



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report explains the conditions under which governments might promisingly negotiate with terrorist groups so as to end their violence. It is drawn from a larger United States Institute of Peace–supported multiyear research project on how terrorist campaigns meet their demise. Based on qualitative and quantitative research that explores the lessons of negotiations with terrorist groups and analyzes other potential pathways for a group’s decline, including decapitation, repression, reorientation, and implosion, the conclusions herein offer general guidance to policymakers who must decide whether to enter talks with a given terrorist group. The report applies those lessons specifically to the current debate over negotiating with “al-Qaeda” and “the Taliban.”

For fuller explication, see the author’s book *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), available at <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9012.html>.

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*Audrey Kurth Cronin*

## When Should We Talk to Terrorists?

### Summary

- The longer a terrorist group has been in existence, the more likely it is to engage in negotiations. Even so, only about 18 percent of terrorist groups engage in talks on strategic issues at all.
- When groups do enter talks, the most common pattern is for negotiations to drag on, with the conflict occupying a middle ground between a stable cease-fire and high levels of violence.
- Negotiations do not necessarily result in a cessation of the violence: about half of the groups that have entered negotiations in recent years have continued to be active in their violence as the talks unfolded, typically at a lower level of intensity or frequency.
- A wide range of variables can determine the efficacy of negotiations. A crucial element in the success or failure of such talks is the ability of policymakers to devise a plan in advance for what will happen when violence does again occur.
- Those policymakers who are able to unite with their nonstate negotiating partners in condemning violence are more likely to sustain talks and make progress.
- Talks with some global affiliates of al-Qaeda, as well as some smaller factions of the Taliban, may hold promise.
- Talks should not be seen as a “silver bullet” but rather as a way to manage and channel the violence over the long term, a process that often contributes to the decline of groups or their demise, along with other factors.

### Introduction

Passionate debates about “negotiating with terrorists” produce plenty of heat but scarce light, having more to do with the emotional aftermath of an attack. Government policymakers understandably respond with righteous anger and determination after a horrible event. The priority is to shore up the safety of the population, stabilize the state, avoid

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legitimizing the group that attacked, punish those responsible, and remove incentives for future attacks by demonstrating that “terrorism doesn’t pay.” There is nothing less popular than so-called appeasement in the face of terrorist attacks on innocent victims: entering talks with the perpetrators can be political suicide, especially in a democracy.

Yet time and again, governments and their populations face the unpalatable reality that groups engaging in violent attacks against innocent civilians may be stopped no other way. Under some conditions, other counterterrorism approaches such as military repression, policing, infiltration, targeted killings, arrest, reform movements, or marginalization may not work, may be insufficient on their own to end a campaign, or may even worsen the problem overall. Or the violence necessary to obliterate a terrorist campaign may be so bloody and indiscriminate that it also kills innocents, violates the laws of war, destabilizes a state, and is just as morally repulsive as the initial terrorist acts. The cure may be worse than the disease. In short, if the goal is to end terrorist attacks, history demonstrates that there are situations where there may be no viable alternative to entering talks. Fortunately, there is a rich history of experience with terrorist campaigns, replete with lessons about how, when, and why they decline or fizzle out, that inform any number of questions related to negotiations: On the basis of historical experience, when and why do governments and groups negotiate? Under what conditions are those negotiations promising or unpromising? Can we assess whether a particular terrorist campaign is more or less likely to end through talks?

