

Making myths about Sri Lankan Tamil and Palestinian struggles

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It is natural to compare Gaza today and Tamils' plight at the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War - but claims that the LTTE stood in solidarity with Palestine and got training from the PLO are dangerously misleading

THE WAR IN GAZA continues to escalate, with over 40,000 killed, at least 100,000 injured, public infrastructure and homes decimated, and almost the whole of the territory's 2.1 million people displaced. Those of us across the world who are horrified by Gaza's plight continue to deliberate on how best we can organise and build solidarities to bolster the movement for a free Palestine. At the heart of this is the question of how we should mobilise across the political spectrum at this moment of crisis.

For Sri Lankan Tamils - both in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora - it is natural to draw comparisons between the devastation in Gaza and the brutal end of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009. Back then, the Sri Lankan government rained down bombs - some of them procured from Israel - on Tamil-dominated areas that continued to hold out. A savage military assault killed over 40,000 Tamils in the space of some months, while the international community continued to provide arms to the Sri Lankan government and simultaneously issued vacuous statements urging restraint.

The parallels with Israel's conduct and the present situation in Gaza are striking. Yet we must be careful in comparing the oppression of Palestine and Palestinian resistance to the state's repression of Tamils and the rise of Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka. Hasty analogies made without critical examination can be dangerously misleading.

Certain elements of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in particular see that there is a vibrant international movement in solidarity with Palestine garnering serious power across the globe. They have tried to piggyback on this for their own cause of creating an international solidarity movement for a separate Tamil state, even in the absence of a Tamil nationalist resistance movement in Sri Lanka at present. A section of the Tamil nationalist lobby is promoting all manner of ill-conceived comparisons between the Palestinian struggle and the Sri Lankan Tamil struggle, spearheaded until 2009 by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Historically inaccurate statements by some elements of the diaspora have portrayed the LTTE as an anti-imperialist, progressive force that supported and stood in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. These elements also claim that the LTTE received training in arms from the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), avoiding the well-known fact that the group was actually trained by the Indian Army in the 1980s.

My task here is to decipher these myths so that progressive sections of the Sri Lankan Tamil community can build true solidarity with Palestinians in good faith and with an honest appraisal of

our own movements and histories. I will provide a brief outline of the LTTE's political history, which is directly relevant to the question of its links with the PLO. To do this, I draw on my direct experience as one of the founding members of the LTTE - which I left in 1984 due to its undemocratic and authoritarian character - as well as on interviews I have conducted with other former members of the LTTE and diverse Tamil militant organisations. While some of the information I present is already in the public domain, I will highlight certain key details that may not be widely known - particularly in relation to the LTTE's initial formation and early political ideology.

I WILL START with the establishment of the Tamil Self-Rule Party, or Tamils Suyaadchchi Kazhagam, by the Tamil nationalist parliamentarian V Navaratnam in 1969. This was a break-away from the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi, or Federal Party, which championed a federal state for Tamils within a unified Sri Lanka. The Self-Rule Party argued that Tamils formed a nation and aimed to establish a separate nation state for the Tamils of what was then still Ceylon.

Navaratnam, after splitting away from the Federal Party, also published a newspaper, *Viduthalai*. I read the paper in the 1970s, when it often compared Tamils and Jews in terms of cultural character - including a supposed predisposition for intelligence and entrepreneurship - and argued that they were similar. (This line of thinking survives to this day: I know of Tamil nationalists in the diaspora who invoke the establishment of Israel as an example for their own goals, and see similarities in the Tamil and Jewish struggles.) *Viduthalai* also serialised *Exodus*, a popular 1958 novel by the American Jewish writer Leon Uris, which was translated by Navaratnam and published in Tamil as *Namakkoru Naadu - A Country of Our Own*.

Exodus presents a factually inaccurate but heroic account of the Zionist project to establish Israel as a Jewish nation state, and follows a group of Jewish arrivals in Palestine after the Second World War. It makes no mention of the mass dispossession and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Zionist forces in 1948. Edward Said, the Palestinian activist and intellectual, has highlighted how the novel dehumanises Arabs. Said has also argued that, when it comes to Israel, "the main narrative model that dominates American thinking still seems to be Leon Uris' 1958 novel *Exodus*." The British journalist Robert Fisk once described the novel as a "racist fictional account of the birth of Israel" in which Arabs are "rarely mentioned without the adjectives 'dirty' and 'stinking'."

