

Abbas's resignation heralds escalating Israel-Palestine conflict

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Just four months after he was handpicked by Washington to head a Palestinian government and sideline Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman Yasser Arafat, and three months after shaking hands on the so-called "Road Map" to peace with US president George W. Bush and Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon at Aqaba, Mahmoud Abbas threw in the towel and resigned.

Within days, on Monday, September 10, two suicide bombs went off outside an army camp in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem, killing at least 14 and confirming that the so-called peace process is effectively dead.

Almost to a man, the world's media blamed Abbas's resignation on a power struggle with Arafat. By extension, Arafat is therefore also held responsible for preventing Abbas from using the Palestinian security forces to disarm militant groups opposed to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, who are in turn responsible for the suicide attacks on Israel. This stand was confirmed by Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security advisor, who said, "The leadership of the Palestinian Authority, the prime minister and his team, have been hamstrung by internal bickering."

Such an analysis explains nothing. How is it possible for someone backed by the US to lose a power struggle against someone the Israelis have kept cooped up in a bombed-out compound in Ramallah for the best part of 18 months, whose administrative structures have been destroyed by Israeli bombs, and who is forbidden to travel or even communicate with the outside world?

The aim of the media in making such a presentation of events is to conceal the real reason for the collapse of the Road Map and the consequent undermining of Abbas, which is the constantly escalating violence and murder being perpetrated by the Sharon government with the full support of Washington.

Abbas, known as Abu Mazen, is a businessman and advisor to the reactionary rulers of Qatar. He had little popular support. On the right wing of Arafat's Fatah movement, he played a key role in the secret talks that led to the failed Oslo Accords signed in 1993.

He was chosen by the Bush administration and propelled into a position of power, charged with ending the Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, in return for a promise of some kind of Palestinian self-government in parts of the West Bank and Gaza by 2005.

This was always a tall order for a man who was reviled as a US stooge by most Palestinians, given that what was on offer under the Road Map fell well short of the territory promised under the Oslo Accord, was not contiguous, and would exist as a series of ghettos surrounded on all sides by Israeli troops.

Imposing this sellout also meant disarming and suppressing the military wing of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah's Al Aqsa martyrs brigades and anyone else who opposed such a course of action.

But his task would have been made a little easier had Israel agreed to honour its side of the bargain, which was to end military incursions, halt the construction of illegal Zionist settlements and loosen its military and economic blockade of the Occupied Territories.

Abbas tried to do as he had been instructed. At the June 4 Aqaba summit, he publicly renounced the Intifada and acknowledged the past sufferings of the Jewish people without mentioning the squalor, misery and hardship that the Palestinians had suffered for decades both in exile and under the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Intensive arm-twisting by Abbas and his narrow circle of Palestinian businessmen, neighbouring Arab regimes and the White House led to a three-month ceasefire being called by Hamas et al at the end of June. But his efforts were to come to nothing because his signing onto the Road Map brought nothing but continued repression.

Sharon was intent on using the Road Map as little more than a façade behind which Israel could continue to expand its land grab of the West Bank with the eventual aim of destroying the Palestinian people as a national entity.

Despite promises to dismantle illegal Zionist settlements, the expansion of the settlements continued apace. Sharon also pressed ahead with building a 200-mile concrete wall separating Israel from the West Bank that constituted an additional land grab and served to further divide Palestinian families and villages.

Promises to release some of the 6,000 Palestinians detained—mostly without trial—in Israeli jails yielded only 340. And most of these were people held on ordinary criminal charges who had almost completed their sentences.

The closures, bypasses and roadblocks making travel between villages and towns in the occupied territories all but impossible continued without respite. So did the house demolitions, the deportations and the detentions without trial, while violence by Zionist settlers against Palestinians continued with impunity.

Most importantly, the ceasefire notwithstanding, Israel continued its policy of political assassinations. Helicopter gunships were used to kill suspected militants and their families.

Four Israeli actions were benchmarks in the ongoing descent into chaos and violence:

- * The attempted assassination of Hamas political leader Abd-al-Aziz al-Rantissi in Gaza city on June 10 provoked the June 11 suicide bombing of a Jerusalem bus by Hamas that left 17 dead and scores injured.

- * On August 14, Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) killed Islamic Jihad's senior official Mohammed Sider in the West Bank city of Hebron. Five days later, a suicide bombing on a bus by an Islamic militant

killed 20 Israelis and wounded more than 100.

* Then, on August 21, an Israeli helicopter missile strike on a car in Gaza City killed senior Hamas militant leader Ismail Abu Shanab and two bodyguards. Hamas and Islamic Jihad responded by stating that they no longer felt bound by a three-month unilateral ceasefire they declared on June 29.

