

Fatah lines up behind Abbas and threatens Barghouti

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9 December 2004

In the aftermath of Yasser Arafat's death, all the factions within his Fatah party have closed ranks behind Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen and have threatened his most serious electoral threat, Marwan Barghouti, with expulsion for having broken ranks by standing.

Fatah head Faraq Qaddumi has confirmed that Barghouti will be thrown out of the party unless he withdrew from the race for president of the Palestinian Authority (PA). "Marwan is one of our heroes," he said. "We hope he won't break the Palestinian consensus and destroy his reputation."

The al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a militant armed faction within Fatah, has also opposed Barghouti, with one of its leaders, Zachariaah Zubeidi, stating, "We will support the candidate of Fatah, the one over which there is consensus."

On November 25, Fatah's Revolutionary Council had voted in Ramallah, with two abstentions, to support Abbas's bid to succeed Arafat as PA president. Palestinian official Tayeb Abdel announced that Abbas was "the only candidate of the Fatah movement".

The Fatah leadership are determined that Abbas, who has already taken over Arafat's role as chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and has been a prominent opponent of the uprising against Israel, should succeed as president in elections set for January 9.

Abbas is the favoured candidate of the United States, Britain and Israel. He has been in discussions with US Secretary of State Colin Powell and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, who have been visiting the Middle East to bolster Abbas and Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei against the armed militant factions and parties. He has pledged to end completely the Palestinian uprising. "What is needed is a comprehensive and complete calm in the occupied territories," he said. Though he stated that success required Israel to "stop its attacks and assassinations in Palestine" and its "settlement activities and construction of the wall," Abbas stressed that there would be no preconditions for ending the four-year intifada.

Abbas told Powell and Straw that his first propriety was to get all the armed groups, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the al Aqsa brigades, to end their campaign of violence against Israel. The head of the Palestinian preventative security, Fatah member Rashid Abu Shbak, said that Fatah would merge its

armed militias, including the al Aqsa Brigades, and bring them under central control.

He told *Newsweek*, "After the elections, I am ready to meet at any time [Israeli Prime Minister] Sharon". He hoped that the Palestinian Authority would be in a position to take responsibility for security by the time that Israel withdraws from Gaza next year.

In response to a question from a *Newsweek* journalist about a comment he was supposed to have made in the Palestinian parliament saying that he would demand that Israel recognise the right of return for refugees, he replied, "I didn't say that. I am not talking about anything beyond the road map"—the US-sponsored plan offering a truncated Palestinian entity in return for ending all opposition to Israel.

Fatah's choice of Abbas again throws light into the constant efforts of Washington and Israel to portray Arafat as an obstacle to peace. Whereas Arafat had a popular social base amongst the Palestinian workers and peasants, Abbas has none. As such Arafat was unable to fully impose the scale of attacks on the democratic rights of the Palestinians that were expected of him after he signed the Oslo Accords in 1993. He balked at reaching a deal that involved surrendering the Palestinians' claim to East Jerusalem, their right of return to Israel, and access to water in return for a truncated and unviable mini-state precisely because it would necessitate the all-out suppression of the Palestinian masses on Israel's behalf. That was a step too far for a man who had led a popular nationalist movement.

No such restraint can be expected of Abbas or Qurei. Despite their long association with Arafat, they shed any links with the masses years earlier. Abbas is a businessman, widely reviled for his corruption and nepotism. He was closely involved with the disastrous Oslo Accords that established the interim Palestinian self government in the West Bank and Gaza, but which paved the way for Israel to double its settlements in the Occupied Territories, and exacerbated the already appalling social and economic plight of the Palestinians.

He is the representative of a tiny financial elite that have become millionaires on the back of the impoverishment of the overwhelming majority of Palestinians and whose continued financial success depends on their relations with the US, the Arab regimes and Israel. As such they are ready to suppress all

resistance to the Israeli occupation, even though they know this must provoke a violent confrontation within the Occupied Territories.

Though Abbas and Qurei represent the most right-wing elements within the Palestinian bourgeoisie, no tendency within Fatah or amongst its opponents offers a genuine alternative to their capitulationist stance.

