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Challenging the New Apartheid: Reflections on Palestine Solidarity

By: Adam Hanieh, Hazem Jamjourn, and Rafeef Ziadah

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The Palestinian solidarity movement has made significant gains since the onset of the Second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000. Over the last five years, a new generation of Palestinian solidarity activists has mobilized in the streets, campuses, and schools across North America. Among the left and progressive movements, there is broad acceptance of the proposition that US foreign policy in the Middle East is based on support for Israel as a “colonial-settler” state, to draw upon the title of Maxime Rodinson’s classic work. Every major mobilization against the war in Iraq has seen the Palestinian struggle placed up front in opposing the US war machine, and most activists new to the movement are introduced to the Palestinian struggle and history through an anti-Zionist perspective.

This is an unprecedented achievement. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, radical and progressive movements in the advanced capitalist countries generally refused to take an unequivocal stance in support of Palestinian liberation. Zionist organizations were active in the movements against the Vietnam War, South African apartheid, and other progressive causes. Palestinian solidarity was marginal to the large mass struggles that took place in the latter half of the 20th century, and the left commonly countenanced a supposedly “progressive Zionist” stance.

While the Zionist movement remains extremely well-funded and dominates the mainstream press there has also been an important shift in this regard. Zionism has shown itself as a political current completely aligned with the pro-imperial policies of the US administration in an openly racist and anti-emancipatory fashion. There are many indications of this beyond the policies of the Israeli government. Throughout North America, Zionist student groups openly invite representatives of the CIA, US Department of Defense, and the Canadian Security and Intelligence Services to speak at meetings they sponsor. The witch hunt against progressive academics and activists is led by an alliance of neo-conservative journalists, academics, and think tanks with Zionist groups such as the *David Project* and Daniel Pipes’ *Campus Watch*. Pipes explicitly advocates that US academics should work to serve US foreign policy interests; first and foremost, the defense of Israel.

The pro-imperialist character of the Zionist movement has impacted their ability to mobilize students on university campuses. While their paid organizers are active they are unable to win a significant hearing amongst students and lack the ability to do effective outreach on the ground. Each day brings news of initiatives around the world to isolate the Israeli state through boycotts, divestment, and sanctions. Zionist propaganda is increasingly

responsive to the campaigns of the Palestinian solidarity movement, and a quick read of the Zionist press indicates a widespread fear that they are losing the ideological battle in an unprecedented fashion.

Moving into 2006, however, it is clear that the Palestinian solidarity movement is also faced with significant challenges in the coming period. In some cities throughout North America, Palestine activists have lost momentum given the shifts on the ground. The routinization of the Intifada and the seeming intractability of Israel's apartheid wall have led to a certain demoralization and loss of focus. Activists are confused about how to respond to the new situation following the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections. The purpose of this article is to set out a balance sheet of the solidarity movement in North America and to begin a discussion of where to go next.

Current political situation

An enormous shift has taken place with Hamas' overwhelming victory in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council on January 25, 2006. The popular vote for Hamas was principally a rejection of the disastrous negotiations process that followed the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Countless voices have criticized the Oslo Accords as a fig-leaf for the ongoing colonization of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, far removed from the avowed goal of a genuinely independent Palestinian state. Under the cover of "peace" negotiations, Israel continued to encircle and isolate Palestinian towns and villages with its network of settlements, bypass roads, and checkpoints.

The Israeli military controlled Palestinian transit with a complicated system of permits and movement restrictions. These isolated population islands were given the trappings of autonomy but effective control remained in the hands of the Israeli state. Oslo (and the subsequent agreements) aimed at having Palestinians police themselves while allowing Israel to deepen this system of apartheid. "Peace" has simply acted as newspeak to mask the apartheid blueprint.

Hamas' victory is a striking indictment of this so-called "peace process." Promoted with the deliberate deceit of Western governments and the corporate media, the myth of negotiations was fully shared in by the leadership of the Palestinian Authority (PA), most particularly by individuals such as Palestinian President Abu Mazen and Prime Minister Abu Ala. The PA leadership came to represent submission and surrender under the banner of peaceful negotiations and empty condemnation of violence. Indeed, immediately prior to the Legislative Council elections, Hamas leader Khaled Mishaal pointed out that "the experiment of fifty years taught us this road was futile" and Hamas would not continue to deceive the Palestinian people with this "political fiction."

