

Negotiating with Hamas

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Members of the Trump negotiating team are now engaged in [direct negotiations with Hamas](#). This is new for an American administration and has the potential to allow both sides to explore the options that could get everyone to peace in the Middle East.

Norma Percy and Brook Lapping's brilliant BBC documentary series "[Israel and the Palestinians: The road to 7th October](#)" makes the point that Hamas were frozen out of negotiations with the Obama administration in 2009. But when I met with them in December 2008 they were willing to negotiate a peace agreement that would lead to [security for Israel within the 1967 borders](#).

I had been commissioned to undertake a programme of [public opinion research in Israel and Palestine](#) in November 2008, in preparation for the incoming Obama administration and his Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, [Senator George Mitchell](#), in January 2009. My sponsors, [OneVoice](#), would not arrange a meeting for me with Hamas as Israel would not permit such meetings. So I had to get an independent negotiator, [Ghassan Khatib](#), to arrange the meeting for me.

I knew, as did George Mitchell, that peace in Northern Ireland could not have been achieved without all the stakeholder parties at the table. And that included Sinn Fein and their military wing the Irish Republican Army (IRA). So when I got to Israel and Palestine in 2008 I knew I had to meet with Hamas.

My Israeli pollster [Mina Zemach](#) arranged meetings for us with the then Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) and President of Israel [Shimon Peres](#). She advised me not to mention that I had met with Hamas as such meetings with a designated terrorist group were not permitted. Most probably Olmert and Peres knew I had had such meetings and diplomatically they did not ask me if I had. But one of Olmert's staff did, I could not lie. Fortunately Olmert had the good sense not to pursue the matter.

Critically, in Northern Ireland, I continued to work with Sinn Fein even after they had been excluded from the peace talks when [they broke their ceasefire](#). I had explained all this to Hamas and they were willing to work with me [on the same basis as Sinn Fein](#), informally, if and when I worked with Senator George Mitchell as his Middle East pollster in 2009. No doubt Hamas hoped such cooperation might lead to them being in the formal negotiations like Sinn Fein. But as the [Percy interview with the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh](#), pointed out, the Hamas offer to negotiate in good faith was rejected and [I was also replaced as the negotiation's pollster](#).

[Percy's interview with Ehud Olmert was also a revelation for me](#). Olmert has recently signed a potential [peace agreement informally with ex Palestinian Foreign Minister Nasser al-Qudwa](#) that includes East Jerusalem being part of the Palestinian state and the contested Old City to be managed under UN authority by five states: Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. Percy's documentary makes it clear that this was a

private offer made to President Abbas in September 2008. The proposal had not been cleared by the Israeli cabinet and as an American official pointed out would most probably not have done so. Had [Olmert not been replaced as Prime Minister in 2009 by Benjamin Netanyahu](#), that deal probably would have got made. [The Two State Solution](#) would have been implemented and the Middle East region would be at peace.

President Trump now has an opportunity to strike a [Grand Bargain](#) in the Middle East region that could include Iran and perhaps, like Sinn Fein and the IRA, Hamas would agree to disarm and put their weapons '[beyond use](#)'. The Trump administration are quite right to have direct negotiations with Hamas in my view. [The Egypt / Arab leaders plan](#), for peace in the Middle East is there for the taking.