

# Twenty-five years after Oslo, a deepening catastrophe for the Palestinians

Bill Van Auken  
14 September 2018

Thursday marked the 25th anniversary of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin adopting the Oslo Accords at a meeting in Washington, with US President Bill Clinton hosting the affair.

The accords were supposed to initiate a “peace process” that would result in a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, resolving such issues as the borders between Israel and a Palestinian state, the future of illegal Zionist settlements, the status of Jerusalem and the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

The deal was promoted as a path to the realization of the “right of the Palestinian people to self-determination,” supposedly to be achieved by means of a “two-state solution,” creating a Palestinian national entity in the lands occupied by Israel in 1967.

The anniversary was barely observed in either Israel or the occupied Palestinian territories. A small meeting at the American Colony Hotel in East Jerusalem addressed by Palestinian and Israeli officials who had backed the accord was broken up by a group of angry young Palestinian demonstrators.

Sections of the Israeli media published articles lamenting the “missed opportunities” of the so-called peace process, while evenhandedly apportioning blame. In reality, Oslo served precisely the purpose for which it was intended, providing a cover for unrelenting Israeli aggression over the last quarter century.

US and Israeli officials have marked the anniversary with the aggressive pursuit of a policy that is unabashedly determined by the most right-wing elements within the Israeli state. It is dedicated to forcing Palestinian officials to carry out an unequivocal renunciation of all demands and rights of the Palestinian people, what President Donald Trump describes as his “deal of the century.”

On Monday, Trump ordered the shutdown of the de facto PLO embassy in Washington. This follows a series of escalating and increasingly punishing measures taken by Washington to back the Israeli regime of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and starve the Palestinians into submission.

These include the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the transfer of the US embassy there from Tel Aviv in a repudiation of previous US policy and of Palestinian claims to the city. The State Department, meanwhile, has dropped the word “occupied” in its references to Palestinian territories.

More substantively, Washington has cut off nearly \$600 million in aid for impoverished Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and refugee camps in the Arab world, while repudiating the very

existence of Palestinian refugees as well as the UN agency that assists them, UNRWA. The US eliminated all its funding for UNRWA, which last year stood at \$350 million, while scrapping another \$200 million in aid funneled through USAID and, in a particularly petty and vindictive act, announced that it would end \$25 million in assistance previously given to six hospitals that serve predominantly Palestinian populations in Jerusalem. The results will be felt in people going hungry, children being denied education and patients dying.

Trump has dispensed with the worn-out façade of the “peace process” that has been promoted by successive US administrations since Clinton’s, even as negotiations proved more and more pointless and broke down irrevocably over a decade ago.

With the unconditional backing of Washington, the Netanyahu government recently pushed through a law declaring Israel to be the “nation-state of the Jewish people,” renouncing the formal recognition of equality of all the state’s citizens and raising apartheid to the level of a constitutional principle.

In the quarter century since Arafat, Rabin and Clinton stood in the White House Rose Garden, the conditions for the masses of the Palestinian people have deteriorated sharply. Meanwhile, Israel, backed by Washington, has utilized the so-called “peace process” as a smokescreen for its seizure of ever-greater amounts of Palestinian land, the vast expansion of settlements in the occupied West Bank and the consolidation of what amounts to an apartheid state.

The number of Israelis living in West Bank settlements nearly doubled by the end of the 1990s. Today their numbers are three times what they were in 1993, with nearly 700,000 living in the West Bank, with another 200,000 living on what had been Palestinian land in East Jerusalem.

These “facts on the ground” have been supplemented by the Israeli military separation of the West Bank from Gaza and Jerusalem and the carving up of the West Bank itself into a collection of discontinuous Bantustans by walls, security roads and hundreds of Israeli checkpoints.

In Gaza, which is governed by the Islamist Hamas movement, conditions are “catastrophic” after 11 years of “economic siege,” in the words of a new report issued by a UN agency. This siege has included repeated Israeli military assaults that have destroyed thousands of lives and basic infrastructure.

The UN development agency UNCTAD blamed conditions on both the economic strangulation imposed by Israel’s occupation

and blockade, as well as the sharp reduction in international aid, which fell by more than 10 percent in 2017 compared to the previous year—well before the massive cuts imposed by the Trump administration.

The population of the Gaza Strip, the report stated, had been “reduced to a humanitarian case of profound suffering and aid dependency.” It noted that the unemployment rate in the occupied Palestinian territories is the highest on the planet—over 27 percent overall and around 44 percent in Gaza. Fully half of Palestinians under the age of 30 have no work in the occupied territories.

The one enduring creation of the Oslo Accords is the monstrosity known as the Palestinian Authority (PA) headed by Mahmoud Abbas, an unelected president who rules by decree. The PA has enriched a thin layer of the Palestinian bourgeoisie off of aid kickbacks, while serving to police the population of the West Bank in the interests of Israel and imperialism. The territory has the highest ratio of security forces to the population of any territory on the planet, and prisons are being built at a more rapid rate than schools.

Even as Trump made his demonstrative gestures of closing the PLO office in Washington and cutting off humanitarian assistance, US funding for the PA’s militarized police has continued uninterrupted and a delegation of PA security and intelligence officials traveled to Washington earlier this month for talks with the CIA.

The PLO’s road to the Oslo Accords included a series of Norwegian-brokered secret negotiations and the public declaration by Arafat in Geneva in 1988 that the PLO renounced terrorism and recognized the “right of all parties concerned in the Middle East conflict to exist in peace and security.”

Pressed by the Western media to go further and recognize Israel, Arafat replied bitterly, “Enough is enough. Do you want me to do a striptease? It would be unseemly.”

The striptease was ultimately consummated on the White House lawn five years later.

The heroism and self-sacrifice of the PLO’s fighters had inspired workers and youth throughout the Middle East. The PLO was, however, a movement that ultimately represented the nationalist aspirations of an exiled Palestinian bourgeoisie and was unable and unwilling to make a genuine appeal to the Arab working class and oppressed masses. It remained dependent upon the reactionary regimes in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere, even as they collaborated in Israel’s persecution of the Palestinians and carried out direct attacks against them, 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 the end, there was an inexorable logic to the PLO’s capitulation to imperialism and its transformation— which included the enforced isolation and unexplained death of Arafat in 2004—into an open instrument of oppression of the very people that it claimed it would liberate. Its evolution followed a well-worn path traveled by other movements that had promised national liberation through armed struggle, including the African National Congress in South Africa, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the FMLN in El Salvador and others.

The PLO had sought to maintain its survival by means of maneuvers between the various Arab regimes and by exploiting the Cold War conflict between Washington and Moscow’s Stalinist 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 wages of this bargain came due, as profound changes in world capitalism based on the ever-increasing global integration of production undermined the very forces upon which the PLO had depended. The Stalinist bureaucracy’s turn to the restoration of capitalism 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.

The undeniable impasse and degeneration that confronts this nationalist project, 25 years after the Oslo Accords, has 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 will never be achieved through imperialist brokered negotiations for a “two-state solution.” Putting an end to decades of oppression, poverty and violence can be realized only by means 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.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**