Palestinian Liberation and the MENA Revolutions

written by Joseph Daher | October 19, 2023



The following article was originally published by Joseph Daher, a Syrian/Swiss academic and Marxist internationalist, in the journal Tempest on July 5, 2021. We republish it here believing it provides important background, particularly on Palestinian originations and their politics. – Eds.

Israel's recent attacks against Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza demonstrated, once again, the brutal colonial, racist, and apartheid nature of the Zionist state. The replacement of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's government by a new coalition led by ultranationalist Naftali Bennett will change nothing for Palestinians.

The new regime's policy is no different than Netanyahu's. Proving this reality, Bennett ordered fresh air strikes on Gaza just a few days after his assumption of power. These new acts of violence and repression prove why the international left must stand in unconditional solidarity with the Palestinian resistance.

But we also must engage in the strategic debates about how to win liberation and our role in it. Socialists should see the Palestinian struggle as inextricably tied to the revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) against all the region's states, most importantly Israel. This combination of resistance in Palestine and regional revolution is the only realistic way to free Palestine and all the peoples of the region.

Israel: a settler-colonial state

The Zionist movement from its origins in Europe to its foundation of Israel in 1948 and its displacement of Palestinians today has been a settler-colonial project. To establish, maintain, and expand its territory, the Israeli state has had to ethnically cleanse Palestinians from their land, homes, and jobs. Throughout this process it allied with, and found sponsorship from, imperialist powers, first the British empire and then the United States, which used Israel as their agent in the struggle against Arab nationalism and socialism.

Thus, the Israeli state's support for Zionist settler's expropriation of Palestinian's homes in Sheikh Jarrah must be seen as a continuation of the Nakba ("catastrophe" in Arabic) that drove over 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in 1948. This process of ongoing colonization is the reason why more than 5 million Palestinians refugees live in camps and cities in the Middle East and North Africa.

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Even mainstream groups now recognize the reactionary nature of Israeli colonization. For example, both Human Rights Watch and Israel's B'Tselem have recently denounced Israel's ongoing seizure of Palestinian land. They have documented how Israel has violated international laws to back 620,000 colonists building colonies in the occupied territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. They also concluded that Israel is an apartheid state that gives Jew's special privileges and reduces Palestinians to second-class citizenship.

Given the utterly reactionary nature of Israel, the far right's political hegemony over the last decade should come as no surprise. It is in some sense the logical outgrowth of the Zionist movement, its ethnonationalism, Israel's institutional racism, and its more than seven decades of oppression and dispossession of Palestinians. These create the conditions for the flourishing of right-wing Zionist mobs that march through Palestinian neighborhoods chanting "Death to Arabs."

Mistaken alliances with authoritarian regimes

Just like any other population under colonial occupation and apartheid, Palestinians have the right to resist, including with military means. Support for this right should not be confused with support for the political perspectives of the various Palestinian political parties. None of these parties—Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front of the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and others—offer a political strategy capable of winning Palestinian liberation.

The dominant Palestinian political parties look not to the Palestinian masses and the regional working classes and oppressed peoples as the forces to win liberation. Instead they seek political alliances with the region's ruling classes and their regimes to support their political and military struggle against Israel. They collaborate with these regimes, and argue for non-intervention, even as those regimes oppress their own popular classes and Palestinians within their borders.

One of the key examples in the evolution of this approach was in Jordan 1970, and culminated in the events known as Black September. Despite the strength, organization and popularity of the Palestine Liberation Orgization (PLO), within Jordan— a country whose population was seventy percent Palestinian— the Fatah leadership of Yasser Arafat initially refused to support a campaign to over throw the country's dictator, King Hussein. In response, and with the backing of the U.S and Israel, Hussein declared martial law, and with the regional Arab governments largely passive, Hussein attacked the PLO camps, killed thousands of Palestinian fighters and civilians, and ultimately drove the PLO out of Jordan and into Syria and Lebanon.

Despite this history, and its subsequent experiences in exile, the PLO pursued this strategy of collaboration and non-intervention for decades. Today, the Palestinian Authority's (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas supports Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's dictatorship in Egypt. In another shocking example, Abbas recently sent a message of congratulations to Syrian autocrat Bashar al-Assad on "his re-election" in May 2021, despite Assad's brutal repression of Palestinians participating in the Syrian uprising and destruction of the Yarmouk refugee camp.

Hamas pursues a similar strategy; its leaders have cultivated alliances with monarchies in Gulf states, especially Qatar more recently, as well as the fundamentalist regime in Iran. In 2012, Ismail Haniyeh, prime minister of the Hamas government in Gaza at the time, praised Bahrain's "reforms" while the regime with the backing of its Gulf allies smashed the country's democratic uprising. Many Hamas leaders viewed it as a "sectarian" coup d'état by the Shi'ites of Bahrain supported by Iran.

