

Time to talk to the men of violence

By Gabrielle Rifkind

‘There is no point in talking to Hamas because they want to see us destroyed’ – so runs the conventional wisdom of Israeli politics. And yet the success of the militant group at the ballot box has brought tantalising signs that they, too, may now be ready to tread a route familiar from South Africa to Northern Ireland – the gunmen who come in from the cold to pursue and realise their aims by political means instead.

The challenge of the Palestinian election results, for the outside world, is to come to terms with a new reality and seek ways for constructive engagement. Hamas, the Islamic movement sits on both the European and the American terrorist list and is defined as the enemy by Israel. It has now been democratically elected to represent its people. With this goes responsibility, and that responsibility is to improve the conditions of their communities who have elected them into power. Like it or not, this is where the centre of gravity lies.

There are many signals so strong that they cannot be ignored. Before the vote, the group deliberately stepped back from its 1988 charter demands for Israel’s eradication and the establishment of a Palestinian state in its place. Instead, it decided to compete in the elections ‘to establish an independent state whose capital is Jerusalem.’ They fully recognize that for the conditions to improve on the ground, there needs to be cessation of violence. Their messages are multiple and what is needed is not knee jerk response but a more subtle engagement.

Indeed, Hamas is now calling for a 30-year Armistice. It deserves serious consideration as it is based on a negotiated agreement to end violence. As in Northern Ireland, it would allow the aspirations and hopes of both sides to be kept intact and enable certain thorny questions to be left to the next generation. It is based on the assumption that some issues in this conflict are so doused in suspicion and mistrust as to be better left to another, less traumatized generation.

Understandably, concerned parties in the West continue to view groups like Hamas through the optic of terrorism. Within their own communities, however, they are viewed as resistance fighters. What is needed is to simultaneously hear and take seriously their call for reform, elections and good governance together with their statements about an all-inclusive process which would support their transition from violence.

There is legitimate fear about the methods used by these groups and suspicion about their political intentions – as there was about the African National Congress and continues to be, to some extent, about the IRA. Hamas continues to call for the continuation of the armed struggle. This can be understood in context, as a tactical response to Israel’s continued occupation of the West Bank, her military dominance and Hamas’s attempt to rectify this asymmetrical power balance with the use of political violence.

No doubt, Israel is aware of this strategic game being part of Hamas’s bargaining position, but what Israel is most concerned about is putting an end to the violence on its streets – to see no more of its cafes and buses blown up. What both the communities need is a sustained period of non violence in which people can get on with the ordinariness of living. Hamas has demonstrated an ability to be disciplined in its adherence to the ceasefire and any contraventions have been on the part of Islamic Jihad. Amongst the Israeli military there would be recognition of this.

The conventional media analysis has been to see the ascendancy of Hamas as a crisis for the peace process. But it is one of the oldest truisms of peacemaking that every crisis contains an opportunity. Above all, it may offer a way out of a snare, familiar since the days of the Oslo Accords. Up to now, the Palestinian Authority has excluded Hamas, and therefore faces perennial calls to ‘crack down on militant groups’.

In the words of Alastair Crooke, director of Conflicts Forum and - a facilitator of the de-escalation of Palestinian violence of 2001-3, ‘Oslo awarded one faction the monopoly of power and of armed force in exchange for dismembering and disarming their main political rivals’.

This arrangement always left room for doubt as to whether Palestinian leaders could ‘deliver’ on any prospective agreement, in terms of bringing about a cessation of violence. Those leaders must now answer to Hamas representatives in the Palestinian Legislative Council - a step, Crooke says, ‘towards a real national inclusiveness rather than the Oslo-entrenched divisiveness of the ‘93 era’.

In order to break the cycle of violence, it is necessary to have a more nuanced exploration of the new agendas, rather than dismissing them because of the history of mistrust. Previously, Hamas had called for a long term *hudna* (truce). It was originally proposed by Sheik Yassin over a decade ago. Israel saw this as a cynical move on the part of the Palestinians to re-arm, and has historically dismissed this proposal. However, over the last year, there has been a unilateral *tah`dia* (calming) by the Palestinians. What is needed now is a mechanism to reward restraint, to prove it can pay dividends in political engagement and a preparedness to listen seriously to the organisation’s point of view.

There could even turn out to be common objectives between the call for a long-term interim agreement as made by the Sharon’s break-away Kadima party, and the call for a long-term ceasefire by Hamas.

Engaging with these groups will be tough and exacting. It demands our expectations not be shaped by our experience of living in stable societies. Indeed, one of the lessons needed to be learnt is that societies that have been exposed to endless conflict are not going to operate according to the same code of conduct as we do. If we are to engage in serious dialogue with groups such as Hamas, we need to work hard to win their trust and confidence. This may be antithetical to our instincts, particularly if they have been men of violence.

Simultaneously we need to recognise this as a shock for Israel, and that they may need time to adjust to the new political landscape. But, experience has taught us that those inside the political process are much more likely to find a mature engagement than those excluded. It is now time to change both the rhetoric and the behaviour on both sides. The price of failure is too great.

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