

Meeting: Usamah Hamdan – Senior Hamas Representative in Beirut

Where: Beirut – Hotel Albergo

When: 19 June 2007

Present: Michael Ancram MP, Jonathan Lehrle, Mark Perry

Conversation of Participants

What follows is the transcript of a discussion held over lunch between Member of Parliament Michael Ancram, British foundation head Jonathan Lehrle, and American Mark Perry, co-Director of Conflicts Forum.

Michael Ancram: Good to see you. Lots has happened since we last met. I guess you have been busy, Gaza has been interesting, I'm keen to hear what has been going on. How do you think things will go?

Usamah Hamdan: I will start from the Mecca Agreement. At Mecca there were three important points. The first one was on the National Unity Government; the second point covered the reform of the security services and called for a new security plan for the Palestinian territories, and the third point was on the reform of the PLO and the new political arrangements inside the Palestinian political body. That means that the relations within the PLO itself, the relations between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, the internal Palestinian relations. And we [in the Hamas movement] went back to Gaza and within one month there was the formation of the national unity government. We started talking about security. There was a security plan that was put forward and that was endorsed by the government and that was then endorsed by Abu Mazen himself as President.

When we started to apply that [the security plan] on the ground we faced an important problem -- which was that the main General in the security service failed to apply and rejected this plan. That was General Rashid Abu Shabak. He ordered all the security officers not to receive the Interior Minister without permission.¹ So we were not able to make any progress. We were not able to go

¹ Rashid Abu Shabak's line-of-command is to the President through the head of the National Security Council. The head of the National Security Council is Mohammad Dahlan. The Interior Minister at the time of the controversy over the security plan was Hani al-Qawasmeh. Mr. Qawasmeh threatened to resign several times over Mr. Abu Mazen's refusal to accept the agreed-

anywhere and the Interior Minister was not able to order the security service to implement the security plan that was agreed to. The Interior Minister was not able to order any security service to apply the plan.

[Rashid Abu Shabak is the head of the Preventive Security Services and takes orders from the head of the National Security Council, Mohammad Dahlan and from the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas. As of June 2006 -- according to the Washington Post -- the forces of the PSS -- were comprised of 6000 officers and enlisted Fatah personnel. The number of PSS members had increased to nearly 8000, according to Palestinian Fatah officials by June 1 of 2007.]

UH: So because of these difficulties we talked directly to Abu Mazen in April in Cairo and it was a frank talk about this plan which was endorsed by himself and we insisted that the plan that was agreed to be implemented. But he did not promise to do anything. He just said, 'I will talk with Mr Mohamed Dahlan and then I will give you an answer, and this answer will be inside the territories.' [That is: 'I will give you the answer in the West Bank or Gaza and not during a meeting in Cairo.'] He [Abu Mazen] went to Gaza. He had a meeting with the Interior Minister and he told him, 'I consulted with Mohammed Dahlan and he rejected to apply that [agreed to security plan.] So we reached an end point, we reached a closed point in the security plan. At the same time there was another security plan, which was generated by the Americans, you know [Lt. General Keith Dayton], and the Palestinian Mr. Dahlan and some of our neighbours.

This plan (I think a part of it was published) and all the people knew about it -- the politicians knew about it -- I think you have a copy of this plan.² This plan calls for the establishment of a new security force taken from the Presidential Guard. It was supposed to train 20,000 soldiers and they were to be trained in Jordan, Egypt, the UK, the US and in Russia. This was a complete plan and the budget for this plan was about \$1.27bn dollars and we followed that up. In Cairo there was training for 500 [Palestinians] at that time -- in April. They were talking about training up more than 5000 at the end October and in Jordan they were talking about training about 4000 and outside in the West they were talking about training about 700 officers. They will collect the other members from the security service.

So they were closing the road for the national security plan and they were having their own security plan. [The intent we determined was] to give themselves some time. They [Fatah] were undermining their own [National Unity] Government and undermining the security plan which we were working on. In order to make the situation more difficult they started disturbing the security in Gaza by some

to security plan, telling Mr. Abu Mazen that Mohammad Dahlan was thwarting the implementation of the plan. His resignation was refused twice before being accepted on May 14.

² The plan was published in the Jordanian weekly newspaper, Al-Majd and detailed in an article in Asia Times: www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/IE16Ak04.html, entitled: "Document Details US Plan to Sink Hamas."

robberies and killings and by supporting some drug mobs and finally the kidnapping of some people, including the journalist Allen Johnston -- who was kidnapped by some members of the [Dagmouh] family, who were directly connected to Mohamed Dahlan.

