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Palestine

Evolution of the "non-Islamic" national movement in Palestine since the 1980s

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Introduction: Before 1987

The object of this report is to deal with the evolution of the non-Islamic national movement since the end of the 1980s. That is why I have chosen to "amalgamate" the two reports that had originally been suggested into only one, inasmuch as it is difficult to consider the evolution of the Left independently of the evolution of the majority current of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Fatah.

The starting point of the report will be the year 1987, because that marks a turning point, insofar as there can be turning points in history and politics, with the outbreak of the first Intifada. We obviously cannot understand these events and their consequences without looking further back, but given the time limits, I will try and cover what is essential, in a way that will necessarily be rapid and schematic.

The Palestinian national movement really began to develop after 1967 and of the defeat of the Arab armies and states by Israel during the Six Day War. Up until then, the Palestinian question had remained in the hands of the Arab states, whose control was expressed in the creation of the PLO in 1964, on the initiative of the states of the Arab League, in particular of Nasser's Egypt. The Charter of the PLO specified for example that the organization did not exert any regional sovereignty over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

These territories were respectively administered by Jordan and Egypt, which, with different modalities and in the framework of a struggle for influence, equipped themselves with autonomous Palestinian "national" currents, while at the same time basing themselves on the local elites (in particular the great families of notables).

In reaction to this confiscation of the Palestinian question Fatah was formed, in 1959, by Palestinians exiled in Kuwait (Arafat, Kaddumi, Abu Jihad, Abu Iyad), who denounced the passivity of the Arab regimes since 1948 and asserted the "Palestinisation" of the struggle. They advocated a "people's war" (on the Algerian model), conducted by the Palestinian masses, and established bases of support in the refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, from where they multiplied, from 1965 onwards, armed operations against Israeli military targets.

With the defeat of 1967 Fatah gained in credibility, a credibility that was reinforced with the battle of Karamah, in 1968, where the Palestinian guerrillas held their own against the Israeli armed forces. This was a turning point and in 1968-69, the guerrilla organizations, with Fatah at their head, took control of the PLO, "Palestinised" its charter and considerably developed the organization, which had not been solidly implanted. The PLO developed in the camps in neighbouring countries, because the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza made it impossible to establish guerrilla cells there.

The leadership of the PLO, although based outside the Palestinian territories, acquired legitimacy in the eyes of the populations of the interior, in particular after September 1970 when the massacres perpetrated by the Jordanian army in the Palestinian camps led to the population and nationalist feeling turning against Jordan and pro-Jordanian notables. In this way there developed in the interior a nationalist movement, strongly linked to the PLO, which it recognized as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, but which sought to have relative autonomy with respect to the leadership abroad. Several attempts at structuring the movement in the interior (the Palestinian National Front in 1972, the Committee of National Orientation in 1978) were taken in hand and scuttled by the leadership abroad.

The Fatah leadership of the PLO, which managed the financial resources of the organization, followed a policy which consisted of ensuring that it was the dominant force in the territories, basing itself on militant and popular local cadres, while preventing the emergence of a real leadership of the interior.

The Palestinian Left, mainly the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) (which had a base in the Palestinian territories), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) gradually lost ground to Fatah. What is more, since the relationships of forces were different between the interior (where the Left was relatively strong) and the exterior (where Fatah was clearly dominant), the progressive establishment of control of the interior by the exterior contributed to this weakening.

Thus on the eve of the Intifada there was a national movement, structured around the PLO but with a certain number of dissensions, and a bureaucratized leadership of the PLO, which had come to favour a negotiated settlement from the middle of the 1970s onwards (witness Arafat's speech at the UN in 1974), refusing to leave too much autonomy to cadres of the interior who were more radicalized by the daily struggle against the occupation. We should not over-estimate these dissensions but we should be aware of them, because they explain many future developments.

The Intifada

The explosion of 1987, a consequence of the violence of the Israeli occupation and the development of Palestinian nationalism in the occupied territories since the 1970s, was neither programmed nor organized by the PLO. It was a real popular uprising which was not at the outset controlled or led by the Palestinian political organizations: the rioters who were arrested by the Israeli forces in the first weeks of the uprising were not known and/or organized militants.

Local leaders emerged, coming in particular from factions of the PLO, and a certain number of structures of self-organization arose, both at a local level (People's Committees) and at the national level (the Unified National Command of the uprising).

