



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Palestinian Leadership's Position toward the Launch of Dahlan's Counterrevolution

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | March 2014

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Series: Assessment Report

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Introduction

On March 11, the Palestinian satellite channel broadcast President Abbas's speech to the 13th session of the Fatah Revolutionary Council in the presence of all the PLO's top-tier leadership. During his speech, Abbas accused Mohammed Dahlan—a one-time Fatah member who was later kicked out of the movement and former head of the Preventative Security in the Gaza Strip—of a number of allegations, including treason, involvement in the assassination of Yasser Arafat, murder, corruption, receiving backing from international and regional parties, and threatening the unity of the PLO.

In response, in an interview on the Egyptian satellite channel Dream 2, Mohammed Dahlan accused the Palestinian president of financial and institutional corruption and of undermining the Palestinian cause and the PLO with his dictatorial approach. Dahlan's interview came in the midst of efforts to mobilize official Fatah supporters and supporters of Dahlan, whose influence is concentrated in the Gaza Strip against Hamas and in a number of refugee camps in the West Bank.

The clash has sparked a battle between two wings of the PLO, which is by no means the first internal crisis faced by the PLO since Mahmoud Abbas came to power. Opposition between members of the same faction has long been a feature of the Palestinian scene. On this occasion, however, at least one of the parties has been part of a vast web of regional and international relationships since the infamous dispute between Abu Ammar and Abu Mazen at the beginning of the second Palestinian Intifada. At the time, Dahlan tried to stage a coup against Arafat in the final year he was under siege, an attempt foiled by Musa Arafat, who was killed by those whose coup he had prevented, after the murder of Abu Ammar.

Abbas and Dahlan: From Allies to Enemies

The structure of the various Palestinian factions largely conforms to the fragmented geography of Palestinian politics as a result of the Israeli occupation. Unsurprisingly, Palestinian factions hold different views and positions, and these differences, naturally, extend to within each faction. Fatah, as the largest political breeding ground for the various Palestinian social and regional groupings, has faced internal crises since its inception. Nevertheless, many factors contributed to the maintenance of the movement's

unity, among them independence from the Arab regimes, its history of struggle, and the relative balance with which benefits and internal positions were parceled out. Yasser Arafat also played a big role in keeping the movement together. He was skilled at managing the contradictions and creating a fine balance between the various internal power bases and networks. This was what saved him in 1983 from the greatest historical schism within the PLO, which was led by Abu Musa and Abu Khalid al-Umla and backed by the Syrian regime.

However, after the signing of the Oslo accords, the formation of the PA in 1994, and the transformation of Fatah into something akin to a ruling party, voices inside the movement called for an end to the “cult of the individual and of personality” in the PA administration and the adoption of institutionalization and anti-corruption measures. At the time, the reference was to Yasser Arafat’s monopoly hold over the levers of power.

These voices rapidly coalesced into a grouping led by Mahmoud Abbas, one of the [PLO’s] founders, and some of the second-generation leadership, most prominently Mohammed Dahlan. Just prior to this, the disagreement with Arafat over his support for the second Palestinian Intifada and lack of patience with the political track had worsened. The dispute continued as Israel invaded a number of Palestinian cities and besieged Arafat in his residence, taking advantage of political cover provided by George W. Bush administration, which gave the green light in January 2002 to finally eliminate Arafat.

Although the Abbas-Dahlan current, bolstered by US policy, was able to force Arafat to create the post of prime minister with full executive power, including control of the security apparatus, Arafat stripped the office of any meaning after he decided to annex the security apparatus to the presidency, which led Abu Mazen to resign as prime minister. Ironically, this is the same reason that sparked the crisis with Hamas, which won the legislative elections in 2006. Just as Arafat had done with him, Abu Mazen did with the new movement led by Ismail Haniyeh when he withdrew responsibility for the security forces from the office of the prime minister and annexed it to the presidency.

