

Hamas: A Marxist appraisal

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The new *Nakba* taking place in Gaza has made it clearer than ever that the struggle for Palestine is a struggle against the entire system of capitalism and imperialism in the Middle East. Israel is a nuclear-armed ethno-state backed to the hilt by the US empire and all its allies. International organisations such as the UN have been powerless to intervene, reduced to putting out press releases pleading for aid to be restored. For months the Western media were uncritical cheerleaders of the Israeli genocide, regularly calling on supporters of the war while silencing Palestinians and their allies. Though the narrative is more mixed now, there is still an overwhelmingly pro-Zionist bias. As well, the Arab and Muslim regimes have been utterly passive in the face of this catastrophe, offering their tacit approval as Israel unleashes its destructive power against a defenceless population.

All of this can be explained with reference to the international system of profit and power. The Middle East is a strategically vital region for both oil and trade, and Israel is the most powerful state within it. Given the US is Israel's primary ally, there is no chance that NATO members or other US allies such as Australia will do anything to seriously challenge or constrain Israel's ambitions. And of course, institutions like the media are tools of the establishment, more likely to mindlessly reproduce imperialist propaganda than offer a critique. Within the Middle East, many of the region's most important countries - think Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE - have long been integrated into the Western orbit, and have been steadily normalising their relationships with Israel. Those that haven't are not interested in risking their own positions for the sake of solidarity with the Palestinians.

Within this situation, the first task of socialists across the world is to offer our solidarity to the Palestinians and their liberation struggle, and to respond to the endless lies and propaganda put out to justify Israel's racist existence. To do this socialists in Australia and across the world have thrown ourselves into organising protests, sit-ins, pickets, blockades, camps, strikes and forums to grow and deepen the movement. But in the midst of this vital activism, there's an urgent need to convince activists of the fundamental connection between capitalism and Palestinian oppression.

Within the broader movement, the question of Hamas looms large. For Israel and its allies, Hamas is a terrorist organisation, the latest manifestation of the savagery and violence inherent in the Arab peoples. Its very existence serves as a self-evident justification for Israel's most brutal actions. This argument reached its climax in the immediate aftermath of Hamas's military operation on October 7, which shook a complacent and rightward moving Israeli society to its core. Led by a vulnerable yet tenacious Netanyahu, Israel has sought to save face by launching an unprecedented assault on the people of Gaza, ludicrously justified as self-defence. The enormous casualties and cruelties

unleashed on the people of Palestine need not be described here, as they are well known and ever increasing. All of this has been outrageously justified as a campaign of self-defence against Hamas.

The issue of Hamas also arises in the international solidarity movement, often for opposite reasons. Many supporters of Palestine have little idea about the history, politics or practice of Hamas (or its allies in Hezbollah or the Houthis). They are seen simply as the only group willing to resist Israeli aggression, which leads many to fall into fairly uncritical support for its actions and leaders.

In developing an independent assessment of Hamas, we have to avoid simplistic reactions to Zionist propaganda or glorification of an abstract “resistance”. On one hand, we absolutely defend the Palestinians’ right to fight for self-determination, including with force. Yet defending these essential national rights does not require us to champion whatever organisation rises to the fore at a particular time, and certainly not to defend any and every tactic employed. That would be third world nationalism, not Marxism. Anti-imperialism is not as simple as putting a plus where the imperialists put a minus.

This article will therefore attempt to put forward a Marxist assessment of Hamas as a political organisation. It will begin by exploring the decline of secular nationalism across the region and in Palestine, compounded by the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) acceptance of the treasonous Oslo accords. By then exploring their conservative approach to governing Gaza, their cosy relationship with reactionary capitalist forces in the region, and their inconsistent struggle against Israel and imperialism, it will become apparent that Hamas is incapable of achieving any kind of Palestinian liberation.

Much discussion about Hamas focuses on their conservative religious views or their attitude to armed struggle. But while these factors are important, they are secondary. The most essential thing to establish is their position within the political economy of Palestinian society, which invariably shapes their attitude to a range of vital political, economic and strategic issues. My argument is that the organisation represents a conservative form of bourgeois nationalism, one that marks a qualitative degeneration from previous eras of mass resistance in Palestine. As a bourgeois force, it is totally incapable of mobilising the type of revolutionary mass movement required to defeat the imperialist powers that oppress the Palestinians alongside the workers and poor across the Middle East.

The rise of Hamas

In developing a serious analysis of Hamas, we should start with its rise as a political tendency in Palestinian society. Hamas has built for itself a profile as a resistance movement within Palestine and in the broader Arab and Muslim world on the back of its rejection of the disastrous Oslo Accords. Its commitment to resistance resonated with those who refused to placidly accept the status quo of Israeli dominance, and its heartland being the beleaguered Gaza Strip meant that it has been on the front line of substantial social, economic, military and cultural attack by the Israelis. All these factors, in addition to their long-standing and relatively efficient welfare networks, transformed Hamas from its origins as a marginal rival to the hegemonic PLO into the most popular political organisation in Palestine.

Hamas was launched in December 1987, just as the first Palestinian Intifada was kicking off. But its roots go back to the early part of the twentieth century, with the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood. Initiated in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna in the late 1920s, the Brotherhood developed into a transnational network of clerics and activists organised around a modern yet socially conservative brand of political Islam. The Brotherhood sought to build up their supporter base by

providing welfare services to the poor, funded by donations from the middle- and upper-class figures who led the organisation. This reliance on landowners, mosques and urban businessmen shaped its fierce hostility to Arab nationalism and the left. It was used as a weapon against socialists and nationalists throughout the anti-colonial era, and received substantial funding and support from the British puppet, King Farouk of Egypt. At various points during the Cold War the Brotherhood played an important role in fighting the left, both ideologically and physically. As reward the organisation would often receive funding and political support from various reactionary governments and sources.

