

Factional warfare breaks out in Palestinian Authority

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The Palestinian Authority is wracked by factional conflict that has led to attacks on government buildings and a number of armed confrontations and shootings.

It has assumed the form of an opposition to the nepotism and corruption of the clique around Palestinian Authority (PA) President Yasser Arafat. But the banner of anti-corruption barely conceals a power struggle between disparate layers within the PA leadership.

In part this has been brought to the fore by efforts to manoeuvre for positions of influence prior to the expected withdrawal of Israeli troops and 7,500 settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005. But longer-lasting conflicts are involved over control of the West Bank as well as Gaza, and over Palestinian policy towards Israel and the proposals backed by the United States for the creation of a truncated Palestinian entity.

The conflict has centred on attempts to undermine Arafat's control of the PA's police and security apparatus, on which his power ultimately rests. It burst into the open on Friday July 16, when Arafat's chief police commander in Gaza, Ghazi Jabali, was kidnapped, as well as four French aid workers, by members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, which is affiliated to Arafat's own Fatah organisation. The kidnapping was ostensibly a protest against corruption within the PA by a group of militants, but was immediately seized on by Arafat's rival for power, PA Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei, who tendered his resignation the following day complaining of "unprecedented chaos."

His captors made Jabali read a videotaped statement admitting to crime, including embezzling millions in government money and sexually assaulting women.

Arafat was forced to declare a state of emergency. But his subsequent response to the kidnapping only added fuel to the fire. He first successfully negotiated for Jabala's release and then dismissed him. But he then appointed his nephew and chief of military intelligence, Moussa Arafat, as head of general security in both Gaza and the West Bank.

Moussa Arafat is hugely unpopular and is viewed as brutal and corrupt. His appointment only inflamed the situation in Gaza, prompting two public demonstrations against corruption within the PA. Members of Al Aqsa attacked the headquarters of the Palestinian security forces under Moussa Arafat's

command and burned it to the ground. The brigade also threatened to distribute leaflets listing the names of corrupt officials if reforms weren't forthcoming. Gun battles left more than a dozen wounded in the southern Gaza town of Rafah.

For their part, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the Islamic fundamentalist opposition to Fatah in Gaza, sent a letter demanding that Arafat implement political and security reforms, including broadening the government to include non-Arafat groups.

Arafat was forced to concede some ground, returning Moussa Arafat to a lesser post and reinstating Abdel-Razek al-Majadeh to the position. But he made clear he would go no further.

On Tuesday, July 20, Qurei finally bowed to Arafat's demands that he remain as prime minister. But he insisted that his was only a "caretaker government" and that he would resign unless Arafat ceded control over security services.

Al Aqsa dismissed Arafat's re-appointment of Majaida as "another attempt to fool people" and "a way of circumventing reforms and change on the part of the national administration."

That same day, gunmen wounded Arafat opponent and former Palestinian cabinet minister Nabil Amr, in an attack on his home in Ramallah. Amr had just given a television interview in which he criticised Arafat. Qurei condemned the shooting as a "cowardly attack".

The very next day, the Palestinian Legislative Council approved a resolution by 43 votes to 4 saying that the cabinet had "failed to fulfil its responsibility to control the domestic situation and improve the security of its people" and urging the acceptance of Qurei's resignation.

The speaker of the legislative council, Rawhi Fattuh, called for the creation of a national unity government that included "the entire Palestinian political spectrum".

The various factions involved in the struggle hold significant differences between them, but are united in feeling excluded from power by Arafat's ageing clique.

The most open political opponent of Arafat's secular nationalist leadership is the Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas, which is determined to secure its control of Gaza as an alternative power base to Arafat's West Bank stronghold and to secure a place in government.

Other opponents, such as Qurei and his predecessor,

Mahmoud Abbas, or Abu Mazen, who quit in 2003, represent a more fractious and disunited layer within the Palestinian bourgeoisie. However, they all view Arafat's domination of the PA as a block on their own ambitions—and a liability in securing an agreement with Washington guaranteeing limited autonomy over Gaza and parts of the West Bank and thereby securing their continuing ability to exploit the Palestinian working class.