After having been elected president, Abbas proceeded with his program that focused on restructuring the PA. Despite some Fatah quarters being against competing with Hamas in the legislative elections, because of the internal chaos the movement had endured during the Aqsa Intifada, Abbas gambled on going ahead based on his belief that Hamas could be contained within the PA under the leadership of Fatah. However, Hamas’s electoral victory opened up another violent struggle that ended in a geographical-political divide.

Out of these circumstances grew the alliance with Dahlan in his capacity as the leader of a large number of armed militias and a figure with far-reaching security and financial relations with the intelligence services in Israel. Dahlan was also renowned for his ties with Seif al-Islam Gaddafi and his friendship with Egyptian tycoon Naguib Sawiris, as well as with arms and drugs smuggling gangs. During Abbas's conflict with Arafat, Dahlan, for reasons of his own, offered support to Abbas, even if to a limited extent.¹ In fact, Dahlan personally led demonstrations in the Gaza Strip condemning Arafat's policies. Mahmoud Abbas also needed the alliance with Dahlan to establish his rule at the early stages of his presidency, when chaos reigned within the Fatah organization. Others, including Abbas, also needed Dahlan in the struggle with Hamas after its victory in the legislative elections and its growing political and military influence.

Even so, Abbas was aware of the danger in the growth of the Dahlan trend within Fatah, and had misgivings with regards to his corruption and suspect relations with Israel. Thus, he exploited the clash with Hamas and the decline in Dahlan's power, after he already fled Gaza, to finish him off as the main power base capable of threatening his positions as PLO chairman and PA president. In any event, the presence of someone with so many suspect relationships with Arab regimes and US and Israeli intelligence, and a network of links with international organized crime, certainly made things difficult.

In June 2007, clashes between Dahlan's militias and the Qassam Brigades ended with Hamas exerting control over Gaza and the surrender and de-arming of the militias. Dahlan had lost his importance on the ground, and the Palestinian president intended to gradually exclude him. The PLO Central Committee decided in June 2011 to dismiss Dahlan and end any official relationship he had with the movement. The decision to expel Dahlan was accompanied by a systematic campaign to sever funding to sectors of Fatah in Gaza that were loyal to him. At the same time, Abbas allowed Hamas to root out and prosecute the remaining Dahlan supporters in the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian security services took on the task of dismantling most of his platforms in the West Bank cities and began the pursuit of his supporters.

At that point, Dahlan became willing to join forces with any opponent of Mahmoud Abbas. He even made contact with Hamas, but to no avail. Despite his support for giving more

¹ Because Dahlan, along with others, was directly cooperating with Israel and Arab states to pressure Arafat at Camp David in 2000. Mahmoud Abbas supported Arafat's position to refuse to sign an agreement giving up Palestinian rights.

concessions to Israel, he was willing to make a bid out of opposition to Oslo. By all accounts, he had been beaten and rejected. Thus, the Dahlan phenomenon in Palestine came to an end. He spent months in London being trained by MI6, but it would be his residence in Dubai, his links with the UAE, and the outbreak of the Arab revolutions that opened up a new opportunity for him to use his security and economic relationships on a new level. He would ride the wave of the counterrevolution.

From a Spook and a Thug in Palestinian Politics to a Counterrevolutionary

The Mohammed Dahlan phenomenon can be understood within the context of the fractured Arab regional order. The collapse of some Arab regimes, and the internal preoccupations of their intelligence services (Egypt, Syria, and Libya, specifically), has given scope to organized cross-border groups to play a part in the current turmoil, usually for financial incentives but also for political reasons. This is especially so with the rise of an organized campaign overseen by states damaged by the Arab revolutions, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Dahlan fits into this context, feeding off of, alongside others, the power vacuum created by states preoccupied with internal conflicts. At such a time, these gangs become useful for the power bases of regimes that feel threatened by democracy and perform services and roles that essentially aim to cause chaos and destabilize Arab societies. This creates an atmosphere hostile to the idea of the Arab revolutions and democracy. It is, therefore, not strange that these formations should have good ties not just with Arab and Western intelligence agencies, but also with (and by funding) a network of NGOs, political parties, official and unofficial associations, businessmen, and state and private media, according to a single logic: "money can do anything."

