

Saeb Erekat: Palestinian peace negotiator who epitomised the degeneration of the PLO (1955-2020)

Jean Shaoul**18 November 2020**

Saeb Erekat died last week in hospital in Jerusalem, four weeks after being diagnosed with COVID-19. He was particularly vulnerable to the disease, having undergone lung transplant surgery in the US in 2017.

For nearly three decades, Erekat was one of the most prominent members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). He served as a minister in the Palestinian National Authority that became known as the Palestinian Authority (PA), and was a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

While the late Yasser Arafat will forever be associated with the cause of Palestinian liberation and the PLO in its ascendancy as a mass movement, Erekat was merely its garrulous spokesman, begging on behalf of a tiny elite at Washington's table for a few crumbs during the period of the PLO's political decline.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas issued a statement on Erekat's death saying, "The departure of a brother and a friend, of the great fighter, Dr Saeb Erekat, is a great loss for Palestine and our people, and we are deeply saddened." But there was no popular outpouring of grief, reflecting the widespread understanding that negotiations with Israel were utterly futile and the huge gap between Palestinian working people and the political establishment.

Erekat was not a "great fighter" during the PLO's radical phase in the late 1960s and early 70s. Quite the opposite. He adamantly rejected the PLO's perspective of the armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Neither was he a politician with a strong political base of support. It was these very characteristics that rendered him so eminently qualified to function as the Palestinian elite's chief spokesman, acting as their negotiator in talks with Israel set in motion by the 1993 Oslo Accords that was supposed to inaugurate a mini-Palestinian state and resolve the long-running Israel/Palestinian conflict.

Erekat came to prominence after Arafat, betrayed and isolated by all the bourgeois Arab regimes on which he had relied, renounced the PLO's armed struggle against Israel. In December 1988, in a statement dictated word for word by the US State Department, Arafat guaranteed the security of Israel, accepted that a peace settlement with Israel was a "strategy and not an interim tactic," and renounced all forms of terrorism, "including individual, group and state terrorism." Openly acknowledging his humiliation, when asked at a press conference to declare his acceptance of Israel, Arafat said, "What do you want? Do you want me to do a strip tease? It would be unseemly."

For 25 years, Erekat had no compunctions about doing the unseemly. He took part in every, increasingly demeaning, round of "negotiations" between the Israel and Palestinians held under the auspices of successive US administrations including meeting with President Donald Trump and his advisers, Jason Greenblatt and Jared Kushner. Under his watch, the PA made concession after concession to Israel on all the key issues—the fate of

Palestinian refugees, land and the status of Jerusalem, while coordinating with Israel forces in the killing and arrest of Palestinians that took up arms against the occupation, as internal Israeli-Palestinian documents from 1999 to 2010 leaked by Al-Jazeera in 2011 revealed.

By December 2017, the Trump administration abandoned all pretence of negotiations and announced its decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the US Embassy there. Only then did Erekat's team abandon its political dealings with Washington.

While all obituaries testified to Erekat's tenacity, none could explain why he and the PLO were in the end wholly unsuccessful. It is striking that none of the nominally left groups that are wont to sport the Palestinian keffiyeh in solidarity with the PLO saw fit to say anything about him, or the PLO.

Erekat's political failure to achieve a two-state solution expresses the degeneration of the Palestinian nationalist movement as a whole—rooted in the bourgeois character of the PLO itself. The PLO's perspective of a Palestinian state has always been based on reaching an agreement with imperialism, at first through armed struggle to gain a seat at the negotiating table, and then through negotiations. While it was the most radical of the national movements that established a mass popular base among broad layers of the Palestinians, in the final analysis the PLO's leadership represented the interests of the Palestinian bourgeoisie not those of the broad mass of the population.

The Palestinian working class and peasantry sought nationhood as a means of reclaiming their land stolen in 1948 with the establishment of the state of Israel and ending oppression by imperialism and Israel. The PLO's aim was to establish a Palestinian state that would enable it to secure its own class rule, exploit its "own" working class and take its place in the global economic arena. The PLO's perspective of a democratic secular state was in essence a capitalist one. To this end it opposed any independent mobilisation of the working class and poor farmers and insisted it was the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."

In so doing, it was following the path travelled by other movements that 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. Not one of these, or any of the revolutionary movements in the Middle East and North Africa that had ejected their colonial rulers and had access to vast energy resources, was able to end the domination of finance capital and the transnational corporations or alleviate the appalling suffering of the working class and poor farmers. The colonial rulers or local stooges were simply replaced with corrupt local plutocrats.

