

Syria and the Palestinians: 'Almost no other Arab state has as much Palestinian blood on its hands'

Monday 3 September 2012, by [KARADJIS Michael](#) (Date first published: 7 March 2012).

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March 7, 2012 - *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — The declaration by Ismail Haniyeh, prime minister of Hamas, that his movement was backing the popular uprising in Syria against the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad was widely reported [[1](#)], as was the significance of his statement to worshipers at Cairo's Al Azhar mosque. Hamas, while ruling the Gaza Strip, had its exile leadership based in Syria; now Haniyeh was perhaps betting on a new strategic relationship with post-Mubarak Egypt. Haniyeh saluted "the heroic Syrian people, who are striving for freedom, democracy and reform".

In fact, Haniyeh's very strong statements in support of the Syrian people were not the only statements from Hamas. Another senior Hamas official in Gaza, Mahmud Zahar, said Hamas was not taking sides in the Syrian conflict. "We cannot take one side, with half a million Palestinians living in complete freedom in Syria having to (face the consequences) of this position ... We do not seek to get involved in internal or regional Arab conflicts. Our fundamental struggle is directed against the Israeli occupation of Palestine." He did "advise" the Syrian regime "to give more freedom to the Syrian people, in order to strengthen Syria so that it would be able to free the occupied Golan territory and support the resistance (against Israel)".

Given the presence of so many Palestinians in Syria, he has a point. Palestinians have their own problems, to say the least; the last thing they need is to be on the "wrong" side in Syria when one or the other side wins, and have to face the consequences.

And while Hamas' obvious sympathies are, as Haniyeh made clear, with the Syrian people who are fighting for freedom, the consequences of being on the "wrong" side in the event of Assad retaining power could well be dire, given the simple fact that no other Arab state except Jordan has as much Palestinian blood on its hands as has the Syrian regime under the 42-year Assad dynasty.

Being on the "wrong" side in the event of the victory of the Syrian uprising could also be nasty, depending on who exactly wins; there are certainly those among the externally based Syrian National Congress (SNC), especially those closest to the reactionary Saudi Arabian and Qatar monarchies, who could be equally vicious.

That should be the starting point for any supporter of the Palestinian people: recognition that their

first priority is to their struggle and the defence of their people, not to gaining nods of approval from Western leftists and some of their more peculiar views.

Hamas and WSWS

Least of all would Palestinian freedom fighters be concerned about a most peculiar sect writing that Hamas's decision to finally denounce the 12 months of daily slaughter of the Syrian people in the streets by the reactionary Assad clique "points ultimately toward a complete break with Iran and Syria and rapprochement the US imperialism".

This assertion by the "World Socialist Web Site" (WSWS) [2] was essentially a rehash of what had been thrown about in the bourgeois media, indeed, from the more no-nothing sections of it. While this web-based sect would be of little consequence to the Palestinians, it is worthwhile to look at their argument as part of a discussion of how leftists relate to national liberation movements such as Hamas - whatever its errors and limitations - compared to how we ought to relate to a consolidated capitalist state, even one with some "anti-imperialist" heritage (in the case of Assad, as will be shown below, an entirely fictitious one).

The implication in the WSWS statement that it is the Syrian regime, rather than the national liberation movement Hamas, that has a more fundamental conflict with US imperialism flies in the face of decades of reality, as anyone with the slightest knowledge of recent Middle East politics is aware, so without other evidence, there is simply no reason for Hamas's shift to "point to" anything of the sort.

Perhaps Hamas actually prefers the at least slightly open Egyptian border since the fall of Mubarak to the tightly-closed-as-ever-for-40-years Syrian-Israeli border. Hamas had been based in Damascus not out of love for Assad, but due to having few alternatives. As long as Mubarak ruled Egypt, that country was an active collaborator with the Zionist occupation of Palestine, especially the criminal siege of Gaza. Hamas had been based in Jordan until King Hussein kicked it out in the late 1990s.

The deal was, "we [Syria] give you offices, but you make sure to never use Syrian territory for any operations against Israel, even symbolic". The Syrian border with Israel on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights was the second quietest border for 40 years, after that of Egypt, enforced by the "anti-imperialist" Assad. If the regime was never going to move even symbolically on its own occupied territory, it sure as hell was not going to allow Palestinians to.