To tackle these questions, I initiated a multiyear project on how terrorism ends that employed three approaches: first, a detailed study of the history of terrorism over the past two centuries; second, a series of controlled comparative case studies of the decline and ending of specific terrorist campaigns; and finally, a database of hundreds of campaigns taking place over the past fifty years or so. The study included numerous groups dating back to the mid-nineteenth century; however, because of the availability of better data and archival information, campaigns occurring in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were naturally favored. The quantitative and qualitative analyses complemented each other: all three approaches contributed to the conclusions presented here.<sup>1</sup>

The database that supports this discussion of broad phenomena in negotiations was created from detailed information about individual groups, numbers of incidents, dates of initiation, and so forth, accessed online at the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT)’s Terrorism Knowledge Base.<sup>2</sup> From the more than 800 groups analyzed by MIPT, I drew 457 groups that satisfied clear and consistently applied criteria as having engaged in durable terrorist campaigns. These included orchestrating repeated and sustained attacks (thus campaigns), having fundamentally political goals, with symbolic use of violence aimed at an audience, and the purposeful targeting of noncombatants, carried out by nonstate actors. No definition of terrorism is perfect; but all of the cases included in this project had all of these features.<sup>3</sup> The study focuses on when terrorist violence ended—usually but not always the same as when the *group* ended, since organizations occasionally transitioned to other modes of behavior.

There are two more caveats regarding the scope of the research summarized here. I did not study *state* uses of violence against innocents in this study—so-called terror from above—even though these have unquestionably claimed more victims. Because there are many other terms to describe treacherous state use of force, including crimes against humanity, violations of the laws of war, genocide, and so on, the project was limited to the phenomenon of terrorism by nonstate actors. Also, while there are many important lessons to be learned from counterterrorism programs that “negotiate” with individuals, including amnesties, incentives, and political rehabilitation programs aimed at reintegrating single operatives into society, this report focuses only on collective talks with groups or organizations that use terrorism.

## Overview of Findings about Negotiations

Despite common assumptions, negotiations between states and terrorist groups are historically rare: the vast majority of terrorist groups do not negotiate at all. Only about 18 percent of groups in my database have entered talks. There is a strong relationship in my study between participation in negotiations and longer group life spans. The mean life span among groups that have negotiated over their fundamental aims was between twenty and twenty-five years, while the figure for terrorist group life spans overall was only five to nine years. Thus, from the perspective of a group, the first prerequisite for negotiations is to *survive*. All else being equal, terrorist groups tend to die young.

More interesting, perhaps, are the conditions under which negotiations have occurred. Nearly all of those who have entered talks at least in recent decades have been pursuing causes related to the control of territory. Of course, a brief acquaintance with twentieth-century history explains that finding, since many of the groups engaging in terrorism in the past sixty years supported causes that were connected in one way or another to decolonization, some eventually transitioning into insurgencies (in which they were able to target primarily military forces) or factions in a civil war (in which they became larger and stronger still). This was an era of predominantly ethnonationalist terrorism. Moving forward, it is hard to know whether this connection to territory will hold in an era of “virtual” globalized causes.

Many writers (including me) have observed that negotiations most frequently succeed if groups express tangible demands, and that is true but somewhat tautological. Governments cannot negotiate over demands they can neither understand nor satisfy, and more to the point, popular opinion cannot understand or support such talks. There is a deep historical connection between ideas and terrorism. Popular international ideologies have regularly spurred local terrorism and, reciprocally, groups often espouse global causes so as to achieve local legitimacy or notoriety. Yet cause and effect is complex: global ideologies spark increased levels of terrorism, but the record indicates that they have not necessarily prescribed local goals over time. For example, some of the groups that negotiated in the twentieth century professed Marxist or socialist claims at the outset of their campaigns only to transition into local demands over land or self-determination as years passed.<sup>4</sup>

In determining whether to approach a group, therefore, it is vital first and foremost for policymakers to assess what a group’s goal actually is, to measure whether a leader’s characterization of that aim is accurate (as opposed to an exaggerated rallying cry), and to weigh whether the goal is evolving. This kind of intelligence is fundamental and typically involves clandestine “feelers” or secret back-channel interactions. (“Negotiations” are always a multifaceted phenomenon.) Sometimes members of a group do not share the publicized goal, or do not share a commitment to violence as the means of furthering their interests. When that is the case, there is a promising opening for more formal talks. Whatever the cause being pursued, antipathy toward the means—terrorist attacks against innocent civilians—is a well-worn common ground from which to parlay.

