

The Palestinian Left and the Multi-layered Challenges Ahead

This is a translation from Arabic of the concluding (seventh) chapter of a book published by the Ramallah office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation at the end of 2009, under the title of "The Palestinian Left: Where to?". The book written by Jamil Hilal is based on research that relied largely, but not solely, on interviews and discussions that he and two research assistants carried out over the spring and early summer of 2009 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. One hundred and eight figures from the Left were interviewed distributed as follows: 61 were members of left-wing parties (the four parties that declare commitment to the socialist option) and 47 non party members (all, except one were previous members in the four left-wing parties); 21 were women, 37 were young (between 20 and 34). Sixteen were Politburo's members; 20 were members of central committee and 25 were from the rank and file of the leftwing political parties. The book utilized party literatures, articles by the left in journals and newspapers and internal memos.

The other chapters of the book cover the following: An introduction that outlines the circumstances that gave rise to the contemporary Palestinian Left in the 1960s and the conditions that impacted its organization and practice. The second chapter discusses how Palestinian (and Arab) leftwing parties define the Left ideologically and programmatically while the third chapter details the "subjective" factors that the Left see as the causes of its decline. The fourth chapter details the "objective" factors that the Left views to have contributed to the weakening of its influence and contracted significantly its social base. Chapter five discusses how the left evaluates its role in relation to the ongoing conflict between Fatah and Hamas, and the chapter six is devoted to ideas and comments on how the left can regain its influence and activate its mission in the current Palestinian situation which is characterized by political deadlock, societal fragmentation, political polarization, and a paralysis of national institutions.

"The Palestinian Left should first arrange its priorities and define its national and social agendas. Second, it should launch a campaign to mobilize its organizational bases to serve the unity of the leftwing movement. It cannot hold onto its name to the detriment of its future role, the history of each faction belongs to the Left as a whole. Third, the Left should unite in a new body while preserving the history of its past struggle. Without unity the Left is doomed to vanish."(a young party member).

Not one leftwing individual (party members or non-party members) among more than one hundred such persons who were interviewed denied that the Palestinian Left is facing a crisis or suffering decline.

The positive side is that there is an open environment for discussing the reasons for this crisis and the decline of the Left. Of greater significance is the concern and willingness of interviewees to reverse this decline, and initiate a renewal of the Left's role and influence, its presence amongst the masses, and its political, social, and cultural weight.

The three issues that were raised in the interviews with leftwing partisans and supporters touched upon the Left's definition of itself, upon the factors and causes of its weakening, and upon its conception of how to recover and resume its role.

A. Reflections on Defining the Intellectual Identity and Organizational Structure of the Left

It was natural, during these interviews, to raise the question of the parameters that define a "leftwing" party. The question retains its relevance if instead of "leftwing" the words "Marxist," "progressive," "democratic" or even "liberal" are used. All the political parties and movements that relate to these designations have overtly or covertly an ideological dimension, political goals, and societal and cultural visions.

Political parties and movements are instruments of mobilization, organization, and representation that aim at introducing change in the society where they are active according to their goals, visions, and the interests they represent.

Several political organizations that present themselves as leftwing operate within Palestinian politics and are in their overwhelming majority represented in the PLO. (e.g.: the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, The Palestinian People's Party, The Palestinian Democratic Union, The Palestinian Struggle Front) The plurality of leftwing Palestinian political parties has historical roots linked to the political formations that came into being before the *Nakba* (expulsion of Palestinians by Zionist forces in 1948), to the transformations witnessed by the Arab National Movement in the 1960s, and to the splits and debates within the leftwing factions (the Popular Front, then the Democratic Front, and the Communist Party).

The adoption of Marxist ideas and options did not entail any specific burdens or risks, apart from those inherent in the Palestinian National Movement, and that is because of the pluralist structure of this movement both before and after the establishment of the PLO and before its establishment in the 1960s. All the leftwing factions were represented in the leading bodies of the PLO, received from it a budget, and were represented in its popular and professional unions, and those who were not represented strived to do so, as was the case with the Palestinian Communist Party (later the Palestinian People Party). The active Palestinian leftwing parties did not suffer the pressures and harassment many such political parties were subjected to in many Middle Eastern countries. Moreover, the fact that they were committed to a program of national liberation spared them the task of putting forth clearly-defined social and economic policies, and having to confront, therefore, the class, regional, and national forces directly linked to capitalist interests.

The Left's need for democracy

Opting for the establishment of a socialist society and devising policies related to this option are the two most typical features characterizing a leftwing political party. However, the remoteness of achieving the goal of socialism, has forced the Palestinian leftwing political parties to focus on representing the interests of those strata of society that they ought, as leftist parties, to represent: The workers, the exploited, the dispossessed, the oppressed and the marginalized. In the Palestinian case, the tasks facing the Left fit in firstly, in the frame of national liberation, and secondly in the context of the struggle to establish a state capable addressing the interests of the social strata represented by the Left: a democratic state with supportive social structures capable of paving the way to socialism.

What sets the program of the Left apart from other political parties is its firm commitment to democracy in its widest sense: Political democracy (the circulation of power through general fair and free elections, the separation of powers, the freedom of expression, organization, belief, and thinking), social democracy (securing the citizen's right to education, social and health security and dignified living), and economic democracy which begins with guaranteeing everyone's right to an equal wage for equal work, and a minimum wage linked to the cost of living and a system of workers' rights (paid sick leaves, maternity leave, health care, and end of service payment or pensions, the right of every man and woman working in an institution or factory in direct or indirect representation in managing the affairs of this factory, and receiving a fair share of its revenues.)

The Left's attachment to, and defense of democracy are based its character as a political system that is friendly to plurality and committed, at least in principle, to preserve the rights of the exploited, oppressed, and even persecuted strata to organize and assert their rights and defend their interests. Consequently, democracy guarantees the leftwing political parties the right to represent those strata and protect their present and future interests. It also guarantees the freedom of leftwing parties to organize and compete in general elections, and to put forth their ideas and programs in complete freedom, on a par with the other political parties, without any fear of being repressed, excluded, or rejected.

