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Palestine

# Palestinian Labour, Unconquered

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**I. The May pogroms beginning in Sheikh Jarrah, the Palestinian neighbourhood of East Jerusalem, were not merely the work of ‘extremists’. In Israeli terms, they are not particularly extreme. The Kahanist mobs shouted ‘death to the Arabs’, but it would not have been the first time a genocidal sentiment was expressed in Israeli politics. In 2008, it was the Deputy Defence Minister Matan Vilnai, representing Labour in the Knesset, who threatened Palestinians with a ‘holocaust’. In 2014, the Likudnik Deputy Speaker of the Knesset, Moshe Feiglin, called for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip. In the same year, Ayelet Shaked, who was appointed Minister of Justice the following year, called for the Gazan children, whom she called ‘snakes’, and their mothers to be wiped out. On the Israeli Left, the same violent impulse is blamed on its victims to keep the settler’s conscience pure; it was the feminist hero of socialist Zionism, Golda Meir, who castigated Palestinians for ‘forcing us to kill their children.’**

The pogromists were intoxicated by their violence, but so were the Israeli troops who attacked worshippers in the Al-Aqsa Mosque with stun grenades, rubber-coated steel bullets and tear gas, hospitalising hundreds. When Palestinian protests in solidarity with Sheikh Jarrah erupted from Haifa and Nazareth in the north, to Ramla, Yafa and Lydd in the middle of the country, to the Naqab desert in the south, Jewish Israelis took up arms. In Lydd, a Palestinian protester was shot dead. When a suspect was arrested, it was Israel’s Minister for Public Security, Amir Ohana who took to Twitter to denounce the arrest. Declaiming that the killing had been self-defence, he argued that ‘law-abiding citizens carrying weapons are a force-multiplier for the authorities’.

In the aftermath of the murder, thousands of Israeli Jews applied for gun licenses, at seven times the usual rate, adding to the 145,000 existing licensed gun owners. The following month, the Israeli government authorised the ‘Flag March’ of the Israeli far right through Palestinian communities in East Jerusalem. Clearing the way for the marchers, Israeli troops advanced through the streets, driving Palestinians out of the way at gunpoint. Those who didn’t comply were beaten. Pogromism has very much become a mainstream political force in Israel, complementing state terror and representing one bloodied edge of a ‘transferist’ ideology that has been constitutive of the Zionist project since its inception, and has been ratified by the Israeli courts for decades.

Since the ethnic cleansing of approximately 700,000 Palestinians in the Nakba of 1948, the state of Israel has legally discriminated against the remaining Palestinian population, and has used those laws to drive out Palestinian families. In the immediate aftermath of the Nakba, Israel appealed to British colonial-era laws, the Defence Regulations of 1945, which permitted the army to uproot and transfer whole communities at will, to impose indefinite curfews, to seize land and requisition any property, to search any home, to arrest any man, to expel him from the country without explanation or restraint. Israeli military courts were the only recourse that Palestinians subject to these laws had, which invariably found against them. The Palestinians could be driven off their land, thanks to laws deeming them ‘present-absentees’. While the Nakba had decimated Palestinian land ownership to just 5 per cent of the total, the expropriations of the ensuing years saw it driven down to just 1 per cent.

It wasn’t until 1966 that martial law was abandoned within 1948 Israel, largely because it disrupted the absorption of Palestinian labourers into the lowest ranks of the Israeli economy. But this hardly stopped the land grab, with its twinned secular and theocratic mandates in Zionist ideology. The following year, the so-called ‘Israel Defence Forces’ (IDF) occupied Gaza and the West Bank, where most of the refugees of the Nakba lived. The logic of martial law, and legal expropriation, resumed.

A crucial juridical step in the ensuing pattern of expulsions was the Legal and Administrative Matters Law of 1970,

which allowed Israeli Jews, and only Israeli Jews, to pursue ownership claims in occupied East Jerusalem based on allegations that the property had been Jewish-owned before 1948. Combined with existing legislation, this ensured that Israeli courts repeatedly issued expulsion orders forcing out Palestinian families who have resided in these homes for decades. The majority of the cases have been brought by settler-colonial organisations, their settlement programmes aggressively supported by Israeli governments, whether representing Labour or Likud.

