



‘The Middle East Peace Process; the case for Jaw-jaw not War-war’

Lecture by **The Rt Hon Michael Ancram QC MP**,

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My talk today, as its coined Churchillian title suggests, is about talking to your enemies, and in particular talking to terrorists. I can claim some qualification for doing so, because fourteen years ago I opened talks with Sinn Fein/IRA. Such at the time was the anger of the Ulster Unionists at this, that they declared me ‘contaminated’ and withdrew from talks with me. Today as a direct result of those initial communications all those years ago we now have the makings of a peaceful and prosperous future for that historically troubled province. Paisley has sat down with Adams. The cobra has sat down with the mongoose. 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; on the other hand it helps to respect him and dialogue is part of that respect.

I am no pacifist or liberal appeaser. As deputy leader of the British Conservative Party I called on my colleagues in Parliament to vote for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, without which Tony Blair would have had no mandate to join the US in toppling Saddam Hussein. I led the calls on the Opposition side of our Parliament after 9/11 for military action against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

At the same time I was under no illusions that military action would have its limitations.

My conflict resolution background comes from four years in Northern Ireland as the ‘political minister’.

No conflict is the same as another, and drawing too close analogies is dangerous. But there are similarities from which it is instructive to learn.

I want briefly to set out my Northern Ireland experiences from which I believe some lessons for the Middle East can be learned, particularly as the process we developed in pursuit of peace had largely to be constructed as I went along.

The Northern Ireland Experience

When I arrived, violence was at a new peak; mass bombings, assassinations, sectarian violence, gun-running and outside interference. No one was talking to anyone, not governments, not parties, not insurgents. I was frequently advised that the problem was intractable, and that the ‘war’ would have to go on until it was won

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 could only be done by opening dialogue.

The first challenge was how to do so with those with whom you had no formal means of communication, in our case the Provisional IRA, a proscribed organisation on account of their murderous terrorism. The first step therefore was language¹ designed to resonate with PIRA. Eventually tentative contact was made². Contact of the barest kind had been made. Meanwhile, and significantly in the Middle East context, the bombings and assassinations continued, and our military response was commensurate.

What followed was vicarious dialogue seeking to identify language which might build some confidence with the insurgents, without driving other necessary participants out of the ballpark. The outcome was the Downing St 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 others positions - but equally not to expostulate against them.

Again significantly in the Middle East context, 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 before formal negotiations was bypassed by informal discussions. More pertinently there was never a requirement made of Sinn Fein/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 treat with us. Both of these experiences have direct echoes in the Middle East.

We established 'exploratory dialogue', hard and often uncompromising talks without conditions or commitment. Some of our meetings were publicly known, others were not. The publicly known ones were on our territory, the others were in their strongholds. 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 Fein/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.

¹ 'no selfish economic or strategic interest' Peter Brooke 1991.

² 'The war is over, help us to end it'. Martin Maguinness

Amazingly many of these lines overlapped, and that was the launch pad for progress. These overlaps led to the now notorious Framework Document which was 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 Good Friday agreement.

The lessons

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

Of course Northern Ireland is a one off which does not easily translate to other areas of conflict; but there are lessons to be learned.

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

What does this mean in practice? In the broad region of the Middle East there are a number of eligible conflicts to which these principles might be addressed.

- The effective state of civil war between the Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq where a process of dialogue rather than armed foreign occupation might be a more productive way forward.
- The mutually unwinnable conflict with the Taliban in Afghanistan.
- The current standoff between the West and Iran, which cannot be divorced from the increasingly pervasive influence of Iran within the region as a whole.
- The astonishing isolation of Syria, denying the reality that that country in many ways holds the key to the whole region.
- The myopic ostracising of Hamas and Hezbollah which ultimately will be essential to any lasting peace settlement with Israel.

