



## CONFLICTS FORUM

*Opening the way for peaceful dialogue*

**PRESS CONFERENCE**  
*13 January 2006*  
*13 Norfolk Place, Frontline Club, Paddington*

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*What follows is a transcript of an appearance by Conflicts Forum Directors Alastair Crooke and Mark Perry at the Frontline Club in London on 13 January. The Press Conference featured a briefing by Crooke and Perry summarizing the activities of Conflicts Forum in its program to engage political Islam during the previous year.*

*Alastair Crooke began the Press Conference followed by Mark Perry, which was then followed by a question and answer session.*

***Alastair Crooke:***

We have seen how, in the past years, the EU and the US are trying to play a part in what is happening in the Middle East and how they have been facing serious crises in the region. And certainly since the last year that we have been there, these crises have become more acute. At the same time we talk to fewer of those who have any real influence or input to these crises. We are trying to manage crises but yet we don't talk to Iran; we don't talk to Syria; we don't talk to Hamas; we don't talk to Hesballah; we don't talk to Sudan; we don't talk to the President of Lebanon; we don't talk to the Muslim Brotherhood; and we don't talk to terrorists.

It seems very strange that we have gotten into these circumstances while trying to act politically in the Middle East, and in fact are becoming further estranged from political Islam in a real sense of projecting hostility and enmity. This gravely concerns all of us, not only the threat Islam feels from the West but also the impact it has on us, in our lives and in our societies, as we see every day in new legislation which is curtailing more freedoms and curtailing the welfare of Muslims across Europe.

What I want to do is briefly talk about what we have done in the past year and what we are planning to do ahead, but more importantly what our conclusions have been.

We have been engaging widely with what you could broadly describe as political Islam, both with those groups that have also engaged in violence and other groups which are not engaged in violence.

During the year we have had two major meetings where we brought people from the US and Europe to Beirut to meet with Hamas, Hesballah, [the] Muslim Brotherhood and Jammāt-e-Islami of Pakistan. One of the purposes of having such a wide grouping in spite of them having very different agendas is that they do hold one thing in common. And this is the point we wanted to make to our American and European colleagues: one of the things they have in common is that they all wanted elections, reforms and change for their society. The point is that here were the four pillars of political Islam all saying that they wanted constitutional guarantees, popular participation, and effective, incorrupt governments, which is presumably also what the West says it wants to see when it talks about change and reform in the Middle

East. And it is certainly also what the polls show Muslims generally wanting for their own society.

The purpose of these meetings was to try to flip the coin. One side of the coin is that we see these groups through the prism of the West in terms of terrorism and violence. But the other side of the coin is that these are the same groups that are the vanguard of the agenda for reform and for change in their society and for clean, effective governments. It was partly to change that perception that we held these first two meetings. The meetings had no direct government participation but there were certainly people who held senior policy-making positions in the governments of the US and Europe.

Since then we have had a series of lower-profile, less public meetings with these and other groups in different areas. These secondary meetings were important in taking the agenda further along. With these groups meetings were held almost one a month, being more detailed and in which the attempt to listen was quite deep and extensive.

Conflicts Forum has no interest in trying to build democracy in the Middle East or reform Islam or moderate Islam in any way because I think it is entirely counter-productive to do that. What we are trying to do is to listen to these groups and understand them better. If we are doing any job, it is that of acting as translators in this sense by trying to get the American and European policymakers to see them in a slightly different light than what is seen through the prism of the Western press and through the prism of terrorologists, which would be the large group of people employed in the counter-terrorism industry here in the West.

### Conclusions

A serious conclusion that we can make is that what we see from talking to these groups is a complete misreading of the situation by the West of what it is facing. And the misreading of that situation has very serious consequences, consequences that seem to be completely unperceived in most areas of American policy. Typically in the West from the perspective of policy-making, we read the situation as a struggle between the West and “radical Islam” usually defined in the US by these meaningless and ambiguous terms of “al-Qaeda related or linked groups.” And if pressed, the State Department spokesman would respond that these “al-Qaeda related or linked groups” would include everything from Hamas, Hesballah, to even the non-violent Muslim Brotherhood, and Hizb-ut-tahrir as well in this whole mix of groups. In a sense that the situation is perceived as always being about them, this is quite a narcissistic view on the part of the West.

