

IN the midst of tragedy there is often opportunity.

Hopefully this time the Palestinian leadership will learn that there is only one real game in international politics — hardball.

Unfortunately, for many years now there have been many questions — especially from those most knowledgeable and most concerned about Palestinian affairs — whether the PLO really knows how to play.

When speaking of “hardball”, however, one doesn’t necessarily mean guns and killing. While it’s obvious that throughout history force and violence have played major roles, it’s also true that more and more in the modern world there is authority in words credibly spoken, in symbols thoughtfully put forward, and in well-crafted appeals, to human rights, to international law, to justice.

Especially in today’s new world of instant communications and mass media saturation, serious fighting on the battlefields of public opinion is more important than ever before.

It’s not just a matter of building up support in the minds and hearts of ordinary people. More and more public opinion weighs heavily on the decisions policy-makers eventually take, constraining them into choices they might like to not make but which they feel public opinion won’t let them easily avoid.

In other words, a crafty, tough, no-nonsense approach in the diplomatic arena is the least the Palestinian leadership should be able to come up with at this crucial time.

Everyone who cares about peace and justice in today’s

WHAT SHOULD THE PALESTINIANS DO NOW?

Mid-east is well aware that most of the guns are on the other side. So no one is expecting the Palestinian and Arab leadership to match the Israelis and the Americans on the military front. But when it comes to the diplomatic battlefield it’s time this leadership showed what it’s made of; and if it turns out that it’s not made of much then it should realise it really is time to step aside.

In this overall context, here is a brief prescription for immediate steps the Palestinians should now take at this possibly crucial turning point that has been brought about by Israel’s unprecedented expulsion of hundreds of Palestinians:

Real suspension of the talks. The “peace talks” should be completely suspended, the Palestinians reserving for themselves alone when and if they will be begun again.

First of all these talks were mishandled by the Palestinian side from the very beginning. Quite tellingly it seems to me is that every major Jewish supporter of Palestinian statehood I have spoken to in recent months — General Matti Peled in Israel, Prof Noam Chomsky at MIT, journalist Maxim Ghilan in Paris,

publisher Abi Melzer in Frankfurt among them — has been extremely critical of how the Palestinians allowed themselves to be manipulated into Trojan Horse negotiations on the wrong terms, in the wrong forums, through the wrong procedures.

Secondly the credibility of the Palestinian leadership for taking firm and principled stands has been so badly damaged in the past that few believe this same leadership can rise to the moment now. This puts a double burden on them to make the suspension they have already spoken of credible.

In short the current spiral of tragedies in the region offers an opportunity to restart things on far better terms. But first what’s needed is a serious and real suspension of the current framework: a suspension that has credibility and if necessary — as it probably will be — staying power.

This also means no more footsy game-playing between West Bank Palestinians and American officials in Washington at the fancy hotels and dinner parties they have unfortunately got much too use to already.

Palestinian negotiators should go home where they belong and

stay there at least until the “peace talks” suspension is resolved one way or another. The Americans know very well how to get in touch with them there; moreover they know very well who pulls the real strings in Tunis and Cairo.

New refugee camp. The expelled Palestinians should stay right where they are — caught in a kind of no-man’s land in southern Lebanon. They should set up a new refugee camp — for what has happened to them is but a modern paradigm of what has happened to tens of thousands of their people before them. The new refugee camp could be called “Camp Palestine” and the Palestinians in it could devote themselves to establishing contact with and knowledge about each of the more than a hundred Palestinian camps throughout occupied Palestine and the surrounding countries, thus becoming a kind of clearing-house for information about all the camps.

UN initiative. While the coals are still hot the PLO should absolutely insist that the UN Security Council denounce Israel’s violations of international law and imposition of collective punishments.

It’s also high time for the Palestinians to be creative and savvy. For instance, they could prepare a short video presentation of the scope of Israeli law violations in the occupied territories — in addition to mass expulsions, the torture, severe beatings, death squads, never-ending curfews, home demolitions, land confiscation, discriminatory and racist use of identity card and roadblocks. By showing such a video in the UN itself it is quite likely at least parts of it would be shown by media around the world.

And even if it means a US veto the Palestinian leadership should insist that at a minimum the Security Council authorise an immediate on-site investigation of Israeli violations of international law.

If the US vetoes such an appeal — after using the Security Council for its own purposes for so many years now and so visibly when it came to Kuwait and Somalia and now Bosnia — American hypocrisy will be front and centre. If the US accepts the resolution and the Israelis block the investigation it will be obvious that Israel is a leading international law-breaker.

Furthermore, it’s probably a good idea in these weeks before

Bill Clinton and his friends at the Israeli-Jewish lobby take over in Washington, for the Palestinians to try to institutionalise a few things that Clinton will then be stuck with. Everyone else is operating in this way; and there’s every reason the Palestinians should do the same.

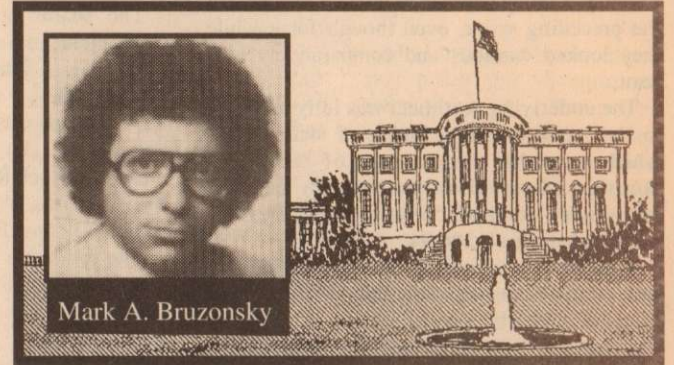
New “peace talks” strategy. First of all the Palestinian leadership should realise that those who need these talks the most, but only as talks, are the Americans and the Israelis. What the Palestinians need is not talks but action, and action can only come from talks that have a specific purposes and set deadlines, talks that do not drag on and on and result in more confusion than progress.

In the past the talks have been of the first kind — talks for the sake of talks.

If they are to be restarted it should only be in a context of firm timetables and specific goals so that the talks are not used by the Americans simply to claim progress and by the Israelis to gain more time and give the appearance of reasonableness.

In the future, if and when there is serious reason to think that a renewal of “peace talks” might be useful, there should be new terms

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of reference that the Palestinians should absolutely insist upon. And if anyone should challenge them they should simply say, “we’ve already played the American game and gave the talks they arranged more than a year. Now it’s time to try another way”. In short, it’s high time the Palestinian and Arab leadership stopped dancing to American and Israeli music.

Key elements of any future talks should be:

● The talks should in the future be under international, not US, auspices and should be held nowhere else but at the UN in New York or the Palais de Nations in Geneva. The UN midwifed Israel’s creation and throughout the decades has had UNRWA as a symbol of its ongoing commitment to the Palestinians. If the Israelis don’t want talks under international auspices then fine, no talks.

● The talks should include Palestinians from both inside the occupied territories and from the Palestinian Diaspora on the actual delegation. It’s not absolutely necessary that the PLO formally be involved, but it should be very clear that the Palestinian people worldwide are making their own choices and the PLO is their agent of legitimisation just as the Jewish Agency was for the Jews back in the 1940s.

● The talks should be about mutual co-existence and should be fully balanced in all ways. The only way this can be brought about is if Palestinians are allowed the same self-determination everyone else claims for himself. Any more talk about “transition periods” should be entertained *only* if there is an agreed outcome down the road and in the foreseeable future. Anything else is subterfuge, delay, and dishonest.