



HAMAS AND THE PALESTINIAN NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLE

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The Israeli army is laying waste to Gaza. Whole communities are being destroyed and entire families wiped-out. The scale of displacement, as people are forced from their homes, points towards an ethnic cleansing. Israeli munitions strike the hospitals and schools where the desperate seek shelter. On the West Bank raids, murders and repression have escalated. Whether the Israeli state will go all the way and drive the Palestinians from Gaza is an open question. What is not in doubt however is the utter indifference of Israel's political and military leaders towards the suffering they are inflicting. The leaders of the western imperialist powers, especially the United States and Britain, are also teaching the world a new and shameless lesson in hypocrisy.

The national oppression of the Palestinian people over more than a century stands amongst world capitalism's most horrific crimes. The Israeli state has

waged a war of state-terror against the people of Gaza for fifteen years. The full consequences of this latest phase cannot be fully predicted. Around the world the war has deepened political and social polarisation. The tensions between the world's imperialist and regional powers have been wound tighter. Across the Middle East the masses' burning fury at the Palestinian's suffering brings their anger at poverty, unemployment and corruption into sharper focus. The ruling classes look on in fear of new political and social explosions. For the Palestinian national liberation struggle 2023 was a turning point. The terrain on which it will unfold in the future is being utterly transformed.

The pretext for the Israeli state's latest onslaught was the Hamas-led attack into Israel on 7 October. The breakthrough of the Gazan 'security barrier' and attacks on Israeli military bases exposed the supposedly 'invincible' ultra-modern Israeli-military as vulnerable. Some will cheer this as a militant strike against national oppression, especially in the neo-colonial world where the legacy of colonial subjugation and national oppression is

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still sharply felt and where military interventions by the ex-colonial powers casts a permanent shadow. A blow against the Israeli state can be seen by some as a blow against the imperial overlords that back it and still police the world in defence of their interests.

The indiscriminate slaughter of civilians that the Hamas-led attack also involved will have shocked and repelled some of those otherwise supportive of confronting the Israeli state militarily. But for many this can however sit alongside a feeling that although horrific, 7 October was not a 'greater crime' standing above the Israeli state's repeated slaughters of Palestinian civilians. This can also be linked to the feeling that even if Hamas's methods went 'too far', at least someone did something.

But many will still have questions on the 'balance sheet' of the 7 October attack. It can appear to have made some important achievements. The world's attention is again on the plight of the Palestinians. The 'normalisation' of relations between the Israeli and Saudi regimes has been scuppered, at least for now. Hundreds of Palestinian prisoners have been released in exchange for the hostages taken in the attack. And after two months of fighting Hamas is still undefeated and inflicting casualties on the Israeli army. But at what cost? At the time of writing 22,000 Palestinians are dead, even more are wounded and over 80% of the Gazan population displaced. What is the significance of any of this in the broader struggle for Palestinian national liberation and self-determination? Advancing towards this goal is the criteria against which all organisations and their methods, ideologies, programs, strategies and tactics must be judged. This article will explain why the 7 October attack was not a step forward.

Permanent Revolution

Marxists explain that the national oppression of the Palestinian people has become deeply intertwined with capitalism's complex web of class relations in the Middle East. The regional ruling capitalist classes chafe against the imperialist powers' domination of world capitalism in general and US imperialism's domination of their region in particular. They are trapped in a dependent position within the global capitalist system and vacillate between subservience to imperialism and limited confrontation with it. The combination of economic underdevelopment that flows from this and widespread dependence on oil exports means the social bases of these neo-colonial capitalist classes are weak. Unable to

offer broad economic and social development they look with fear at the poor masses that surround their palaces. The mass uprisings of the 'Arab Spring' from 2011, which challenged these regimes, confirmed these fears. These regimes are therefore incapable of consistent support for the Palestinian liberation struggle.

The Israeli ruling class, with the backing of imperialism, has been able to construct a stronger social base for its rule. It oversaw the development of an advanced high-tech economy which enabled it to provide higher living standards and a stronger welfare state than other countries in the region. However, these gains for the population have been threatened in recent decades. This has led sections of the Israeli ruling class to more and more lean on the 'insecurity' of the Jewish working class, offering to 'protect' them against 'existential' threats which it is itself responsible for nurturing, chiefly the national oppression of the Palestinian people. But the mass protests in Israel in the months before the 7 October attack confirmed that the Israeli ruling class is also permanently performing a balancing act with the masses and suffers from its own internal divisions.

This precarious status quo, at constant threat of breaking down, has 'locked in' Palestinian national oppression. These class relations must be overthrown for the Palestinians to win genuine national liberation and self-determination. This poses the socialist revolution as the central issue in the Palestinian national liberation struggle. There can be no solution on the basis of capitalism.

The working class is the only social force capable of winning the struggle for genuine national liberation and self-determination because it is the only social force capable of leading the socialist revolution. Workers' key role in production creates an awareness, or consciousness, of their common class interests which in turn points them towards acceptance of socialism – the democratic control and planning of the economy on the basis of social ownership – as the way to realise them.

Even when the working class is a minority in society, as can still be the case in the neo-colonial world, the cohesion and unity that mass organisations and collective action makes possible, allows it to mobilise and lead the poor masses behind it. No other class can play this role in the neo-colonial world in the imperialist-era, and especially in the Middle East. When the working class moves into action against national oppression it will also be compelled to confront the class exploitation from which it suffers too. The national and the social

struggles can become merged as the working class fights for a society that will solve all its problems. The socialist revolution will grow out of the working class's striving to free itself from both yokes holding it in slavery. These are the key ideas of Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, confirmed again and again by experience in the over one-hundred years since it was first published. The repeated betrayals of the Palestinian people over a century by different groups of feudal and pro-capitalist leaders are another tragic confirmation.

