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Palestine

What future for the national liberation movement?

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After almost two years of confrontation, the Palestinian people have suffered a new defeat, with thousands of dead and wounded, thousands taken prisoner, an unprecedented degradation of its living standards and a deep dislocation of its social life.

Accompanied by an immense feeling of frustration and a deep bitterness concerning the conditions that governed the lifting of Israel's siege of Arafat in Ramallah, which have been seen by the immense majority of the Palestinian people as an unacceptable compromise and an insult to the combatants and victims of this new uprising. [1]

This new defeat calls for a collective reflection that can draw appropriate lessons for future political action. For this defeat is also that of a generation which, while combative and sometimes heroic, had no political strategy and was incapable of offering the Palestinian masses the perspectives for mobilization which were indispensable, given the political bankruptcy of all components of the Palestinian national movement.

The disarray and frustration of these militants is now considerable. However, we are convinced that they are ready to engage in reflection and pursue action. This text is intended as a contribution to this process.

From the Oslo trap to the reoccupation of the Territories

Imposed by US imperialism after the Gulf War and the crushing of the Iraqi people, the Washington peace agreements were a concentrated application to the 'Arab world' of the new world order.

The 'peace process' involved the normalization of the relations of the Arab world with the Zionist state through its submission to the imperialist order and required the existence of a political representation which was sufficiently legitimate in the eyes of the Palestinian people to make it accept the substitution of a partial autonomy under Israeli control for its historic national demands. Far from being the 'peace of the brave' proclaimed by Arafat, the Washington agreement of September 1993 turned out to be a fool's bargain for the Palestinians.

The famous 'peace process' has unilaterally served the unchanged Zionist projects of territorial conquest and led to a constant degradation of living conditions for the great majority of Palestinians. The pursuit of colonization with its inherent litany of expropriations, destructions of houses and fields, the construction of fortified towns protected by military camps, linked by roads which isolate the villages and prevent peasants from reaching their fields, the closures which prevent workers from reaching their workplaces and deprive them of resources, the grabbing of Palestinian land and water in particular, all amounted to violence against the Palestinians; a violence that the Palestinian authority excused by saying that 'everything will be settled at the final negotiations'.

To this violence was added the arrogance of a privileged layer who did not suffer the torments of the occupation (who, for example, could freely move about the territories, avoiding the multiple Israeli controls), the development of a bureaucracy linked to the PA apparatus, the development of phenomena of corruption and scandals sometimes revealing open and structural collaboration with the occupier, the total absence of democracy in decision taking, the irresponsibility of and impunity guaranteed to those close to the networks of power and so on. Far from being the polar opposite of the interminable negotiations, far from being 'an abandonment of the peace process', the events of the past 18 months, including in its exacerbated form the reoccupation of Palestinian towns, is the outcome of it.

What future for the national liberation movement?

The political bankruptcy of the Palestinian leadership and the absence of any serious alternative on the part of the organized political forces, notably 'the Palestinian left' [2] have allowed the putting in place of all the conditions facilitating the passage to a brutal and massive repression by the Israeli government of national unity.

The situation opened after September 11 has allowed this government to move onto a higher gear. The military reoccupation of the areas under 'Palestinian autonomy' in late March-early April, 2002 did not come out of the blue. It was preceded by bombardments, 'targeted' assassinations of militants, killings of civilians, partial reoccupations of neighbourhoods, towns and refugee camps. It came after an intensification of the policy of closures of Palestinian towns and limitations on the right to movement leading in practice to its suppression.

Contrary to what many have said, Sharon had a strategy, which he has implemented with the necessary help of the Labour Party. Considering that the developments throughout 2001 invalidated the basic hypothesis of Oslo, namely the capacity of the Palestinian Authority to put an end to national aspirations and contain Palestinian frustration and anger in limits compatible with the security of the state of Israel, he drew the conclusion that it was necessary to profoundly redraw the map before resuming negotiations.

