

Mahmoud Abbas and the degeneration of the Palestinian national movement

Part Two

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The following is the conclusion of a two-part series. The first part was posted February 16.

Abbas, along with other wealthy Palestinian businessmen, returned to the Palestinian territories after Oslo. In 1995, he moved to Gaza and Ramallah and became secretary general of the PLO's executive committee in 1996. He played an important role in all the negotiations with Israel.

Oslo entailed the rejection of all forms of resistance to Israel, including the intifada, recognition of the state of Israel, renunciation of the PLO's claim to all but 22 percent of Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza), the establishment of a PLO-led interim Palestinian Authority (PA) that would take over most of the functions of the Israeli military authority, including police powers and internal security, while leaving Israel in charge of foreign policy, defence, the protection of Israeli settlements, and control of borders and crossings into Israel. The final borders, the status of East Jerusalem, control of water resources and the right of return for Palestinian refugees were left open for negotiation.

From the perspective of US imperialism and the Zionist state, the Palestinian bourgeoisie, as represented by the PLO, would be tasked with policing the Palestinian working class and ensuring Israel's security. From the perspective of the Palestinian bourgeoisie, who had amassed considerable assets in exile, even such a non-contiguous and essentially unviable state would enable them to expand their wealth through the exploitation of their own working class, guaranteed by their own repressive state apparatus.

It was this deal and the prospect of a state economically dependent upon and politically subordinate to Israel that made Gaza a stronghold of the Islamic fundamentalists. The fledgling state was characterised by cronyism and mismanagement, and the PLO became involved in acts of repression to secure the privileges of a thin bourgeois layer.

For the last decade, political and social relations in the Occupied Territories have been characterised by the attempts of the Palestinian Authority to reconcile an increasingly

impoverished and embittered population with the terms of the Oslo Accords. Such a situation was rendered all the more difficult by the refusal of successive Israeli governments to honour a single element of the agreement. The number of settlements and settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem more than doubled in the aftermath of Oslo.

Economic conditions also deteriorated. The military incursions, roadblocks, curfews, house demolitions, and detentions without trial continued. Israel's political agenda was increasingly driven by an ultranationalist right-wing group of religious and settler parties opposed to any concessions to the Palestinians.

Despite all this, the PA continued to try to reach a deal with Israel, until the Camp David talks of July 2000, when the Israeli Labour government of Ehud Barak made demands that Arafat could not accept: the loss of all of East Jerusalem and severe limitations of the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

An eruption of popular anger followed Sharon's provocative armed visit to the Temple Mount in September 2000. Abbas once again came forward as the most determined opponent of mass resistance to Israel, calling for an end to the second intifada. This convinced Washington and Tel Aviv to back him for the position of prime minister in 2003, as a counterweight to Arafat. His task was to end the intifada in return for a promise of some kind of Palestinian self-government in Gaza and the West Bank by 2005.

Abbas was forced to resign a few months later after losing an internal power-struggle with Arafat. It was Arafat's death in November 2004 that enabled Abbas to move with the utmost determination to meet the White House's expectations of him.

A comprador regime

Abbas heads a Palestinian Authority that functions as an instrument to suppress the Palestinian masses on behalf of the US, Israel and the Palestinian bourgeoisie itself. The Oslo Accords set out to create institutions that were not answerable to the wishes of the popular masses—stipulating a presidential regime backed by a council of elected deputies, as opposed to one based upon an elected parliament. The Accords brought loans and aid from international financial institutions to the nascent Palestinian Authority that facilitated the consolidation of a bourgeois ruling clique of an essentially comprador character—one that functions as the local representative of the financial and commercial powers, corporations and banks that dominate the global economy, and that owes its continued existence to the patronage of Washington, in particular.

The PA established itself as the political representative of the expatriate Palestinian bourgeoisie, many of whom belonged to pre-1948 patrician families and had used their time in exile to enrich themselves in the US, Europe and the Gulf. The PA, on their return, allowed them to set up monopolies controlling all the major commodities and services, and they went on to amass further fortunes.

Munib Masri and his family exemplify this social layer. The Texas-educated billionaire from Nablus returned to the West Bank from London at Arafat's invitation, joining his first cabinet and helping to set up and run the Palestinian Development and Investment Company (PADICO).

His brief was to "create investment opportunities" for expatriates in the fledgling economy. To this end, he courted Palestinian investors around the world and raised more than \$1 billion.

Granted monopolies by the PA, PADICO controls the PA's biggest manufacturing venture, a Gaza industrial park with its own Israeli customs post. It also dominates the Palestinian stock exchange and has large holdings in power generation, luxury hotels and real estate. It has significant stakes in other state-licensed monopolies such as telecommunications and electricity. Maher Masri is the PA's trade and industry minister.

Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei is himself a major shareholder in companies that have monopolies in cigarettes, preserves, dairy and other basic products. He has been accused of profiteering by selling cement to Israel to build its security wall.

Some years ago, the personal wealth of the PADICO board was estimated at about \$20 billion. To put this in context, the entire gross domestic product of the Occupied Territories is about \$3 billion.

The cost of profiteering and monopoly pricing has been borne by the Palestinian people. The PA has the largest number of police per capita in the world. One third of the

PA's budget is spent on security, not to resist Israel, but primarily to protect the thin Palestinian social layer at the top that has prospered since 1993.

It is no accident that the central theme of Abbas's acceptance speech was the need to curb the violence of armed groups and establish a monopoly of armed power by the Palestinian police force. This serves not only Israel's interests, but also those of Palestinian bourgeoisie.

The degeneration of the PLO demonstrates that there is no national road to the liberation of oppressed peoples. It is not possible to oppose either the Palestinian bourgeois elite or Israel on the basis of a continuation of the limited acts of resistance to Israeli security forces associated with the intifada, least of all by the suicide bombings advocated by the Islamist groups. These actions succeed only in deepening the divisions between Palestinian and Israeli workers, alienating other working people internationally and providing a pretext for further acts of Israeli repression. The Islamist groups themselves articulate only the interests of different sections of the Arab bourgeoisie that favour the creation of a religious rather than a secular bourgeois state.

A new political road is required that entails the construction of a socialist party of the working class. Under conditions of a globally integrated capitalist economy, only the perspective of socialist internationalism can provide a way forward. What is needed is a determined struggle to unite Palestinian workers with their class brothers in Israel, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the entire Middle East based upon a common struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression.

Concluded



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