But what we miss entirely is the actual, more important struggle that is taking place not between the West and Islam, but between what I describe as the revivalists and revolutionaries. The revivalists are the groups who believe working through elections and bottom-up politics can gain them a stake in power and with that they can ultimately bring reform to their societies. And I call them revivalists for lack of a more suitable term. The struggle is between them and those who turn and say to them, “Well my brothers, you may try, but, you will fail. Ultimately the West will not allow you to make real changes. There will be a glass ceiling which you will not be able to penetrate. You will end up like the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, decorative but largely unable to bring about significant changes in society. Therefore the only solution is to end the culture of imperialism and colonialism. We need to sweep away the legacy that has been left after the last European War, burn the system down and out of those ashes might emerge a more just and reformed Muslim society.” These are the revolutionaries.

I call them revolutionaries rather than salafiyah or jehadiyah, because I feel the time has moved on from the 1980s when it was more appropriate to call them so. Today, the leaders of the revolutionaries are not simply reading Qutb; they are reading Ho Chi Minh and also

Begin's account of his campaign against British colonialism. So we are talking about something that does have a real effect in creating a revolution.

People wonder what their programme is. But again this is misreading the situation because they are not putting forward a programme; they don't have a blueprint of society. We are, according to them, in the early stages of a revolutionary movement. They want to reawaken people, to use Qutb language ending the neo-jehadiyah (what the Marxists call false consciousness), to get people out of their bubble of self-satisfaction. So there are different elements in this and one has to be careful with one's language.

If the revivalist groups like Hamas and Hesballah and Muslim Brotherhood are finally blocked by conditions imposed on their ability to participate in elections then we should not be surprised when the young people of Hamas and people in the refugee camps say to them: "We told you so, it is no good going down a Western system, you have to burn the system down." We have found in this year that many of these groups like Hamas and Hesballah are really under tremendous pressure because they risk being outflanked; outflanked not by secular, liberal, pro-Western groups, but outflanked by the revolutionaries. These groups have two choices: either they can produce results now or they will find themselves being pushed towards having to move closer to the revolutionary position.

And the West still goes on regarding these groups as a challenge. "How do we deal with these people?" You quite often hear the West to say, "Why should we roll the dice with these people? They are too religious, they are not liberal, not particularly pro-American. Why can't we deal with some pro-western, secular constituency?" The answer to that is simply because there are none. There are a few individuals out there but no real constituency that can provide an answer to the West. The effect of this can be seen if we compare the reaction of the West to the imprisonment of Ayman Nour in Egypt; to the absolute silence that accompanied the arrests of thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood over the past year. The key thing for the West is to look at where is the centre of gravity and if you look at all the polls they overwhelmingly show where most Islamists stand. They don't want revolution, violence, uncertainty and total upheaval. The West should recognise that instead of chasing the chimera of some liberal pro-western groups that simply don't exist in terms of having real constituencies on the ground.

While the West is still yearning to find some kind of alternative, there is no time to sit back and think about whether Hamas should be allowed to participate in elections or whether it can hold government positions because the dynamic is already running in the direction of the revolutionaries. The pendulum is swinging towards the revolutionaries because of what is happening principally in Iraq and elsewhere in the region like Afghanistan. Iraq is radiating serious uncertainty and instability in the entire region from Lebanon to Cairo. It is also generating a dynamic of hostility between the Sunnah and Shia and it is creating the sense of the pre-revolutionary conditions which a small minority of people in Iraq want to exploit.

Out of our reluctance to engage with them and our language that calls all Islamists "Al-Qaeda linked or related groups," we are in fact putting ourselves in a more dangerous situation: we are pushing them into that box. They are not in the same box at the moment, but if we give them no political space then we should not be surprised if these groups go in the other direction. There is an urgent need for people to recognise this.

At Conflicts Forum we are therefore also talking to the other side of the equation, not only to the Islamic groups. Over last summer Mark and I spoke at the Clinton Global Initiative and at several think-tanks in America arguing the case for inclusion of Hamas and Hesballah, in an effort to try and get people to understand this present situation.

***Mark Perry:***

A year ago when we started, it would have been unthinkable for Alastair and me to appear at a Washington DC think-tank or in front of the staff on the Hill or talk with any of the intelligence agencies. They simply viewed us as too radical and the events of 9/11, Madrid and London were all still very tangible.

But something changed. I brought Alastair over to Washington in September and we went to the Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Middle East Institute (MEI), the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), some intelligence services, Capitol Hill and also had a number of private discussions with senior policy makers. At one of our talks at CSIS we had some really senior officials in the room and while Alastair was talking I looked around and found people just quietly nodding to what he was saying. This would have not happened a year ago and I wondered what change had brought about this difference. And the difference is this: that the American and Western programme in Iraq has failed. As a result of this the political dynamic has changed, and we are drawing down our troops from Iraq, not immediately but surely.