The common basis of the different possible scenarios was a major defeat of the Palestinian people, the crushing of its aspiration to national rights that had forcefully re-emerged with the new uprising beginning in September 2000. This meant repression and mass terror, massive destruction with the aim of eradicating the material base necessary to the credibility of an independent state, the creation of a governmental vacuum through the political neutralization of the Palestinian Authority and, finally, through the destruction of the armed groups, many of which are outside the direct control of the Palestinian Authority.

In this offensive, Sharon capitalized on the errors of Arafat, who was incapable of ending his double game of pursuit of negotiations and militarisation of the intifada, notably through the intermediary of Fatah. Now, because they think that the Palestinians will have to accept whatever is signed by their 'legitimate representatives', the US has taken on the responsibility of imposing a political solution that will be obviously anything but the recognition of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. It involves putting an end to the Oslo process, drawing the lessons of its weakness and taking into consideration the new relationship of forces after the recent action of Israeli 'military pacification'.

The objective is to neutralize the Israeli-Palestinian front for at least long enough for imperialism to pursue the offensive it is preparing in the Middle East and in particular against Iraq. The political commitment to a solution 'taking into account the right of the Palestinians to a state' is indispensable to the participation, or at least the neutrality of the Arab allies in the coalition against terrorism. The framework should naturally allow Israel to pursue its projects, starting with the integration of the principal settlements into Israeli territory.

This road of separation does not exclude the option of expulsion of the Palestinians, initially encouraging it and then provoking it on a larger scale if a favourable situation emerges. It is about making the lives of Palestinians 'unliveable', to close any horizon, to show that there is no possible future, to block any possibility of professional realization and social promotion, in short to create a continuous flux of candidates for permanent exile. [3] Those who cannot or will not leave will be cantoned in isolated and controlled zones.

On the directly political level, we see the establishment of a new protectorate under US hegemony with an 'international' facade. Closed and isolated zones, granted a limited autonomy in the West Bank and remaining under security control with perhaps a status of partial autonomy evolving more rapidly in Gaza (the provisional state?).

How did we get to this after 18 months of resistance and thousands of dead, wounded, imprisoned, not to mention the destruction?

The national movement during the Oslo years

It can be said that with the Oslo accords the Israelis and the US succeeded in marginalizing the PLO to the profit of the PA. [4] Thus the PLO, which represented the Palestinians living in the occupied territories and in the diaspora, became a reference without political or decision-making role; these were confiscated by Arafat and the small group around him, some originating from the PLO and some not, who constituted the PA.

The PA's political programme was fixed by Oslo: to negotiate with Israel (with the promise that this would lead to an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital), ensure the security of the state of Israel against any attack from Palestinians and assume responsibility for the management of everyday life for the Palestinians in the autonomous zones.

In reality the concerns of the Palestinians were different: the right to self-determination, the frontiers of the independent and sovereign state, the settlements, Jerusalem, the right of return of the refugees, the liberation of the political prisoners.

The political groups of the Palestinian left, opposed to the Oslo process, rapidly decided that Oslo was 'a fact that had to be dealt with'. They belonged to the PLO and justified their attitude by their will to not be cut off from the process led by the PA. The PFLP, DFLP and PPP [5] did not hesitate to get involved in the political game structured by the PA, without going so far as to participate in its political leadership.

Hamas took care to preserve its independence from the Authority, developing its political programme around two dimensions: firstly, a dimension of national liberation, resisting the Israeli occupation through armed struggle and secondly a social dimension of education of the people through the Islamic religion: 'Islam is the solution'.

The weakness of the organizations of the Palestinian left is evident from all the polls (support is around 5 %) and this bears out the observations one can make on the ground: the weakness of organized cortèges, the absence of public profile, absence of distribution of a militant press. It is sad to say and hard to believe but these parties now exist mainly through the distribution of communiqués and by their websites!

