

DANCING WITH WOLVES: THE IMPORTANCE OF TALKING TO YOUR ENEMIES

Michael Ancram

The following is the text of a lecture by the Rt. Hon. Michael Ancram, a member of the British Parliament and a former shadow foreign secretary, presented at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC, April 2007.

It is often a better use of time to talk to your enemies than your friends.” So said a wise, experienced and senior Israeli to me a few weeks ago. In a similar vein last summer, following the cessation of hostilities in Lebanon, I wrote in *The Independent*, “It is time to start dancing with wolves, to start talking to terrorists.”

We live in an age where there has never been a greater failure by the West to engage in dialogue. The result is an increasing incidence of standoff, fear and violence. Nowhere is this more the case today than in the Middle East.

I am neither a pacifist nor a 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 vote Tony Blair would have had no mandate to join the United States in toppling Saddam Hussein.

I come from what might be described as the Northern Ireland school of conflict resolution. I was sent there as political minister in 1993, after years of troubles and 3,000 dead out of a population of 1.5 million, with many more injured and traumatized.¹ It was as bad and intractable a conflict as any.

While drawing too close an analogy between different conflicts is dangerous, there are lessons in common which can be shared.

I want, therefore, to set out my experiences in Northern Ireland, from which I believe some lessons 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, that I was wasting my time, and that the “war” would have to go on until it was won.

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

The first challenge was how to get in touch. The first step was language; publicly using phrases² that we understood from other sources might resonate with the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army), which was a proscribed terrorist organisation with whom we were not supposed to talk. The words used were somewhat esoteric, but they were signals. Eventually a signal was received in return: “The war is over, help us to end it.” Contact of the barest kind had been made. Meanwhile, the bombings and assassinations continued — if anything, on an intensified scale — and our military response was commensurate.

What followed was vicarious dialogue that resulted in a narrative encompassing in general terms the aspirations and grievances of all the participants sufficient to give them a degree of confidence without requiring them to sign on to the others’ positions — but equally not to expostulate against them. The outcome was the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993.

There was no prior demand for a cessation of violence or for any undertakings of recognition. It was a signal, ratified by two interested sovereign governments, aimed at persuading participants that there was sufficient basis for dialogue. It was an invitation to engage.

It was designed to encourage the participation of those we needed to bring in, and it set the stage for the ceasefire by the insurgents.

“EXPLORATORY” DIALOGUE

Thus the basis for dialogue began to be put in place. A requirement for a permanent renunciation of violence and the decommissioning of illegally held weapons before formal negotiations was bypassed by what became known as exploratory dialogue. 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. Exploratory dialogue, talks without conditions or commitment, became the way forward.

In place 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.

It soon became apparent that many of these lines overlapped, albeit without commitment, and that there was scope for progress. This resulted in the informative but nonbinding Framework Document, which demonstrated a way through to a settlement. It was initially disowned by most of the participants but ultimately, because of the robustness of all the gathered lines in the sand, became the basis of the Good Friday agreement.

I have gone to some length in describing the process of exploratory dialogue because I believe the lessons from it are clear and relevant. Dialogue can be achieved even within conflict. Exploratory dialogue can avert the need for preconditions, can inch by grinding inch begin to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable, and seek out the eventual compromises upon which any long-term settlement must inevitably be built.

There are wider principles, too:

- First, conflict and insurgency can be contained by military action; it cannot be defeated by it.
- Second, negotiation towards a settlement of conflict nearly always needs to be preceded by informal dialogue.
- Third, dialogue that is exploratory and noncommittal can often make more progress than seeking commitments.
- Fourth, undeliverable preconditions are an end, rather than a 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 bright spotlight of international publicity.
- Seventh, it is a better use of your time to talk to your enemies than your friends.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

In the broad region of the Middle East, there are a number of 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 provide 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 current astonishing isolation of Syria, denying the reality that that country in many ways holds the key to the whole region.
- The myopic ostracizing of Hamas and Hezbollah, despite the reality that there cannot be a viable Palestinian state without involving Hamas, and there cannot be a secure Israel without a stable and nonaggressive Lebanon, which in turn is unachievable without involving Hezbollah.