When they are engaged, publicized negotiations may facilitate a process of decline but they have rarely been the single factor driving an outcome. The most common scenarios in recent history are for talks to start and stop, dragging on, neither obviously succeeding nor failing. After groups survive past the five- or six-year mark, for example, it is not at all clear that *refusing* to negotiate shortens their violent campaigns any more than entering into negotiations appears to prolong them. From a government’s perspective, the principle purpose of talks seems to be to channel the violence to a more manageable form over time, enabling other factors to converge and contribute either to the ending of a group or (rarely) to its transition to more legitimate means. Thus, those who claim that talks alone

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end terrorism are just as wrong as those who insist that governments must never negotiate with terrorists: under certain conditions, talks are a necessary but not sufficient element of effective counterterrorism.

Entering into negotiations does not necessarily end the violence, and it is a mistake to perpetuate the impression that it will. About half of the negotiating groups in our study have continued their attacks, though typically at a lower level of intensity and frequency. Still, among those 18 percent of groups that negotiated, the proportion of talks that clearly failed was small: about one in ten. On the other hand, in the remaining nine cases of talks that trundled on, very few groups actually achieved their ends through negotiations. The classic pattern is for groups either to cease to exist for other reasons, or to remain in periodic talks that drag on and on with interruptions and periodic setbacks, lacking either dramatic successes or outright failure.

Thus, for governments, talks function best as essential elements of a wider policy driving toward the decline and ending of a group or its violence. The statistical analyses, historical survey, and comparative case studies that I examined in my study together all indicate that negotiations with terrorist groups are best approached as long-term, managed processes demanding patience, resilience, extensive intelligence, and steady determination, rather than the kinds of intensive meetings and well-publicized signing ceremonies that follow civil war cease-fires or the endings of conventional wars. The good news is that groups rarely get what they want and usually either die out or stop engaging in terrorism in the process.

When determining whether to pursue negotiations, therefore, it is crucial first to thoroughly analyze the internal characteristics of groups, especially what members value, how they make decisions, what the nature of their constituency is, and how their organizations are structured. In the absence of such intelligence, the asymmetry between the state and a group, and between the audiences supporting or opposing each party, may result in counterintuitive outcomes. Received wisdom about conflict resolution between states, or even within civil wars, does not translate directly to situations where nonstate actors are engaged in terrorism. My research reveals that there are vital differences in the dynamics of wars, civil wars, and terrorist campaigns that affect the conditions under which negotiations fail or succeed.

Terrorist groups should not be treated as if they are small weak states: most states want a conflict to end (albeit on their own terms), while some terrorist groups derive their very identity from the violence itself and may have little else besides the capacity to strike. Groups that rely on terrorism are normally small and clandestine, lacking even the kind of broader mobilized support base that characterizes actors in civil wars, insurgencies, or guerrilla warfare. Although they engage in rational strategic behavior, they are not rational unitary actors. Nonstate actors do not generally have the kinds of structures, lines of authority, and command-and-control that are available to states. The classic incentives and disincentives of negotiations may be irrelevant if violence is central to the identity or livelihood of the individuals involved. Thus, it is a mistake to assume that classic coercion theory applies to groups who signal through surprise attacks, because without the violence, some feel they have no voice.

Likewise, unlike in civil wars, terrorist campaigns cannot focus primarily on the government-group relationship, because affecting government policy may not be the aim of attacks. Groups that use terrorism often do so because they are trying to affect an audience (or several audiences) who may be distinct from government policymakers or even citizens of the targeted state. Sometimes symbolic attacks on civilians are intended to show strength, intimidate, advance a cause, or mobilize supporters, for example, in order that the group may gain sufficient legitimacy and support to be able to attack more traditional military targets at some point in the future. Terrorism is highly leveraged symbolic violence.<sup>5</sup> The

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role of the audience is arguably of more relative importance to small clandestine terrorist groups than it is to rebel groups in a civil war, making negotiations with terrorist groups especially problematic.