How can we explain this degradation of the situation for organizations that had experienced a real development in the course of the first intifada? The expectations of the Palestinian people were not changed by Oslo. In the autonomous zones, the corruption and incompetence of the PA were notorious. However, these problems hardly concerned the political currents. Thus, a considerable gap grew between the Palestinian people and the political organizations of the Palestinian left. The leaderships of the political parties acted only in reaction to the initiatives of the PA and Arafat. This distancing of the links with popular concerns can be measured through the practice that these organizations have shared with the PA in the construction and bureaucratic administration of mass movements.

Take the case of the trade unions, of which the most important is the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). After Oslo unification was imposed with quotas of representation of the four main political currents: Fatah, the PFLP, DFLP and the PPP. At all levels, the general secretaries belong to Fatah, while the others content themselves with participation in the designated leadership bodies. Fatah is dominant while the other currents, and notably the PPP, which had a tradition of trade unionism, have seen their influence considerably decrease since this 'unification' from above. The PGFTU is, then, entirely under the hegemony of Fatah. The democratic process inside the union is non-existent and activity is limited to settling individual situations of conflict between employers and wage earners.

The situation of the movement for defence of women's rights is also instructive. The Palestinian Women's General Federation was formed after Oslo. It was the result of the cooption of all the women's committees belonging to the different political organizations. Other women's organizations have been converted into NGOs, in conformity with programmes decided by foreign financiers who have transformed the organizations into providers of services and women into passive beneficiaries. This has widened the gap between the mass of women and the co-opted leadership of the movement. The student movement, which was a veritable nursery of political cadres, notably in the 1980s, has also been significantly weakened.

Such is the reality of the 'mass organizations' in Palestine, a weakness due on the one hand to their dependence on the political parties and on the other to their dependence on the PA and foreign donors who have paid millions of dollars in subsidies to create a passive network of dependent beneficiaries and not a movement of actors fighting for their rights.

Because of the absence of development of real mass organizations, the political forces have reduced their action to a social activism, trying to respond to the demands stemming from everyday problems, deserting the terrain of the political struggle and allowing a corrupt Authority to corral the national struggle in the impasse of endless negotiations with Israel. Such a situation has encouraged the people to seek individual solutions to their problems by approaching the best placed parties; this is most often Fatah, sometimes through the intervention of Arafat himself, since he concentrates in himself the essential powers, notably that of the signing of cheques!

For these same reasons the population was encouraged to seek protection and power inside their 'tribes' and families to the detriment of all independence, or to fall back into the isolation of religion. Women were particularly affected by this phenomenon, which threatened the conquests of the first intifada.

The uprising of September 2000

The uprising of September 2000 was not the sign of a conscious and organized break with the policy of submission and capitulation imposed by the PA. This spontaneous uprising of an exasperated population was above all the result of a frustration and political disarray rooted in its concrete existence. This exasperation was perceptible well before Sharon's provocation in September 2000.

The uprising was the sole means the Palestinian people had to compensate for the bankruptcy of the Palestinian leadership, whose strategy has progressively led to a situation of total political and material dependence on US imperialism, Israel and the most reactionary Arab régimes. If it revealed the maintenance of a popular will to attain the historic objectives of the independence struggle, this uprising also revealed the impotence of those who should have channelled this energy and combativity into a programme, a strategy and objectives renewed in the light of the experience of the Oslo years.

The two dominant political currents were able to recuperate the popular uprising, wasting again the energies of a new generation. Raising forceful but vain slogans like 'the Intifada until victory' (Fatah) or 'killing the Jews will weaken the state of Israel' (Hamas) and practicing the sole road of armed struggle, increasingly reduced to bombings, these two currents have prevented the construction of a democratic mass alternative to the Authority. They have succeeded thanks to the absence of any alternative, the Palestinian masses being compelled to choose between armed struggle and capitulation!