After Mubarak

But with the fall of Mubarak things have changed. Certainly, the Egyptian generals are not exactly enthusiastic supporters of the Palestinian struggle, but under the influence of the revolution, their public posturing has shifted since Mubarak; certainly over the last year a number of events on the Egypt-Israel borders have shifted the number one most sealed border from Egypt to Syria.

Why Hamas would not want to take advantage of that - especially given the proximity of Egypt to Gaza - would be a mystery. Clearly, by making his announcement at Friday prayers in Egypt, Haniyeh manoeuvred to push forward the positive momentum in Egypt. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood is now the strongest party in Egypt, and that Hamas was originally the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, is hardly insignificant either; and the brotherhood is, of course, for better or worse, a prominent part of the Syrian opposition based among the Sunni majority there.

The WWS thought that Hamas' shift away from Assad's dictatorship indicated a move away from Hamas's more militant stand on Palestinian issues to a more compromising stand, again reflecting bad bourgeois media. Yet one has to think: why would a national liberation movement moving away from support for a reactionary capitalist dictatorship indicate a softer, more compromising line towards imperialism and Zionism? Unless one had massive illusions in the nature of that regime. How would it be that a capitalist regime would be more "militant" than the national liberation movement of the very people being oppressed by Israel?

Indeed, one of the statements continually heard both in the capitalist mass media and among leftists with some level of illusions in Assad was that the West may want a "more pliant" regime in Damascus; while often acknowledging the real limitations and vacillations of Assad, many leftists suggested that giving sanctuary to the exile leadership of Hamas was an example of how the Assad regime was not completely pliant, still had a little bit of anti-imperialist backbone.

Thus Assad was measured based on partial support to Hamas (and Hezbollah in Lebanon). Logically, then, if Assad had kicked out Hamas, one could say this may indicate Assad moving towards accommodation with imperialism. But how does it follow that when Hamas quits Syria of its own accord that this indicates Hamas has gone pliant? There is a lack of logic in such statements.

In any case, let's look at some facts regarding what WWS says. The article asserted:

"This aptly called 'seismic' shift has already expressed itself in the most recent position of the group's leadership toward reconciliation with Fatah in the West Bank and its willingness to abandon armed struggle against Israel and ultimately endorse a two-state solution."

The mind boggles. The movement of Hamas towards reconciliation with Fatah is already several years old, starting a very long time before Hamas's recent break with Damascus. And from the point of view of the Palestinian people, this move towards reconciliation is long overdue on both sides and very much in their interests.

Second, Hamas has been engaged almost entirely in political struggle for at least seven-eight years. Nearly all suicide attacks ended in 2003, then definitely in 2005 after a final spate. There have been occasional armed operations with other Palestinian groups against Israeli armed forces since then, but overwhelmingly it has not been an armed but political struggle.

For just as long, Hamas has pushed the hudna, or ceasefire, concept, whereby if Israel ends its occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem and allows a fully independent Palestinian state there, Hamas will definitively end all armed struggle, while refusing to give up the ultimate goal of liberating all of Palestine; achieved after that via political struggle. Hamas is completely right on this, and this has been decade-long policy.

Capitalist dictatorship

For an allegedly Trotskyist grouplet, WWS displays remarkable illusions in a capitalist dictatorship:

"Hamas's presence in Syria dates back to 1999, when the Jordanian monarchy expelled it in a bid to strengthen the position of its rival, the Fatah leadership in the PLO in the so-called peace process. Syria, which had historically opposed any settlement between Palestinian groups and Israel on the basis of a two-state solution, provided the group with logistical and financial support."

Let us be very clear: Syria under the Assad dynasty has never opposed a two-state solution and

never claimed to. When Assad senior seized power in 1970 from the left-wing Baath Party that had ruled in the 1960s, the new regime immediately recognised UN Resolution 242, as did Egypt and Jordan. This called for Israel's withdrawal from the recently occupied territories but only regarded Palestinians to be a refugee problem. There was nothing about Palestinian self-determination. Resolution 242 was rejected by more "rejectionist" Arab states (e.g., the Iraqi Baathists, Libya, Algeria, South Yemen) and by the PLO, including by Yassir Arafat's Al Fatah faction. Fatah was sometimes called the "right wing of the PLO", but as a national liberation movement was always fundamentally to the left of the treacherous Assad clique (the current Fatah leadership is, of course, a different issue, in a different context).

