

Why isn't Hamas the same as the Algerian FLN?



By Clive Bradley

THE ALGERIAN war of independence, which ended in 1962, lasted eight years. It was bitter and bloody; according to some accounts, over a million people died. French colonialism considered Algeria part of France, although only the European settler colonists, the so-called *pieds noirs* , had full rights. The majority Arab and Berber population were second-class citizens facing brutal racism. The nationalist movement, the *Front de Libération Nationale* , (FLN), from the beginning of its military campaign launched terrorist attacks on civilian as well as military targets, and sometimes also on the French mainland (although there they did not target *cafés* , and so on, as they did in Algeria). The French army responded with utter brutality: massacres were carried out (and then massacres in retaliation by the FLN); torture was common.

One of the scandals of the Algerian war was that the mainstream French left failed to take an internationalist stand. The Socialists formed governments which continued colonial rule and all that went with it. The Communist Party did not support the struggle for independence; at times it supported the idea of it in the abstract, but certainly it did not support the FLN. All of this was unforgivable, and was sharply criticised by more radical forces (including Trotskyists), who

supported both the aim of full independence and those fighting for it.

There is no doubt that the FLN were ruthless, and frequently brutal, for instance in their attacks on civilians (dramatised in the film *Battle of Algiers*). Yet to equivocate on solidarity with them was to fail to fight oppression. Frantz Fanon, the Martinican theorist of "Third Worldism" who was closely involved with the FLN, also rightly denounced those liberals who opposed French oppression, but in the name of what it was doing, morally, to the French, rather than its Algerian victims.

The FLN, incidentally, although it had some links with Arab nationalists elsewhere, especially the Egyptian government, was more self-consciously "Islamic" than many other such movements, and the regime it installed in 1962 declared itself "Islamic".

Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine do not, as yet, command the levels of support the FLN had in Algeria. But they are growing, and in principle they could eclipse Fatah (the main faction inside the PLO). They have already eclipsed the old PLO Stalinoid left like the Popular and Democratic Fronts and the Communist Party. Even before then, they had widespread support, and it seems their most dramatic contribution to the struggle, the suicide bomber, has very considerable support among the Palestinian masses. A generation of youth wants to be martyrs. Isn't the basis of an internationalist stand as clear as it was for Algeria — and the same? Shouldn't we support Hamas, defend the suicide bombings (or at least their right to do them, even if we question their tactical wisdom)? Isn't our sharp opposition to Hamas just an abdication of revolutionary duty as bad as the failures of the French left over Algeria? (And wouldn't this judgement be even more true of Israeli socialists?)

This is not a small matter. If *Workers' Liberty* is wrong about Hamas, it is a very serious error. I think it is worth teasing the issues out in some detail.

The immediately obvious distinction between Algeria and Israel/Palestine is that Hamas' actions are not only chauvinistic towards Jews, but are aimed at the destruction of the Israeli Jewish national entity. The FLN may or may not have been chauvinistic towards the French (or towards the colonists), but either way the existence of France itself was never in question in the Algerian revolution.

But this in itself is not, I would argue, decisive. Hamas' attitude to the existence of Israel by itself might be only a chauvinistic expression of Palestinian nationalism — reprehensible, no doubt, but not of much real political weight. For one thing, whether Hamas would like to destroy the Israeli Jewish national entity or not, it does not possess the power to do so. Maybe some people in the FLN would have liked to destroy France, whatever that might mean, but even if they did, it was outside their power to do so. Someone refusing to support the FLN against the French army on the grounds that some people in the FLN wanted to destroy France would have been odd, not because it would be reasonable to want to destroy France, but because nobody in their right mind would think it could be achieved.

Hamas' programme has a different significance, however, because of the history of the region and because of previous attitudes towards Israel on the part of the Arab bourgeoisies (in particular on the part of non-Palestinian Arab bourgeoisies who have armies). Also its significance depends on an assessment of Islamism. And has an extra significance, for us, because of the attitudes of the British left. But in and of itself, that a section of the Palestinian national movement has a chauvinistic programme towards Israel, could not determine our overall attitude.

The PLO did not formally support a "two states" programme for Israel/Palestine until the late 1980s (in practice it was for two states since the 1973 war). But even when the PLO was fighting for a "democratic secular state",

i.e., formally, for the destruction of Israel, I think socialists could reasonably have said they “supported” the PLO. (WL did say this, and at the time we weren’t for two states, either). The PLO had the support of the big majority of the Palestinian people. If there was to be any short-term settlement, it would require Israel to negotiate with the PLO. Socialists would not “support” the PLO in a more specific sense, but in the same way that we would not support *any* bourgeois nationalist movement, rather than because of its programme regarding Israel. It was in a more limited sense that the PLO deserved our support — including for many of its military actions. Like the FLN, it was a bourgeois nationalist movement.