In this context, Dahlan, under Emirati auspices, has been able to expand his web of relations to take in Salafi groups in the Gaza Strip and Sinai that have had a key role in launching the conflict in the Sinai Peninsula and in targeting the Egyptian Army. These groups are also working to entangle the Gaza Strip in a battle with Israel by means of "sponsored missiles" that are not part of the resistance's strategy, and are, in fact, opposite to it since their aim is to confuse the resistance and draw it into battles with Israel for which it is unprepared.

By raising the slogan of hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood, a sworn enemy for Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Dahlan has been able to oversee the organization of Emirati relations with Egyptian businessmen, private Egyptian media outlets, and the editors of Egyptian newspapers, all mediated by Egyptian intelligence. These relationships have relied upon public relations agencies, which form a cover for the injection of petro-money, and taken advantage of domestic contradictions between Islamists and secularists, which are only natural and could have been contained through the democratic process, in order to push them into confrontation by flooding the media space with rumors. These endeavors, combined with other factors, helped create the atmosphere for a military coup, which is what happened on July 3, 2013.

The success of the coup and the events accompanying it reinforced the wave of hatred against Islamists in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, thanks to the view and influence of "Dahlanism". In his interview on the Egyptian Dream 2 channel, Dahlan depicted himself as the hero of the ousting of the Brotherhood. Those who follow the details of the movement of major holders of capital in Egypt, including senior officers in the Egyptian Army, know the extent to which these businessmen are enmeshed in economic relations with Emirati companies.

In terms of Palestine, the return of Dahlan's influence, and his exploitation of the differences between the Arab states, would be no problem for the Fatah leadership, which has essentially benefited from the ousting of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi. However, Dahlan's exploitation of this influence to pressure Abu Mazen via the new Egyptian regime, to ensure his return as a partner in the Palestinian institution, provoked the Palestinian president. In addition, Dahlan's attempts to exploit sectors of Fatah disgruntled at their official marginalization in the Gaza Strip have irritated some in Fatah, whose independence from the regimes and autonomous decision making are red lines not to be toyed with. Abbas was further angered by the direct Emirati pressure to appoint Dahlan as his deputy.

Accordingly, the crisis that was supposedly dealt with three years ago blew up again. More dangerous still, Dahlan is back this time as the spearhead of the counterrevolution. That is, his return comes in the context of a regional plan aiming to rearrange the region.

Fatah and the Palestinian Cause

Fatah is preparing to enter a new battle to preserve its unity, its autonomy in decision making, and its institutional structure, as the Palestinian president was keen to point out in the recent Revolutionary Council meeting. The cameras showed the majority of the top-ranking Fatah leadership projecting a clear message rejecting current regional pressures. The Palestinian leadership is well aware that allowing regional powers to interfere in the form of the Palestinian institution means that, sooner or later, they would be allowed to reformulate the Palestinian national project itself. This is the valuable lesson to be learnt from Yasser Arafat. Accordingly, the Palestinian leadership, while it tries to arrange the current round of negotiations with the Israeli side, is expecting further pressures except this time, the source of the pressure is the axis of the counterrevolution, which is currently readying itself to redraw the Arab regional order. For this reason the Palestinian leadership will, in the short or long term, have to fight a battle on multiple fronts.

The power vacuum afflicting the current Arab regional order poses the threat of other forms of penetration, which will have a number of effects, Dahlanism being neither the first nor the last. The intelligence phenomenon which entails meddling across borders represents the other side of terrorism in neighboring countries. This threatens the Palestinian cause as a just cause that demands combined efforts between the Palestinians and fellow Arabs. To this end, the right way to confront the new challenges is represented by a Palestinian national reconciliation and the formulation of a unified Palestinian position for all elements of the Palestinian people to believe in.