You need first to assess who is worth engaging in exploratory dialogue on the basis of their importance to any putative settlement. For a start that completely rules out Al Qaeda and associated Jihadist or Sulafist fundamentalists where there is absolutely no potential for building understanding. But it is crassly short-sighted to exclude on the basis that they have not renounced violence Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and even the Taliban in Afghanistan.

And then there are countries, currently ostracised and isolated but nevertheless crucial to regional settlements, including currently Syria and Iran.

Exploratory dialogue in the Middle East



There are many conflicts around the world ripe for exploratory dialogue. I want however to concentrate on the broad Middle East.

No areas of conflict are analogous with each other, and it can be dangerously misleading even remotely to suggest that they are. However both the pursuit of conflict and the art of peacemaking are intensely human activities. Experiences from one set of circumstances can sometimes usefully be recruited to inform another.

The areas I want to examine are those where the opening of dialogue with bodies in the Middle East previously regarded as enemies is now an imperative.

There can be no resolution of conflicts within Iraq without the external involvement of influential neighbours such as Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia, and possibly even that of other neighbours such as Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar. We are in friendly dialogue with most of these. With two of them we are not.

Syria

Take Syria first. Syria is a difficult country and has always been so, invariably seeking to extend her influence by playing both ends off against the middle? At the same time as a secular Arab state she has the potential to do good as a contiguous neighbour of a gravely sectarian Iraq. It is neither in Syria's interests to have a strongly Shiite neighbour next door nor a religious civil war. Syria thus has the capacity and incentive to play a constructive stabilising role in Iraq. Already there are healthy and regular contacts with senior Iraqi ministers, bolstered by Syrian presence at the recent Baghdad conference. But still, inexplicably, illogically and totally counterproductively the US administration and Britain refuse to enter formal talks with Syria.

The Syrian Foreign Minister when I visited him in Damascus before Christmas distinguished openly between 'isolating' and 'engaging'. It was beyond him why in the current climate in relation not only to Iraq but Israel as well, we were not seeking to bring them to the table. I should add that there are many wise heads in Israel who can't understand this either. If ever there was an opportunity for 'eyes open' exploratory dialogue it must be this. I fear that history will not judge kindly those who failed to grasp it, and I applaud Speaker Nancy Pelosi for recently talking to the Syrian Government.

Iran

Iran is another case in point. She is a proud historic nation; misguided occasionally, as now under the erratic and extreme leadership of Ahmadinejad, but nevertheless with a very clear view of her international standing and her diplomatic potential. I have little problem with the UN imposing targeted sanctions to bring pressure on the Iranian administration to desist in their pursuit of nuclear weapons. But regional stability will not be achieved in the long term without the participation of Iran along with the other regional powers, Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Excluding her from genuine involvement with Iraq is shortsighted and counterproductive, because whatever the outcome of the sorry mess there, Iran will have a significant role to play. We need therefore urgently to talk to them about Iraq – and for good measure about Israel/Palestine as well where their influence on Hamas and Hizbollah could be important.

It requires, without altering our position on Iran's nuclear ambitions, or on its sponsorship of violence, treating Iran not as a recalcitrant to be chastised but as a senior and serious regional player. Hectoring and humiliating wins no hearts. That to me was the lesson of the humiliating capture of our sailors two weeks ago. Had dialogue been ongoing, rather than suddenly undertaken in response to this crisis, the outcome would have looked like a success rather than a shameful defeat for Britain.

In the end, nuclear or non-nuclear, Iran will once again be a major regional power. We should be encouraging that re-emergence in a positive rather than the current negative spirit which bolsters even hated leaders and encourages both resentful inaction and provocative reaction.

Hamas and Hezbollah

It is however with the presently excluded participants to the Middle East peace process that I want to deal in more detail, namely Hamas and Hizbollah.

I am no anti-Israel propagandist. Over thirty years I have been and am a firm friend of Israel. That does not mean that I cannot be a frank friend. Nor does it mean that I cannot equally be a friend of the Palestinians and of other key participants in the area.

