

# Gaza: From colony, to open air prison, to killing field—Part Two

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In 1993, Israel's incoming Labor Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Arafat signed the Oslo Accords, promising a "two-state solution" whereby Arafat and the Palestinian Authority would guarantee Israel's security and preside over a bifurcated, non-contiguous state, separate from but contained by Israel. This precluded any possibility of an independent sovereign state, let alone any democracy or improvement in the Palestinians' social and economic conditions.

Oslo's economic arrangements left Israel in control of foreign policy, defence, the settlements and the borders and crossings into Israel. It gave Israel jurisdiction over a customs union with the PA that exempted Israeli goods from customs duties and de facto control of Palestinian water and other resources, while giving the Palestinians the right to work in Israel. It held the PA's purse strings, courtesy of its collection on the PA's behalf of customs duties and value added tax—equal to about 75 percent of all PA revenue—and regularly withheld the tax revenue.

The newly formed Islamist groups, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), rejected the Oslo Accords and escalated their attacks on Israel. Rabin responded by implementing a closure regime, sealing Israel's borders, establishing checkpoints and restricting Palestinians' entry into Israel for work or business, breaking the Oslo agreements. Gaza was subjected to repeated closures. In 1994, even as the Accords concluded, Israel began constructing a perimeter fence around the enclave.

Deprived of their Palestinian workforce, Israel's bosses turned instead to Asia for cheap labour, with the number immigrant workers reaching 100,000 by 1996, far more than the 70,000 Palestinians at their peak. The Palestinians had lost their limited usefulness to Israel's employers, but not their land, resources and markets.

Israel's land grab and settlement building continued apace. By 2000, the number of housing units had increased by 52 percent and three new settlements were officially established, along with over 42 unofficial settlements. The number of settlers rose from 115,700 in 1993 to 176,973 in mid-1999. Israel's extraction of Palestinian water resources escalated, rendering Gaza's water undrinkable and causing an acute water crisis in Gaza in 2000.

The Oslo Accords legitimized the increased theft of Palestinian land and resources, and a one-way movement of goods with little or no movement of labour. While Israel prospered during the Oslo years and largely secured the end of the Arab boycott, Palestinian agriculture and its economy collapsed, and unemployment and poverty rose. While Israel's per capita GDP rose by 14 percent during Oslo years,

the Palestinians' per capita GDP fell by 3.8 percent. The situation in Gaza was even starker. Its share of the Palestinian economy fell from around 37 percent in 1994 to 31 percent in 2000.

## The second Intifada and the ghettoization of the Palestinians

The assassination of Rabin in 1995 by a right-wing, religious zealot signaled the refusal of Israel's ruling elite to make any meaningful concessions to the Palestinians. This and the self-evident fraud of the Oslo process that had brought only appalling poverty and degradation for the Palestinian workers and peasants, amid the rampant corruption and cronyism of the Palestinian bourgeoisie, gave rise to the second Intifada in September 2000. This was as much an uprising against the PLO leadership that had signed up to Oslo as against Israel, with Mahmoud Abbas, one of the negotiators of the Oslo Accords, calling for an end to the Intifada. It paved the way for the rise of Hamas as a political force to fill the vacuum.

It would take six years of massive Israeli violence and brutality to crush the uprising, with Arafat confined in a virtual prison inside the PA's compound in Ramallah almost until his still unexplained death in 2004.

With the "demographic problem" escalating, all the Zionist parties sought to expand control over the West Bank, escalate settlement construction and promote population transfers and ethnic cleansing.

Ariel Sharon's government embarked on a policy of separating Israel from the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and the West Bank Palestinians from those in the Gaza Strip. This included imposing a blockade on Gaza, erecting a high wall around the Strip, bombing Gaza's new international airport just three years after it was opened in 1998, and stifling Gaza's fishing industry by encircling it, ostensibly to stop arms smuggling.

Announcing in 2003 that Israel would "disengage" from Gaza, Sharon closed down the settlements and withdrew the troops guarding Israel's assets in the Strip, having gained Washington's green light for far more important settlement expansion and consolidation in the West Bank. He ordered the construction of the infamous Separation Wall that seized a further 18 kilometres of land inside the West Bank, taking 9 percent of the territory.

On taking up the PA presidency in 2005, Abbas faithfully imposed Israel's dictats. After Hamas won a surprise victory in the January 2006 Palestinian elections over his Fatah-dominated PLO, widely seen as the corrupt representative of a handful of multimillionaires and

Israel's proxy security force, Abbas—with Israel's backing—waged an unsuccessful civil war to unseat Hamas in its Gaza stronghold. The fratricidal struggle marked the definitive end of the Oslo “two-state solution” and more fundamentally of the nationalist perspective on which the Palestinians had based their struggle against Israel.

