

Abbas attempts a political coup on behalf of Washington

Jean Shaoul

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Mahmoud Abbas, the Fatah president of the Palestinian Authority, has announced that he will dissolve the recently elected parliament and call new presidential and parliamentary elections. Abbas aide Yasser Abed Rabbo told Associated Press that the president would set the date within a week, and that new elections would be held within three months.

The move is an unconstitutional attempt to unseat the Hamas-led government that has been engineered by the United States and Israel. It threatens to precipitate a full-scale civil war. Washington and Jerusalem also have the backing of European powers and are being aided and abetted by the Arab regimes Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf States.

The move by Abbas is the product of consultation with the Bush administration. Washington welcomed the announcement of fresh elections, saying that it hoped they would help end violence in the region. Britain and Spain also welcomed the call. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was in Cairo as part of a Middle East tour, urged other governments to back Abbas. Miri Eisin, a spokeswoman for the Israeli government, said that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert “respects Abu Mazen and hopes that he will have the capability to assert his leadership over all of the Palestinian people.”

Abbas echoed the position of the US and European Union in blaming the economic and political crisis created by Western sanctions on the refusal of Hamas to recognise Israel or participate in a government that would do so. The best solution, he said, would be to form a national unity government that would win the support of the Quartet (US, the European Union, United Nations and Russia) and enable the resumption of economic aid to Palestine. But months of talks between Hamas and Fatah have collapsed.

Hamas is vehemently opposed to new elections, having won a four-year term of office only last January with a landslide victory. It denounced the decision, calling it a coup against the Palestinian government and the will of the Palestinian people. Ahmed Yousef, an adviser to Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, said the call for elections was a recipe for violence. “I think this will lead to bloodshed because this is something against the constitution.”

“Abu Mazen is not part of the solution anymore. He is part of the problem now,” he continued.

Several Palestinian factions based in the Syrian capital, Damascus, and including Hamas’s leadership in exile, also rejected early elections. “Any step outside the context of the laws is rejected by us all and this is not just the position of Hamas,” said Damascus-based Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine supported the Hamas stance. Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Shallah, who met with Mashaal in Damascus, urged Hamas

and Fatah to reach an agreement, calling Abbas’s decision “lawless.”

Abbas also announced the revival of the Palestine Liberation Organisation negotiating department, implying that he was ready to go into talks with Israel and accede to its terms. A senior Israeli defence spokesman said, “This is a very important internal decision by the Palestinians, which creates a new opportunity to relinquish the path of terror and return to the negotiating table.”

The decision to call new elections must lead to an escalation of the internecine warfare now raging between Hamas and Fatah. There is every possibility that Abbas will use this to declare a state of emergency for 30 days. This would allow him to assume special powers, including those of the current government.

Abbas’s announcement has already sparked renewed fighting between Hamas and Fatah. It directly followed the attempted assassination of Haniya. Hamas accused Mohammed Dahlan, warlord and former Fatah chief of internal security in Gaza, of orchestrating the assassination attempt when Haniya was crossing the border into Gaza from Egypt after a tour of the Middle East to seek economic aid. Haniya had been detained at the border on the orders of Israel’s Defence Minister, Amir Peretz, who instructed the European monitors at the crossing to refuse his re-entry into Gaza.

Following seven hours of negotiations, the Fatah border guards let Haniya through after he left the money he had collected in Egypt. But his detention brought more than 1,000 Hamas members to the checkpoint, and armed clashes broke out during which a bodyguard was killed and 26 people were injured, including Haniya’s son. Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh told Israel’s Army Radio that government officials made the right decision not to let Haniyeh bring the money into Gaza, adding that if he had been killed, “I wouldn’t put up a mourning tent.”

Last Monday, masked gunmen fired on the car carrying the three young children of Colonel Baha Balousha, to school in Gaza City, killing them and their driver. Balousha is a Fatah intelligence officer and a leading prison interrogator during a Fatah crackdown on Hamas during the late 1990s. On Wednesday, Fatah gunmen killed Bassam El-Farra, a 32-year-old commander of Hamas’s military wing and Sharia judge, in Khan Yunis in southern Gaza. On Thursday, a gun battle broke out when Fatah security forces arrested Hisham Mukhaimer, a member of the Popular Resistance Committees, in Gaza City, in connection with the killing of the three young children. More than 40 Palestinians have been killed in factional fighting since March.

On Friday, the West Bank city of Ramallah became a battleground when Hamas supporters tried to march towards the town centre to celebrate the 19th anniversary of Hamas’s founding. They were met by a mass deployment of Fatah police, and 32 people were wounded

by stones and gunfire. In Gaza City, masked Hamas gunmen battled with Fatah-allied police near a security post, a block from the home of Mohammed Dahlan.