In April 2018, former Hamas leader Khaled Mashal praised Turkey's invasion and occupation of Afrin in Syria during a visit to Ankara. He stated that "Turkey's success in Afrin serves as a solid example" hopefully to be followed by similar "victories of the Islamic ummah in a lot of places in the world." The occupation of Afrin by Turkish armed forces and its reactionary Syrian proxies drove out 200,000 mostly Kurdish people and repressed those who remained.

Unfortunately, the Palestinian left has for the most part implemented its own version of the same strategy. It too has withheld criticism of its allies' repression of their people. The PFLP, for example, has not voiced any objections to the Syrian regime's crimes and has even supported its army against "foreign conspiracies," declaring that Damascus "will remain a thorn in the face of the Zionist enemy and its allies." The PFLP's relationship towards the theocracy in Iran, and the military dictatorship in Egypt follow a similar pattern.

Regimes betray the liberation struggle

Rather than advance the struggle, despotic states in the region have repeatedly betrayed it and even repressed Palestinians. As noted earlier, the Jordanian state crushed the Palestinian movement in 1970, killing thousands and expelling the PLO during Black September.

In 1976, Hafez al-Assad's regime in Syria intervened in Lebanon against Palestinian and leftist organizations in support of far-right Lebanese parties. He also conducted military operations against Palestinian camps in Beirut in 1985 and 1986. By 1990, approximately 2,500 Palestinian political prisoners were held in Syrian prisons.

Egypt has collaborated in Israel's blockade of Gaza since 2007. Iran opportunistically seeks to use the Palestinian cause as foreign policy tool to achieve its wider objectives in the region.

While the Syrian regime has supported Hamas, it drastically cut assistance to it when it refused to support the regime's counter-revolution against the democratic uprising in 2011. Iran only resumed formal ties with Hamas after the election of Ismail Haniyeh and Saleh al-Arouri as the new leadership.

Tehran collaborated with U.S. imperialism in Afghanistan and Iraq. That's why during the recent Iraqi uprising protesters marched under the slogan "Neither USA, Nor Iran". These examples alone demolish the idea that Iran is a reliable ally of the Palestinian cause or that is an ant-imperialist state.

Turkey, despite Recep Tayyip Erdogan's criticisms of Israel, maintains close economic connections with it. Erdogan has increased the volume of trade with Tel Aviv from the $1.4 billion when he came to power to $6.5 billion in 2020. Thus, the regimes restrict their support for the cause to areas where it advances their regional interests and betray it when it doesn't.

Dead end of peace deals brokered by U.S. imperialism

With the failure of its strategy of relying on political support from, and alliance with the regions regimes, the PLO turned to an even more bankrupt approach of pursuing a peace deal brokered by

the U.S. and other great powers. The hope was to secure a two-state settlement through the Oslo Accords struck in 1993.

Instead of winning Palestinian liberation, such a settlement would amount to surrender, accepting Israeli colonialism in historic Palestine, while at best winning a Palestinian rump state, and betraying Palestinian refugees the right to return to their stolen land in Israel. In the final analysis, the peace process has reduced the PA to ruling over a bantustan entirely under the control of Israel.

This disastrous result should come as no surprise. The U.S. and other imperialist powers have supported Israel as their local police force against the revolutionary transformation of the region, an event that would challenge their control over its strategic energy reserves.

Israel served this purpose repeatedly since its founding. In 1956, it participated in France and Britain's attack on Nasser's Egypt following its nationalization of the Suez Canal. In 1967, Israel's Six Day War targeted Nasser's Egypt as well as the Syrian state during their radical nationalist phase.

Since then, the U.S. has backed Israel. Washington has poured an average of $4 billion annually into Tel Aviv's coffers, backing its colonization of Palestine and its wars of aggression against progressive governments and movements in the region. Washington supported Israel's military intervention in Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 that oversaw the terrible massacre of Sabra and Shatila, destroyed progressive Palestinian and Lebanese forces, and installed a friendly regime in Beirut.

Israel's victories against Arab nationalist states and its intervention in Lebanon led to the retreat of radicalism in the region, isolating the PLO. This predicament led, in 1978, to Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction adopting the two-state solution, a necessary step along the path to its signing off on the 1993 Oslo Accords.

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In effect, this meant the surrender of the struggle for the liberation of historic Palestine, and the transformation of Fatah into the Palestinian Authority (PA), administering the occupied territories. The Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, who opposed the Oslo agreement, declared that it represented "a massive abandonment of principles, the main currents of Palestinian history, and national goals" and "relegated the diaspora Palestinians to permanent exile or refugee status."