Velupillai Prabhakaran, who established the LTTE in 1976, was a supporter of the Self-Rule Party as a young man. He would also have been a *Viduthalai* reader, and was inspired by *Exodus*. I was informed by a former LTTE member that the organisation also separately translated *Exodus* in full in the mid-1980s, and that it was widely distributed among LTTE cadres and supporters. Two prominent members of the organisation told me separately that the film adaptation of *Exodus* was also screened to LTTE cadres at camps in both Sri Lanka and the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

It is evident that the LTTE leadership was inspired by the Zionist settler-colonial project justified by *Exodus* and disseminated the idea of Jewish nationhood as an example for the Tamil people. Of course the LTTE was not solely inspired by Zionist ideology: as I wrote in my [obituary of Prabhakaran](#) in *Himal Southasian* in 2009, his "ideology was derived from the Bhagavad Gita, the Indian national struggle, the history of the ancient Tamil kingdoms, the situation surrounding Jewish statehood and Adolph Hitler's authoritarianism." Yet while the LTTE's early political inspirations were complex, if it felt any sympathy for or solidarity with the Palestinian struggle it could have translated and disseminated works of Palestinian literature and history instead of *Exodus*. There is

no evidence that it ever did.

BEFORE COMING BACK to claims that the LTTE received training from the PLO, I want to summarise the history of relations between Tamil and Palestinian militant groups – based on my own knowledge as a founding LTTE member as well as my interviews with Alagiri, a veteran of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) who currently resides in France.

EROS was formed in the United Kingdom in 1975 by Tamil student activists inspired by Marxism and Leninist principles of self-determination. It soon established contact with Fatah, the largest organisation within the PLO's coalition of Palestinian nationalist groups. Some EROS members, including Shankar Raji, went to Lebanon in the 1970s and were trained by the PLO. The Fatah co-founder and military commander Khalil al-Wazir, better known as Abu Jihad, supervised the training. Pathmanabha, initially an EROS member and later the leader of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), was one of those to receive PLO training.

In early 1976, Alagiri was sent to India from London by one of EROS's founders, Eliyathamby Ratnasabapathy. He was asked to contact LTTE members living in the country to extend them an offer of training from the PLO. In Chennai, Alagiri managed to meet Patkunam, alias Appu, another founding member of the LTTE, who had been sent to India for safety reasons. Alagiri and Patkunam held discussions before they both returned to Sri Lanka. It was Alagiri who brought EROS's offer of PLO training to us at the LTTE, and he stayed with us in our Vavuniya camp. He confirmed that Abu Jihad was in charge of the training programme.

With EROS having established contacts with the LTTE, Shankar Raji travelled from London to visit the LTTE camp in Vavuniya in late 1976. I was in the camp at that time. He discussed forming an alliance with the LTTE and also proposed to arrange military training for LTTE members with the PLO in Lebanon. Uma Maheswaran, the LTTE's chairman at the time, was selected for training in Lebanon, along with Vichu, as we knew him, an EROS member who had come to establish links with the LTTE in 1976 and ended up joining the group. (Uma Maheswaran would leave the LTTE following a split in the organisation in 1979, and would go on to found the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam, or PLOTE.) A dispute between Uma Maheswaran and EROS members in Lebanon resulted in him returning without completing the training. Vichu returned earlier because he had not been able to cope with the training and had become ill. (He left the LTTE in 1978.)



A poster from the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) in the 1980s. There is no evidence that the LTTE had anything except minimal contact with the PLO facilitated by EROS in the 1970s. International Institute of Social History / The Palestine Poster Project Archives

I know that this was the only contact the LTTE had with the PLO until April 1984, when I left the organisation - and even this limited contact was through EROS. The likelihood of any collaboration between the two groups afterwards, in the wake of big changes in the early 1980s for both the Tamil and Palestinian struggles, was extremely slim.