Salience of Secularism

The leftwing political parties are, by force of necessity, secular parties. That is so because secularism is, first, the guarantee of pluralism and, second, the guarantee of the practice of democracy, the overseeing of state institutions, and the separation of state powers. Secularism also protects religion from being exploited by the ruling elite, and protects state power from the power of religion that places itself above the citizens and above accountability. Secularism protects citizens from being treated as subjects, sects, and cults, of being labeled as infidels, of subjecting half of society to the whims of the other half and/or imposing a certain form of dress (or any other symbol) on women in the name of religion and morality. The Left should consider the fact that possessing a progressive or revolutionary consciousness has many sources and may include antagonism to colonization and military occupation and external hegemony, class exploitation, the antagonism resulting from the domination of one stratum over the others (including male supremacy), and the antagonism between two value or cultural systems (e.g., traditionalism vs. modernism). Popular religiosity (not political religiosity) may become the factor that helps wide sections of the population to resist oppression when the leftwing or progressive parties wane or collapse. The Left must also understand that secularism, enlightenment, progress, and democracy constitute a national and global legacy, and not a monopoly of certain peoples or nations as some would have it.

In fact, the Palestinian (and Arab) Left did only begin to determine its ideological identity beyond a general declaration of its affiliation to Marxism-Leninism and a consideration of the Soviet Communist party as the authoritative reference in matters relating to organizational and intellectual issues, after the fall of this authoritative reference. However, it took a long time for the impact of this fall to be felt, due to the internal dynamics of the Palestinian leftwing parties. The delayed effect was linked to their position within the PLO institutions, and to the predominance of political national tasks on their agenda. This was compounded by the fact that the PLO institutions were located in the Diaspora where the leftwing factions as well as the other political factions (including Fatah and Hamas later) had their constituencies in the refugees camps and relied on military and paramilitary organization during their stay in Lebanon (and previously in Jordan). As a result, military struggle took precedence over the other forms of struggle (without underestimating the importance of political, diplomatic, and intellectual organization and representation)

outside Palestine for reasons that cannot be detailed here.

Under Occupation: Models of Resistance and the Coming of the PA

In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the struggle against occupation and colonial settlements took many different forms, in the context of an uneven economic and military balance of power. The first phase of the First Intifada produced a creative model of tilting the balance toward the National Movement through the organization of resistance and steadfastness, i.e. the popular and specialized committees, and through establishing and fostering collective leaderships (predominantly leftwing) to guide the Intifada. The struggle of the Palestinians in Israel (in territories occupied in 1948) is characterized as the struggle of a national minority subjected to racial segregation and discrimination. In other words, the Palestinian Left did not gain much training, either in the Palestinian diasporas (*al-shataṭ*) or under military occupation, in leading social and democratic struggles; that is why its intellectual affiliation remained, to a large extent, anchored in left theorizing, and lacked the necessary engagement with social and livelihood issues.

The major change in this situation came with the establishment of self-government with limited autonomous authority (the Palestinian Authority (PA) established in 1994), concerned with livelihood and domestic issues. This, in itself, implied new tasks and challenges for the Palestinian Left. Moreover, the Left's reliance on the Soviet deprived it from shouldering the responsibility of implanting Marxism within the specificities of the Palestinian and Arab context. Matters to be addressed in the Palestinian context included the fragmentation of society, the dispersal of the people, the disappearance of the socio-economic unifying formation, and the absence of the national state. All this left its impact on the class structure and cultural milieu of the Palestinian people, compounded by the interconnections between the Palestinian demographic, political, and cultural situation and the Arab situation. Moreover, the adoption of a Marxist-Leninist organizational party structure, (as it was embodied by the ruling party of a superpower), that hushed political pluralism and democracy, deprived the Palestinian and Arab Left of the ability to produce a party that more capable of dealing with these national specificities based on its own experience in building a Marxist or leftwing party.

In fact the participation of Palestinian leftwing political parties (and the Palestinian Communist Party, which became the Palestinian People's Party later on) in the institutions of the PLO while

keeping special unilateral links with Socialist countries and a number of Arab countries, relieved these parties of the burden of providing resources for their activities and organizations. The Left thus did not rely on party membership, on its own investments, and on donations from its own public. This state of affairs bestowed a large degree of autonomy on the first rank of party leadership enabling it to develop a quasi-rentier relationship with the rank and file of the party and its supporters; the leadership was able to financially support cadres and mass members, and inflated the ranks of full-timers to the degree you would rarely find a cadre who is not recruited on a full-time remunerated basis. This state of affairs has created a sizable bureaucratic stratum having its own interests, vision, and lifestyle; a lifestyle that is, to a large extent, cut off from its social surroundings. Doubtless, the PLO's entanglement, and the leftwing factions along with it, in the Lebanese Civil War has also significantly contributed to the militarization of these organizations, and to the swelling of their military, administrative, organizational, and ideological apparatuses.

Democracy and the Left

Democratic practices have little chance to grow and bloom within military, militia-like, or bureaucratic structures. Add to this that the theory of "democratic centralism" has, in practice, proved to be a hotbed of uncritical and conformist thinking. Suffice it to reflect upon the fall of the ruling Communist Parties which relied on "democratic centralism" as the principle organizing internal relationships within the party (and the people), and upon the ease with which they fell, to realize that this principle did not guarantee "the unity of thought, action, and will" in the party. However, what is of greater use is to contemplate the experience of the factions of the Palestinian Left that adopted and practiced "democratic centralism", and the impact on their internal affairs: atrophy in one respect, indiscipline in the second respect, and tendency to split (factionalize) in the third. The Left may need to consider the fact of the fossilization of their top leaderships over decades, in order to realize that there is a link between what was known as democratic centralism and the reproduction of hegemonic control by the top leadership. The Left needs also, especially after the establishment of the PA, to revise their internal constitutions away from barricading themselves behind formulas (including a hypothetical industrial working class, dictated by circumstances remote from Palestinian realities. It is equally possible to study the experiences of many leftwing political parties that gave up democratic centralism and held on to their consistency, vitality, and influence.

