

Robert Fisk: Welcome to 'Palestine'

How troublesome the Muslims of the Middle East are. First, we demand that the Palestinians embrace democracy and then they elect the wrong party - Hamas - and then Hamas wins a mini-civil war and presides over the Gaza Strip. And we Westerners still want to negotiate with the discredited President, Mahmoud Abbas. Today "Palestine" - and let's keep those quotation marks in place - has two prime ministers. Welcome to the Middle East.

Who can we negotiate with? To whom do we talk? Well of course, we should have talked to Hamas months ago. But we didn't like the democratically elected government of the Palestinian people. They were supposed to have voted for Fatah and its corrupt leadership. But they voted for Hamas, which declines to recognise Israel or abide by the totally discredited Oslo agreement.

No one asked - on our side - which particular Israel Hamas was supposed to recognise. The Israel of 1948? The Israel of the post-1967 borders? The Israel which builds - and goes on building - vast settlements for Jews and Jews only on Arab land, gobbling up even more of the 22 per cent of "Palestine" still left to negotiate over ?

And so today, we are supposed to talk to our faithful policeman, Mr Abbas, the "moderate" (as the BBC, CNN and Fox News refer to him) Palestinian leader, a man who wrote a 600-page book about Oslo without once mentioning the word "occupation", who always referred to Israeli "redeployment" rather than "withdrawal", a "leader" we can trust because he wears a tie and goes to the White House and says all the right things. The Palestinians didn't vote for Hamas because they wanted an Islamic republic - which is how Hamas's bloody victory will be represented - but because they were tired of the corruption of Mr Abbas's Fatah and the rotten nature of the "Palestinian Authority".

I recall years ago being summoned to the home of a PA official whose walls had just been punctured by an Israeli tank shell. All true. But what struck me were the gold-plated taps in his bathroom. Those taps - or variations of them - were what cost Fatah its election. Palestinians wanted an end to corruption - the cancer of the Arab world - and so they voted for Hamas and thus we, the all-wise, all-good West, decided to sanction them and starve them and bully them for exercising their free vote. Maybe we should offer "Palestine" EU membership if it would be gracious enough to vote for the right people?

All over the Middle East, it is the same. We support Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, even though he keeps warlords and drug barons in his government (and, by the way, we really are sorry about all those innocent Afghan civilians we are killing in our "war on terror" in the wastelands of Helmand province).

We love Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, whose torturers have not yet finished with the Muslim Brotherhood politicians recently arrested outside Cairo, whose presidency received the warm support of Mrs - yes Mrs - George W Bush - and whose succession will almost certainly pass to his son, Gamal.

We adore Muammar Gaddafi, the crazed dictator of Libya whose werewolves have murdered his opponents abroad, whose plot to murder King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia preceded Tony Blair's recent visit to Tripoli - Colonel Gaddafi, it should be remembered, was called a "statesman" by Jack Straw for abandoning his non-existent nuclear ambitions - and whose "democracy" is perfectly acceptable to us because he is on our side in the "war on terror".

Yes, and we love King Abdullah's unconstitutional monarchy in Jordan, and all the princes and emirs of the Gulf, especially those who are paid such vast bribes by our arms companies that even Scotland Yard has to close down its investigations on the orders of our prime minister - and yes, I can indeed see why he doesn't like The Independent's coverage of what he quaintly calls "the Middle East". If only the Arabs - and the Iranians - would support our kings and shahs and princes whose sons and daughters are educated at Oxford and Harvard, how much easier the "Middle East" would be to control.

For that is what it is about - control - and that is why we hold out, and withdraw, favours from their leaders. Now Gaza belongs to Hamas, what will our own elected leaders do? Will our pontificators in the EU, the UN, Washington and Moscow now have to talk to these wretched, ungrateful people (fear not, for they will not be able to shake hands) or will they have to acknowledge the West Bank version of Palestine (Abbas, the safe pair of hands) while ignoring the elected, militarily successful Hamas in Gaza?

It's easy, of course, to call down a curse on both their houses. But that's what we say about the whole Middle East. If only Bashar al-Assad wasn't President of Syria (heaven knows what the alternative would be) or if the cracked President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad wasn't in control of Iran (even if he doesn't actually know one end of a nuclear missile from the other).

If only Lebanon was a home-grown democracy like our own little back-lawn countries - Belgium, for example, or Luxembourg. But no, those pesky Middle Easterners vote for the wrong people, support the wrong people, love the wrong people, don't behave like us civilised Westerners.

So what will we do? Support the reoccupation of Gaza perhaps? Certainly we will not criticise Israel. And we shall go on giving our affection to the kings and princes and unlovely presidents of the Middle East until the whole place blows up in our faces and then we shall say - as we are already saying of the Iraqis - that they don't deserve our sacrifice and our love.

How do we deal with a coup d'état by an elected government?