

Talking of Talks

DIALOGUE OVER A LONG TERM and on a sustained basis holds the key to better understanding and lasting peace in West Asia, despite all the periodical setbacks and spoiler violence.

BY JOHN ALDERDICE and SUNDEEP WASLEKAR

Until a decade ago, the conflict in West Asia was essentially between Israel and the Palestinian people represented by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). This was especially true after Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. However, since 2000, the political landscape of West Asia has changed. Elections have shown that the Palestinians are now represented by Hamas as much as by Al Fatah; the Israel-Syria conflict has found an echo in the domestic conflict of Lebanon, though it has momentarily found a respite through the unity government formed in the summer of 2008; and the war in Iraq has added a whole other dimension.

As compared to about 10,000 people killed in the two *intifadas*, somewhere between 500,000 to a million people have lost their lives in the latest war in Iraq. Iran has also entered the fray through its support for Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and groups in Iraq. If Israel and the Arab parties do not find a comprehensive solution soon, Iran can be expected to be an even more direct player in the near future. If a few more years are allowed to pass by, China and Russia will have developed very significant stakes in the region. Israel and the PLO missed an opportunity provided by the Oslo Accords in the 1990s. Now the resolution of each of the conflicts in West Asia is dependent on the resolution of a number of other conflicts, and this requires a more integrated and inclusive approach than before if it is to be capable of addressing these multiple, interconnected disputes.

There is good reason to believe that West Asia can draw from the experience of some of the other conflicts that appeared equally intractable at one stage. While each conflict is distinct for its own history and geography, the problems are problems of relationships between peoples. Like individual relationships they are driven more by emotional than by rational factors and one key element is the sense by one or both sides that they have been treated with disrespect, and sometimes even humiliation. When a compromise solution becomes possible it is rarely because of some new masterpiece solution invented

out of 'blue skies thinking' by negotiators but rather comes about because the parties find it emotionally acceptable to accept a solution that was lingering in the wings for some time. What they needed was a process which enabled them to build better, more mutual relationships, characterised by a respectful way of doing business.

The post World War II project of European integration, the contribution of the process of Security and Cooperation in Europe in bringing the Cold War to an end, and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland all underline the importance of engagement in dialogue leading to institutionalised arrangements for peace and security. Such arrangements can be successful because they provide scope for aggrieved parties to participate in dialogue over a long term on a sustained basis, despite setbacks and spoiler violence.

Drawing on these three historic experiences we can identify three key elements to building a peace process:

- *Confidence-building measures.*
- *'Talks about talks' to identify issues, participants and ways of working in the process.*
- *The establishment of an inclusive, semi-permanent conference to deliberate contentious issues through peaceful dialogue on a sustained basis.*

How might these three elements be used to inform an approach to West Asia under a new U.S. President?

It is a truism to observe that there is little confidence or trust between the various parties in West Asia and between them and the key external players, but trust and confidence do not develop out of thin air. They are the result of constructive ways of working, and of small understandings and agreements which are then built upon and carried through.

There are many confidence building measures (CBMs) which could help generate some goodwill and address the immediate security concerns of the states and non-state actors in question. Some possible CBMs are outlined here:



FRACTURED LEGACY:
A poster of the late Yasser Arafat looms over Palestinian students at Hebron University in West Bank

STANDING FOR PEACE:
A 1991 file photo of heads of state and delegates assembled for the Middle East Peace Conference at the Royal Palace in Madrid