For reasons that are beyond the state's control, the group may be committed to violence for its own sake unless and until that violence becomes counterproductive in the eyes of a potential constituency. In these situations, talks may actually increase the attacks, especially in the short term. Unless the government is well-informed about the specific audience toward which the symbolic violence is aimed, therefore, it may make false assumptions about how to influence or end that violence: potential victims of terrorist attacks may not be the actual "targets" after all. Excellent intelligence and deep knowledge of cultures, languages, and local group histories, as well as a thorough understanding of the broader context, are always prerequisite to effective negotiations.

## **Promising and Unpromising Conditions: Lessons for Policymakers**

A wide range of variables can determine the efficacy of negotiations, including the nature of the organization (with hierarchical groups having an advantage over groups that cannot control their members' actions), the nature of the leadership (groups with a strong leader having an advantage over those that are decentralized), and the nature of public support for the cause (where groups with constituencies who tire of violence are more likely to compromise). In addition to these well-known considerations, I have identified seven key factors that affect the likelihood of success.

### ***Political Stalemate***

Negotiations are best initiated when both sides sense that they have achieved a situation where further violence is counterproductive. William Zartman coined the phrase "hurting stalemate" to refer to the most promising circumstances for talks in internal conflicts. From the perspective of a challenger group that mainly uses terrorism, this situation reflects a *political* rather than a military status. Zartman also detailed four stages of insurgency—articulation, mobilization, insurgency, and warfare. It is because terrorist groups remain essentially in the phase of *mobilization* that they are particularly difficult to negotiate with: the level of mobilization determines the incentives of the group. Thus, it is crucial to determine the degree of popular support for a group and its cause. Generally, groups are more likely to compromise if their popular support is waning. On the other hand, if a group perceives that the domestic constituency of a *state* is shifting in directions that serve its interests or responds favorably (from its perspective) to violence, it will wait to negotiate.

Negotiations with terrorist groups occur most easily in situations where the group perceives itself to be losing ground in the conflict. This may occur for a number of reasons. There may be competition for support with other groups, as was the case with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the rise of competitors in the intifada. Or there may be infiltration by government agents, as was the case in the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) throughout the 1990s. Or the group may perceive an undercutting of popular support, as did the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers) in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Quite often the erosion of support is the result of the group's own miscalculations, leading to a backlash by its own actual (or intended) constituency. Public opinion may be passionately repulsed by targeting errors—as was the case with the Real IRA following the Omagh bombings, the Red Brigades following the killing of Aldo Moro, and the Egyptian Islamist group al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya following the killing of sixty-two Western tourists in

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Luxor. All of these things (and others) may result in an erosion of political support and a sense that the group is losing ground.

Another impetus for talks is increases in civilian casualties among the group's constituency that are directly caused by the group (not the government). It seems an obvious point, but if a group is killing large numbers of its own people (i.e., not just targeted killings of rival factions), it will lose political ground. Intelligent counterterrorism strategy aims to manipulate political conditions, particularly by ensuring that a focus on military means does not work at odds with the political realm. In determining whether negotiations are promising or unpromising, therefore, a thorough understanding of the *political* context is more important than either the tactical facts on the ground or the substance of the talks themselves.

***Groups sometimes enter talks to relieve pressure on themselves and to rearm.***

Related to this, governments should be mindful that the military situation may not be improved by negotiations, especially in the short term. Groups sometimes enter talks to relieve pressure on themselves and to rearm. The PIRA continued to rearm following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, buying guns in Florida and importing AN-94 rifles from Russia. The Basque Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) announced a cease-fire in 1998 following a public backlash to its murder of a popular young councillor and then renounced the cease-fire in 1999, claiming that it had wanted a reprieve from government pressure in order to rearm.