In Palestine, the Brotherhood had only a small base in Gaza from before the *Nakba* of 1948. Though Islamism was always stronger in Gaza than the West Bank, it was largely sidelined by the secular nationalists for decades. Islamic organising only really began to gain mass influence in the 1970s. Having said that, the Islamists had been encouraged first by Egypt, then after 1954 by Israel. This had allowed generations of Islamic organisers to patiently embed their religious, cultural and welfare organisations and their ideology in the wider population even as the nationalists and the left were harshly repressed. [1]

The standing of political Islam was given an immense boost by the Iranian revolution of 1979. Though it started as a popular and democratic rebellion against the Western-backed Shah, Khomeini was able to hijack the revolution to install a repressive theocracy, assisted by the leading Stalinist organisations. Despite its authoritarian and reactionary nature, the new Islamic republic skilfully played on the themes of anti-imperialism and social justice and won an international following.

The seeming success of this new regime in challenging the West contrasted greatly with the disastrous policies of the secular nationalists who headed increasingly authoritarian and neoliberal nationalist governments across the region. These regimes were no longer interested in even pretending to stand with the people of Palestine, highlighted by Egypt's decision to make peace with Israel in 1978. The PLO had been unable to achieve any form of statehood; its terrible defeats in Jordan in 1970 and Lebanon in 1982 sent people looking elsewhere for inspiration.

The left in the Middle East, totally dominated by Stalinism, was also unable to pose an alternative. Communist parties and new left formations across the region largely tailed behind the reactionary post-colonial dictatorships, and in many cases even formed part of their pseudo-democratic governing coalitions. The Palestine Communist Party was never much of an attraction, having supported the partition of Palestinian territory in 1948 and for decades defended the right of Israel to exist, the most conservative position of any of the main Palestinian parties. The Popular and Democratic Fronts, which formed in a later era with an initially more radical platform, quickly moderated under the influence of their Stalinist "stages" theories and their opportunist alliances with reactionary figures such as Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein.

Having grown substantially as a result of their own efforts and the failure of the nationalist and left forces, the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood was coming under increasing pressure for refusing to engage in resistance to Israel. A minority split to form the more militant Islamic Jihad in 1981. As sentiment for rebellion grew in the build-up to the First Intifada, a fierce debate broke out regarding the future of the group. The traditional view of the organisation was that charity work and the gradual "Islamisation" of society was a precondition for any liberation struggle. The majority, however, had now come to the conclusion that it was impossible to delay their engagement in active resistance any longer. This wing of the party did not explicitly reject the importance of Islamic welfare work, but rather argued that religious proselytising could and should co-exist with armed resistance. In this way the organisation known as Hamas was born.

Already viewed with scepticism by the other factions, Hamas's inaugural intervention into

Palestinian politics did little to reassure its detractors. On one hand, it actively took part in the First Intifada along with everyone else. Yet even then there was a tendency towards militarising the struggle, and their activities were generally conducted separately from the other organisations grouped under the rubric of the PLO. Tareq Baqoni, author of *Hamas Contained*, summarises their sectarian and politically reactionary approach:

Rather than joining the local leadership that was coordinating with the PLO to sustain the uprising, Hamas openly competed against it... The leaflets it published were different in language and feel from those officially issued by the intifada's leadership. They introduced a religious element into an uprising that was not thought of by most Palestinians in particularly religious terms. Slogans from Hamas proliferated, its graffiti attacking Jews and Christians as well as secular nationalists. [2]

But like any mass rising, the Intifada could not sustain itself forever. Years of mobilisation and brutal repression saw thousands of leaders and activists imprisoned, and the base somewhat exhausted. The leader of the PLO, Yasser Arafat, picked this moment to start negotiations with Israel that have gone down in history as the Oslo Accords. From the outset these so-called "peace talks" were a trap to defuse the mass rebellion and convince the PLO to abandon central planks of its liberation program. But Arafat and the other bourgeois leaders of Fatah and the PLO were not simply victims of some Israeli trick: they were willing and active participants in the betrayal of the liberation struggle, selling all their principles for a cushy position within the international order of states. Sections of the left, alongside nationalist intellectuals like Edward Said, argued that Oslo would not grant Palestinians meaningful self-determination. But these criticisms were ignored, with Arafat and his team prepared to settle for a statelet consisting of Gaza and fragments of the West Bank. As a downpayment for this dubious result, the PLO accepted Israel's right to exist as a Jewish ethno-state, along with its right to control 80 percent of historic Palestine, and renounced the armed struggle.

The political structure of Palestinian life we know today essentially took shape in this period. In return for giving up every single principle of Palestinian liberation, the PLO was allowed to set up a pseudo-state structure in the form of the Palestinian Authority. Critics remarked that the PA was neither Palestinian nor an authority, with Israel granted indefinite control over security, borders, trade, water, electricity and a host of other functions typically carried out by a state. Oslo ultimately collapsed because Israel had no intention of giving the Palestinians a single concession. But the failure of the negotiators to achieve a deal at Camp David in 2000 angered the Palestinian street, who rightly felt they had given up much and received nothing in return.

Hamas had steadily gained support and authority among Palestinians by opposing this disastrous process every step of the way. They denounced Arafat's acceptance of the two-state solution, the growing security collaboration between Palestinian and Israeli forces and the tacit abandonment of Palestinian demands, including the right of refugees to return to their homes. Instead, it argued for a renewed resistance. It gained prestige from the Second Intifada, which definitely ended the Oslo process. This Second Intifada was a far more militarised affair than its earlier namesake, and far more under the control of the political factions. The rebellion saw guerrilla fighters from Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front engage in escalating armed attacks against Israeli targets. The mass of the population supported the uprising, but were far less involved than the last time around.

The end of Oslo, the Second Intifada and the election of a new Israeli government led by mass murderer Ariel Sharon pushed Hamas in new and contradictory directions. Hamas now sensed an opportunity to build on its support in Gaza and, for the first time, entrench itself as a leading faction

in Palestinian politics. It decided to run in a series of local and municipal elections in 2005 and 2006, and achieved strong results. It then decided, after much internal debate, to contest for positions in the Palestinian Authority (PA). This was a big step for the party, which had rejected the PA as the bastard child of the Oslo process. The PA has no real power or control over the Palestinian territories. It is instead better understood as a quisling government, a Palestinian Vichy, which receives international funding and support in exchange for administering - and repressing - the Palestinians on behalf of Israel.

