

Mahmoud Abbas and the degeneration of the Palestinian national movement

Part One

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The following is the first of a two-part series. The concluding part will be posted tomorrow, February 17.

The cease fire announced by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheik comes just weeks after Abbas was elected to office. It demonstrates the degree to which his ascendancy has been bound up with the ruling Fatah faction's and the Palestinian Authority's abandonment of any opposition to the demands of Washington and Tel Aviv.

The cease fire has been billed as the start to implementing President George W Bush's "Road Map" and the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state. But there was no agreement on when talks would start on the "final status" of any Palestinian state, much less the thorny issues of East Jerusalem and the right of return for the Palestinian refugees.

Sharon, under pressure from the White House, agreed to end all military action, transfer security control of the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinian Authority, release 900 prisoners held in Israeli jails over the next three months, and implement other "confidence building" measures. But US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said that Washington would not pressure Israel to make further concessions until after the "disengagement plan" to withdraw settlers from Gaza and four outposts in the West Bank was completed. Most importantly any further moves will be dependent on Abbas suppressing all armed resistance to Israel, reining in the militant Islamic groups and centralising the various security services under his control. Rice even said that Washington would appoint a former US general to supervise the reform of the Palestinian security forces.

Abbas has already made strenuous efforts to appease Israel. Since coming to power on January 9, he has sought to persuade Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade to end their campaign of bombings against Israel. He has offered Hamas the prospect of sharing political power by agreeing to hold parliamentary elections in July that, given its success in the recent local elections in the West Bank and Gaza, should give Hamas political representation in the Palestinian Legislative Council. At the same time he has deployed over 8,000 police to Gaza in order to prevent rocket attacks on Israeli targets, and arrest suicide bombers.

Although Abbas has sought to cultivate Washington's support by carrying through measures against his own people that the Palestine Liberation Organisation's (PLO) long-time leader Yasser Arafat balked at, his present course nevertheless expresses the degeneration of the Palestinian nationalist movement as a whole—a degeneration rooted in the bourgeois character of the PLO itself.

The fundamental perspective of the PLO for the establishment of a Palestinian state has always been based on reaching an agreement with imperialism. This goal has been pursued through two

methods—negotiations and the armed struggle. While appearing to be opposed, they have always been essentially complementary. The final aim of the armed struggle has always been a negotiated settlement with imperialism, never the independent mobilisation of the working class and peasant masses. In other words, the acceptance by Abbas and the PLO leadership of a ceasefire, and its imposition, do not contradict the logic of the armed struggle, but arise organically from it.

The PLO was the most radical of national movements and established a mass popular base amongst broad sections of the Palestinian people due to its determined advocacy of armed struggle against Israel. But in essence its leadership represented the Palestinian bourgeoisie and its interests and not those of the masses, as it professed. National bourgeois organisations, however radical, are organically incapable of consistently leading an independent struggle against imperialism along a progressive and democratic route because their interests are, in the final analysis diametrically opposed to those of the working class and peasantry.

Whereas the Palestinian working class and peasantry saw the establishment of a national entity from the standpoint of reclaiming the land stolen since 1948 and ending oppression by imperialism and Zionism, the essential aim of the Palestinian bourgeoisie in its conflict with Israel is to establish its own class rule—which centres on its right to exploit the working class. As such its opposition to imperialism is always conditional and partial. Its aim is not to end imperialist domination, but to establish its own relations with the major imperialist powers that dominate the global economic order. At all times it seeks to oppose any independent political action by the working class that would threaten the basis of capitalist rule. Hence, even in its most radical period, the PLO insisted that it be recognised as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" and that its perspective for establishing a Palestinian state on the basis of capitalist property relations go unchallenged.

On this basis it was never possible to resolve the problems of national oppression and social exploitation. Not one of the states in the Middle East, even where the national revolutionary movements have been able to throw off colonial rule and had access to oil, was able to end the domination of the transnational banks and corporations or alleviate the dreadful social conditions of the working class and the rural poor. They have instead exchanged their colonial rulers or puppet kings for corrupt local bourgeois cliques. In this the PLO is proving to be no exception.

The oppression of the Palestinian people is not just the result of Israel's military strength but the treachery of the Arab bourgeoisie. As a direct result of their strategy of working through the various Arab regimes to achieve a Palestinian state, Arafat and the PLO were never able to achieve any independence from them or their imperialist backers.

Arafat's reliance on the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union for backing was no more successful. For a period the contest between Moscow and

Washington for hegemony over the Middle East provided various Arab bourgeois regimes with some bargaining power. But this was always limited by the dictates of the Stalinist bureaucracy's unprincipled manoeuvres with the imperialist powers and its own efforts to prevent social revolution at all costs. In the end it was the collapse of the Soviet Union due to Stalinism's efforts to restore capitalism under Gorbachev and Yeltsin that finally forced Arafat to seek a deal with US imperialism. And it was Abbas who was at his side during those crucial negotiations.