Following Fatah's rout, Israel imposed a full-scale economic blockade of Gaza, with the backing of the PA, Egypt, the Arab regimes and the imperialist powers. Israel allowed just 259 commercial trucks to leave Gaza in the first three years, bringing Gaza's exports, including agricultural products, to a halt. Within a year, employment in Gaza's manufacturing industries fell from 35,000 to just 860. In 2010, Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron, no friend of the Palestinians, called Gaza “an open-air prison.”

Gaza's plight was compounded by Israel's repeated assaults that destroyed much of its public and social infrastructure and residential and commercial buildings. Its share of the Palestinian economy fell to 22 percent in 2008 and to 18 percent in 2018. Its per capita GDP of just \$1,500 is now half that of the mid-1990s. Even before the war started, poverty rates were more than 50 percent, with unemployment at a similar level, leaving 80 percent of Gaza's 2.3 million population dependent on international aid.

### **The failure of Palestinian nationalism and the way forward for Palestinian and Jewish workers**

The suffering inflicted on the Palestinians, no less than the failure of the Zionist project to secure a “safe haven for the Jews,” flows from the impossibility of securing democratic rights and socio-economic demands on the basis of a nationalist perspective. Fatah's perspective of establishing a secular, democratic state by means of armed struggle could never provide the basis for the unification of Jewish and Palestinian workers that is required for the dismantling of the Zionist state. With the Israeli bourgeoisie backed to the hilt by the Arab regimes and the imperialist powers, above all the US whose interests it serves, the overthrow of the Zionist state would necessitate the overthrow of the Arab regimes.

Fatah, dominated by the Palestinian bourgeoisie, could never address that. Its aim was to reach a negotiated settlement with imperialism that would secure a state serving the interests of the Palestinian elite within the Middle East. It pledged to “cooperate with all Arab states.” Like all nationalist movements, it prioritized the national struggle over the class struggle, making it impossible to develop a class-based anti-imperialist movement that would cut across ethnic, religious and national division, be it in Jordan, Lebanon or Syria but above all in Israel. Instead, it maneuvered between one or other bourgeois Arab regime, all of whom in turn isolated and abandoned the PLO and the Palestinian people.

Hamas's action on October 7, launched to secure the release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails and the end of the blockade, against vastly superior forces, was tantamount to a suicide mission, with 1,500 Palestinians losing their lives in the attack. But its legitimate resistance to decades of oppression and siege, the longest in modern history, cannot end the terrible suffering of the Palestinian people or halt Israel and US imperialism's plans for a wider war in the region.

The Biden administration has deployed US war ships and troops to

the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and launched attacks on Iranian-backed targets in Syria, while Israel, in addition to its repeated attacks on Syria, has exchanged fire with Hezbollah in the Israel, Lebanon and Syria border region.

The genocidal war now engulfing Gaza is no less a tragedy for the Israeli working class. The perspective of nationalism has proved to be just as disastrous for the Jews as their Palestinian counterparts. Israel has developed as an apartheid state, discriminating against non-Jews and responsible for decades of brutality against the Palestinians in the occupied territories and neighbouring countries. Israel's ruling elite, having embraced fascism, has no political perspective other than dictatorship at home, genocide and ethnic cleansing, and savage wars abroad. Israeli workers will be sacrificed in the service of the Israeli ruling elite and its imperialist backers.

Throughout the nine-month protest movement against Netanyahu's fascist government, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the only way to combat the threat to democratic rights and put an end to the danger of war is to break with all factions of the Zionist bourgeoisie and carry out a struggle to unite the Palestinian and Jewish working class. We warned, “The opposition leaders are no less committed to the expansion of Israel's borders at the expense of the Palestinians,” a statement confirmed by opposition leaders Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot's rush to join Netanyahu's war cabinet.

A state founded on the basis of “the ongoing repression of the Palestinians was always incapable of developing a genuinely democratic society. Its evolution as a garrison state for US imperialism, repeatedly at war with its Arab neighbours and in perpetual war with the Palestinians; pursuing an expansionist ‘Greater Israel’ policy; resting ever more firmly on right-wing settler population in the Occupied Territories and US military subventions to offset the destabilizing impact of acute levels of social inequality among the highest in the world, is what has paved the way for the Frankenstein monster of Netanyahu's government.”

Forging a path out of this bloody impasse means taking a determined stand against Netanyahu's fascist gang of warmongers and their efforts to whip up hatred of the Palestinians and making a class appeal, across the national divide, to win the entire working class—Jewish and Palestinian—to a unified socialist struggle against imperialism and its bourgeois agents within the Arab and Israeli elites.

The war is provoking mass opposition throughout the world. There are signs of opposition emerging within Israel. But this opposition must be mobilized as part of an international anti-war movement against capitalism and for socialism. The critical task facing workers and youth is the building of revolutionary parties, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, including in Israel/Palestine, to provide the political leadership necessary to overthrow the Zionist state and Arab bourgeois regimes and build a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

*Concluded*



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