Nor are the settler-colonists isolated globally. UN spokespersons, B'TSelem, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch may protest until their voices are hoarse that these expropriations violate international humanitarian law. Israel, the occupying power, has no right to seize property, they say. Yet they are not Israel's major funders, arms suppliers or diplomatic allies. If pushed, most US presidents or British Prime Ministers might disapprove of Israel's settlement programme, but this has yet to prevent them from supplying arms or, in the US case, \$3.8bn a year to purchase them. The settlers also benefit from a strong alliance with Israeli capital – but not only Israeli capital. Among 112 firms charged by the UN with assisting the settlements, including by construction, financing, maintenance and expansion, as well as demolition of Palestinian properties, are AirBnB, JCB, TripAdvisor and Motorola. The constellations of arms, capital and legal violence directed against Palestinians are as global and overdetermined as racial capitalism itself.

II. This was the issue that exploded in Sheikh Jarrah, and swiftly spread, this May. For the first time since the First Intifada beginning in 1987, Palestinian resistance was united across Gaza, the West Bank and 1948 Israel. The street movement erupting within Israel was pivotal, and so rattled the administration that it immediately deployed thousands of troops to 'mixed' cities for the first time in decades. This so inspires because it offers a needed break with an established pattern. The coloniser seeks to remove from the colonised the coherence of their identity, to obliterate the possibility of resistance by bombing away the memory of their ethnic cleansing and the truth of their indigeneity.

Black South Africans became the mock citizens of a diffuse collection of different Bantustans, a bid by the settler to rule out even the possibility of his antagonist: to remake the landscape as the white man's land with pockets of guest accommodation for the tolerated natives. Palestinians, whose land was turned into someone else's property, are themselves turned into Gazans isolated under siege; West Bank residents in cantons with a mock government of their own; 'Israeli Arabs' permitted as guests in other people's land; refugees told they are Jordanians or Syrians now, and should move on and stop harping on about a past called 'Palestine'.

May 2021's 'Unity Intifada' resisted that fragmentation which is so crucial to the mental and material violence of colonialism. The very claim to be Palestinian, from the river to the sea and well beyond both, marks a refusal to accept defeat as final and colonial architecture as inevitable. As the land was set on fire and lampposts in Lydd flew the Palestinian flag, refugees rushed to the borders in Syria and Jordan and Lebanon to insist on their unforgotten right to return home.

In Gaza, pressure from Palestinians compelled Hamas to offer a token of resistance and solidarity with Sheikh Jarrah by firing Qassam rockets into Israel for the first time in years. These rockets, though synonymous with Hamas in the moral bestiary of imperialism, had first been used by Gazans against the Gush Katif colonies before Israel's 'withdrawal' in 2005. The vast majority of the casualties that can be attributed to them dates to this period, when Israeli forces were bulldozing homes, blitzing ambulances and turning parts of Gaza into Grozny.

Since then, every Israeli offensive has precipitated largely demonstrative retaliatory fire. The rockets remain a weak, ineffectual weapon against an occupier with overwhelming firepower, air power and nuclear warheads. The minor dangers primarily inflicted on the southern city of Sderot are, one would think, little deterrent to Israel. However, in this war, Qassam rockets reached Israel's large cities, causing major disruption and forcing Israel to expend far more money and effort on interception and avoiding significant property damage than it cost to make and fire them. They

are, in other words, weapons which exploit the asymmetry between occupier and occupied.