Hamas saw running in these elections as a means of confirming their new role as a major party within the Palestinian establishment. Party spokesman Ghazi Hamad set out the new approach:

Hamas presented an alternative, we said *negotiations alone are not enough* [my emphasis] to achieve our rights. What is needed is a Palestinian-led strategy, with a genuine consensus over aims and a proper balance between political and military struggle. But we also said the priority was reform and change in the way we are governed. How can we promise Jerusalem and the right of return when we can't deliver our people a loaf of bread? [3]

This superficially attractive formulation entailed a lowering of horizons from liberation to successful governance under occupation, a shift that has entailed policing the armed factions, repressing rivals and political compromise. Initially, their goal was not to win outright, but to form a coalition with Fatah and the other existing parties. But Hamas-backed lists did surprisingly well, giving the party unexpected control of most urban councils and a substantial majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council. This shocking result transformed Palestinian politics.

Elected on a platform of "change and reform", Hamas promised a break with the previous ten years of negotiations and humiliation. Although it continued to defend the right to resist Israel's expanding occupation, the concept of resistance had now been radically redefined. Far from calling for a new round of protest or armed struggle, Hamas leaders offered modest promises: they would improve the corrupt and inefficient provision of essential services and walk away from negotiations that seemed one-sided. While on paper it upheld the long-term goal of unifying Palestine from the river to the sea, on repeated occasions Hamas offered Israel long-term truces based on the previously unthinkable: a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. [4] This programmatic convergence with Fatah and the PLO was designed to facilitate a coalition government. Even after winning a majority, Hamas offered Fatah a number of ministries - this despite the fact that the latter had an established history of collaboration with Israel and was led by US President George Bush's hand-picked stooge, Mahmoud Abbas.

But these historic concessions were not enough to placate Hamas's enemies. Israel and its Western allies refused to accept the democratic process, lightly dismissing the outcome of a free and fair election because they did not like the result. Israel, the US and the EU immediately cut financial, diplomatic and military ties to the PA and placed sanctions on the new government. Emboldened by these acts of aggression - and, presumably, behind the scenes lobbying - Mahmoud Abbas initiated a partially successful coup against the newly elected legislature. Hamas easily rebuffed Fatah to maintain control over Gaza, but Fatah was able to use their existing power to establish a dictatorship in the West Bank that lasts to this day. The result was a Palestinian polity now divided in two.

Israel responded to Hamas's victory by turning the Gaza Strip into a disaster zone, even before the latest offensive. They set out to punish the population for daring to elect Hamas. Prior to the latest

assault, more than 2 million people lived in the tiny territory, more than 50 percent of whom were unemployed. According to the UN Relief and Works Agency, around 80 percent of the population relied on international aid for their survival, and 95 percent lacked access to clean water due to systematic Israeli policies. The situation was established and maintained by a callous siege that denies the people of Gaza sufficient materials to live their lives. Israeli political and military leaders regularly talk of the need to “mow the lawn”:

Israel must wean itself from the naïve belief that improving the standard of living of the Palestinians in Gaza will reduce terror. Actually, the opposite is probably true. ... Israel [has] wisely adopted a patient military strategy of attrition or “mowing the grass,” which was conceived, first and foremost, to harm the enemy’s capabilities. [5]

This thinly coded language refers to the regular massacres of civilians in the Strip, and should put to rest once and for all the false narrative that Israel is merely responding to Palestinian provocations. The current genocidal attack is thus best understood as a new stage in this historic process of suppression and mass murder.

Hamas: repackaged bourgeois nationalism

When Hamas emerged from the 2006 elections as the most popular party in Palestine, it reflected the desire for a less corrupt and more resistance-oriented political leadership. Yet its time in government has seen it fall into many of the same practices and dead ends as its predecessors in Fatah and the PLO. Indeed, its slide from resistance organisation to an authoritarian regime prepared to negotiate with Israel was far more rapid than that of the PLO.

In Marxist terms, Hamas is a classic bourgeois nationalist party. While many of their founders were impoverished refugees and low ranking clerics, the organisation has since evolved to being an institution with an annual budget measuring in the tens of millions of dollars. Much like the PLO, the party is both pro-capitalist and pro-market. Many of its leaders are filthy rich and possess huge investment portfolios, particularly in Turkey and the Gulf. This wealth was accumulated through real estate, Islamic finance and skimming off the top of international aid destined for Gaza. The party has cultivated relations with a range of capitalists across the Muslim world, using them to bypass sanctions, open diplomatic doors and as a source of donations. Hamas also has close connections with wealthy Palestinians in Gaza. Among other things, these figures help to fund and run the tunnel network that Hamas runs as a sort of public-private partnership. This raises revenue for the group in the form of taxes and bribes. This layer has also profited from the agriculture and hospitality sectors, and generally enjoyed much better lives than the millions of regular Gazans. There was no debate within the party when Hamas proposed a wealthy Palestinian businessman to be the minister of economy, trade and industry in their first cabinet, and two of the three candidates seriously considered for the key post of prime minister were Palestinian capitalists. [6] This reflects the pro-capitalist attitudes of Hamas and the broader Muslim Brotherhood tendency within Islamism, which have always championed trade and private property as core pillars of society.

Many commentators and experts have documented the way in which Hamas has gradually moderated its politics over time. The factors behind this shift include their growing affiliations with sections of Palestinian and international capital, their situation in Gaza shifting the group from resistance to governance, and the objective challenges of dealing with Israel’s ongoing siege on Gaza. In any case, Hamas has clearly shifted further towards reconciliation with Fatah’s governing principles – if not always the organisation itself – and, in a contradictory and uneven way, the Israeli

occupation. Their practice right up until the attack on October 7, which will be discussed separately, also confirms this approach.

1. The Liberation of Palestine

The traditional position of the Palestinian liberation movement was - rightly - to refuse to recognise the legitimacy of the Israeli state. Facing a colonial settler project originally initiated by British imperialism on an indigenous population, the Palestinians were and are fully within their rights to demand the destruction of the structures of occupation and their replacement by democratic institutions open to all those who live in the area formerly known as Palestine. This perspective is not simply a more just alternative to the status quo. Rather, the very existence of the apartheid structures and the perpetual expansion of Israel - which has racism and imperialism encoded into its very DNA - precludes any lasting and just peace. The abandonment of this perspective in favour of the so-called two-state solution was a disastrous concession to imperialism and a symptom of the broader degeneration of the left and nationalist forces. Accepting the two-state solution and Israel's "right to exist" has never resulted in any gains for the Palestinian people. In fact after decades of negotiations and the creation of institutions designed to move in that direction, the situation for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank has never been worse.