The Bush administration, once it came to power, opposed and sabotaged any negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. It supported Israel in its refusal to recognise Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat as a “partner for peace.” Arafat was kept under virtual house arrest and his government compound all but destroyed, after he refused to suppress the uprising that erupted after Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit to the Temple Mount in September 2000. This gave Sharon the green light to expand the Zionist settlements and launch attacks on the Palestinians when he subsequently came to power.

The White House favoured Abbas, a businessman, as prime minister, and Dahlan as his security chief, after both had indicated their willingness to crack down on militant Palestinian groups. Abbas was appointed as PM by Arafat on March 19, 2003—the very day Iraq was invaded.

At the time, Bush made a pretence of returning to Washington’s role as an “honest broker” in the long-running dispute and proposed the “Road Map” in late April in order to help British Prime Minister Tony Blair and various Arab regimes defend their support for the US-led war. While the Road Map reiterated the commitment to a Palestinian state, even beginning to implement its provisions was made conditional on the Palestinians ending all resistance to Israel. But Abbas, too, balked at the civil war that would have resulted from an attempt to impose the repressive measures demanded by Washington and Tel Aviv, and resigned in October.

On Arafat’s death in November 2004, the White House made clear that Abbas was the only acceptable candidate for the presidency. He assumed the post in January 2005.

By April 2004, Bush had effectively shelved his Road Map and accepted Sharon’s policy of “unilateral separation.” This meant drawing up Israel’s borders to permanently annex much of the West Bank and the whole of Jerusalem, leaving any future Palestinian state as little more than a few discontinuous Bantustans hemmed in behind an eight-metre-high concrete barrier.

A pattern was established in which Israel mounted repeated military assaults designed to provoke a violent response from militant groups that could be used as the pretext for jettisoning talks and tightening the border controls, road blocks and curfews that made the Palestinians’ lives unbearable. For its part, the US continuously reiterated that statehood was entirely dependent upon Abbas suppressing opposition to Israel.

But this policy was to backfire. Abbas’s close relations with the US, the increasing economic hardship imposed on the Palestinians by Israel and widespread government corruption only served to alienate the mass of the Palestinians from Fatah, and strengthen Hamas. As a result, Hamas won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections in January.

The consistent response by the US and Israel has been to seek to overthrow the government and to stoke up the tensions between Hamas and Fatah in the hope of precipitating civil war. Washington ensured that international sanctions prevented any economic aid from reaching the Palestinian government, while Israel withheld \$600 million in taxes due to the Palestinian Authority and threatened Hamas with the assassination of their leaders, including the prime minister himself.

Last summer, Israel launched a full-scale war on Gaza that killed

more than 300 people in order to scupper efforts to secure the acceptance by Hamas of the so-called “Prisoners’ Charter,” which accepted a “two-state” solution that implicitly recognised Israel, and tried to facilitate a common command structure between Hamas and Fatah.

It now appears that the US and Israel are preparing to subcontract the task of suppressing the Palestinians to Fatah. Washington has encouraged Abbas to strengthen the power of the presidency to counter the Hamas government, and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said she would ask Congress for tens of millions of dollars for Abbas’s security forces.

There is evidence that the US has been making preparations for the civil conflict that has been provoked by Abbas’s announcement for months. A report in the November 18 *Economist* noted that Lt. Gen. Kenneth Dayton, America’s security envoy to the Palestinians, had said that the Quartet should give up any hopes of a unity government and back Abbas by whatever means necessary to help him take on Hamas. The *Economist* cites a diplomatic source as saying that the other three members of the Quartet balked at this because it would be “tantamount to backing one side in a future civil war.”

Abbas’s announcement is in line with the hostile response of the Bush administration and Israel to the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group report that urges the US to make some concessions to the Palestinians as part of a wider initiative to stabilise the Middle East. The White House’s response echoes the dictum of Sharon: “When in crisis, escalate, escalate, escalate.” Nothing short of complete submission by the Palestinians to Washington’s dictates will do: the time has come for Abbas and neighbouring Arab bourgeoisies to impose this on the long-suffering Palestinians by brute force on Israel’s behalf.

To this end, according to an earlier report in the November 4 edition of the *Economist*, the US is already financing a “training camp” near the West Bank city of Jericho for the Palestinians’ Force 17, for new recruits for the presidential guard, as part of its plans for “security reform.” Israel has sanctioned the transfer of heavy weaponry from Jordan in the form of the Badr Brigade, a Jordanian-based division of the Palestinian Liberation Army, which operates largely under Jordanian command, and allowed Fatah’s militia, Tanzim, to rearm.

The *Economist* cites Abbas’s advisors as saying that these troops would provide the backbone of a force of tens of thousands to take on Hamas, whose own forces are said to number 5,700 in Gaza and 1,500 in the West Bank.



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