The left cannot represent the model society that it strives to establish without practicing internal democracy. It also cannot criticize the undemocratic practices of the Palestinian government (whether that governing the West Bank or the Gaza Strip) or of the PLO without reviewing its own internal structure from a perspective of democracy, and accountability, within the limits that protects it from total exposure to the military occupation and adversary forces. This review should take place on the basis that any self-imposed constraints on the exercise of internal democracy (democracy within the party) are just provisional and must cease to exist with the disappearance of their causes, and after scrutinizing any practices that knowingly or unknowingly impeded democratic rights. The Left would not have any credibility if it declares its support to the cause of Palestinian women and refrains from representing them in its leading institutions. Showing interest in the problems of young people is insufficient if the power in the leftwing political parties remains the monopoly of middle and older members – without underestimating, of course, their valuable experience.

Three conceptions of the Left

Three concepts emerged in discussions with the Left leaders and cadres on the meaning of "leftwing." One concept linked the Left to Marxist thought or methodology, whether historical materialism in some of the left parties' literature or scientific socialism in others with neither providing much clarification of the meaning of these terms. Commitment to socialism – both as a specific system of production (and distribution) – as well as a socio-political system remains the goal of the Palestinian Left. However, leftwing Palestinian factions took to focusing on *method* and not on *doctrine* after the collapse of the Soviet experience.

The second concept focused on the features of the social system that the leftwing political party strives to establish: democracy, secularism, equality, pluralism, and social justice. The third concept gave priority to practice over text or theory; i.e. not to a mere theoretical declaration of ideological affiliation. It laid emphasis on the kind of practices of a leftwing political party, in struggle against the military settler-occupation, and in active daily involvement in the social and democratic struggle in defense of the rights of workers, women, the poor, and the young, and in advocating the values of secularism, democracy, equality, and social justice. It emphasized the importance of the practice that translates these principles into policies and legislation in the face of the forces that reject or violate these principles. For example, equality means clear

opposition to polygamy and to commitment to parity in inheritance laws between men and women. This means struggling to transform these principles into legislation, and waging organized struggles to form a societal public opinion (that is, to generate "hegemony" in Gramsci's terms).

Opting for Socialism

The Marxist left is characterized by its strategic commitment to the socialist option. Such a commitment implies the readiness to draw the necessary lessons from the collapse of the socialist Soviet experiment and the complications involved in building socialism under the prevalence of the globalization of capitalism. It also signifies the need to be aware of the conflicts that might arise within the socialist system, including the need for radical democratization. The tremendous developments that were introduced by technology and science, and the merger of mental and physical work might require the extension of the concept of the working class). Finally the Left needs to be conscious of the replacement of large industrial units by smaller ones, and the globalization of capital and the simultaneous restrictions on the movement of labor.

What can be termed the Social Left merely sides with democracy, secularization, equality, and social justice, all of which are principles and values adopted by the Marxist Left as well. The Marxist left is committed, in the long run, to working for the establishment of a socialist society, with the full implications entailed by this: the necessity of taking note of the past and present socialist experiences, the importance of democracy in enabling society for the flowering of civil and cultural life, The social goal of the Left is to establish a democratic, secular, modern, caring society (a social welfare state), without necessarily subscribing to socialism at a later stage. In the Palestinian context, both trends count among their priorities the achievement of self-determination for the Palestinian people, liberation from military occupation, settler-colonization and the apartheid regime, as well as the recognition of the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

In other words, siding with the socialist option (the potential for realizing this option is linked to future Arab, regional, and international developments), in the present Palestinian situation comes as a reaffirmation of the intellectual identity of the party. The present tasks that the Left, and the whole Palestinian political movement, has to shoulder are subsumed under the tasks of national liberation which, after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, have become intermingled with the tasks of establishing democracy.

Four factions that are represented in the institutions of the PLO opt for building of socialism after an independent Palestinian State is established; these are the PFLP, the DFLP, the Palestinian People's Party (PPP), and the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA). In addition, there are within the folds of the PLO other smaller factions that consider themselves leftwing in the social meaning of the term (such as the Popular Struggle Front, and possibly the Palestinian Liberation Front). Some other factions that claim to be Marxist and socialist are not represented in the PLO, and have their headquarters located outside Palestine (with the exception of the tiny Palestinian Communist Party operating in some localities in the West Bank). All these are very small parties that might find their place in a united leftwing front, or a leftwing coalition, or even a united leftwing political party, under certain conditions.

"Free" to Disunite

With regards to their goals and theoretical-philosophical orientation, there is, indeed, nothing that prevents the Palestinian Leftwing Front (announced by the PFLP, the DFLP and the People's Party in September 2008) from expanding to a viable democratic leftwing coalition that could include, a number of political parties larger than the three currently forming the Palestinian Leftwing Front. However, the chronic dilemma that stalls a move toward genuine unification lies in the political stance of these parties. This is the problem that a Front, or any other framework uniting the Left must solve on the basis of unified action on consensual issues (these have a wide range in the social, economic, cultural and ideological realms), as well as an accommodating attitude concerning differences in political stances that do not violate an agreed basic political program. Be it as it may, there are many common political stances, and more specifically in the activities against the settler-colonialism, the Judaization of Jerusalem, the Separation Wall, the siege of Gaza, the restrictions imposed on movement inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip and outside these areas, the racist treatment at the checkpoints and crossings, the confiscation of lands, the prisoners, and many others), in addition to scores of social and livelihood issues.

