

Could Mahmoud Abbas, Who Didn't Go to Bahrain, Now Meet His Comeuppance?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



As is well known, at the recent meeting in Manama, Bahrain, the Americans presented the economic part of the Trump Administration's plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. It was unprecedented in the generosity of what was being offered the Palestinians: more than \$50 billion in aid, with \$27.5 billion of it going to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and the remaining billions going to Palestinians in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. It is the largest aid package for a single recipient in history. Compare, for example, the Marshall Plan, which resulted in \$12 billion (\$100 billion in 2018 dollars) being shared by 17 countries in Western Europe.

Neither Mahmoud Abbas nor any other Palestine Authority

official showed up in Bahrain. They had ranted for weeks against the \$50 billion dollar economic plan, proclaimed they would accept no such plan before their political demands were met, even if it meant that the "Palestinian people" had to continue to suffer high unemployment and levels of poverty in both the West Bank and Gaza. To the Americans, it made more sense to offer the Palestinians tangible economic benefits first, a peace-through-prosperity plan, to let them see how their lives could be substantially improved, and perhaps their businessmen would then have the desire and the wherewithal to begin to cooperate with Israeli businesses as well. In this view, prosperity must precede, not come after, a political settlement which, given the Palestinian intransigence and Abbas's refusal to deal, will be a long time coming.

Mahmoud Abbas does not have to worry about his own economic wellbeing. He and two of his sons – Tareq and Yasser – have, through corruption and the exploitation of his political connections, managed to accumulate a family fortune of \$400 million. So he doesn't himself feel the urgency to improve the lot of the people he pretends to care about. He told Palestinian businessmen to stay away from Bahrain, to wait for that ever-receding political settlement, a veritable will-o'-the-wisp, between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, that he insists must precede that \$50 billion aid package – a breathtaking sum, entirely undeserved – that Jared Kushner was prepared to raise for the benefit of the Palestinians.

Not all of the Palestinian businessmen did as Abbas demanded. Some actually thought that there might be useful contacts to be made in Bahrain, both with the deep-pocketed Gulf Arabs who were present, and with the Israeli businessmen who were in attendance, even though Israeli officials, having heeded the Americans' request, did not appear. So the Palestinian businessmen took a chance, and went to Manama.

Soon after the Bahrain conference ended, the Palestinian Authority arrested at least one of the Palestinian

businessmen who had attended the US-led economic conference.

He was identified as Salah Abu Miala from the Palestinian city of Hebron in the West Bank.

“Sarah attended a wedding party for a family member yesterday and then he disappeared. We haven’t seen him since,” the man’s brother, who asked not to be identified, told Reuters. He said that police forces had not shown up at Abu Mail’s home.

The Palestinian Authority’s security service did not respond to requests for comment, but Palestinian businessman Ashraf Jabari, who also attended the conference in Manama, said by phone: “Salah’s son spoke to me by phone and he told me his father was arrested.”

A phone call from Reuters to Abu Miala’s mobile phone was answered by the same son, who said his father could not come to the phone.

A spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas could not be reached for comment.

The thirteen Palestinian businessmen who attended the Bahrain workshop have been branded as “collaborators” by some in the Palestinian leadership, which boycotted the conference.

When Abu Miala was seized and held overnight, the US embassy in Israel managed to pressure the Palestinian Authority – it’s unclear what was said – and Abu Miala was promptly freed.

Another businessman, who attended the conference, believing he had done nothing wrong, now lives in fear for his life. He is Ashraf Ghanem, owner of a furniture factory in Hebron, who has had business dealings with Israelis living in the West Bank.

He has said that another PA security agency, Preventive Security Service, was now “harassing” his workers and business

as part of an effort to punish him for attending the Bahrain workshop.