As mentioned earlier, Hamas benefited greatly from being the largest faction to publicly and systematically oppose the Oslo Accords and the idea of a bantustan state. Article 13 of its first charter states that "so-called peaceful solutions and international conferences, are in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement". [7] The concept of a *hudna*, or long-term ceasefire, gradually entered their lexicon and has become an accepted element of their strategy. Based on a particular reading of Islamic texts, the concept developed as an attempt to straddle the conflicting requirements of diplomacy and resistance. It allows Hamas leaders to negotiate with Israel and the imperial powers while shielding the group from the accusation of selling out. [8]

Given all this, the persistent accusations that Hamas refuses to acknowledge Israel's supposed right to exist are cynical and disingenuous. In practice, Hamas has repeatedly accepted Israel's existence. Its 2017 charter maintains the organisation's formal opposition to the foundation of Israel, the Oslo Accords that recognise it, and the PA's subsequent collaboration with the Israel Defence Forces. But more importantly, the new document positions Hamas as a potential partner of government and negotiations within the framework of a reconstituted PLO, declaring the two-state solution to be a "formula of national consensus". [9]

But of course, what's written in a party's charter or platform is far less important than what the party says and does on a daily basis. In practice, Hamas's attitude to Israel looks strikingly similar to that of Fatah in the early years of Oslo. Thus in 2001, just as the Second Intifada was getting started, a leading figure in Hamas put out a leaflet explaining that "Hamas and Islamic Jihad may agree to a temporary ceasefire, for a set time period such as ten years, during which the Palestinian people can create their own state within the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital, without giving up one inch of historic Palestine". [10] In 2003 Hamas agreed to a unilateral ceasefire with Israel, and by 2005 Hamas had conceded further, signing up to the Cairo Declaration which promised to "maintain an atmosphere of calm" - that is, to stop attacks on Israel - in exchange for peace and the release of prisoners. [11] In the aftermath of their election victory in 2006 Hamas agreed to "'respect' all past agreements signed by the PLO, on the basis that they supposedly 'safeguard the interests of our people.'" [12]

But like Fatah before them, Hamas have gained nothing from this backsliding. Israel has never

accepted the Palestinian right to genuine self-determination, nor has it ever stopped building illegal settlements on stolen Palestinian land. Indeed, it refuses to even define its own borders. In January of this year, Netanyahu openly declared his opposition to ever granting the Palestinians any sort of statehood.

2. Anti-democratic rule

One of the tragedies of the Palestinian people is that they live with the weight of multiple layers of authoritarianism. They suffer under the genocidal Israeli occupation and the siege on Gaza imposed by Israel and Egypt, but also the authoritarian rule of the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

It's true to say that Hamas won a majority of seats in free elections back in 2006, and were immediately denied the chance to govern by Fatah and its imperialist supporters. In this sense, it's impossible to say whether they would have governed in a democratic manner given the chance. Yet the party has clearly grown comfortable with its position as unquestioned rulers of Gaza. Fatah and its subsidiary organisations in Gaza have been repressed repeatedly over the years, and while Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine can operate openly, they self-censor for fear of repression. Hamas have at times indicated they would tolerate new elections, but at other times indicated some wariness. Recently elected leader Yahya Sinwar made his reputation by personally executing a dozen Palestinians accused of being "collaborators" as part of his role heading up the organisation's feared Internal Security Force. While it's possible some of the accused *were* working with Israel, many were - and continue to be - killed simply for being gay. [13]

When it comes to class struggle, Hamas have proven totally reactionary. Their hostility to the organising efforts of workers and the poor was exposed early in 2019 when protests across Gaza threatened to spark a general strike under the slogan of "we want to live". [14] The movement was a response to persistently high unemployment in the Strip - not primarily Hamas's fault, of course, given Israel's siege - but also the government's decision to raise taxes on cigarettes and a series of essential food items. The protest demands included establishing a labour office to protect workers' rights, reduction of prices on staples, and the suspension of all taxes on essential goods. The protests were organised by a broad coalition of grassroots activists backed by every faction aside from Hamas and Islamic Jihad. When Mahmoud Abbas and the PA tried to use them as a means of undermining Hamas's rule in Gaza, the activists put out a statement clarifying their stance, which sheeted home the blame for the crisis first to Israel and Egypt, then to the PA for not paying the wages of their employees in Gaza, and only then to Hamas. [15]

None of this sophisticated messaging and political positioning stopped Hamas from physically crushing and politically slandering the movement. They responded by subjecting protesters to harsh beatings to drive them off the street. According to an excellent article by Salem Al-Rayes for the pro-resistance publication *Raseef22*, Hamas then arrested more than 1,000 people - including dozens of journalists and Palestinian human rights observers - whose cases were then referred to military courts. [16] The pretext was that stones were thrown; the Israelis would have been proud. All this repression was justified by depicting the movement as an agent of Israel and the right-wing Palestinian Authority. Thus the Hamas minister for refugee affairs, Atef Udwan, was quoted in an Emirati newspaper as asking protesters to leave: "Hamas will not fall and we will not hand over power to anyone, so for those who don't like this, the Rafah crossing is open for them to emigrate." [17]

The protesters also pointed to the huge inequality among Palestinians in and around Gaza. Some held signs saying "we want to live the same life of luxury, money and cars as Hamas' leaders' sons",

while one viral video featured a woman attacking the same injustice:

Are we forbidden from saying we are in pain? Let people say what they want, why do you oppress them? All of Gaza is unemployed. Our children have lost 12 years of their lives. Why? Each child of a Hamas official, as soon as he is 20 years old, will own an apartment, a car, a jeep, a building and be married, while our sons have nothing in this life. [18]