Several views pointed to the focus on political concerns among the leftwing factions due to the Palestinian condition. This entailed the Left's scant interest in social struggle, which in turn prevented it from forming a social base that would regard the Left as its representative and the defender of its interests. Thus, the Left has not been subject to pressure from a large social base demanding its factions unite and put an end to the present state of fragmentation.

Unfortunately, the leaderships of the Left factions have no problem with steering clear of unity, even in its non-integrative forms. Moreover, the societal dislocation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the fragmentation of the Palestinian people have contributed to freeing the leftwing political parties from the necessity of coming together, so that the similarity in their social programs has turned into a formal similarity; because the social issues are not yet among the priorities of these parties. In other words, one of the most important and real reasons for the decline of the Left is the lack of

communication with its constituency. This is due to its elitist understanding of its role; a populist understanding of an imagined social constituency, an understanding based upon transforming Marxism into a rigid doctrine alien to human practice, and ignorance of what Marxism itself affirmed: that knowledge is relative and historical. It is equally due to considering that its authority is not liable to any accountability by popular institutions, and to its populist conception of its imagined constituency.

B. An Examination of the Subjective Reasons for the Decline of the Left

The factions of the Palestinian Left still need (each for itself or collectively if possible) to undergo an impartial and bold review of the causes and factors that led to the shrinking of its social base, and especially to examine subjective conditions and factors. It may be necessary (and certainly useful) to expand the community of participation in this review. Hopefully, this article will contribute to the process. One of the most significant observations we can draw from the interviews is the recognition that subjective factors had the greatest impact on the dwindling role and influence of the Left. It is these factors that also prevent it from resuming its role and they are as follows:

First: *The ossification of the organizational structures of the leftwing parties*; i.e. their lack of interactive communication between the rank and file and the leadership, and between the various party organizations and the people with whom they are supposed to interact. The consequence was the loss of the capacity to swiftly adapt to the objective changes and socio-economic and political developments. This was most salient in handling of the changes that affected the Palestinian political field after the initial year of the first Intifada, and after the Oslo Agreement of 1993, and following the establishment of the PA. These changes dictated new tasks and new forms of organization and struggle requiring the conscious integration of the tasks of national liberation and democratic struggle.

In other words, the organizational structures of the Left remained, by and large, confined by their rigid internal composition, oblivious to their obligations towards the national and democratic struggle. They did not fully understand the repercussions of the change that occurred, and are occurring in the field as a result of the Oslo Agreement, the impact of the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, and the entry into the political field of new political forces outside of the

PLO (Hamas and Islamic Jihad) coming from a experience and perspective that is quite different from that of the Palestinian national movement formed by the PLO. All this in addition to the failure of the Left to address issues raised by the transition from covert to overt or quasi-overt action (with the return of the leadership of a number of leftwing parties from exile to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) coupled with the need to adopt extreme alert to the determinants of Israeli colonizing and expansionist policies.

The left wavered and failed to take on the task of enlightenment in the face of the rising influence of political Islam in Palestinian society, and remained largely indifferent to the details of the daily burdens and problems of ordinary Palestinian people.

Some leftwing activists did not hesitate to diagnose leftwing organizations as institutions that cater to private interests that prevailed over the political, social, and cultural responsibilities of the party. This alarming diagnosis ascribes the weakening of the Left to the backwardness and failure of its leadership. Some even considered this leadership the chief cause of the crisis, and the major handicap to the unity of the Left, because there are those in this leadership that view the unity of the Left as detrimental to their positions and privileges. Some others accused the leadership of obstructing political, organizational, administrative, and financial accountability. Indeed over the last four decades the leadership of the Left was never seriously held accountable despite the decline, weakening, and confusion that befell all the leftwing organizations.

Second: *The fading of the social role of the leftwing organizations is coupled with the decline of its role in the struggle for liberation.* This is due to the Left's lack of a strategy that integrates social struggle and the struggle for national liberation. The Left has compromised its social

identity as a result of failing to adopt the causes of those social classes and groups that it has the duty, as Left, to represent and identify with (the workers and peasants, the pauperized and the oppressed). It is also due to its hesitation to spearhead the struggle and mobilize its forces against corruption and mismanagement and to democratize public life, including fighting for progressive laws and policies that serve the interests of women and workers, the oppressed and exploited groups and classes. The absence of this social and intellectual role separated the Left from its public which was attracted by the gravitational force of both Hamas and Fatah, after the failure of the Left to exercise its mandate as a representative of the interests and rights of the workers, the poor and the oppressed.

In the context of explaining the abstention of the Left from playing its social role, many remarks were made by interviewees about the remoteness of the Left from popular action and struggle, and the consequences of its substitution of democratic popular organizations by professional organizations (NGOs) that then relied on foreign funding are thus were bound, to a certain extent, by other agendas than the Left's national and social priorities. Several remarks were also made about the part played by these NGOs in stripping the Left of its experienced cadres and leadership. Repeated remarks were also put forward on the declining interest in organizing women and youth in democratic mass organizations (which the leftwing parties took the lead in forming in the late seventies and the early eighties). Many comments by members of the left-wing parties blamed the leadership of the Left (which lacks young faces) for jeopardizing the process of renewal in various party structures and for depriving the youth of the opportunities to occupy leading positions, and for preferring office work to work at the popular level to organize, mobilize and educate.

Third: *The waning of the Left's part in the struggle for liberation since the first Intifada.* This reduced role was widely considered as the leading factor in the decline of the Left. Many also considered that the weakening of the social and cultural roles of the Left and the shrinking of its role in the struggle are the two decisive factors in its regression. In this context various positions were articulated; such as the Left did not present an alternative vision and practice of struggle different from that of Fatah and Hamas;

others noted that Fatah and Hamas succeeded in pulling some leftwing factions toward them, and this has robbed them of their political weight. In the same context, a subtler observation emphasized the fact that the Left did not read correctly enough what fundamentalist political Islam really represents; it failed to confront its agenda of Islamizing society. At the same time, the Left fell short of spearheading the fight against the performance of the PA (led by Fatah) in its style of negotiations, institution-building, and its intentional marginalizing the PLO. The Left read the conflict between Hamas and Fatah in simple political terms and overlooked the importance of scrutinizing its national, social, and cultural dimensions. The reason why it refrained from defending secularism is to avoid a clash with Hamas, and the reason why it shunned attacking corruption is to avoid colliding with Fatah. The Left was thus forced to take the blame for its membership in the PLO which is dominated by Fatah that dwarfs the role and vision of the Left.