Because of the risky nature of negotiations for both sides, it is naive to expect groups to halt their usual preparations for violence. This is why entering into negotiations should be seen as another form of competitive interaction, to be decided upon according to its merits and on local conditions, approached as a process, and accompanied by low expectations for changes in behavior, especially in the short term. Keeping the population patient, its expectations realistic, is probably the most important and difficult task any negotiating government faces as talks unfold.

### ***Suicide Attacks***

The presence of suicide attacks is an unpromising factor for successful negotiations, because they reduce the ability and willingness of populations to live side-by-side. Those involved have much greater incentive to be separated from one another physically, as intermingling among different ethnic, sectarian, religious, or national groups carries with it the possibility that some of those among them may prove to be human bombs. And the attention given to such attacks enhances their psychological effect, heightening the intimidation of potential victims but also enlarging the sense of a "sacrifice investment" on the part of the group.

Suicide attacks force a sociological and cultural shift in societies that experience them, causing changes that are difficult to overcome. It is not a coincidence that the most intransigent and difficult negotiations of the late 1990s were in Israel-Palestine and Sri Lanka. In such circumstances, it is uniquely difficult to separate talks from the passions that surround them. The increasing prevalence of suicide campaigns internationally is thus a discouraging development.

### ***Strong Leadership***

Terrorism is a type of violence employed most often in situations where the population is not sufficiently activated for a cause. Targeting noncombatants is a means of mobilization and garnering support, in addition to intimidating a target and spreading fear. Talks are most promising when there are strong leaders on both sides, able to mobilize support for alternatives to violent behavior instead.

The role of a leader who advocates terrorism is distinctive. Political science professor Charles King has argued that a change of leadership can increase the likelihood of successful negotiations in civil wars, but it is not at all clear that this dynamic operates in the same

way with campaigns characterized primarily by terrorist attacks. Leaders who have negotiated, including such figures as Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness in Northern Ireland and Pedro Antonio Marin of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, have frequently been held personally responsible for the success or failure of the talks. And of course failure damages the political prospects of government policymakers as well; but generally the state is not damaged as much as is the group. Even when they falter, negotiations have a long-term impact upon a terrorist leader's credibility, complicating his efforts to perpetuate the "absolutist" perspective that is so necessary to justify this tactic.

From a government perspective, the importance of strong leadership is widely recognized, as well as the need for a strong bipartisan consensus in favor of a peace process. Negotiations by democratic states are virtually impossible without both. Likewise, a strong, charismatic terrorist leader who pursues talks and can at least pretend to distance himself from the violence can be equally crucial to successfully easing a campaign toward decline. Nudging such a leader toward compromise holds the potential of bringing his constituency with him. On the other hand, when groups will not compromise, it is vital to consider very carefully how their leaders are targeted by a state. Comparative historical case studies indicate, for example, that if the goal is to end campaigns, arresting leaders has more often been effective than assassinating them, as a way of undercutting a political movement over time.

Talks often become more difficult following a leadership change. If the group survives the transition, a change of leadership may result in a more diffuse organization that is more difficult to parley with, as its different parts chase different aims. Because it targets civilians, the size of a terrorist group is not necessarily correlated with its ability to kill, so fractionation might make the violence worse, especially in the short term.

### ***Splintering***

A common effect of engagement processes is the splintering of groups into factions that support the negotiations and those that do not. For example, the PIRA splintered into the Real Irish Republican Army, Continuity IRA, and the Irish National Liberation Army; and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command split with the PLO over the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Efforts to negotiate with ETA likewise resulted in a splintering of the group, with Basque radicals continuing urban violence and extortion activities, even as the political wing, Batasuna, seemed to be moving toward normalization.

From a counterterrorist perspective, dividing groups can be a purpose of the negotiations process, as it isolates and potentially strangles the most radical factions. Talks may also provide great intelligence on the positions of members of the movement, especially divisions among them that may be exploited. But such splintering can occur on the "status quo" (or, usually, progovernment) side as well, as happened in South Africa (with the Afrikaner white power group Farmer's Force, or "Boermag") and in Northern Ireland (with the Ulster Volunteer Force). Governments naturally confront huge difficulties negotiating with organizations against which they are still fighting.