This sentiment has grown as Hamas has become increasingly corrupted by an extended period of one-party rule. The most infamous symbol of this is the extraordinary wealth of Hamas leaders and family members outside of Gaza, who live the decadent lives of luxury you would expect from members of the Gulf royal family. So while many supporters of Hamas are happy to cite Fanon's defence of anti-colonial violence approvingly, his denunciation of the corruption and self-interest among the post-colonial elite is at least as pertinent. His final book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, is famous for its defence of revolutionary violence, yet it is also filled with rage at the new class of local leaders that replaced the old colonial elite. The chapters on the perils of national consciousness and spontaneity are chock-full of insights as to the limits of bourgeois nationalism and the self-appointed leaders of the struggle:

Certain natives continue to profiteer and exploit the war, making their gains at the expense of the people, who as usual are prepared to sacrifice everything, and water their native soil with their blood. The militant who faces the colonialist war machine with the bare minimum of arms realises that while he is breaking down colonial oppression he is building up automatically yet another system of exploitation. This discovery is unpleasant, bitter, and sickening: and yet everything seemed to be so simple before: the bad people were on one side, and the good on the other. The clear, unreal, idyllic light of the beginning is followed by a semi-darkness that bewilders the senses. The people find out that the iniquitous fact of exploitation can wear a black face, or an Arab one; and they raise the cry of "Treason!" But the cry is mistaken; and the mistake must be corrected. The treason is not national, it is social. [19]

In the case of Palestine, the situation is even worse than Fanon imagined, because the elites have been corrupted while colonialism remains in place. Yet his insistence on grounding the failures of bourgeois nationalists in their material privileges is absolutely spot on, and is forgotten by third world nationalists.

As with ruling classes across the world, Hamas has attempted to use culture wars around issues of oppression to consolidate their popularity and clamp down on opposition. In Gaza this has taken the form of soft-Islamisation drives, and it is women who have been the most public and sustained victims of these efforts. [20] Hamas has attempted to force women to wear the hijab in public institutions and to ban them from smoking in public, along with other generalised policing of their behaviour. Resistance on the ground has resulted in many of these policies being abandoned or delayed. In one incident, two prominent women publicly unveiled themselves, in opposition to the increasing religiosity of Gazan society. In their public statement the activists were careful to blame Israel's siege and occupation, as well as Hamas, for the growth of conservative politics in the strip. [21] LGBT people have also been harassed and killed by the regime, on the reactionary basis that LGBT individuals can be more easily turned into informers. For all these reasons and more, as early as 2010 Palestinian researcher Khaled Hroub was arguing that:

The Islamization that has been forced upon the Gaza Strip - the suppression of social, cultural, and press freedoms that do not suit Hamas's view[s] - is an egregious deed that must be opposed. It is the reenactment, under a religious guise, of the experience of [other] totalitarian regimes and dictatorships. [22]

In practice then, Hamas have long abandoned the full liberation of Palestinian territory, and their rule over Gaza is characterised by pro-market and pro-rich policies, anti-democratic suppression of free speech and assembly, and conservative clericalism.

These experiences have led Gazans to be increasingly critical and distrusting of Hamas over the years. An extensive survey of Palestinian public opinion organised by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, conducted just before October 7 last year, found that just 32 percent of likely voters in Gaza would have voted for Hamas in hypothetical elections, with 32 percent preferring Fatah. This is down from 44.5 percent Hamas won in the 2006 legislative elections. [23]

Hams and the armed struggle

Despite Hamas offering endless concessions and compromises, Israel has refused to grant any of their core demands. The paralysing siege has been maintained, as have Israel's strict controls over food, migration, the economy, and everything else.

In this context, faced with endless Israeli oppression and a growing domestic hostility to Hamas's reactionary policies, armed resistance takes on a new meaning. To some extent it remains a tactic deployed to improve Hamas's negotiating hand, and at times has resulted in the release of Palestinian prisoners, a partial loosening of the siege, or some other minor concession. But just as importantly, the use of armed force is a form of political communication to a *Palestinian* audience, and is a proven way of winning mass support. For instance the October 7 attack has massively boosted its support among Palestinians and the wider Arab world, particularly in the West Bank. The same polling agency that identified cratering support for Hamas prior to October 7 found its popularity nearly doubled in Gaza and more than doubled across Gaza and the West Bank. [24]. This surge in public opinion would seem to be matched across much of the Arab world, where figures from Hamas's armed wing, such as Mohammed Deif and Yahya Sinwar, are lauded as heroes in the struggle against Israeli colonialism.

From a Marxist point of view, it has to be said directly that occupied peoples have the right to resist their oppression, including using armed force. Even bourgeois legal theory recognises this right, which is enshrined in the Geneva conventions of 1949. Resistance to unjust foreign and colonial occupation forms a core part of the folklore of countries as politically diverse as France, Iraq, India, and Vietnam. And there is no question that Palestine is being occupied, not just in lands stolen since 1967, as is usually understood, but across the land spanning from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. So armed resistance by Palestinians is a legitimate tactic.

Yet the Palestinian people have consistently been defined as terrorists for resisting the occupation of their country. From the very beginning of the Israeli occupation of their land, a racist narrative was established that distinguished between Arab savages and civilised European Jews. Israel and its Western allies opposed Palestinian resistance long before the existence of Hamas. This reflects an Israeli desire to crush any and all sources of opposition to the entrenchment and expansion of Israel's colonial expansion.

Confronted with endless Israeli violence and provocations, multiple generations of Palestinian

activists have insisted that resistance in general, and armed resistance in particular, is both their right and an absolute necessity. Yet given the overwhelming advantages possessed by the Israeli military, attempts at specifically *armed* resistance have generally failed to weaken the Israeli occupation or deliver lasting results. For decades Fatah oscillated between phases of armed struggle and tortured peace talks, neither of which effectively hindered Israel's colonial expansion. Oslo was their final surrender, but it could have been foretold from the very beginning, given the utopianism of their alternative strategy.

The First Intifada was a brief respite from this pattern precisely because of its mass character. Tens of thousands of Palestinians found their voice by taking part in the years-long uprising, which involved street protests, strikes, union organising, student actions, rent-strikes, boycotts and more. The mass nature of this resistance made it harder for the Israelis to unleash overwhelming violence, and gained the movement access to international support. Unfortunately, rather than build on the possibilities created by this movement, Arafat and Fatah sought to leverage it into hopeless peace talks that later became known as the Oslo Accords.

