

US plot to overthrow elected Palestinian government exposed

Part Two

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See Part One

With Fatah's social base almost totally eroded in January 2007, and without the funding promised by the Arab regimes, according to David Rose's *The Gaza Bombshell* in *Vanity Fair*, Fatah strongman Muhammad Dahlan now had insufficient financial support to carry out the coup attempt Washington expected of him.

He used his new weapons to storm the Islamic University of Gaza, a Gaza stronghold, provoking Hamas to attack Fatah-held police stations. Even now, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas was unwilling to preside over a civil war. So he acceded to Saudi King Abdullah, who had long been trying to broker an agreement between the two factions, and went with Dahlan to meet Hamas in Mecca. On February 8, 2007, he struck a deal with Hamas for a National Unity government.

While Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh would remain prime minister, he would allow Fatah members to hold several key cabinet posts. Haniyeh did not agree to recognise Israel, one of the three tests required by the Quartet (the US, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia) for restoring economic aid. In return, the Saudi King Abdullah agreed to pay the Palestinian Authority's salary bills.

While there was rejoicing on the streets of Gaza, the Bush administration was astounded by the news. This was not what it wanted or expected from its key ally in the region. According to a State Department official, "[Secretary of State] Condi [Condoleezza Rice] was apoplectic."

David Rose cites and posts on *Vanity Fair*'s web site an extraordinary series of documents to show how the US responded by redoubling the pressure on its Palestinian allies to oust Hamas, with the State Department drawing up an alternative to the new unity government: "Plan B."

That these documents should have been leaked and authenticated by officials shows how bitter the internecine divisions in Washington have become.

According to a State Department memo, Plan B's objective was to "enable [Abbas] and his supporters to reach a defined endgame by the end of 2007. The endgame should produce a [Palestinian Authority] government through democratic means that accepts Quartet principles."

Plan B reiterated Walles's ultimatum delivered in late 2006, calling for Abbas to "collapse the government" if Hamas refused to sign up to the Quartet's conditions. Abbas was to call early elections or impose an emergency government.

Plan B set out explicit arrangements to suppress Palestinian militants and opposition to Abbas and prevent any attacks on Israel. While the unity government remained in office, Abbas had to maintain "independent control of key security forces." He must "avoid Hamas integration with these services, while eliminating the Executive Force or mitigating the challenges posed by its continued existence."

Washington clearly expected that the covert funding pledged by its Arab allies would be forthcoming, as the memo recommended that "Dahlan oversees effort in coordination with [US security coordinator for the Palestinians, Lieutenant] General [Keith] Dayton and Arab [nations] to train and equip 15,000-man force under President Abbas's control to establish internal law and order, stop terrorism and deter extralegal forces."

Vanity Fair's sources confirmed that the State Department, in consultation with the Palestinian Authority and the Jordanian government, developed the objectives of Plan B in a document entitled "An Action Plan for the Palestinian Presidency."

The early drafts of the Plan emphasised the need to strengthen Fatah's forces in order to "deter" Hamas. The "desired outcome" was to give Abbas "the capability to take the required strategic political decisions...such as dismissing the cabinet, establishing an emergency cabinet."

Rose explains that "the drafts called for increasing the 'level and capacity' of 15,000 of Fatah's existing security personnel while adding 4,700 troops in seven new 'highly trained battalions on strong policing.'" The plan would provide "specialised training abroad," in Jordan and Egypt, and pledged to "provide the security personnel with the necessary equipment and arms to carry out their missions."

The budget for salaries, training and "the needed security equipment, lethal and non-lethal," was estimated at a further US\$1.27 billion over five years, a massive sum for such a small country.

The plan states: "The costs and overall budget were developed jointly with General Dayton's team and the Palestinian technical team for reform"—a unit established by Dahlan and led by his friend and policy aide, Bassil Jaber.

Jaber told Rose that the budget was the result of the work he had done with Dayton and his team. He said, "The plan was to create a security establishment that could protect and strengthen a peaceful Palestinian state living side by side with Israel." What it in fact meant was the launching of a brutal civil war against Hamas and any opposition to Israel and its Palestinian collaborators.

