

What is Israeli/Palestine clash about?

Part 3: Arab states betray Palestine

The previous two *Labour Bulletins* charted the early history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. In this part **Chandra Kumar** tells of how the Arab states progressively abandoned Palestinian struggles in favour of a more profitable alliance with the US and Israel.

The previous article ended with Israel and the United States drawing closer as the US sought to become the dominant power in the Middle East. On 5 June 1967 Israel attacked Egypt. This was a turning point in cementing its relationship with the US. After the 1967 war, Israel became the main enforcer of 'regional stability' for the US. In the Cold War period this meant keeping the Soviet Union from becoming too influential in the region.

In 1967 Egypt began to build up troops in the Sinai close to Israel's border, but it was not clear what prime minister Nasser was planning. The Israelis claimed that Egypt, Syria and Jordan wanted to attack it, and that it was defending itself by striking first. Israel's aggression was illegal under Article 51 of the UN Charter, which says that a country can only defend itself when there is a clear threat of an attack.

With its strong air force, Israel easily defeated its Arab foes and occupied the Egyptian Sinai, the Golan Heights (Syria), Gaza (then under Egyptian control) and the West Bank including East Jerusalem (then under Jordanian rule). Even if Israel was defending itself, its occupation of these territories was illegal.

Israel has never agreed to

withdraw from these occupied Palestinian territories.

Instead, there are now more than 285 000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, with another 193 000 in East Jerusalem. The current right-wing government in Israel has plans to expand its settlements.

Since the 1970s, Israel and the US have rejected annual UN General Assembly resolutions in favour of a two-state settlement where each country is recognised as a separate state (see *SALB 34.3*). This again shows how much responsibility the US bears for Israel's colonial policies in Palestine.

BLACK SEPTEMBER

The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) had been founded in 1964 under the Arab League. It called for the liberation of all Palestine through armed struggle, the defeat of Zionist colonialism and Western imperialism in the Middle East, as well as the right of Palestinian refugees to return (see *SALB 34.1*). After Israel had seriously weakened Nasser and the Arab movement in the 1967 war, Palestinian nationalism and the PLO began to grow.

In 1968, the PLO became a mass organisation after Palestinian and Jordanian troops engaged Israel in the 'Battle of al-Karamah'. Israel

raided two Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, one in Karamah, believing that the Jordanian authorities would turn a blind eye. But it turned into a full-scale battle and the Jordanian army inflicted heavy losses on Israeli forces.

After the battle of al-Karamah, the Palestinians spoke of incorporating Jordan into Palestine. This alarmed conservative Jordanian leaders who were faced by Palestinian socialist revolutionaries who wanted the Palestinian struggle to become a broader social revolution in all Arab countries. The US and Israel turned to crushing the PLO and sided with the Jordanian monarchy in its civil war against Palestinian guerrillas.

The crushing of the Palestinians in Jordan is known as 'Black September'. This showed how Israel and most conservative Arab monarchies had become closer than they ever publicly admitted. If the threat of democratic, progressive change emerges in these countries, they tend to work together to keep the structures of class domination, as well as US imperialism in place.

Neither the Iraqis in eastern Jordan, nor the Egyptians, nor the Saudis under King Hussein helped the Palestinians. The Palestinians were defeated by their Arab enemies as well as by Israel and the US.



An Israeli armoured troop unit enters Gaza during the Six-Day War in June 1967.

Black September showed that many of the Arab elites were more worried by democratic social movements than they were by the existence of Israel. Class divisions proved more important than divisions along national, ethnic or religious lines.

US CLIENT REGIMES IN MIDDLE EAST

Some critics of Israel argue that the powerful Israeli lobby controls the US government. They say that Israel often pursues policies that upset Arabs in the Middle East. This is taken as meaning that even US oil companies play second fiddle to the powerful Israeli lobby.

But given the relative economic and military power of the US and Israel, this claim is extreme. It is the US, not Israel that has military bases in over 150 countries, and it is the US, not Israel, that dominates global economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation. It is Israel that depends on a constant supply of weapons and money from the US.

The US is able to maintain its dominance in the Middle East because it has formed strong alliances with right-wing regimes:

- The US client regimes of Egypt

and Jordan are ruled by corrupt, repressive governments. They cooperate with the US on regional security and in the 'war on terror'.

- The Arab Gulf states (six monarchies on the Persian Gulf) of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) established in 1981 comprised of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The US has over 100 000 military personnel in these countries. Qatar was home to the US Central Command headquarters for the 2003 Gulf War. The oil revenues of Saudi Arabia allow it to buy US weapons and equipment and also to invest heavily in the US.
- Israel, which has been the most important pillar of US power in the region since 1967. Aside from rolling back popular movements in the Middle East, Israel cooperates closely with the US in military and intelligence matters.