Hamas started on this journey from military resistance to diplomatic dead ends decades later, but has traversed similar ground. Their early attacks targeted the Israeli military and illegal settlements. This position was abandoned following the massacre of Palestinian worshippers at the Ibrahimi mosque by a fascist Israeli settler during Ramadan in 1994. This outrageous attack pushed Hamas to adopt a similar tactic of targeting civilians. But every attack by Hamas and other resistance groups was followed by Israeli reprisals, each more brutal than the last, a chain of escalating violence which led to thousands of dead Palestinians.

This campaign of terror attacks - the correct technical word for blowing up cafés or buses in civilian areas - continued for years, and was a total disaster for the Palestinians. It did not weaken the Israeli occupation one iota. In fact, the attacks gave Israel the excuse to expand and deepen its control over the West Bank and Jerusalem, including the construction of the apartheid wall. At the same time, it gave the Israelis and their international propaganda machine - otherwise known as the mainstream media - an excuse to smear the Palestinian movement. Less importantly, but still of some relevance, the attacks helped accelerate the Israeli public's trajectory towards the far right, and empowered the most militaristic and aggressive factions. So the campaign of terror attacks - which also included members of other factions, including Fatah - was a total disaster.

This failure to achieve anything positive is fairly typical of terrorist tactics, which is why Marxists have generally opposed them, from the Irish Troubles right back to the days of Bakunin and the Russian Narodniks. Even when they are successful, the type of secretive and minoritarian organising involved in these methods undermines the possibilities of democratic, let alone socialist, outcomes for the struggle.

After much internal and external debate, Hamas gave up the suicide bombing tactic in 2005. Aside from the most recent events on October 7, the crux of Hamas's military struggle in the last 20 years has involved the fairly indiscriminate firing of rockets towards Israel. News of a round of rocket fire is inevitably reported with breathless horror by international journalists based in Israel. But the reality is that Hamas's relatively primitive rockets pose almost no threat to Israeli society. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, just 21 people in Israel were killed by this method between 2000 and 2013, some of whom were temporary migrant workers. [25] By comparison, 183 Palestinians were murdered by Israel during peaceful protests at the Gaza border in 2018 alone. [26] So as a military tactic, rockets have proven woefully inadequate.

Supplementing the rocket attacks have been occasional incursions into Israeli territory, where Hamas and other armed groups seek to capture Israeli soldiers to trade for Palestinian political

prisoners and the slight loosening of the siege on Gaza. This tactic has been of some utility, at times forcing Israel to release thousands of Palestinian prisoners. But it is by nature a fairly defensive measure, with no prospects of ending the occupation.

In the aftermath of October 7, a debate has emerged on the left about how to respond to the attack, and by proxy, armed resistance more broadly. Many have adopted an approach of unconditional and uncritical support for Hamas and its military actions, celebrating October 7 as a moment of liberatory potential. But Marxists need to judge tactics concretely and politically. While armed self-defence and insurrection can be an important part of mass mobilisations, and certainly revolutions, the military aspect must always be subordinated to a broader political strategy.

There are two factors in assessing any tactic and strategy. The first is to judge whether it can assist in the struggle for Palestinian self-determination. Of course, no single act or campaign will achieve full liberation, so the assessment is whether it helps take the struggle even one small step forward, either by strengthening our side or weakening the enemy in some way. When judging the utility of any action, we should ask whether it contributes to the building of a movement that can achieve genuine liberation, and whether it is deployed as part of a coherent strategic vision to that end. That is as much true of a strike or protest, say for a wage rise or climate action, as it is of the armed struggle. The second is what type of social system and political dynamics are implicit in or unleashed by the method of struggle.

In Palestine, the armed struggle has always had an attraction due to the violence and brutality of the Israeli state. Through their resistance Palestinians have discovered and rediscovered their national pride and dignity. But the problem with any strategy that relies primarily on armed resistance is that Israel possesses by far the most powerful military in the region. Imperial powers have offered Israel billions in military and economic aid, meaning that its military capacities dwarf those of the Palestinians. And while the early PLO was rightly inspired by the heroic Vietnamese resistance to US occupation, the two situations are fundamentally different. The US empire could eventually be forced to retreat from Vietnam with its tail between its legs, but the Israeli ethno-state has nowhere to go, it must fight to the death. So while the willingness to participate in or support armed resistance often expresses the courageous refusal of the oppressed to give up their struggle for freedom, in the Palestinian context there are real limits to its utility. That's especially the case now that the Israeli state is an entrenched presence in the Middle East, with abundant weapons, deep pockets and powerful friends.

Even as Hamas have adopted many of the same principles of Fatah, their commitment to armed resistance has remained their primary distinguishing characteristic. There is no argument put forward about how sporadic rocket fire or kidnappings can help achieve a free Palestine. Indeed, aside from October 7, which took Israel totally by surprise, Hamas's attacks are fairly symbolic gestures. There is simply no possibility of a substantial *offensive* military victory against the Israeli army, and Hamas does not present a serious program to overcome the structural imbalance of power. In this sense, the armed resistance the party launches from time to time is more usefully understood as a political stunt, a means by which Hamas leaders exploit the admirable bravery and commitment of their rank and file to gain attention and assist the party in winning small improvements through their negotiations with Israel.

Of course stunts can be effective, if paired with a broader strategy. Yet as well as being incapable of defeating Israel, the armed struggle is also directly counterposed to the type of mass revolutionary resistance that can achieve the type of radical democracy and economic equality needed for true liberation for the Palestinians. Military struggle, especially by guerrilla fighters, is inherently top-down and secretive. Planned attacks cannot be promoted in advance, and its protagonists are restricted to small groups of fighters rather than the mass of the population. The evidence for this

counterposition is abundant. The radical potential of the Second Intifada was quickly subsumed by the armed attacks unleashed by the various political factions. A similar process took place in 2021, where an ongoing grassroots campaign of protests and strikes against the eviction of Palestinians from occupied East Jerusalem was essentially squashed after Hamas decided to fire rockets at Israel – and thereby initiate a cycle of violence. This action increased Hamas’s popularity as a national resistance force, but curtailed the possibilities of ongoing mass mobilisation. Even in countries where the armed struggle has succeeded, national liberation by this means did not deliver democratic results. So in Vietnam, Algeria and elsewhere, the elite bands of guerrilla fighters who led the national liberation struggles simply installed themselves as the new oppressive dictators. For socialists, who are not nationalists, but are interested in pushing every struggle towards revolutionary democracy and economic justice, such an outcome in Palestine would be totally unsatisfactory.