The Palestinian working class must place itself in the leadership of the liberation struggle as the only way to advance the Palestinian people toward the goal of national liberation and self-determination. The Hamas-led 7 October attack, despite initial support for it, did nothing to raise the working class's understanding of its central role in the struggle for national liberation and self-determination, nor point towards the urgent and fundamental task of building independent class organisations. In its brutal methods the attack has reinforced national and religious divisions between the Palestinian and Israeli working classes. The 7 October attack has therefore failed to advance the Palestinian liberation struggle in any way. Rather, it confirms the deep impasse the struggle is mired in. This impasse is a consequence of the class forces that have shaped the national liberation struggle and dominated its leadership up to now, including, crucially, the class origins and class character of Hamas itself, from which flow its methods, ideology, program, strategy and tactics. These are incapable of winning national liberation and self-determination for the Palestinian people.

Origins

Hamas's immediate roots lie in an earlier impasse reached by the Palestinian national liberation struggle in the 1970s. In 1967 the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria were defeated by the Israeli Defence Forces. The West Bank and Gaza were occupied and East Jerusalem annexed. In 1973 the attempt to reverse this in a new war also ended in defeat. Any Palestinian hope that national liberation would be achieved by Israel's defeat in a conventional war lay shattered.

The Palestinian guerrilla struggle was also reaching a dead-end despite widespread popularity. This had been launched by Fatah in 1965. By 1971 Israel had imprisoned 15,000 fighters in camps in the Sinai Peninsula. In the same year, the Palestinian Liberation

Organisation (PLO), by then an umbrella front of different armed groups, but dominated by Fatah, was violently driven out of its Jordanian bases by the regime which feared revolution. The PLO reorganised in Lebanon but enjoyed no respite as civil war developed, leading to a partial Israeli invasion in 1978 and a full invasion by 1982 and the long-term occupation of the south of the country. The PLO leadership and thousands of its remaining fighters retreated to Tunisia depriving its guerillas of a direct military front on Israel's borders. The idea that national liberation would be achieved by guerilla struggle appeared more and more utopian. Although very different in character to Hamas's version of armed resistance, the PLO's guerrilla struggle suffered from the same fundamental weakness – it did not base itself on the organisation and mass mobilisation of the Palestinian working class and poor masses.

With no organisation capable of explaining these defeats or pointing to a convincing way to break the impasse in the liberation struggle, demoralisation grew amongst a layer. This was deepened by growing disillusion with Fatah and the PLO as corruption became an increasing concern. The PLO also turned more decisively toward the 'inevitability' of negotiations with Israel. But they appeared too willing to make fundamental compromises that would limit self-determination in any future Palestinian state. In the West Bank and Gaza life was dramatically transformed by Israeli military occupation. In the face of seemingly permanent national oppression and indefinite Israeli military occupation feelings of helplessness and desperation inevitably developed. Despite the PLO and Fatah's continued widespread support, a political space for a reaction against the organisations of the PLO and the secular left pan-Arab nationalism that guided them was opening. Setbacks and defeats in national liberation struggles can lead to reaction even within an oppressed nation.

In a situation where the present was a nightmare and where the road to a future Palestinian state seemed blocked, the idea of consolidating on the certainties of the past could gain traction. National oppression often strengthens religious identity, particularly when the oppressor has a different religion. For a Muslim religious layer this allowed this mood to wear the clothes of Islam. "The people returned to their religion...", reflected Mahmoud Zahar, one of Hamas's founders, reflecting on that period.

This was the background to the strengthening of

right-wing Islamist political organisation in the West Bank and Gaza. It was part of a broader trend in the region. The secular left pan-Arab nationalism of several of the leading states, especially Egypt under Nasser, had failed to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the masses. Economic and political crises had developed because of the failure of these regimes to overthrow landlordism and capitalism. The 1979 Iranian revolution, in which leadership ultimately fell to the forces of right-wing political Islam, enormously strengthened this trend.

Hamas's Precursor

In Gaza, in 1973, 'Sheikh' Ahmed Yassin founded the *al-Mujamma' al-Islami*, or the Islamic Centre, as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which internationally had been opposed to secular left pan-Arab nationalism. This was the immediate predecessor to Hamas. The leadership presented the Mujamma as a religious and social movement. It claimed to reject politics and confrontation with the Israeli occupation forces. But in practise the Mujamma leadership pursued a definite political agenda. The main obstacle to the Palestinian people returning to 'the true path of Islam' was, in the Mujamma leadership's view, the secular, left and 'communist' forces of the PLO and the attraction they and their ideas held, especially for the youth. Through the 1970s and 1980s the Mujamma emerged as a pole around which organised reaction crystallised in the occupied territories.

The Mujamma leadership set out to undermine, and ultimately displace, the PLO organisations that up to this point led the national liberation struggle. This required the consolidation of a social base which the Mujamma leadership was relatively successful in developing through the establishment of social and welfare programs. These included sports clubs, orphanages, clinics, scholarship programs, and welfare payments and packages. They also combatted crime and drugs.

However, these initiatives did not begin in a vacuum, helping to meet social needs that had previously gone unmet. The organisations of the PLO had their own network of social and welfare organisations. The United Nation's UNRWA agency, set-up in 1949 to provide aid to Palestinian refugees, was also very active. The Mujamma leadership pursued a conscious policy to displace these organisations. With Israeli occupation the social and welfare programs of the PLO organisations were forced underground. In contrast, in 1978 the

Israeli authorities, with a green light from as high-up as the office of the prime minister, granted the Mujamma 'official status' meaning they could operate openly. This was not accidental, the Israeli authorities saw this as a way to undermine the PLO's social base.

