

What Actually Happened in Fatah's Elections?

CIA-Trained Security Chiefs Elected to the Palestinian Leadership

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"He is our guy."

George W. Bush speaking of Palestinian security chief Muhammad Dahlan, June 4, 2003

The U.S. government has been meddling in the Palestinian internal affairs since at least 2003. Its effort is to transform the Palestinian national movement for liberation and independence into a more compliant or quisling government, willing to accede to Israel's political and security demands.

The tactics employed by the U.S. include military, security, diplomatic, and political components. With the ascension of Hamas after the 2006 legislative election, U.S. strategy has been fixed on unraveling the election results. Its aim for a political comeback of the pro-American camp within the Palestinian body politic has been initiated with the convening of Fatah's national conference this last week.

During the week of August 4, 2009, the Palestinian National Liberation Movement Fatah, convened its sixth national conference in its 44-year history. Fatah has historically been considered the largest Palestinian faction, but that perception changed when it lost the legislative elections to Hamas in January 2006. As the group wrapped up its conference after eight days, it announced the results of its elections. The international media, particularly western outlets, framed the election as "fresh" and "new" faces ascending to power in the movement. But what actually happened in the vote?

Fatah's internal structure is unlike most political parties or resistance movements. It is not hierarchical and its members' loyalty largely follows a system of patronage and factionalism embodied in a 23-member Central Committee.

The Central Committee is technically supposed to reflect a system of collective leadership and the political program of a national liberation movement. Even its founder, the late Yasser Arafat, who led the organization from its inception in 1965 until his death in 2004, did not have an official title beyond that of a member of the committee and commander-in-chief of its military wing. But over time, in the eyes of many Palestinians, Fatah's leadership has symbolized, a system of cronyism, corruption, collaboration with Israel, and political failures, especially since the Oslo process.

Although its internal charter calls for a national conference every four years to elect its leadership, the major questions at the eve of this conference were: Why did it take Fatah two decades to convene this one? Did the election of Fatah's new leadership reflect the

aspirations of the Palestinian people and a new and fresh approach to the political process? And finally, who are the backers of the main individuals who were recently elected to lead it?

Fatah's Central Committee led by Arafat made the strategic decision in 1988 to negotiate a political settlement with Israel, and accept the United States government as the main broker. For two decades, especially in the aftermath of the 1993 Oslo accords, the Palestinian issue gradually receded from the international agenda, becoming an almost exclusive affair between the U.S, Israel, and the Palestinian leadership whether it was the PLO or after 1994, the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Most neutral Middle East analysts such as Robert Malley, the Middle East Program Director at the International Crisis Group, and a former National Security Council (NSC) staff member during the Clinton administration, observe that American negotiators throughout several administrations (both Democratic and Republican) have mostly adopted the Israeli point of view and placed most of the pressure on the Palestinian leadership (whether Bill Clinton with Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, or George W. Bush with Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert.)

During the first term of the Bush administration, Arafat, as the head of the PA, was isolated, while Washington promoted those within the Palestinian leadership such as Mahmoud Abbas (imposed on Arafat as prime minister in 2003), and former security chief Muhammad Dahlan, both of whom embraced the American strategy in the region. In 2005, Bush declared his freedom and democracy agenda, demanding elections in the Palestinian territories, and hoping for a Fatah victory to implement his vision.

However, the administration soon abandoned its agenda of promoting democracy in the Arab world when Hamas won a landslide victory in the January 2006 legislative elections. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed shock about the results saying, "No one saw it coming." A Department of Defense official told David Rose of Vanity Fair in 2008, "Everyone blamed everyone else," "We sat there in the Pentagon and said, 'Who the f*#@ recommended this?'"

Ever since that election, the American administration employed three different but overlapping strategies in order to undo the results. These efforts by the State Department, the White House and the Defense Department, were scantily planned and poorly coordinated.

Throughout 2006 and the first half of 2007, the State Department used its diplomatic resources and political muscle to topple the democratically-elected Palestinian government led by Hamas. In an April 2008 report, Vanity Fair disclosed that an American talking point memo emerged after a U.S. diplomat accidentally left it behind in a Palestinian Authority building in Ramallah. The document echoed Rice's demand that Abbas dissolve the national unity government and take on Hamas.

Meanwhile, as detailed by Vanity Fair, neo-con and NSC deputy director Elliot Abrams was plotting a coup in Gaza against Hamas with former Gaza security chief Muhammad Dahlan in the spring of 2007. It included coordination with Israel, several Arab countries such as UAE and Jordan, payments to Dahlan of over \$30 million, the training of five hundred security personnel, a campaign to destabilize Gaza, and a torture program against Hamas members and other Islamists.

Dahlan admitted as much to the magazine's writer, David Rose, saying that he told his American counterpart who was pushing for a confrontation with Hamas, "If I am going to confront them, I need substantial resources. As things stand, we do not have the capability."

The Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported on June 7, 2007, that the American administration had asked Israel to authorize a large Egyptian arms shipment, including dozens of armored cars, hundreds of armor-piercing rockets, thousands of hand grenades, and millions of rounds of ammunition. Rose explains that Abrams's plan stressed the need to bolster Fatah's forces in order to "deter" Hamas. According to a senior administration official the "desired outcome" was to give Abbas "the capability to take the required strategic political decisions (i.e. fulfilling the Israeli conditions for a political settlement) and dismissing the (Hamas led) cabinet, establishing an emergency cabinet."

But Dick Cheney's Middle East advisor, David Wurmser, admitted the failed effort when he told the magazine, "It look(ed) to me that what happened wasn't so much a coup by Hamas but an attempted coup by Fatah that was pre-empted (by Hamas) before it could happen."

The third effort, was mainly overseen by the Pentagon, and led by Lt. General Keith Dayton. In a speech before the pro-Israel think tank, the Washington Institute on Near East Policy (WINEP) in May 2009, he said that the Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator, which he has been leading since December 2005, is "an effort to assist the Palestinians in reforming their security services." But according to the notes of a meeting between Dayton and a Palestinian security chief in Ramallah in early 2007, the real purpose of the mission was revealed when Dayton said, "[W]e also need to build up your forces in order to take on Hamas."

Since 2007, Congress has given Dayton \$161 million dollars to implement his plan. In addition, this year Congress appropriated an additional \$209 million dollars to Dayton for the 2009 and 2010 fiscal years, to accelerate his program after receiving high marks from Israeli security chiefs. In the past year alone, more than 1,000 Hamas and Islamic Jihad members have been arrested and detained without trials, with many tortured and killed under interrogation, by U.S.-trained Palestinian security personnel in the West Bank. Amnesty International and many other human rights organizations have condemned these actions and called for an immediate halt to the human rights abuses of Palestinian detainees in PA prisons.

In his WINEP speech Dayton acknowledged this crackdown when he said, "I don't know how many of you are aware, but over the last year-and-a-half, the Palestinians have engaged upon a series of what they call security offensives throughout the West Bank, surprisingly well coordinated with the Israeli army." He further admitted that during the 22-day Gaza war last winter, U.S.-trained Palestinian security forces prevented Palestinians in the West Bank from organizing mass protests against the Israeli army, which ironically allowed for the reduction of the Israeli military presence in the West Bank in order to redeploy those troops to Gaza. Dayton added, "As a matter of fact, a good portion of the Israeli army went off to Gaza from the West Bank— think about that for a minute, and the (Israeli military) commander (of the West Bank) was absent for eight straight days."

After a failed coup and brutal military offensive failed to dislodge Hamas from Gaza, the Israeli and U.S. strategy sought to intensify its pressure against Hamas through a suffocating economic siege in Gaza, massive security detentions in the West Bank, financial

squeeze in the region and political isolation internationally. Meanwhile, according to several Hamas spokesmen, including the deposed prime minister Ismael Haniyya in Gaza and political chief Khaled Meshal in Damascus, the main obstacle to any national reconciliation with Fatah has been the detention of hundreds of Hamas members and the PA's security collaboration with the military occupation overseen by Dayton.

The next phase in this effort is to reinvent Fatah and present it as a viable political alternative to Hamas and other resistance movements by improving the living conditions in the West Bank in contrast to Gaza's devastating siege. But more important, the plan envisions a new Fatah that is considered a reliable partner willing to accommodate Israel's conditions for a political settlement. The sixth Fatah conference and accompanying elections was thus convened to dispose of its corrupt and dysfunctional image.

For over a year, the Central Committee, the highest body in its structure, could not agree on many major issues, including where to hold the conference (the final decision was to hold it in the occupied Palestinian territories, which means that Israel has a veto on which delegates from abroad would be allowed to participate). They also squabbled about which delegates would be appointed to the conference, which would determine the composition of the new leadership, as well as the political program and the role of armed resistance against the occupation. Abbas and his inner circle vetoed the decision of the committee, and decided to hold the conference in Bethlehem, virtually hand-picking all the participants to guarantee the election outcome.

Historically, the delegates to Fatah's national conference were elected or appointed by the Central Committee, but at least fifty-one percent came from the military apparatus. Since most of the military wing has either been disbanded or wanted by the Israelis, a large number of the delegates to this conference were security personnel substituting for the military ones. This fact guaranteed that the election results would be skewed towards the security chiefs and their supporters.

The original number of delegates was supposed to be around 700. Then it increased to 1,250 but eventually mushroomed to 2,355. Less than ten percent were actually indirectly elected by the virtue of their positions, while the overwhelming majority was appointed by a small group in Ramallah led mainly by Abbas and other power brokers such as Dahlan and former West Bank security chief Jibreel Rujoub, who used to hang the picture of former CIA director George Tenet above his desk alongside that of Arafat.