So far, the Arab monarchies in the region have kept their power, but this may not continue. If popular movements in these countries rise up again and stand in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle against Israel, then the US may loosen its ties with Israel.

EGYPT BETRAYS PALESTINE

After a further war with Israel, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Egypt moved closer to the West. Egypt was stronger militarily in this war than in the 1967 war so in peace talks the Sinai was returned to Egypt in 1979. Egypt and Israel now became allies.

Egypt opened its economy to Western investment and became a close ally of the US. The Egyptian military gets massive aid from the US.

Before the 2008 Israeli assault on Gaza, Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni told Egyptian officials of Israel's plan to attack Gaza. Egypt assured Hamas that an Israeli attack was *not* going to happen. For the two years prior to this attack, Egypt had helped Israel to implement a blockade of goods into Palestine which caused untold suffering.

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY AND HAMAS

In 1994 the Palestinian Authority was formed following an agreement between the PLO and Israel. It was an interim body during which time final negotiations between the two parties were to take place but never did.

The administration of the Palestinian Authority governs parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It also controls security and civilian issues in Palestinian urban areas. The remainder of Palestinian territories, including Israeli settlements, the Jordan Valley, and bypass roads between Palestinian communities, remained under Israeli control.

The Palestinian Authority has become yet another Arab elite that tries to win the favour of the US and Israel. In Palestine the Authority falls under Fatah which is a major Palestinian political party and the largest faction of the PLO which is a multi-party confederation. Fatah is a far cry from what the PLO once was. Although it had strong involvement in revolutionary struggles in the past, unlike its rival Hamas, it is no longer regarded as a terrorist organisation by any government.



The battle of al-Karamah.



A Jordanian military unit returns after the Battle of al-Karamah in 1968.

In the 2006 elections, Fatah lost its majority in the Palestinian parliament to Hamas and became the main opposition party.

The PLO leadership, for many years under Yasser Arafat, tried to imitate Anwar Sadat who succeeded Nasser as Egyptian president until his assassination in 1981.

Sadat followed a strategy of gaining American acceptance in defending Palestinian rights. The problem however is that unlike Egypt the Palestinians are weak and poor and have little to offer the US. By pursuing this strategy, Arafat, posed no threat to US-Israeli domination. While the Palestinian leadership in the Palestinian Authority has gained privileges from collaborating with Israel, most Palestinians continue to suffer terribly.

Like Fatah, Hamas is also not a revolutionary force as it upholds conservative and especially gendered rules of Islam. But Hamas is more representative in than the Palestinian Authority. Unlike the Authority, Hamas has not been willing to

accept Israeli 'peace' accords and 'roadmaps' that fly in the face of international consensus. Though Hamas has used terrorist methods, it has been willing to stop this during periods of ceasefire with Israel.

SAUDI PEACE PLAN

Despite working with the US, in the past the Arab states have sometimes promoted the Palestinian cause.

In 2002, Saudi Arabia came up with a two-state peace plan that included 'normalising' relations with Israel if it withdrew from Occupied Palestinian Territories. The 22 members of the Arab League approved this peace offer.

Sadly Israel and the US did not take the Saudi plan seriously, although recently the Obama administration has agreed with aspects of it excluding the Arab League calling for a two-state settlement, with Israel withdrawing to pre-1967 borders.

The leadership of the Arab states have already 'normalised' relations with Israel (apart from Jordan). They aim to cooperate with Israel to help

develop the Middle East as a neo-liberal 'free trade zone'.

Since the early 1990s, the US has attempted to change the Middle East into a neo-liberal 'free trade' zone. It wants to integrate Israel's economy with the economies of the Arab countries. This is what 'normalising' relations with Israel means. In 2006, the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, called this emerging neo-liberal arrangement, the 'New Middle East'.

The 'New Middle East' government policies included privatisation, cutting public spending, opening countries to foreign investment, reducing state subsidies, retrenchment and harsher conditions for workers and trade unions, and free trade agreements. The IMF and World Bank as well as regional organisations such as the Arab Monetary Fund and the Arab Business Council encourage these policies.

Factories, hospitals, electricity and water plants, postal services, banks, airlines and other businesses have been privatised in countries throughout the Arab region and they have opened up oil and gas fields to foreign capital. Iraq's 37-year policy of nationalisation has been reversed. This is also happening in the Gulf States where state subsidies for food, electricity, fuel and rent have been withdrawn because the World Bank and IMF demand this in exchange for loans and aid. LB

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In the next and final episode SALB continues discussion of neo-liberalism in the Middle East and how this has affected Palestinian workers. We also look at solutions and solidarity with the people of Palestine.