

US plot to overthrow elected Palestinian government exposed

Part One

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The United States plotted the armed overthrow of the Hamas government elected by the Palestinian people in January 2006, according to “The Gaza Bombshell”, an article based on leaked documents and interviews with key players in the Bush administration that was published in the latest edition of the US magazine *Vanity Fair*.

Vanity Fair called the affair “Iran Contra 2.0”, a reference to the Reagan administration’s funding of the Nicaraguan Contras by covertly selling arms to Iran in contravention of official policy. This latest plot was prepared not by some middle-ranking spies and military personnel, but by the State Department with approval from the very top of the political establishment, including President George W. Bush. It was implemented by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Deputy National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams, who has a long history in plotting coups and illegal activities on behalf of US imperialism.

The plan was being prepared and implemented at the same time as Bush publicly professed that the last great ambition of his presidency was to broker a deal that would create a viable Palestinian state, bring peace to the region and further his “freedom agenda” of engineering the election of pro-US regimes throughout the Middle East.

The intention was that Muhammad Dahlan, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’s national security advisor and a Fatah strongman, would facilitate the downfall of Hamas with forces armed by the US. Dahlan, who has worked closely with the FBI and CIA since the 1990s, was publicly described by Bush as “a good solid leader” and privately called “our man.”

But the plan back fired. Instead of removing Hamas, its effect was to provoke a tragic and ongoing factional struggle between Fatah and Hamas that brought Palestine to the point of civil war and a pre-emptive coup in Gaza by Hamas to forestall the coup planned by Fatah last June. The result was yet another foreign policy debacle for Bush.

While some of this was known at the time, the full extent of Washington’s skulduggery was not. The article by award winning British journalist David Rose, who also writes for the *Observer*, provides documentary evidence of the conspiracy, setting out the nuts and bolts of the plans. It also provides a revealing insight into what passes as policy making within the Bush administration, its *modus operandi* and the tense relations and divisions within the neo-conservative circle surrounding Bush.

“The Gaza Bombshell” explains how, after the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004, the White House insisted upon early elections — under the guise of giving the Palestinians the chance to choose new leaders who were not “compromised by terror”. This was intended to forestall growing support for Hamas. Dahlan and Abbas repeatedly told Bush that the elections should be delayed until Fatah was ready. But Bush and his advisors would not listen.

Hamas came to power in January 2006 as a result of widespread disaffection with Fatah over its readiness to agree a rotten deal with Bush and its own endemic corruption. An offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas does not represent a progressive alternative to Fatah but articulates the interests of sections of the Arab bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie.

When democracy resulted in the wrong party winning, the Bush administration was taken by surprise. Condoleezza Rice told reporters. “I don’t know anyone who wasn’t caught off guard by Hamas’s strong showing.” According to *Vanity Fair*’s sources, a Department of Defence official said, “Everyone blamed everyone else. We sat there in the Pentagon and said, ‘Who the f*** recommended this?’”

The White House rejected any idea of working with Hamas, even though leading Israelis including Ephraim Halevy, a former head of Mossad, supported such an approach. A senior State Department official said, “The administration spoke with one voice: ‘We have to squeeze these guys.’ With Hamas’s election victory, the freedom agenda was dead.”

First, the US ensured that the Quartet, made up of the US, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia, terminated aid to the Hamas government, depriving it of most of its budget and the means of paying salaries. Second, Israel closed its borders with Gaza and severely restricted the Palestinians’ freedom of movement. These measures were designed to turn the Palestinians against Hamas. Israel arrested 64 Hamas officials, including half of its elected legislators, most of whom are still in detention today, making Hamas’s parliamentary majority inoperable.

Washington was furious when Hamas began holding talks with Abbas in an attempt to form a “unity government”. In October 2006, Rice went to see Abbas. According to officials present at their private meeting, she told him in no uncertain terms that the US expected him to dissolve the government of Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh as soon as possible and hold fresh elections.