If Hamas makes good of its promise not to sustain these structures of occupation, this will be a huge setback for Israeli and US interests in the region. The situation, however, defies simplicity due to the labyrinthine network of factions and interests located throughout the PA apparatus. The Legislative Council is a weak body and considerable power officially remains in the hands of Abu Mazen and the Presidential Office. The security forces—in particular the Preventative Security branch—remains a Fatah-led body under the nominal control of Abu Mazen. Hamas itself, particularly in the Gaza Strip, maintains a strong network of armed cadre.

A number of commentators have raised the fear that the election results could herald a

repeat of the 1991 Algerian experience, where the election victory of the Islamic party FIS was overthrown by a French-backed FLN military coup and led to prolonged civil war. Any repeat experience in the Palestinian context would undoubtedly see the involvement of the Israeli military and security apparatus in both provoking and maintaining internal armed strife. There is no doubt that Hamas is cognizant of this threat, repeatedly stating that it supports a government of national unity and refusing to be drawn into armed clashes with other Palestinian factions. Nevertheless, covert Israeli support for such an eventuality is a real and concrete possibility.

A key question will be how Hamas manages the contradiction between its commitment to the national struggle and maintaining the structures of the PA. The economic dependency of the PA will not disappear with the Hamas victory, although the political character of this relationship has been made strikingly obvious with threats by the US and EU to cut funding. It remains to be seen whether Hamas finds alternate sources of support, attempts to implement some form of wealth re-distribution or strategy of popular reliance, or begins to redefine its politics to become more acceptable to the West. While the latter appears unlikely at this stage, it is certainly not possible for the situation to remain static.

This contradiction is not of Hamas' making and is precisely a consequence of the structural limitations put in place by the Oslo/Apartheid process. The only way out of this bind is to break with the conception that the Palestinian struggle is principally about what happens in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A conscious aim of the Oslo process was to narrow the Palestinian struggle to a dispute over land percentages in the West Bank and to sever any link between Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, those who remained in 1948 historic Palestine as Israeli citizens, and those exiled outside of their homeland. Key to this was the destruction of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a national liberation movement and its replacement by the Palestinian Authority "state" building project.

The formation of the PLO in the 1960s was a critical step forward for the Palestinian struggle as it unified the dispersed Palestinian nation across many generations and countries. The bed-rock demand of this struggle was the right of return: the insistence that Palestinians had the right to return to their homes and lands from which they had been exiled. A key feature of all negotiations since Oslo was an attempt to undermine this demand, reducing it to the symbolic return of a few thousand Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Nevertheless, despite the open willingness of individuals such as Abu Mazen to acquiesce to such attempts, Palestinians across the globe remain united behind a full return to historic Palestine. Central to the dynamics of the coming period will be what happens to these broader Palestinian national structures and the possible reinvigoration of the right of return movement.

Apartheid analysis

The overdue end of the Oslo process and its attempt to narrow the "Palestinian question" to a state-building project in the West Bank and Gaza Strip opens enormous opportunities in the coming period. In particular, the space has opened for renewing an analysis of Israel as a colonial, settler state based on a system of apartheid resembling apartheid South Africa.

Israel is an apartheid state not just because of its policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Israeli state defines itself as a Jewish state and, therefore, cannot be a state for

all its citizens. More than 90% of 1948 occupied Palestine is land that only Jewish people can control or develop. The apartheid character has been clear from Israel's inception. It is illustrated by the fact that Palestinian refugees are prevented from returning to their homes and lands from which they were expelled. In contrast, any person of Jewish descent from anywhere in the world may become an Israeli citizen under the so-called Law of Return.

This apartheid analysis provides an extremely powerful strategy for our movement. It bridges all parts of the Palestinian people: those who are citizens of Israel, those living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and those in exile. It is a strategy grounded in the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their homes and lands. It also makes sense: equality of all in a democratic state regardless of religion or ethnicity.