This uprising has been left without perspectives and instrumentalised. The PA, (Arafat and cronies mainly), the nationalist and the Islamic political forces, the groups around this or that local leader have encouraged the

development of armed minority actions; and this in the greatest disorder and without any collective democratic debate. [6] The bankruptcy of the left organizations is explained firstly by a complete inability to analyse the relation of forces and its recent evolutions.

The organizations and currents of the national and the Islamic movements are as one on this subject. Any halfway serious analysis of the reality of the state of forces, the consequences of confrontations, the real impact of the Israeli occupation and repression on the people is systematically avoided. Even when they describe quite faithfully - in order to very legitimately denounce them - the various attacks and destructions visited on the Palestinian civil populations, the appeals of these organizations invariably end in the reaffirmation of the 'invincible determination' of the Palestinian masses. The rhetoric of the unbreakable resistance of the people is transformed, sometimes into a veritable blindness. [7]

The suicide bombings are also systematically instrumentalised, with the help of the satellite television chains owned by Arab billionaires which broadcast videos of martyrs, devoid of any political message [8] and transform acts of political despair into heroic victory. For sure, the rhetoric of the invincibility of the just cause serves primarily to avoid dealing with the responsibilities for the defeats and tragedies of the Palestinian people.

The appeals for 'resistance to the Israeli offensive by all means', launched in the days before the treacherous agreement allowing Arafat's 'liberation' from Ramallah, without any serious analysis of the resources available, the appeals for demonstrations when curfews had been imposed on Palestinian towns, [9] none of this can be reduced to an isolated incompetence. It is necessary to have never shared the terror which grips the people of the camps and villages when the helicopters attack and when the tanks pull up inside inhabited zones, crushing all in their path, to realize the imbecilic nature of the discourse of the 'invincibility of the struggle of the united people'. Alternatively, you need to have an interest in denying reality for fear of having account to settle, like Arafat who after his fine words on 'Jeningrad' did not dare to go to the camp at Jenin!

Denying the gravity of the blows suffered and their consequences for the consciousness and capacity of struggle of the Palestinian people one avoids facing up to a key moment of any strategy of struggle: drawing the lessons of the phase just finished and looking to the future. Today the unavoidable question is: What balance sheet should be made of the strategies and leaders who have exposed an unarmed people to the brutal and massive aggression of the enemy army? What balance sheet should be made of the leaders who decide to foist a confrontation on the civil population, who they have lulled for years with songs of peace, without the least preparation and the least means of defence?

Incapable of channelling the inevitable desires for 'revenge' that stem from the killings of political leaders and militants, incapable of mastering the dynamic that was unleashed, following a perfectly established plan, by the various Israeli attacks and incursions against the refugee camps from October 2001 to February 2002, the PFLP and the DFLP and Fatah have shown their total incapacity to develop an alternative to the catastrophic line of the PA. Each refuses to face the central problem of forms of struggle in the current situation of the relation of forces and notably the question of the pertinence of armed actions and particularly attacks on civilians which have allowed Israel to draw the Palestinians into the trap of a total confrontation.

A new phase

To say that the entire framework put in place since the declaration of principles and through the Oslo years is now bankrupt is indispensable. However, it is not enough, for the question of what new strategy to implement is obviously posed.

What future for the national liberation movement?

There is a strong temptation for some to return to the past, draw a negative balance sheet of the Oslo phase, renounce the PA and try to revive the PLO. The affair could be simple because in fact the PLO no longer exists. Marginalized by Oslo and the PA, 'the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people' is no more than an empty shell, carefully conserved by those who think they might still need it. Like Arafat, who revives the corpse to make it seem like he is reforming his mode of government. Like the leadership of the PPP, for whom the PLO provides a cover for its open collaboration with the PA (the PPP is in the government). Thus, in an appeal issued in May 2002 the PPP's Political Bureau proposed, after a long inventory of the weaknesses of 'the leadership', that the PLO and particularly its executive committee be reactivated. The PFLP also regrets the paralysis of the PLO and denounces any attempt at marginalisation of this 'conquest of all Palestinians'.