The demands, the forms of action and the dates of mobilization fixed by the UNC were taken up by the local People's Committees and the other structures. The UNC affirmed its allegiance to the PLO but was not regarded as a simple emanation of the Tunis-based leadership or as its relay in the Palestinian territories and asserted its autonomy (but in no case its independence) with respect to the leading bodies of the PLO. The UNC was at the beginning, "the instrument of a process of taking over the political initiative by the interior, to the detriment of the exterior" (J-F. Legrain). It was also the expression of the relationships of forces in the interior, since it respected parity between the organizations which were members of the PLO (contrary to the leadership of the PLO).

But from the summer of 1988, the relative autonomy of the UNC disappeared: under the pressure of the Directorates of Political Affairs of the exterior (of Fatah but also of the PFLP and the DFLP), the cadres of the interior engaged in the UNC were dispossessed of political decision-making. From then on official statements were written in Tunis and factionalism gradually took over again in the occupied territories. By indirectly taking control of the legitimate framework of the leadership of the uprising, the leadership of the PLO ensured that it had taken over the function of representation of the population of the occupied territories, and could thus claim legitimacy to negotiate on their behalf.

In July 1988, the King of Jordan announced his decision to give up sovereignty over the West Bank of the Jordan. At the next meeting of the Palestinian National Council, in Algiers, in November, an independent state of Palestine on the territories occupied in 1967 was proclaimed, a proclamation accompanied by a recognition of UN resolution 242 and thus of Israel in its borders of 1949. By doing this, the PLO tried to base itself on the uprising in order to pose as an unavoidable and reasonable interlocutor in the framework of a hypothetical process of negotiation.

But the road was still long. Weakened considerably by its support for Saddam Hussein at the time of the Gulf War, and jostled by the divisive manoeuvres of Israel, which claimed to prefer to discuss with the leaders the interior, the leading core of the PLO ended up agreeing to negotiate in the strictest secrecy, on the basis of conditions that were extremely minimal, behind the backs of the Palestinians of the interior and the leading bodies of the PLO.

The United States and Israel made the following wager: the Arafat leadership is sufficiently weakened that it will agree to save its skin under conditions that are more than favourable to the Israelis but still sufficiently legitimate to get agreements accepted by a population that was crushed by five years of ferocious repression and was exhausted, agreements which were actually nothing but a capitulation: Oslo. The Oslo Agreements were in fact nothing but the resolution of the old Israeli problem (to have a state that was both Jewish and democratic) on the basis of the Allon Plan (abandonment of the most densely populated zones to a subject Palestinian authority and maintenance of Israeli control over the major part of Palestine).

The Oslo years

Thus was the Palestinian Authority (PA) created: its real function, within the framework of the Zionist project (whatever might have been the intentions or the illusions of Arafat) was the maintenance of law and order in the autonomous Palestinian zones and the destruction of Palestinian resistance, in exchange for the construction of a pseudo-apparatus of state.

The principal problem of the leading core of the PA (Arafat and his close colleagues, Qorei, Abbas, Nabil Shaath) was to establish its political authority in a territory over which they did not have real sovereignty. It was thus necessary for the PA to ensure the support of the social forces of the interior, while neutralizing the forces of contestation (Islamic and, to a lesser extent, left forces) and preserving the essential levers of command in order to remain the only and unavoidable interlocutor of Israel in the continuous process of negotiations.

Powerful security forces were built, in which many Fatah militants of the first Intifada were recycled and at whose head were placed individuals who were reliable but legitimate in the occupied territories (Rajoub and Dahlan at the head of Preventive Security, an essential component of the apparatus of control of the autonomous zones). These security forces were characterised by their unflinching collaboration with the Israeli services, by numerous arrests and also by repression that was sometimes very violent (14 dead during a demonstration by Hamas-Jihad in Gaza in November 1994).

Having monopoly control over the flow of international financial aid to the PLO and building a state apparatus that was the major source of employment in a society marked by the closing of the Israeli market to more than 100,000 Palestinian workers, Arafat established a vast network of clientele and a system of corruption at every level of the "Palestinian institutions" that were being established, accelerating the depoliticization of Fatah and of the whole of Palestinian society.

At the time of the legislative elections of 1996, recalcitrant Fatah leaders (for example Hussam Khader in Balata) were sidelined, while the leading core of the PLO did not hesitate to promote many local notables who had been conspicuous by their absence during the first Intifada, and to base itself on the great families. That guaranteed Fatah victory in the elections, but in fact very often local considerations overrode national considerations, which was a double-edged sword for the leadership of the PA: it tried to make sure it was the only force capable of exercising power on a national level, but at the same time it reinforced the centrifugal tendencies in Palestinian society, tendencies which were already considerably encouraged by the fragmentation that was the result of colonization and of the isolation of Gaza.