In 1982, the PLO, headed by Yasser Arafat, was ousted from Lebanon by an Israeli invasion that installed a pro-Israel Maronite Christian government. Arafat, along with other Fatah members, established a new headquarters in Tunisia. So it is impossible that the PLO trained the LTTE in Lebanon after 1982. The only remaining possibility for contact with Palestinian groups in West Asia was to establish links with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) - the second-largest organisation in the PLO, which operated from a base in Syria at the time.

After the anti-Tamil pogroms in Sri Lanka in 1983, which marked the start of full-blown civil war, two Tamil militant groups established contact with and received training from the PFLP. These were the EPRLF and PLOTE. I was informed by individuals who were part of this training that around 11 EPRLF members went to Syria after the 1983 pogroms, and PLOTE sent over 50 youths.

The PFLP, working from its base in Syria, fought alongside Muslim militants in neighbouring Lebanon against the Christian government installed by Israel. (The leader of the PFLP, George Habash, was inspired by Marxism, and the organisation was secular.) A few ex-PLOTE members told me that after they were trained by the PFLP in Syria they were deployed to the Lebanese border to

fight. They also confirmed that no LTTE members had been present in Syria.

There is no evidence that the LTTE had any contact with the PLO – let alone any offer of training from the group – apart from that facilitated by EROS in the 1970s. In 1993, as part of an ultimately failed peace process, the PLO signed the Oslo Accords with the Israeli government. Under the agreement, the PLO was to establish an interim government in the Palestinian territories, and it agreed to give up armed resistance. So it is very unlikely that LTTE cadres were trained in arms by the PLO after 1993.

The LTTE did have contact with West Asia to procure arms, but this had nothing to do with the PLO. When the LTTE leader Kumaran Pathmanathan, who went by “KP”, arranged for an initial consignment of weapons to be sent from Lebanon to Chennai in late 1984 – something confirmed to me by several LTTE members – it seems the arms were purchased from the Phalangists. The Phalange, a right-wing Lebanese Christian political party, was supported by Israel and worked against the Palestinian resistance. A former senior LTTE member, who asked to remain anonymous, told me that the arms received from Lebanon had the Phalangist emblem engraved on them. He was puzzled by this, as the Phalangists had been directly involved in the notorious massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut in September 1982. (This does not necessarily mean the LTTE had political links with the Phalange, as this weapons purchase was arranged through illicit channels.)

I also interviewed Thalayasingam Sivakumar, alias Anton, a former LTTE member who was part of the organisation’s military office. He confirmed that the LTTE had no contact with the PLO until the point that he quit the group, in 1987. He also confirmed that the arms consignment from Lebanon bore the Phalangist emblem. He said the LTTE was not interested in getting training abroad except in India, where the group had military bases – and it was especially not interested in getting training in West Asia. After the training that the LTTE received from the Indian Army, he added, it hired retired Indian military officers to provide special further training for its members.

UNTIL THE ANTI-TAMIL pogroms in 1983, which were abetted by the Sri Lankan state, Tamil militant groups including the LTTE were small and did not have wide political or military networks. Through the 1970s, the main political force of the Sri Lankan Tamils was the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), a parliamentary party that first campaigned for federalism rather than separatism and later, in 1976, declared a wish to achieve a separate state through nonviolent struggle. The LTTE, meanwhile, was a guerrilla unit with about 20 members who engaged in hit-and-run tactics against the police, targeted people they deemed “traitors” and carried out bank robberies to fund their activities. After the pogroms, many Tamil youths joined militant groups and the Tamil public in general provided them with enormous support and assistance.

In the late 1970s, the Sri Lankan government, led by J R Jayewardene, introduced neoliberal economic policies and took a pro-Western stance, veering away from the non-aligned principles it earlier espoused amid the Cold War. This meant estrangement from India, which had a crucial role in the Non-Aligned Movement and maintained strong relations with the Soviet Union at the time. The Indian government was displeased with Sri Lanka’s foreign policy and viewed it as a regional threat. Simultaneously, political parties in Tamil Nadu supported the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist cause.

