September of 2009. "We have had to kill Palestinians to establish one authority, one gun and the rule of law," said Erekat. "We continue to perform our obligations. We have invested time and effort and killed our own people to maintain order and the rule of law."

Other documents demonstrate that the Fatah leadership was more concerned about crushing its Hamas rivals than achieving liberation for the millions of Palestinians facing collective punishment in the Gaza Strip. They indicate that the PA was warned in advance of and complicit in the 2008-2009 Israeli invasion of Gaza that claimed the lives of over 1,400 Palestinians. In addition, transcripts recount several discussions in which PA negotiators urged the Israelis to tighten their siege of the Gaza strip that has subjected a million-and-a-half Palestinians to hunger and misery.

Under the mantle of promoting statehood and "democracy," the US and Israel have foisted a police state upon Palestinians on the West Bank, an adjunct of the Israeli occupation that represents no one but the PA officials themselves and a handful of millionaires who have fattened themselves off of CIA stipends and USAID contracts. The ratio of security personnel to the general population in the Palestine Authority—1 in 80—is among the highest in the world, while construction of prisons is booming, outpacing that of schools. Within these prisons, torture is endemic.

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Abbas, whose mandate expired in 2009 with no new elections called, has dismantled all elected bodies and rules by decree. As the Palestine papers reveal, this is an arrangement demanded by Washington. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is recorded as threatening to pull the plug on the PA if there is any change in leadership.

No doubt, Fatah's rivals in the Islamist Hamas movement that governs the Gaza Strip will be one of the immediate beneficiaries of the Palestine papers. A Hamas spokesman said Tuesday that the documents proved that the "men of Fatah who created the Palestinian Authority represent nothing but a betrayal of the interests of the Palestinian people."

While the rise of Hamas has been a function of mass disillusionment with the abortion of the nationalist project of the PLO, the Islamist movement offers no viable alternative. It represents just another variant of nationalism, saturated in religious fundamentalism, and reflects the social interests not of the masses of Palestinian workers and oppressed, but rather of an aspiring capitalist layer that is prepared to do its own deal with Israel and Washington.

The long and tragic road that began in 1988 was prepared by profound changes in the world situation which laid bare the impossibility of achieving the democratic and social aspirations of the Palestinian people based on the PLO's bourgeois nationalist program.

While the PLO's heroic resistance had gained it a mass popular base and worldwide respect, from its inception it based its survival on maneuvers between the different Arab regimes and exploiting the conflict between Washington and the Moscow bureaucracy. Part of this Faustian bargain was an explicitly stated neutrality in relation to the class struggle within the Arab states.

By the end of the 1980s, the cost of this bargain became clear, as profound changes in world capitalism based on the ever-increasing global integration of production undermined the very forces upon which the PLO depended. The Stalinist bureaucracy's capitalist restorationist policy and liquidation of the Soviet Union was accompanied by the turn by supposedly nationalist Arab regimes toward ever closer collaboration with imperialism.

Within the Palestinian territories themselves, this process was accompanied by the first *intifada*. This spontaneous rebellion erupted among workers and youth independently of and ultimately against the opposition of the PLO leadership, which feared that this struggle from below threatened its project of establishing an independent bourgeois state.

In the end, the steady march to the right by the PLO leadership could be consummated only over the bones of Yassir Arafat, who was made prisoner in his compound in Ramallah and died under unexplained circumstances in November, 2004. He was replaced by Abbas.

It is not merely a coincidence that the release of the Palestine papers and the profound crisis opening up for the Palestinian Authority has coincided with the unprecedented uprising of workers in Tunisia and the spread of popular upheavals to Algeria, Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.

The PA deployed its secret police on the streets of Ramallah last week to break up a demonstration in solidarity with the revolutionary struggles of the Tunisian people. Those who came out to demonstrate were chased from the streets and a Palestinian youth who dared wave a Tunisian flag was manhandled and had it ripped from his hands.

Abbas and company fear that the intense social contradictions that toppled Tunisia's government and are laying waste to the pillars of US policy in the Middle East will produce a movement from below against their own police state regime.

The events in Palestine and throughout the Middle East have provided fresh confirmation of the theory of permanent revolution developed by Leon Trotsky. In the oppressed countries, the democratic and national tasks that in an earlier historical period were associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie can, in the epoch of imperialism, be achieved only through the independent revolutionary mobilization of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The liberation of the Palestinian people can never be achieved through an imperialist brokered "two-state solution." Putting an end to the decades of oppression, poverty and violence is the task of the working class, which must unite across national and religious boundaries in a common struggle against imperialism and its local agents, both Israeli and Arab.

It is the prospect of socialist revolution in Tunisia, Egypt and throughout the Arab world that poses the greatest threat to Israel's Zionist regime and its US backers. The growing social struggles throughout the region, fueled by the insoluble crisis of world capitalism, poses the burning necessity of uniting the Jewish and Arab working class in the struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East as part of the struggle to put an end to capitalism all over the world.

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