Arafat also faces dissent from sections of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Rumoured to be led by the 42-year-old former security chief Mohammed Dahlan, these are younger layers of Fatah who feel excluded from power by Arafat's ageing coterie of supporters and family members. Though they are advocates of a more militant struggle against Israeli occupation, the desire to push the old guard aside is a more decisive element in their campaign against corruption and nepotism. They also feel threatened by the growing influence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as a result of an ostensibly more militant stance that has tapped into widespread disaffection with the PA's failure to secure social improvements or to establish a state through negotiations and accommodation with Israel and the imperialist powers.

Israel welcomes any development of a movement directed against Arafat, from whatever source, because they view him as the only figure capable of maintaining the unity of the PA and preventing its collapse. If Hamas comes to prominence, this provides Tel Aviv with an excuse for further military repression. But they clearly hope that Arafat will be deposed by the forces within the PA who are more ready to negotiate a filthy compromise. Israel's Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim told Israeli radio that he hoped "these developments will finally move Arafat to the sidelines, and so finally we will be able to talk to serious and responsible forces."

For its part, Washington seized on the fighting to reiterate its demand that Arafat step aside. Secretary of State Colin Powell told the media: "We believe the correct path forward involves Mr. Arafat yielding power, real executive power to a prime minister, for that prime minister to do what is needed for the Palestinian community. And when that happens, then we can get moving on a road map [to peace]."

Washington's demands were also echoed by the United Nations, with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan insisting that Arafat "should really take the time to listen to the prime minister and other members of his leadership."

Arafat bears ultimate political responsibility for the emergence of factional infighting because of the failure of his nationalist perspective of establishing a secular Palestinian state through a combination of armed struggle and negotiations with Israel. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Arafat concluded that it was no longer possible to continue opposing the now unchallenged dictates of the US in the Middle East. He signed up to the 1993 Oslo peace accords with Israel, in return for a promise of the creation of a truncated Palestinian state on

the West Bank and Gaza.

Instead, the ensuing decade saw an escalation by Israel in the construction of Zionist settlements in the Occupied Territories and the continued erosion of Palestinian living standards, which, following the provocative visit by current Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in September 2000 to the Temple Mount site of the Al Aqsa mosque surrounded by hundreds of soldiers, culminated in a second Intifada.

However, none of Arafat's opponents represent a genuine alternative to his failed perspective. Qurei, because he does not face exclusion, exile and possibly assassination by Israel and the US, is even more ready to collaborate with Washington and Tel Aviv. Al Aqsa only advocates a renewal of Fatah's failed perspective of armed struggle, but does not fundamentally differ from the old guard in its pro-capitalist class position.

Hamas suicide attacks and its welfare program have won support from an increasingly desperate Palestinian population. But, as demonstrated in Iran and elsewhere, its goal of establishing an Islamic state in Palestine would only constitute an alternative form of exploitation of the working class by a different section of the bourgeoisie. They have long been viewed by Tel Aviv as a useful tool for the destabilisation of the PA, and its suicide attacks have provided justification for repeated attacks and incursions by Israel. And, as evidenced in its plan to seize control of Gaza, Hamas has always been prepared to reach an accommodation with Israel provided that its own power base is secured.

The ongoing collapse of the PA cannot be prevented by extending any support to Arafat. He could only play the role of a Bonaparte holding the various factions of the Palestinian national movement together under conditions in which his promise of a democratic homeland in the Occupied Territories had not been so thoroughly refuted.

The Palestinian working class must instead break from the political influence of all factions of the Palestinian bourgeoisie and strike out on a new road of struggle. The liberation of the Palestinian people requires a united offensive of the entire Arab working class, in unity with their Israeli brothers and sisters, in a secular and socialist movement against capitalist exploitation and imperialist domination and for the creation of the United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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