

Palestinians demand end of Abbas presidency after death of activist

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For four days, tens of thousands of Palestinians have taken to the streets across the West Bank demanding an end to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the presidency of Mahmoud Abbas. The mass anti-PA protests followed the death of Nazar Banat, an activist and critic of the PA, who died after being arrested and beaten by security forces on Thursday morning.

Protesters marched through the streets accusing the PA of killing Banat and chanting slogans that included “Go away, go away, Abbas,” “Abu Mazen [Abbas] is a traitor,” “The people say, ‘Down with the Authority!’” and “The people want to overthrow the regime!”

Some 15,000 people took part in Banat’s funeral procession in the southern city of Hebron on Friday, chanting, “Your blood won’t be in vain,” while several hundred Palestinians gathered for Friday prayers at the al-Aqsa mosque in occupied East Jerusalem, chanting anti-Abbas slogans and accusing the PA of acting as “Israel’s spies.”

More demonstrations are planned, while protests in support have taken place internationally, in Boston, Beirut, London and Amman.

The protests highlight the growing anger on the part of the Palestinians over terrible economic and social conditions amid the systemic corruption of the PA, which serves as Israel’s subcontractor in the decades-long Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, while enriching a handful of Palestinian families. The PA is dominated by the Fatah movement within the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) that was led by Yasser Arafat, the international symbol of Palestinian resistance, until his death in 2004.

In a pre-dawn raid Thursday morning, at least 20 Palestinian security force officers arrested the 44-year-old father of five Nazar Banat, who had long been a vocal critic of Abbas and the PA on social media, excoriating the PA for its corruption, close security cooperation with Israel’s military forces and handling of the pandemic. One of his last Facebook posts attacked Abbas for his botched effort to

secure vaccines from Israel that turned out to be too close to their expiry date to be used in time.

A former member of Fatah, Banat had campaigned on the Freedom and Dignity List in the election that Abbas called off in April after it became clear his Fatah faction would lose. The PA cited as a pretext Israel’s refusal to guarantee that Palestinians in East Jerusalem would be able to vote. Suha Arafat, Arafat’s widow, called for PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh to resign after Banat’s murder.

Banat had been arrested and detained eight times in the last 14 years, most recently seven weeks ago, and survived several assassination attempts. He was, according to *Al-Jazeera*, in hiding and sleeping at the home of one of his uncles in the H2 area of Hebron that is under the direct control of Israel’s security forces, suggesting that the Israeli security forces had given the PA permission to enter the neighbourhood and arrest him.

The Hebron governorate claimed that Banat’s “health deteriorated” after his arrest and he was taken to hospital semi-conscious where he was later pronounced dead. A Palestinian coroner, however, stated that Banat had died within one hour of his arrest due to “blows to the body including to the head, chest, and lower and upper parts of his body,” with evidence of bruises and fractures across his body. This prompted an angry demonstration later that day in Ramallah, the seat of the PA administration, that was broken up with great force by the PA’s security forces.

Palestinian security forces launched tear gas and stun grenades against protesters in Ramallah on Saturday, attacking the crowd, hitting at least four journalists, including a reporter for the *Middle East Eye*, all of whom were clearly identifiable as reporters, and confiscating their mobile phones. They blocked demonstrators from approaching the presidential offices in the city centre, closing off the area and forcing shops to close. Video clips have circulated of plainclothes security forces beating and dragging a protester across the road. Other protests took place in Al-Bireh and Hebron.

While Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh has promised

an investigation, no one believes it will reveal the truth or that anyone will be held accountable or punished.

The United States, Canada and the European Union issued the usual pro forma expressions of concern over Banat's death, condemning the security services' actions. Such statements are utterly hypocritical given that the imperialist powers play a major role in funding, training and politically justifying the PA's security services in Israel's interest.

The PA's security services were set up under the 1993 Oslo Accords that criminalized the armed struggle while supposedly promising a mini-Palestinian state through negotiations with Israel. The various branches employ 83,000 people or one security officer for every 50 Palestinians in the occupied territories, one of the highest ratios in the world. They account for nearly half of all the PA's employees at a cost of almost \$1 billion, a sum equal to around 30 percent of total international aid to Palestinians.

Far from securing their safety from Israel's military oppression and settlement expansion, the PA's multiple security services serve to suppress the Palestinian people in the interests of the Israeli and Palestinian bourgeoisie, without even the fig leaf of democratic control, accountability or elections. The recently cancelled vote was the fifth abortive attempt to hold elections since the last in January 2006, when the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group Hamas, much to everyone's surprise, defeated Fatah.

Abbas suspended the PA's security coordination with Israel in May 2020 in protest over President Donald Trump's "deal of the century" that purported to bring "peace" based on Israel's annexation of the settlements, but he resumed relations with Israel in November when it became clear Democrat Joe Biden had won the presidency. This was despite the PA's rejection of the Abraham Accords under which the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain—with the green light from its puppet master Saudi Arabia--Morocco and Sudan established formal diplomatic relations with Israel.

Israel's withholding of the tax transfers due to the PA during the suspension of relations, amounting to some \$1 billion, brought the PA to the point of bankruptcy, forcing it to declare a state of emergency amid the COVID pandemic.

The resumption of security coordination with Israel signified Abbas's recognition that the PA cannot exert authority and its leaders secure access to privileges or wealth without the security services, as well as the tacit acceptance of the Abraham Accords.

This decision portended ever greater concessions to Israel, including the ending of payments to the families of the 4,500 Palestinian political prisoners held in Israel jails, to avoid Israel's punitive sanctions on the Palestinian banks transferring the funds. At the same time, the decision to

resume relations with Israel intensified the divisions within Fatah and antagonised Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has increasingly orientated towards Iran.

The 11-day assault on Gaza in May further discredited Abbas. The PA stood back as Israel violently suppressed protests in support of the Palestinians facing eviction in Sheikh Jarrah and other neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, stormed the al-Aqsa Mosque compound during Ramadan and bombed Gaza, bolstering Hamas's popularity.

Washington and the major powers have insisted that any aid for reconstruction in Gaza must be channelled through the PA in order to shore it up at the expense of Hamas, with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visiting Ramallah in May in a show of support for Abbas, whose approval rating has sunk to an all-time low.

The PA has stepped up its political arrests and the detention of people without trial in the West Bank as the Palestinians in the West Bank and Israel protested against the actions of the Israeli authorities in East Jerusalem, the vigilante gangs of Jewish extremists that incited violence in mixed towns and cities and the bombardment of Gaza. This comes amid Israel's arrest of more than 2,150, of whom 90 percent were Palestinian Israelis, up until June 10.

The situation has exacerbated the internal divisions within the PA, with Nasri Abu Jaish, the PA's minister of labour, resigning on Monday and pulling his Palestinian People's Party out of the PA due to "its lack of respect for laws and public freedoms."

The Palestinians' bitter experience has demonstrated the impossibility of combating imperialist machinations and capitalist exploitation without the political unification and independent mobilisation of the working class throughout the region against all sections of the bourgeoisie on a program of socialist internationalism.



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