Abbas, like Yasser Arafat before him, found himself being asked to sign off on a civil war. Unlike Arafat, Abbas agreed, albeit reluctantly, to take action within two weeks.

When there was no action, Rice sent Jake Wallis, the US consul general in Jerusalem, to present Abbas with an ultimatum. A “talking points” document prepared for him by the State Department and authenticated as genuine by US and Palestinian officials, stated:

“We need to understand your plans regarding a new [Palestinian Authority] government. You told Secretary Rice you would be prepared to move ahead within two to four weeks of your meeting. We believe that the time has come for you to move forward quickly and decisively.”

“Hamas should be given a clear choice, with a clear deadline: ... they either accept a new government that meets the Quartet principles, or they reject it. The consequences of Hamas’ decision should also be clear: If

Hamas does not agree within the prescribed time, you should make clear your intention to declare a state of emergency and form an emergency government explicitly committed to that platform.”

Since no one doubted that such an ultimatum would lead to fighting on the streets, the document said that the US was already working to strengthen Fatah’s security forces: “If you act along these lines, we will support you both materially and politically, we will be there to support you.” Abbas should be encouraged to “strengthen [his] team” to include “credible figures of strong standing in the international community.” This was a reference to Muhammad Dahlan.

In the long term, Abbas and the handful of Palestinian millionaire and even billionaire families whose interests he represented were entirely dependent upon Washington and had no choice but to comply. But he was still reluctant to initiate a fratricidal conflict and did not dissolve the Hamas government. So the US instead worked to provoke a civil war, which it thought Hamas would lose, by boosting military support for Fatah. Abbas was sidelined in favour of direct talks with Dahlan.

Dahlan had been Yasser Arafat’s security chief in Gaza, which he had run as his own personal fiefdom. He headed up the Preventive Security Service, an outfit of thugs, whose trademark was kidnappings and torture. It was an occupation that had made him a very rich man.

Rose’s article cites a State Department official as saying that David Welch, assistant Secretary of State, who was in charge of Middle East policy, “didn’t fundamentally care about Fatah. He cared about results, and [he supported] whatever son of a bitch you had to support. Dahlan was the son of a bitch we happened to know best. He was a can-do kind of person. Dahlan was our guy.”

This apparently alarmed Avi Dichter, Israel’s internal-security minister and the former head of its Shin Bet security service. When he heard senior American officials refer to Dahlan as “our guy”: “I thought to myself, the president of the United States is making a strange judgment here.”

Bush’s schemes fell afoul of his administration’s previous policies. While Fatah’s forces were numerically superior, most of its strength had been destroyed by the US-backed Israeli invasion of the West Bank in 2002, aimed at destroying Arafat’s political and security infrastructure. Furthermore, without the economic support from the EU, there was no money to pay Fatah security forces, with the result that Fatah could neither control Gaza’s streets — Hamas’s power base — nor protect its own personnel.

Dahlan tried to convey an impression of strength. He initiated a series of kidnappings accompanied by torture. Fighting broke out between Fatah and Hamas. Atrocities were committed on both sides. Soon dozens were dying each month.

The US security coordinator for the Palestinians, Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, met with Dahlan. He said that US would supply weapons and training. Dahlan should take responsibility for all the Palestinian forces as national security advisor and the number of separate forces would be reduced. This would include disbanding Dahlan’s own Preventive Security Service, widely known to be perpetrating kidnapping and torture.

When Dahlan ridiculed the idea, saying, “The only institution now protecting Fatah and the Palestinian Authority in Gaza is the one you want removed,” Dayton replied, “We want to help you. What do you need?”

The project was hugely controversial even within the administration. Some agreed with the general approach, but thought Dahlan was soiled goods and wanted nothing to do with him. Others disagreed about the type of weaponry and the cost. Israel itself was worried that arms destined for Fatah would end up in Hamas’s hands and was reluctant to cooperate. It stipulated that only light weaponry would be acceptable.