Weak governments are likewise threatened by conciliatory approaches by terrorist groups. The most extreme case of counterproductive splintering of the status quo side was in Colombia, where the signing of the peace accords between the Colombian government and the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) in 1984 resulted in the formation of right-wing paramilitary groups that disagreed with the granting of political status to the EPL. Before long, leftist groups, paramilitary groups, and the Colombian Army stepped up their attacks,

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unravelling the peace, increasing the violence, and further fractionating the political actors. Worse, small splinter groups are often more violent than the parent organization, feeling it imperative to demonstrate their existence and signal their dissent. This is the classic situation where violence is their only identity and voice.

Yet splintering may be advantageous and strategic. Intelligent, targeted concessions made openly or clandestinely by a government can chip away at the challenger side. If a group is growing in its size or strength for other reasons, negotiations may be seen by the state as a way to disaggregate the threat. Talks can be a means of splitting off factions with whom one can work, whose demands can be appeased, and whose interests do not fully comport with the goals of the overall campaign being fought in their name—although, of course, the splinter group must be weighty enough to have a credible constituency. Again, knowledge of the movement and its constituent parts is crucial. In all of these cases, however, the long-term goal (a viable political outcome) and the short-term goal (the reduction in violence) may be at odds.

### ***Spoilers***

Related to the formation of splinter groups, terrorist attacks have often been used as “spoilers” to derail or destroy ongoing peace negotiations. One study by political scientists Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter examined fourteen peace agreements that were signed between parties to civil wars from 1988 to 1998. If terrorist attacks occurred in association with the talks, only one in four peace treaties was put into effect. If they did not occur, 60 percent took effect.<sup>6</sup> According to my research, terrorist campaigns themselves are even more difficult to resolve.

Clearly talks that are unmarred by spoiler attacks promise better outcomes. The process of cause and effect, however, is far from clear. Spoiler violence is as often directed at gaining power within a movement at a time of change or opportunity as it is at undermining the talks themselves.

In the presence of a foundation of popular support for the talks, strong outside guarantors, and identification of the negotiators with the process itself, terrorist “spoiler” attacks can actually strengthen the commitment to the negotiations rather than undermine it. The Northern Ireland peace process is a case in point. Terrorist incidents were frequently timed to coincide with developments in the talks. Having a peace process became not only a source of vulnerability but also a source of power: attacks were framed as targeting not only the victims but also the process. Through effective public relations efforts, all parties deflected popular passion to the splinter faction that was undermining the peace process. Their unified narrative made the negotiators in Northern Ireland more resilient, not less, as the talks became a productive channel for outrage.

When spoiler violence occurs, whether interested parties inside and outside the talks label it as illegitimate makes a difference. The broader political climate and international attitudes to the violence have practical effects. Governments can influence that climate by building a plan for strategic communications in advance of the virtually inevitable violence, and building a strong coalition with other governments that support the peace process. Third-party states undercut the potency of spoilers and deflect pressures on negotiating governments when they condemn all terrorist violence against civilians and support the talks. Indeed, when the public becomes outraged at the specific attackers themselves, spoilers may not spoil the talks at all.

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## **Sponsors**

The role of third-party states neighboring or having interests in a conflict is crucial, as are mediators, outside guarantors, and other external actors willing to push along or support negotiations. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process could not have begun without the Israeli government's realization that it could not circumvent the PLO by talking to Jordan, Syria, or non-PLO Palestinians within the occupied territories. But the failure of key Arab states such as Syria to demonstrate a commitment to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process also helped to undermine it, even as the United States unsuccessfully tried to facilitate the talks. The signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Republic of Ireland's subsequent efforts to influence and support Northern Ireland republicans provided an international framework and safety net and was arguably a key turning point in the early moves toward peace.

