

Mahmoud Abbas: Who Is Hussein Al-Sheikh?

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Senior PA official Hussein Al-Sheikh. (Photo: via Al-Sheikh official website)

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By Robert Inlakesh

Hussein al-Sheikh, long seen as Mahmoud Abbas's right-hand man, is a deeply controversial figure widely viewed by Palestinians as a symbol of collaboration and repression.

Late last month, a man by the name of Hussein al-Sheikh was selected, by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, deputy chair of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This move made al-Sheikh the next in line to take over the West Bank based authority.

The currently unelected PA President, Abbas, created the new position of Vice President last week, during the 32nd session of the Palestinian Central Council. After naming al-Sheikh as the man for the job he had just created, many on the outside ask who he is and why he is so unpopular amongst Palestinians.

Hussein al-Sheikh was born on December 14, 1960. Although his mother gave birth to him in Ramallah, his family were refugees that had been displaced from the village of Deir Tarif, near occupied Ramle. In the 1970s, he became a member of the Fatah movement.

However, before he could go and get an education, at 18 years of age he was arrested by the Israeli occupation forces and subjected to 11 years imprisonment for his role in Fatah as a youth. It is in Israeli detention that he would go on to learn Hebrew, which he fully mastered.

Upon his release from prison, during the height of the first Intifada in 1989, he quickly rose to a prominent local level Fatah leader. Then, following the beginning of the Oslo process in 1993 and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), he joined the PA's security forces, eventually rising to become a colonel in the Preventative Security (intelligence) branch.

During the Second Intifada, as Hussein al-Sheikh grew in power within the Fatah Party, then Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat grew to despise him and the role that he viewed al-Sheikh as playing.

This distrust eventually came to a head in 2003, when Arafat ordered his arrest and had accused him of trying to sow division within the Fatah Party leadership.

'Our Man in Ramallah'

A recent report issued by Israeli media outlet, Sicha Mekomit (Local Call), referred to al-Sheikh as "our man in Ramallah". The article covered his time as the PA's head of the Ministry of Civilian Coordination with the Occupation, during which he strengthened his ties with the Israeli government, later playing a role in helping maintain the infamous "security coordination".

A senior Israeli security official once told Foreign Policy magazine that al-Sheikh is "our guy in Ramallah."

The 64-year-old has long maintained close relations with the PA President, becoming widely known as his right hand man and won a promotion to Secretary General of the PLO's Executive Committee, in 2022.

At the time, this made him by default the second most powerful person in the Palestinian Authority's chain of command.

Senior Al-Jazeera political analyst, Marwan Bishara, commented on al-Sheikh's recent nomination to officially become the next in line to the Presidency, stating that he had been "groomed for the past 18 years" by Abbas for the position.

"The Israelis know him and trust him – more than they know and trust Abbas", Bishara continued.

Al-Sheikh had worked to not only head up security coordination matters with the Israeli side, but also on behalf of President Abbas to combat his Fatah rivals such as Mohammed Dahlan and Marwan Barghouti.

Perhaps the loudest voice to have aired these opinions from within the party itself has been Fakhri Barghouti, a member of Fatah's revolutionary council, who said that:

“Hussein works for himself and in the positions the occupation wants him to take. The most important task assigned to him has always been to conspire against Marwan (Barghout), as he is responsible for the organization in the West Bank, and also to carry out unpatriotic acts against the (resistance) fighters.”

Al-Sheikh openly expresses that “cooperation with Israel” is the only way to bring about what he describes as peace.

West Bank Crackdown

However, since the beginning of the genocide in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Authority have worked together with Israel to violently crack down on resistance fighters in the West Bank and silence opposition. This has only led to more resentment growing amongst the Palestinian public.

Mahmoud Abbas, who has held onto the PA Presidency for 20 years and stifled the democratic process is widely viewed as an illegitimate leader amongst the Palestinian public.

Anywhere between 70 to 90+ percent of the population living in the 1967 occupied territories answer that they would like to see him resign, when polled. It suffices to say that most Palestinians do not recognize the legitimacy of his decision to put Hussein al-Sheikh in his line of succession.

In the event that Abbas steps down for health issues, or dies, then according to Palestinian law, an interim President is supposed to take over for a brief period prior to the organisation of democratic national elections. The man chosen by Abbas to be that transitional figure, Rawhi Fattouh, a Fatah Party official who became infamous for corruption.

It is unclear whether al-Sheikh would automatically assume power before or after the initial transitional phase, as elections will not likely occur.

The reason why the PA is unlikely to hold national elections is because all relevant polling data suggests that the current pro-Israeli collaboration Ramallah elite would lose.

Hamas would be likely to win the legislative election, while all previous polling data suggested that Fatah’s Marwan Barghouti could be elected President.

(The Palestine Chronicle)