The \$86.4 million financial support package promised by Dayton, with the ostensible purpose, according to a US document published by Reuters, of paying to “dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism and establish law

and order in the West Bank and Gaza”, never materialised.

Congress dragged its feet, finally blocking payment in January 2007. The House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia feared that military aid to the Palestinians would end up being used against Israel, a forecast that ultimately proved to be correct. Congress finally approved a reduced, \$59 million package for non-lethal aid in April 2007.

According to the *Vanity Fair* article, the coterie around Bush were simultaneously scouting around for an alternative, covert means of getting funds and weapons to Dahlan. Congress’s reluctance to provide funding meant that “you had to look for different pots, different sources of money,” said a Pentagon official.

A State Department official added, “Those in charge of implementing the policy were saying, ‘Do whatever it takes. We have to be in a position for Fatah to defeat Hamas militarily, and only Muhammad Dahlan has the guile and the muscle to do this.’ The expectation was that this was where it would end up—with a military showdown.”

There were, this official said, two “parallel programs”—the overt one, which the administration took to Congress, “and a covert one, not only to buy arms but to pay the salaries of security personnel.”

The covert plan, according to State Department officials, consisted of Rice phoning and meeting up with the leaders of four Arab nations—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. She wanted them to provide Fatah with military training, pledge funds to buy weapons for its forces and pay money into accounts controlled by President Abbas.

As David Rose explained, the scheme was similar to the Iran-contra scandal where the Reagan administration sold arms to Iran, an enemy of the US, and used the proceeds to fund the Contra rebels in Nicaragua in violation of a congressional ban. Some of the money for the Contras, like that for Fatah, was provided by Arab allies as a result of US lobbying, while the arms were channelled through Israel.

Supplying arms to Dahlan and Fatah was not illegal, because Congress had never explicitly outlawed it. But “It was close to the margins,” a former intelligence official with experience in covert programs told Rose.

By late December 2006, four Egyptian trucks crossed an Israeli-controlled border point into Gaza and handed over their contents to Fatah. These included 2,000 Egyptian-made automatic rifles, 20,000 ammunition clips, and two million bullets. When news of the shipment leaked, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, an Israeli cabinet member, said on Israeli radio that the guns and ammunition would give Abbas “the ability to cope with those organizations which are trying to ruin everything”— meaning Hamas.

As Avi Dichter pointed out, since Israel had to approve all weapons shipments, it was unlikely to want Washington to send high-tech weaponry into Gaza in case it was used against Israel. A State Department official is quoted as saying, “One thing’s for sure, we weren’t talking about heavy weapons. It was small arms, light machine guns, ammunition.”

Rose believes that it could even have been Elliott Abrams himself who held back from sending in heavy weaponry, to avoid breaking the law for a second time in the same way. In 1991, Abrams had been convicted and fined for unlawfully withholding information from Congress during Iran Contra affair but was later pardoned by the first President Bush.

One of his associates says Abrams, who refused an interview for the *Vanity Fair* article, was torn over the policy—between the disdain he felt for Dahlan and his overriding loyalty to the Bush administration. David Wurmser, Vice President Dick Cheney’s former adviser, admitted that Abrams was not the only one: “There were severe fissures among neoconservatives over this. We were ripping each other to pieces.”

Rice herself was in for a shock. When she went to the Middle East in January 2007, her Arab allies stonewalled and refused to cough up. This was not simply because they had differences with Washington. Rather, as one official told Rose, “The Arabs felt the US was not serious. They knew

that if the Americans were serious they would put their own money where their mouth was. They didn't have faith in America's ability to raise a real force. There was no follow-through. Paying was different than pledging, and there was no plan."

This official believed that Rice's trip with the begging bowl raised "a few payments of \$30 million"—mostly, as other sources agree, from the United Arab Emirates. Dahlan himself says the total was only \$20 million, and confirms that "the Arabs made many more pledges than they ever paid."

To be continued



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