At this time, in May, we visited Egypt and we talked frankly about what was happening on the ground and we told them [Abu Mazen and other members of the Fatah leadership]: 'From the beginning of March until the end of May those forces [of Dahlan's Preventive Security Services] kidnapped and assassinated 40 members from Hamas. Those kidnapped were not militants. Most of them were civilians. Some of them were not only civilians they were working in public issues and it was clear that some of them were students, some of them were engineers.' But they continued assassinating the people. And you don't want to investigate. Samir Medhon on Palestinian TV named a person who said 'well I was responsible for burning 20 houses of Hamas people I am responsible for killing this man and that man.' He named four names of people he assassinated. So we talked to Abu Mazen and we said 'you have to arrest him, you have to take him to court' and he said 'I'll try to do something.' Finally we discovered that he was staying in his house, in Abu Mazen's house.

So it was clear what the problem was: this group [the Preventive Security Services] was working on their own agenda. I don't want to say they were connected to the Israeli's or the Americans, they were working on their own agenda, which was against the national agenda. Abu Mazen was supposed to make a decision. But I believe he could not do that. This is the best thing if you want to say more than this he may be involved in this. I prefer to say he could not do anything. He knew those people were supported by the Americans and the Israelis. And he could not do anything against them.

MA: Was Dahlan involved with them?

UH: Yes, Dahlan was involved with them. I want to add one more thing which is important. Some senior advisors working with Abu Mazen went to Europe and to the United States and some of them went to Arab countries talking to them to stop the support for the national unity government, especially the financial aid. They told them that if they stopped the financial aid that the national unity government would collapse by the end of the year and that that collapse would end the political programme of Hamas and so that would open the road for a new political peace process. For example [Rafir Husseini], he went to Brussels and he talked directly to the Europeans. I think you may have heard of this. Saeb Erekat did the same thing in the United States. When we faced Abu Mazen with these facts, saying we had some recorded things of this, he was angry. He said, 'I will not accept it. I will not accept it that this man is saying this or that. I am the man who expresses the official position of the President.' But it was clear that [Rafir Husseini] is his office manager and he was the one who sent him to the Europeans. He did not buy the ticket from Ramallah and go by himself, or on his

own behalf. At the same time [Yasir Abed Rabbo] went and he said in public, in the United Arab Emirates, that supporting Hamas will damage the Palestinian cause.

So, we have come to this point. They are undermining the National Unity Government. They are supporting the siege against the Palestinian people. They are undermining the security plan and over that they are doing their best to damage the security in the territories in order to destroy everything. There was no other choice. We had no other choice. You have to make your own step against those people. So our step was very limited. We had to face those generals of the security forces who worked without against the national benefits. Our actions were not against Fatah, they were not against the President, they were not against the security forces. We made that step and it was clear that no one of Fatah's leaders were attacked in Gaza – I'm talking about Gaza. Not one of their offices or their institutions was attacked. Even the security forces; we asked them to leave their offices before any attacks and if they did there were no attacks, there were no killings. For example in Rafah, you can check that, we took over all the offices without shooting anybody.

MA: And the Marina?

UH: The marina in Jubalya was the same. For example there were senior leaders from Fateh in Gaza, no one attacked them [Ahmed Hellas, Acre el Avaa, Sufran Abu Zaide] you have dozens of names. More than this, we called them. We knew there is some leaders in the security forces, they were involved in the killings; but we believe we want to solve our problem, we don't want to complicate the problem. If you guarantee their position we would release them, and that happened. With someone like [Misawa Hallerpersi], who was responsible for the massacre of Al Hidea Mosque, when about 30 people were killed in the mosque, I'm sorry to say this in a way even the Israeli did not do that. It was not as it was done in Hebron [the Hebron Massacre of the early 1990s]. Rather, I am talking about an official security leader, an official security force, they did that in a mosque killing more than 30 people and injuring more than 70 people.

Anyway we said at this point that we have to talk clearly and frankly. The complications in the Palestinian situation resulted from the weakness of Abu Mazen. It resulted from the feeling that the United States and Israel may support may generate a new leadership for the Palestinian people, which is Mohamed Dahlan. And it is the feeling that if Hamas could continue in power, forming the government, having the majority in the legislative council, this may not help the stability in the region. This wrong concept generated this result.

