



*'Dancing with Wolves'*

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On the face of it, Tony Blair's appointment as the Quartet's representative in the Middle East Peace Process should be welcomed. His problem however is that he comes with the negative baggage of Iraq and the July War in Lebanon last year. He can overcome this if he now clearly departs from the counter-productive factionalised American strategy in the Middle East and deploys instead the lessons of the Northern Irish Peace Process of which he has a right to be proud.

In Northern Ireland we 'danced with wolves', we opened communications with the IRA who even as we did so were killing our soldiers and maiming and murdering civilians. We did so because we had rightly concluded that there was no answer to 'the Troubles' which did not encompass and eventually include Irish Republicanism. Talking didn't indicate endorsement on either side. It offered engagement.

If Tony Blair is to have any real effect in the Middle East he will have to dance with wolves there too. Even if they are still threatening Israel, he will have to start talking with Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The justification is simple. There can be no viable and autonomous Palestine that does not involve Hamas which is a major part of the Palestinian political scene. There can be no secure Israeli border with Lebanon that does not similarly encompass Hezbollah which is a crucial and predominant part of the Southern Lebanese political and security structure.

Talking to Hamas and Hezbollah is no 'great step'. I have been doing so in bomb-damaged southern Beirut with senior officials from both movements on and off for the last six months. They are encouragingly ready to talk. I have not been negotiating but exploring, not browbeating but trying to understand, not to pin down but to engage. This is the process of 'exploratory dialogue' which began to open windows in Northern Ireland. So far my conversations with both Hamas and Hezbollah have been rewarding – and civilized.

Of course Israel cannot currently talk to them. But if Blair is to promote an agreed settlement he has to be friends of all sides. I am an established friend of Israel. I am also a firm friend of Palestine, with many long established contacts within Fatah. Blair also needs to talk to all the disparate voices within each side if eventually he is to help create a credible roundtable for negotiations.

I started talking to Hamas and Hezbollah last autumn on the same basis that I began dialogue with fundamentalist Irish republicanism nearly fifteen years ago. The primary lesson of Northern Ireland was that while you might militarily contain national terrorist movements you could not defeat them and more significantly you would never eradicate them. In the end you need to engage with them.

My exploratory dialogue with Hamas and Hezbollah has already identified areas for further exploration. Being merely exploratory, undeliverable and potentially 'game-busting' preconditions such as the legal recognition of Israel are unnecessary at this stage for dialogue to proceed. It is suddenly possible to explore Hezbollah claims to be essentially a Lebanese resistance movement with no current aggressive cross border intentions towards Israel. Certainly it would appear that their present domestic political interests are best served by that being so. Equally we can further pursue Hamas claims that given progress on a genuinely viable Palestinian State they can envisage a referendum of all Palestinians to recognise Israel. Already their leader Khaled Meshal states that he recognises the existence of Israel and will build a Palestinian State alongside it. Surely these comments are sufficient for Tony Blair on behalf of the Quartet to take up the baton of exploratory dialogue.

The Quartet must by now realise, and Tony Blair must understand, that ostracising these movements has not undermined them, it has added to their credibility. Last year's July War in Lebanon has, as I have personally witnessed, earned Hezbollah enormous kudos within their own community and respect more widely through Lebanon. The alliance with General Aoun's Christian Marronites may largely be a marriage of convenience. It is also an indicator of an unexpected degree of esteem.

The obtuse refusal of the Quartet to recognise Hamas' political mandate as a result of free and fair elections - which they had demanded in the first place - has reinforced the Palestinian perception of 'western' bias and of hypocrisy about democracy, and increased the credibility of Hamas.

Gaza today has certainly muddied the waters amid a welter of claim and counterclaim between Fatah and Hamas. There is a way through. Last week Hamas told me that they did what they did because the Saudi-brokered Mecca Agreement of a few months ago was being breached by a US-backed Fatah, in particular in relation to a joint Fatah/Hamas security force. They further told me that they accept the legitimacy of Abu Mazen as elected Palestinian President, and are ready to return to the Mecca Agreement - including a government of national unity - as long as this time there is an international body to oversee its evenhanded implementation. Blair should take them up on this. If they are sincere, there is room for progress. If they are not, that will be clearly seen in the whole Arab world.

It would also enhance Fatah's credibility and challenge current and damaging Palestinian perceptions of Abu Mazen as a puppet of 'the West'. The Palestinian aspiration to statehood will be fatally damaged if the Quartet appears to be favouring West Bank Palestinians against those in Gaza and in surrounding lands. Implementing Mecca would avert this.

A wise old and immensely experienced friend in Israel with whom a few months ago I discussed what I was doing told me that he had learned that 'it was a better use of his time to talk to his enemies than his friends'. Tony Blair knows from Northern Ireland that you must talk not only to your enemies, but also to your friends - and eventually to get them to talk to each other. It will be a long haul but worth the effort.

The current Middle East Peace Process has run into the sand, has totally lost its momentum, and needs a fresh start. What better way for Tony Blair to initiate this than by dancing with wolves.

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