There is a clear sense among the American people that this [the American programme in Iraq] will not work and a new strategy has to be found for the Middle East. The US is still in a dilemma over this. The problem with the promotion of democracy is that the people who win elections may not be the same ones who like America. In May, President Bush made a very important speech: he said that we need to promote democracy in the Middle East because we have had 60 years of failure in the Middle East; he said that we need to have elections in the Middle East even if this means that the people who will come to office may not like the United States of America. And on hearing this I was ecstatic. I thought great, let's have a vote in Egypt, let's open the jails and let's vote. Let's have a vote in the West Bank and Gaza, guess who'll win! Let's have a real vote in Iraq.

Having promoted that vision we are now twelve days away from elections in the West Bank and Gaza, and it is very likely that Hamas will win a working majority in the Palestinian Authority. So what will America do now, is it going to repudiate its support for democracy and still refuse to talk to Hamas?

I think one of the reasons why we (Conflicts Forum) have had success, apart from the failure of the American programme in Iraq and the deepening crises in the region, is that there is a willingness amongst the leaders of political Islam to adopt over time some of the language we, the West, use on democracy and human rights, especially in West Bank and Gaza where the party that the US has promoted for so many years, Fatah, is now viewed as the corrupt party and the reformed wing is now Hamas. Hamas expands the whole spectrum: women, Christian, yes, orthodox Islamist too, are a group that people in the West Bank and Gaza feel would be answerable to their constituency. And when the West sees this they are back in the dilemma of promoting democracy but faced with the reality of electing Islamists.

There is a broad conclusion within the American government that the presence of American troops in Iraq is an accelerant to the conflict. Every time an American soldier meets an Iraqi, the situation gets worse. And that's why we are moving towards a draw down.

The second reason for this is that, there is a famous saying in my country, "all politics in America is local." If the people of Illinois don't support a war, it is not going to be prosecuted. You see now every time the President makes an announcement for the withdrawal of troops, his polls pick up. He understands very well that the Republican Party has a better chance of carrying the 2006 mid-term elections if we draw down troops. And people ask "but what about the mess in the Middle East, doesn't that take priority?" The answer is "no," nothing takes priority over local politics in America.

The third reason for a draw down of troops in Iraq is a lack of a coherent strategy. A senior Canadian diplomat I met with several months ago had made rounds in Washington DC talking to senior foreign policy officials. When I met him after his talks I asked whether he had been able to discern what America's policy in the Middle East was. He replied saying, "No, I don't think America actually has any foreign policy in the Middle East."

If you look at the political spectrum of what is going on in the Middle East, our tendency in the West is to view Hamas and Hesballah, and the Muslim Brotherhood as radicals and extremists. They are not. They have gained legitimacy not simply because they have been able to provide their constituencies with services and have appeared to be incorrupt, but because they have staked out the large middle ground on the political spectrum in the region.

When President Bush talks about "Al-Qaeda linked or related groups," he means Hamas and Hesballah and as Alastair mentioned this is a terrific misunderstanding by the West. It was a great misunderstanding that was made here, in Britain, and in the US during the French revolution when your author, Thomas Carlyle, dubbed Danton as a radical. If you think Danton was bad, wait until you get Robespierre and if you think Kerensky was bad wait until you get Lenin. And if you think Hamas and Hesballah are bad and you're going to keep on refusing them you will be pushing them into the Takfiri box and making them dead-enders.

The reason that we want to talk to Hamas and Hesballah is not to give them legitimacy. We want to talk to Hamas and Hesballah because they *have* legitimacy. They are the groups that represent the great middle ground of the political spectrum in the Middle East.

[So too] there are three countries that can probably help us to solve the challenge of Iraq: Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran. Now we don't talk to two of them. It's a very short-sighted policy. If we want to bring democracy to Egypt we have to talk to the Muslim Brotherhood -- they have legitimacy there. If we want to bring democracy to West Bank, we have to talk to Hamas -- they have legitimacy.

To conclude, our goal a year ago was to engage with political Islam and we have done that. What we would want to do right now is to engage with our own societies. It was American Secretary of State Dean Acheson who once said in 1948 that America will go anywhere and talk to anyone for peace. Today we can't do that. It is a very short-sighted policy and our goal at Conflicts Forum is to change that.