Indeed, one of the main criteria for deciding who is worth engaging in exploratory dialogue is to assess who explicitly or implicitly is either crucial or essential to any putative settlement. It is tragic that all over the world there are terrorist movements without whose cooperation and participation lasting settlements will not be reached, which are excluded from dialogue on the basis that they have not renounced violence.

The areas I want to examine in the light of my Northern Ireland experiences are disputes where the opening of dialogue with those previously regarded as enemies is now an imperative, and where the setting of preconditions can only prolong violence and standoff.

There can be no resolution of the conflicts within Iraq without the external involvement of influential neighbors such as Iran, Syria, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. We are in friendly dialogue with two of these. With two of them we are not.

Syria

Syria has always been difficult. When hasn't she been seeking to extend her influence and not trying to play both ends against the middle? At the same time, as a secular Arab state, she has the potential for good as a contiguous neighbor of a gravely sectarian Iraq. It is neither in Syria's interest to have a strongly Shiite neighbor next door nor a religious civil war. Syria thus has the capacity and incentive to play a constructive stabilizing 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 and totally counterproductively, the U.S. administration and Britain refuse to enter formal talks. 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 to not only Iraq but Israel as well, we were not seeking to bring them to the table. I should add that the wise Israeli whom I quoted at the beginning of this talk couldn't understand it 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 House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for talking to the Syrian government two weeks ago.

Iran

Iran is another case in point. She is a proud, historic nation; misguided occasionally, as now under the erratic and deliberately extreme leadership of Ahmadinejad, but nevertheless with a very clear view of her international standing and her diplomatic potential.

Excluding her from genuine involvement with Iraq is shortsighted and counterproductive, because whatever the outcome of the sorry mess in Iraq, Iran will have a significant role to play. Just beginning to talk to them about the Iraq issue would be a good start. And talking to them about Israel/Palestine, about the influence for good that they could bring to bear on Hamas and Hezbollah, along with the potential peace dividend they could help to create for the region, would be a welcome step forward.

It doesn't require courage, but political will. Without altering our position on Iran's nuclear ambitions or its sponsorship of violence, it requires treating Iran not as a recalcitrant to be chastized but as a senior and serious regional player. Hectoring and humiliating wins no hearts, as we saw recently with our captured sailors. In the end, we had to talk. We, in the end, were the humiliated.

The truth is very simple. In the end, Iran will once again be a major regional power. We should be encouraging that reemergence in a positive, rather than the current negative, spirit.

The Near Middle East

It is, however, with the essential, but currently excluded, participants to the Middle East peace process — namely Hamas and Hezbollah — that I want to deal in more detail. I must start by saying that I am no anti-Israel propagandist. Over 30 years I have been and am a 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 other key participants in the area.

As I had to in Northern Ireland, I would start by looking at the antagonists, the so-called wolves, and ask what the effect of military action upon them has been. Not only has Israeli military action over the last 60 years failed to defeat them, but in both cases that same military action 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 — but 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 border with Lebanon without the cooperation of Hezbollah, 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 organizations have been involved either directly or through sponsorship in terrorist activity, including acts that caused the deaths of Israeli civilians. Both have proclaimed the eradication of the state of Israel as part of their purpose.

This is 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 we were dealing with a proscribed terrorist organization against which we were still pursuing full military sanction, an organization that had openly vowed to end our jurisdiction in Northern Ireland by force and was killing civilians by terrorist action. To have demanded that they formally accepted the right and legality of British jurisdiction would have ended exploratory dialogue before it even started, so we never sought that assurance, any more than we asked them formally at that stage to renounce violence. Instead, we explored those areas where we might make progress.

There will be those who 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 to openly begin such a process with either Hamas or Hezbollah. Others, however, can lay the groundwork. I have met with the members of both Hamas and Hezbollah. I listened to both of them with a healthy skepticism, but what they had to say to me is worth considering.

