Former US ambassador Ryan Crocker: Nearly every Arab state has long viewed the Palestinians with "fear and loathing"

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The Arab regimes have not lifted a finger to oppose Israel's genocidal war and ethnic cleansing of Gaza.

Instead, they have colluded every step of the way with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's gang of fascists, settlers and religious bigots committed to Jewish Supremacy "from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea", even as they wring their hands and call for a ceasefire.

Netanyahu and his paymaster in Washington have counted on them doing so because their entire record in relation to the Palestinians has been one of shameless betrayal.

When asked last Sunday whether the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) would move into Rafah, Netanyahu replied, "We'll go there. We're not going to leave them." He added that he had the tacit support of several Arab leaders, saying, "They understand that, and even agree with it quietly," in an interview with German media giant Axel Springer on Sunday March 10. "They understand Hamas is part of the Iranian terror axis," he said.

Netanyahu named no names, but he did not need to. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have all been in constant communication with Israel and senior Biden administration officials under the guise of mediating an agreement on the release of hostages held by Hamas in Gaza.

Retired US diplomat Ryan Crocker was, however, far more explicit in confirming every word that Netanyahu said. In a revealing interview with *Politico* magazine last month, he let the cat out of the bag, stating unequivocally why, despite publicly supporting Palestinian rights, none of the Arab regimes are willing to accept Palestinian refugees—because they have long viewed the Palestinians with "fear and loathing."

Crocker is in a position to know. Beginning his diplomatic career with a posting in the US consulate in the inland port city of Khorramshahr, near Iran's oilfields, in 1972 during the Shah's reign, he later served in Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Kuwait. While it is not necessary to accept everything he said, Crocker did expose the Arab regimes' undying hatred of the Palestinians and gave examples of their repeated treachery and duplicity.

In reviewing the history of the Palestinians, Crocker explained that the Nakba of 1948, when more than 700,000 Palestinians fled to Jordan, Gaza, Lebanon and Syria to escape Zionist terrorism and the Arab-Israeli war of 1947-49, "shook the legitimacy of Arab regimes. Seven Arab states declared war on the Zionists—and were decisively routed. Arab leaders feared the consequences of their failure in Palestine, both from elements within their own societies and from Palestinians themselves… But the fact that [Palestine Liberation Army] units were under the command of the Arab armies allowed them to keep control of Palestinian arms until the [1967] Six Day War."

He described the Palestinians' experience as refugees in neighbouring Arab countries as "pure hell by and large." Only in Jordan did they get citizenship. In Lebanon, they remain stateless, they cannot own property and face restrictions on the jobs they are allowed to do, leaving them subject to super exploitation.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which created a new wave of refugees, largely to Jordan, dramatically changed the Arab regimes' relations with the Palestinians. Their decisive defeat ended any prospect of them defeating Israel militarily. But it also led to Yasser Arafat's Fatah group, with its commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian state by means of armed struggle, taking control of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), an umbrella group of multiple factions, each with different ideologies, each seeking support from different Arab states, Moscow or Beijing.

The PLO, now recognised as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," became a mass movement. The Palestinian struggle became somewhat independent of the Arab regimes, particularly Jordan and Syria. These factors combined to shift the fight for Palestinian control of territory to the Arab lands—Lebanon in 1969 and Jordan in 1970—and turned the Arab regimes against the Palestinians. In essence, the struggle became an international struggle, beyond Israel and the Palestinian territories, threatening the ruling elites of the neighbouring states that were themselves weak, wracked with divisions and facing an increasingly impoverished working class and peasantry, plus the Palestinian diaspora.

As Crocker explained, while the Arab leaders routinely gave support to the PLO in what he described as "the staple of Arab politics… the actual practice of Arab governments vis-a-vis the Palestinians was exactly the opposite." In a particularly telling assessment, he said that they all viewed the Palestinians who had taken refuge in their countries "as a threat, a foreign population that should be weakened if not exterminated."

Jordan

After 1967, the Palestinians stepped up their attacks on Israel from the Jordanian border town of Karameh, amid growing support both within the occupied West Bank and Jordan, more than half of whose populations were Palestinian. As the PLO's strength grew, some of the Palestinian factions began to call for the overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy, installed by Britain in the aftermath of World War I to preside over a mini state designed to be unviable and dependent on London. This led to violent clashes in 1970.

As Crocker explained, Jordan's King Hussein was able to defeat the PLO in what became known as "Black September", "not just because of

the prowess of the Jordanian military but also because Syria refused to provide air cover to the Syrian tanks supporting the Palestinians as promised" when they came under Jordanian attack, forcing the brigade to withdraw. This left the Palestinians isolated, and thousands were massacred by Hussein's forces in pogroms. "That Syrian air force," writes Crocker, "was under command of a general named Hafez al-Assad [later ruler of Syria], whose hatred and fear of all things Palestinian was intense."