A few miles and half a world away, in the West Bank, Israeli troops gunned down protestors – killing eleven in one day, including teenagers, and injuring five hundred. Unlike in Gaza, there Israel has a pliant Palestinian apparatus to aid it; under the terms of Oslo's peace accords, Israel got a Palestinian Authority (PA) without real sovereignty but locked into 'security cooperation', which PA President Mahmoud Abbas calls 'sacred'. Without it, the international donor support on which the PA relies would dry up. The money makes clear the function: for most of its existence, the PA has spent significantly more on security than on health or education. Palestinian police officers are tasked, in areas A and B of the mutilated West Bank, with enforcing the military rule of the occupier. It is worth stressing how central is that obstacle to the progress of a unified liberation struggle.

Without the PA, Israel would have to rule directly to maintain its power over almost three million Palestinians in the West Bank and so resistance could target its military infrastructure unimpeded. As illegal settlements multiply, the confrontation would be open, as it cannot be in Gaza where Israel has withdrawn to the skies and the sea to besiege the Strip from outside. With the PA as a native subcontractor – bribed away from the interests of national liberation and into an aristocracy of the colonised – the settler state achieves one degree of insulation and a buffer. In polling after May's uprisings, carried out by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, fully 75 per cent of Palestinians rated Hamas 'outstanding' for its role in the events, but only 8 per cent said the same of Abbas. The stalled Palestinian revolution appeared locked into its splinters; Gazans assailing Israel and punished violently for it, abandoned by settlers in a prison for natives, while the larger, slightly more populous West Bank was kept tame by a compound of direct and devolved Israeli sovereignty. So far, so familiar.

Surprisingly important in terms of power and leverage, however, was the 'dignity strike' by Palestinians. Such withdrawal of labour across the whole of historic Palestine, involving hundreds of thousands of Palestinian citizens of Israel as well as Palestinians in the West Bank, had not been seen since the First Intifada. The success of the strike in overcoming traditional Israeli patterns of divide-and-rule – often echoed in Palestinian institutions – recalls the spirit of the general strike of 1936, precipitating the Great Arab Uprising, and the 'Land Day' strike of 1976, against the ongoing Israeli expropriation of Palestinian land. As Ha'aretz reported, the strike illustrated 'Israel's dependency on Palestinian workers'. This dependence is concentrated in menial sectors like construction, garbage disposal, cleaning, and taxi driving, as the absorption of Palestinian labour has tended to follow the upward mobility of Jewish workers in the occupational structure. However, the strike also involved Palestinian doctors and high-tech workers within 1948 Israel. As such, by exposing a dependency, the strike demonstrated a potential transformative power that is generally occluded by one of the Left's characteristic lines of analysis. In contrast to apartheid South Africa, we have long argued, the Israeli ruling class has no inherent need to exploit the labour of those it oppresses. The existence of Israel in its current form depends on the non-existence of Palestine, and the historical obliteration of its memory. Of the 530 villages entirely depopulated during the Nakba, the majority were either wholly or partially razed, their existence reduced to rubble. Some were covered over with forests, or new buildings. As one of the protest signs during the May general strike said, 'Every Israeli city was once Sheikh Jarrah'. When Israel conquered Gaza and the West Bank in 1967, one of their first moves was to ban the Palestinian flag and to ban books evoking Palestine's existence. The attempted eradication of historical memory is part of a process that Israeli historian Baruch Kimmerling once called 'politicide'. To destroy the idea of Palestine need not entail the physical destruction of the Palestinians. However, as the increasingly overt calls for genocide from Israeli politicians suggest, it need not entail their survival either.

III. That Palestinians should therefore retain any class leverage within Israel is counterintuitive, and even more so given the conscious effort to found the Jewish state on the exclusion of Arab labour. The vox pop response of many Jewish residents of East Jerusalem to the May general strike – fire the strikers and employ only Jewish workers instead – is rooted in a longstanding, but thus far unavailing, fantasy of Zionism. And nor was this specifically a fantasy of its right-wing: Zionism was the first colonial nationalist movement led by parties nominally committed to building a 'socialist' society, and it was the labour movement and Zionist socialism that pioneered the exclusion of

Arab labour. The 'conquest of labour' policy entailed that, to create an economy that would attract Jewish migration on a scale necessary to build a state, Palestinian Arabs would have to be prevented from competing with Jewish workers. More than that, because it was to be a Jewish state, won against the inevitable resistance of Palestinians, cooperation between Jewish and Arab workers had to be thwarted. The main Jewish labour organisation, the Histadrut, was far more a state-building tool than a class organisation. Its policy of excluding Arab labour contributed to the lower state of organisation and earning power among Palestinian workers across all sectors, compared to Jewish workers.