If we are right about Hamas, then, our opposition to it can’t be purely because of their programme regarding Israel.

Is making the parallel with “France” is making things a bit easy for ourselves?

Well, it is not *a priori*, and beyond argument, that the *pieds noirs* in Algeria constituted a national minority whose collective rights deserved to be protected against the chauvinistic programme of the FLN. If that were the case, terrorist attacks on cafes, massacres of civilians, etc, rather than essentially legitimate expressions of the nationalist, anti-colonial struggle, were outrageous attacks on the democratic rights of French-speaking people in Algeria.

Certainly, the *pieds noirs* were a sizeable population, by definition native to North Africa rather than Europe. If you can argue that the Jewish population in Palestine could be considered a nation by 1948 even though most of them were refugees, perhaps you could argue that the far more indigenous European-origin population of Algeria was a national minority.

Perhaps you could also argue that the wholehearted solidarity with the FLN advocated by the most radical voices of the day was based on a romantic, “third worldist” view of the world. In retrospect, the FLN, like other nationalist movements, had profoundly limited progressive potential. Socialist solidarity needed to stress the independence of the working class, and socialist organisation. (The mainstream Trotskyist movement was so enthusiastic in its support for the FLN that it saw them, like Tito, Castro, etc, as incipiently Marxist).

Is our attitude to Hamas just more hard-nosed and realistic? No these arguments do not stand up.

In Algeria, millions of Algerians were denied their right to self-determination — and denied in a particularly brutal and murderous way. (Straight after World War Two, French colonialism ushered in the new order by a dreadful massacre of Algerian nationalists. Perhaps 40,000 people were slaughtered in May 1945 in the town of Setif.) Algeria was a separate country forcibly controlled by France. The rights of a minority of colonists could not, by any democratic standard, be placed above the rights of the huge non-European majority. Moreover, abstract considerations of whether or not the *pieds noirs* were a national minority aside, the French in Algeria did not at any point demand minority rights, or a separate connection to France which allowed Algeria its independence. Their demand was for Algeria to remain incorporated into France — but denying the Arab and Berber majority any political rights.

In any case there was no way in which the French minority’s national rights, if you argue they had them, could be territorially expressed: they were an elite, defined by race and language, within the general population, not a territorially distinct group — in other words they were sociologically closer to the whites in South Africa than the Israeli Jews, although with even less claim to distinctness, as they considered themselves French and Algeria to be part of France.

Of course socialists should argue against chauvinism even towards this elite group, but it’s hard to see what demanding “national rights” for them could mean except denying such rights to the majority, to the Algerian people. In

South Africa in the 1970s and 80s, there was a debate about the concepts of “non-racialism” versus “black consciousness” (I’m simplifying). The most important independent unions defined themselves as non-racial, rather than “black”. In general, this was a more progressive attitude, i.e. it expressed a non-chauvinistic attitude towards whites. Black consciousness was not necessarily chauvinistic, although it tended to be so (not only towards whites but also towards “coloureds”, who sometimes were regarded as insufficiently black). Being non-chauvinistic towards whites is of course quite different from suggesting that whites deserved any collective rights in South Africa: in that context, collective rights could only mean the continuation, in some way, of apartheid. For this reason, “progressive”, or anti-racist white South Africans did not demand collective rights, but one person one vote.

It was the same in Algeria: collective rights for the *pieds noirs* necessarily entailed denying democratic rights to the majority. The *pieds noirs*, like the South African whites, were fighting for their privileges.

In the Middle East, it is perfectly possible for the Israeli Jews to have collective, national rights without denying those same rights to the Palestinian Arabs (and vice versa). The Israeli Jews of course have privileges, and to some degree it is privileges they seek to protect. But only to some degree: it’s not the whole story.

There is a version of support for movements like the Algerian war of independence which goes like this: we support the movement, the struggle, but not the organisation leading it. Or: we give no political support to the bourgeois nationalists although we would give them hypothetical military support (or advocate that socialists in a position to do so, do so), or form some kind of united front with them where possible. There are numerous historical examples: for instance China, where bourgeois nationalists had massacred communists, but where Trotsky still advocated a military united front against Japan.