The renovation and expansion of mosques across the occupied territories, especially in Gaza, also played a crucial role in securing the Mujamma's influence. Funding from Gulf dictatorships saw the number of mosques in Gaza triple from 200 in 1967 to 600 by 1987. On the West Bank the number rose from 400 to 750. Mosques were crucial social hubs, less under the scrutiny of the Israeli occupation forces. In their 2010 book, academic Beverley Milton-Edwards and *New York Times* journalist Stephen Farrell described how, "The mosque became the place where marriages were arranged, where family disputes were mediated and resolved, where clan clashes were reconciled, where pupils and students studied to improve their chances of good exam results, where news of work opportunities in Israel and further abroad were shared, where children were immersed in a world of Muslim scholarship and where a sense of security was established." Through its social and welfare programs and its leading position in the mosques the Mujamma leadership was able to lean on sections of the working class and poor masses as a social base to pursue its political agenda.

The Mujamma leadership also waged a struggle for control of student unions and the middle class professional associations of lawyers, doctors, engineers etc. as well as chambers of commerce. Political parties were banned in the occupied territories meaning that political life flowed through these organisations. This invested elections to their leadership bodies with greater significance. They acted as proxies for testing the support of different political organisations. A struggle for dominance at the Islamic University of Gaza, as well as other education institutions, was crucial. By the early 1980s the Mujamma leadership had succeeded in having seven of the thirteen members of the university senate removed, often via a summons to the offices of the Israeli occupation authority. After securing effective control, the Islamic University of Gaza became an important source of recruitment to the Mujamma, and later, Hamas.

The Mujamma leadership was willing to organise violence in pursuit of its political goals. In January 1980 it orchestrated an attack on the offices of the PLO-linked Palestine Red Crescent Society which operated clinics. One eyewitness, quoted in Milton-Edwards & Farrell,

described how, "I heard shouting on the street, so I went out into the road and it was a big Islamist demonstration, [thousands of] people with beards shouting their slogans. At the end of the demonstration was an Israeli military jeep which did not interfere." The former president of the Islamic University of Gaza described how, "The Israeli's turned a blind eye to all the harmful activities the Mujamma undertook against the people ... ambushes against individuals on the streets, raids on houses of leaders of nationalist groups ... They sent to me about 500 armed Mujamma supporters and threatened me ... telling me to leave [Gaza] ...". Milton-Edwards & Farrell, summing-up this period in Gaza, write how, "After Friday prayers burning torches were held aloft as Mujamma thugs set fire to libraries, newspaper offices, billiard halls and bars. They burned cinemas and cafés, closed liquor stores, and ran intimidation campaigns in the community and on the university campuses."

The Israeli state exploited the emergence and growth of right-wing political Islam. Especially in the context of the Cold War's ideological struggle between left and right it could be encouraged as a counterweight to the left secular nationalism of the PLO. A conservative social elite existed in the West Bank and Gaza that the Mujamma's leadership had links with. This elite was ideologically opposed to the secular and 'modern' ideas dominating the liberation struggle up to that point and was emboldened by the strengthening of right-wing political Islam elsewhere in the region. The Israeli state encouraged and fostered the Mujamma to divide and weaken Palestinian resistance to occupation and undermine the idea of a separate Palestinian state. But the Israeli state did not create the Mujamma, nor, by extension, Hamas.

Hamas's Social Base

In the 1970s there was a significant expansion of higher education in the occupied Palestinian territories alongside an increase in scholarships to universities elsewhere in the region. In a 2007 study, American academic, Loren D. Lybarger, interviewed Hamas activists about their social background. Prominent were the descendants of rural landowning families displaced after 1948 and the children of the middle class, especially from the West Bank, under new pressures since the advent of Israeli occupation in 1967. The expanded access to education of youth from these backgrounds stimulated expectations of economic advancement

and social mobility. However, military occupation and the limited economic development in the occupied territories severely limited opportunities. Many qualified doctors, engineers and other professionals could only support themselves and their families through unskilled work in Israel, resentfully joining the armies of day-labourers Israel allowed at this time, frustrating these expectations.

The relatively secure jobs in the bureaucracies of UNRWA and the social and welfare programs of the PLO could offer a ladder for some to climb. But political affiliation – in other words patronage – was crucial to accessing these jobs. As the Mujamma leadership rolled-out its own social, welfare and mosque expansion programs it too was able to act as a vehicle for the aspirations of this social layer. These programs were managed by a younger generation of self-employed professionals. The expansion of mosques meant an increase in opportunities to work in clerical posts with the social status and authority attached to these. Milton-Edwards and Farrell write that, "... the leaders of the Mujamma were the epitome of lay preachers, largely bereft of the theological training offered by world famous Muslim seminaries...". Political control of the education institutions and professional associations that the Mujamma leadership fought for opened access to relatively secure and privileged administrative jobs in their bureaucracies too.

This social layer formed the backbone of the Mujamma's leadership, middle-ranking cadre and active membership. Their class outlook and class aspirations would shape the movement. It made its living as an intermediary between the Palestinian masses and the extremely limited resources of society. This nevertheless elevated this layer above the working class and poor masses. Marxists would describe it as a petty bourgeois layer, albeit one forged in the furnace of national oppression and shaped by military occupation and war. The Mujamma could not of course satisfy every individual. But the idea that membership would one day open the door to social advancement could begin to develop, further helping to build the movement and consolidate a social base for right-wing political Islam. Limited as they were, these relative privileges shaped the relationship of this petty bourgeoisie to the working class and poor masses.

Class & National Oppression

No class in Palestinian society has had, or can have, a 'normal' development. In conditions of extreme national oppression, military occupation and war the class struggle can be partially suppressed. But the contradictions between the classes into which Palestinian society is ultimately divided are not eliminated and remain decisive in shaping society and its development.

Before 1948 the majority of Palestinians were peasants. When their lands were seized to create Israel they were displaced. Most became "registered refugees" under UNRWA in the permanent refugee camps of the West Bank, Gaza and neighbouring countries. Even up to the eve of the Israeli state's 2023 war of state-terror, two-thirds of the population of Gaza were registered refugees living in eight UNRWA-run camps. Unemployment in Gaza was 45% and the residents hugely dependent on welfare and aid.

