

Fatah's congress followed by hollow claims of a "new beginning"

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Fatah's first congress in 20 years was proclaimed by its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, as a "new beginning." That he was still in a position to do so is proof to the contrary.

Since assuming control of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Fatah has presided over a disastrous attempt to seek an accommodation with Israel and discredited itself in the process. Abbas is the personification of a corrupt and brutal regime, encircled by Israel and beholden to Washington and Tel Aviv. He is rarely seen outside Ramallah and spends most of his time in his villa in Jordan. While the Fatah leadership has enriched itself, the Palestinian masses face appalling levels of poverty, squalor and misery.

The congress took place after US President Barack Obama's recent diplomatic efforts to secure Israeli agreement to establishing a Palestinian mini-state as part of a broader realignment in the Middle East meant to secure the US's geo-strategic interests in the oil rich region. This would only encompass parts of the West Bank, not including East Jerusalem and the main settlements. In addition, it requires some resolution of the fate of Gaza, which is controlled by the Islamist movement, Hamas, which neither the Israel nor US presently recognise and have repeatedly sought to depose.

Billed as an attempt to bring forward a young leadership, draft a new party programme and restore its credibility among the Palestinians, Fatah's congress was motivated primarily by efforts to convince Israel and the US that it could be trusted to impose this agenda and successfully discipline and, if necessary, crush all popular opposition. It was held under the auspices of the Israeli state, which dictated who could attend, bearing witness to Fatah's direct dependence upon Israel and the US. Fatah's real role as the organisation of the Palestinian bourgeoisie was unmistakable: with delegations of cigar smoking men in business suits and expensive cars, whom the *Financial Times* aptly described as a "gerontocracy."

Media claims that the "new generation" of leaders is somehow more directly representative of residents of the

West Bank and Gaza than the "exiles" are false.

In the first place, there was a continuity of the "old guard." The 74-year-old Abbas, Washington's preferred replacement for and successor to Yasser Arafat, retained his position unopposed. This was despite widespread public hostility and renewed accusations that he had colluded with Israel in Arafat's death by poisoning—made by Farouq Qaddoumi, one of Arafat's closest associates and secretary general of Fatah's central committee.

While 12 of the 18 aged businessmen on the 23-strong central committee who were up for election lost their seats, some were replaced by loyal and trusted allies, such as Saeb Erakat, who has served for years as Arafat's and Abbas's chief negotiator with Israel.

Those newly elected were neither young nor new, much less representative of the oppressed Palestinian masses. Mainly in their late 40s and early 50s, they are in fact more closely associated than their predecessors with Fatah's political machinations with Israel and the brutal suppression of the Palestinians, often in direct collaboration with Mossad, the Israeli Defence Forces, and the CIA. They include two police chiefs and warlords, Mohammed Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub.

Dahlan's biography epitomises this layer. He joined the Fatah youth movement in 1981, aged 20. By 1986, he had been arrested 11 times by the Israeli police and served numerous terms in jail. He was one of the leaders of the first intifada, or uprising, against Israel in 1987-88, but was soon arrested and deported to Jordan from where he made his way to Tunis.

The intifada, which had broken out spontaneously against Israeli oppression, had caught the PLO and Fatah off guard. The fear that the movement of the masses would escalate out of its control was a significant factor in convincing the Palestinian bourgeoisie of the necessity of reaching some kind of an accommodation with Israel. This was compounded by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War, which cut off funding to the PLO.

Because of his association with the intifada, Dahlan was to

prove extremely useful to the Palestinian bourgeoisie in first reaching an accommodation with Israel, legitimising it and then imposing the new arrangements on the Palestinian masses. He was directly involved in the secret talks with Israel that ended in the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993.

When Dahlan returned to the newly established Palestinian Authority in 1994, he was put in charge of the Preventative Security Service (PSS) and finance, making him one of the strongest officials in Gaza. There he was responsible for building up a 20,000 strong police force with the help of the CIA to rein in opposition to Israel and protect the Palestinian elite. He became renowned for his brutality and the use of torture, while accumulating a vast personal fortune through the PA's monopoly enterprises and kickbacks on construction contracts.

He was involved in direct negotiations with Israel to end the second intifada that began in September 2000. After Israel's assault on Jenin and destruction of Arafat's compound in Ramallah, and former president George Bush's call for a new Palestinian leadership, Dahlan became part of the layer around Abbas seeking to replace Arafat. He too has been accused with Abbas of colluding with Israel to engineer Arafat's death.

Following Hamas' victory in the January 2006 Gaza elections, the US and Israel trained and financed Dahlan to suppress Hamas militarily, leading to a civil war between Fatah and Hamas. Later the CIA and Israel built up his forces in a bid to overthrow Hamas in a bloody coup, prompting Hamas to mount a pre-emptive coup in June 2007. Earlier this year, Israel launched an all out assault on Gaza with the express aim of toppling Hamas and installing Dahlan as their stooge.

For his part, Rajoub played a similar role, tasked with reining in Hamas in the West Bank.

A third member of the "new layer" is Marwan Barghouti, a longstanding Fatah leader having joined as a youth in the 1980s. Elected to the Fatah Revolutionary Council and PLO central council in 1989, he welcomed the Oslo Accords. He gained popular support for his campaigning on social issues and his criticism of the corrupt coterie around Arafat, as well as Israel's expansion of the settlements in the West Bank. And while Abbas sought to end the uprising that broke out in September 2000, Barghouti was one of the few PA officials to openly support the Palestinians' right to resist the Israeli occupation.

He was arrested in 2002, and convicted in 2004 for alleged complicity in the killing of five people. But while in prison, he has played a significant role in Palestinian politics with the full cooperation and support of the Israeli authorities, including access to television time for election campaigning. He was instrumental in getting Arafat to appoint Abbas as

prime minister in 2003 and in securing the participation of the Islamic militant groups in a cease-fire with Israel in 2004, a key demand of Abbas and Dahlan, who was then interior minister. He stood against Abbas in the presidential elections in 2005, but pulled out when it became clear that Abbas would win. In 2005, when Fatah's old guard refused to give due recognition to his faction despite its success in the primaries, Barghouti established a new party, al Mustaqbal (The Future), *together with Dahlan and Rajoub*, to contest the 2006 elections. He subsequently withdrew his list so as not to split the Fatah vote.

He drafted the Prisoners' Document, which set out a common platform between Fatah and Hamas and was intended to lay the basis for a National Unity Government in May 2006.

There has long been speculation that Israel will release Barghouti as part of a larger prisoner exchange, with the long-term aim of making use of his popular support and grooming him as a possible successor to Abbas.

Fatah's conference has confirmed that it is the party of businessmen, police chiefs, warlords and Israeli placemen. Its role mirrors that of other national movements such as the ANC in South Africa. But the sorry end of Fatah and the PLO is particularly tragic and grotesque. Its leaders and cadres—irrespective of its class and programmatic limitations—made enormous personal sacrifices and often displayed great heroism, winning mass support amongst the Palestinians and internationally. Despite this, it has ended up as a police force for Washington and Tel Aviv as a direct result of its nationalist perspective and programme—one based on establishing a capitalist state that would provide the Palestinian bourgeoisie with the rights and the means to exploit its own working class.

Today the future of the Palestinian people, like all the oppressed peoples of the world, is bound up with the development of an international socialist movement led by the working class in opposition to both the secular nationalist and Islamic movements of the bourgeoisie.



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