Such distinctions are fine as far as they go. But by the end of the 1950s the FLN had an enormous level of popular support. To support “the struggle” without supporting the organisation conducting it was somewhat meaningless. Given the level of anti-FLN propaganda in France, there was a basic question of taking sides. And here was a case of a military conflict in which the basic idea of “defeatism” would seem to apply: if you support the objective of an independent Algeria, in the war being waged over whether Algeria should be independent, you support the victory of the Algerian nationalists. *In other words, democracy required supporting the military victory of the armed wing of the FLN over the French army.*

Socialists would still need to say that the working class of Algeria needed its independence, and so on. But bottom line: you would say you supported the military victory of the FLN, that is, the military defeat of France. You therefore supported the military campaign of the FLN. Reservations or not, *that would include the terrorist campaign.* At the very least — while reserving the right to criticise particular methods — you would defend the FLN’s right to whatever sort of struggle they saw fit to employ. To overdo your criticism, reservations about methods, and so on, would be to concede too much to the propagandists of colonial rule.

What of Hamas, then? As I have said above, it seems to me the argument for not applying identical standards to Hamas and Jihad cannot rest simply on Hamas’ attitude to the existence of Israel. Nor can opposition to the suicide bombings. There is, unquestionably, a Palestinian national question, i.e. the Palestinians have a right to a state, and on one level Hamas and the suicide bombers are engaged in the struggle to secure it. It should be said that if there was an argument for terrorist attacks on civilians in Algeria it was that it has-

tened independence: it put the FLN on the political map; it forced France to leave. On a similar level, the suicide bombings are keeping the question of Palestine on the map; they are confounding the efforts of the Israeli state to suppress the Palestinian struggle; they are symbols of an uncowed people, and at the same time political facts which the world can't ignore.

The reason the comparison with the FLN doesn't hold is that Hamas is not the same kind of political animal.

What distinguishes the militant Islamist groups from old-style bourgeois nationalists? If it is not straight-forwardly their position on the existence of Israel I don't mean to imply this is not a factor just that it is not the only one. Still the question is quite hard to answer. There are many ways in which the militant Islamists are *not* different from old-style bourgeois nationalists.

- They recruit from more or less the same milieu. In the Palestinian context, that's a) among petty bourgeois (mainly male) youth, often university educated; b) in refugee camps, and among the poorest and most dispossessed.

- They get money from Arab ruling classes, eg the Saudi ruling class, Iraq, etc.

- They articulate national demands — i.e. what feeds Hamas and makes it grow is the denial of national rights to the Palestinians: the people who join or support Hamas do so primarily for nationalist reasons, whatever the ideology.

The Islamists are anti-democratic, and so on; but it would be wrong to think the old-style nationalists are fabulous democrats or friends to working class socialists. Indeed, the appalling record of Arafat's repressive Palestine Authority is one of the factors feeding the growth of Hamas.

It is horribly easy to imagine a situation where the Islamists have completely eclipsed the more-or-less secular nationalists — in which case the Palestinian national movement, in effect, would be politically Islamist. So it would be wrong to think that the FLN, for example, and Hamas are distinguished by their level of popular support. I think Hamas is as yet way off the level of support the FLN had at the height of the war; but it is not a distinction in principle.

However the differences between groups like Hamas and the old-style bourgeois nationalists are decisive. These are some:

- Old-style nationalist movements, even if in practice they created undemocratic (even, outside the Middle East, Stalinist) states, drew their legitimacy from "the people" and some notion of popular sovereignty. The movement of masses of people under the banner of nationalism — in oppressed nations — is fundamentally and profoundly democratic, because it is about the establishment of popular sovereignty. Militant Islamism claims to draw its legitimacy from God.

- As a result, even though their practice might be quite different, nationalist movements articulate their demands in terms of "democracy", claim to be fighting for democracy, promise democracy in some form. The word "democracy" is sometimes used by Islamists; but their programme is for a theocratic state.

- Even where religion is an aspect of nationalist ideology (as it was in Algeria), it is used as a cultural reference, or medium of popular mobilisation, not as an alternative source of legitimacy to the people.

- Nationalists were, even when they had shades of religion in their ideology, avowedly secular in terms of the types of laws they wanted, and were sympathetic to secular thought. They were generally in favour of broadly progressive ideas towards, for instance, women's rights (though from above, bureaucratically, etc — indeed, in the Arab world, nationalist governments were sometimes insensitively secular, as in Tunisia's banning of the hijab, etc). The Islamists are implacably opposed to women's rights in any sense that has meaning for us.