I believe we have to talk about the future. The first point; if you want to deal with the Palestinian people you have to deal with their elected leadership. If anyone thinks that he can generate a Palestinian leadership by financial support and by some political support he will complicate the situation and finally he will fail.

And everyone noticed that in Gaza, they could not even survive for three days, even they were supported by the international community by the Israeli's for more than twelve years.

Second point; I believe, if you are talking about a solution, if you are talking about stability, you have to deal with a real committed movement, and it was clear in the last two years the most committed movement, for example, to the ceasefire was Hamas, it was not Fateh, it wasn't any other group.

The third point, I believe they can continue putting the Palestinian people under the siege. But helping Abu Mazen by aid will not help him in front of his Palestinian people. Now -- and we will say that in the future -- he is a traitor. He is applying the outsider plans, he is doing the steps as the Israeli wants. This will not help him, this will not help his group.

So the solution is clear: To recognise the results of the elections. To respect the Palestinian democracy; to support the Palestinian people to secure the organisations; to secure their democratic systems, and to deal with them directly, talking about peace, security and the political process. This will lead us in the right direction. Otherwise I believe the Palestinian people will defend their rights. They will defend their honor.

MA: how do you get this new process started?

UH: Well we have already started. In Gaza we call for the police to start their work. What had happened? General [Kamal Sheikh], who is the general command for the police, asked all the policemen in Gaza to return to their homes, not to do anything in the streets, and he will pay them their salaries and if anyone went to the street doing his job he will take him to a marshal court. So it is clear that someone is trying to damage the whole situation while you are doing your best to apply the rule of the establishment, the institution. So the first point we have a National Unity government, and this National Unity government is supposed to be supported.

There was a security plan endorsed by the government who are ready to start working on that and I believe we have to work in order to hold a national dialogue conference – all the groups are supposed to be invited – and then we can start our dialogue under the supervision of the Arabs - maybe some other people - but this time this dialogue is supposed to be supervised and there must be guarantees, anything which will be accepted, I mean the Palestinian people will agree it, it is supposed to be applied on the ground. If someone asked how to start the dialogue while there are problems on the ground? We did not say that we are taking over Gaza. We are asking the security forces to start their work back, and the ministers to start their work, they are working now but it is clear this security plan which was generated by [Dayton] and his colleagues will not work on the ground

anymore.³

MA: Has Saudi Arabia still got a role?

UH: Well we have talked to Prince Saud al Faisal and we are still committed to the Mecca Agreement and he said that in the Arab League and he said well we believe we have to start from this agreement.⁴ We appreciate this position and I think it will be a good point to start from. The Syrians support that, the Qatari, the Yemeni's, the Algeria, the Sudan, I think it's a good number of states that supported that. Even Amr Moussa he said on the phone that he accepts the idea -- that was between him and Khaled Mashal.

Jonathan Lehrle – Is anybody seeing Amr Moussa in Beirut today, he comes in this evening.

UH: He will come in today but [laughter] he probably has enough on his agenda, so this is probably not something that he will think about today.

MA: At the moment if you look at the perception in the world you have very strong propaganda operation on behalf of Abu Mazen, how do you counteract that?

UH: Well, they are repeating the same mistakes when they brought him for the first time as a prime minister, when he came as a prime minister, by their propaganda they convinced all the Palestinian people that he was brought by them to be a Prime Minister, even Fatah people, they attacked him. When Abu Amar [Yasser Arafat] died and he became the President by their propaganda they showed that he is their man and this damaged him, now they are damaging the remains of his reputation among the Palestinian people. When Condoleezza Rice talked to him on the phone telling him that she supports his steps, when President Bush talked to him telling him that he will lift the sanctions against a government that he had formed, when the support came directly from the EU – this is damaging to all his reputation.

I believe Abu Mazen is losing his legitimacy inside the Palestinian community. And by their acts, by his people's acts on the ground ... in the West bank they attacked 150 institutions related to Hamas humanitarian – educational, clubs, support for sports, mosques, even libraries ... so they attacked 150 institutions, they burned them; I'm not saying attack, they damaged the doors, they burned them. They attacked the house of the Parliament Speaker, they burned it, even his

³ Usamah Hamdan and the Hamas leadership are here endorsing the security plan the resulted from the National Unity Government but which was not implemented.