The PFLP does not participate in the PA. It has even refused to benefit from any of the 'advantages' linked to the establishment of partial Palestinian autonomy, declining, for example, to solicit from Israel the right to return to the occupied territories for its exiled political cadres. Still, while not participating in the PA, qualified as the 'product of Oslo' by Abu Ali Mustapha in May 2000, the PFLP does not wish either to be outside the political game set up by Oslo. In these conditions, the PLO is a useful alibi: when the leaders of the PFLP meet Arafat, they can say that they are meeting the president of the Executive Committee of the PLO!

In Palestine, many militants and former militants are aware of the responsibilities of the PLO in the engagement of the national movement on the catastrophic road of Oslo. Many also experience the reality of its current situation: marginalized in the years of negotiation, the PLO has been totally non-existent over the last 18 months and notably in the recent months of the Israeli offensive. Yet it is not easy to turn the page and envisage the pursuit of the struggle 'without the PLO'.

The difficulty is all the more real in that the militants of the Palestinian left wage their combat in a great isolation, far from the debates and actions which have progressively allowed the actors in the struggle against capitalist globalisation to renew the link with the broken thread of anti-imperialism and struggles of social liberation. For many of them the fall of the USSR remains the central explanation of the rut into which their struggle has fallen since the Gulf War. References to the old Nasserite populist nationalism and a Stalinized and dogmatic 'Marxism-Leninism' are insufficient for grasping the meaning of the rising tide of the Islamic nationalism of Hamas or understanding the relations of complementarity between the Zionist state and the general expansion of capitalism.

The pathetic spectacle of Arafat demanding US redemption shows how dramatic an error it was for the PLO leadership to subject its fate to US arbitrage. The total unconditional support given by US governments to Israel stems from the link uniting the undisputed leader of world imperialism to the colonial power invested with a key political-military role in the defence of the interests of capitalist globalisation in this region.

The necessary appraisal of this dimension will recognize the will of the Arab and Palestinian bourgeoisies to integrate themselves in the framework of capitalist globalisation, albeit in subaltern position.

The growing evidence of the impasse represented by calls for 'justice and respect for the law' and the endless appeals for the intervention of the 'international community' indicate the return of the anti-capitalist social dimension of the liberation struggle of the Palestinian people. This dimension will be reinforced by the aggravation of the crisis of Israeli society, where the rapid development of social inequality can only indefinitely be masked by the scapegoat of the 'terrorist danger'.

The programmatic refoundation that the national liberation movement requires must necessarily approach the central question of implementing a strategy favouring the rupture of Israeli workers with the chauvinist ethnic-religious nationalism which dominates their society today. Taking account of the place occupied by the Palestinians in the Israeli proletariat, this demands that any new project of national liberation integrates fully their role as 'second front'

inside Israel itself.

The same clear affirmation of the anti-imperialist dimension of their struggle could allow the Palestinians to transform the spontaneous sentiment of the Arab street and favour its insertion in the struggle against imperialism and war. Today the symbol of the frustration of the Arab masses, support for the struggle of the Palestinians can be transformed into a vector of anti-imperialist awakening and a motor of action against the submission of the Arab régimes to capitalist globalisation and against their policy of insertion in the world capitalist order. Embodying the confrontation between imperialism and the Arab peoples of the region, the struggle of the Palestinian people could thus favour the coming together of the mobilizations developing in the Arab countries with the movement against capitalist globalisation.

By challenging the social order and the autocratic regimes, a Palestinian left could combat Islamicism and contest its pretensions to incarnate anti-imperialism and the struggle for independence. An open collective democratic debate, without preconditions, is now a necessity. The tragic outcome of the Oslo 'peace process' has revealed the strategic impasse of the Palestinian national movement. If they want to bar the road to the growth of the Islamic forces and avoid a new disaster the militants of the left must analyse the reasons for popular disaffection, understand the crisis of legitimacy of the PLO and engage in a strategic and organizational refoundation. Only democratic discussion will allow the framework of this necessary recomposition to develop, the important thing today is to begin, without prejudices and taboos.

