



On the 19th and 20th June 2007 Michael Ancram and Jonathan Lehrle, Chairman and Director respectively, of Global Strategy Forum attended a small conference in Beirut. The aim of the conference was to examine perceptions of Hezbollah and Hamas by the West and vice versa. In the fringes of this conference a meeting was held with Hamas's Senior Representative in Beirut Mr Osama Hamdan. This is a transcript of that meeting, which could not be made public - for reasons which become apparent - until the BBC journalist Alan Johnston had been released. Alan Johnston was released in the early hours of 4th July 2007.

Jonathan Lehrle
Director
Global Strategy Forum

Meeting: Osama Hamdan – Senior Hamas representative in Beirut
Where: Beirut – undisclosed location
When: 19th June 2007 (lunchtime)
Present: Michael Ancram MP, Jonathan Lehrle and Mr Mark Perry (Conflicts Forum)

Transcript of conversation - verbatim

[first 30/40 seconds is muffled, thereafter sound quality OK]

MA – 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?

OH – I will start from the Mecca Agreement. At Mecca there were three important points. The first one was National Unity Government; second point is the reform of the security services and a new security plan for the Palestinian territories, and third the point 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 went back to Gaza and within one month there was the formation for the national unity government. We started talking about the security, there was the security plan that was endorsed by the government and then by Abu Mazen himself as President.

When we started to apply that on the ground we faced an important problem which was the main Generals in the security services rejected to apply this plan – even Rashid Abushbak, ordered all the security officers not to receive the Interior Minister without his own permission, so he was not able to go anywhere, he was not able to order any security service to apply the plan. So we have talked directly to Abu Mazen in Cairo and in April and it was a frank talk about this plan which was endorsed by himself and we insist that this is supposed to happen but he did not promise to do anything, he said just I will talk with Mr Mohamed Dahlan and then I will give you an answer, and this answer will be inside the territories. He went to Gaza, he had the

meeting with the interior Minister and he told him I consulted Mohammed Dahlan and he rejected to apply that. So we reach and end point, a closed point in the security plan. At the same time there was another security plan, which was generated by the Americans, you know 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 and about it, the politicians knew about it, I think you have a copy of this plan. This plan it works in order to establish a new security forces from the Presidential Guard and it was supposed to train 20,000 soldiers and they were supposed to be trained in Jordan, Egypt, UK, US and in Russia. This, it 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 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 up the officers – about 700 and 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 which is supposed to give themselves some time they were undermining their own 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 and the ... in somehow by some robberies and killings and by supporting some drug mobs and finally the kidnapping of some people, including the journalist Alan Johnston - who was kidnapped by some members of the Daghmush family, who were directly connected to Mohamed Dahlan.

At this time, in May, we visited Egypt and we talked frankly what is happening on the ground and we told them from the beginning of March until the end of May those forces kidnapped and assassinated 40 members from Hamas, they 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 etc, so they continued assassinating the people and it was you don't want to investigate because somebody like Samir Medhon, on Palestinian TV he 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, who assassinated them. So we talked to Abu Mazen and 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 that the problem, this group 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 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 Israeli's and he can't do anything against them...

MA - Was Dahlan involved with them?

OH - Yes Dahlan was involved with them. I want to add one more thing which is important. Some senior advisors working with Abu Mazen, they went to Europe and to the United States and some of them they went to Arab countries talking to them to stop the support for the national unity government especially the financial aid - telling them if that happened, this government by the end of the year it would collapse and this will end the political programme of Hamas and this will open the road for a new political peace process. For example Rafir Husseini, he went to Brussels and he talked directly to the European, I think you may have heard of this. Saeb Erekat did the same thing in the United States. When we faced Abu Mazen by those facts, saying we had some recorded things for this, he was angry and he said I will not accept to tell me 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 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 Raboo went and he said that in public in the United Arab Emirates telling them the support of Hamas will damage the Palestinian cause.

So, you 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. You have to make your own step against those people. So our step was very limited, we have to face those generals of the security forces who worked without those, who work against the national.. err benefits, it is not against Fateh, it is not against the President, its not against the security forces itself. We made that step and it was clear that no one of Fateh's leaders was attacked in Gaza – I'm talking about Gaza – no 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 so there was no attacks, there was no killings. For example in Rafah, you can check that, we took over all the offices without shooting anybody...*And the marina?*...The marina in Jeballia was the same. For example there was senior, senior leaders from Fateh in Gaza, no one attacked them - Ahmed Hellis, Acree El Avaa, Sufran Abu Zaida, etc - 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 Miswa Halerpersi 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. Just what had happened in Hebron but I'm 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 we have to talk clearly and frankly. The complications in the Palestinian situation, it was a result for the weakness of Abu Mazen, it was a result for the feeling that the United States and the Israeli support may generate a new leadership for the Palestinian people, which is Mohamed Dahlan, and the feeling 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, it resulted, it was, it generates 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 it 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, it will not help him, it 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 honour.

MA – how do you get this new process started?

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.

MA – Has Saudi Arabia still got a role?

OH – 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. 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, 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.

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

OH - He will come in today but.....[lost in much comment re Moussa having enough on his plate re Lebanese politics]

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?

OH - 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 Fateh people, they attacked him. When Abu Ammar [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 all his reputation. I believe he is losing his legitimacy inside the Palestinian community. And by their acts, by his people's acts on the ground, eg 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 Mr Aziz Adweik, the Parliament Speaker, they burned it, even his family was in the house, they kidnapped 100 members of Hamas, they assassinated 1 of them, they attacked the elected municipalities. In Nablus they kicked them out and appointed a new municipality from Fateh, and they did that in Beita and Salfit and several municipalities, all that was done in just 5 days. And even they said that they have stopped this, up to today they are still attacking the people, destroying a damaging the 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, the presidential guard, the preventive security and the intelligence are doing this. I believe if this propaganda continued, if this support continued this will not help Abu Mazen and 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 theso Mecca is still the basis.

OH - Well for us Mecca and the Cairo agreement before that and the Palestinian National conciliation 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, get on with the rest – that is very dangerous.

OH - Well they are claiming that we are killing and assassinating the people in Gaza. We said we are ready for the 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 was 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 we it happened. 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 – 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 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 damaging the situation.

MA - Who do you see doing the supervision?

OH - 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 for you to see the situation through, Abu Mazen is now given the money and Gaza is cut off?

OH - 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 democrats, 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.

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

OH - That's right.

MP - 'cos no Palestinian could ever agree to the separation of ...(lost in background noise...)

OH – 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 insists for all the 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 about for example Azmi Bishara, 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.

OH – 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?

OH – well there is some people who are not accepting that. Abbas Zaki he 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?

OH - Well Hani El-Hassan, he said clearly that this will damage everything, but Hanil is weak. Farouk Qadoumi, he said nothing, he called for keeping the unity of Fateh.

MA - Where is Dahlan?

OH - He is in Ramallah, he was in Egypt, he was in Taba.

MP – (question about relationship between Dahlan and Abu Mazen.) Telephone call in which Ghaith Al-Amari said Abu Mazen was relieved that Dahlan had been humbled. Plan was to leave Dahlan in Egypt, 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?

OH – 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.

OH – 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...

OH – Daghmush.

MA - ...that they were associated with Dahlan. Would Dahlan have known?

OH – yeah, 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, ‘cos Hamas gave a deadline?

OH – 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 with 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 – Yeah, 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 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.

End.

JL