Moreover, Assad did more than just support a compromising resolution; unlike most reactionary Arab regimes far from the conflict, Assad – like King Hussein of Jordan – was willing to put words into action by actively slaughtering Palestinians. In 1976, the Syrian army invaded Lebanon, where the Palestinians had been allied to a Muslim and leftist coalition fighting for equal rights against the reactionary Phalange Party, which aimed to maintain the sectarian dominance of the Christian minority, which had been foisted onto Lebanon by retreating French colonialism in 1943.

The Syrian army took the side of the Phalange and participated in their siege of the Palestinian-Muslim-leftist coalition in Tel-al-Zaatar Palestinian refugee camp, a monstrous siege leaving 2000-3000 Palestinians dead or wounded.

Assad's aim in all this was to do what Egypt's Sadat had just done. Sadat had betrayed the Palestinians by signing the Camp David "peace" accords with Israel in order to get back the Israeli-occupied Sinai. Assad aimed to show the US and Israel how useful his regime could be to try to get Israel to likewise return the occupied Golan Heights. But having returned the Sinai and pacified its southern border, Israel felt no need to return any more land.

What's more, for Assad's efforts, Israel formally annexed the Golan Heights in 1981, an act of outright international piracy. With this slap in the face, Assad was unwillingly forced into the "rejectionist" camp.

Ever enthusiastic about Assad's imaginary "rejectionism", the WSWS continues: "It had done the same (as it did with Hamas in 1999) with other tendencies in the PLO's 'rejectionist' camp in 1988, the year Yasser Arafat recognized the state of Israel."

The mind explodes. In 1983, Syria and Libya encouraged a rebellion within Fatah among its cadres in Lebanon when Arafat was exploring various diplomatic manoeuvres. Yes, these were "rejectionist" cadres of Fatah, who felt Arafat's diplomacy was too compromising, unlike the pro-242 Assad regime hypocritically sponsoring them. Assad's real objectives were to weaken and take over the independent PLO, in order to better try to do a deal with Israel over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights; he only used the rejectionist rebellion for his own opposite purposes. And whatever compromises Arafat was making, they did not include recognising Resolution 242.

Israel was well aware of this, and despite the "rejectionist" position of the Fatah rebels, openly expressed its support for Syria taking control of the PLO.

The more rejectionist parties in the PLO – e.g., the Popular front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) – had many of the same criticisms of Arafat that the Fatah rebels had, but rejected this Syrian bid to take over the PLO and attempted to mend the feud.

In any case, Assad soon abandoned the initial principled Fatah rejectionists (who had been

discredited due to Syrian interference on their side) and took hold of a grotesque Palestinian splinter group which had originally been a split from the PFLP, called the PFLP-General Command (PFLP-GC), led by Ahmed Jibril who was willing to be a puppet.

Syria and Israel attack refugees

In late 1983, Syrian troops in Lebanon and their PFLP-GC stooges launched a monstrous attack on Palestinian refugee camps in Tripoli in northern Lebanon, while the Israeli navy joined in the same siege and bombardment from the sea. While the alleged “compromiser” Arafat was there with his people defending them against this murderous double siege, the “rejectionist” PFLP-GC and Syria were bombing Palestinian refugees in direct coordination with Israel.

Libya split with the “rejectionists” and reoriented towards an alliance with Fatah. In 1985, Assad launched the Lebanese Shiite sectarian militia Amal against the Palestinian refugee camps throughout Lebanon, in the famous year-long “war of the camps” in which thousands of Palestinians were killed by Assad’s goon squads. Anyone visiting these camps decades later can see thousands of bullet holes from Amal’s criminal siege. Libya sent military aid to Fatah to defend the camps. Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian splinter from Amal, vigorously condemned its Amal co-religionists over these attacks.