Who is Mahmoud Abbas?

Abbas's rise to power is due to the fact that he most consistently expresses the interests of the Palestinian bourgeoisie. He was born in 1935 in Safed, now in northern Israel, to a very prosperous merchant family. When the 1948 Arab-Israeli war broke out after the United Nations voted to establish a Zionist state on part of Palestine, then ruled under a UN Mandate by Britain, his family was one of the 750,000 who fled or were driven out of Palestine. His privileged social position enabled him to study law at Damascus University and then obtain a permit to work in the Qatar civil service before setting up his own business that was to make his fortune.

There were at the time thousands of Palestinian professionals working in the Gulf and he soon came into contact with Arafat's Palestine National Liberation Movement or Al Fatah, which was to become the core of the PLO. Al Fatah represented the most radical wing of the Palestinian bourgeois national movement. Its professed aim, the reclamation of the land seized by Israel and the creation of a democratic and secular Palestine, was to be achieved by armed struggle and attracted a popular base among the working class and the peasantry. But it always opposed a socialist perspective in favour of a capitalist Palestinian state. It was this class orientation that enabled Fatah to draw in the support of the more privileged layers, such as Abbas.

Abbas became an important fundraiser for Fatah and was responsible for establishing relations with the Arab regimes. He built up a network of powerful contacts that included Arab leaders and heads of intelligence services. He was able to do this because the PLO accepted the legitimacy of the Arab regimes and agreed to separate the Palestinian cause from the struggle of the Arab masses against the dictatorships and the semi-feudal dynasties that ruled over them.

Although Abbas went on to manage the PLO's finances, he was on the right wing of Fatah and was not a member of the PLO's inner circle, then led by Arafat, Abu Iyad and Abu Jihad. He had a stormy relationship with Arafat and there were long periods when the two men refused to speak to each other. He distanced himself from the PLO's terrorist activities and remained in Syria after Jordan's King Hussein savagely suppressed the Palestinians in what is known as Black September, 1970, expelling the PLO from Jordan and forcing them into Lebanon.

Abbas was one of the first PLO officials to recognise Israel and support the establishment of a mini-Palestinian state alongside Israel—the so-called two-state solution. In the late 1970s, he was instrumental in forging links between the Palestinians and the Israeli peace groups. From 1980, he headed the PLO's department for national and international relations.

He and Ahmed Qurei, the Palestinian prime minister, became close to Arafat only in 1988. That year Abbas was elected to the PLO executive. His rise to prominence was in part facilitated by Israel, which had a policy of targeting the PLO's radical leaders. Israeli security forces assassinated both Abu Iyad and Abu Jihad in 1988, thus setting the stage for the transfer of power to Fatah's right wing represented by Abbas and Qurei.

More fundamentally, Abbas was the beneficiary of two major political

shifts that were to drive the PLO into the arms of Washington.

Firstly, the turn by the Stalinist bureaucracy to dismantle the Soviet Union and align its foreign policy with the US meant that the PLO lost what little room for manoeuvre between the imperialist powers it once had. The collapse of the USSR left the US with an unprecedented opportunity to establish its global hegemony. In the context of the Middle East, this enabled George Bush senior to launch the Gulf war against Iraq in 1991. The PLO, having supported Saddam Hussein in a final attempt to secure a base from which to oppose both Israel and the US, was left completely isolated.

Secondly, the intifada, a spontaneous uprising of Palestinian workers and youth against Israeli occupation, broke out in December 1987 and was to last for the next four years. It not only shook the Israeli state and Washington, but also the Palestinian bourgeoisie—which feared that the revolutionary movement of the masses would escalate out of control in Palestine and elsewhere in the oil rich Middle East. The Palestinian capitalists in exile, whose interests Abbas reflected, saw this as a major threat to their own economic and social aspirations.

Confronted with militant youth and workers at home, the Palestinian bourgeoisie concluded that it needed the backing of US imperialism if it was ever to establish its own rule. It was these factors that led the newly reconstituted PLO leadership to renounce its armed struggle on the White House lawn. It marked the end of the PLO's grand illusion that it could resolve the Palestinian question without a settlement of the fundamental class questions in the Middle East.

These developments enabled the US to dictate the terms of the PLO's capitulation to Israel and the future form of any Palestinian state. It was Abbas who, after playing a key role in both the 1991 Madrid conference and the secret talks in Oslo, went on to sign the ill-fated 1993 Oslo Accords with Israel on behalf of the PLO, as the first stage towards an independent Palestinian state.

To be continued



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