The analytic link with South African apartheid helps to clarify the real nature of Zionism as a reactionary and exclusivist colonial project. The strategic demands of boycott, divestment, and sanctions that we put forward help to illustrate the powerful ties between North American and European capital and the Zionist state. We can also build upon the experiences and lessons of the earlier anti-apartheid movement.

There is a powerful momentum building around the world for a boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaign. On July 9, 2005 a call was made by over 170 Palestinian organizations to launch a global BDS campaign. Churches in North America have begun to investigate the possibility of divestment. In Norway, the first provincial council to have adopted a boycott of South African apartheid recently did the same in regards to Israel. Twenty Quebec organizations, including the Fédération des Femmes du Québec (FFQ) and the provincial union of CEGEP teachers, have endorsed a new campaign to boycott Israeli products and companies supporting Israeli apartheid.

The Zionist movement is fully cognizant of the implications of this movement. At the University of Toronto, the Arab Students Collective recently held their second annual Israeli Apartheid Week. The week received widespread coverage and pro-Zionist groups such as Hillel, Bnai Brith, and the Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center pressured to have the word apartheid removed from the event's name. In the words of Avi Benlolo, Canadian director of the Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, "seeing the name will register in the minds of students that Israel is an apartheid state, and that is an issue." In 2006, Israeli Apartheid Week was also held at Oxford University, Montreal, and Kitchener-Waterloo.

The solidarity movement and the national movement

It is important to draw a distinction between the solidarity movement and the Palestinian national movement. While these two wings can support and strengthen each other—and steps forward on one side will push forward the other—rebuilding the Palestinian national movement is a task of Palestinians in exile, not of the solidarity movement. For this reason, the regrouping and organization of Palestinians in exile is of critical importance at the current juncture.

There is often considerable confusion on this point. Solidarity activists frequently comment that life would be so much easier if there was a "Palestinian ANC" to clearly articulate goals and strategy of our movement. Nevertheless, we need to work with the reality that exists. Non-Palestinian solidarity activists cannot substitute themselves for the lack of Palestinian leadership. But building an effective solidarity movement that consistently tries

to make links with Palestinian initiatives can push forward and inspire the reorganization of the broader Palestinian national movement.

The PLO's signature on the apartheid blueprint of Oslo rendered the institutions of the national movement (the PLO and the Palestine National Council—Palestinians' parliament in exile) a hollow shell. The national leadership transformed itself into the PA; the prison warden of the Palestinian Bantustans representing no more than the minority of Palestinians in 1967 Occupied Palestine. Palestinian activists and organizers should recognize the centrality of rebuilding the institutions of the national movement.

This being said, the Palestinian movement is part of a broader anti-imperialist struggle and cannot be built in isolation from movements within North America. Israel's apartheid character is reinforced through its role in maintaining US hegemony in the Middle East region. For this reason, the dispossession of the Palestinian people is ultimately linked to the fate of US imperialism. This is the root explanation for the growing convergence between US imperialism and the Zionist movement in North America, and its opposite reflection in the anti-war movement. In countries as far apart as Iraq and Venezuela, we are witnessing a resurgence of popular movements across the globe. These struggles are beginning to roll back the power of US imperialism, and our Palestinian solidarity work must continue to make real and effective links with these struggles. These struggles will be central to pushing forward the struggle for Palestinian liberation, and they provide a basis for optimism in the coming period.

The role of Palestinian grassroots activists who straddle both the solidarity and national movements is vital to the success of this project. Like all minority groups, the supposed leadership of established Palestinian communities in North America is often tied to dominant political parties and interests in North America, or to Palestinian sectarian divides. This is reflected in strategies that channel the community into supporting capitalist electoral parties or advocate lobbying tactics that emphasize US interests in the region. Part of challenging this conservative leadership is to build real solidarity with other anti-capitalist movements in our cities. We strengthen the anti-imperialist character of the Palestinian movement when we are active in struggles of women, workers, people of color, immigrants, prisoners, and particularly indigenous peoples. This means being active as real participants in these struggles and moving beyond mere lip service or sloganeering. It is clear that the Palestinian movement is healthiest in those cities in North America where this approach really does exist in a non-sectarian and honest fashion.

