The Middle East Peace Process

The case for jaw-jaw not war-war

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When I opened talks with Sinn Féin/Irish Republican Army (IRA), such was the anger of the Ulster Unionists that they declared me ‘contaminated’ and withdrew from talks with me. Yet as a direct result of those initial communications in the early 1990s we now have the makings of a peaceful and prosperous future for that historically troubled province. In Churchill’s terms, after thirty years jaw-jaw has proved better than war-war.

Let me be clear: I do not like terrorists and I despise their activities. However, while you do not have to like your enemy, it helps to respect him and dialogue is part of that respect. The Northern Ireland experience holds some lessons for the Middle East, particularly as the process we developed in pursuit of peace had largely to be constructed as I went along. No conflict is the same as another, but there are similarities from which it is instructive to learn.

Lessons from Northern Ireland

When I joined the Northern Ireland Office, violence was at a new peak; mass bombings, assassinations, sectarian violence, gun-running and outside interference. No one was talking to anyone and I was frequently advised that the problem was intractable.

We made a different analysis. Firstly, that the war could not be won. Secondly, that there could be no long-term solution to the problem we were confronting without the eventual involvement of those we were fighting. Thirdly, that even as the fighting continued we needed to find a means of engaging them. And fourthly, that this could only be done by opening dialogue.

The first challenge was how to open dialogue with the Provisional IRA, a proscribed terrorist organization with whom we had no formal means of communication. The first step was using language designed to resonate with them. Eventually tentative contact was made – even as...
the bombings and assassinations continued, along with our commensurate military responses.

What followed was vicarious dialogue seeking to identify language that might build some confidence with the insurgents, without driving other necessary participants away. The outcome was the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 which encompassed in general terms the aspirations and grievances of the participants sufficiently to give them a degree of confidence without requiring them to sign up to each other’s positions.

This was not preceded by or dependent on a prior cessation of violence, nor any undertakings of recognition. It was a signal – ratified by two interested sovereign governments – aimed at persuading participants that there was sufficient basis for moving to dialogue. It was an invitation to engage. It was designed to encourage the participation of those we needed to bring in. Thus the stage was set for the ceasefire by the insurgents.

Then the framework for dialogue began to be put in place. Any formal requirement for a permanent renunciation of violence and the decommissioning of illegally held weapons prior to formal negotiations was bypassed by informal discussions. More pertinently there was never a requirement made of Sinn Féin/IRA for de jure recognition of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. Such a precondition would have been a game-breaker. It was enough that they were tentatively seeking to talk with us.

We established ‘exploratory dialogue’ – hard and often uncompromising talks without conditions or commitment. Precisely because it was not part of formal delicate negotiations the participants can be much more robust with one another. The early conversations I had with Sinn Féin/IRA members were most certainly not the language of negotiation, but provided an important part of the exploration. Instead of negotiating commitments, we were exploring boundaries, establishing lines in the sand beyond which they would not go. Narrow horizons suddenly began to broaden. The hitherto impossible suddenly became remotely possible.

And there was a vital spin-off. If Sinn Féin/IRA could be persuaded to explore their lines in the sand, why not the democratic parties in the middle and indeed the paramilitaries at the other extreme as well? Thus exploratory dialogue spread organically until it encompassed all participants, each individually without commitment exploring the lines in the sand. When many of these lines overlapped, we had a launch pad for progress. These overlaps led to the Framework Document – notorious for being disowned by all the participants – but which because of the robustness of all the gathered lines in the sand eventually became the basis of the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

Lessons for the Middle East

The lessons from Northern Ireland are relatively simple. Dialogue can be entered into even during conflict. Exploratory dialogue can overcome the need for
preconditions and can grindingly begin to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable, to seek out the eventual compromises upon which any long-term settlement must inevitably be built. Furthermore:

- Conflict and insurgency can be contained by military action, but it cannot be defeated by it;
- Negotiation towards a settlement of conflict nearly always needs to be preceded by informal dialogue;
- Exploratory, non-committal dialogue can often make more progress than seeking commitments;
- Undeliverable preconditions or deadlines are an end rather than beginning to dialogue;
- Exploratory dialogue should be as multilateral as possible to seek out potential areas of common ground;
- Low profile dialogue is more likely to succeed than that carried on in the spotlight of international publicity;
- It is a better use of your time to talk to your enemies than your friends.

These principles might be addressed to conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. They might apply to the standoff with Iran, a country that – without altering our position on Iran's nuclear ambitions or on its sponsorship of violence – needs to be treated as a senior and serious regional player with a key role in long-term regional stability. The same principles also might apply to Syria, whose isolation is counterproductive given that it in many ways holds the key to the whole region.

They might apply to a number of armed groups. While there is no case for exploratory dialogue with al-Qaeda and associated Jihadist or Sulafist fundamentalists who have little to do with any putative settlement, it is crassly short-sighted to exclude Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and even the Taliban in Afghanistan, on the basis that they have not renounced violence.

**Engaging Hamas**

Here I concentrate on Hamas, without whom there can be no viable autonomous Palestinian state within a two-state solution. Hamas has been involved in terrorist activity, including acts that caused the death of Israeli civilians, and it has proclaimed the eradication of the state of Israel as part of its purpose.

Speaking as a firm but frank friend of Israel, I say this is an ideal background for exploratory dialogue. It will not be easy for Israel to engage with those who have wrought such destruction upon them. But then it was not easy for me as a government minister to sit in private conversation, let alone formal negotiation, with the man who sanctioned the assassination of my best friend in politics. The purpose, as was ours in Northern Ireland, would be to test out whether there is the possibility of progress. It may need a document endorsed by all the nations involved which sets out the grievances and concerns of all sides, not for agreement but for acknowledgment ‘without expostulation’ and as a basis from which exploratory dialogue can then be taken forward.

However, western countries have made this more difficult. When Hamas won the free democratic elections in January 2006, many countries reacted by refusing to deal with the Hamas-led Palestinian government. A popular mandate should have provided an opening for exploratory dialogue. It should have at the very least been the occasion for a peace dividend. Instead it was counterproductively an excuse for economic sanctions.

The failure of the West to react positively to that election contributed to pressures that led to civil war between Fatah and Hamas. At a time when all efforts should have been directed at building confidence between the various participants in the peace process, this perceived betrayal of the principles of democratic mandate has only served further to undermine it.

If Hamas agreed to the West’s demands and accepted the legal right of Israel to exist prior to talks, it would lose all credibility with its own supporters. The IRA would have had the equivalent problem in the Northern Ireland context. From what Hamas representatives have told me before the collapse of the unity government – and I hear them with a healthily sceptical mind – the fact of their engagement with Israel on issues such as water and electricity supplies and other cross-boundary matters was in itself a de facto recognition of Israel. Khalid Meshaal’s recognition of the existence of Israel ‘and that it will continue to exist’ took this recognition further. Hamas went as far as to say that if the concept of a Palestinian state became a reality they would hold a referendum on the full de jure recognition of Israel. They know that all of this has to be accompanied by a cessation of violence, for which they envisage a long term Hudna (pause).

Despite the present difficulties, there are those of us who can initiate exploratory dialogue. What we must ask of the Israelis is that they do not seek to derail it, and that if it shows potential for progress they will – in the peaceful interests of their people – be prepared to engage. Israel, somewhat like the Ulster Unionists, has too often been reluctant in terms of exploratory dialogue. Their current leadership must be brought to understand the importance of talking to their enemies.