The outlook of this social layer has changed over time and through the generations. In the first decades after the Nakba the "right to return" was closely bound with the desire to return to villages and resume small-scale agriculture. Despite the loss of farming skills as the generations have passed this aspiration has not entirely disappeared. Peasant resistance to British colonialism and Jewish immigration in the 1920s, 30s and 40s took the form of armed bands, or *fedayeen*, that would raid the enemy in a primitive version of guerrilla warfare. Amongst a people denied the experience and the example of mass working class organisation and its methods of mass mobilisation, the memory of this could survive as a model for resistance. This would be tapped by the PLO for support for its guerrilla struggle, and later, by Hamas for their version of armed struggle. Lybarger identified the "descendants of former sharecroppers" from the refugee camps, i.e. de-classed peasants, as the third and final significant social background of Hamas cadre.

But the refugee camps were not only a dumping ground for the victims of imperialism. They have been used as a pool of unskilled and semi-skilled labour depending on the shifting demands of the local, Israeli, regional and world economy. This has shifted the outlook, especially amongst younger generations, towards the expectation of living by wage-labour and in the direction of working class methods of organisation and struggle. A small but important working class exists. Of a Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza of just under 5.5 million there are 1.1 million

wage-workers. In the months before the 2023 war this included 150,000 working in Israel or Israeli settlements, often as building labourers. Despite being a minority, it is still the most cohesive class in Palestinian society, and decisive in the struggle for national liberation and self-determination. This was confirmed by its role in the first Intifada, or uprising, which remains the most serious challenge to Palestinian national oppression to date. There have also been significant strikes, especially in the public sector.

First Intifada

In 1987 the first Intifada exploded as the Palestinian working class and poor masses rose up against national oppression. It spread rapidly across the occupied territories and would ebb and flow for the next six years. The Mujamma's young cadres and activists were caught up in the militant mood sweeping Palestinian society. In response Sheikh Yassin led a reorganisation of the Mujamma, setting-up the *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas (its Arabic acronym).

Under the banner of the Mujamma the petty bourgeois social base of right-wing political Islam had led the conservative reaction against the national liberation struggle. Under the pressure of the working class and poor masses in the first Intifada this social layer performed a 180-degree turnaround. Now, under the banner of Hamas it placed itself among organisations at the forefront of the liberation struggle. Major swings of this nature are in the class character of the petty bourgeoisie. Lacking the social weight to fundamentally influence the direction of the class struggle it gravitates either towards the working class or the capitalist class depending on the balance of class forces and how these shape its conditions and consciousness. When the Palestinian working class and poor masses moved in the first Intifada they made deep imprints on the soft clay of the petty bourgeois social base of right-wing political Islam.

However, the founders of Hamas were incapable of giving a clear class content to the national and social aspirations of the masses. This was reflected in Hamas's 1988 founding 'Covenant' in which it grafted nationalism on to its interpretation of Islam. Article 12 said,

Nationalism from the point of view of [Hamas], is part and parcel of religious ideology. There is not a higher peak of nationalism or depth of

devotion than Jihad when an enemy lands on the Muslim territories. Fighting the enemy becomes an individual obligation of every Muslim man and woman.

Although Hamas was still presented as “one of the wings” of the Muslim Brotherhood it had made a radical ideological break from its ideas. These generally held Islam as incompatible with the “Western idea” of the nation-state. Right-wing political Islam’s ideological development in response to the first Intifada illustrates how religion reflects definite class and political agendas. On this new ideological basis Hamas put forward a program for national liberation based on the destruction of Israel and the creation of an Islamic state on the territory of ‘historic’ Palestine, i.e. within the borders of the old British colonial mandate. The strategy to implement this program would be ‘*jihad*’, or a holy war. The tactics of the *jihad* would shift as the years passed but none would be based on the organisation and mass mobilisation of the working class and poor.

Hamas’s new nationalism reflected the social base of its guiding layers – it was a petty bourgeois nationalism that downplayed or denied the class contradictions within Palestinian society. It was therefore silent on the class character of the future liberated society. Hamas’s Covenant, for example, spoke vaguely of “mutual social responsibility” as its way of evading this central issue. It was also, therefore, incapable of identifying the working class as the only social force capable of achieving national liberation and putting forward a program for its organisation and mass mobilisation.

Rivals

The first Intifada caught all the Palestinian political organisations by surprise. The PLO leadership manoeuvred to assert its leadership. Its historic authority allowed it to secure a leading position within the structures of popular control that emerged to lead and coordinate struggle. But the Hamas leadership was determined to challenge it. Refusing to accept the PLO’s leadership Hamas issued alternative communiqués and called rival strikes and demonstrations throughout the first Intifada. Rather than co-ordinating with the initiative of the masses, Hamas imposed their ‘mass’ actions through intimidation and violence. Milton-Edwards & Farrell describe how, “When Hamas activists enforced commercial and general strike actions on the Palestinian people, many reported that Israeli soldiers

stood by.” In contrast, when the PLO led mass action “... the Israeli army used its full force to open shops, to break strikes, arrest strikers and to punish them in other ways.”

Elements of civil war raged as Hamas challenged the position of Fatah and the PLO. This now escalated to significant armed clashes. But the masses reacted against the climate of fear and the divisions that the Hamas leadership was widening. At various points conciliation committees were established to try and end the violence. Hamas had to appear to be cooperating with these. In a mass movement like the Intifada the urge towards unity is enormous. Therefore, the PLO and Hamas leaderships had to manoeuvre against each other carefully, broadly remaining within the framework of mass mobilisations – strikes, marches, ‘days of rage’ etc. – that the masses were imposing on the struggle.