Fourth: *The dwindling financial resources of the Left in comparison to those of Fatah and Hamas.* The dwindling resources of Palestinian left-wing parties (which combines objective and subjective elements) was attributed by some to the absence of a wise financial policy, both in investment and in expenditure, the decline in volunteer work and the neglect of membership fees and popular donations. It was attributed by others to external factors related the regional and international changes in the early 1990s. The leadership of the Left was also accused of adopting Fatah's style (now adopted, apparently, by Hamas, too) of spending without having the necessary means. Volunteer work that was once embraced by leftwing parties through the formation of democratic sectoral organizations (women, workers, teachers, physicians, etc.) declined after the first Intifada. Interviewees blamed the elitist relationship that the leftwing parties had with these mass organizations and their administrative domination over them. Also linked to the weakening of the Left's financial resources is its non-ownership of a mass media, and the absence, to this moment, of a unified leftwing strategy that would enable it to establish joint media outlets (newspaper, magazine, TV, etc.) even before unity, that could accommodate their differences and focus on what they have in common intellectually, socially, culturally and politically.

C. A New Look at the Objective Factors of the Decline of the Left

Palestinians are enduring a settler-colonial military occupation and a regime of racial and national discrimination. They also endure a long-lasting exile for more than six decades. They lack a unified economic and social entity (an independent state or a unified national movement). That is why the chief task of the Palestinians, until further notice, is one of national liberation, which requires a political movement that can unify, coordinate, and guide the struggle of the Palestinians in their three major components (in the diasporas (*al-shatat*), the West Bank and Gaza, and within the Green Line). The Left, in particular, should always keep focused on the unity of the Palestinians in their struggle for their national rights. In addition, the Left should embody the interests and rights of the impoverished and toiling groups in their struggle for equality, justice, and participation.

Soviet collapse and a new global order

In the interviews, identifying the impact of objective factors in the decline of the Left was not generally used to downplay the decisive and determining role of subjective factors. This is undoubtedly a positive indicator. One of the objective factors that affected the Left is the collapse of the Soviet Union and collapse of socialism in Eastern European countries, under the pressure of popular uprisings. The Palestinian Left realized that the demise of the Soviet Union introduced a qualitative change in the international balance of power, along with the increasing pace of the globalization of capitalist economy, and the Chinese Communist Party's adoption of a capitalist market economy. The regional changes since the Iranian Revolution, the Gulf Wars, and the investment of a portion of the Gulf oil revenues (with US support) in financing Salafist (traditionalist Islamic fundamentalist) movements, as well as dominating the regional mass media (newspapers, TV outlets) to generate a political, and cultural environment antagonistic to leftwing, secular, equalitarian values, an environment that is more akin and receptive to the neo-liberal ideas, and the ideas of political Islam and fundamentalist movements. This explains the rapid growth of the political Islamic forces in the region in the last three decades.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union the PLO lost political and financial support, and the United States, Israel's strategic ally, became the major superpower worldwide. At the same time, the Left's relation to the Soviet Union had political implications that limited, even if relatively, its political autonomy, such as taking into

consideration the political stances of the Soviet Union and refraining from criticizing its internal policies. Moreover, this relationship left its ideological and intellectual stamp on the Palestinian Left as it tended to adopt Soviet ideological conceptualization, including the theory of revolutionary democratic organizations, as well as the Soviet model of the Marxist-Leninist party, and the principle of democratic centralism. This deprived the Left of profiting from the experiences of other leftwing forces in the world. The impact of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, however, should not be overstated because the Palestinian Left remains bound to the tasks of national liberation. The collapse of the Soviet Union also weakened the PLO, and this left its mark on the Palestinian Left.

Regional and Palestinian dynamics: new vulnerabilities

In fact, most, if not all, of the objective factors that were mentioned as identified affecting the decline of the Left also negatively affected the role, and effectiveness of the PLO because these factors transformed the Palestinian political national field. There were, in addition to the weakening of the PLO, the grave changes that took place in the region, starting by the Camp David Accord between Egypt and Israel (1978), to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, to driving the PLO out of Lebanon in 1982, to the aftermath of the Gulf Wars (particularly the 1990 war), the repercussions of the Oslo Agreement (1993), and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (1994), to the outbreak of the second Intifada (September 2000), and the repression and institutionalization of the system of racial discrimination and fragmentation of the Palestinian Authority areas, ending with the events and developments that followed the presidential (2005) and legislative (2006) elections and the ensuing rift between Fatah and Hamas. This chain of events and developments heightened to the maximum the vulnerability of the Palestinian political field.¹ Palestinian were completely exposed to the forces of internal strife, and the intervention of the regional forces (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran, in

¹ The concept of the Palestinian political field refers to the whole of the Palestinian political parties and forces, the national institution (including the PA), the superstructures (including the customs, covenants, charters, decisions of the National Councils, the Declaration of Independence, and the Basic Law of the PA), the electoral law, the system of governance and control of effective mass media, and what can be termed the political culture, the competing values in society, and the interrelationships of what is called civil society.

addition to Israel) as well as the international powers (the USA and the European Union specifically), in addition to Israeli control and daily interventions.