His treachery set a precedent that was to be repeated not just by Syria but all the Arab regimes.

Lebanon's civil war 1975-1989

The PLO moved to Lebanon. Under an agreement brokered by Cairo in November 1969, the Palestinian guerilla movements set up their bases there, began taking at least partial control of 16 official UNRWA camps that were home to 300,000 refugees, and launched attacks on Israel from southern Lebanon. As home to the PLO's military headquarters, Beirut became an enemy stronghold as far as Israel was concerned, leading to multiple attacks aimed at undermining popular support for the Palestinians and sowing divisions between the Palestinians and Lebanese.

This set the stage for Lebanon's civil war that raged from 1975-1989, between the Palestinians and their Muslim allies against the reactionary Maronite Christian ruling elite, backed by Israel.

Israel was to receive support from an unexpected quarter. In the first phase of Lebanon's civil war, when it seemed that the fascist Phalangist forces faced being routed, the Syrian army intervened to preserve the Lebanese state and the Maronite establishment—shelling Tall al-Za'tar, the big Palestinian refugee camp in East Beirut under siege from Lebanese forces—reducing it to rubble and leaving at least 1,500 Palestinians dead in August 1976.

Egypt signed an agreement with Israel at Camp David in 1978, ensuring the neutrality of the most important Arab country should Israel attack any of her other neighbours. This enabled Israel to invade Lebanon in June 1982. A botched attempt on the life of the Israeli ambassador, Shlomo Argov, in London, by a Palestinian faction hostile to Arafat and the PLO, provided the pretext for driving the PLO—and Syria—out of Lebanon.

After Israel attacked Syrian forces in Lebanon's Beka'a valley and bombed more than 60 Syrian aircraft in the first phase of the invasion, effectively neutralising Syria for the rest of the campaign, not one of the Arab regimes, including those in the "Steadfastness Front" seen as the most pro-Palestinian—Algeria and Libya—came to the PLO's defence. This took place while Iraq was embroiled in an eight-year-long war against Iran.

The attacks on the Palestinians by Arab forces continued even after the PLO's expulsion from Lebanon. In September 1982, Phalangist forces, under the protection of the Israeli military, massacred some 3,000 Palestinian men, women and children in the Sabra neighbourhood and the adjacent Shatila refugee camp in Beirut.

As Crocker said, it was just one of many massacres.

Three years later, in 1985, Lebanese Shia in the Amal movement, along with other Muslim and Palestinian factions, laid siege for almost three years to the Shatila and Bourj el-Barajneh camps, in what became known as the "War of the Camps." With backing from Damascus, which feared that Israel might use the Palestinians as a pretext for invading Syria, and Tehran, their aim was to dislodge supporters of Fatah and the PLO. It led to the deaths of several thousand Palestinians, with many more injured.

No neighbouring country willing to host the PLO

One of the most revealing accounts in Crocker's interview is his description of the problems the US encountered organising the evacuation of the PLO, following Israel's massive bombardment of Lebanon and siege of Beirut that together killed at least 19,000 people. It proved extraordinarily difficult to find an Arab country willing to provide a home for the PLO factions and its leadership. Crocker said that while Libya and Sudan agreed to accept a few Palestinians:

> "I don't know how we ever talked the Tunisians into accepting the PLO leadership. Some of the hardest parts of the entire diplomatic effort to end the fighting involved trying to find locations for the PLO leadership and its rank and file, because nobody wanted them. Those were extraordinarily tough talks. And again, it is noteworthy that the Syrians accepted none of them. We didn't even ask Jordan. So it was those countries farther afield, not directly involved in the conflict and without substantial Palestinian populations. Tunisia ended up with the headquarters… I think the Tunisians eventually accepted because they felt not having a Palestinian population meant they were not likely to be internally destabilized by it."

Syria

Crocker pointed out that Arafat and his Fatah movement, whose secular nationalist ideology had a broad appeal, presented a particular threat to Syria. The "support" of that weak, unstable country for the Palestinian cause was never more than an attempt to dominate the Palestinian masses and use them as pawns in its political manoeuvrings at home and abroad in the service of Syria's national interests—more precisely, those of the ruling clique. Hence its intervention in a de facto alliance with Israel against the Palestinians in 1976, when it looked as though Lebanon might be split in two, to bolster the Phalangist forces.

Israel's subsequent invasion of Lebanon in 1982 performed a vital service for Damascus, itself beset with civil war against the Muslim Brotherhood, "in dismantling the PLO structures in Lebanon and forcing the PLO to evacuate from Beirut."

Fatah's ideology was to lead to the refusal of most of the Arab regimes to host the PLO after its expulsion from Lebanon in 1982, but their hatred of the Palestinians was something, Crocker said, that successive US administrations and Israel had failed to grasp and exploit. He cited as an example Israel's failure to agree a deal with Syria, which he said was entirely possible in January 2000, that would have served to further isolate Arafat and the PLO.

