

The Intifada Continues — Against Arafat

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The massacre of 12 anti-Arafat demonstrators on Nov. 18 outside the Palestine mosque in Gaza is the logical result of the so-called peace process in the Middle East. While news agencies and governments either feigned surprise at the events that have unfolded in the areas controlled by the Palestine Liberation Organization, or attempted to blame the victims, anyone with a clear-sighted view of the situation in Palestine could have predicted these events, and expects the situation only to get worse.

The reality of the Oslo agreement between the PLO and Israel is imposing itself on the fantasies of “just and lasting” peace and mutual cooperation that have dominated “mainstream” political opinion for the past year. In place of high-sounding values and saccharine rhetoric, the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and Jericho is looking more and more like an instrument of fascist oppression in the hands of the Israeli government.

The Events

Since news coverage of the Middle East in the US is often spotty, not to mention hopelessly pro-Zionist, a summary of recent events is in order. The Nov. 18 massacre was the culmination of a series of events that began in October. Since that time, Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine (Hamas) and Islamic Jihad have carried out a series of attacks against Israeli targets, both military and civilian; the attacks killed more than 30 Israelis in October alone. Since the PLO, in accordance with its agreement with Israel, is responsible for security in Gaza, the main stronghold of these groups, it has come under increasing pressure from Israel and the US to suppress “Islamic fundamentalist terrorism” in the name of protecting peace. Of course, this amounts to demanding that the PLO defend the Israeli army against Palestinian resistance.

The first major incident in this chain of events occurred with the seizure, by Hamas militants, of an Israeli soldier in mid-October. The militants demanded the release of their comrades held in Israeli jails. Initially, the Israeli authorities claimed that the soldier was being held in the area administered by the PLO, and began a campaign to disparage the PLO’s ability to maintain security. In the end, however, the soldier turned out to be held in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and was killed, along with the militants, during a botched Israeli commando raid on Oct. 15. Four days later, a Hamas suicide bomber killed himself and 22 Israeli civilians when he blew up a bus in the heart of Tel Aviv.

Clearly, the message had been delivered. The Islamic movement would continue its attacks on Israeli targets, without regard for the PLO-Israel peace agreement. Naturally, the Israelis demanded that the PLO crack down on Palestinian opponents to the peace process, which they proceeded to do, arresting dozens. As will be discussed in more detail below, these initial events were very much to Israel’s advantage. Arafat and his cronies were being turned into Israel’s first line of defense. Furthermore, Israel did not leave matters in the hands of the PLO. Shortly thereafter, the Israelis assassinated a journalist, Hani Abed, who was a major figure in Islamic Jihad. On Nov. 13, Jihad responded by launching a suicide attack, in the PLO-controlled zone, which killed three Israeli soldiers. This attack was a major embarrassment to Yasir Arafat, since it was carried out right under his nose. The PLO responded by arresting approximately 180 activists from the Islamic movements. A war of words ensued, and tension within the Palestinian community grew more intense.

Matters came to a head when, on Nov. 18, a joint Hamas-Islamic Jihad demonstration, following Friday prayers at the Palestine mosque in Gaza, turned into a massacre. For no explicable reason, the PLO fired thousands of rounds of live ammunition at the demonstrators. Twelve were killed and dozens injured. The PLO quickly tried to blame someone, anyone, else for the incident. First they claimed that the demonstrators had started the shooting, then they blamed foreign instigators such as Iran. When this failed, they tried other, more absurd explanations. Nabil Shaath, the main PLO negotiator with Israel, claimed that nine of those killed were members of Yasir Arafat's own organization, Fatah. Arafat himself tried to imply that the Israelis were responsible. With hundreds of witnesses to the events, however, none of this nonsense could convince anyone.

Since the massacre, the political leaderships of both the PLO and the Islamic movements have taken a step back. While the rank-and-file of Hamas and Islamic Jihad have been calling for revenge, the leadership is more timid, or perhaps believes that time is on their side. After all, with every new outrage, Arafat loses more and more credibility with his own people. In the meantime, a war of demonstrations has broken out. Arafat's storm troopers, the Fatah Hawks, staged an armed demonstration of several thousand men in support of their leader. When Hamas organized an even larger "festival" the following week, the PLO police confiscated the Palestinian and Israeli newspapers distributed in Gaza to prevent their reporting on the size of the opposition. Despite attempts at mediation on the part of several parties within Palestinian society, the situation remains critical. Any move by either party could set off a bloody conflict within the PLO-administrated areas. The current plans to hold elections in Gaza and the West Bank could provide the spark that sets off the conflagration.

Analysis

That the PLO-Israel peace agreement is in mortal danger is now obvious to everyone. The fact remains, however, that the commentators of the mainstream press are unable to comprehend the real causes behind the collapse of "peace." Most of the rhetoric emanating from the Western capitals presents the image of Islamic reactionaries trying to sink the enlightened attempts of secular powers to bring a new hope to the benighted peoples of the Middle East.

This rhetoric is based on two fundamental errors in conception. First, the problem is perceived as a struggle between national movements, which can be solved by some form of re-partition of Palestine. Second, the attempts of the US and Europeans to arrange peace agreements between the Israelis and the Arab states are presented as aimed at changing the future of the Middle East for the benefit of its peoples.