The Hamas leadership was able to strengthen its social base during the first Intifada. Its militancy won it respect amongst some youth. That the PLO was looking toward a negotiated settlement with Israel by this time meant that it acted as a certain brake on the struggle, trying to keep it within limits, so as not to close-off this avenue. The PLO appeared conservative next to Hamas which rejected outright any concessions to the liberation of all ‘historic’ Palestine. In 1991, the Hamas leadership finally trod the well-worn path laid-down decades earlier by the PLO organisations and created its own armed-wing, the Qassam Brigades. This would further reinforce Hamas’s social base amongst the poor masses over the next decades as a source of employment for unskilled youth, especially as unemployment soared. By December 2008 the Qassam Brigades were 20,000 strong in Gaza alone.

In the early years of the first Intifada the Israeli authorities continued to foster right-wing political Islam. This developed further into high-level contacts as the Israeli state sought to cultivate an “alternative address” to the PLO. According to Milton-Edwards & Farrell, “Hamas leaders were filmed attending high-level meetings with Israelis”. But a Hamas attack that killed two Israeli soldiers ended this and the first major crackdown took place, including the arrest of Sheikh Yassin. He would be assassinated by the Israeli state in 2004.

Oslo & its Aftermath

As the first Intifada unfolded the international situation changed profoundly. By 1991, capitalism had been or

was being restored in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The latter especially had given financial and military support to the PLO, as well as diplomatic protection, often via regional allies. This was now gone. It was also a further ideological setback to the PLO's already discredited secular left-nationalism. In 1990 the PLO backed the invasion of Kuwait by the Iraqi Hussein regime. This, temporarily at least, alienated the Gulf dictatorships, leaving the PLO politically isolated from the rulers who previously supported it and starved of funding as never before. US imperialism, unchallenged as the then-world superpower, seized the opportunity to increase pressure on the Israeli state and the PLO to find a 'solution' to the national conflict and bring an end to the Intifada that was destabilising its key regional ally.

In 1993 the Oslo Accords between the Israeli state and the PLO were signed. In these, the PLO agreed to recognise the existence of Israel on its pre-1967 borders and end the armed struggle. In return Israel would end the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and allow the establishment of an autonomous Palestinian Authority (PA) as a first step toward an independent Palestinian state. However, other issues would be finalised only in future negotiations. This included Palestinian refugees' right of return, the status of Jewish settlements built after 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza, and the status of Jerusalem. In the interim, the 'capital' of the PA would be Ramallah in the West Bank.

The Hamas leadership rejected Oslo in its entirety and attempted to derail it, including by launching its first campaign of suicide bombings against Israeli civilians. But the overwhelming mood of the Palestinian masses after years of struggle and decades of oppression was to give Arafat and the PLO the benefit of the doubt and give Oslo a chance. Hamas's introduction of the clandestine and individual tactic of suicide bombings was a tacit admission of this. There was no mass support to oppose Oslo at this stage. Consequently, Hamas's popularity plunged through the 1990s. In the first elections to the new Palestinian Authority in 1996 Hamas called for a boycott. This was overwhelmingly ignored. The masses were determined to use their new democratic rights despite their limitations. The PLO umbrella was put into storage and its constituent organisations contested separately. Yasser Arafat and Fatah won the elections decisively.

As the 1990s wore on, however, the post-Oslo negotiations reached an impasse. The Israeli ruling class had no intention of 'completing' the moves toward an

independent Palestinian state which had been forced upon them by the masses in the first Intifada. A political shift to the right was encouraged within Israeli society, towards the politicians and party's that opposed Oslo. Benjamin Netanyahu's first term as prime minister took place between 1996 and 1999. Hamas's suicide bombing campaign was an important contributor to this. Milton-Edwards & Farrell interviewed a mid-level Hamas military commander. He confirmed that strengthening the Israeli right-wing was not an accidental byproduct of the bombing campaign but a conscious goal, saying that, "[the Hamas leadership] thought that the military operations would work to the benefit of the Likud and against the left."

Nevertheless, the creation of the Palestinian Authority was a major transformation of the terrain of the liberation struggle. The creation of a Palestinian capitalist quasi-state more clearly revealed the class contradictions of Palestinian society. It contributed massively to the shattering of illusions in Fatah as it allowed an aspirant capitalist elite to more clearly crystallise. Corruption became rife. New mansions appeared in Ramallah to house the Fatah political elite who drove to their offices in limousines and SUVs. Patronage networks grew and were strengthened through Fatah's control of access to the new jobs in the PA's bureaucracy and security apparatuses.

On the ground in the West Bank and Gaza frustration grew. Life was not improving. National oppression was barely relieved and the expected 'peace dividend' of rising living standards for the mass of the population did not materialise. The Israeli state was increasingly understood to be breaking its Oslo promises. A full military withdrawal did not take place. The Israeli settlements remained, and, after the briefest pause, resumed expansion. Humiliating and punitive raids continued. The first fence went up around Gaza. Fatah's agreement to end the armed struggle, apparently for nothing in return, was seen to have disarmed the people in the face of continuing national oppression.

Worse, the Fatah-led PA was now responsible for internal security. The Israeli state and US imperialism placed relentless pressure on the Fatah-led PA to act as an 'outsourced policeman'. Close links were fostered between the PA's new security services and the American CIA and Israeli Shin-Bet. The corps of guerrilla fighters turned policeman now played a role in repressing Palestinian groups, like Hamas, that continued the armed struggle. But they also policed outbursts of protest

against continuing national oppression emanating from the masses themselves. The betrayal by the organisation broadly accepted for decades as the leader of the national liberation struggle opened a huge political vacuum in Palestinian society.