The record of the PLO-dominated PA has been no different. Its strategy of working through the various Arab regimes to achieve a Palestinian state

proved disastrous, as one after another betrayed and isolated Arafat and the PLO.

Like all these other national movements, the PLO's ability to survive was dependent on manoeuvring between Washington and Moscow. But as the Stalinist bureaucracy turned to the restoration of capitalism and the liquidation of the Soviet Union that strategy became wholly unviable.

At the same time, the spontaneous rebellion of Palestinian workers and youth—the first Intifada that broke out at the end of 1987 outside the control of the PLO—threatened its perspective of an independent capitalist state with its legal framework and structures enabling the exploitation of the working class by the Palestinian bourgeoisie. By 1993, Arafat, bereft of his bourgeois allies, was forced to accept the Oslo Accords and the illusory promise of a much-diminished state on just 22 percent of the land of Palestine at some future point. It was Erekat who was to become the public face of the Palestinian negotiating team.

Who was Saeb Erekat?

Born in 1955 in Abu Dis, an East Jerusalem suburb then under Jordanian rule, to a prosperous business family, Erekat spent his formative years in Jericho. His opposition to Israel as a youth involved throwing stones at the Israeli security forces for which he was arrested.

His family's relatively privileged position enabled him to go, at the age of 17, to college in San Francisco where he learnt English before moving on to study international relations at both undergraduate and postgraduate level at San Francisco State University. In 1979, he returned to the West Bank, which after the 1967 War was under Israeli control, to take up an academic position at An-Najah University in Nablus (1979-91) and write for the traditionally cautious and conservative *al-Quds* newspaper.

Erekat obtained a PhD in peace studies (1983) at Bradford University in Britain. This was to have a major impact on him. As he later explained, it was during his PhD studies that he became convinced that there was no military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and it would end only through negotiations. He rejected all the most heroic sacrifices made by the PLO during the years of its armed struggle, replacing it with the mantra of peace and negotiations.

He said, "I'm telling Palestinians don't use violence. We're going to use the civilized means of international law to achieve our goals, our independence, our freedom." He called on the "international community" to act on the Palestinians' behalf.

It was this, along with his fluency in English, writing ability, and lack of strong political affiliation that led Arafat to invite him to attend the 1991 Madrid conference, the first face to face meeting between the PLO and Israel that launched his career as the Palestinians' negotiator.

The fraud of Oslo

Erekat participated in the Oslo Accords, working closely with Arafat until his unexplained death in 2004. Under the Accords, Arafat agreed to recognize Israel, guarantee its security and renounce the armed struggle for Palestinian liberation with which the PLO had long been identified, in return for a mini-bifurcated Palestinian state alongside Israel, the so-called "two state solution," to be negotiated with Israel under US brokerage.

The Accords established the PA as the guardian of Israel's security and government in waiting. But its remit was severely circumscribed, with no control over its borders and with supposedly full jurisdiction over Gaza

and just 18 percent of the West Bank (Area A) and joint jurisdiction with Israel over 22 percent (Area B). Fully 60 percent of the West Bank (Area C) remains to this day under Israeli military control. As Erekat acknowledged, "They [Israel] control the water, the sky and the passages. How can you say occupation is over?"

The PA maintained—courtesy of international "aid"—one of the largest per capita police forces in the world to suppress the Palestinians in the interests of Israel and its imperialist backers and further enrich the narrow layer of the Palestinian bourgeoisie that had grown rich in the Gulf and elsewhere.

How such a state would resolve the plight of the five million Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, the two million second class citizens living in Israel, as well as the millions more living in impoverished refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan and in the wider diaspora, was never made clear.

From the start, even a mini-Palestinian state was an anathema to Israel's far-right nationalists, cultivated by the Likud party under Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu. The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, one of the signatories of the Oslo Accords, by a right-wing Israeli fanatic just two years later in 1995 signalled that Israel would brook no compromise with the Palestinians, only total submission.

In July 2000, acutely aware of the Palestinians' rising anger and disillusionment over the failure of the Oslo Accords to improve their social position, Arafat rejected a deal with Israel at Camp David. The deal required the whole of Jerusalem to remain under Israeli sovereignty and severe limitations of the right of return for Palestinian refugees in return for little more than a vague series of promises for a Palestinian ghetto.

Erekat opposed the Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, that broke out after the talks and Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the al-Aqsa compound in September 2000. It took Israel more than four years to suppress the uprising in which an estimated 3,000 Palestinians lost their lives. Arafat himself spent the last two and half years of his life confined to the PA's Ramallah compound, a virtual prisoner.