To teach neighbouring Sri Lanka a lesson, after the 1983 pogroms the Indian government encouraged Tamil militant groups, providing them with arms and military training. Anton Balasingham, a prominent theoretician and advisor of the LTTE, moved with his wife from London to Chennai at this time. In his book *War and Peace*, Balasingham provides a detailed account of how the LTTE received military training and weapons from India, and confirms that Prabhakaran and he met with the Research and Analysis Wing, India's foreign intelligence agency. Notably, he does not mention anywhere in the book that the LTTE received military training from the PLO.

I know that 200 LTTE youths were selected for Indian military training. I prepared the second batch of these youths myself, providing them with basic weapons instruction and conducting physical exercise. They were based in Coimbatore, in Tamil Nadu, and I took them by bus to Bangalore to meet Indian military officers before sending them by train to the north of India for military training. Some of these LTTE members trained by the Indian Army are still alive.

Following long-term disillusionment with the LTTE, and seeing no democratic space to raise my concerns with the organisation's autocratic leader, Prabhakaran, I quit the LTTE for good in April 1984. Many others also left, both before and after me, with the same concerns - among them the one-man leadership and complete intolerance for political discussion or difference. Some of them were murdered by the LTTE for leaving. One tragic example is Patkunam, one of the group's founding members, who was murdered by Prabhakaran sometime in or around 1977 with the agreement of the appointed central committee of the LTTE. Prabhakaran suspected that Patkunam had been influenced by EROS's leftist ideas and wanted to leave the LTTE. The LTTE had a policy that those who wanted to leave and join another group or establish another organisation would face capital punishment.

In 1984, following the wishes of the Indian government, an alliance called the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF) was formed, eventually comprising the LTTE, EROS, EPRLF and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). The Indian government provided military training to all these organisations. PLOTE - which separately received Indian military training - was kept out because the LTTE opposed its inclusion. In any case, the idea of a unified Tamil militant alliance was short-lived. By 1986, with its members never seeing eye to eye, the ENLF was defunct.

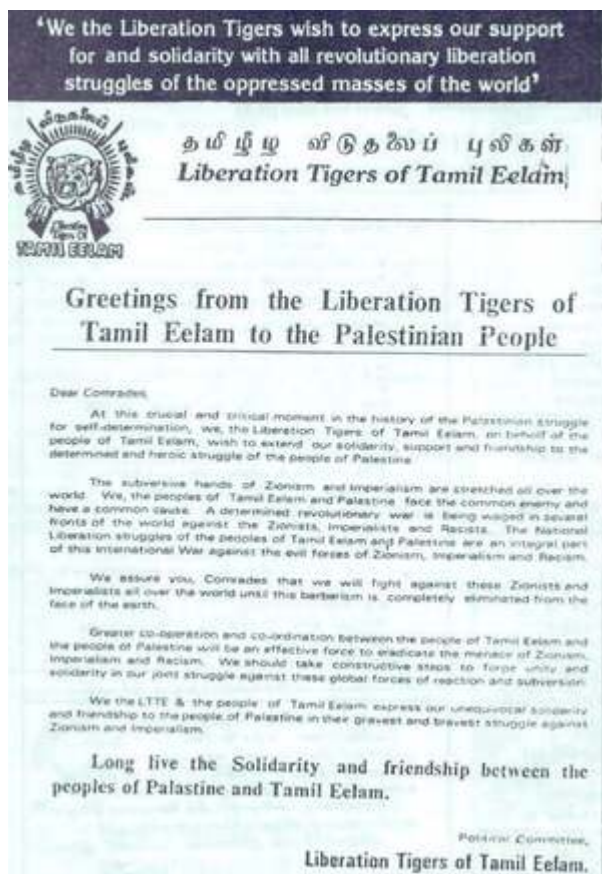
The LTTE's India-based cadre and leadership returned to Sri Lanka after the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord was signed in 1987. This was a pact between the Indian and Sri Lankan governments, and it meant an end to Tamil militant bases on Indian territory. The accord aimed to end the conflict in Sri Lanka via the devolution of power from Colombo to the country's provinces, which was meant to provide meaningful autonomy to historically Tamil-dominated areas. The Indian Army, in the guise of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), was sent in to monitor the implementation of the accord, with Sri Lankan forces confined to their barracks and militant groups required to give up arms.