* Finally, on September 6, within hours of Abbas announcing his resignation, Israeli aircraft bombed a meeting of the Hamas leadership in a botched attempt to assassinate Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the 67-year-old leader of Hamas, and all the other leaders of the Islamic organisation, in the full knowledge that such action must inevitably provoke attacks such as the latest suicide bombings. Hamas had promised to “open up the gates of hell,” and mass demonstrations had called for Sharon to be killed.

It is Sharon who has thus torpedoed the possibility of any negotiated settlement, while blaming retaliatory strikes by the Palestinians so that Israel can renege on its own obligations to withdraw from the Occupied Territories.

The Palestinians had ended the Intifada without gaining any amelioration of their utterly wretched social conditions, let alone moving any closer to their goal of political independence. This made Abbas’s position untenable. As one Fatah MP, Ahmad Al-Batsch, was quoted in the *Guardian* as saying, “If Abu Mazen had been capable of improving the life of the average Palestinian, his support would have grown. Don’t tell me Israel wanted Abu Mazen to succeed. If they wanted him to succeed, they would have done a few things to improve the lives of the Palestinians.”

Abbas had pinned his hopes on the US pressuring Israel to make concessions and stand by the terms of agreement. But in the event, it became clear to all that Sharon had the full support of the White House to do whatever he wanted. There was scarcely a word of criticism of Sharon, whatever atrocity he committed, and this was always accompanied by ever more strident demands that Abbas clamp down on dissident groups and a repeated insistence that Arafat was “part of the problem, not part of the solution.”

In the week before his resignation, Arafat’s supporters called Abbas a collaborator and a traitor. Arafat himself likened Abbas to Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, who is widely seen as a US puppet.

Behind the much vaunted “power struggle” therefore lay the refusal of the Palestinians to accept the plan drawn up by US imperialism for a ghetto state policed by Israel and her accomplices. To carry out Washington’s diktats required the deployment of the Palestinian security forces against Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Brigade. This would have resulted in a civil war in which it is most likely that Abbas would have been amongst the first casualties. Faced with Israel’s increasingly aggressive stance on the one hand and an angry Palestinian people calling for Sharon’s head on the other, Abbas had little choice but to quit.

Abbas’s resignation has not led to a change of course by Israel or Washington. Sharon predictably upped the ante by issuing a statement saying that Israel would not accept a new government controlled by Arafat or one of his loyalists. Not content with that, the health minister, Dan Naveh, called for Israel to expel Arafat immediately, while Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom told Israel Radio, “I think Arafat’s expulsion is an inevitable result after years of involvement in terrorism.”

Far from throwing the Palestinians any crumbs of support, the US has backed Israel and blamed the lack of progress on the Palestinians. Secretary of State Colin Powell, after slapping Israel on the wrist for

assassinating its political opponents, demanded that whoever replaces Abbas make internal repression his priority. “That person has to have political authority and the determination to go after terrorism. If that person does not make a solid commitment to follow the Road Map, go after terrorism and stop these terrorist attacks, then it is not clear that we’ll be able to move forward,” he said.

He also blamed Arafat for not supporting Abbas, declaring, “The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) and Mr. Arafat and other authorities within the Palestinian community did not give Mr. Abbas the resources he needed in order to go after Hamas. We will have to change that or else we will not find progress.”

With leading members of Sharon’s cabinet declaring that Arafat should be expelled from the Occupied Territories, such a call for change has ominous implications.

It is impossible to exaggerate the degree of recklessness and stupidity that animates a Middle East policy in the White House dictated by a fanatical alliance of Christian fundamentalist reactionaries and right-wing Zionists. They are backing Sharon to the hilt in his criminal activities, under conditions where the US and Britain are bogged down in the hugely unpopular occupation in Iraq.

An explosion of popular opposition is brewing amongst the Palestinians that represents a grave political danger for all the imperialist powers, particularly if Israel decides to make good on its threats against Arafat—the only popularly elected leader in the Arab world. Such Israeli repression could yet prove to be the nodal point around which opposition to US imperialism and mounting discontent with economic, social and political conditions throughout the region will coalesce.

And there is no government amongst the European powers that has demonstrated a greater degree of political perspicacity. The European Union (EU) has lined up behind the US and Sharon, by initiating steps to outlaw the political wing of Hamas and freeze its assets. Britain had been demanding for some time that the EU take action against Hamas but had faced opposition from France. This stance has now been abandoned by Paris.



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