"I pay about NIS 20,000 in income taxes each month to the Palestinian Authority," he noted. "Now they want to punish me and kill me just because I went to an economic conference. What has the Palestinian Authority done for the residents of Hebron? All the projects you see in Hebron are funded by the international community. Where does the money go? Where are the billions of dollars that the Palestinian Authority received in order to help the Palestinians?"

Ghanem has said he wrote to PLO secretary-general Saeb Erekat asking for help, but did not receive a reply. He appealed to the US and EU to intervene with the PA leadership to allow him to return to his home.

"I'm not a traitor, and I'm not a collaborator with Israel," he told the Post. "I'm a businessman who wants to help his people and boost the Palestinian economy. I didn't break the law and I'm not a criminal. I went to a conference to discuss economic projects for my people, and because of that I'm now being punished and forced to live in hiding."

This is the situation: the leaders of both the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and of Hamas in Gaza, are deeply corrupt, helping themselves to aid meant solely for the people, while threatening the lives of those Palestinian businessmen who, through their own entrepreneurial undertakings, are actually improving the lives, by providing employment, to Palestinian workers.

But their peace bid has been met with broad rejection among the Palestinians and the Arab world, mainly because Trump has so far not embraced the Palestinian quest for statehood.

Egypt and Jordan, the only two Arab states that have peace

agreements with Israel, attended the conference. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who also attended, said they would not endorse a plan that fails to meet Palestinian core demands.

It is unsurprising, though disappointing, that several Arab states that are known to have good, if mainly covert, security relations with Israel, especially in the sharing of intelligence on the Iranian threat, still are insisting they will not endorse any peace plan that does not meet “the core demands” (on Jerusalem, return to pre-1967 borders, return of “refugees”) of the Palestinians.

The arrest, however brief, of the businessman Abu Miala, who has been a successful entrepreneur and provided jobs for Palestinians, ought to be publicized. The death threats against Ashraf Ghanem should become widely known. He is not, as Mahmoud Abbas has branded all thirteen Palestinian businessmen who were brave enough to go to Bahrain, a “collaborator.” Unlike Mahmoud Abbas, someone who has amassed a fortune through corruption and contacts both Abu Miala and Ashraf Ghanem are successful businessmen, trying to improve the economic lot of their fellow Palestinians by providing employment.

In the end, it was Mahmoud Abbas who blinked. After a phone call from the American Embassy to the Palestinian Authority, Miala was set free after being held by the P.A. for only one day. One wonders if Abbas and his men had other considerations as well, beyond American pressure. They may have sensed the unpopularity of their move against these businessmen, and decided not to risk a possible open challenge, on the street, to their authority. After all, slogans about those who create jobs and are then arrested for the crime of trying to create more of them, and invidious comparisons made with the Palestinian leaders who have created no businesses but have stolen aid for themselves. It’s an impressive list of grand

thievery: Arafat (\$1-3 billion), Abbas and sons (\$400 million), Mousa Abu Marzouk (\$2.5 billion), Khaled Meshal (\$2.5 billion).

How many of those enduring the heavy-handed rule of Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank now sense that with the release of Abu Miala, and the fact that none of the other twelve Palestinian businessmen have been arrested, Abbas is revealing weakness? Perhaps it's time for a different Great March, a march against Abbas and his grasping rule. For those both enraged and brave enough to take part in such a protest march against the P.A. for its rejection of the economic plan, a walk from Hebron to Ramallah, with chants of "we can't wait" and signs with a simple pointed message – "\$50 billion dollars!" – a reference to the colossal sum for the Palestinians discussed in Bahrain at a meeting that Abbas refused even to attend – ought to be enough to embarrass Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority.