Perhaps the most damning proof that the armed struggle as carried out by Hamas poses no threat to Israel can be found in the actions of the Israelis themselves. Paula Caridi’s invaluable book on Hamas documents in detail how Israel has repeatedly intervened to prevent the party from silencing its armed wing. On multiple occasions the Palestinian factions have been close to agreeing to ceasefires based on a program of dialogue with Israel on the grounds of the Oslo agreements, only to have the talks sabotaged by Israel. During its suicide bombing phase, Hamas offered to stop targeting civilians on three separate occasions, on the proviso that Israel agreed to do the same. Israel did not agree. Another time, the Palestinians were close to negotiating a truce among themselves, and to abandon suicide attacks altogether. When Israel found out, they dropped a one tonne bomb on the home of a Hamas leader, scuttling the prospect for years to come. Caridi bases all this on the recollections of former MI6 agent Alastair Crooke, at the time a key advisor to the EU on Middle Eastern policy [27]

This history makes it clear that Israel has never been interested in peace with the Palestinians, and certainly not with Hamas. But it also reflects their supreme confidence that armed Palestinian resistance poses no threat to Israel’s survival. Reinforcing this point, Israeli journalists have recently exposed the extent to which Netanyahu had been happy to fund Hamas – including its military wing – via Qatar. His rationale was that maintaining the division between Hamas in Gaza and the PA in the West Bank precluded any implementation of a two-state solution. This strategy of supporting the Islamists to weaken Fatah goes back decades. But if Hamas or its strategy posed any fundamental threat to Israel, this would not have been a viable option.

To some extent, the events of the last six months have fundamentally transformed the situation. It is too soon to know exactly what Hamas was thinking in launching the attack on October 7, what the result of Israel’s murderous response will be, or indeed what will happen inside Israel itself. There are many, many moving parts. But already it’s clear that the military “achievements” of October 7, dramatic as they were, have not advanced the Palestinian cause by a single step. Never before has any Arab force done so much damage to Israel, and yet the result has been an unimaginable setback for the Palestinian cause, comparable only to the *Nakba* of 1948.

Hamas and its supporters have attempted to argue that the current situation marks a victory for the Palestinian cause. Sometimes it is argued that Hamas can claim credit for the current surge in public support for the Palestinians around the world. But this is a real stretch – by that logic Osama bin Laden could have taken credit for the historic movement against the Iraq War. The mass rallies have not occurred as a result of October 7, but despite it. They reflect a humanistic and solidaristic response to Israel’s genocidal massacre, and the integration of the Palestinian struggle within a broader anti-racist framework popular among sections of youth. Others have argued that Hamas simply needs to survive Israel’s onslaught to have achieved victory. But the best case scenario for Hamas is a new “truce” that allows them to maintain their hegemony over what’s left of a ravaged

and diminished Gaza. It is hard to see how anyone could argue that such a scenario would represent an advance for the people of Palestine from the status quo before the war. The fundamental error here is conflating Hamas's interests – for whom surviving the war would clearly be an achievement won at the expense of enormous Palestinian misery – with those of the Palestinians.

In any case, there is much yet to play out before a definitive judgement can be made on recent events. But for now we can say that the attack has given the bloodthirsty Israeli establishment an excuse to inflict an historic defeat of the Palestinian people. The numbers of Palestinian casualties and refugees are unprecedented, as is the physical obliteration of the Gaza Strip and Gaza City, Palestine's second largest urban centre. While it is understandable that people seek to psychologically cushion themselves from the terrible truths about the unfolding genocide, socialists have a responsibility to look reality in the face. How many more such "successes" can the Palestinian people afford?

Revolutionary alternatives

The Palestinians' struggle has oscillated between armed resistance and peace talks for decades, in two major cycles. The first was led by Fatah, starting around the time of the battle of Karamah in 1968, and ending with the betrayal of the Oslo agreement. The second was driven by Hamas, starting in the late 1990s, spurred on by growing frustration with Oslo, and ended with the decades of uneasy coexistence between Hamas and Israel. October 7 shattered that status quo, and it is too early to know what comes next. But regardless, it's clear that the bourgeois nationalist leaderships of both Fatah and Hamas have failed to bring the Palestinians a single step closer to liberation. In the words of Palestinian intellectual and journalist Haidar Eid, Palestinians face the choice "between the religious right and the secular right, while a necessary alternative is absent from the field". [28]

The fundamental reason is that both are trapped within the framework of bourgeois nationalism, which seeks simply to claim a place for Palestine in the international capitalist order. The problem with this perspective is that the Israelis and their imperial backers do not want such a situation, and have not accepted any limits to their colonial expansion. The Arab and Muslim states, which have been looked to for support by generations of Palestinian organisations, similarly have no interest in confronting the complex web of economic and geopolitical relationships that prop up Israel. Indeed, they are part of the system. The Palestinians cannot defeat the armed might of this international alliance of capitalist reaction on their own.

This is why the left has always understood the issue of Palestine as intrinsically linked to that of regional and global imperialism. Partly this is because the creation of Israel was never simply about disempowering the Palestinian people, but was an attempt to implant a loyal, pro-Western entity in a region that has enormous strategic significance due to its large oil reserves. Since its creation Israel has helped maintain first British and then American hegemony in the region, in the process disciplining any Arab states that have threatened to challenge the status quo, even in minor ways. Israel has been an attack dog that has sought to preserve the unequal economic and geopolitical structures of the Middle East and North Africa, often in conjunction with sections of the ruling class in the Arab world, most notably the Gulf States, to stem the revolutionary movements that have periodically swept the region. In this way the settler society set up by the Zionists has proven to be a highly effective outpost of Western imperialism.

There is also another reason it's important to understand the Palestinian struggle as a regional and even international one. This relates to the structure and nature of the society that has emerged as a result of the historical struggle between Zionist settlers and the indigenous Palestinian inhabitants.