The LTTE, pressured into reluctantly accepting the accord, soon refused to proceed with disarmament and began to fight the IPKF. In 1989, following a change in power in Colombo, the Sri Lankan government decided to oust the IPKF, seeing its presence as an affront to Sri Lanka's sovereignty. The LTTE made a secret pact with the Sri Lankan state, and received arms and money from it to help drive the Indians out. (The Tamil academic and activist Rajan Hoole has detailed the pact in an article in the *Colombo Telegraph*.) The IPKF withdrew in 1990, and India and the LTTE remained enemies for the rest of the organisation's survival.

As it increasingly gained control of the North and East of Sri Lanka, the LTTE arbitrarily declared itself the “sole representative” of the Sri Lankan Tamil people. On this basis, it targeted Tamil activists from leftist and progressive organisations, killing or otherwise silencing them. The leadership of the TULF, the Tamil parliamentary party, was also wiped out. From as far back as the mid 1980s, the LTTE also suppressed other Tamil militant organisations such as TELO, PLOTE and the EPRLF. Eventually this meant targeted killings and massacres of both cadres and leaders from rival groups. Sections of EROS were forcibly absorbed into LTTE ranks. The LTTE also killed numerous EPRLF and PLOTE cadres who had received training from the PFLP in Syria.

In his paper ‘Parallel Governments: Living Between Terror and Counter-Terror in Northern Lanka (1982-2009)’, the Jaffna-based scholar Daya Somasundaram writes that many leaders and prominent members of the Tamil community were killed or forced to leave because the LTTE sought to eliminate intra-community opposition to its agenda. Those with “leadership qualities, those willing to challenge and argue, the intellectuals, the dissenters, and those with social motivation” were especially targeted by the LTTE.

THE ONLY EVIDENCE of any LTTE support for the Palestinian cause is a leaflet published by the organisation’s political committee in 1986, which has lately been recirculated online. But this assertion of the LTTE’s solidarity with Palestine was an isolated event. Anton Balasingham had attempted to portray the group as an anti-imperialist force, and early on he wrote articles in the LTTE’s newspaper supporting international anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements. It could well have been Balasingham who drafted the leaflet. (He died in 2006, so there is no way to ask him. In 1984, Balasingham told me jokingly that his articles were not read by LTTE members, only EPRLF members.)



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In practice, the LTTE leadership did not show interest in forming links of solidarity with such movements. (One exception, however, was the Kurdish nationalist Kurdistan Workers' Party, with which the LTTE maintained some political links.) It continued to seek assistance and recognition from state actors rather than progressive resistance movements.

After the Oslo Accords, popular resistance against Israeli occupation in Palestine flared up notably during the First Intifada of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the Second Intifada of the early 2000s. There is no evidence that the LTTE leadership or the group's affiliated diaspora organisations expressed solidarity with the Palestinian struggle during these periods, whether in writing or through demonstrations. However, many in the diaspora did lobby Western governments for support and recognition of an independent state for Sri Lanka's Tamils.

In 1990, the LTTE executed a plan to ethnically cleanse Muslims from territories under its control in the North of Sri Lanka. The entire Muslim population of the Jaffna, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Mannar and Kilinochchi districts, numbering approximately 75,000 people, was evicted at gunpoint. This demonstrated the LTTE's desire to establish an ethnically exclusive Tamil state, much like the Jewish state of Israel envisioned by the Zionists. The LTTE's entire ideology was based on exclusive Tamil nationalism; its idea of a homeland and a nation meant treating Muslims and other minority communities in Tamil-dominated areas as second-class citizens at best. In this, it had uncomfortable similarities with the Zionist outlook on Palestinians and Muslims.

The LTTE was a right-wing organisation, with a statist approach to popular struggles. Prabhakaran made it clear that the LTTE would not interfere with "domestic issues" in other countries. I know this because, while I was with the organisation, he did not want to have any links with Marxist-Leninist parties in India as he did not want to antagonise the Indian state.

The LTTE's international network consistently aligned with Western governments and lobbied for their support. Although the LTTE was deemed a terrorist organisation and proscribed by the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union, these governments' notices stated clearly that the LTTE had no intention of targeting Western interests.