The U.S. and Israel have supported the PA controlling Palestinians in the West Bank as well as Gaza (before the latter was taken over by Hamas in 2007). The PA has been happy to serve as Washington and Tel Aviv's cop. For example, during the recent uprising, the PA arrested more than 20 activists for their social media posts and leadership of protests. More recently, Nizar Banat, a leading Palestinian activist and critic of the PA, was killed in a raid by its security forces on his home in Dura in Hebron.

With the PA functioning as a quisling regime, the U.S. has promoted Israel's political and economic integration with states in the region, most recently through the Trump administration's Abraham Accords. This normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states further isolates the Palestinian liberation struggle.

Newly elected president Joe Biden has reaffirmed Washington's unflinching support for Israel, whatever its crimes against Palestinians. In the midst of its most recent bombing of Gaza, a sale of $735 million in precision-guided weapons to Israel passed Congress and the billions in annual aid

will continue to pour in. The PA strategy of collaborating with the U.S. entails surrender to the occupier and its imperial sponsor.

The Weakness of the Palestinian Working Class

If strategies based on the region's states and peace deals brokered by the U.S. are dead ends, what about an alternative orientation on the Palestinian working class? That too is foreclosed by Israel's particular nature as a settler-colonial state.

Unlike apartheid South Africa, which relied on Black worker's labor in its factories and mines, Israel has driven Palestinian workers out of any central role in its economy and replaced them with Jewish workers. As a result, Palestinian workers do not have the means to shut down the Israeli economy through strikes like Black workers did in South Africa.

That does not mean that the Palestinian resistance is powerless within the state of Israel and in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The struggle of workers of other groups remains central to the movement.

The most recent wave of Palestinian struggle demonstrates its power as well as its potential to forge a new strategy to supplant the failed one of relying on support from the region's regimes. New youth and feminist groups such as Tal'at as well as the working class has been at the heart of the recent resistance.

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The worker's general strike on May 18 was called and led from below. It shut down sections of the economy from Israel to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. As Haaretz noted: "The Israel Builders Association observed that Palestinian workers had observed the strike, with only 150 of the 65,000 Palestinian construction workers coming to work in Israel. This paralyzed building sites, causing losses estimated at 130 million shekels (nearly $40 million)."

The character of the strike, while extremely important, should not be exaggerated. As Assaf Adiv, the director of the MAAN Workers Association — the only Israeli trade union that organizes Palestinians in the industrial zones of the West Bank settlements (from which Palestinian trade unions are barred)—noted the observance of the strike by Palestinians who work in Israel was in part "due to closure of the checkpoints and uncertainty on the roads of the West Bank".

Regardless of the breadth of the participation in the strike, the Israeli economy was relatively unscathed, showing that the Palestinian working class and other social movements need solidarity from other workers, peasants, and oppressed peoples. The question is which ones should Palestinians orient on to win a secular democracy in historic Palestine.

The Israeli working class—not a strategic ally

The first and perhaps obvious strategic orientation would seem to be on the Israeli working class. But it has always placed loyalty to Israel over and above class solidarity with the Palestinian masses.

This is not just the result of ideological devotion but material interest in the Israeli state, which provides Israeli workers with homes stolen from Palestinians as well as inflated standards of living. The Israeli ruling class and state thus integrate the Israeli working class as a collaborator in a common project of settler colonialism.

Its working class' institutions such as its union, the Histadrut, have played a central role in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Labor Zionist leaders established the Histadrut in 1920 as an exclusively Jewish union and used it to spearhead the displacement of Palestinian workers.

Its slogan "Jewish land, Jewish work, Jewish product" neatly summarizes its ethnonationalist class-collaborationist project and underlines how fundamentally hostile it is to solidarity with Palestinians. Applying these slogans during and after the founding of Israel, it has helped ensure that land was only leased to Jews; farms and industries hired only Jews; and Palestinian farms and industries were boycotted.

On top of that, the Israeli state has militarized the incorporation of Israeli workers through mandatory conscription. This compels them to participate in the repression of Palestinians, enforce the occupation, and defend Zionist settler's theft of Palestinian homes and land.

Given this incorporation into the colonial project, it should come as no surprise that, with few exceptions, workers supported the most recent assault on Gaza. In just one example among many, the union of the Israeli Electric Corp (IEC) went so far as to declare that it would not repair power lines to the Gaza Strip until two Israeli soldiers and a missing Israeli civilian were returned.

