

# Israel failed to learn from Northern Ireland peace process



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## OPINION

negotiating teams, of which I was a part, did in Northern Ireland.

There is no peace in the Middle East because there is no effective peace process. This isn't because the Palestinians and Israelis do not know how to make peace. They do. The Good Friday Agreement, which brought peace to Northern Ireland a quarter of a century ago, provided a clear guide. They have to do what the

The problem is Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ally, the United States of America, who have failed to apply the lessons of Northern Ireland to Middle East peacemaking. To fully understand the tragedy this represents, it's necessary to go back in time to the negotiations that achieved the Good Friday Agreement in 1997. At the time I was working, together with two other Northern Ireland-based academics, Fred Boal and Tom Hadden, and developing a range of public polls to gauge opinion about how to achieve peace.

As the principal investigator on the Peace Building and Public Policy in Northern Ireland project — independent of government and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) — my role was to develop relations with all the parties to the Northern Ireland peace process and act as an informal negotiator and manager of public opinion and public diplomacy. The public was kept informed through reports and articles in the local newspaper, the Belfast Telegraph. It was key to the process that people of all shades of political opinion were not only involved but were fully informed at all times.

Critically, all the parties to the conflict in Northern Ireland were democratically elected to participate in the peace negotiations there, including the Irish Republican Army represented by Sinn Féin, as well as the Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Freedom Fighters represented by their political leaderships, the Progressive Unionist Party and Ulster Democratic Party, respectively.

In all, I had to work with eight political parties negotiating and agreeing questions for public opinion polls designed to resolve issues in the formal negotiations that had yet to be settled.

### How 'peace polls' work

These "peace polls" were unlike "partisan polls" designed to underline the public's support for a particular policy favoured by one party or another (most commonly a government). Instead, the polls — which I developed with a partner from each of the eight political parties elected to the formal negotiations — aimed to fairly and objectively measure the public's support, from both sides, for every possible policy option across the political spectrum. The objective was to determine the precise points of common ground, where they existed, or effective compromise where it was needed for peacemaking.

Public opinion polls are an American invention and, fortunately for me, Bill Clinton's special envoy to Northern Ireland and the "talks" chairman, Senator George Mitchell, took the polls very seriously and gave me every possible support.

When the British offered to run the polling project for the parties, the parties rebelled and insisted on working with me with JRCT funding. So, I always made a point of hand-delivering the reports to Mitchell and the parties the day before they were published. And each time the polling reports were published, deals got done until we reached an agreement that we knew could pass a referendum, which was eventually held on May 22, 1998.

The legitimacy of the Good Friday Agreement was ensured by the full democratic participation of all the parties to the agreement and the people of Northern Ireland. Through public opinion polls, the people gained a seat at the negotiating table, and through a referendum, the deal was made.

Tragically, the peoples of Israel and Palestine have been prevented from learning and applying these same peace lessons to the resolution of their conflict.

### When it all went wrong

In January 2009, the newly elected US president, Barack Obama, appointed Mitchell as his special envoy for Middle East peace, in the hope he could bring the success of the Good Friday Agreement peace process to Israel and Palestine. Expecting Obama to appoint Mitchell to this post following his successful election in 2008, I was invited to run a peace poll in Israel and Palestine.

I was flown to Washington in June 2009 along with my Israeli and Palestinian polling team. Presentations were arranged for us in the US House of Representatives and Senate, and various think tanks to brief all the politicians and experts with an interest in Middle East peace.

I had been in touch with Mitchell and met him in his office at the State Department. At that time, I had also been running peace polls in Sri Lanka with support from the Norwegians. They were a generous and reliable funder and had indicated they would be willing to support my work in Israel and Palestine if Mitchell wanted them to.

Mitchell welcomed the Norwegian offer, and arrangements were made to take it up, but it all fell through —

my gut feeling was that the State Department wanted to have control of the research to meet their own agenda. So, I did not get the funding and Mitchell eventually resigned his post without achieving peace in May 2011. Of course, it can be argued that even if I had brought the lessons of the Northern Ireland peace process to Israel and Palestine, I would have failed. But I had made all necessary preparations and contacts with all the parties to the conflict to make it work. I knew what I was doing — as did Mitchell when he accepted his appointment from Obama.

Over a period of two months of interviews to develop the questionnaire, in November and December of 2008, I had private meetings with all the relevant stakeholders, including the then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President Shimon Peres on the Israeli side. My pollster, Mina Zemach, was a good friend of Peres and had been his pollster when he led the Labour Party.

