

IRAN-CONTRA 2.0

A number of people are talking about David Rose's article on US clusterfuckery with its Palestinian policy. If you need any convincing that the entire Administration—and Condi Rice above all—is dangerously incompetent, read this article.

The story explains how the Administration pushed an election for the Palestinians, not seeing what every sane observer saw—that Hamas would win. Immediately after the election, Condi started pressuring Mahmoud Abbas to dissolve Parliament. When he refused, the Administration started backing the Fatah strongman, Mohammad Dahlan, in hopes that he could strengthen Fatah and the Palestinian Authority's security organizations—which had been devastated by Israel during the intifada—sufficiently to overcome Hamas. This set off a civil war between Fatah and Hamas. To end the bloodshed, Saudi's King Abdullah brokered a national unity government, without warning the US he would do so. In response to Abdullah's unity government plan, the State Department developed its own \$1.27 billion plan, what Hamas considered "a blueprint for a U.S.-backed Fatah coup." The US handed that plan to Abbas and had him adopt it as if it were his own. Hamas responded by taking over Gaza and capturing the Egyptian weapons intended to strengthen Fatah.

In other words, the story is a description of the US' profoundly incompetent Palestinian policy, one which has exacerbated problems with each new development. As one Fatah commander described it, the whole plan seemed destined to leave Hamas in control.

You know," he says, "since the takeover, we've been trying to enter the brains of Bush and Rice, to figure out their mentality. We can only conclude that having Hamas in control serves their overall strategy, because their policy was so crazy otherwise."

I wanted to focus on what Rose calls "Iran Contra 2.0." When the US decided to strengthen Fatah so it could combat Hamas, Congress refused to fund the effort. Given our political climate, Congressmen are not about to green light giving Palestinians—of any faction—improved arms and military training. Instead, the Administration turned to a tactic used in Iran-Contra: to have other governments fund the US' desired foreign policy.

In essence, the program was simple. According to State Department officials, beginning in the latter part of 2006, Rice initiated several rounds of phone calls and personal meetings with leaders of four Arab nations—Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. She asked them to bolster Fatah by providing military training and by pledging funds to buy its forces lethal weapons. The money was to be paid directly into accounts controlled by President Abbas.

The scheme bore some resemblance to the Iran-contra scandal, in which members of Ronald Reagan's administration sold arms to Iran, an enemy of the U.S. The money was used 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 furnished by Arab allies as a result of U.S. lobbying.

But there are also important differences—starting with the fact that Congress never passed a measure expressly prohibiting the supply of aid to Fatah and Dahlan. "It was close to the margins," says a former intelligence official with experience in covert programs. "But it probably wasn't illegal."

I'm fascinated by Rose's description of the

operation, because of the fissures it created within the Administration and with our allies. The move really pissed off the Neocons.

Perhaps the Israelis held the Americans back. Perhaps Elliott Abrams himself held back, unwilling to run afoul of U.S. law for a second time. One of his associates says Abrams, who declined to comment for this article, felt conflicted over the policy-torn between the disdain he felt for Dahlan and his overriding loyalty to the administration. He wasn't the only one: "There were severe fissures among neoconservatives over this," says Cheney's former adviser David Wurmser. "We were ripping each other to pieces."

The eventual coup in Gaza was actually the precipitating event for David Wurmser's departure.

Within the Bush administration, the Palestinian policy set off a furious debate. One of its critics is David Wurmser, the avowed neoconservative, 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 that was pre-empted before it could happen," Wurmser says.

And, at the same time, the plan to arm Fatah was met with little enthusiasm—or follow-through—on the part of our Middle Eastern allies.

During a trip to the Middle East in

January 2007, Rice found it difficult to get her partners to honor their pledges. “The Arabs felt the U.S. was not serious,” one official says. “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 estimates that the program raised “a few payments of \$30 million”—most of it, 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.” Whatever the exact amount, it was not enough.

Though Rose doesn’t make the connection explicitly, it was during this period—when Condi was finding it difficult to get Saudi Arabia and others to cough up millions to pay for our foreign policy—that King Abdullah was brokering his own unity government.

Unwilling to preside over a Palestinian civil war, Abbas blinked. For weeks, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had been trying to persuade him to meet with Hamas in Mecca and formally establish a national unity government. On February 6, Abbas went, taking Dahlan with him. Two days later, with Hamas no closer to recognizing Israel, a deal was struck.

In other words, I think Condi was having trouble to get Saudi Arabia to fund her policy schemes because they simply didn’t support them and were actually working at cross-purposes to them.

The article ends with Administration officials reluctantly adopting the policy implicitly

avored by Abdullah: including Hamas in plans for peace.

With few good options left, the administration now appears to be rethinking its blanket refusal to engage with Hamas. Staffers at the National Security Council and the Pentagon recently put out discreet feelers to academic experts, asking them for papers describing Hamas and its principal protagonists. "They say they won't talk to Hamas," says one such expert, "but in the end they're going to have to. It's inevitable."

Don't get me wrong—I don't really believe the Bush Administration will do what it needs to do to actually achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians; negotiating with Hamas is not the same thing as negotiating in good faith with Hamas.

But Rose's description reveals how futile the American position on Israel and Palestine is. I suspect that any move to restore the strength of Palestine such that it could perform as a sovereign state would be impossible to pass through Congress—AIPAC's just been doing its work too well for too long to support strengthening the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, at least, appears to be reluctant to support anything less than restoring the strength of the Palestinians.