The policy of exclusion wasn't always as fixed as it can appear in retrospect. In the early years of Histadrut's existence, from 1920 to 1927, the divisions among Palestinian Jewish workers as to how to relate to Arab workers, the need to win the support of the British Labour Party, and the fact that Jewish railway workers relied on their Arab counterparts, necessitated some degree of class cooperation. Ben Gurion felt obliged to say: 'Together we will rise and together we will fall. The Hebrew worker will not work eight hours a day if the Arab workers will be forced to work ten or twelve.' Yet, precisely because of the overridingly ethno-national aspirations of Histadrut, it was at best conflicted and hesitant when Arab workers organised themselves and – not perceiving the exclusionary implications of Histadrut's commitment to 'Hebrew Labour' – asked to join. When they were at first formally permitted to join, they were excluded from central or leadership positions, and Histadrut's main contribution was to restrain Arab workers' militancy.

By 1927, the organisation resolved to deny Arab workers admittance to Histadrut, and to ensure they organised separately from Jewish workers while actively working to exclude them from key sectors of the economy. The tactics of exclusion included lobbying employers and picketing workplaces, not in support of the workers against their bosses, but to drive out Arab workers. Solel Boneh, the construction firm created by Histadrut to bid for public contracts, divided workers along ethno-national lines, offering an 'unskilled' wage scale to Palestinian workers, and a 'skilled' wage scale to Jewish workers. The point of these methods was to create a caste system among workers, and to create a closed Jewish economy in which money and capital would not bleed into the wider Palestinian economy. It was a corollary of another principle of the Zionist movement, upheld by the Jewish Agency, that Jewish property – largely acquired from absentee landlords – was inalienable and could not be sold on to any non-Jewish buyer.

This did not prevent Arab workers from organising. The formation of the Palestinian Arab Workers Society (PAWS) in 1925 allowed Arab railway workers to organise autonomously, began the process of establishing class unity, and challenged the exclusionary politics of Histadrut. Likewise, one of the earliest attempts to organise Arab workers on an anti-Zionist and anti-imperialist basis came from the Palestine Communist Party (PCP), launched in 1923. However, though the PCP allied with PAWS and blocked with Arab nationalists against Poale Zion at the League Against Imperialism in 1927, it remained overwhelmingly Jewish. It failed dismally in its efforts to organise the incipient Arab working class, and it failed no less dismally when during the Comintern's 'ultra-left' turn in 1928, it followed Moscow's instructions to denounce Arab nationalism.

The promise shown by PAWS, as it gained from a nationwide radicalisation against Zionism in 1929, was thwarted by the strength of a traditionalist social structure, and by the efforts of the British-appointed Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Amin Husseini to block communist influence by setting up rival unions. Meanwhile, the success of Histadrut in keeping Arab workers out of certain workplaces would prove decisive during the 1936 general strike against British rule and Zionist colonisation.

The strike was called in April 1936 as part of a wider campaign of disobedience, including tax resistance, and a boycott of Jewish products intended to stop the growth of an incipient national economy in which Arabs were deliberately excluded and subordinated. The brutal British response, including sweeping arrests of suspected organisers, was facilitated by the fact that Arabs had been driven out of many workplaces, while the Zionist movement – threatened by Arab nationalist demands, and keen to establish the dominance of Jewish labour in new

sectors of the economy – supplied strikebreakers. Not for the last time, however, it was the failings of the Palestinian leadership that killed the strike. The formation of the Arab Higher Committee (AHC), led by the Mufti and a cluster of Arab notables detached from the labour movement, took the initiative away from local strike committees. By November, arguing that the British were ready to fulfil their demands, the AHC leadership called off the strike. Instead, the British imposed martial law, banned the AHC and for the first time proposed a partition of Palestine that would lead to the transfer of land and the displacement of a quarter of a million Palestinians.