Second Intifada & Gaza

In 2000 a second Intifada erupted as frustration mounted with the broken promises of Oslo. However, it developed a different character to the first Intifada's mass protests. Alongside the infrastructure of the Israeli occupation, institutions of the Palestinian Authority were now also targets of the masses' fury as police stations and courts were attacked. A new wave of Israeli state repression was unleashed. Hamas began a new wave of suicide bombings targeting Israeli civilians. Other armed groups, including Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, also resumed armed struggle. Despite the prominence and notoriety of Hamas's suicide bombing campaign, the Israeli state still prioritised targeting Fatah, the PLO and the PA. The second Intifada was used to isolate and subdue the Fatah leadership and Yasser Arafat in particular. He died in 2004.

By 2005 the second Intifada had petered out. Armed struggle, conducted undemocratically by groups and individuals, especially suicide bombings, could not break the impasse in the national liberation struggle. Rather, it deepened it by cutting across the mass mobilisation that had begun to develop early in the second Intifada. However, in the absence of this, and against the background of the gaping political vacuum that now existed, there was a level of popular support for Hamas's bombing campaign.

In August 2005 the Israeli state took the decision to withdraw from Gaza, including the evacuation of the 8,000 settlers there. The Hamas leadership was able to portray this as a victory for their tactics. The reality, in terms of the factors informing the Israeli state's decision, was, however, more complicated. Nevertheless, victory rallies were organised. Hamas banners in Gaza City announced, "Jerusalem and West Bank after Gaza".

In 2005 Hamas again boycotted the presidential election, which saw Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas become president of the PA. But a major debate was already underway about election tactics. The decision was taken to field candidates in the 2005 municipal elections. Hamas won control of 48 municipalities to Fatah's 56. In the 2006 elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council

(PLC – the PA's quasi-national parliament) Hamas won 74 seats, a majority in the 132-seat legislature. However, Hamas's share of the national vote was lower. It won 44% of the vote but secured 56% of the seats. Internal rivalries within Fatah had led to the fielding of two lists of candidates – an official list and an 'independent' list. This split the Fatah vote. The official Fatah list, whilst winning 41% of the vote, secured only 36% of the seats.

Opinion polls conducted before the 1996 elections predicted support for Hamas at only around 10% and 'trust' in Sheikh Yassin at only 3%. The 2005 and 2006 elections therefore represented a breakthrough in support for Hamas. But it was a highly qualified breakthrough. The Palestinian masses were nowhere near giving an endorsement to Hamas of the sort that Arafat and Fatah had enjoyed in the 1990s.

Hamas contested the 2006 PLC elections, not under its own name, but the broader banner of Change and Reform. The candidates included well-known faces from Hamas's social and welfare programs, as well as non-Hamas candidates from the same milieu. Change and Reform's manifesto concentrated on Fatah's corruption. Its candidates posed as incorruptible, pious and burnished their credentials for good social works. Hamas's position on the national liberation struggle, and, fundamentally, its lack of a way forward, were consciously kept in the background.

The extent to which the Change and Reform vote was a vote *against* Fatah's corruption and patronage politics, its failure to improve living standards, and betrayal of the liberation struggle is crucial to explaining – and qualifying – Hamas's success. One teacher, explaining his vote for Hamas, said of Fatah's rule, "Even the petrol coupons, telephone cards and food aid that were sent as donations to poor families never reached them. It all went to clan and family members. This has nothing to do with religion. [The vote for Hamas] is about our daily needs." Another Hamas voter commented, "Not necessarily people voted Hamas because they believe in Hamas ideology or Hamas outlook. A lot of them voted for Hamas ... like an act of revenge from Fatah. Because of what they suffered, corruption, abuses, all these years. So, they wanted to give Fatah a lesson, that look we will vote for Hamas." (Quoted in Milton-Edwards & Farrel, 2010.)

The Israeli state and western imperialism refused to accept the 2006 election result. Under their pressure Fatah rejected Hamas's offer to form a national unity government. Fatah withheld funding from Gaza, where

Hamas's base was strongest, and ordered its supporters in the PA security forces and bureaucracy not to cooperate. Over the next several months attempts to find a negotiated political settlement failed, largely due to Fatah's intransigence, but with the full backing of the Israeli state and western imperialism. They were determined to overturn the 2006 election results. This was a confirmation that on the basis of capitalism even the partial-self-determination granted to the Palestinians at Oslo was a sham.

On 11 June 2007, Hamas began a five-day armed operation to secure its base in Gaza. Fatah activists were forced out and the security forces and PA bureaucracy purged. Ordinary Gazans took to the streets demanding an end to the violence in echoes of the opposition to the in-fighting in the first Intifada. In response to Fatah's routing, the Israeli state implemented a near-total blockade of Gaza, supported by Egypt on its southern border, that has continued up to this day. Within a year Israel launched its first war of state-terror against the now-isolated Hamas-led statelet. Wars of state-terror were launched again in 2012, 2014 and 2021.

Hamas in Power

The siege massively increased the Palestinian people's dependency on Hamas-administered social and welfare programs which it now had a near-total monopoly over. The blockade's disastrous economic consequences ruined livelihoods and increased unemployment, further increasing dependency on the jobs Hamas was still able to offer via its armed-wing and in the Gazan Palestinian Authority bureaucracy and services, now under its exclusive control. Like Fatah before it, control of the PA, even if limited to Gaza, allowed Hamas to further consolidate its social base.

Despite the extreme limitations placed on its ability to govern 'normally' Hamas's methods display an understanding of its fragile political position. The split between Gaza and the West Bank is deeply unpopular among the working class and poor masses. It is widely viewed as a disastrous step away from an independent state. Under the pressure of this mood Hamas has been careful to avoid being seen as responsible for a permanent political rupture between the Palestinian territories.

Hamas has maintained the framework of the Palestinian Authority and governs within the limits of its constitution, the Palestinian Basic Law. Hamas claims to support its democratic framework and has kept the Gazan Legislative Assembly functioning despite Hamas

MPs sitting alone in the absence of Fatah's. At times Hamas has guaranteed their safety if they are prepared to return. But no elections have been held in Gaza since 2006. In the West Bank only municipal elections have taken place.