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### *Alastair and Mark in response to questions*

**Alastair Crooke:** I don't think it is really wise to predict election results. We do not know what the conditions for the day will be. There could be violence in some areas. But I expect Hamas to do very well in the coming elections. They have an extremely good regional list; the people on their list are professionals, coming from a diverse background and have a high reputation in their community. I do expect them to do reasonably well in the national list too.

Hamas, Hesballah and the Muslim Brotherhood seem to have the centre ground in the Islamic world. If you create what would be a fairly artificial construction of trying to find the middle point of the curve of political opinion, I think Hamas is probably quite close to the centre. And on one end you can put some of the Sufi groups and on the other end some of the revolutionary groups, I'm not sure Al-Qaeda would be right at the far end of that spectrum any more.

Today, it is wrong to say that Al-Qaeda has no political appeal. They do. There may not be a political programme written down, in the way in which Hamas has just issued a manifesto for society, but that is because Al-Qaeda is looking for something quite different. They want to achieve a pre-revolutionary state of mind; they keep talking about an awakening, bringing people out of the enclosure of their bubble in which they have been living. One can see how in the refugee camps in Lebanon, revolutionary groups like Al-Qaeda still have strong political resonance especially amongst the youth. Many of those young people think that the revolutionaries are right, that they do need to burn the system down to effect real change because they don't believe that working through elections will ever succeed.

What is more difficult to say is the extent to which they have real legitimacy and credibility in the way in which you can see that plainly for Hezbollah and Hamas. I don't think that most of these revolutionaries would have any interest in talking to the West even if the West were able to talk to them, because they perhaps believe that dialogue wouldn't bring about any real change. However, on the whole, I don't think that this is true. If you look at what they say all of them including Al-Zawahiri, say that talking is important and dialogue is acceptable. But the key point that they make and which I think is essential in any such process is that any exchange has got to be done on the basis of respect.

But at the moment I don't see that there is necessarily any move towards that while, on the other hand, there is now an immediate need to interact with groups having legitimacy and real strength on the ground. We must engage with those who emerge as the elected representatives of the Palestinian people in free elections. It is not for us to pick and choose who to talk to. It is quite clear that there is a strong Islamist current in the Middle East. These currents may change and no current is permanent. And we have to understand and accept that.

#### On Hamas' call for the destruction of Israel

**Alastair Crooke:** One of the things we are very careful to do is to not tell Hamas to be more like us or how to run their affairs. Hamas are an extremely sophisticated movement. We have never offered that kind of advice and I don't imagine they would seek it from us. We try to give them a better understanding of western perceptions and why the West says certain things, and also to try and understand them better. Our observation is that Hamas is currently doing politics and the changes that have taken place in the last two years have been very significant. Would anyone have expected their leaders to participate in not only municipal but parliamentary elections two years ago? Would you have expected the Hamas spokesman talking about being part of an Oslo institution like the PLO? Would you expect their leaders to stand up and say that their Charter is just a document and not the Quran? I think we have seen a lot of changes and after the elections we will gradually see more political initiatives on their part.

**Mark Perry:** Even Sharon said he will never talk to Hamas but then set out two conditions for talking to them – the charter and ending violence. There is such a thing as legitimate resistance. If you talk to Hamas about the Charter, they understand the realities. I'm sure they will be able to change it. And the US will talk to them. The way it may happen is that a Secretary of State in the not so far future will walk down the line of cabinet ministers in the Palestinian Authority and shake their hands and that's it, we would have talked to Hamas.

**Mark Perry:** The neo-conservatives in Washington DC are currently in an eclipse because of the failure in Iraq. But we still do hold the neo-imperialist view in the Pentagon that "we are in charge, and that American force will be able to overcome anything." In my opinion that kind of thinking still has to be overcome. It is okay for America to use force when it is used as, what is supposed to be, as America says "the last option." But we need to make sure it is just that. Right now it is being used as the first. The President says that he has to use the last resort to force and it is the hardest thing to do. The hardest thing to do is to talk to people.

The hardest thing to do is to do diplomacy, and Washington has proved that it is incapable of doing that. That is why we are in this mess.

There is a growing recognition in the US that we actually served al-Qaeda by creating the mess we did in Iraq and also by over-estimating them in general. Al-Qaeda is nothing but a loose network of people who happen to take on the name. If you read the Washington Post and New York Times very carefully you will see the phrases being used reflect that they have a very difficult time trying to get an idea of what is going on in the Middle East. If there is a bombing in Saudi Arabia, they can't figure out who it is; they have no way to ascertain whether these are terrorists or nationalists or just kids with guns. So what do they do? They will cut the baby in half, and they will say 'Al-Qaeda inspired violence'. What is that? If you can't identify your enemy, you have already breached Clausewitz's first rule. And we in America have seemed unable to do just that.

