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The Infamy of the Palestinian Elites: An Imminent Split Within Fatah?

By Ramzy Baroud
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The Fatah movement is involved in a massive tug-of-war that will ultimately define its future. Though the conflict is between current Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and once Gaza strongman Mohammed Dahlan is in no way motivated by ending the Israeli occupation, their war will likely determine the future political landscape of Palestine.

The issue cannot be taken lightly, nor can it be dismissed as an internal Fatah conflict. The latter is one of the two largest Palestinian factions, the largest within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and has single-handedly pushed Palestinians into the abyss of the “peace process” and the great Oslo Accords gamble, which has come at great cost and no benefits.

Moreover, Fatah embodies Palestine’s ruling elites. True, Abbas’ mandate expired in 2009 and Dahlan has been accumulating massive wealth since he fled the West Bank in 2011 (following his public feud with Abbas) but, sadly, both men wield substantial authority and influence. Abbas runs the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah with an iron fist and with the full consent and support of Israel and the United States, while Dahlan is being actively groomed by various Middle Eastern governments, and possibly Israeli and US powers, as the likely successor of the aging Ramallah leader.

They are both indifferent to the harsh reality experienced by their people on the ground.

A limited uprising, known by some as the “Knife Intifada” and others as the “Jerusalem Intifada”, is teetering on the brink, with no serious efforts by the Palestinian leadership to – at least – try to harness Palestinian energies towards a sustainable, long-term popular uprising. On the contrary, Abbas has done his utmost to ignore the Palestinian people’s cry for help and for an astute, courageous leadership.

Instead, Abbas continues to perceive his “security coordination” with Israel as “holy”, while continuing to crackdown on Palestinian resistance and on his own Fatah opponents and their supporters.

He is yet to designate a successor, despite the fact that he is 81 years old and suffers from heart ailments.

This has signaled an opportunity for Dahlan, who has been accused of involvement in various shady Arab affairs. Dahlan has been aching for a comeback from his villa in Abu Dhabi. In a recent *New York Times* article, Peter Baker, who interviewed Dahlan, described part of his wealth:

His spacious home here in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, features plush sofas, vaulted ceilings and chandeliers. The infinity pool in the back seems to spill into the glistening waterway beyond.

Dahlan’s amassing of wealth goes back to his years in Gaza, when he was the head of the notorious Preventive Security Service, itself formed and trained with the help of the US – the CIA in particular – according to various media reports. Its torture techniques were criticized repeatedly by international human rights groups.

Dahlan remains unrepentant: neither apologetic about his unexplained wealth, nor for the Gaza crackdowns which ended when Hamas deposed him and his movement in 2007, resulting in a short-lived civil war.

“Two things that I am not denying,” he told the *NYT*. “That I’m rich. I will not deny it. Ever. And that I am strong, I will not deny it. But I work hard to increase my level of life.”

Explaining what many perceive as a brutal reign in Gaza, he dismissed it, saying that he “wasn’t head of the Red Cross,” at the time.

A Human Rights Watch report expounded on the extent of the crackdown that commenced soon after the PA took charge of the Occupied Territories in 1994. For example, “during the first eight months of 1996, at least 2,000 Palestinians were arrested” by the PA police. The rate is almost as high as arrests carried out by the Israeli army. “The arrests were arbitrary,” according to HRW and no courts or due process was ever part of the procedure, which, almost always, involved torture.

Sadly, the legacies of Abbas and Dahlan are largely predicated on such behavior, and their current conflict is mostly concerned with personal power struggles that involve just them and their followers.

Abbas, who is slowly losing the traditional Arab allies who once supported him against Hamas, and is relegated by Israel – which is trying to arrange the post-Abbas Palestinian leadership – is trying to explore new alliances. He has recently visited Turkey and Qatar. In Qatar, he met with top Hamas leaders Khaled Meshaal and Ismael Haniyeh.

Hamas is not being courted by Abbas to end the protracted and disconcerting Palestinian feud for many years, but rather to counterbalance earlier moves by Dahlan to pander to Hamas.

Dahlan is involved in various “charity projects” including financing mass weddings in impoverished Gaza. But it is not Dahlan’s money that Hamas is seeking; rather the hope that he mediates with Egypt to ease movement on the Rafah-Egypt border.

With a growing clout and rising number of benefactors, Dahlan’s resurrection is assured, but imposing him on an embattled Fatah faction in the West Bank remains uncertain.

To preclude Dahlan’s attempt at regaining his status within Fatah, Abbas’s PA forces in the occupied West Bank have been conducting arrests of Dahlan’s supporters. The latter’s armed men are retaliating and clashes have been reported in various parts of the West Bank.

Moreover, Abbas has called for the seventh Fatah conference to be held sometime later this month, where the Abbas faction within Fatah is likely to rearrange the various committees to ensure Dahlan’s supporters are weakened, if not permanently removed.

Considering Dahlan’s strong support base and his ability to win followers using his access to wealth and regional allies, a move against his followers is likely to backfire, splitting the party, or worse, leading to an armed conflict. Despite Israel’s intentional silence, there are also reports that Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who was tied to Dahlan repeatedly in the past, is keen on ensuring the return of Dahlan at the helm of Fatah.

Tragically, the power struggle rarely involves ordinary Palestinian people, who remain alone facing the Israeli military machine, the growing illegal Jewish settlements, the suffocating siege, while persisting under an unprecedented leadership vacuum.

This is one of the enduring legacies of the Oslo Accords, which divides Palestinians into classes: a powerful class that is subsidized by “donor countries” and is used to serve the interests of the US, Israel and regional powers, and the vast majority of people, barely surviving on handouts and resisting under growing odds.

This strange contradiction has become the shameful reality of Palestine, and regardless of what the power struggle between Abbas and Dahlan brings, most Palestinians will find themselves facing the same dual enemy, military occupation, on the one hand, and their leadership’s own acquiescence and corruption, on the other.