In general, the Hamas leadership has not attempted to implement its conservative social agenda through legal changes by, for example, introducing any version of 'Sharia', or Islamic, law. This would be opposed by a large majority of the population. But pressure is still exerted on the population to abide by its social agenda.

In the 2006 elections Hamas campaigned to mobilise support from women, including holding women-only rallies, with some success. Hamas's social and welfare programs were important for winning some support amongst the most oppressed and downtrodden women. One women's rights campaigner, quoted in Milton-Edwards & Farrell, lamented, "I can't dare to speak with women about the hijab while she can't find milk for her children, and I can't speak to women about freedom issues while they are unable to feed their children. It would be as if we are speaking about luxuries. When there is economic stability, then we can handle these issues." This confirms the importance of putting forward a class program to combat gender and all other forms of oppression.

But the Hamas government does not have a progressive position on women's rights, or LGBT+ rights. Education is segregated by gender and women are required to wear the hijab, but there are no formal educational or career restrictions. The court-system has been restructured to strengthen traditional and clan-based mediation of some disputes and crimes. This was partly out of necessity after Fatah ordered its supporters staffing the judicial system, including all judges, to go on strike. This has strengthened conservative and patriarchal elites who use the courts to reinforce social control of women.

The Hamas government has leaned in an authoritarian direction. In the wake of the split in the Palestinian Authority, like Fatah on the West Bank, the Hamas government has created its own special police units under the direct control of the organisation. With echoes of Fatah's 'policing' of the struggle, in its first year the Hamas government moved to control rival militias, insisting they abide by its decisions on rocket-fire campaigns and ceasefires or face suppression. Summary execution could face those found with unauthorised weapons.

Several waves of protest have taken place in Gaza against Hamas during the years of its rule. None has yet approached the proportions of the first Intifada, but nor have they been insignificant. Especially amongst a new generation of youth who have come of age under the Hamas government, frustration at the poverty, lack of opportunities and isolation from the world is enormous. Hamas is seen as at least partly responsible for their suffering. Protests developed in 2011, 2014, 2019 and as recently as August 2023. The last two waves of protest were over living standards and under the slogan “we want to live”. These have been strictly policed, sometimes violently dispersed, and organisers victimised and even imprisoned. The Hamas government will not allow an independent movement of the working class and poor, or even the youth, to emerge.

New Impasse

This is the background that explains why it has been possible for the Palestinian masses’ seething anger at national oppression to be partially reflected through the prism of Hamas. It has only been possible because of the huge political vacuum opened by the capitulation of Fatah and the other semi-left organisations of the PLO. Politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum, which has been prolonged because independent working class political organisation, advancing a socialist program for the liberation struggle, has failed to emerge and fill the space. These circumstances are woefully insufficient to concede that the leadership of the Palestinian national liberation struggle automatically falls to Hamas.

The Hamas leadership’s class character means it cannot be trusted with the Palestinian liberation struggle any more than the Fatah leadership could. The decades old rivalry between them can obscure the crucial thread of class continuity: the leadership of the Palestinian national liberation struggle has been dominated throughout by petty bourgeois nationalism. This has taken different forms, shaped by the balance of class forces in Palestinian society, the region and worldwide. Hamas’s right-wing religious-nationalism, including the encouragement of antisemitic attitudes towards the Israeli Jewish population, was a reactionary step backwards compared to Fatah’s historic secular left pan-Arab nationalism. Especially up to Oslo, Marxists would have approached Fatah differently to Hamas. Nevertheless, both have the same essential class character.

Fatah originated from a petty bourgeois Palestinian layer too. It was founded by a previous generation of students and professionals who in the 1950s organised student unions in Egypt and elsewhere in the region. The Fatah leadership also refused to recognise the class contradictions of Palestinian society and in doing so avoided the question of the class character of a future independent Palestine. Fatah’s founding document instead spoke vaguely of an independent Palestinian state where the “exploitation of man by man is ended”. The Fatah leadership proposes a ‘secular’ state and the Hamas leadership proposes an ‘Islamic’ state. But both would be capitalist states. The Fatah and Hamas leaderships have since confirmed this in their support for the Palestinian Basic Law that came out of Oslo, which is explicit that, “the economic system in Palestine shall be based upon the principles of a free market economy.”

The Fatah leadership’s method of armed struggle differed to Hamas’s. But for both it is a substitute for the organisation and mass mobilisation of the working class and poor masses. Both are suspicious of their independent activity and, depending on circumstances, either make moves to control and influence it, manoeuvre against it, or actively suppress it.

The lack of a class approach is continued at the regional level. The Fatah leadership manoeuvred endlessly between the ruling capitalist classes of the Middle East, looking for support from one and then another. They repeatedly turned their backs on the working class and poor masses suffering under those regimes when they rose-up against them. The Hamas leadership looks towards, and depends upon, capitalist regimes such as the Iranian and the Qatari. The Hamas leadership turned its back on the mass movement against the Iranian regime that began in 2022. For both leaderships the class contradictions in Israeli society are a closed book.

The Fatah leadership, brought to an impasse by its entire approach to the liberation struggle, ultimately looked toward imperialism, and US imperialism in particular, to extract a negotiated settlement from the Israeli ruling class. Confirming that there is no solution on the basis of capitalism the result was Oslo and the disasters that have rained down on the Palestinian people over the last thirty years. However, the Hamas leadership has also increasingly looked towards a negotiated settlement with Israeli capitalism and world imperialism. As early as 1997, the Hamas leadership offered a *hudna*, a long-term truce in its *jihad* against

the existence of Israel, in the meantime accepting an independent Palestinian state on the territory already conceded in principle at Oslo. Again, after its election victory in 2006, Usama al-Mazini, a member of Hamas's dialogue committee, reiterated that, "We accept a state on 1967 border without recognizing the legitimacy of occupation. They can have their state on the 1948 lands, but I don't recognise it..." But the lives of the working class and poor masses would not change in any fundamental way on the basis of this wordplay. Building a bridge for this, in 2017, Hamas issued a new *General Principles & Policies* document, which attempted to 'modernise' its positions. It acclaimed "democratic principles" such as "free and fair elections", nodded in favour of women's rights, trade union rights etc. and dropped the antisemitism present in its founding Covenant.