As for the PLO, a report by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency, dated 20 July 1983, stated that it is "an active ally of Communist revolutionaries throughout Central America." The report said that the Sandinistas in Nicaragua were trained by the PLO and that the PLO also had links with other revolutionary groups in the region. There is no such record claiming there were links between the PLO and the LTTE.

IN MUCH OF the diaspora, the Tamil national struggle has become synonymous with LTTE's heavily militarised nationalist project, and the LTTE's claim to have been the sole representative of the Tamil people remains taken for granted. This is so even after the LTTE was militarily defeated in 2009.

The brutal end of Sri Lanka's civil war, the huge loss of civilian life during the conflict, the

disappearances of many of those who surrendered, the mass internment of Tamil civilians in the aftermath and the vast military camps since established by the Sri Lankan state in Tamil areas – these things have undeniably affected all Tamils in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora. Especially painful for the survivors is the enduring lack of a proper mechanism in Sri Lanka or internationally to address wartime and conflict-related abuses, and to seek accountability and justice for civilians who were massacred or disappeared. There is a wealth of evidence that the the Sri Lankan military committed war crimes and crimes against humanity that could amount to genocide.

So it is understandable that news about genocidal massacres in Gaza triggers pain among diaspora Tamils who have themselves lost loved ones and had to flee their homes. Some second-generation diaspora members also see the situation in Gaza as being similar to the final phase of the war in Sri Lanka. But while there are similarities between Israel's violence against Palestinians and the Sri Lankan state's violence against Tamils (and Muslims, too), there are also fundamental differences.

Israel is a settler-colonial state that has evolved an apartheid system where the indigenous people, the Palestinians, have been robbed of their land and country, either expelled and denied the right of return or forced to live under military occupation. Zionism is a settler-colonial ideology, like many other such European ideologies, in which annihilation and dispossession – indeed, genocide – is the principal task, and is an intention at the outset even if this is left unstated.

This approach is enshrined in Israel's Basic Law. It proclaims that the land of Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people, grants them an inalienable and exclusive right to self-determination, and declares that the development of Jewish settlements is a national value that the state has a duty to encourage and promote. Further, the Law of Return declares, "Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*" – an immigrant. Palestinians expelled from this land, however, have no right of return.

Because of this, and because the Israeli project has been supported by Western imperial powers from the outset, the Palestinian struggle should rightly be seen as an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist movement.

Sri Lanka is a post-colonial, ethno-nationalist state that has evolved into a majoritarian democracy. The state relies on Sinhala Buddhist nationalism for its state-building enterprise and pushes the country's minorities to the margins. Tamils, Muslims and other minorities are discriminated against and periodically attacked, and do not have sufficient access to state power.

The claim that Sri Lanka is an exclusive homeland for Sinhala Buddhists, and the counterclaim that the North and East are traditional homelands for Tamils, should be considered in the context of post-colonial nation-state building and the construction of ethnic national identity. Identities based on race, nationality and ethnic markers were constructed and reconstructed during colonial rule in the 19th century. Colonial rulers identified 78 nationalities and 24 races in the 1881 census, while the 1901 and 1921 census identified ten principal races, categorising even Kandyan Sinhalese from central Sri Lanka and Low Country Sinhalese from the country's south-west as separate entities. Such categorisation has since been rearticulated and redefined by the local political elite, paving the way for competing ethnocentric political ideologies.

How a settler-colonial state functions is paradigmatically different to how a post-colonial ethno-nationalist state functions.

Portraying the LTTE as a progressive force that supported the Palestinian struggle is a dishonest propaganda tactic primarily to win over progressive second-generation diaspora Tamils. It also trivialises the magnitude of imperialist intervention in Palestine, and thereby trivialises and undermines the Palestinian struggle. For Sri Lankan Tamils to make comparisons between their own and the Palestinians' plight is understandable because of the enormous suffering that Tamils have faced. But it is false and politically opportunistic to claim that the LTTE supported the Palestinian struggle and was trained by the PLO.

It is crucial to be politically conscientious and honest in how we show and build solidarity if we want to create a progressive international movement for Palestinian liberation.

Ragavan

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