This miscalculation, squandering an incipient working-class unity among Palestinian Arabs, weakened the movement just as it was forced into a military confrontation with the British. It expedited the further exclusion of Arab workers from the economy. And, as the reactionary leadership failed to make any strategic distinction between the Yishuv and the Zionist movement, failed to create or exploit schisms among Jewish workers to the advantage of the Arab working class, while consolidating the alliance between the British authorities and Zionism. This collaboration would be repeated during Britain's counterinsurgency against the Great Arab Uprising, as Zionist paramilitaries like Irgun and Lehi waged a campaign of terror attacks on Arab civil society.

By the end of the uprising in 1939, when the British state sued for peace in preparation for war in Europe, promising to limit Jewish migration and deliver an independent Palestinian state within a decade, the Palestinian leadership had been broken and scattered. The PCP and its offshoot, the National Liberation League, experienced some growth during the forties, and laid the foundations for post-war labour organising. However, the broader political desolation would leave Palestinian society decisively weakened when Zionist parties and paramilitaries launched their insurrection and ethnic cleansing campaign in December 1947.

IV. While the majority of Palestinians were turned into stateless refugees by the Nakba, with most Arab workers left under the control of the Jordanian dictatorship in the West Bank, between 80,000 and 160,000 Palestinians remained within the boundaries of the newly created state of Israel.

Representing about 15 per cent of the population, and subject to martial law, they were subject to routine arrests, torture, murders, disappearances and expulsions. They had little ability to organise politically in defence of their civil rights, let alone organise as workers. Their marginal status as workers was directly linked to the structure of colonialism and the legal expropriation of their land. The Emergency Land Regulation Law of 1949 established that Israel had a right to seize Arab urban property, while the Basic Law of 1960 institutionalised the inalienability of Jewish-owned property. These laws were compounded by the 1950 Law of Return and the 1952 Israeli Nationality Act, which ensured that while Palestinian citizens of Israel were subject to regular expulsions, Jewish migrants from anywhere in the world had a right to claim Israeli citizenship.

In the new Israeli economy, while Jewish workers were overwhelmingly urban, Arab workers overwhelmingly rural. However, being progressively deprived of their land and lacking the means to make a satisfactory living from agriculture, Palestinian Arabs were converted into a proletarianised migrant reserve workforce.

And as Jewish workers moved up the occupational strata, Arab workers were absorbed more completely into the lowest wage jobs in construction, mining, quarrying, crafts, transport and services. These former redoubts of 'Hebrew Labour' became 'Arab work', and saw a dramatic decline in their prestige, wages and conditions. The salience of Palestinians in construction is particularly important. As the sociologist Andrew Ross points out in *Stone Men*, despite the Zionist myth of the pioneer ('*halutz*'), much of modern Israel was actually built by the Arab workers disparaged in Israel as uneducated fellaheen.

The caste system, indeed, ensured that Israel could be built on the hyper-exploitation of Palestinian labour. In the first two decades of Israel's existence, Arab wages ranged between 35 per cent and 70 per cent of Jewish wages for similar work. Arab workers were also more exposed to the cycles of the capitalist economy: during periods of

recession, unemployment among Arab workers was double the rate among Jewish workers. They were also crammed into smaller accommodations, with Arabs living in homes with on average two people to a room, and enjoyed far less of the leisure and culture available in the Israeli economy, as the vast majority of their income was taken up with food and shelter.