The legitimacy of the leadership of the PA rested on the past of the PLO and of Arafat and on the promise of liberation to come. But this legitimacy was exhausted during the Oslo years and disillusion quickly set in.

Many militants of Fatah, disorientated, abandoned the political terrain. The Palestinian Left was divided over Oslo: whereas the PCP (which had become the Palestinian People's Party, PPP) supported the process with timid reservations and even took part in the PA government, the PFLP and the DFLP took a wait-and-see attitude: critical of Oslo, they hardly dared to engage in confrontation with the leadership of the PA. Paralysed during the first years, the militants of the PFLP and part of the PPP fell back on NGOs and cultural centres in the refugee camps, deserting the national political terrain. This NGOisation of Palestinian political life (whose most outstanding figure is Mustapha Barghouti) contributed to the depoliticization and to the increasingly strong dependence of the critical "left" elements" on the sources of funds... which came from the sponsors of Oslo.

This attitude of "a foot inside, a foot outside" by the Left contributed to its weakening and the lack of initiative of these political forces left the field free for Hamas, whose attitude towards Oslo was unambiguous and which had a much more powerful network of associations (quicker to act and less dependent on the imperialist "godfathers"...))

Conscious of the limits of the process, confronted with a relative increase in criticism from the Left (which had been considerably weakened by the loss of prerogatives of the PLO to the advantage of the PA and by a wait-and-see attitude (PFLP, DFLP), and even by tail-endism (the CP, now the PPP, which took part fully in the setting up of the PA, even taking ministerial posts) and of part of Fatah, Arafat refused the "generous offers" of Barak at Camp David in the summer of 2000 and seized on the uprising of September 2000, which he had largely encouraged, to try (what illusions...) to modify the relationship of forces with Israel.

The uprising of September 2000

Although it would be exaggerated to say that Arafat organized the uprising, it is undeniable that he prepared for it and took steps to be able to control it as closely as possible. He favoured and supported individuals like Marwan Barghouti, the incarnation of the militant wing of Fatah, and the cadres of the interior who had come out of the first Intifada – whom, however, he had constantly marginalized during the Oslo years. He helped considerably to create and develop "the" armed wing of Fatah, the Al-Aqsa Brigades. The leadership of the PA sapped any attempt at self-organization of the movement, encouraging its militarization in order not to lose ground to Hamas and to de-popularize the uprising, and proclaimed himself natural leader of the uprising while offering it the perspective of new negotiations.

This policy failed. The violence of Israeli repression and the political line of Barak, then of Sharon, in particular after September 11, was aimed not only at breaking the uprising but also at dismantling the structures put in place by Arafat, in particular the security forces which sometimes turned their weapons against Israel. This led to the reoccupation of the autonomous zones (October 2001) and the massive onslaught of March-April 2002, combined with the putting into quarantine of Arafat, declared to be undesirable. Cracks appeared in the leadership of the PA. Some, like Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) and Nabil Amr, openly condemned the uprising and the return to the armed struggle.

Pressures were exerted on Arafat to reform the PA and agree to share power with them. A post of Prime Minister was created in 2003 (for Abbas), but Arafat refused to give up the control of the security services and the rupture was consummated. During these years, the struggle was more and more taken in hand by Hamas, Jihad and the PFLP, while Fatah was imploding: the depoliticization that had been orchestrated by the PA in the 1990s and the promotion of local potentates who had their own clientele networks largely contributed to the autonomisation of notables of

Fatah, to an exacerbation of the competition between them and to a decomposition and autonomisation of the armed groups linked to Fatah (in particular the Al-Aqsa Brigades).

The Palestinian Left, and in particular the PFLP, which took part with the means that it had in the armed resistance and whose network of associations demonstrated its utility during a period of generalized impoverishment and dismantling of the meagre infrastructures of the PA, won back a small part of its base. The PFLP undertook a critical examination of the ten years which had elapsed since Oslo and tried to bring its orientation up to date, including in terms of international links. Mustapha Barghouthi did the same, more for reasons of politicking and opportunism than from conviction.

The death of Arafat and the advent of Abu Mazen and Fayyad

The physical death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004 represented an important moment. He was the only one capable of ensuring a pretence of unity in Fatah and in the PA, the only one to incarnate past resistance and the "peace" process. Abu Mazen took over the succession and was "badly elected" in January 2005 (with a low level of participation and especially with 20 per cent of the votes going to Barghouthi, whose candidature was supported by, among others, the PFLP). He carried out a series of reforms in the PA and reorganized the security services, trying to change some of those who were in charge of them.

