

OMAR SULEIMAN PROMISED THE 2006 ELECTION IN GAZA WOULDN'T TAKE PLACE

Back in 2008, David Rose had a fairly explosive article on Condi Rice and Elliot Abrams' incompetent meddling in Gaza, which he compared to Iran-Contra. Here's how I summarized its revelations at the time:

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.

Central to the whole story is how the State Department could have been so stupid as not to see that Hamas would win a democratic election

in Gaza in 2006.

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?’”

But a Wikileaks cable released by Aftenposten may explain why State was taken by surprised.

They may have thought the election itself wouldn't happen.

In fact, they were warned by Israeli Defense Official Amos Gilad that if elections were held, "it will destroy everything" with attempts to foster stability (in the name of "peace") in the Middle East. But Gilad also told them Omar Suleiman promised to see to it that there were no elections.

Gilad said he warned Suleiman that if Hamas participates in the January 2006 Palestinian elections "it will destroy everything, as Hamas will take over and start a new process." According to Gilad, Suleiman and his deputy told him, "There will be no elections in January. We will take care of it." Gilad requested that the USG closely hold this information and strictly protect the sources. He clarified that neither Suleiman nor his deputy explained how Egypt would stop the elections or elaborated further on the subject. Gilad admitted that he does not know how the Egyptians could prevent the elections from taking place, but said, "The only people the Palestinians can trust now are the Egyptians."

All of which doesn't surprise me. But does remind me of two things. First, Obama invited Elliott Abrams to attend an experts meeting at the White House on January 31; Abrams declined to attend.

Elliott Abrams, the former Bush White House Middle East/democracy advisor, was invited but couldn't go. "I had other commitments I did not think I could fairly cancel at such short notice," he told POLITICO. While another colleague tried to soften Abrams's implication he had better things to do than offer counsel to the White House, saying he thought he was out of town, in fact

Abrams later said he had already committed to speak to the AJC along with Jordanian former diplomat Marwan Muasher.

So I guess this is the kind of catastrophe Obama thinks we should repeat?

I'm also reminded about Robert Grenier—who was head of CIA's Counterterrorism Center until just after the Gaza election—talking about American hypocrisy on democracy.

So nice to see that we want to put a guy who promised to prevent a democratic election the US was backing (at least in theory, though Suleiman didn't deliver on that promise) in charge of transitioning to democracy in Egypt.

Update: Changed description of cable for accuracy.