⁴ The Saudis have said publicly that they still retain their support for the national unity government. Their endorsement was followed by that of the head of the Arab League. Egypt and Jordan have endorsed the government of Abu Mazen. Syria has called for dialogue.

family was in the house, they kidnapped 100 members of Hamas, they assassinated one of them, they attacked the elected municipalities. In Nablus they kicked them out and appointed a new municipality from Fatah, and they did that in [Beita] and [Safirt] and several municipalities, all that was done in just five days. And even they said that they have stopped this, up to today they are still attacking the people, destroying and damaging the national institutions.

This shows the people what is the meaning of the security under their rule, what is the meaning of security by their security forces. It is not the al Aqsa brigades who are doing that. It is the presidential guard, the preventive security services and the intelligence services that doing this.⁵ I believe if this propaganda continues, if this support continues, this will not help Abu Mazen and it will not help the Palestinian situation.

MA: Just so I'm clear. Your position is if you got back to the Mecca Agreement that would be the position. The conditions of Mecca, that would be a basis for restarting the so Mecca is still the basis.

UH: Well, for us Mecca and the Cairo Agreement before that and the Palestinian National Conciliation Agreement which was agreed in June last year. It is still the basis and we are committed to the three of those agreements. I believe it was a temporary step in order to stop this, and to say well we have to apply what we have agreed on, and if there was international support for this I think we can have a new start in the Palestinian situation. And I believe after a while you can talk with a committed and a legitimate Palestinian leadership.

MA: The reason I'm asking is that King Abdullah at the moment is in Spain, talking to the European leaders and he is taking the same view that Mecca must be the beginning. Yesterday we saw President Assad and he is of the same view. I had my foreign spokesman from my party with me and I told him the first message he must get back is that talking must begin again. At the moment if you look at the propaganda, the news, everybody is saying that Hamas is in Gaza so we must forget it and get on with the rest – that that is very dangerous.

⁵ The head of military and security intelligence in the West Bank is Tawfik Tarawi, formerly designated by the Israeli government as one of “the Muqata terrorists.” Mr. Tarawi now maintains extensive files on Hamas, its networks in the West Bank, and its reach inside the religious community. His bright and shiny new headquarters, near the presidential compound, has -- on its third floor -- extensive files on each Hamas member and cell. I have seen them. Mr. Tarawi, in spite of his dislike of Hamas, has an extensive network of associates who spend their time attempting to undermine Mr. Dahlan and his arch-nemesis, Mr. Jabril Rajoub -- now unemployed (who lived just blocks from Mr. Tarawi's offices). Mr. Tarawi's operation is said to be supported by American funds: it is hard to imagine where else he might receive such extensive funding -- certainly not from Israel. Mr. Tarawi is a personable, open and has a good sense of humor. But he is in fact a rather common, low, run-of-the-mill everyday thug who, having once killed Israelis, now finds his talents can be used to kill his fellow countrymen. He takes great pride in his intelligence operation which, as he told me, “has penetrated every West Bank mosque.”

UH: Well, they are claiming that we are killing and assassinating the people in Gaza. We said we are ready to have an Arab investigation committee in Gaza. They can come, they can stay, they can see everything on the ground. The one who rejected this is the other side, and I know why: they know what they have done before, they know what they are doing now. I'm not saying that there were no mistakes this last few days. There were mistakes and it is clear we don't accept that and we will not let the people to do these mistakes again. It is clear we are not defending the mistakes. We are not saying it did not happen. We have the courage to say this was wrong. The main problems is how to apply all the agreements. It is not accepted anymore to make those agreements in the first hours of the day but then not to apply them at the end of the day.

I'm not sure if you have this expression, they say – it is an Arabic expression – it means the talks in the night are done with butter, when the sun rises it will melt again. I'm not sure if you have something like this in English, but we will not accept this situation. If they are really insist to reform the whole situation they have points from which are ready to start from, the Mecca agreement, Palestinian Conciliation and the Cairo Agreement from 2005. This time we will insist on supervision for this dialogue so everyone can know who is working positively and who is trying to damage the situation.

MA: Who do you see doing the supervision?

UH: Well, as I said we accept the Arab supervision and if there is anybody interested in that we will not say no for anyone.

MA: And how difficult [will it be] for you to see the situation through. Abu Mazen is now given the money and Gaza is cut off?

UH: Well there is an important point; we have to ask a big question. If the international community is interested in having Gaza separated from the West Bank, if they are he can do that, if they are not I think he will not do that. What will happen if they want this to happen? I believe this will give a chance for all the people who are against the democratic processes inside Palestine to say 'well you have tried, but it is not workable, so there is no real democracy.' And this will take us back to the position -- there is no use to accept this system, there is no use to work with this system, the only solution is to burn up the system. Do you know what this will mean for the whole region? No one will accept the democracy anymore and this will minimise the space for the people who believe in democracy, the democratics, the political Islam. And this will widen the space for the people who talking about burning the system. I believe this will not secure the region.