And now?

While Arafat thought that the development of violent actions would exert pressure on the US and Israel, the transformation of the uprising into minority armed actions led it onto a terrain where the relationship of forces was totally in the favour of the Israelis. Far from seeing its margin of manoeuvre enlarged, the Palestinian leadership is increasingly captive to the Israeli and US demands. This is borne out by the current parodies of political reform and the organization of elections under constraint.

Beyond their grotesque character - the PA refusing to apply the decision of the court of justice to free [PFLP leader] Saadat two days after Arafat's speech on the necessary separation of powers, for example - we must understand the political meaning of these new submissions of Arafat to the Israeli and US demands. The fact that the new government is essentially a carbon copy of the preceding one [\[10\]](#) should not hide the growing submission to these demands in the field of security (repression of resistance to the occupation) and finance (control of the use of the funds granted to the PA).

What can elections mean in the absence of democratically debated national political programmes and thus the absence of possible choices for the people? The PA's acceptance in advance that Palestinians living outside the occupied territories are excluded from this vote is a prefiguration of the capitulations to come, notably concerning the right of return of the refugees. How, moreover, can a people vote when it is under occupation, confronted with permanent military repression, subject to constraints which stop it fulfilling the basic acts of everyday life?

What counts today is to respond simultaneously to the challenge that the US and Israel have thrown down and the frustration and bitterness provoked by defeat. Participation in the elections under conditions set by the occupier and its international supporters will not allow the necessary renewal of political action inside the Palestinian community.

The lesson should be drawn of the integration of the Palestinian political forces in the 'peace process' and the subsequent political dilution and loss of efficacy which the parties integrated in the 'Oslo current' suffered.

What future for the national liberation movement?

The only elections envisageable would be elections capable of providing the bases of a new legitimacy, free elections which could allow the Palestinian people as a whole to discuss and define the fundamental bases of the emergency programme needed to resolve the key problems of everyday life and face the continuing colonial aggression according to democratically decided modalities and forms of struggle. Beyond this, the election of a new constituent assembly would allow the discussion indispensable to the elaboration of a new political programme expressing the objectives and the means of social and national liberation proposed to all Palestinians wherever they are today.

[1] We refer here to the imprisonment under US-British control of the PFLP militants in Jericho, arrested after a farcical trial held in Ramallah in the presidential palace besieged by the Israeli army and the green light given by Arafat to the exiling of 13 militants hiding in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

[2] The only attempts to rectify the situation were made by individuals who, while respectable, were without solid links with the Palestinian masses, like the appeal of the 20 in late 1999 (see IV 326).

[3] Some sources indicate the departure of 150,000 Palestinians since September 2000.

[4] PLO: Palestine Liberation Organization. PA: Palestinian Authority.

[5] PPP: Palestinian People's Party; PFLP: Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; DFLLP: Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

[6] In Bethlehem we witnessed numerous situations witnessing to the arbitrary and individualist nature of decisions to carry out armed operations, against the Gilo settlement or during different occupations by the Israeli army in October 2001, March and April 2002.

[7] Thus in a recent interview (May 22, 2002) with the newspaper Al Bayan, PFLP leader Leila Khaled says that 'Sharon and his army foundered on the barricades of Jenin'.

[8] In recent months these have been exclusively centred on a discourse of revenge and no longer even mention the political objectives of national liberation.

[9] As in Bethlehem where, when the town was under curfew, members of the committee of organization of the intifada called for the women and children of the camps to demonstrate at the Church of the Nativity which was surrounded by the Israeli army, at the very moment that the governor of Bethlehem called on Christians and Muslims to go and pray before the PA buildings destroyed by Israeli planes!

[10] Involving generally the same collaborators and corrupt ministers, like Jamil Tarifi, minister of civil affairs, head of a public works company who has made a fortune building the roads linking the settlements on the West Bank.