**Mark Perry:** There is a tendency to believe that the US sees the Middle East through the eyes of Israel and in general, but not always, I think that has some truth, but there are some notable exceptions. It was the US and not Israel that first opened to the PLO. We did it in 1989: long before Oslo we had discussions with them in Tunis.

It was not that the US went into Iraq at the urging of Israel or on behalf of Israel. There were in fact senior Israeli officials who recommended that we not do this and there were also senior Israeli officials who warned that if we did go into Iraq, we make sure to keep the Ba'ath Party intact and the army intact: two things that we did not do. So the US is certainly capable of independent action on its own behalf and its own interest in the region.

However it is very difficult for any American government (Republican or otherwise) to open to Hamas and Hesballah because of Israel's position. And this is not simply because of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem influence but the influence of constituencies that are very real in New York and Florida and who are also contributors to our Parties. And that is just a fact of our democracy. The fact of your democracy, here in the UK, might well be one day, and I hope is one day, that you will have to listen to your Muslim constituency. While we have to listen to our Jewish constituency. That's just the way it is.

There is also a realisation in the US (everyone says this) that the US should just impose a solution on the Israeli-Palestine conflict. But doing that means in fact to impose a solution on Israel and that is political suicide in my country. That is an uncomfortable fact, but it's just the way it is.

And to mention finally, if the American plan in the Middle East continues to fail, what Israel wants and needs will be the last thing on our agenda. We will do what is in the interest of America. I'm very confident of that. Do we see the Middle East through the Israeli lens and are influenced by it? Yes, but at the end of the day is that the most important thing? No. If it becomes in our interest to talk to Hamas, and it is, then we will.

Question on whether it would be easier for Western governments to engage with groups like Hamas and Hesballah if there was a presentational dichotomy between the militant organisation and its political wing like the Sinn Fein and the IRA?

**Alastair Crooke:** That ploy has largely been used. I don't think European governments are ready to see it again. There is a strong sense from the European countries that it wasn't very credible. We all knew the Sinn Fein was the IRA and the IRA was the Sinn Fein. I think we have really stretched the analogies as far as we can and people are wise to it now and it's hard to use anymore.

Also the situation is quite different with groups like Hamas and Hesballah, primarily because they believe that the use of armed resistance is justified. They are an armed resistance group and the West has to understand why. So they are not particularly disposed to the idea of trying to hide their weapons under a different presentational name. They prefer the West to have an adult discussion on violence. From the perspective of the West violence is wrong and they agree, but they feel we need to address violence in its broader context. They say this because they know that it's not that the West is not engaged in violence. Who complained or criticised what happened in Fallujah? Then simply for the West to use state arms and structures on enforcing its political will on others and for the West to just use the mantra that you must give up violence to be allowed to the political process, they find very unacceptable.

We've got two things here: a complete breakdown in comprehension i.e. translation - people don't have an understanding of what these groups are about. And this extends even to the highest levels. People still think 'who are these people? What do they really want?' And it's probably inappropriate saying this in front of the journalists but in an age where global communications are supposed to be better than ever before there is no touching of interface between Arab media and Western media: they are all in their separate camps and quite distant from each other.

#### Question on the 'one man, one vote, one time' concern amongst the West and secular Muslims

**Mark Perry:** We gave a talk at the Middle East Institute in Washington, and this always happens: there was a fellow who said "you remember what happened in Weimar? We had an election and Hitler came into power." The glib answer to that is if you are arguing against democracy in Germany that's fine. And Hitler was not elected: he was appointed. But anyway, every meeting we have there does seem to be a generalised fear that this will be a "one man, one vote, one time."

And our answer to that is the Algerian example. In policy making circles what the US did and importantly did not do in Algeria is still a running sore: a destruction of a society because the US remained silent when elections where Islamists were supposed to win were called off. We can't afford to have another Algeria; we don't want to make that mistake again.

Another glib answer to the "one man, one vote, one time" concern is what we have right now "one man, no votes, ever." Promoting democracy means taking a lot of chances and a democratic society is very fragile but the current system isn't working, and we are supporting dictators wearing suits that happen to be pro-Western. We have to accept the need to change this.

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