The decline of the Palestinian Left began in the first Intifada. The paradox is that as much as the first Intifada was characterized by the visible strong role and weight of the Left (especially in its initial phase), it also introduced many of the factors of its decline. One of these factors was the Left's neglect of its democratic popular organizations after they were integrated into nation-wide organizations mandated by the Intifada leadership (popular committees, neighborhood committees, and specialized committees). When these groups waned as a result of the PLO's *modus operandi* and the mammoth force exercised by Israel to break the Intifada, leftwing organizations were unable to rebuild their democratic sectoral organizations due to the changes sweeping the Palestinian political field, and the Left's failure to realize their political and organizational dimensions. Coupled with this factor was the Left's failure to absorb (organizationally, politically, and intellectually) the rapid growth in its constituencies during the first two years of the Intifada. The other factor that came to the fore during the first Intifada and contributed in confusing the Left was the emergence of political Islam represented by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This quite sudden emergence of political Islam introduced an alternative to the PLO, and a host of ideas and programs that are the exact opposite of the Left's ideas and programs.

Gulf War, Financial Crisis and the Oslo Accords

The PLO's stance on the Iraqi military invasion of Kuwait was the reason given for the Gulf States' cessation of financial support to the PLO. This resulted in a decrease in, and an erratic provision of, budget grants normally paid by the Palestinian National Fund to all the factions of the PLO including the leftwing parties. This task was

transferred to the PA and lost in the process its status as a right enacted by the PLO and was viewed as assistance that required a periodic decision of the President of the PA. This made budget support an instrument of political pressure by whoever is at the helm of the PA and the PLO, and made it almost impossible for the Left to afford costly plans or activities.

The Oslo agreement and the establishment of the PA speeded up the decline of the Left's power; the PLO institutions were the first victims of both developments which greatly curtailed the national influence of the Left. Both the Oslo accords and the Palestinian Authority were met with confusion by the leftwing parties and widened the divisions among them. The leftwing parties found themselves bereft of any regional and international support (material, political, and in coverage by the media), unlike Hamas and Fatah. With the obstruction of any real political possibility for the founding of a Palestinian independent state, and the increasing sway of Hamas, the Palestinian political field was captive to two political poles of attraction while the Left failed to form a third force capable of tipping the balance.

Hamas made notable gains in implementing its project of Islamizing the Palestinian society without any significant resistance from the Palestinian Left. The Left went on neglecting the social, democratic, and cultural struggle, and missing out on its role as a spearhead of enlightenment capable of ideologically challenging Hamas' project. Hamas equally succeeded in building its popular and military force unheeded by Fatah, especially after the cadres and leadership of the latter organization became preoccupied by bureaucratic matters in the PA institutions. The Left did not exert itself to remind Fatah of its responsibilities as the ruling party of an Authority bounded by a military settler-occupation, and as a dominant force within the PLO.

D. The Stance of the Left Concerning the Conflict Between Fatah and Hamas

Most remarks on the part played by the Left in the conflict between Fatah and Hamas were self-critical, and considered that the Left wasted its time and effort in attempts to reconcile the two antagonistic camps, instead of elaborating a national initiative that would provide an alternative to the agendas of these two forces competing to hold the reins of power while operating under conditions of occupation and siege. The demand was raised that the Left ought to have seized the opportunity to rebuild its popular base of the power struggle between the

two largest organizations, a struggle waged heedless of its implications for the national cause and the morale of the public both in Palestine proper and in the diasporas outside Palestine. The leftwing factions' excessive eagerness to appear neutral in this power struggle was ill received by a majority of the interviewees; the same applies to the dispersion the leftwing forces between the two antagonistic camps.

In fact, many expressed their concern over the possibility that ending the present power struggle

with an agreement between Fatah and Hamas on some form of power sharing might only offer the leftwing forces a marginal role. Coupled with this fear is an anticipation of a rigid two-party system that will put an end to the political and ideological pluralism that characterized the formation of the Palestinian national movement before 1948, as well as after the founding of the PLO before it was marginalized by the PA which is now monopolized by two organizations each in their own "territory". The present conflict has become a direct threat to the gears of democracy and secularism.

The current politico-geographic divide (between Hamas and Fatah) aggravated the condition of weakness and vulnerability affecting the Palestinian political field. Its institution-

alization has also generated more exposure to external intervention (from Israel and other regional powers) in the details of political, financial, administrative, economic, and security matters. This is most apparent in Israel's acceleration of its colonial settlement policy to the maximum, and its policy of creating population ghettos inside the West Bank, forcefully Judaizing Jerusalem, institutionalizing racist segregation, blockading Gaza and waging war on its inhabitants in December 2008 and January 2009 mounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Left has failed so far to present itself as the historic bloc that is most concerned for the Palestinian national cause, is the closest to the concerns and interests of the majority of Palestinians, and the readiest to defend these interests.

E. The Left's Vision of the Requirements of its Resurgence and its Readiness to Take the Initiative

It is not difficult to guess, for both the partisan and non-partisan left, that the prolongation of this state of affairs will lead to more erosion, marginalization, and demise. Diagnosing the subjective causes of the regression of the Left in the past two decades has, by and large, revealed what is needed to bring this decline to a halt, and create a state of resurgence despite the severe obstacles and grave challenges generated by the objective conditions. Following is an outline of the main lessons drawn from the Left's reflections on the causes of its present state.

First: Leftwing organizations need to undertake a major critical review of their organizational experience (on both the internal and popular levels), their political stances and ideological leanings, their relations with other leftwing forces, their overall national relationships, and their role in national institutions, as well as in popular and trade unions. This review would be of great benefit if it includes cadres and is not restricted to the leadership, if it is free of any contrived self-justification or putting the blame on others. It would be beneficial if this review is carried out collectively (on the level of the central committees of the leftwing political parties, for example) and with the participation of independent leftwing personalities.