During the year 2005, municipal elections were organized in the big cities, almost all won by Hamas, with for the first time, on the part of the PFLP, the choice of allying with the Islamic organization in several municipalities (in particular Bethlehem). Israel and the United States forced Abbas to organize legislative elections in January 2006. Hamas and Fatah were neck and neck for the list seats at national level, but on the level of the districts (half of the seats), the defeat of Fatah was unequivocal: the candidates who were associated with the PA (former ministers or high ranking officials) were swept away. The PFLP won 4 per cent of the vote, Mustapha Barghouthi 2.5 per cent.

After the failed putsch of June 2007, Abu Mazen declared a state of emergency and appointed (on the recommendations of the United States and the EU) Salam Fayyad to the post of Prime Minister. The new government of the PA was a government of economists, technocrats, and the tandem Abu Mazen-Fayyad laid down three major goals: to normalise economic relations with Israel, to rebuild and reform the security services and to dismantle resistance.

The reorganization of the security services was significant of the changes underway with Fayyad and Abu Mazen: recruitment no longer took place on a partisan basis (contrary to what occurred after Oslo, it was better to avoid being in Fatah or to have a past as a combatant), training of new recruits was officially under US supervision (by General Dayton), those in charge of the principal services were replaced by individuals considered close to the United States (such as Hazem Atallah, appointed to be in charge of the police force in the West Bank, in place of Kamal Sheikh, a member of Fatah but considered to be too conciliatory with regard to Hamas)...

There followed a series of operations aimed at "restoring order", in Nablus, Jenin, Hebron, with hundreds of arrests, serious incidents (deaths, wounded) and the dismantling of the whole of the armed groups. At the time of the events of Gaza, this police force was used to repress demonstrations in the West Bank, to prevent them from going towards Israeli objectives and to arrest dozens of demonstrators, in particular militants of the Left and of Hamas.

Conclusion

If the Arafat team was able to get the Oslo Agreements accepted "ideologically", the Abu Mazen-Fayyad team is probably the one that some people, in Israel and in the United States, are counting on to get them accepted definitively, by using the (economic) carrot and the stick.

The last twenty years have completed the process of transformation of the leadership of the PLO from a state apparatus without a state into an element that is integrated into the system of Israeli colonial administration. The PLO, emptied of its prerogatives and of its legitimacy, has paid the price for this; Fatah, which has completely imploded, has paid the price for it. Abu Mazen does not incarnate a "strategy" of the national movement, but the most barefaced collaboration, which does not go uncriticised within the (plural) Fatah.

The Left has been considerably marked by the 20 last years. The PPP is very much weakened. It has lost credibility and many of its militants are demanding a critical balance sheet of the Oslo years, and even more than that. The DFLP has become a small group in the Palestinian territories, decimated by the split of Yasser Abed Rabbo at the time of Oslo and the foundation of the FIDA (Palestine Democratic Union). Mustapha Barghouthi, the incarnation of the NGOisation of Palestinian political life and of political opportunism, has more credibility and more of an audience in the solidarity movement than he has in Palestine.

There remains the PFLP. The leadership of the party has been considerably weakened (half of the cadres are in prison). The PFLP is also marked by localisms, but the organization has succeeded in maintaining itself, and even in finding a second wind. Many of its militants have a real legitimacy, their "left" criticisms of the PA have a relative audience, and the organization, open to the outside world and aware of the changes that are taking place on an international scale, in particular of the political recompositions that are taking place in the radical Left and in the countries of Latin America.

The PFLP seems nevertheless to lack a strategic vision in the medium and long term: with Barghouthi in 2005, then with Hamas in the local elections, then on its own in the legislative elections, while remaining in the PLO; with Hamas in the West Bank (demonstrations, student elections), in permanent confrontation with Hamas in Gaza. Since the elections of 2006, the PFLP has primarily tried to play the role of unifier between Hamas and Fatah, without necessarily developing a strategy for building a credible political alternative.

Their recent declarations, following Gaza, put the accent on unity "in resistance". Some leaders of the PFLP also take part in discussions on the reorganization of the PLO, with the possible integration of Hamas, which would indicate an important evolution. Moreover, Fatah has in its ranks many critical elements which could also take part in processes of recomposition of the Palestinian resistance and of the PLO, also involving members of the Islamic factions, and even the Palestinians of 1948.