Palestinian Authority officials in Ramallah drew up the final version, which differed from earlier drafts only in that it presented the plan as if it had come from the Palestinians, not the State Department and Jordan. It claimed the security proposals had been "approved by President Mahmoud Abbas after being discussed and agreed [to] by General Dayton's team."

Abbas had now explicitly signed up to a State Department blueprint for a coup against a government in which his own party was participating, an all-out civil war against Hamas and the suppression of all opposition to Israel. In return, he was given a vague promise of support for a non-

contiguous mini-state, where Palestinian businessmen would have a licence to exploit their own working class as long as they did Washington's bidding.

At the end of April 2007, part of an early draft was leaked and published by the Jordanian newspaper, *Al-Majd*. Hamas saw it for what it was: the blueprint for a US-backed Fatah coup.

The publication of the Action Plan ended the relative calm that the unity government had brought to the occupied territories. Bitter factional fighting broke out all over again. With fortuitous timing, Dahlan had left Gaza for Berlin where he had undergone knee surgery. As he had said about Fatah's claim of strength, "I knew in my heart it wasn't true." On another occasion, his estimation was that "We are late in the ball game here, and we are behind."

Tensions rose further when 500 of the newly trained Fatah National Security Force recruits arrived from Egypt, complete with new weapons, vehicles and uniforms. A frequent visitor from one of the Western aid agencies said, "They had new rifles with telescopic sights, and they were wearing black flak jackets. They were quite a contrast to the usual scruffy lot."

Fighting escalated, with 250 Hamas members having been killed by Fatah since the beginning of 2007.

On May 23, Lieutenant General Dayton himself gave the issue a public airing by discussing the new unit in testimony before the House Middle East subcommittee. He insisted that all the aid going to Fatah at Washington's behest was "100 per cent non-lethal." This was manifestly untrue.

On June 7, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* reported that Abbas and Dayton had asked Israel to authorise the biggest Egyptian arms shipment yet, which included dozens of armoured cars, hundreds of armour-piercing rockets, thousands of hand grenades and millions of rounds of ammunition.

A few days later, just before the next batch of Fatah recruits was due to leave for training in Egypt, Hamas began its counter-offensive in earnest.

Fawzi Barhoum, Hamas's chief spokesman, told Rose, "Finally we decided to put an end to it. If we had let them stay loose in Gaza, there would have been more violence." Mahmoud Zahar, the former foreign minister for the Haniyeh government, who now leads Hamas's militant wing in Gaza, told Rose, "Everyone here recognises that Dahlan was trying with American help to undermine the results of the elections.... He was the one planning a coup."

According to Zahar, Hamas's original aim was fairly limited: "The decision was only to get rid of the Preventive Security Service. They were the ones out on every crossroads, putting anyone suspected of Hamas involvement at risk of being tortured or killed."

When Fatah's forces beat a speedy retreat, however, Hamas decided to get rid of them once and for all. The fighting was ferocious and savage. Within five days in June 2007, its forces had taken control of Gaza and routed Fatah, whose fighters either went into hiding or left for the West Bank.

Some Fatah personnel did not fight because they feared that, with Dahlan absent, his forces were bound to lose. "I wanted to stop the cycle of killing," says Ibrahim abu al-Nazar, a veteran party chief. "What did Dahlan expect? Did he think the US Navy was going to come to Fatah's rescue? They promised him everything, but what did they do? But he also deceived them. He told them he was the strongman of the region. Even the Americans may now feel sad and frustrated. Their friend lost the battle."

Fatah was and is riddled with divisions. There were some who wanted to continue opposition to Israel and they also refused to fight Hamas. Khalid Jaberi, a commander with Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades told Rose, "Fatah is a large movement, with many schools inside it. Dahlan's school is funded by the Americans and believes in negotiations with Israel as a strategic choice. Dahlan tried to control everything in Fatah, but there are

cadres who could do a much better job. Dahlan treated us dictatorially. There was no overall Fatah decision to confront Hamas, and that's why our guns in al-Aqsa are the cleanest. They are not corrupted by the blood of our people."

Plan B backfired spectacularly on the Bush administration.

In Gaza, Hamas took possession of Fatah's arms and ammunition—including the new Egyptian guns supplied under the covert US-Arab aid program. Other groups, if not Hamas itself, have continued to fire rockets into Israel's southern towns.

