



## Robert Malley

### Notes on the Fodip meeting: House of Lords 12<sup>th</sup> Jan 2009

*Dr Robert Malley is Director of the Middle East and North Africa Program for the International Crisis Group based in Washington DC. A former advisor to President Clinton, Rob Malley has also been a significant voice for Barack Obama on matters relating to Israel and Palestine. The meeting was hosted by Richard, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, on behalf of Fodip (the Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine).*

Dr Malley's analysis began with a very clear and concise overview of the current situation. In spite of Israel's attempt to destroy the infrastructure of Hamas, it was, he said, far from demolished and was in fact growing daily in prestige. Setting out the steps to the Gaza conflict, he illustrated how, in his view, 'a war which would have been easy to avoid becomes much harder to stop'. The dynamics of the conflict were so complex that things could only be halted either if the parties concerned felt that they had 'done enough' or if foreign countries put sufficient pressure on either side.

Every day that passes is not a neutral day, Dr Malley said, but changes the nature of the conflict for better or worse. Ironically, the 'moderate' Arab voices were the losers strategically, as they became more and more marginalised – so the greatest risk was run by those the West wanted to support. The needs on both sides were for Gaza to be open, without weapons or the means of smuggling more in. This scenario was impossible at this point.

Despite being democratically elected, Hamas had been unable to make the transition from terrorist movement to governing party. Israel had also demonstrated political naïveté in insisting on isolating Hamas. The international community had encouraged the election process and then refused to acknowledge the result, boycotting Hamas instead, the meeting was told.

The position of the U.S.A. was not detached, but a negative influence. Throughout the trail of the 'peace processes', there were fundamental flaws where basic issues were ignored or misunderstood. For example, it had never been properly recognised internationally that Israelis have a real *need* for security. On the other hand, Palestinians had been dealt with as though they were being 'offered a gift' rather than as having basic rights to be enforced.

The next U.S. administration needed to 'create something new'. This was not just a case of 'turning the page and carrying on'. The Democratic party now was not the

same in character as had comprised the Clinton administration. Times had also changed: since 2000 there had been 3 'wars' and the escalation of the second Intifada. One question to address was that of 'who needs to be at the table?'. This might include Turkey; however, Dr Malley was clear and consistent that it was vital to talk to Hamas. The process needed to be planned strategically from start to finish and then carried through to its conclusion. This change in administration was, he argued, an opportunity which must not be wasted. If Barack Obama fails, it will be virtually impossible to find anyone else who can succeed.

In responding to questions from those present, Dr Malley agreed strongly that U.S. policy also needs to address Iran. The current policy towards Iran had, he believed, made matters worse. Barack Obama *does* understand the connections between powers in the region, he stated.

Dr Malley also believed that demands for Hamas to renounce violence were not helpful; no entity in the world, including the United States, has totally given up the possibility of recourse to violent means. Furthermore, none of the many 'agreements' made in the past has been fully honoured; why, Dr Malley asked, should people still be expected to make such agreements?

He believed that there was a fundamental religious approach within Hamas that made it impossible for them to recognise Israel, but they do need to begin to *think* about how to negotiate. Dr Malley felt strongly that the West has not been 'dealing with Hamas in a way which would encourage them potentially to think creatively'. Neither has Hamas built any institutions; all Palestinian institutions were now destroyed one way or another.

Continuing his response to comments and questions, Dr Malley stated that 'grassroots' activists could help by 'staying faithful to core beliefs and values while finding a way to engage with the other'. He agreed that the Alexandria Process is a model for inter faith co-operation and expressed regret that the Clinton administration made a mistake in keeping religion at arm's length. The Alexandria Declaration itself had been unworthily and short-sightedly sidelined, in his view. The role of religious leaders was, Dr Malley concluded, to 'give legitimacy to solutions within their own communities'.

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