The first point requires a substantial reply. The conflict between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism is not really a conflict between two national peoples over the division of land. In fact, the conflict more closely resembles the struggle in South Africa against apartheid. The Zionist movement is a settler-colonial movement that has established a state by and for the Jewish people, an entity it created in the process of settlement, to the exclusion of the indigenous Arab Palestinian people. As such, Zionism is a form of racial segregation and oppression that cannot be alleviated by an attempt to redraw the borders of the state.

The bankruptcy of this measure becomes clear when one examines the case of the Gaza Strip. Gaza has no independent economy. More than 30,000 Gazans work inside Israel, and when the

borders are closed between the two regions “for security reasons,” they and their families go without income entirely. According to a recent statement by Yasir Arafat himself, the unemployment rate in Gaza is currently 52%. In these circumstances, it is clear that Gaza forms a source of cheap labor for the Israeli economy. Despite many plans to replace “dangerous” Arab labor in Israel with “safe” labor imported from Southeast Asia, Israel continues to depend on Palestinian Arab labor. Even if the Israeli economy could be gradually weaned of its dependence on Arab labor, this would only cause the complete collapse of Gazan society.

On the West Bank, the situation is much the same, although the economy is somewhat less depressed. Nonetheless, the major question there will be the division of lands. The West Bank has considerable agricultural potential, but Israel has seized most of the best land for its settlements. Despite all of the loud noises concerning peace and brotherhood, Israeli settlers continue to pour into the West Bank. It is therefore very unlikely that the Israeli government will be willing to concede any territories to the Palestinian Arabs. Redrawing the maps will not change the basic economic realities in Palestine.

It should also be noted that “peace” has been more of a fantasy than a reality. In the first 11½ months after the Oslo accord, 119 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli Occupation Authorities (including 17 killed by undercover units). Another 45 were killed by Israeli settlers. In the same period, 29 Israelis were killed by Palestinians. The fact is that the Intifada goes on, with or without international recognition.

As for the second point, that the peace process will bring a new future to the Middle East, this is the most absurd idea of them all. Any remotely competent observer can tell that the peace process is a tool to rescue the regimes in place in the Middle East. It has become increasingly obvious that the entire Middle Eastern state system requires direct and regular American intervention to avoid being swept away. The opening act of this drama was the Gulf War, in which the US and its allies intervened to save the Gulf states, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, from collapse. Currently, pro-American regimes in Algeria and Egypt are under sustained attack by Islamic militants. The future of Lebanon depends on Syrian-Israeli cooperation, and Iraq and Turkey are wracked by ongoing civil wars, especially with their Kurdish populations. The US desperately needs a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict to keep a lid on the changes that are sweeping the region.

Perhaps the most endangered group of all is the leadership of the PLO. When the Intifada, or Uprising, began in Dec. 1987, the PLO was taken completely by surprise. The Palestinian people showed a remarkable ability to reorganize themselves spontaneously by recasting old organizational forms and creating new ones overnight. Since the Intifada began in Palestine, the methods displayed there have been studied and put into practice by opposition movements all over the Middle East, although none of them has yet to achieve the success of the original. Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the Intifada has been its ability to perpetuate itself over seven years of constant, bloody repression. Its strength lies in the fact that it is not a small, conspiratorial party, but a true mass movement that cannot be beheaded by the death or imprisonment of a few leaders. In spite of every attempt by the Zionist government and the PLO leadership to liquidate the Intifada, the struggle continues.

It must be said, however, in criticism, that in many aspects the Intifada has yet to transcend the limitations of a national movement. The PLO and the Islamists are selling different brands of the same product: the dream of a Palestinian Arab national state. The PLO has abandoned its call for a secular, democratic state in all of Palestine in favor of accepting an Israeli-backed bantustan.

The Islamists, at least some of them, reject any compromise with Zionism, but want to substitute an Islamic state for the Jewish state. Clearly neither option holds out much hope for either Arab or Jewish Palestinians. Neither does either endeavor have much chance of succeeding.

It is important to remember here that the Zionist movement has not succeeded entirely in subjecting Jewish opinion to its aims. Large sectors of Israeli Jewish society continue to suffer class and ethnic oppression, especially Jews of Arab origin, who are largely working class, and recent Russian immigrants. Like working class whites in the US, these groups sometimes support extreme-right policies as a means of keeping the racially oppressed one level beneath them. On the other hand, they have no illusions about the dreams being sold by the Zionist leadership and its international allies. Any attempt to move beyond the current impasse must make use of their talents and address their concerns.

What is needed now is coordination between Arab and Jewish Palestinians to build a united movement against Zionism and its Arab lackeys. Such a movement cannot make any concessions to Zionism or ethnic nationalism. The basis of this movement should be the common exploitation of Arab and Jewish labor by Zionist capital. The Intifada, which was begun by Palestinian Arabs, must be extended to include disaffected elements within Israeli Jewish society. This process will not only help to strengthen the existing struggle, it will also transform that struggle into a united front against all forms of exploitation. The repartition of Palestine must be replaced by a Palestine without borders. The failure to build such a movement can only invite further tragedies on an even greater scale.

For reasons of space, the writer has refrained from giving a detailed historical summary of the Zionist movement and the development of the race war in Palestine. Those readers who would like to obtain a more detailed account of the background to the Palestinian conflict are directed to the writer's articles in *Love and Rage* (Nov. 1993) and *Race Traitor* (Fall 1994).

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