The number of Central Committee members was also increased from 21 to 23, with 19 directly elected by the delegates. Abbas was to appoint four members later, but he himself was chosen by acclamation, to avoid embarrassment if he does not garner first place in a direct election. The 18 individuals who were elected at the end of the week-long conference comprised four from the "old guard" who are considered close to Abbas, and 14 new members, three of whom are former security chiefs who've been close to the CIA. These include Dahlan, Rujoub, and Tawfiq Tirawi, a former intelligence chief, who is currently heading a security training academy in Jericho under the supervision of Gen. Dayton.

From the outset, this conference was heavily tilted towards delegates from the West Bank. Unlike previous conferences, Palestinians in the Diaspora were hardly represented since Israel allowed only a few people to enter from abroad. While Gaza's population is equal to that of the West Bank, less than 400 people were selected as delegates from Gaza, while there were over three times as many delegates from the West Bank.

But most of the Gaza delegates did not even attend because Hamas prevented them from leaving the strip, demanding in return that hundreds of its detained members in the West Bank be freed by the PA, which it summarily refused. In short, aside from Dahlan, who no longer lives in Gaza, not a single elected person is from or lives in Gaza. This prompted the entire Fatah leadership in Gaza, including former Central Committee member Zakariya al-Agha, to resign en masse one day after the conference, protesting not only the results, but also the whole election process.

Similarly, Fatah members abroad did not fare well. Only two people were elected to the Central Committee, though more than two-thirds of Palestinians (eight million) live outside of the Palestinian territories, many in squalid refugee camps, with the “right of return”, considered a hot-button issue in future negotiations, up in the air. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of the new members were either from the West Bank or already living in Ramallah as part of Abbas’ closest aides, affirming the American-led ‘West Bank first’ strategy.

Some of the historic old guard who oppose Abbas’s political program such as Central Committee secretary Farouk Kaddoumi or Hani Al-Hassan did not even attend or run as candidates. Kaddoumi condemned the conference, questioned its legitimacy, and went as far as accusing Abbas and Dahlan of plotting with the Israelis to poison Arafat, eventually causing his death.

Other former members who ran as candidates were defeated and cried foul. Former prime minister and negotiator Ahmad Qurai (Abu Alaa) questioned the credentials of the delegates and the integrity of the election procedure. When Abbas chief of staff, Tayeb Abdel-Rahim lost, he demanded a recount and was eventually declared a winner, after the election committee claimed he was actually tied for last. Many delegates, especially female candidates, all of whom lost, criticized this blatant cronyism. Nevertheless, several popular and “clean” candidates were able to win a seat such as Marwan Bargouthi, who is serving five life sentences in Israel, and Mahmoud Al-Aloul, a former mayor of Nablus.

As Palestinians watched this conference unfold, many were hoping that it would be the beginning of a national reconciliation and the establishment of a unity government. However, it seems that as a result of this conference Fatah itself may further disintegrate, as its Gaza leaders and Abu Alaa are threatening to launch a new faction called “Fatah Awakening,” further increasing division and tension within the Palestinian ranks.

The next step in the strategy of the pro-American camp is to hold presidential and legislative elections in the Palestinian territories next January, hoping to present a rejuvenated Fatah as an alternative to Hamas and other resistance movements. Jonathan Steele of the Guardian further exposed on June 22, 2007 the U.S. “hard coup” of June ’07, as well as its political strategy. He detailed US officials’ conversations with several Arab regimes. These were, among others, “ ‘to maintain President Abbas and Fatah as the center of gravity on the Palestinian scene’, ‘avoid wasting time in accommodating Hamas,’ ‘undermining Hamas’s political status,’ and ‘calling for early elections.’”

In the words of Gen. Dayton, the Palestinian personnel trained by the U.S pledge after their graduation that they “were not sent here to learn how to fight Israel, but were rather sent here to learn how to keep law and order.” The main purpose of these security battalions is to halt any resistance to or rejection of the occupation including non-violent means. He then added that senior Israeli military commanders frequently ask him, “How many more of these

new Palestinians can you generate, and how quickly?"

Many of the questions, posed by ordinary Palestinians before the conference, remain unanswered. What is Fatah's political program in light of the current Israeli intransigence and pre-conditions? What of national reconciliation with other Palestinian factions and the establishment of a national unity government? What is the role of resistance against the occupation, the suffocating siege against Gaza, and most importantly, the continuous collaboration with the Israeli security agencies and military against their own citizens?

These questions persist while Israel's occupation and its brutal policies, the expansion of settlements, the separation wall, the detention of over 11,000 Palestinians, the expropriation of land, the depopulation of East Jerusalem's Palestinian residents, and the denial of Palestinian refugees' right of return, continue unabated.

Simply put, the U.S. wants a Palestinian leadership that will answer these questions in a way that is satisfactory to Israel. As one State Department official said to Vanity Fair regarding American objectives in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, "[W]e care about results, and [we support] whatever son of a bitch [w]e have to support. Dahlan was the son of a bitch we happened to know best."

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