October 2023 and the Arab regimes

Fast forward to 2023. Netanyahu now has no intention of passing up that advice. He never hesitates to pose Iran's support for Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen as a threat to the stability of the Arab regimes. His confidence in pressing ahead with a ground assault on Rafah rests on the Arab regimes' support, amply demonstrated over the last five months.

Not one of the Gulf Arab oil producers has seen fit to even suggest imposing an oil embargo on Israel's backers, as they did after the 1973 Arab Israeli war. And neither Egypt nor Jordan, which signed treaties with Israel, have revoked their treaties. None of the states that signed normalisation agreements with Israel under the Abraham Accords—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain (with the approval of its paymaster, Saudi Arabia), Morocco and Sudan—have sought to void the Accords. Only Jordan, more than half of whose population is of Palestinian origin, has withdrawn its ambassador from Israel.

The war has done nothing to derail Washington's long-running efforts to broker a normalisation deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Even Riyadh's nominal support for the so-called two-state solution is a thing of the past. In September, the country's de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman told a television interviewer that he did not demand a two-state solution but merely hoped for a deal that would "ease the life of the Palestinians." Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan later told CNN that such a treaty was dependent upon "a *viable pathway* to establishing a Palestinian state" [emphasis added].

In the meantime, the Saudis' cooperation with Israel continues, particularly in relation to investment and trade in Israel's high-tech and surveillance equipment.

Jordan, along with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, is playing a key role in keeping Israel's economy functioning. With shipping taking the route round the Cape of Good Hope to avoid Yemen's Houthis attacks on ships in the Red Sea with links to Israel or its backers, the US and the UK, the Arab regimes are providing a "land corridor" for the transportation of goods to Israel.

All the Arab regimes have continued trading with Israel, which has become their go-to source of surveillance and hacking technology used to control political activism and dissidents among their own restive populations. The Arab signatory states to the Abraham Accords are the third largest purchasers of Israeli arms.

The Butcher of Cairo, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who has long used the military to serve as Gaza's prison guard on Israel's behalf, opposed Israel's plans to push Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians into Egypt's Sinai desert. This was not out of any concern for the Palestinians but apprehension they would become the focus for broader political opposition to his regime, to US imperialism and all its allies in the region. His counterproposal was to house them in Israel's Negev desert instead of Sinai, "until Israel is capable of defeating Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Afterwards, Palestinians could return to their homeland."

He ordered the army to fortify Egypt's border with Gaza to prevent the Palestinians from fleeing into Sinai. Should the Palestinians succeed in breaching the reinforced border, they will be housed in a prison camp under construction in northern Sinai until they can return to Gaza.

It was El-Sisi who first put forward plans for a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority (PA) in Doha last December at a meeting of US imperialism's key Arab allies in the region: a new provisional PA government of "technocrats" would organise parliamentary and presidential elections to determine the post-war administration of the West Bank and Gaza. The PA's role would be to guard an open-air prison that the Arab regimes have been complicit in creating, not only in Gaza but also in the West Bank.

In the final analysis, their efforts to come up with a such plan to stabilise the region—albeit one that is both unworkable and also unacceptable to Israel—are aimed at obtaining Washington's commitment to back their own "security" in the event of a new "Arab Spring" or mass movement to unseat them, to neutralize the Houthi threat to Saudi Arabia and to wage war against Iran, which has backed forces opposed to their rule, as part of Washington's preparations for war on China.

The way forward

The oppression of the Palestinian people has been maintained not simply by Israeli violence and military might, but by the treachery of the Arab bourgeoisie. The line-up by the Arab states with Israel and US imperialism signifies the ultimate political collapse of all the regimes that emerged after the post-World War I imperialist carve-up of the resource-rich Middle East by Britain and France.

Moreover, the Palestinians, under the leadership of Arafat, Fatah and the PLO—with its perspective of a Palestinian nation state to be achieved by means of the armed struggle and the backing of the Arab regimes and the Soviet Union—was unable to put forward a perspective and programme capable of uniting the working class and toiling masses of the region in what is essentially an international struggle. Today the Fatah-dominated leadership of the Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas is also an accomplice to Israel's savage repression, concerned only with ensuring the privileges of the West Bank and diaspora billionaires, dependant on acting as a police force for Washington and Jerusalem.

These tragic events provide a powerful confirmation of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, demonstrating that in the imperialist epoch the workers and oppressed masses in the less advanced countries cannot achieve any of their most basic needs—freedom from imperialist oppression, democratic rights, jobs, and social equality—under the leadership of any section of the national bourgeoisie.

Under conditions of a globalised economy, an end to war and genocide, national oppression and social exploitation lies not along a national, but rather along an international and socialist road. It demands the taking of power by the working class as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution. This begins by waging a determined struggle to unify the working class, Arab, Persian, Jewish, Kurdish and across all other national, ethnic and religious divisions, for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East. It requires the building of a new leadership, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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