However, the fact is that the Arab working class was both growing and increasingly included within the Israeli economy, giving them a potential disruptive capacity that tended to be overlooked and even disparaged by the Palestinian national leadership organising among the refugee communities. As overwhelmingly migrant workers subject to despotic emergency laws, their bargaining power was limited. However, a crucial breakthrough came when in 1966 the Israeli state abandoned martial law. This step was not a measure of Israel's liberalisation, but rather reflected the dilemmas facing a capitalist economy in which both a growing share of surplus extraction and of the realisation of surplus value through consumption, depended on Palestinian workers with Israeli citizenship. Though these workers never ceased to constitute an internal colony for Israel (an 'enclave economy', in the idiom of dependency theory) and the labour market remained strongly segregated, the modalities of emergency rule with its restrictions on movement impeded the efficient allocation of labour.

In the West Bank, the crushing military defeat of the Arab forces in 1967 and the IDF's occupation had led the trade union leaders to 'freeze the class struggle', in the words of Adel Ghanern, future leader of the General Federation of Trade Unions. As Ghanern put it, they surmised that 'the danger from the occupation was greater than that from the capitalists', and opted to 'help the national industries' as a way to resist Zionism. The danger from the occupation was real and obviously more lethal. Palestinian businesses exploited the nation's workers, but it was Israeli troops that harassed, administratively detained, and deported union leaders, just as it was Israeli forces that seized Palestinian land and homes for a new generation of settler-colonists from the religious right. Israeli colonial capital, reinforced by the arsenals of occupation and segregation, could also exploit Palestinian labour more brutally. In the long-run, however, the strategy of shoring up Palestinian capital only incubated a weak national bourgeoisie dependent on the Israeli capitalist class.

Just as Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza were pushed into the role of reserve army for the Israeli economy, Palestinian workers in Israel were becoming a regularised low-wage workforce. From being insecure migrant workers forced to supplement their incomes with agricultural work in a dwindling area of land, they became vital workers. As their leverage improved, the workers became more militant, asserting themselves in a series of strikes against discrimination and unfair taxes.

In the Occupied Territories, meanwhile, the failure of the 'freeze' on class struggle led to political radicalisation. Leftist factions of the PLO, which by 1974 the UN recognised as the 'sole legitimate representative' of the Palestinian people, organised alongside the PCP in the workers' movement, among students and in the women's movement to build infrastructures of resistance.

These trends culminated in 1976 with a collective uprising against the Israeli authorities. The Israeli appropriation of 5 million acres of Palestinian land, in an effort to 'judaise' the territory, deprived the incipient nation of space for construction and agriculture. The further theft of 21,000 acres of land in the Galilee region of northern Israel, accompanied by curfews across Palestinian villages, precipitated a general strike by Palestinian workers. The 'Land Day' strike was brutally suppressed with live bullets by Israeli forces. Four thousand Israeli police were deployed in Galilee, and demonstrations were fired upon. However, the unprecedented unity of force across all of historic Palestine, supported by student walk-outs, solidarity strikes and marches in towns throughout Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, succeeded in reversing the theft of land in Galilee. 'Land Day', 30 March, subsequently became an annual commemoration in Palestine.

V. The next major class uprising by Palestinians, heralding the First Intifada in 1987, followed another interim of

defeats and growing pessimism in the PLO leadership. In December 1987, an IDF truck killed four Palestinians in the Jabilia refugee camp, triggering protests that would become the Intifada. By then, Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza alone made up 7 per cent of the Israeli workforce (about a third of the West Bank/Gaza workforce). They had also become a major consumer market for Israeli goods. While this bolstered support for the occupation within Israel, among those who benefited from Palestinians doing the undignified work and supporting Israeli markets, this gave workers in the Occupied Territories in tandem with Palestinian citizens of Israel the potential to disrupt the apartheid economy.

