

THE GAZA BOMBSHELL



After failing to anticipate Hamas's victory over Fatah in the 2006 Palestinian election, the White House cooked up yet another scandalously covert and self-defeating Middle East debacle: part Iran-contra, part Bay of Pigs. With confidential documents, corroborated by outraged former and current U.S. officials, DAVID ROSE reveals how President Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and Deputy National-Security Adviser Elliott Abrams backed an armed force under Fatah strongman Muhammad Dahlan, touching off a bloody civil war in Gaza and leaving Hamas stronger than ever

HEAVY MEDDLE

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and President George W. Bush, whose secret Palestinian intervention backfired in a big way.

The Al Deira Hotel, in Gaza City, is a haven of calm in a land beset by poverty, fear, and violence. In the middle of December 2007, I sit in the hotel's airy restaurant, its windows open to the Mediterranean, and listen to a slight, bearded man named Mazen Asad abu Dan describe the suffering he endured 11 months before at the hands of his fellow Palestinians. Abu Dan, 28, is a member of Hamas, the Iranian-backed Islamist organization that has been designated a terrorist group by the United States, but I have a good reason for taking him at his word: I've seen the video.

"A Dirty War"

It shows abu Dan kneeling, his hands bound behind his back, and screaming as his captors pummel him with a black iron rod. "I lost all the skin on my back from the beatings," he says. "Instead of medicine, they poured perfume on my wounds. It felt as if they had taken a sword to my injuries."

On January 26, 2007, abu Dan, a student at the Islamic University of Gaza, had gone to a local cemetery with his father and five others to erect a headstone for his grandmother. When they arrived, however, they found themselves surrounded by 30 armed men from Hamas's rival, Fatah, the party of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas. "They took us to a house in north Gaza," abu Dan says. "They covered our eyes and took us to a room on the sixth floor."

The video reveals a bare room with white walls and a black-and-white tiled floor, where abu Dan's father is forced to sit and listen to his son's shrieks of pain. Afterward, abu Dan says, he and two of

the others were driven to a market square. "They told us they were going to kill us. They made us sit on the ground." He rolls up the legs of his trousers to display the circular scars that are evidence of what happened next: "They shot our knees and feet—five bullets each. I spent four months in a wheelchair."

Abu Dan had no way of knowing it, but his tormentors had a secret ally: the administration of President George W. Bush.

A clue comes toward the end of the video, which was found in a Fatah security building by Hamas fighters last June. Still bound and blindfolded, the prisoners are made to echo a rhythmic chant yelled by one of their captors: "By blood, by soul, we sacrifice ourselves for Muhammad Dahlan! Long live Muhammad Dahlan!"

There is no one more hated among Hamas members than Muhammad Dahlan, long Fatah's resident strongman in Gaza. Dahlan, who most recently served as Abbas's national-security adviser, has spent more than a decade battling Hamas.

repeatedly stated that the last great ambition of his presidency is to broker a deal that would create a viable Palestinian state and bring peace to the Holy Land. "People say, 'Do you think it's possible, during your presidency?'" he told an audience in Jerusalem on January 9. "And the answer is: I'm very hopeful."

The next day, in the West Bank capital of Ramallah, Bush acknowledged that there was a rather large obstacle standing in the way of this goal: Hamas's complete control of Gaza, home to some 1.5 million Palestinians, where it seized power in a bloody coup d'état in June 2007. Almost every day, militants fire rockets from Gaza into neighboring Israeli towns, and President Abbas is powerless to stop them. His authority is limited to the West Bank.

It's "a tough situation," Bush admitted. "I don't know whether you can solve it in a year or not." What Bush neglected to mention was his own role in creating this mess.

According to Dahlan, it was Bush who

"WE NEED TO BUILD UP YOUR FORCES TO TAKE ON HAMAS," DAYTON REPORTEDLY SAID.

Dahlan insists that abu Dan was tortured without his knowledge, but the video is proof that his followers' methods can be brutal.

Bush has met Dahlan on at least three occasions. After talks at the White House in July 2003, Bush publicly praised Dahlan as "a good, solid leader." In private, say multiple Israeli and American officials, the U.S. president described him as "our guy."

The United States has been involved in the affairs of the Palestinian territories since the Six-Day War of 1967, when Israel captured Gaza from Egypt and the West Bank from Jordan. With the 1993 Oslo accords, the territories acquired limited autonomy, under a president, who has executive powers, and an elected parliament. Israel retains a large military presence in the West Bank, but it withdrew from Gaza in 2005.

In recent months, President Bush has

had pushed legislative elections in the Palestinian territories in January 2006, despite warnings that Fatah was not ready. After Hamas—whose 1988 charter committed it to the goal of driving Israel into the sea—won control of the parliament, Bush made another, deadlier miscalculation.

