

A failure to communicate: Israel's lost opportunity

by [Marc Gopin](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

Israel's former prime minister Ariel Sharon could never bring himself to sit across from an equal Palestinian partner. As a result, Israel lost an opportunity to gain, in return for giving back Gaza, serious changes in the Palestinians' approach to their struggle. It turned out that Sharon gave Gaza not to the Palestinian people but to Hamas. History will judge this as a free favor to Arab radicalism.

Israel's unilateral pullout from Gaza was judged by the Palestinians and much of the Arab world as an Israeli acknowledgment that it had lost control of Gaza to Hamas, and therefore it was seen as a victory for suicide terrorism. It was also a stunning rebuke of Palestinian moderates, since no other Palestinian leader has been as moderate as Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, and he was ignored by the Israelis in the Gaza pullout.

Hamas has become stronger because of the steady corruption and deterioration of the Palestinian Authority. For that there is blame to go around, including some for the Palestinian elites. But if the Israelis had shown a willingness to engage seriously with moderate Palestinian demands, they might not be facing a Hamas government right now.

Some observers believe that dominance by Palestinian radicals was always the goal of the Israeli right, since reaching the conclusion that "there is no partner" on the Palestinian side would give Israel permission to extend control over greater and greater swaths of the West Bank. The irony is that now everyone has lost: the Israeli right is losing more territory as the government plans more unilateral pullouts, and the Palestinians have lost moderate leadership. On balance, this still benefits Israeli unilateralism, because Israel is securing the most coveted of the contested areas in and around Jerusalem.

Sharonism, the Gaza pullout, and the birth of Kadima, the new Israeli centrist party, are expressions of an evolution in internal Israeli thinking, just as the political

victory—at least for now—of Hamas is an expression of an internal evolution of Palestinian thinking in response to corruption and lack of progress. Taken by themselves, these are healthy evolutions.

Israeli civil society is on a more stable, centrist course than it has been in many years. The vision of some Israelis of a Greater Israel—with no Palestinian state or with Palestinians being transferred out of Israel—was so utterly at odds with a vision of a democratic Israel that there was serious danger of civil conflict. That is abating. But there is no vision of peace to take its place other than a unilateral divorce from the Palestinians.

Similarly, corruption and its divisive threat to the future of Palestine is going to be ameliorated by Hamas, although we do not know yet whether the political construction of the Palestinian Authority will be democratic or will involve the imposition of shari'a law.

The problem is that neither one of these developments evolved in conversation with the enemy next door. There is no peace without conversation, secret or public, nor will there be realistic internal debate that will yield peace or coexistence with enemies. If a conversation had been ongoing, Israelis would have understood how wrong it was to go through the trauma of a pullout without the benefit of strengthening Palestinian moderates and peacemakers, and they would have figured out a scheme, together with moderate Palestinians, to reap those benefits. If the conversations had been ongoing, the world would have understood how fed up average Palestinians were with corruptions imposed on them, and it would have stopped feeding the corruption rather than make Hamas the most attractive game in town.

Now the conversation is stuck. Americans and Israelis have good reason to thwart public support for Hamas until it renounces terrorism. But U.S. leaders never should have touted “democratization” as an answer when that meant elections that would lead to the rise of antidemocratic parties.

Rather than promote elections, the U.S. should have insisted on promoting the foundations of democracy. It should have listened to the Arab masses who are clamoring mostly for jobs and a fair share of wealth. They should have pushed for basic Palestinian humanitarian needs and human rights as a way of making peace more attractive.

If they wanted elections, U.S. leaders should have insisted, through negotiations, on no less from Hamas than was asked of Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland—renunciation of violence and the giving-up of weapons. None of that clarity was to be found, for there was no U.S. negotiator like George Mitchell involved in conversation. There have been no serious U.S. negotiations with Palestinians for years, because this White House has been a master at global alienation, unilateralism, arrogance, and self-fulfilling prophecies of military confrontation and conquest.

It is time for Israel's political establishment to stop looking to the Pentagon for inspiration. The U.S. is never going to make Israel safer in the Middle East. Only Israel has that capacity, together with the Palestinians as equal partners.

The Oslo peace process of decades ago was a brilliant effort to bring together moderate Israelis and Palestinians to design a future together. It was flawed in that it failed to include essential constituencies on both sides—religious communities and their militants. Whatever their methods and antidemocratic predilections, Jewish and Muslim radicals had important needs and demands that were virtually eliminated from serious discussion—issues surrounding holy land, holy places, historical claims, lifestyles in any future states and so forth. Had their interests and needs been at least part of the bargaining, we might have avoided the failure of the peace process.

The time has come for Oslo II, with the key players in Israel and Palestine acting this time without the arrogance of secular elites who do not pay attention to the poor and the religious on both sides. There is only one choice for the future: conversation, conversation and conversation, so that the moves made on each side may create a road back to a peace process.