Before the uprising began, however, the PLO was becoming desperate about its chances. A growing number of Israeli politicians, above all government ministers, had been talking about another 'transfer': this time to force the Palestinian population out of Gaza and the West Bank. The disavowed fascist Rabbi Kahane explicated the racist premise of this: one could not have a Jewish state extending across the entirety of Eretz Israel with a large, growing and potentially majority Arab population. The Palestinians were a 'demographic problem'. And the Reagan administration had given full support and sympathy to Israel as it dehumanised Palestinians, the better to destroy them. The PLO leadership, fearing destruction, was drawing the conclusion that it had to act urgently to establish the material foundations of a Palestinian state, even if only within the limited framework of UN resolutions and the 1967 armistice line. As such, it had to concretise its ambitions in Gaza and the West Bank. This meant it had little to say to Palestinians living in Israel, and increasingly little to offer the refugee population. The shift toward 'statehood' as opposed to 'liberation', which was resisted by the left-wing faction led by George Habash, came just as the Intifada was about to break out.

When the Intifada began, it was not under the impetus of the PLO. While the constituent parties of the PLO fully participated in the uprising, the political lead was given by the Popular Committees and community organisations. It was their leaflets stopped by Israeli troops, their leaders rounded up and deported. Some of the most effective tactics, reflecting Israel's dependence on Palestinians as workers and consumers, included strikes, boycotts and the withholding of taxes.

When Israel suppressed protests with live fire, killing dozens in what the anglophone press invariably described as 'clashes', hundreds of thousands of Palestinian workers in Israel joined strikers in the Occupied Territories. The strikes and boycotts alone cost the Israeli economy \$1bn in the first year. It was precisely because of the efficacy of this combined offensive that Israel started to implement a new institutional architecture preventing West Bank and Gaza residents from moving freely between the territories, and imposing new restrictions on workers from Gaza entering Israel. It was for the same reason that the Israeli government and employers shifted toward the use of migrant workers from Thailand, the Philippines and Romania. Though the latter were technically more expensive due to the cost of housing and transporting them, they were more politically manageable.

The effect of the Intifada on the PLO's internal struggle over the 'peace offensive', as suggested by Edward Said's account, seems to have been to sharpen the urgency of its strategic swerve to negotiations. Here was a Palestinian revolution and, at the end of it, there had to be an independent Palestinian state to show for it. Of course, as Said would later lament bitterly, the result of this shift was ultimately to canalise Intifada energies into the unavailing Oslo process. The Palestinian leadership accepted, ostensibly as a transitional settlement toward a Palestinian state, a tripartite occupation structure in the West Bank. Of the total territory, the Palestinian Authority (PA) would control 3 per cent (Area A), the Israelis would control 70 per cent (Area C), and the remainder would be jointly ruled by the PA and the Israelis. Israel also controlled all underground resources, meaning it was at their discretion whether Palestinians would have water or energy. Obviously, the number of settlers more than doubled in the first decade of Oslo. The first thing the Israeli government did after signing Oslo was to start a new settlement-building programme.

The effect of this was to further entrench the Israeli architecture of segmentation and division of the Palestinian population. Not only were the West Bank and Gaza separated, while crossing the Green Line became ever more difficult, but even within the West Bank the Israeli authorities could shut down travel between different areas at a

moment's notice. Everything that has happened since then, from the carving up of the West Bank with settler roads, to the brutal suppression of the Second Intifada, to the 'withdrawal' from the Gaza strip, to the Israeli-supported civil war between Fatah and Hamas, to the blockade on Gaza, to the repeated pulverisations of Gaza, to the perpetually expanding settlement programme, has tended to further entrench the partitioning and fragmentation of the Palestinian people.

Throughout, the PA has enabled the fracturing of resistance by morphing rapidly into a corrupt, conservative force, dependent on the state of Israel and willing to punish those who protest Israeli policies. Mahmoud Abbas' leadership of the PA has been increasingly characterised by petty despotism, as in the recent murder of the regime critic Nizar Banat, which followed years of PA security forces terrorising Banat and his family with live bullets fired at his home and regular assaults.