Strengthening our movement

A boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign based upon an apartheid analysis can provide an overarching framework for our other Palestine work. It doesn't replace the need for outreach, education, and action around the myriad of issues connected to Palestine such as refugees, the apartheid wall, or prisoners. Rather, a BDS campaign can answer the question: what to do next? It provides a concrete strategic focus that raises consciousness around Palestine as we carry it out. Pushing a divestment motion through a union requires sustained work to convince the membership of Israel's apartheid character. Recent successes show that these demands are winnable and can provide tangible gains.

The experience of many divestment campaigns thus far has shown the difficulties with localized campus activism. The high turnover rate of students, combined with the fact that

most students are in transit, without significant roots in the local community, has meant that many campus initiatives wither away as central organizers graduate and move on. The success of a BDS campaign depends on its being based in the community of long term residents of a locality. Efforts on campuses, if they are to be sustained, must be a branch of such a community based effort, and not the other way around. Campus activism itself should be viewed as an opportunity to funnel students' energies and resources into the struggles waged outside of the campus.

Our movement faces many challenges in the coming period, challenges that go beyond being campus-centered. A persistent problem is the widespread sectarianism that exists in many cities. A multiplicity of different (usually small) groups with little substantive differences between them compete against each other for political audience and memberships. The roots of sectarianism lie in fetishizing minor programmatic differences and organizational forms ahead of the interests of the movement as a whole. Often this sectarianism is brought into the movement from competing left organizations or other movement divisions (such as those within the anti-war movement). We need to change the way we relate to each other, realizing that building unity in practice is our most powerful weapon. We need to truly internalize the reality that the best political line is something developed through a common political practice—not bequeathed to the movement from historical texts or pontificating from outside the struggle. This means swallowing our egos and realizing that whose name goes first on a leaflet, who gets to speak, and which banner is the biggest in a demonstration is not as important as what we achieve by marching together.

We also need to realize that the larger our movement grows the more it will contain differences in political interpretation, focus, and tactics. We are often paralyzed by sterile debates over emphasis on large demonstrations, direct action, lobbying, or educational outreach. The BDS campaign provides the perfect political vehicle for allowing these differences to exist while marching in unity. Individuals and organizations can support and build a BDS campaign with their own focus, constituencies, and tactics yet each victory achieved helps to strengthen the work of others. Clearly, this ideal is best achieved when the individuals and organizations involved can put sectarian divides aside for the purposes of coordination and cooperation.

A related problem is our weakness in building a collective leadership. Too often our movements are associated with individual “stars” rather than a truly broad and accountable leadership. We don't consciously think through who gets to speak and how we can expand the number of people taking on responsibility for our work. This can easily lead to other problems such as reinforcing gendered divisions of labor where the day-to-day organizational tasks fall upon women and the speaking, writing, and public face of the movement is male.

This lack of a conscious approach to movement building also means that we don't pay enough attention to those who are joining activist politics for the first time. Few people are naturally able to do public speaking, write an article, facilitate a meeting, or hand out a leaflet. The political education that sustains lifelong committed activism needs to be carried out consciously—it doesn't happen through osmosis. If we don't help to foster these skills and political education in new activists then our movements cannot sustain themselves in the long-run.

All of these problems are reflected in the lack of common projects and vision within the

Palestinian solidarity movement across North America. The unevenness of activities across different cities points to how much there is to learn from each other. The retreat to the “local” that characterized much of the anti-globalization movement means that we often fetishize this fragmentation rather than look for ways to build and strengthen the commonalities that we all experience.

The important steps made in the last five years towards strengthening popular solidarity for the Palestinian struggle lay the groundwork for future victories. The possibility of building a successful campaign to isolate and end Israeli apartheid is probably more likely today than at any other time since the establishment of the Israeli state. Accompanying this possibility is the responsibility to sustain and improve what has been built so far.

Adam Hanieh, Hazem Jamjoum, and Rafeef Ziadah are active in a variety of groups in Toronto, Canada, including Al Awda (Toronto), Sumoud Political Prisoners Group, the Arab Students Collective (University of Toronto), and the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid.

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