

Vicious Palestinian Politics

by Michael Curtis

The mills of democratic politics in Palestinian organizations grind slowly, if they ever grind at all. This was borne out once again at the 7th General Congress of the Fatah section of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) held in Ramallah, the capital of the West Bank on November 29, 2016, the anniversary of the day in 1947 when the UN General Assembly approved the Partition of Palestine. This was the first such conference since 2009. It was attended by 1400 delegates compared with 2355 in 2009.

The main function of the Congress was to elect the leader of Fatah, the Fatah Central Committee and the Revolutionary Council. The main event was the reelection of 81 year old Mahmoud Abbas, said to be suffering from a heart problem, and having undergone cardiac catheterization, as chairman of Fatah. The stated term of office is five years , but it is unpredictable when it will actually end. The lack of adherence to rules and time restraints by Palestinian leaders is familiar. Mr. Abbas is presently in the twelfth year of his 4 year term as president of the Palestinian Authority, and appears ready to hold the post until destiny calls.

In the Congress in Ramallah, Abbas, not unexpectedly, was elected unanimously inspite of a possible challenge from his long time rival , the 55 year old Mohammed Dahlan, former leader of Fatah in the Gaza Strip, who is in exile in Abu Dhabi. Dahlan had been minister for Palestinian security for a short time in 2003 and had organized a paramilitary force in 2007.

However, no challenge took place. Abbas has been wary of a threat to his leadership and acted ruthlessly. He thus suspended key Dahlan supporters from Fatah, reduced the PA

salaries of many others, and prevented many other Dahlan supporters from attending the Fatah conference.

At the Congress there was pointless talk about the successor to Abbas when he retires. Interestingly, that retirement will not be in Palestine or Jordan, but in Qatar, where Abbas has citizenship and where his two sons, who through connections have acquired considerable wealth, have investment firms.

Abbas's bitter rival, Dahlan has had a chequered career, personal and political. In the Karni scandal of 1997 he was accused of diverting 40% of taxes levied in Gaza to his own personal bank. Dahlan fled the West Bank in 2014 after accusing Abbas of corruption. As a result he was sentenced in absentia to two years in prison.

The bitter power struggle continues. In a ceremony on November 10, 2016, the 12th anniversary of Arafat's death, Abbas in his remarks implied that Dahlan was behind Arafat's death in Paris. Two days later Dahlan replied. In his version, it was Abbas who was a suspect, because Abbas was the only one who benefited from Arafat's death.

The power struggles in Palestinian politics make the contest between Presidential candidates in American politics look likely a friendly game of chess. The organizers of the Ramallah Congress using political muscle could have given Debbie Wasserman Schultz valuable lessons in her attempts to distort the Democratic party primaries in favor of Hillary Clinton.

The bitter rivalry between Abbas and the ambitious Dahlan is highly personal, rather than based on issues on which their opinions are largely similar. This rivalry is only part of the other divisions among Palestinians: the bitter fight between Fatah and Hamas; the rival groups within Fatah; and the feud between the PLO and other groups, the Popular Front (PFLP) and the Democratic Front (DFLP).

Abbas has tried to reach agreement with Hamas, partly through the agreement signed in Cairo in 2011 for a joint government in the West Bank and Gaza. But this has been postponed, even though Abbas met Hamas leaders Khaled Mashaal and Ismail Haniyeh in Qatar in October 2016.

Supporters of all sides in Palestinian politics claim they are following the path of Yasser Arafat. That path was a devious one, but it bears some similarity with the road taken by Abbas concerning Russia. Arafat had emerged as a leader of Fatah (Movement for the Liberation of Palestine), formed in Kuwait in 1959, and then as chairman in 1964 of the PLO created by the Arab League aided by the Soviet Union in 1964.

There is controversy over the origin of the PLO. The most dramatic, if exaggerated, explanation comes from Ion Pacepa, a former adviser to Nicolae Ceausescu, dictator of Communist Romania, and a general in the secret police of that country, who defected to the U.S. in July 1978. Pacepa's argument is that the Soviet Union proposed the creation of the PLO and decided on the main point of appeal, the liberation struggle of the "Palestinian people."

Indeed, around this time the Soviet Union was creating "liberation fronts" throughout the Third World, especially in Bolivia and Columbia. The Soviet influence is shown in the PLO Charter created on May 28, 1964, with a preamble, "We, the Palestinian Arab people," and Article 25 which calls for the liberation of its homeland in "liberational, organizational, political, and financial matters."

The first PLO Council with 422 representatives, in which the KGB had an influence, approved the document. The first chair, Ahmad Shukeiry, only held the position for a few months after which he was replaced by Arafat, who was dependent on the Soviet Union for military and economic assistance.

It is unclear the exact nature of Soviet influence in the

creation of the PLO, but it is more than coincidental that Abbas studied in Moscow in the early 1980s, that he got his doctorate from Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, and published in 1984 his dissertation, *The Other Side: the Secret Relationship between Nazism and Zionism*. Abbas told the world that the Holocaust had been exaggerated, and that "Zionism" had fabricated the myth of six million killed.

According to some documents, revealed by another Soviet defector Vasili Mitrokhin, Abbas was a KGB agent in 1983.

The Obama administration has persisted in seeing Abbas and Fatah as a possible negotiating partner for peace with Israel. President Trump can benefit from the true nature of Fatah as illustrated by the rhetoric and ruthless power politics at the Ramallah Congress. The most devastating comments were that Abbas is a political corpse, corrupt, tyrannical, who has lost political direction. The incoming Secretary of State in the Trump administration should act accordingly.