It is fitting, in this story of resistance against fragmentation, that May's Unity Intifada became June's resistance to the PA. After Banat's murder – even the official autopsy admitted he was beaten on the head, chest, neck, legs and hands: dead within an hour of his arrest – initial protests lasted for five days straight. Journalists and NGO workers at the protests were beaten up by plain clothes PA security forces. Some journalists tore up their press cards in protest at the lack of protection. The Palestinian People's Party pulled out of the apparatus, so the PA lost its Minister of Labour. Increasingly the fiefdom not simply of Fatah but of a small clique within it who live by the blessing of the settler state, the PA elections in which Banat had declared his intention to stand have been repeatedly postponed. Abbas now waves the flag of freedom to say that elections would be unconscionable without Jerusalemites able to vote, while Israel does his bidding (such strange inversions are necessary to the maintenance of Israeli power) by refusing them the vote so that he has his excuse to rule for Israel without democratic accountability sweeping him away. One form of domination makes fertile soil for others. Apartheid and autocracy need each other.

This is, with plenty of villains overseas too, the alliance of interests against which Palestinian labour is pitted. Palestinian scholars like Adam Hanieh, Toufic Haddad and Kareem Rabie paint a powerful picture. A rentier class of West Bank capitalists, trading heavily on debt since the creation of a national mortgage market in 1996, builds alliances with Gulf investors and Israeli capital to plan new cities like Rawabi and 'Qualifying Industrial Zones' (QIZ) like the one in Jenin, where unions and corporate taxes are both stripped away. In the PA's 2009 programme 'Ending the Occupation, Establishing the State', this trajectory is represented in terms that perfectly capture the tragic shift from the age of Bandung to the age of global neoliberalism: the revolutionary march to victory is a future past, a horizon closed, and now the creation of a national economy with a strong domestic capitalist class offers the only route out of unending degradation.

It is a false route, since even capital flows utterly on the terms of the coloniser. It articulates national and class struggles together, since the smartest corner of Ramallah is inhabited by state and semi-private Palestinian capitalists whose prosperity is bought by Israel's bid to normalise and eternalise the military status quo: Palestinian prosperity to quell demands for freedom – and checkpoints to harass and discipline the labour force in every QIZ too, so this is not a flat Palestinian prosperity, to be experienced equally by all. When in the West Bank, as in the Israeli state, this parasitic setup breeds government corruption and critics like Nizar Banat. The outpouring of anger over his murder thus holds a necessary class and anti-colonial content.

VI. Israel's divide-and-rule practices were supported in recent years by the Trump administration's support for the most revanchist wing of Zionism, and by the Arab states' abandonment of their increasingly nominal commitment to the Palestinians. There is no sign that Biden is going to depart significantly from the Trump administration's posture. However, Palestinian national consciousness continues to operate as a material infrastructure apart from Israel and its dependent subordinates in the West Bank, in no small part because of its underestimated class capacities. Capacities distinctively formed in and against the specifically colonial contours of Palestine's class structure.

## Palestinian Labour, Unconquered

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One of the factors driving the formation of a new class consciousness, breaking out of the cantonisation imposed by Israel and policed by the PA, has been the growing remoteness of the PA and loyal union leaderships from the base. The PA's dependence on Israeli funding and Israeli capital has left it subject to the patterns of austerity and financialisation that prevail across Israel, as it has struggled to meet its fiscal obligations while supporting a national bourgeoisie.

Since 2012, teachers have engaged in a series of wildcat strikes, coordinated on social media, against the Palestinian Authorities over low wages and the financialisation of pensions. Nor has the Hamas-led enclave in Gaza been spared the same militancy, as teachers struck in 2018 against the systematic underpayment of salaries. Another factor is Israel's radicalisation to the right. In October 2018, workers across the West Bank, Gaza and Israel struck and demonstrated together against the racist Nation-State Law and the migration of the US embassy to Jerusalem, anticipating the solidarity witnessed after the repression in Sheikh Jarrah.

The infrastructure of Palestinian national resistance – now transversally cutting across existing bunkered structures of authority and communication, opening up previously closed sources of opposition – survives because Zionism, in spite of itself, undermining its drive to eliminationism, has not ceased to be produce and reproduce itself through the coerced, terrorised labour of the Palestinian working class.

Source [Salvage](#).

*This is the editorial essay from [Salvage 10: The Disorder of the Future](#).*

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