Vanity Fair has obtained confidential documents, since corroborated by sources in the U.S. and Palestine, which lay bare a covert initiative, approved by Bush and implemented by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams, to provoke a Palestinian civil war. The plan was for forces led by Dahlan, and armed with new weapons supplied at America's behest, to give Fatah the muscle it needed to remove the democratically elected Hamas-led government from power. (The State Department declined to comment.)

But the secret plan backfired, resulting in a further setback for American foreign policy under Bush. Instead of driving its enemies out of power, the U.S.-backed



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CUCKOO D'ÉTAT
 (1) Muhammad Dahlan at his office in Ramallah, January 2008. (2) Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh. (3) Rice and President Mahmoud Abbas, of Fatah. (4) Haniyeh in Gaza, December 2007. (5) Colin Powell, then the U.S. secretary of state, embraces Dahlan, then the Palestinian interior minister, 2003.



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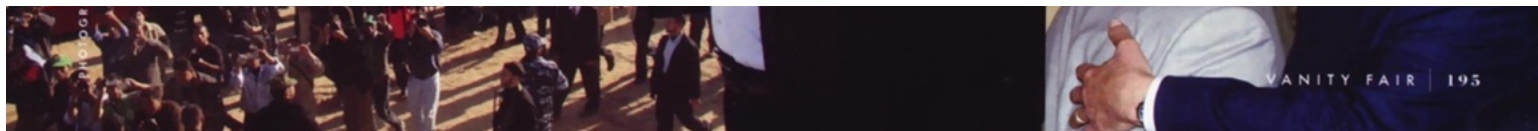


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DANGEROUS TERRITORY

A map of Israel and the Palestinian territories. *Opposite*, the “talking points” memo, left behind by a State Department envoy, urging Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to confront Hamas.

Fatah fighters inadvertently provoked Hamas to seize total control of Gaza.

Some sources call the scheme “Iran-contra 2.0,” recalling that Abrams was convicted (and later pardoned) for withholding information from Congress during the original Iran-contra scandal under President Reagan. There are echoes of other past misadventures as well: the C.I.A.’s 1953 ouster of an elected prime minister in Iran, which set the stage for the 1979 Islamic revolution there; the aborted 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, which gave Fidel Castro an excuse to solidify his hold on Cuba; and the contemporary tragedy in Iraq.

Within the Bush administration, the Palestinian policy set off a furious debate. One of its critics is David Wurmser, the avowed neo-conservative, who resigned as Vice President Dick Cheney’s chief Middle East adviser in July 2007, a month after the Gaza coup.

Wurmser accuses the Bush administration of “engaging in a dirty war in an effort to provide a corrupt dictatorship [led by Abbas] with victory.” He believes that Hamas had no intention of taking Gaza until Fatah forced its hand. “It looks to me that what happened wasn’t so much a coup by Hamas but an attempted coup by Fatah

The botched plan has rendered the dream of Middle East peace more remote than ever, but what really galls neocons such as Wurmser is the hypocrisy it exposed. “There is a stunning disconnect between the president’s call for Middle East democracy and this policy,” he says. “It directly contradicts it.”

Preventive Security

Bush was not the first American president to form a relationship with Muhammad Dahlan. “Yes, I was close to Bill Clinton,” Dahlan says. “I met Clinton many times with [the late Palestinian leader Yasser] Arafat.” In the wake of the 1993 Oslo accords, Clinton sponsored a series of diplomatic meetings aimed at reaching a permanent Middle East peace, and Dahlan became the Palestinians’ negotiator on security.

As I talk to Dahlan in a five-star Cairo hotel, it’s easy to see the qualities that might make him attractive to American presidents. His appearance is immaculate, his English is serviceable, and his manner is charming and forthright. Had he been born into privilege, these qualities might not mean much. But Dahlan was born—on September 29, 1961—in the teeming squa-

street. In 1981 he helped found Fatah’s youth movement, and he later played a leading role in the first intifada—the five-year revolt that began in 1987 against the Israeli occupation. In all, Dahlan says, he spent five years in Israeli jails.

From the time of its inception as the Palestinian branch of the international Muslim Brotherhood, in late 1987, Hamas had represented a threatening challenge to Arafat’s secular Fatah party. At Oslo, Fatah made a public commitment to the search for peace, but Hamas continued to practice armed resistance. At the same time, it built an impressive base of support through schooling and social programs.

The rising tensions between the two groups first turned violent in the early 1990s—with Muhammad Dahlan playing a central role. As director of the Palestinian Authority’s most feared paramilitary force, the Preventive Security Service, Dahlan arrested some 2,000 Hamas members in 1996 in the Gaza Strip after the group launched a wave of suicide bombings. “Arafat had decided to arrest Hamas military leaders, because they were working against his interests, against the peace process, against the Israeli withdrawal, against everything,” Dahlan says. “He asked the security services to do their job, and I have done that job.”