In this case, rather than incorporate the indigenous population into the workforce as in South Africa, the European colonists attempted to ethnically cleanse the land entirely. But unlike in Australia, Canada and the US, the Zionists have not been so successful as to wipe out the vast majority of the original inhabitants. Instead, the numbers of settlers and indigenous inhabitants are roughly equal, with millions more Palestinians dispersed as refugees.

The result is a hybrid structure, where a highly sophisticated capitalist society has been built on top of and in opposition to the former inhabitants of the land, but one that is still forced to engage in frontier wars. The result is a perpetually mobilised and racialised Jewish society which, despite its various social and economic stratifications, is easily united against its Palestinian or Arab enemies. The Jewish Israeli working class has never acted from an internationalist perspective, prevented from doing so by the ideological prison owned and organised by the Jewish colonial elites. There are few countries on earth where nationalism has been more effective in deferring and distorting the dynamics of class struggle than Israel, and there is no prospect of this changing in the short to medium term.

At the same time, there is no sense in which the Palestinian working class is capable of fundamentally challenging the racist structures of Israeli society on its own, as occurred in South Africa during the 1980s. For Palestinians, the exclusionary and genocidal policies of Israel mean there is not a sufficient working-class base from which to launch a revolutionary insurrection against the racist superstructure of the Israeli state. There are a few hundred thousand Palestinian workers who live in the West Bank and work in Israel. Then within Israel itself there is a sizeable number of Palestinian workers. But it is the case that Palestinians are not central to production except in a few secondary areas like construction and agriculture. For the most part, Palestinians are forced to live on the margins of Israeli society. They are subject to its whims while lacking any serious capacity to influence its decision-making.

A regional strategy is necessary to find such a force, which is why Arab revolutionaries have long argued that the road to Jerusalem runs through Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus. There, millions of workers exist and have the capacity to bring down the capitalist and imperialist networks of power that dominate the region. Fatah's refusal to play a role in catalysing this sort of struggle saw the Palestinian movement and the broader left crushed in both Jordan and Lebanon through the 1970s and early '80s. An international movement that links the democratic and economic demands of the people of the region with freedom for Palestine is the only hope for justice.

The Arab Spring was a moment of momentous opportunity for the Palestinian cause. While enormous sympathy for Palestine was evinced as part of the Arab Spring of 2011, the Palestinian leaders failed to offer it meaningful political support or make demands for practical solidarity. Fatah, tied to the Saudi elites, essentially backed the old order. Hamas allied itself closely with the neoliberal government of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its co-thinkers internationally, which used Palestine as a fig leaf to distract from its reactionary economic and social policies. But this too was done out of pragmatism, rather than democratic principle. While Hamas initially supported the protest movement against the criminal Assad regime, when it became clear that Assad would survive thanks to the intervention of Iran and Russia they turned their back on the rebels and sided with the regime.

In contrast to these sordid dealings, a genuinely revolutionary resistance would have understood that the fate of Palestine lay with the fate of these revolutions. But as well as exposing the limits of Fatah and Hamas, the revolutions of 2011 and 2019 proved that simply overturning the old regimes and replacing them with another form of capitalist rule would not be sufficient to achieve the changes desired. Only a socialist revolutionary movement that sweeps the capitalists, militaries, the clerics and the sectarians from power across the region could then set its sights on Palestine. Such a

movement would necessarily be led by the working class, the only genuinely anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist force in the Middle East.

Today this argument is obscured by the fact that this new generation of Palestine supporters are being politicised in a context where working-class and socialist politics are at an historic nadir. This is true not only in the Middle East, but across much of the rest of the world. In this ideological vacuum it is common for people to fall into classless third world nationalism, manifesting now as “anti-colonial” discourse. In this rubric, Palestine supporters can find themselves cheering on the military stunts conducted by the Houthis in Yemen, the neoliberal South African government’s decision to take Israel to the International Court of Justice and the October 7 attack by Hamas. Each of these actions are believed to represent opposition to Western imperialism, but there is no broader strategic vision which would allow for a judgement about their efficacy or utility for the liberation movement.

This article has attempted to advance a more serious assessment of Hamas and its strategies. The Palestinian people have suffered far too much over the years, primarily at the hands of the Israelis, but also the Arab regimes, and due to the missteps and failures of their own leaders. The situation today in Gaza is intolerable. The strangulation of the Strip by Israeli and Egyptian forces has continued for over a decade, leaving many unable to access the most basic necessities of life. There have been no national elections since 2006, as Fatah and Hamas have preferred to entrench themselves in their respective bases than risk the political judgement of the people they claim to represent. Nor are there political parties that can challenge the domination of these two organisations, offering an alternative to their failed approaches. Meanwhile Israeli society continues its drift towards fascistic authoritarianism, backed by a bipartisan consensus in the US congress.

In this desperate situation, socialists have a duty to try to win this new generation of activists to a perspective that can actually achieve liberation. And while the conditions in Palestine make the development of popular resistance extraordinarily difficult, the heroism of the Great March of Return of 2018-19 indicates that Palestinian aspirations for a just future remain unextinguished. More than twelve months of continuous mass protests served to unify Gaza in an unprecedented way, led by independent activists who imposed a vision of collective struggle that harks back to the glory days of the First Intifada. In the context of a regional counter-revolution, this inspirational campaign failed to receive the practical and political solidarity that it both needed and deserved. Yet the movement highlighted one means by which the Palestinians can organise themselves to resist the occupation, and in the process reimpose themselves on the political imagination of progressives across the world.

Ultimately, the Palestinians, like workers and the poor the world over, need to develop a new revolutionary movement that can challenge the stifling, decades-long domination of bourgeois nationalists in Fatah and Hamas.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Caridi 2023, pp.61-3; Filiu 2012.

[2] Baconi 2018, p.25.

[3] Usher 2006, p.21.

[4] Caridi 2023, pp.171-78, Hroub 2010, pp.56-7.

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[13] Khoury & Kubovich 2024, Zilber 2023.

[14] Abuheweila and Kershner 2019.

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[19] Fanon 1963, pp.144-5.

[20] Kear 2018, pp.157-63.

[21] Kear 2018, p.162.

[22] Hroub 2010. His comments were republished on a right-wing site, for reasons that are fairly obvious, but he is no Israeli stooge. See Middle East Media Research Institute 2010.

[23] Shikaki 2024.

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