The Hamas leadership has repeatedly entered reconciliation talks with Fatah, mediated by the regional ruling classes. It has offered to give up its leadership of Gaza and join a Government of National Consensus, also proposing to join – for the first time – a reformed PLO. However, the political reunification of Gaza and the West Bank is anathema to the ultra-right governments that have dominated Israeli politics since Hamas came to power. They see maintaining this division as central to preventing an independent Palestinian state. The Israeli governments have intervened to block agreements between Fatah and Hamas from being implemented, including the timing of its wars of state-terror. Western imperialism has also preferred to continue propping-up Fatah. These have been the main obstacles to the Hamas leadership following Fatah down the road of accommodation with Israeli capitalism and world imperialism. What the Hamas leadership has seemed to desire above all else is to become an accepted faction of the Palestinian political elite, as a step toward taking its place amongst the ruling classes of the region. But at the same time it has tried to maintain its base of support by being seen as the leader of the resistance to national oppression. Trapped in this contradiction, which led it to plan the 7 October attack, the prospects for the Hamas leadership are now uncertain and rapidly changing.

Class Organisation

The petty bourgeois class character of Hamas's leadership makes it incapable of deploying an independent anchor in the storm of class contradictions in Palestinian society, the region and worldwide. Under pressure from multiple

fronts it is pushed and pulled in many directions. This is the material basis for Hamas's contradictory character – a reactionary domestic political, economic and social agenda sitting alongside militant resistance to national oppression. But Hamas can only tail-end the national aspirations of the Palestinian working class and poor masses. It is incapable of adopting the program necessary to advance them. This is because Hamas's petty bourgeois leadership, standing on its right-wing religious-nationalist ideology, is not only incapable of being a vehicle for working class leadership of the liberation struggle, it actively seeks to block it.

The hold of petty bourgeois nationalism on the Palestinian national liberation struggle must be broken. To do this the working class must place itself in the leadership of its own liberation struggle, leading the way for the poor masses. This requires new class foundations for the liberation struggle to be laid. Independent working class organisations – trade unions, community and youth organisations need to be further built and united by a party. These must rely on the methods of mass mobilisation against national oppression, under the democratic control of the working class and poor masses. The elements of armed struggle necessary against Israeli state aggression must be organised as an auxiliary to this. The tail must stop wagging the dog.

Clear class lines need to be drawn. The ruling capitalist classes of the region and the imperialist powers are all enemies of genuine national liberation and self-determination for the Palestinian people. The liberation struggle must look for support from the working class. The working class across the Middle East region, including in Israel, has a key role to play. So too, supportively, does the working class in the imperialist countries. Only through united class struggle and solidarity can the capitalist class foundations of Palestinian national oppression be destroyed.

A clear class policy towards Israeli society is essential. The Israeli ruling class needs to be denied the possibility of leaning on the Israeli working class in its oppression of the Palestinians. The Israeli working class must also build its own independent class organisations to make this possible. The working class, in the leadership of the Palestinian liberation struggle in the West Bank and Gaza, would need to foster class unity across the national divide. Whilst demanding the right to self-determination for the Palestinian people it must uphold the Israeli Jews' right to self-determination, up to and including in their own state for as long as they feel it is necessary. The

only class basis upon which two states could peacefully co-exist, with the peoples of each genuinely enjoying self-determination, and guaranteeing the rights of minorities, is on the basis of workers' and poor peoples' governments beginning the socialist transformation of society and posing the need for a socialist confederation. This would allow for democratic economic planning in those areas where there is agreement that it is mutually beneficial. On this basis it would be possible for workers' organisations to come to a democratic agreement about where borders would lie and what their character would be.

The mass class organisations needed to politically rearm and take forward the Palestinian national liberation struggle do not yet exist. How they can emerge, develop and strengthen, are the key tactical issues posed today. This includes how they relate to the existing Palestinian organisations, including Hamas. Any form of political 'united front' approach would be a fatal mistake. But it will be crucial to win the support, especially of the youth, and any workers, that currently look towards Hamas, including struggling alongside them on concrete issues where there is agreement. These issues can only be fully addressed when the Israeli state's current onslaught ends and the new terrain of the liberation struggle becomes clearer.

The Israeli ruling-class will again discover that it is impossible to militarily destroy the Palestinian's national aspirations. A new generation of Palestinians will emerge to pick-up the baton of struggle, wherever it falls. There will be a searching, across the region, to understand how the threshold of disaster was crossed yet again. The brutalising new experiences will force a questioning of old assumptions and certainties. The history of the liberation struggle up to this point will be re-examined. They must discover the ideas of Marxism and be won to a class solution to national oppression which means the struggle for a socialist Palestine and Israel, in a socialist Middle East and a socialist world.

The CWI offers this analysis as a basis for dialogue with Palestinian workers and youth, and workers and youth across the Middle East, on the way forward for the Palestinian national liberation struggle to which we give our full support.

4 January 2024

Other important aspects of the CWI's analysis of the struggle in the Middle East can be read on our website.

The roots of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the war on Gaza (8 December 2023)

2011 Arab Spring: Revolutionary uprisings swept the middle east (6 December 2023)

Stop the Israel-Gaza war! For workers' unity and struggle against national conflict and oppression (9 October 2023)

Israel-Palestine: 30 years since the Oslo accord – will there ever be a Palestinian state? (7 October 2023)