As in Northern Ireland, I look at the antagonists, and ask what the effect of military action upon them has been. Not only has Israeli military action over the last sixty years failed to defeat either Hamas or Hizbollah, but in both cases that same military action arguably gave rise to their coming into being. Future military action might at best contain them - and last year's July war in Lebanon indicates that even that is no longer certain - it will not defeat them. Any genuine peace process must therefore seek to include them.

There can be no viable autonomous Palestinian state within a two state solution without Hamas who are a vital part of the political fabric of not only the current Palestinian Authority but also among the prisoners and the external refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. There can be no peaceful and second border with Lebanon without the cooperation of Hizbollah who are not only a significant part of the political fabric of Lebanon but whose natural constituency lies largely in Southern Lebanon.

At the same time both these organisations have been involved either directly or through sponsorship in terrorist activity, including acts which caused the death of Israeli civilians. Both have proclaimed the eradication of the state of Israel as part of their purpose.

This is an ideal background for exploratory dialogue. The purpose, as was ours in Northern Ireland, would be to test out whether there is the possibility of progress.

There will be those who will argue that exploratory dialogue delays progress. In my experience, although it was often painstaking, the identification of potential areas for progress speeded up the actual negotiations once they began.

Of course it would be highly difficult for Israel openly to begin such a process with either Hamas or Hizbollah. Others however can lay the ground work.

For a start over the last four months I have met both Hamas and Hizbollah. I listened to them both, and while discounting inevitable propaganda there were a number of points which I believe are salient.

If Hamas was to accept the legal right of Israel to exist, it would lose all credibility with its own supporters. For that matter the IRA would have had the same problem in the Northern Ireland context. From what Hamas told me – and I hear them with a healthily skeptical mind – the fact of their engagement with Israel, on issues such as water and electricity supplies and other cross-boundary matters is in itself a de facto recognition of Israel. Negotiations in a ‘Mecca –style’ format³ would be further de facto recognition. Kalid Meshal’s recognition of the existence of Israel ‘and that it will continue to exist’ took this recognition further. On my criteria it certainly should open the door to exploratory dialogue. I along with others have tried to encourage this process.

According to Hamas they are ready, as part of a reconstituted PLO, to enter talks on a two state solution which creates a viable autonomous Palestinian state based broadly on the 1967 boundaries. They go as far as to say that if the concept of a Palestinian state becomes a reality they will 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. They envisage a long term *Hudna* to deliver this. Ceasefires however have come and gone in the past, with breaches leading to their eventual demise. It is worth exploring on both sides whether any new ceasefire to enable dialogue should not be policed by the international community to prevent unauthorised or accidental breaches leading unnecessarily to breakdown and the resumption of violence.

All of this would be a start. There is also the countervailing aspect that if Hamas is fatally undermined or substantially weakened by political maneuvering, other more extreme Jihadist or Sulafist movements stand poised to take its place, movements with which there will be no basis for dialogue. Hamas as a territorial Islamist movement holds the bridgehead against extreme jihadism in Gaza and the West Bank. That must be to both Israel’s and our advantage; and another reason to talk.

It may need a narrative, 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.

There is one more factor. The West told the Palestinians to hold free democratic elections. They did, as the international community confirmed, - and Hamas won. It is hard for Palestinians to understand how that same West can then tell them that as it doesn’t like the result, it is not going to recognise it and what’s more will punish the Palestinian electorate economically for having exercised their free democratic vote. Apart from the mixed messages this gives throughout the region, it creates enormous cynicism and resentment among the majority of Palestinians and threatens to suggest that the ballot box in Western eyes is not more powerful than the gun. A popular mandate should provide the opening for exploratory dialogue. It should have at the very least been the occasion for a peace dividend. Instead it has counterproductively been an excuse for economic sanctions.