Such a critical review would be a first step on the way to recovering Palestinian public confidence in the Left, especially if the results are openly publicized, and informed by the will to remedy and learn – if not, its results may be detrimental. If successful, this review could clarify the options of the Left identify its values and vision, and consequently, what set it apart from other political forces. It may also facilitate

achieving common understandings among left groups about important issues on the national agenda, starting from the problems of Palestinian national action given the obstructions to any just political solution, to the issues of political polarization, to the geographic fragmentation of the population generated by the politics of racist colonial settlement practiced by the Israeli occupation, to the forms of resistance that are most likely to tip the balance of political, economic, military, and moral power, to the issues of equality and social justice, the rights of women, secularism, and the methods of struggle, ending with the means of reinforcing the financial autonomy of the leftwing factions. To all this must be added the forms of re-organization and programming necessary for rebuilding the Left and renewing its social and cultural roles.

Second: the unification of leftwing parties is indispensable for the future resurgence of the Palestinian Left. Special interest was shown in attempts to unify initiatives in democratic, sector-oriented organizations of women, workers, and students. Interviewees stressed that party leaderships must refrain from intervening and hindering the efforts to unite these democratic frameworks. It is beyond doubt that the motive for this significant interest in the unity of the Left is apprehension about the present state of weakness, and its link to the state of disunion and dispersion of the Left to such an extent that many of its organizations have fallen under the influence of one or the other of the two major parties; i.e., Fatah and Hamas. The hoped for unity is a unity of all leftwing parties including the greatest number of independent leftwing personalities. However, the issue of unity was

(never mind the variety of formulas) not put forth as simply an administrative process, but was linked to some conditions, principally the renewal and democratization of the organizational structure of the united Left. The second condition emphasized openness to the public, in addition to openness to the Arab and international Left. The third condition is the necessity of linking the unification to expressing the Left's social and cultural vision, and its role in defending the interests and causes of the workers, the poor, women, and young people. Equally important is the necessity to bring economic issues to the center of the Left's interests, especially in relating economic policies to social ones and increasing the capacities of people's steadfastness.

Third: the cadres of leftwing organizations and the independents suggested more than one form for the unification of the Left. These are outlined in the following three versions:

a. The first calls for achieving some unifying arrangements as soon as possible to prevent any further decline of the Left under the present dominance of the two major parties in the Palestinian political field. As to the form of unity, it varies between complete integration in a new leftwing political party (from bottom to top), to some form of a front with differing degrees of internal organizational consistency, from a loose front similar to the Palestinian Leftwing Front announced in September 2008, to one with more advanced forms of unification including the unification of political stances, joint electoral lists, joint programs for sector-oriented frameworks (women, workers, students, teachers, etc). Some suggested generating common interests through establishing joint institutions to be run on professional bases to serve the Left as whole. Others proposed working together to create social movements focusing on certain national and social issues (resisting the Separation Wall and colonial settlement, the Judaization of Jerusalem, corruption, unemployment, poverty, women's status, boycotting Israeli products, environmental pollution, and so forth) and devoting their forces to marshal public opinion around these issues.

b. Some considered it hopeless to try to create any viable union within the leftwing forces unless the present leadership structures are changed, because they are considered the major impediment facing the unification of the Left. Prevailing personal and party-centric interests simply do not take into consideration the part to be played by the Left in this specific conjuncture. The old leadership must pass the helm to younger men and women. Most of these outdated and old leaders have nurtured a hostile vision of other leftwing forces, and taken to attributing greater importance to narrow-minded

partisan identity than to the wider leftwing identity, and that for very shaky reasons. This opinion insists on the fact that most of the Left's leadership is against unification because it would be detrimental to their positions and privileges, especially in the absence of democratic renewal, the "quota" system prevailing in PLO institutions, and the reliance of present-day leftwing organizations on PLO (PA) financial provision. Hence, it is a necessity to carry out the critical comprehensive revision and renew the structure of all leftwing political parties lest the process of unifying crisis-laden leftwing organizations gives birth to a new crisis-laden formation.

c. Some think that the unification of the Left could not take place in the absence of a leftwing pole capable of exerting a certain gravitational force on others, and that the presence of more than one leftwing pole (as is the case now) will keep the rivalry on, especially in the absence of any guarantee that the unification will yield the hoped for results within a reasonably short period. This is all the more serious if weighed against what the party leadership will lose in terms of positions, resources, and status if it joins in the new formation, even if this formation stands better chances in terms of popularity and electoral support. Here we go back again to the decisive role of the leadership in any process of unification. One leader summarized the situation as follows:

"The objective conditions push for the unity of the Palestinian left, but the subjective conditions are not ripe enough yet. I believe this needs more effort and time provided this takes place gradually considering the organizational obstacles that dominate the leftwing forces, and the current nonexistence of the capacity to join the national and the social agendas."

Another summarized the state of affairs as follows:

"The Left has no future unless it unites and elaborates a vision that sets it apart from the two major opposed parties (Fatah and Hamas). Implementing this task slams into the existing structures that have generated a state of continuity close to inertia. Some vested interests are attached to this inertia like to any other structure."

Fourth: There is a need to emphasize the fact that the unification of the Left is not sufficient in itself to generate its resurgence and re-establish its popular influence. Unification is not a magic recipe to reverse the waning of the Left and recuperate its role. That is why caution is called for to avoid transforming the motto of unification into an icon, or a redemptive doctrine. The unity of the Left is only a means to be put at the

service of a host of goals. Therefore, it is essential to keep in mind that

a. Developing a detailed and diligent focus on social and livelihood issues as encountered in villages, refugee camps, and towns. This means that it is not enough to raise the slogan of social justice if it is not translated into detailed action plans and policies in the areas of education, health, labor, and social security. This also includes many other issues such as the environment, municipal and local councils, infrastructure, and checkpoints, boycott of Israeli products, the Separation Wall, etc. The problem of equality should be spelled out in detailed plans and stances that begin with fighting corruption and include, but do not end, with women's rights and legal reform of family law and other critical legislation.

b. Unconditionally supporting the formation of a democratic leftwing women's coalition that will elaborate a common vision, for the liberation of Palestinian women in the present conjuncture. In the same vein, the leftwing political parties need to support the leftwing workers coalition that was launched in the summer of 2009 with the aim of uniting the Palestinian labor movement and reinforcing its role in the democratic social struggle nationwide. The efforts made to form unified democratic student organizations in universities need also to be supported which means putting an end to high-handed interventions in forming their electoral tickets.

c. Improving the Left's role in the struggle, after it waned drastically in the past two decades. This means that the Left has to put forth a vision that sets it apart from the Palestinian rightwing, be it secular (Fatah) or Islamic (Hamas).