- Ideologically, the Islamists are closed off from any form of debate which is not posed in Islamic terms. Of course Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism can

be narrow-minded and closed to rational debate. But with the Islamist movements, the blinkeredness is to a qualitatively greater degree.

● In the Palestinian context specifically: the secular democratic state was an Arab nationalist and implicitly chauvinist formula — but it was also an attempt to relate to the Jews, and other non-Muslims. An Islamic state (or rather, an Islamist one as they see it) would oppress religious as well as national minorities, not to mention secular individuals, etc.

● Even the most dogmatic advocates of the democratic secular state among the Palestinians attempted some kind of relationship with Israeli Jews, ie their non-chauvinism was, on one level, perfectly sincere. Indeed, the Palestinian national movement was always quite concerned to demonstrate that it was not anti-semitic, at least in any obvious sense. The Islamists often pedal anti-semitism of a European, fascist kind.

● Moreover, in the Palestinian national movement there were, from at least the early/mid-seventies, powerful voices in favour of recognising the national rights of the Jews. Mainly these were Stalinoid; but their attitude was not simply determined by Moscow. The Islamists will not countenance the right of Israel to exist.

● The targets of military action, including suicide bombings, at least at first, reflected different attitudes towards the Israeli Jews, and towards the programme of Israeli withdrawal, and two states. The nationalists aimed at targets in the West Bank and Gaza (including settlers), while Hamas aimed at civilians inside Israel. This distinction seems to have broken down more recently, as a result of increased Israeli repression and the growth of Hamas, and pressure on the nationalists (Fatah) from them.

● The growth of Hamas and Islamic Jihad are an expression of popular despair. The symbol of “martyrdom” — the notion that the best thing young militants can do in the cause of their people’s freedom is blow themselves up — is a measure of the depths of hopelessness among the Palestinians. A movement for freedom can’t be built on hopelessness in this way, promising glory in an afterlife.

Consider moments in human history which really were hopeless, but where people made a stand in the name of freedom — the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, for example. The Jews of Warsaw were doomed, but their resistance was predicated on hope, even if it was only the hope that their resistance would stand for something that could inspire future generations. The “martyrs” are seen as militants whose actions hasten the day of liberation — but increasingly this is the only revolutionary act on offer. As more kids want to be martyrs, the entire phenomenon implies a Palestine without its best militants, a society without its most passionate members, and without its youth... The suicide bomber is like a symbol for a whole society killing itself and taking its neighbours with it.

This is radically different from the civilian-targeted terrorism of the FLN. Those were actions with concrete objectives (and French withdrawal from Algeria was a rational objective in a sense that the disappearance of the Israelis is not). Martyrs to that cause might be killed. Or they might risk torture. But they didn’t choose to die or be tortured. They were prepared to die for an independent Algeria, but they presumably would prefer to live to see it. The FLN’s militancy was predicated on the hope for freedom that is the oxygen of genuine human progress.

In Algeria thirty years after coming to power, the FLN found themselves locked in a bloody civil war with the Islamists, who were poised to win a crushing victory in elections. It was not only supporters of the government who were to be killed or driven into exile by the Islamists but also independent socialists, feminists, and so on. It is beyond reasonable argument that however popular, the FIS

(Islamic Salvation Front) is a reactionary force, rather than, say, a movement taking on the progressive mantle of the FLN after the FLN itself became a corrupt governmental bureaucratic bloc.

Indeed, one of the measures of the nature of the Islamists, here as elsewhere, is that beyond what are in fact rather vague notions of Islamic law, it is extremely unclear what they will do to improve the lot of the dispossessed poor who support them. In Algeria and in Palestine they are movements which are good with the symbols of revolt, good with angry, militant posture, but have only the vaguest positive programme. They certainly have no programme at all to address social and economic inequality. As opposition movements they typically build through grass-roots programmes of education and social welfare, often through local mosques. How this translates into policy once they have state power is unclear. Where Islamists have taken power their primary policy is repression.

Nationalist movements, on the other hand, tend to have some idea of what they will do in power. The classic post-war nationalist movements, like the FLN, had, for example, a notion of drive for state-capitalist economic development. The details of these policies may have been arrived at through improvisation, but the general idea of promoting national development, reforming systems of land tenure and so on, were clear in advance. These were movements which combined ideas of national independence (from colonial or semi-colonial rulers) with programmes for economic growth. The Islamist movements have no programme of this sort at all, and offer no challenge to the centres of economic power. The social reformism they represent, even were it not straightforwardly reactionary (the hijab, etc), is one of individual Islamic piety: they are hardly policies for profound social change.