It was not, he admits, “popular work.” For many years Hamas has said that Dahlan’s forces routinely tortured detainees. One alleged method was to sodomize prisoners with soda bottles. Dahlan says these stories are exaggerated: “Definitely there were some mistakes here and there. But no one person died in Preventive Security. Prisoners got their rights. Bear in mind that I am an ex-detainee of the Israelis’. No one was personally humiliated, and I never killed anyone the way [Hamas is] killing people on a daily basis now.” Dahlan points out that Arafat maintained a labyrinth of security services—14 in all—and says the Preventive Security Service was blamed for abuses perpetrated by other units.

Dahlan worked closely with the F.B.I. and the C.I.A., and he developed a warm relationship with Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet, a Clinton appointee who stayed on under Bush until July 2004. “He’s simply a great and fair man,” Dahlan says. “I’m still in touch with him from time to time.”

“Everyone Was Against the Elections”

In a speech in the White House Rose Garden on June 24, 2002, President Bush announced that American policy in the Middle East was turning in a fundamentally new direction.

that was pre-empted before it could happen," Wurmser says.

lor of Gaza's Khan Younis refugee camp, and his education came mostly from the

Arafat was still in power at the time, and many in the U.S. and Israel blamed him for

wrecking Clinton's micro-managed peace efforts by launching the second intifada—a renewed revolt, begun in 2000, in which more than 1,000 Israelis and 4,500 Palestinians had died. Bush said he wanted to give Palestinians the chance to choose new leaders, ones who were not “compromised by terror.” In place of Arafat's all-powerful presidency, Bush said, “the Palestinian parliament should have the full authority of a legislative body.”

Arafat died in November 2004, and Abbas, his replacement as Fatah leader, was elected president in January 2005. Elections for the Palestinian parliament, known officially as the Legislative Council, were originally set for July 2005, but later postponed by Abbas until January 2006.

Dahlan says he warned his friends in the Bush administration that Fatah still wasn't ready for elections in January. Decades of self-preservationist rule by Arafat had turned the party into a symbol of corruption and inefficiency—a perception Hamas found it easy to

exploit. Splits within Fatah weakened its position further: in many places, a single Hamas candidate ran against several from Fatah.

“Everyone was against the elections,” Dahlan says. Everyone except Bush. “Bush decided, ‘I need an election. I want elections in the Palestinian Authority.’ Everyone is following him in the American administration, and everyone is nagging Abbas, telling him, ‘The president wants elections.’ Fine. For what purpose?”

The elections went forward as scheduled. On January 25, Hamas won 56 percent of the seats in the Legislative Council.

Few inside the U.S. administration had predicted the result, and there was no contingency plan to deal with it. “I've asked why nobody saw it coming,” Condoleezza Rice told reporters. “I don't know anyone who wasn't caught off guard by Hamas's strong showing.”

“Everyone blamed everyone else,” says an official with the Department of Defense. “We sat there in the Pentagon and said, ‘Who the fuck recommended this?’”

In public, Rice tried to look on the bright side of the Hamas victory. “Unpredictability,” she said, is “the nature of big historic change.” Even as she spoke, however, the Bush administration was rapidly revising its attitude toward Palestinian democracy.

Some analysts argued that Hamas had a substantial moderate wing that could be strengthened if America coaxed it into the peace process. Notable Israelis—such as Ephraim Halevy, the former head of the Mossad intelligence agency—shared this view. But if America paused to consider giving Hamas the benefit of the doubt, the moment was “milliseconds long,” says a senior State Department official. “The administration spoke with one voice: ‘We have to squeeze these guys.’ With Hamas's election victory, the freedom agenda was dead.”

The first step, taken by the Middle East diplomatic “Quartet”—the U.S., the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations—was to demand that the new Hamas government renounce violence, recognize Israel's right to exist, and accept the terms of all previous agreements. When Hamas refused, the Quartet shut off the faucet of aid to the Palestinian Authority, depriving it of the means to pay salaries and meet its annual budget of roughly \$2 billion.

Israel clamped down on Palestinians' freedom of movement, especially into and out of the Hamas-dominated Gaza Strip. Israel also detained 64 Hamas officials, including Legislative Council members and ministers, and even launched a military campaign into Gaza after one of its soldiers was kidnapped. Through it all, Hamas and its new government, led by Prime Minister Ismail

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“WE'VE BEEN TRYING TO ENTER THE BRAINS OF BUSH AND RICE, TO FIGURE OUT THEIR MENTALITY.”