Abbas and Fatah have been even more discredited. They were confirmed yet again in the eyes of the Palestinians as Jerusalem and Washington's paid subcontractors. Such is the opposition to Fatah in the West Bank that Abbas and his so-called Fatah government now preside over little more than Ramallah.

Although it came to power as a result of popular disgust with Fatah over the latter's collaboration with the Americans and the Israelis, Hamas is no political alternative for the Palestinian masses. It speaks for petty bourgeois and bourgeois Arab interests.

The scale of the leaked documents and interviews included in Rose's *Vanity Fair* article and the confirmation of the evidence from so many official sources so soon after the events are extraordinary. They come from high-level Republicans, who support US militarism in the Middle East in furtherance of US's geo-strategic interests, but who are furious at yet another fiasco in policy implementation.

This follows hard on the heels of the ongoing failure of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, Israel's failure to "take out" Hezbollah in the Lebanon and most recently, the Palestinians' mass break-out from Gaza, which has profoundly destabilised social relations in Egypt and strengthened Hamas. To the extent that both Hamas and Hezbollah are viewed as proxies for Iran, then Washington has been unable to score any successes against Iran.

The failure of the attempted coup by Fatah has led to bitter recriminations within the Bush administration. The vice president's office is clearly riven by divisions, and it, in turn, is at odds with Rice and the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA, all of whom are closely involved with the Israel-Palestine conflict.

David Wurmser, Vice President Dick Cheney's Middle East Advisor, resigned his post within weeks of Hamas taking control. He assisted in preparing *Vanity Fair*'s article. His own assessment of the situation in Gaza contradicts the official Washington line that Hamas mounted an illegal coup against Fatah. He said, "It looks to me that what happened wasn't so much a coup by Hamas but an attempted coup by Fatah that was pre-empted before it could happen."

Rose cites comments from neo-con critics who formerly played leading roles in the Bush administration, including both Wurmser and former UN Ambassador John Bolton, who blame the State Department for seeking to use a local strong man to do their work.

Bolton told Rose that relying on local proxies such as Muhammad Dahlan is "an institutional failure, a failure of strategy." He blamed Rice, who he said, "like others in the dying days of this administration, is looking for a legacy. Having failed to heed the warning not to hold the elections, they tried to avoid the result through Dayton [the US security coordinator who reached the agreement with Dahlan]."

Bolton has written a book entitled *SurrenderIs Not an Option*, in which he criticises the Bush administration for changing its foreign policy objectives during its second term.

The *Vanity Fair* article appeared just as Rice set off for yet another visit to the Middle East and was clearly timed to undermine her position.

The article has provoked angry denials from the Bush administration. Bush's spokesperson Dana Perino said, "There is no accuracy to that story." State Department spokesperson Tom Casey called the piece

“absurd,” “untrue” and “ridiculous.” Rice herself dismissed the *Vanity Fair* article as “ludicrous,” while making clear that the US has funded and continues to fund the PA and supply it with weaponry. “If the answer is that Hamas gets armed by the Iranians and nobody helps to improve the security capabilities of the legitimate Palestinian Authority security forces, that’s not a very good situation,” she said. “As long as Iran funds Hamas, the US will back security funding for the Palestinian Authority.”

The Gaza Bombshell reveals the degree to which political life in the United States has become a series of intrigues, in which small cliques within the ruling class fight out critical questions and use a servile media to manipulate public opinion and obscure the real issues.

The nominally liberal media barely reported the revelations by *Vanity Fair*, relying on a short précis of Rose’s article. None of these media outlets made a comment as to the significance of Rose’s article or any reappraisal of their analysis of US foreign policy in the Middle East that accepts the claims of Bush and Rice to be acting as peacemakers between Israel and the Palestinians.

In Britain, the *Guardian*—the sister paper of the *Observer*, for which Rose writes—had access to the documents, but apparently made no effort to commission Rose to do an exposé. We know the *Guardian* saw the documents because of a brief comment made in passing by the newspaper’s columnist and associate editor Seumas Milne: “As confirmed by secret documents leaked to the US magazine *Vanity Fair*—and also passed to the *Guardian*...” Had Milne not written this, no one would have been aware that this was the case.

Concluded



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