PHOTO: MIKE SARGENT / AP

- Parties in the region cannot yet agree upon a way forward, but in the absence of a 'resolution', they can begin to speak in the language of 'human security' — thinking about people and relationships rather than military and economic force brings new ways of understanding to old problems.
- Removal of legal or effective bans on engagement or discussion with the parties that are considered 'enemies' or 'terrorists' and the reduction of travel restrictions, as you will not solve problems with people you never meet.
- More visits by special envoys, senior diplomats, civil society leaders and mediapersons from Israel to all the Arab countries, particularly Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and vice versa.
- Encouragement for a revival of the Mecca Agreement for a national unity government between major political factions representing the Palestinian people.
- Israel's adoption of a humane approach towards the people of Gaza and the West Bank, ending blockades and barriers, and freezing settlement development in the West Bank, reciprocated by a ceasefire from all Palestinian groups, ensuring the stopping of all acts of violence against Israeli people.
- Quiet talks between Sunni and Shia leaders of the region, perhaps jointly sponsored by Saudi Arabia and Iran, to reduce the deficit of trust within the Islamic world.
- Affirmation of a commitment by the new President of the United States to withdraw troops from Iraq in agreement with the government of Iraq, within a fixed time-frame and, in a phased manner.
- Diverting some military expenditure to initiatives by academics, civil society groups and business leaders to promote cooperation, examining ways to reduce the costs of conflict and to promote economic ties between people and states of the region.

Many Israeli and Palestinian groups are actively involved in bridge-building initiatives between their socie-

ties. It is important that they are valued, encouraged and indeed extended to the entire Arab world, particularly in the Maghreb. The future of the region is the future of its people and so the people need to undertake collaborative initiatives to shape it.

With the development of CBMs it can become more possible to engage in 'talks about talks'. Preparatory talks about negotiations among all the relevant actors are necessary to pave the way for an inclusive and semi-permanent conference for comprehensive peace in West Asia. This very time-consuming and often personally and politically difficult work is about building relationships and is usually characterised by deep and understandable suspicions about the intentions of the other side.

In the same way that individuals often circle around

each other for some time, testing the ground, before being able to engage in more productive relationships so 'talks about talks' should not be dismissed as a waste of time. It is crucial that expectations are not raised of any early progress, but even the existence of open channels of communication can begin to ameliorate the situation. Such 'talks about talks' do need to involve senior representatives of all state actors and such non-state actors that have proved their representative strength through elections.

In the current circumstances, the parties must involve Israel, all the important Arab states, including the Arab League, and important external actors such as the United States and the other Quartet members. But sub-state groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah that have won electoral successes in the recent past must also begin to

find a route into this process. If countries like Iran and Syria, and sub-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah are given no alternative than the path of violence and force, it should be no surprise if they take it. If they are given a serious alternative way of addressing the difficulties of their region, there is at least a serious possibility that they may explore that route.

'Talks about talks' is about the development of an informal network of relationships, but it must include those who have the capacity to give firm commitments and undertakings on behalf of their 'principals' so that it becomes possible eventually to define the agenda, the participants, the ways of working and a fundamental set of principles of understandings for the next phase.

In the case of Northern Ireland, an agreement on the



PHOTO: ABBAS MOHANI / AFP

MEDIATING TALKS: Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas welcomes U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Ramallah

Catholics in Ireland, why should we not work towards making 'the impossible' a possibility in West Asia?

While it will be necessary for at least some of the early dialogue to take place in a quiet and confidential manner, it is important that the process beginning with CBMs is conducted openly. Most peace processes that are conducted secretly, collapse because they do not carry their people and societies with them. Peace is not only about the development of private agreements between leaders. The people must become part of the process if they are to be part of the change. It is important for negotiators to be honest and open to all sections of the population they represent, including the extremist groups. A peace process can only succeed if a popular consensus is built to support it.

It is also important to emphasise the need for semi-permanent, formal and institutionalised structures. West Asia missed a valuable opportunity after the success of the Madrid Conference in 1991, at least in part, because of the absence of such a structure. If 'talks about talks' have a clear objective of establishing durable political arrangements for on-going negotiations, there is a high probability that they will not be derailed by spoiler violence.

The European Union is increasingly seen as super-state institution, but for most of its existence the European project has existed as a permanent, high level conference table, and in truth that is what it still is. Even parliaments, as their very name suggests, are fundamentally places where people who disagree find institutionalised ways to talk (almost) endlessly about their disagreements, rather than express them violently.

Finally, it is essential that the stakeholders from the region take ownership of the process. Strategic Foresight Group in India and the Oxford Research Group in the United Kingdom have both explored different versions of this semi-permanent and inclusive approach and there have been debates in the British, German and European Parliaments. There is nothing wrong with outsiders floating such ideas, and in terms of affecting the thinking of the United States of America which has such a key role to play, for good or ill, outside thinking is important.

