

Ulster's lesson for the Middle East: don't indulge extremists

Northern Ireland is too often invoked as a model for resolving conflicts, but it does show conditions must come before talks

By David Trimble

Advocating the Northern Irish "model" has become a popular pastime. In conflicts as different as those in Spain, Sri Lanka and the Middle East, the key players are now urged to consider the undoubted success in Northern Ireland and follow our example. This is hardly surprising, but I am concerned about how that example is described.

A few months ago Peter Hain, the former Northern Ireland secretary of state, described it as "the development of dialogue at every level", a dialogue "delivering the most obdurate constituencies", focusing on "key leaders". It also warned that "preconditions can strangle the process at birth". Many others have followed and urged unconditional dialogue with the most intransigent - "dancing with wolves", it has been called.

These accounts disturb me. They are not accurate. Worse, they are potentially dangerous. Such initiatives in the wrong circumstances can backfire. That happened in Northern Ireland. In 1972 a high-ranking IRA delegation, including both Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, was flown (in secret) to London for talks with the Northern Ireland secretary.

The talks failed. The bar had been set too low - they were invited to engage in dialogue only a few days into a flimsy and temporary ceasefire. The IRA saw it as a sign of British weakness, stepped up their campaign, and for some years thereafter believed that one "last push" would do the trick. Loyalists saw it as a waning British commitment to maintaining Northern Ireland's position within the UK and increased their violence. Actions intended to bring peace merely deepened constitutional uncertainty and generated new levels of violence.

Thankfully, the government learned the lessons. We now know that indirect contacts with republicans appear to have been under way from 1986-87. Crucially it was soon made clear that there were conditions before there could be an official engagement. The key conditions were later formalised in the Downing Street declaration of 1993 as an end to violence and a commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. Equally important was the government's commitment to the consent principle and its refusal to act as a persuader for a united Ireland, which prefigured the outcome of the formal interparty talks, the three-stranded structure of which were defined in March 1991, and the key procedural decisions taken by the parties in 1992 in the absence of Sinn Féin. When it called the cessation of its campaign in 1994, republicans were, in effect, accepting these parameters for talks.

Nowhere is the Northern Ireland analogy applied more vigorously than in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Above all, there has been much said about the need to "engage" with those who we regard as terrorists. If negotiations with the IRA led to the peace agreement in Northern Ireland, we are often told, Israel must be prepared to take the same approach with Hamas.

And as we get closer to a Middle East peace conference in Annapolis - itself clouded with uncertainty but still the most significant meeting for more than seven years - those voices urging negotiation at almost any price are getting louder and louder. Commentators point animatedly to the elephant in the room - Hamas - who will almost certainly not be attending the talks. Nothing can be achieved, they argue, if the most extremist elements are not at the negotiating table.

We must hope for agreement from all the parties at Annapolis. But agreement will mean an

accommodation, not a victory of one side over another. Still less will it mean the annihilation of the "other". Where does Hamas stand on these matters? Will it accept a two-state solution? Will it end violence? These are reasonable questions to ask. Hamas's failure to satisfactorily reply shows that it would be wrong to try to include it. The preconditions for engagement were clear for the IRA in the early 1990s, and they are clear for Hamas today - renounce violence, recognise Israel, and accept previous peace agreements. Hamas must be encouraged to take the same sort of steps the IRA took towards the negotiating table. But this will be undermined if it feels it does it on its terms and continues to reject a compromise solution. We must make sure that events like the Annapolis conference are successful and provide Hamas with further impetus to engage in a process, with all Palestinians and Israelis, of negotiation and compromise.

If there is one lesson to learn from the Northern Ireland experience, it is that preconditions are crucial in ending violence and producing a settlement. Being overgenerous to extremist groups is like giving sweets to a spoilt child in the hope that it will improve its behaviour - it usually results in worse actions. Our experience suggests that while some flexibility is desirable, there have to be clear principles and boundaries. A failure to recognise this risks drawing the wrong conclusions from the recent history of Northern Ireland and fundamentally misunderstanding the peace process.