

A way out of the Gaza crisis

by Arthur Neslen

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Out of sight of the international press pack, a bid to resolve the Gaza crisis, involving a dialogue between a Jewish religious leader and Hamas representatives, continues and is well advanced.

"I'm talking to Hamas representatives every day," a weary sounding Menachem Froman told me by telephone from the West Bank settlement of Tekoa, where he lives and works as a rabbi. "We have had a lot of meetings and I have just spoken to an aide of my prime minister about this."

But Tel Aviv's interest in a negotiated end to the standoff is far from assured.

The day before the tanks rolled into Gaza, Froman had been due to launch an extraordinary peace initiative at a news conference in Jerusalem with Muhamed Abu Tir, the Hamas MP, Khaled Abu Arafa, the Palestinian minister for Jerusalem, and three Israeli rabbis.

The panel was to have made a collective call for the release of Corporal Gilad Shalit, the beginning of a process to release all Palestinian prisoners and the immediate start of negotiations with Hamas on the framework for a peace deal based on 1967 borders.

They would also have announced that Jewish and Muslim religious leaders could achieve peace where Israel's politicians had failed.

But the response from Israel's security establishment was crushing.

Stymied

Hours before the meeting was due to start, the Shin Bet detained Abu Tir and Abu Arafa and warned them not to attend the meeting. The news conference's organisers were forced to contact the other rabbis - who were already on the road to Jerusalem - and tell them not to come.

Instead of a triumphant statement of mutual respect and dialogue, a subdued and gently defiant three-man panel fended off aggressive questioning from an unruly Israeli press pack.

As Yitzhak Frankenthal, whose son was killed by Hamas in 1994, said that the Palestinians had been pushed into the kidnapping by an inhuman occupation, one journalist jumped up and down shouting: "Should someone who murdered your son be freed?"

Frankenthal responded with dignity: "It would be the easiest thing in the world for me to say that they are terrorists and we must fight them.

"But in the eyes of the Palestinians, they are liberators. We need to understand that it is the obligation of the Palestinians, as it is the obligation of every other nation, to fight for their liberation. The time has come for reconciliation, and the only way to achieve that is to talk."

Talking, however, requires a partner.

Kidnapped

Two days after the news conference, Abu Tir and Abu Arafat were kidnapped by Israeli forces, along with a third of the Hamas cabinet. Four days later, Israel revoked both men's citizenship and residency rights in Jerusalem. As the Jerusalem Post headline put it: Shin Bet foils Hamas-Jewish meeting.

An even more accurate headline might have been the one Israel National Radio's Arutz Sheva website ran a few days later, pertaining to another story: The peace process is a bigger danger than Hamas.

In this opinion piece, Ted Belman said that "the threat of rockets raining down on Israel from Gaza isn't nearly the threat that the peace process was and is" because peace talks would require Israeli concessions.

"To avoid this fate, the violence in the territories would have to continue at tolerable levels, but that doesn't solve the problem," he said. Belman concluded that the Palestinians needed to be provoked.

Some argue that Israel's re-invasion of Gaza was a similar provocation aimed at bringing down the Hamas government and preventing a unified Palestinian negotiating stance based on the prisoners' document.

Sharon's path

Having ruled out the only possible solutions that could have bought a temporary peace, Olmert and Peretz are now the proud owners of a Sharonist policy which, almost by definition, strengthens Hamas in the occupied territories and far-right forces at home. American and British support for it traps them further within a dynamic that heats the pot of bloodshed, even as they dishonestly promise their people disengagement, convergence and peace.

Could Froman's efforts offer them a way out of the strings with which the Palestinian fighters have so daringly bound them?

The rabbi is currently "neither eating nor sleeping" as he talks with Hamas representatives, building on his meetings with Mahmoud al-Zahar earlier this year. Froman may be an eccentric, but he has a formidable track record.

A co-founder of the messianic Gush Katif settlers movement, Froman split from the group after Baruch Goldstein's Hebron massacre.

He became a religious adviser to the Knesset and brokered the release from prison of Hamas's spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. He also brokered Yassin's subsequent announcement of a ceasefire, which Israel refused to accept and Yassin subsequently withdrew.

Yasser Arafat considered him a brother.

Indeed, a peace plan the two men were working on was reaching a culmination point in Arafat's final days. It involved Arafat signing off on an independent Palestinian state and permanent religious ceasefire, the latter with the support of key Israeli civic and religious leaders.

It was scuppered by an inconvenient phone call from the then-interior minister, Gideon Ezra, and a deterioration in Arafat's health which, by the following day, had rendered him unable to take visitors.

Ironies abound in the history of Froman's peace efforts. His uncle was killed in the 1930s by Ezzedine al-Qassam, the militant Palestinian cleric whose name was later adopted by Hamas's armed wing. Yet Froman is on record as saying he has more in common with "my brothers and sisters in Hamas" than with secular Israelis.

His motivations stem from a deep commitment to the once-integral universal tradition in Jewish thought, best summarised by Rabbi Hillel's "do unto others" maxim. He believes that while the land of Israel is holy, sovereignty over it is not and so aspires to live as a Palestinian Jew in a Palestinian state. For the past two years, however, he has been living under police protection because of death threats from other settlers.

Should his peace efforts bear fruit, perhaps his national-religious neighbours will be reminded that in the messianic age, according to Isaiah, the wolf is supposed to lie down with the lamb.

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