Does this mean that Palestinians should not seek collaboration with progressive sectors of Israeli working class? Of course not. Examples of small-scale solidarity exist, but they are rare.

It is hard to imagine these becoming a counter to the overwhelming pattern of ethnonationalist unity of Israeli workers with the Zionist state. A strategy focused on trying to build working class unity against Zionism between Israeli and Palestinian workers is thus unrealistic.

The regional revolutionary strategy

The key to developing a better strategy for liberation is putting Palestine in the regional context. Because Palestinian refugees in their millions are integrated in the Middle East and to a lesser extent in North Africa, their national and class struggle is necessarily intertwined with that of the region's masses.

Those workers and peasants remember their forebearers' fight against colonialism, confront imperialist powers' that support the regimes that oppress them, identify with the struggle of the Palestinians, and therefore see their own battle for democracy and equality as bound up with its victory. That's why there is a dialectical relationship between the struggles; when Palestinians fight it triggers the regional movement for liberation, and the regional movement feeds back into the one in occupied Palestine.

Their united revolt has the power to transform the entire region, overthrowing the regimes, expelling the imperialist powers, ending both forces' support for the state of Israel, weakening it the process, and proving to Israeli workers that the regional transformation can end their exploitation. Far-right minister Avigdor Lieberman admitted the danger posed to Israel by the Arab Spring in 2011 when he declared that the Egyptian revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarak and opened the door to democracy was a greater threat to Israel than Iran.

The power and potential of this regional strategy has been repeatedly demonstrated. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Palestinian movement spurred a rise in class struggle throughout the region. In 2000, the Second Intifada opened a new era of resistance, inspiring a wave of organizing that would eventually explode in 2011 with revolutions from Tunisia to Egypt to Syria.

In the summer of 2019, Palestinians in Lebanon organized massive demonstrations for weeks in

refugee camps against the Labor Ministry's decision to treat them as foreigners, an act they considered to be a form of discrimination and racism against them. Their resistance helped inspire the broader Lebanese uprising in October 2019, which in turn has led to the popular uprisings in Iraq.

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To implement a strategy based on this regional solidarity, Palestinian groups and movements must abandon the policy embraced by the PA, Hamas, and most of the left of non-intervention in the affairs of countries in the region. Such non-intervention was the precondition of getting aid from various regimes. Accepting that policy means cutting Palestinians off from the social forces that can help them win liberation.

Instead, the Palestinian struggle must recover the regional revolutionary strategy that was pursued by leftists in the 1960s. Unfortunately, most abandoned this strategy to tail the PLO in allying with the region's reactionary states.

The strategy of regional revolution based on class struggle from below is the only way to win liberation from Israel to Saudi Arabia and Syria as well as their imperialist backers from the U.S. to China and Russia. In that fight, Palestinians and those in other countries must embrace the demands of all those that suffer national oppression like the Kurds and others who suffer other forms of ethnic, sectarian, and social oppression.

Now is the time to resurrect the regional strategy. The whole of the Middle East and North Africa is in a long-term revolutionary process rooted in the masses' blocked political and economic aspirations. There have already been two waves of uprisings, the first in 2011 that rocked the whole region and a second in 2018 and 2019 that swept through Sudan, Lebanon, Algeria, and Iraq.

With none of the popular grievances won, no doubt a third wave is on its way. And Palestine can and must be at the center of this next wave in a fight to liberate it and the entire region.

Palestine in the revolutionary process

Only through this regional revolutionary strategy, can we envision the establishment of a democratic, socialist, and secular state in historic Palestine with equal rights for both Palestinian and Jewish people within a socialist federation throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In the new Palestinian state, all Palestinians would have the right to return to their land and homes from which they were forcibly displaced in 1948, 1967, and after. In addition to this, the liberation of Palestine must also include a global project of economic development and reconstruction to guarantee Palestinians their social and economic rights.

To implement this strategy, Palestinians must forge a new political leadership committed to self-organization from below within historic Palestine and the region. They cannot do that alone but must do so through collaboration with socialists from Egypt to Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Algeria, and all the other countries.

The most important task for those outside the region is to win the left, unions, progressive groups, and movements to support the campaign for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. Forcing this on institutions and corporations in the imperialist powers, especially the U.S., will help block their support for Israel and other despotic regimes and weaken their hold in the region.

The liberation of Palestine thus passes through the liberation of all the peoples living under tyrants in Damascus, Riyadh, Doha, Tehran, Ankara, Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Amman, and all the others. As a Syrian revolutionary wrote from the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights in the summer of 2014, “freedom—a common destiny for Gaza, Yarmouk and the Golan.” This slogan holds out the hope of regional revolutionary transformation, the only realistic strategy for liberation.

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