The failure of the West to react positively to that election led to pressures within the Palestinian Authority which almost led to civil war between Fatah and Hamas and is even

³ ‘respecting previous agreements’

now causing positions within Hamas will harden. At a time when all efforts should be directed at building confidence between the various participants in the peace process, this perceived betrayal of the principles of democratic mandate can only serve further to undermine it.

The position with Hizbollah is a little different. However they too are a bulwark against growing Sulafist and Al Qaeda attempts to spread its influence within the region. It is deeply concerning to hear that in Lebanon there are parties who are cynically encouraging the Sulafists to undermine Hizbollah. They are playing with fire.

Again in considering the merits of exploratory dialogue with Hizbollah we need to explore and test the statements they have made to me.

They do not deny their antipathy in principle to Israel. They reminded me that they were born of the resistance to the Israeli incursion into Lebanon of 1982 and that (again not unlike the PIRA in Northern Ireland) they have set themselves up as the defenders of their community in South Lebanon with the power to strike at the Israelis if such defence demanded it. They did not deny the capture of the Israeli soldiers, claiming that it was for prisoner release bargaining purposes and admitting that in the outturn it was a mistake.

They point out that for a number of years before last July there had been no aggressive action by Hizbollah against Israel. Nevertheless they argue that their military strength, which they claim now to have been totally restored, is necessary if they are credibly going to be able to offer themselves as the protectors of their Shiite community – and the Palestinian refugees who have no other local defenders.

Their declared ambition to me was within Lebanese politics, representing, and physically and financially supporting their community in the south of the country. While being satisfied with the outcome of the July War, they nevertheless protest that it is not in their political interests to have their peoples villages and (as I saw for myself) urban dwellings torn apart by Israeli bombs.

They see themselves as a resistance movement which once the reasons for resistance are past should also be absorbed into the political mainstream. They claim that while not accepting the legitimacy of the Israeli state they accept its existence and, Shaaba farms apart, have no quarrels with the current borders. They say that their primary concern is to achieve an influential position within the government of Lebanon commensurate with the percentage of the votes cast in their favour. They are in an internal political battle of traditional Lebanese proportions, and they will look for support and assistance from any quarter from which it might come. Interestingly they told me that the American and British diplomatic envoys in Iran were the only ones who were not holding dialogue with them at present.

Their message to me was that a satisfactory two state solution with confirmed and acceptable boundaries would leave them to pursue their immediate aim of achieving poll position within the power-sharing structures provided for by the Lebanese Constitution. In practice, tightening their political grip on the people of southern Lebanon might pose wider long term political questions. In the light of this it would appear to me that exploratory dialogue would provide an interesting set of negotiating options.



Once again however undeliverable preconditions including disarmament would be game busters. Given the exploratory nature of the suggested talks and the crucial fact that they would be without commitment, there is absolutely nothing to be lost by initiating them.

Israel

None of this however is worth a candle if at the end of the day Israel is not prepared for reasons of principle to build reasonably swiftly on the outcomes of such explorations. It will not be easy for Israel to engage with those who have wrought such personal 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!

There are others of us who can initiate such exploration. 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. Many of her senior thinkers are now however thinking differently.

Their current leadership must be brought to understand the importance of talking to their enemies.

Conclusion

Exploratory dialogue is not a sign of weakness. Precisely because it is not part of formal delicate negotiations the participants can be much more robust with one another. One of the toughest conversations I have ever conducted was at an early meeting with a leading member of Sinn Fein/IRA. Ours was most certainly not the language of negotiation, but it provided an important part of the exploration.

Over these last two years the world has moved identifiably from one where hard power resolved conflicts to one where soft power is regaining its sway. Diplomacy is rediscovering its role and exploratory dialogue re-establishing its position as its outrider.

This is an art at which the British at least have historically always excelled. With the support and partnership of our American friends we can re-establish its importance in helping to resolve conflicts and create stability between warring factions. And where the vestiges of our hard power have regrettably made us part of the problem, a return to dialogue offers us a pathway towards a solution.

So let's get talking.

End

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