'Mitchell Principles' proved to be very important in providing a basis for the more substantive talks about peace. In July 2008 negotiators from Northern Ireland and South Africa assisted Iraqi parliamentarians from all major groups to develop an Iraqi version of these principles, upon which it is hoped they too may find a way to engage in talks about the constitutional future of Iraq.

'Talks about talks' can enable the establishment of an inclusive and semi-permanent conference that evolves into a formal and institutionalised economic and security cooperation framework for the region. It is not until this final phase that we should expect long-term solutions to emerge on critical issues such as the status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees, protections against the threats and use of violence and the territorial and other questions which afflict relationships between West Asian neighbours.

The first two phases of CBMs and 'talks about talks' should not be expected to deal with substantive issues. However it must be clear from the start that the objective of the process is to reach a comprehensive and sustainable peace on terms that are acceptable to all parties. This may seem impossible, but if lasting peace is possible between France and Germany, or between Protestants and

HIGHLIGHTS

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building measures, 'Talks about Talks' & an inclusive, semi-permanent conference to deliberate issues through dialogue.

Preparatory talks about negotiations are necessary to pave the way for an inclusive and semi-permanent conference for peace.

In the current circumstances, the parties must involve Israel,

important Arab states, including the Arab League, and key external actors such as the U.S. and the other Quartet members.

Sub-state groups like Hamas & Hezbollah that have won electoral successes must also begin to find a route into this process.

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evolved into a formal and institutionalised economic and security cooperation framework for the region.

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However, it would not be productive for outsiders to imagine that they can provide substantive solutions. The parties in the region know their interests and limits and they know how their people feel. If they can have vision, political will and the courage to give leadership to their people, they can reach the required compromises. Outsiders can share their experiences of peace-building and from time to time assist parties in the region to develop a framework to explore solutions.

The Arab League made a serious effort to launch a peace initiative for the region in 2002 and again to revive it in 2007, but one of the reasons why it has not taken off may be that it provides the Arab perspective on the substantive solutions without considering an effective process for negotiations. If the Arab League and Israel can agree on a joint initiative for an institutionalised process of the kind that is described here, there could perhaps be prospects for turn-around in 2009. While the Israeli political leadership will be attending to its own internal debates for the next few months, there are indications across the political spectrum in Israel of openness to consider the Arab League Peace Plan as a starting point for negotiations. There is hope in 2009.

It is especially important to look for and use windows of opportunity in an atmosphere of despair. The

arrival of a new incumbent in the White House in January 2009 may open one such window. India and the European Union can also play a vital role in encouraging Arab and Israeli leaders to engage. If time is lost, more parties will enter the dynamic of the conflict and add to its complexity. For now at least, the parties concerned can talk with each other in Arabic, Hebrew and English. If they wait a few years more, they may also have to conduct business in Persian, Russian and Chinese. Alastair Crooke, an experienced observer of the region, has compared the situation in West Asia to a tinder-box that could trigger a major international war as happened when a spark in Sarajevo ignited the First World War.

If West Asia and the world at large are to avert catastrophe, a credible and inclusive process to explore peace in that region is now urgent. The question is whether the most powerful parties inside and outside the region itself will appreciate the value of such an approach in the ashes and aftermath of a war (as was the case in Europe) or when they are caught in a corner in ten years time with more players complicating the search for solutions, or whether they will now begin to see the value of an approach such as we have described. What is sure is that their vision and courage, or the lack of them, will affect all of us. □

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Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present
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1967: Israel, the War and the Year that Transformed the Middle East
By Tom Segev, Macmillan (2007)

The Middle East Conflict from Bad to Worse to War
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University Press of Southern Denmark (2006)



JOHN ALDERDICE, first Speaker of Northern Ireland Assembly, is a member of the House of Lords & President of Liberal International.



SUNDEEP WASLEKAR heads Strategic Foresight Group, a Mumbai-based think tank that provides strategic advice to governments & institutions.