In 1988, the entire PLO, including Fatah, the PFLP and the DFLP, and all the smaller principled “rejectionist parties” reunited in Algiers. Only groups entirely under Assad’s control, like the PFLP-GC, stayed out. Later that year, Arafat declared the state of Palestine, and declared that the PLO was ready to negotiate on the basis of the original UN partition in 1947 (which only gave Palestine 45% of the land, but at least that was a lot more than the 22% being offered as a Palestinian state in the occupied territories in the most generous of offers, and even this is actively rejected by Israel and the US). Perhaps this is what the WSWS means by Arafat “recognised Israel”, but that year has no relation to what the WSWS says also happened, which apparently refers to the events of the previous five years described above.

In 1990, Assad’s Syria and Saudi Arabia jointly sponsored a new religiously sectarian – but less-so – constitution in Lebanon; the two countries effectively controlled the new state apparatus. This brought together many of the sectarian players from both sides, including Amal and the Phalange. Those standing outside were sidelined. For its opposition and continued resistance to Israeli occupation, Hezbollah was singled out for punishment – Assad’s troops massacred 21 Hezbollah cadres. The Lebanon deal was followed by Syria sending its army to fight on the US side during its attack on Iraq in 1991.

Assad and Israel

For its efforts, Assad still got nothing from Israel on the Golan Heights. As a result, today Syria is still “anti-Israel” because Israel still occupies its land. But no other government in Syria, no matter who comes to power, would agree to give up the Golan. Indeed, the fact that Assad has kept the border quiet for so long means that Israel has largely remained nervously quiet about the Syrian uprising, and in some cases leaders have clearly expressed their preference for Assad remaining in power. Israel has good reason to believe that any replacement of Assad may be less accommodating and be likely to have less control over the border.

The WSWS hopefully notes that today “Syria is throwing its support behind the Popular Front for the

Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), which has some following within the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria, to offset the loss of Hamas”.

Is the Assad dynasty throwing its support behind PFLP-GC now? Not 30 years ago? Throwing support behind its own stooge? Note, WSWS claims that the PFLP-GC has “some following” in the camps. Even that much? Maybe among some camp guards in the camps inside Syria, from which no struggle has ever been allowed to be waged. One wonders how much support the PFLP-GC has in the Tripoli camps they were bombing in tandem with Israel back in the 1980s?

The WSWS article, however, appears to make one valid observation:

“Another significant aspect of Haniya’s tour was his cordial meeting with Bahrain’s King Hamad in which Haniya tacitly endorsed the brutal crackdown against the ongoing uprising by the predominantly Shia population against his Sunni monarchical regime, asserting that “Bahrain is a red line that cannot be compromised because it is an Arab Islamic State.””

If true, this would be appalling. Hamas is a bourgeois nationalist group and thus has its contradictions. Recognising it as a genuine national liberation movement does not change this. However, I would rather see the whole context of this alleged quote rather than rely on WSWS spin, considering the level of accuracy of the rest of the article.

In any case, solidarity with the Palestinian people does not require them to fall in with whatever grotesque schema sections of the Western left may have thought up. The unfolding Syrian drama is extremely complex, and while the people are right to revolt against a tyrant, the outcome is utterly unclear, with rising armed struggle raising the possibility of the largely non-sectarian movement degenerating into a sectarian blood-letting, alongside the intervention of the Saudi Arabian and Qatar tyrants in support of imposing a particular type of regime as Assad falls.

The Palestinians are well within their rights to keep out of it, but whatever the outcome, including possible imperialist intervention, there is little point in denying the tyrannical nature of the Assad regime, and the fact that its actions – slaughtering peaceful protesters in huge numbers – is what has led to the situation as is.

It is only natural that, seeing the opportunities in post-Mubarak Egypt, the Palestinians would want to identify with the Syrian people engaged in a struggle with many parallels to their own, and to break with a regime that not only kills its people, but whose entire history has meant the shedding of massive quantities of Palestinian blood.

Michael Karadjis

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/2766>

Footnotes

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/world/middleeast/hamas-leader-supports-syrian-opposition.html?_r=1

[2] <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/mar2012/hama-m01.shtml>