Palestinians who know little else about Kushner's plan know that they need jobs, they need capital for businesses to be created and expanded. If that means a public display of disaffection with the Palestinian Authority, so what? At this point what do they have to lose? That \$50 billion remains tantalizingly out of reach because of the cruel intransigence of multi-millionaire Mahmoud Abbas. Even a few billion dollars of that fabled sum of \$50 billion is mesmerizing to the Palestinians, not all of whom agree that they should have to wait for that "political settlement" Abbas insists upon, and that may not come at all, because it's not possible for the Palestinian leaders to relinquish their dreams of Jihad. From his luxurious villa in Ramallah, Mahmoud Abbas chooses to strike an attitude of defiance that, to the Palestinian street, may no longer go over well.

Abbas is increasingly unpopular because the Palestinians have been finding out more about his finances. First, there is the matter of secret salary raises from Abbas and his henchman. At

a time of great economic distress for the Palestinians, documents were recently leaked online by a group of anonymous whistleblowers known as “Against the Current,” showing that in 2017, PA President Mahmoud Abbas had quietly agreed to increase monthly salaries of ministers from \$3,000 to \$5,000, as well as boosting the prime minister’s monthly salary from \$4,000 to \$6,000. Those salaries were kept secret, but finally had to be suspended after the posting of the salary raises online caused an uproar this spring. The suspension of those raises has not diminished the fury felt at Abbas and his fellow self-dealing ministers. And we still don’t know what raise, if any, he gave himself as president, and whether he undid it after the popular uproar.

Even more enraging has been the release of information, by Arab sources, about the \$400 million fortune Abbas and his sons Tareq and Yasser have accumulated. Most Palestinians endure difficult lives because of massive corruption and economic mismanagement, and they know exactly where that \$400 million fortune came from.

After all this, would Abbas order his police to smash such a march for economic justice by fellow Palestinians, possibly led by some of the very businessmen who defied him and went to Bahrain? Those businessmen attended that meeting for two reasons. First, they sought opportunities for business expansion, including new markets in Israel and the West Bank. Second, they sought investments from wealthy foreign investors (including Gulf Arabs). They sought financial capital in order to invest in human capital – that is, in the “Palestinians” they employ, whose interests Mahmoud Abbas pretends to defend and so cruelly ignores.

Among the signs the marchers might wish to carry, pride of place should be given to this one: **“\$400 million for Mahmoud, Tarek, and Yasser Abbas, 0 for us!”** The unemployed and impoverished on the West Bank and in Gaza can’t wait until Abbas decides enough progress has been made on the political

plan to permit discussion of that \$50 billion aid package; they need to receive some of those billions now, and not in some impossibly distant future. Another sign marchers might carry should be the simple question: **"0 Mahmoud, where did the \$1.3 billion go?"** This is a reference to a well-known charge made by another PA official, the former security minister Mohammed Dahlan, who has claimed that \$1.3 billion dollars vanished from the Palestinian Investment Fund since it was turned over to Abbas' control in 2005. The Palestinians are asking Abbas not for a Return on Investment, but a Return of Investment; they want those \$1.3 billion dollars given back to the Palestinian Investment Fund, for the benefit of all the Palestinians.

If Abbas were to turn his police loose on the marchers, can he be sure they would obey his orders to attack their fellow Palestinians, with whom the poorly-paid police may readily identify? He knows – and the signs of the marchers will remind him – that there has been growing fury over his own family's wealth, details of which he had managed to keep secret until recently, but can now be found online. What if the police did more than refuse to attack the marchers? What if the police even joined the marchers, swelling the crowds, adding their own discontent with the regime of Mahmoud Abbas?

Such protest marches are the only way to now remove Abbas. He should, but won't be, voted out. Abbas was elected in 2005 to a four-year term as president of the PA; that term ran out in 2009; he has cancelled all elections since, and ten years later, Abbas is still president, with no end in sight. If the police were to publicly turn against Abbas, and join the marchers, his goose would be cooked. The Great March of Return in Gaza has been petering out, the incendiary kites causing some damage to Israeli farmland, but with little else to show for all that effort. In the West Bank, it's time for a Great March of Return Of Investment, one that Mahmoud Abbas won't be able to stop, and that could bring him, at long last, down.

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