Fifth: The Left need to adopt a strategy of popular resistance and limit armed resistance at the present stage - following a national agreement - to the occupied West Bank where colonial settlements exist and are expanding. Armed resistance should proceed according to a national strategy geared to serve the liberation struggle. Popular and armed resistances should also be linked to a nationally agreed upon strategy of negotiation. The prevailing opinion within the leftwing camp calls for achieving a national agreement on the forms of struggle and resistance - with due emphasis on the importance and necessity of popular resistance. It also emphasizes the necessity of reaching an agreement on the goals, and conditions of negotiation especially after the ascent of the radical Israeli right to power. This necessitates the unity of the leftwing factions as to strategy and political positions. This strategy is what sets the Palestinian Left apart from the Palestinian rightwing in political field.

Sixth: A wide difference in opinions appeared, even within the ranks of the same faction, when the issue of one democratic secular state in historic Palestine, instead of the two-state solution, was raised. The one-state option has the advantage of being the most just with regards to the rights of Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem, borders and the historic rights of the Palestinians. Despite Israel's constant efforts to jeopardize the establishment of a viable and independent Palestinian state, the two-state solution seems more feasible, for it has been agreed on in several resolutions made by the Palestinian National Council. The establishment of a Palestinian state within the borders of 1967 now enjoys wide Arab as well as international support. The balance of power seems closer to the two-state solution than to the one-state solution. A third opinion sees no antagonism between the above mentioned two solutions, and considers that a Palestinian state within the borders of 1967 could offer the transitional solution leading to the rise of the one democratic and secular state in historic Palestine.

Whatever the state option, it is essential that the Palestinian Left safeguard the national Palestinian narrative. It is crucial to confront the narrative that divides the history of the Palestinian people and deals with each of its components separately. The latter narrative reduces the problem of the Palestinian people to an issue of occupying the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, and misrepresents the issue of a people that was subjected to ethnic cleansing in 1948, and is now subjected to a system of apartheid, racist discrimination and settler-colonialism.

Seventh: There is a near consensus on the necessity of limiting the mandate of the PA to the social and livelihood affairs of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, conditioned to being accountable to the PLO as the sole political representative of the Palestinians. The majority considered it necessary to preserve the PA institutions to guarantee social, educational, and health services for the people, and to build an economy of resistance to occupation. At the same time there is an insistence on subjecting the PA to the control of PLO on condition of democratizing the latter and revitalizing its institutions. This will require a detailed elaboration of the relationship between the PLO institutions and those of the PA. The democratization of the PLO should take place through elections and proportional representation, or any other democratic means where and when elections are not feasible. In any case, it is imperative to lay the details of reform and the manner of revitalizing PLO institutions, their operations, and budgets so that reform will not turn out to be only formal.

There is a clear and justifiable concern over the possibility of an agreement between Fatah and Hamas that would completely marginalize leftwing parties or exclude them altogether. A bipartisan agreement (between Hamas and Fatah) to share power would make it possible to pass any resolution without taking into account the rest of the Palestinian polity. The other issue that deserves to be discussed is the program of PLO as the sole representative of all the Palestinian people.

Eighth: Two features currently characterize the Palestinian Left: the first is the worsening state of its financial resources; the second is the fading away of its network of relationships with the leftwing forces both in the Arab world and internationally. Hence the need to work out a strategy to develop its financial resources starting with membership fees because of their importance in motivating members to hold the various party organs accountable for their decisions. Equally important is to adapt a wise investment policy and insure a steady budget from the PLO as a due right and not as an ad hoc and arbitrary procedure. This might require adopting a law for political parties. Be it as it may, there is a need to institutionalize auditing the resources and expenditure of political organizations, and espouse complete transparency in this respect. The Left must rebuild its network of Arab and international relations with leftwing and progressive forces. It is in need, as one leftwing supporter commented, of a regional and international backer, to balance of the regional and international backers of Fatah and Hamas.

Urgent: Criticism, Unity, Strategy, Vision

To conclude, the most urgent tasks of the leftwing parties are: first, to undertake a major critical review of their organizational structure,

their political vision and ideological identity, their relations with each other, their relationships with other Palestinian political organizations, and their conception of how to revive national institutions, as well as popular and trade unions. Second, the Left needs to think about its present state of weakness, particularly of the divisions and fragmentation that has made the Left vulnerable to the influence of one or the other of the two rival parties. As one young cadre of the largest left faction put it; "the Left either unifies or will be forgotten by history". No doubt, unity is a necessary condition (though not sufficient) for the revival of the Left as a force to be reckoned with. Third, the Left needs to focus on social and livelihood issues that concern people in towns, villages and camps. This means that it is not enough to raise the slogans of equality, social justice, and emancipation if they are not translated into detailed action plans and policies in the areas of education, health, labor, and social security. Fourth, the Left needs to define a strategy of popular resistance to empower Palestinians in their major communities (i.e. in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; in the diasporas (*al-shataf*); inside Israel). This needs to be coupled with a vision that seeks to democratically renew and revitalize Palestinian national intuitions so as to represent the ambitions and interests of Palestinian people everywhere and not just those living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This necessitates defining clearly the function and responsibilities of the PA and those of PLO (after the democratic renewal of its institutions) and the relations of the one to the other.

One main task of any Left is to enrich society politically, socially, culturally and to intervene in moments of crisis to point the way out of the crisis. Indeed a society without an effective Left is a society that is abandoned to inhumane vicissitudes of the market and the callous agendas of the rightwing.

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