Following Arafat's death in October 2004, Erekat was ready and able to work with his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, the multi-millionaire businessman and right-winger, because he had no essential political differences with him. He returned to the negotiating table with appeals to Israel to act as a "reasonable partner" for peace.

Israel had used the cover of the "peace process" to vastly expand the number of settlements in the West Bank, illegally occupied by Israel since the 1967 War. Yet Erekat continued with the fraud of negotiations even as he admitted, "We will continue to see this government's policy of stealing (land) and wasting time."

The Security Wall and a system road networks and 140 manned-check points as well as a plethora of other obstacles restricting vehicular access have carved up the West Bank's town and villages into a series of non-contiguous Bantustans. The Palestinians face daily harassment and intimidation from fascistic settlers who attack their olive groves and homes and even murder them with impunity. According to Israel's ministry of the interior, at the start of 2020 there were 463,353 Israelis living in the West Bank as of January 1, mainly in Area C, as well as an estimated 300,000 living in East Jerusalem, which Israel also illegally annexed in June 1967.

The results of the "peace negotiations" have been truly catastrophic for the Palestinians. Poverty affects some 25 percent of the population in the West Bank, a figure expected to rise to at least 30 percent due to the pandemic, in large part because Palestinians are unable to cross into Israel for work.

At the same time, the PA faces bankruptcy following the halting of all US aid to the PA—except the \$42 million funding for its security forces—in response to the PA's rejection of President Trump's "deal of the century"

earlier this year and Washington's demand that its Gulf allies cut their financial grants and aid to the PA.

Conditions in Gaza, which is governed by the bourgeois Islamist group Hamas and has been subject to a criminal 13 year-long blockade by Israel, aided and abetted by Egypt and the PA, as well as multiple Israeli military assaults, are in free fall. Unemployment and food insecurity rates are 45 and 69 percent respectively, according to Al Mezan Center for Human Rights' annual report for 2019. Poverty is the rule, running at 53 percent before the pandemic, as GDP per capita fell by 2.8 percent to just \$1,417.

The Trump administration has since December 2017 dispensed with the niceties of negotiations. It recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moving its embassy there, announced that it no longer regarded Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian territory as "inconsistent with international law" and ended its funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Last week, UNRWA announced that it will not be able to pay its 28,000 employees their full salaries unless it raised \$70 million by the end of the month, affecting the refugees themselves and their staff across the region.

In January, Trump's "deal of the century" formally recognised Israel's relentless land grabs in the West Bank and green lighted Tel Aviv's formal annexation of these territories and the consolidation of an apartheid regime. His offer of a "viable path to Palestinian statehood" at some point in the future was accompanied by the demand that the PA recognized Israel as a "Jewish state"—relegating Israeli Palestinians to second class citizens—disarmed Gaza, renounced "terrorism" and its financial support for the victims of Israeli security forces, and accepted a neo-colonial administration.

Last September, the White House brokered an agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with Israel, previously a taboo without a settlement of the Israel/Palestinian conflict, supposedly in return for Israel halting plans to annex swathes of Palestinian land in the West Bank. Its purpose was to cement an alliance between the Sunni petro-monarchies and Israel against Iran, demonstrating yet again the degree to which the fate of the Palestinians cannot be entrusted to the imperialist powers or their regional agents, all of whom have deserted and betrayed the Palestinian people.

The blind alley of bourgeois nationalism has been repeated throughout Africa and Asia where within a few years formal independence brought civil wars, authoritarian rule and mass poverty. There is no national capitalist road to the liberation of oppressed peoples from national oppression.

These experiences confirm Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution that the oppressed peoples of the world, including the Palestinians, cannot achieve any of their most basic needs—freedom from imperialist oppression, democratic rights, jobs, and social equality—by aligning with any section of the national bourgeoisie. In the imperialist epoch, the realisation of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations—tasks associated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise of the bourgeoisie—posed the taking of power by the working class. This in turn could only be achieved as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution, to place all the resources of the national and international economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses.

To conduct this struggle, Palestinian workers need two things: an international socialist strategy and their own fighting organisations, politically independent of the national bourgeoisie, secular and clerical. The way forward lies in the fight to unite Palestinian workers and the rural poor with their brothers and sisters throughout the region in a combined struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression, for the United Socialist States of the Middle East, as part of a struggle for world socialist revolution. This requires the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the region

to provide a socialist revolutionary leadership.



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