On the Palestinian side, the non-governmental organisation organising the project, OneVoice, had close connections with Fatah, the political party founded by

Yasser Arafat and others in the 1950s, which was at that stage dominant within the Palestinian Authority. So, I arranged to meet with Hamas via an introduction from Ghassan Khatib, an independent Palestinian politician and director of the Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre.

Speaking with Hamas was like speaking with Sinn Féin. They had an extreme negotiating position, but that is all it was: a negotiating position. Like Sinn Féin, they had a legitimate grievance and said they would be happy to cooperate with the peace polls. Of course, the impact of the Hamas attack of October 7 and Israel's assault on Gaza has profoundly reshaped public opinion on all sides.

Violence on both sides of the Troubles that continued even as the talks were progressing meant that at times, many thought we would never achieve a peace agreement in Northern Ireland. But such tragedies can either doom negotiations or inspire renewed effort. People have a choice. We carried on.

Significantly, the one key interlocutor who refused to meet with me in December 2008 was Netanyahu. He

only consented to send his chief of staff. Zemach said this was because he would refuse to compromise on sharing Jerusalem as part of any peace agreement. And when he became Israel's prime minister in March 2009, he also refused to include Hamas in any peace negotiations.

My experience told me that excluding Sinn Féin and the other paramilitary organisations from peace negotiations in Northern Ireland had only brought failure, while their inclusion had enabled the peace settlement. Other parties essential to the success of the Northern Ireland peace process had been the centre Alliance Party and Women's Coalition.

The politically equivalent party in Israel was Meretz, a left-wing socialist party and strong supporter of the Peace Now movement. When I met with them, like Alliance, they told me they would be pleased to be part of a fully inclusive peace process, but they were excluded from negotiations as they were not part of Netanyahu's coalition government.

The establishment in Washington did not have a problem with my contacts with Hamas. In 2009, I had also been working on a project in Sudan with the US Institute of Peace. Although Hamas was deemed a proscribed terrorist organisation, the Institute for Peace lawyers said it was OK for me to meet and talk with them provided I did not give them any assistance. They advised me "not to even buy them a coffee". I took this advice. Hamas provided the coffee.

But without inclusive negotiations that also drew on the public's desire for an end to the bloodshed, peace was not achieved.

In 2013, when I was in New York for meetings at the UN, I took the opportunity to visit Mitchell at his law office and asked him why he had resigned. He said it was because he was not getting sufficient support from the State Department. I had planned to reveal this in a book I was writing. But a trusted colleague and friend advised me against it, as it could reflect badly on the former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, when she was campaigning to be president in the run-up to the 2016 election.

Accordingly, I watered down the quote to say something about the lack of sufficient support in Washington. It was not untrue, but it was not the whole truth.

### Misplaced optimism

In my optimism at the time, I thought perhaps that Clinton — if she became president — would send her husband to the Middle East as her special envoy. Bill Clinton had got very close to making an agreement some years earlier with the "Clinton parameters", but he ran out of time. And then Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 election to Donald Trump — and so we are where we are.

It is just as likely that my optimism was misplaced and that Clinton and possibly Joe Biden — who has always been a very strong supporter of Israel — did not want to oppose Netanyahu for domestic political reasons.

When the Good Friday Agreement was struck 25 years ago, both Mitchell and I thought Israel and Palestine would be our next challenge. But Al Gore, who we had hoped might set his sights on a peace deal, lost to Bush, and then 9/11 happened, and the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq took all the political oxygen out of peacemaking.

Then, 15 years ago, we thought it would happen when Obama was elected. It should have. Another opportunity may well arrive when the present war is over. The Hamas' attack on October 7 and Israel's response have raised the stakes for peace considerably. Elections in the US, Israel, and Palestine may also put the peace process on hold yet again. But this must not prevent people of goodwill from talking peace. And it can work, history tells us as much.

Sadly, Israel and Palestine are not alone in their cycles of violence and grief. All over the world, the lessons of the Northern Ireland peace process are ignored. Frozen conflicts remain frozen at best and with increased frequency, become unstable and violent. Over centuries, the cost of war has often been measured in "blood and treasure". It's fair to say that since 2009, in the Middle East and elsewhere we've seen "blood" in thousands of lives lost and "treasure" in billions of dollars wasted, again and again.

The article first appeared on *The Conversation*.



The illustration explores the prospects of peace between Palestine and Israel through a ballot box.  
● M. RYDER/SEATTLE TIMES



Former US president Barack Obama (2nd-R) talks with George Mitchell (2nd-L), American then-special envoy to the Middle East, as well as former secretary of state Hillary Clinton (R) and former vice president Joe Biden during a meeting in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington on February 4, 2009.  
● KEVIN DIETSCH/UPI