It is a curious paradox of the Islamist movements that their radicalism is entirely symbolic, entirely “protest” and militant action. To all intents and purposes, they have no policies for government whatsoever. In Iran, the Islamic Republic had plenty to say about women, thieves, homosexuals and Americans, and knew that it was continuing a violent campaign against the old regime and the left, but its economic policy was ultimately just old-fashioned capitalism.

Does nationalism still have positive social and economic substance in this way? Probably not. The era which produced the FLN and other bourgeois nationalists of their type is over. This is one of the problems because it is one of the sources of the Islamists’ strength. The secular Palestinian nationalists have extraordinarily little to offer: they can’t get Israel to grant them meaningful independence, and they can’t deliver economically. They can’t even get foreign powers to hand over substantial aid, never mind develop the Palestinian economy independently. And so Islamism represents despair. It is not an alternative economic and political programme, but a retreat from having one, trusting instead in God.

Old-style nationalism was for something positive and concrete in the real world. The Islamists of course have their ideology (or ideologies, plural, ranging from that of Sayyid Qutb to that of Khomeini) — but what it represents is essentially negative.

The FLN’s programme was for independence — the end of colonial rule, the constitution of Algeria as an independent nation, and for national development. From a socialist point of view there was much to criticise in these bourgeois nationalist conceptions of development. But regimes like the FLN in Algeria *did* achieve a level of national development in the sixties, and — with qualification — from a socialist point of view this was progressive. It had substance. Algeria today is very different to Algeria under French rule. Today, especially with globalisation and so on, such programmes have no grip. Indeed, they had run out of steam by the 1970s (Egypt, one of the models for this type of state-capitalist development, shifted away from it in the mid 1970s).

A programme for, say, an economically independent Palestine would today be utterly meaningless. The economic isolationism of that programme was always utopian. However in a scaled down (Algerian-type) version it used to have a perfectly sound rational basis from a bourgeois point of view. Now it does not. The only rational programme for social and economic development is international working-class socialism. For the Palestinians this means close economic links with Israel. These links already exist — for instance, a large number of Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza work inside Israel. A socialist programme needs to find ways to oppose the ways in which Israel's economic domination is a feature of its colonial-style control, while at the same time developing integration. (Socialist revolution throughout the region is also needed, of course). It would not be a socialist programme to call for an end to economic links between Palestine and Israel.

One of the arguments against two states is that it leaves Israel's economic domination intact, that the reality of the power relation between Israel and any Palestinian state condemns the latter to being a bantustan. (Today "bantustans" are being created in the Occupied Territories but that development is separate to this argument). It is true that Israeli economic domination can't be turned off at will, though why opponents of two states assume that a single state would guarantee economic and social equality is unclear. (Assuming the Israeli Jews were contended fellow citizens in a democratic secular state, they would still dominate it economically).

But there's another way of looking at this question. Economic and social progress depends on relaxing the tensions between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. Equality will be best served by a just, democratic peace. Blowing up restaurants in West Jerusalem does not help advance towards that goal.

But hold on. We're back where we started: moral outrage at suicide bombings in West Jerusalem, compared to solidarity with the FLN throwing grenades in cafes in Algiers. It was indeed one of the arguments of the pitiful French left that the Algerian and French peoples needed to be reconciled, and the grenades only deepened the divisions.

But their argument, recall, was in a context where Algeria was considered by France to be part of France. The Algerians throwing bombs in cafes did not want to be equal citizens in a French state (still less to incorporate France into an Islamic state). They wanted separation from France. To stop the grenades, France needed only to accept Algeria's independence. (France needed, I suppose, also to take some responsibility for its settlers who wanted to leave Algeria if they couldn't rule it). The dynamic in Israel/Palestine today is quite different.

The Islamist bombers will not be satisfied by Israeli withdrawal at least according to their stated aims. It seems that still a majority of Israelis accept in principle the right of the Palestinians to a state. Their support for Sharon, and for "transfer" (mass deportation) is due to fear of the bombers. (This is not to say the state they are willing to concede is a properly independent one, only that they exhibit different attitudes to the French towards Algeria). Finally, Israeli Jews and Palestinians live side by side — there is no Mediterranean sea between them. France and Algeria, after their bitterly fought war, could go about their separate business separately for a while. Jews and Arabs cannot — or rather, the attempt to do so, with the building of walls, and so on, is a recipe for further conflict rather than peace.