Hamas

If Hamas were to accept the legal right of Israel to exist, it would lose all credibility with its own supporters. The IRA would have had the same problem. From what Hamas

told me, 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. Khalid Meshal’s recognition of the existence of Israel “and that it will continue to exist” took this recognition further. By my criteria, it certainly opens the door to exploratory dialogue. I, along with others, have sought to nudge this process forward.

According to Hamas, they are ready, as part of a reconstituted PLO, to enter talks on a two-state solution that 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 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 better policed by the international community to prevent unauthorized or accidental breaches leading unnecessarily to breakdown and the resumption of violence. It is also worth remembering that Hamas is a territorial Islamist movement that is anathema to al-Qaeda and holds the bridgehead against extreme jihadism in Gaza and the West Bank. That must be to both Israel’s and our own advantage. Another reason for beginning to talk.

It may need a narrative, a document endorsed by all the nations involved that 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 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 recognize it, and that — 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 was the excuse for ostracization and economic penalty. This can only harden attitudes. At a time when all efforts should be directed at building confidence among the various participants in the peace process, this perceived betrayal of the principles of democratic mandate can only serve further to undermine it.

There is nothing to be lost by opening exploratory dialogue with Hamas.

Hezbollah

The position with Hezbollah is a little different. However, in their case it is even clearer with the growing salafist threats to them in Lebanon that they also are a bulwark against the attempts of al-Qaeda to spread its influence within the region. It is deeply

concerning to hear that there are parties who may be encouraging the salafists to undermine the power of Hezbollah. They are playing with fire.

Again, in considering the value of exploratory dialogue with Hezbollah, we need to look at the potential for progress.

They did not deny to me their antipathy, in principle, to Israel. They reminded me that they were exclusively 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 defense demanded it. They did not deny the capture of the Israeli soldiers, claiming that it was for prisoner-release bargaining purposes and admitting that, as it turned out, it was a mistake.

They are at pains to point out that before that, for a number of years, there had been no aggressive action by Hezbollah 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 of 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 people's villages and (as I saw for myself) urban dwellings torn apart by Israeli bombs.

They see themselves as a resistance movement that, 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 — Shebaa 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 votes cast in their favor. 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 in our meetings was that a satisfactory two-state solution with confirmed and acceptable boundaries would leave them to pursue their immediate aim of achieving pole position within the power-sharing structures provided for by the Lebanese constitution. Tightening their undoubted political grip on the people of southern Lebanon might pose wider long-term political questions. In light of this, it would appear to me that exploratory dialogue would provide an interesting set of negotiating options.

Once again, undeliverable preconditions 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 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.

I believe 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 the reluctant player in terms of exploratory dialogue. Many of her senior thinkers are now, however, thinking differently.

Their leadership are rational politicians who should think again. They should consider urgently the consequences of their military action last summer, which for better or worse has created despair for their friends in Lebanon and renewed the resolve of their enemies. They must understand the importance of talking to these enemies.

APPEASEMENT OR PROGRESS?

Inevitably there are those who will mutter “appeasement.” Let me answer them head-on.

Appeasement turns a blind eye to the unacceptable. Exploratory dialogue most certainly does not. As Northern Ireland has most recently and graphically demonstrated, dialogue is no longer the tool of the appeaser; it is the key to conflict resolution.

Nor is exploratory dialogue 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.

CONCLUSION

Over these last two years, the world has moved identifiably from one in which hard power resolved conflicts to one in which it is the last and limited resort. Soft power is regaining its sway. Diplomacy is rediscovering its role, and exploratory dialogue reestablishing 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 reestablish 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, as in Iraq today, then a return to dialogue offers us a pathway towards a solution.

Dancing with wolves may not be the most comfortable of occupations; it may well prove the most fruitful.

History will judge us by our fruits.

¹ Extrapolated to the United States, that would mean 603,000 terrorism-related deaths in the last 30 years, and to Israel 12,700.

² “No selfish economic or strategic interest” (Peter Brooke 1991).

³ Respecting previous agreements.