Mark Perry: If he (Abu Mazen) agrees to the separation of the West Bank and Gaza, he has crossed the red line.

UH: That's right.

MP: Because no Palestinian could ever agree to the separation of the West Bank and Gaza, just as no Palestinian could ever agree to give up the Right of Return.

UH: That's right, but if somebody was supposing to cross that line I believe he will lose everything as a Palestinian leadership. No one will respect him as a leader, because the Palestinian people insist for all time on having a united nation, they are still talking about the refugees outside the Palestinian territories, they still talking about the people inside Israel as Palestinians. If you ask anyone, he will not accept the idea of being an Israeli, an Arab-Israeli, he will tell you directly he is a Palestinian. So if he cross that line I think he will lose it.

MA: Very interesting. It has been helpful for me because I'm going back on Thursday and would be able to give some counter-information.

UH: Well, I will try to follow-up today and tomorrow to see if we have some contacts with the Saudi's and others, if there is anything new I will try to let you know.

MP: How is the Central Committee with Abu Mazen's decision?

UH: Well, there are some people who are not accepting that. Abbas Zaki told me frankly that he is basically against that, and I was shocked by that. He told me. But he is a weak man, you cannot count on him, he may change his position from this chair to that chair. And I believe he is corrupted. Two million is not a little piece of money.

MP: What about the others?

UH: Well, Hani al- Hassan, he said clearly that this will damage everything. But Hani is weak. Farouk Quddumi he said nothing, he called for keeping the unity of Fateh.

MP: Where is Dahlan?

UH: He is in Ramallah, he was in Egypt, he was in Taba.

MP: I understand that there was a telephone call in which a colleague of Abu Mazen's said that Abu Mazen said that he wished that Dahlan would stay in Egypt. And this colleague said that Abu Mazen said he hoped that Dahlan had been humbled and that maybe all that would happen is that Salam Fayad would resign but the government would stay intact. The plan, I had heard, was for

Dahlan to stay in Egypt, but when I woke up next morning to hear that Abu Mazen had dissolved the Government and that Dahlan was in Ramallah, I assume the Americans put him there?

UH: That's right. Abu Mazen has problems. His main problem is that he is a weak man, that he can't make decisions and he is under pressure now but that does not mean he is not responsible. He has some responsibility but he is not acting as a President. Well they prevented him coming to Gaza four days before the clashes. He talked to Ismail Haniya on the phone and said he told him I am coming and will not leave before solving the problem. Then two days later...

MP: Osama, all he has going for him is the internal security service and the Presidential guard and Mohammad Dahlan, he doesn't have the rest of them.

UH: That's right.

MP: At the end of the day Abu Ala is broken.

MA: What if he has money to hand out?

MP – You know what, the Americans will not deliver. Any money will go astray, into condominiums, that money will not reach where it is supposed to.

MA: You mentioned, it is a small thing but could be quite important in Britain. You mentioned that Alan Johnston's captures were a family...

UH: The Dagmouh family.

MA: That they were associated with Dahlan. Would Dahlan have known?

UH: Yes. He knew this, he does. And for three times we came to the point to release Alan Johnston and by telephone call from [Samir Musharawi], who is Dahlan's man, they stopped that.

JL: And what about now, because Hamas gave a deadline?

UH: Well now, in one point which we are working on is to have the man secure and safe. If you did anything wrong they may hurt him so we are making the pressure, slowly in order to have him released. We are talking for some senior members of the family, telling them this will not help the whole family, and they have to play a role, they can't cover their backs while they are kidnapping this man.

JL: And their response from them, they understand, they are listening to this seriously?

OH: Yes, well I believe so. It is dangerous, so can't make a militant attack against them, but you have to pressure them slowly, slowly in order to have this man released. The most important thing is that our people know him well (Alan Johnston), they know him well. I've talked yesterday to our [Dr Ohum Zahar], he saw him dozens of times, not in public, he visited him in his office. They respect him. They believe they have to do the job slowly in order not to hurt him. You know the contacts are still Mohammad Dahlan and Samir Musharawi so you have to be careful. Don't say anything.

MA: The things we talked about before we can come back to, you have enough for now.

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