The younger elements within Fatah refused to mount any challenge to Abbas, in part because they feared that any divisions would risk losing them the election and the powers of patronage that the control of the presidency gave them. The al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades issued a joint statement supporting Abbas and none of the younger faction leaders have sought election.

The supporters of Mohammed Dahlan, a former security minister who is one of a handful to acquire wealth in the share out of business opportunities after the 1993 Oslo Accords, were involved in armed clashes with Arafat's security forces in Gaza last July. Both he and Jibril Rajoub, Arafat's national security advisor in the West Bank, lined up behind Abbas. Neither have much popular support, and Dahlan is widely viewed as a stooge of the western powers. Only last month, masked gunmen started firing in the air as Abbas went to the mourning tent set up for Arafat in Gaza, shouting "no to Abbas and no to Dahlan" and accusing them both of being American spies. Two bodyguards were killed and there were reports that Dhalan's car was set alight.

The Islamic parties, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, that advance themselves as a more militant opposition to the secular nationalists of Fatah, have also left the way open for Abbas to assume the presidency and thus suppress the uprising and reach a deal with Israel. It has put up no candidates for the presidential elections and instead appealed to its supporters, but not the Palestinians as a whole, to boycott the election. It has said it will suspend attacks on Israel if it is included in a new Palestinian Authority government. At a recent meeting with Prime Minister Qurei, Hamas sought to be part of a collective national leadership, something that Arafat had always refused.

This has left Marwan Barghouti, the most popular Fatah leader after Arafat, as the main opposition candidate to Abbas amongst the total of nine standing.

There are conflicting estimates of the extent of popular support for Barghouti, with some polls even putting him marginally in the lead. What is certain is that he will win support from those seeking to oppose the Fatah leadership's readiness to do whatever Washington demands of them.

Barghouti, 43, is one of a younger generation of Palestinian leaders brought up under the Israeli occupation in the West Bank. He has become a symbol of Palestinian resistance to Israel. He is serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison for planning terrorist offences. He has always denied his involvement, claiming he was a political not a military leader.

For this reason, the PA did everything it could to prevent him

from standing. Palestinian cabinet minister Kadura Fares spent several hours persuading Barghouti not to challenge Abbas in the elections and said afterwards that he had pulled out to avoid splitting Fatah and was "calling upon the sons of the movement and his supporters to support the movement's nominee Mahmoud Abbas".

But at the last moment, Barghouti's wife filed his nomination papers, saying that he would stand as an independent candidate. She had spent five hours with him in jail, her first visit since his arrest in April 2002. Israel granted permission for a visit by her and two Palestinian officials in the hope that they would dissuade him from running for election. It appears that Barghouti changed his mind when it became clear that Abbas would not make Barghouti's release from jail a precondition for talks with Israel.

Like Abbas, however, Barghouti supports talks with Israel over the establishment of a mini-Palestinian state based on a type of comprador capitalism that would remain completely dependent on the largesse of its more powerful neighbour. He differs only in his advocacy of continuing armed resistance to the occupation, as a means of exerting additional pressure for Israeli concessions. Political commentators are still not discounting the possibility of a deal that will yet see Barghouti withdraw his nomination.

The promotion of Abbas by Fatah is only a specific expression of the failure of the movement's nationalist perspective of establishing a secular Palestinian state through a combination of armed struggle and negotiations with Israel. And one cannot oppose the betrayals of the national bourgeoisie simply by advocating a continuation of popular protest and low-level armed resistance to the Israeli occupation, which has so clearly failed to defeat the Zionist regime and its imperialist backers.

What is needed is the adoption of an alternative perspective based on the independent political mobilisation of the working class on a socialist programme—one which no nominal oppositional faction within or outside Fatah is prepared to contemplate. The liberation of the Palestinian people from their social, economic and political oppression requires a united offensive by the entire Arab working class with their class brothers and sisters in Israel in a secular and socialist movement against capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination. And this requires that workers reject all appeals for national unity behind Abbas or any other representative of the Arab bourgeoisie and begin the construction of their own party.



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