Early facilitators for talks have been especially important in negotiations with groups that use terrorism, both because these groups are typically clandestine, and because the domestic political cost to a government that reaches out to a terrorist group is potentially high. Using figures that are considered by both sides to have a degree of legitimacy is crucial, not least because they provide political cover. Early contacts may be made by religious leaders or other private citizens (as in the PIRA), or other nongovernmental organizations (as in South Africa and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, among other cases). Governments may also use third-party government intermediaries: for example, the Reagan administration used Swedish foreign minister Sten Andersson to pass messages to Yassir Arafat. States also regularly use intelligence officers. All of these interim measures help insulate weak governments from domestic political fallout. Early contacts may evolve from confidential interactions among private citizens to public dialogues involving organized lectures, panels, discussions, etc., and on to more formal "prenegotiations," such as seminars between influential people in closed, neutral environments and even secret meetings between low- or mid-level representatives aimed at hammering out agreements.

Good negotiated agreements in conflicts that are as complicated as terrorist campaigns often have an element of ambiguity that actors can interpret in ways that suit their constituents. Indeed, clarity in the negotiations is not necessarily a desirable goal, as it can actually undermine long-term prospects for peace if carefully orchestrated, precisely worded agreements spark additional conflict. Ensuring continued interaction of the parties, providing a potential avenue out of terrorism, and offering the elusive hope of a peace dividend may be the best that can be expected for a while.

## **Context**

A last crucial element in determining whether negotiations hold promise to end terrorist attacks is whether terrorist groups and governments are aware of the broader historical context within which they are operating and whether they each adapt to it effectively—not least because terrorist movements tend to come in waves. Of particular concern is the relationship between terrorist groups who share sources of inspiration globally.

Looking broadly at campaigns that have actually ended in a negotiated agreement, they have all involved groups whose cause was no longer in the ascendancy on the international stage. The most successful negotiations occurred with groups that were a part of the wave of decolonization that occurred in the mid- to late twentieth century and faced colonial powers that were on the defensive for other reasons, including the Greek Cypriot Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston, the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale, and the Kenyan Mau Mau, for example. This global influence can be seen in a very practical way in Northern Ireland, where the angry moral overtones of the Northern Irish peace process were replaced by a kind of pragmatism, especially on the part of the British. And although negotiations

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with the Basque ETA have so far been unsuccessful, the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland was an important factor driving ETA to talk.

A changing international context may be essential to successful negotiations. Popular ideas about the state and human aspirations do matter in the resolution of local conflicts that employ symbolic violence aimed at broader audiences, and those ideas in turn are influenced by the fate of local actors, especially in the context of increasingly globalized communications that project the narratives of terrorist campaigns far beyond their usual constituencies. Talks with groups whose global cause is perceived to be on the ascendancy in terms of broad-based political support are unpromising.

## Relevance to “al-Qaeda” and “the Taliban”

Lessons learned through this research are relevant to current and future debates over negotiating with specific terrorist groups. For example, some have floated the possibility of talks with al-Qaeda. Objectively addressing the matter begins with clarifying what we mean by “al-Qaeda”: in recent years it has become a misleading label referring to a hodgepodge of actors, groups, and individuals, tightly or loosely connected to the central leadership of Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri.

Zeroing in on the leadership enables us to reach clear conclusions. The central core of al-Qaeda is a small, highly dangerous collection of a couple hundred operatives clustered around the group’s senior leadership and probably holed up in the border region of Pakistan. There is no realistic chance of negotiating with them for three reasons: first, they have nonnegotiable terms; second, they are increasingly defined by their indiscriminate violence; and third, they are unresponsive to their broader constituency.

The research here demonstrates that negotiations with terrorists are best engaged when there are negotiable terms, a sense of political stalemate, and an absence of suicide attacks. None of this describes al-Qaeda’s core, which continues to carry out attacks and to train or inspire others to do so (in so-called martyrdom operations). Al-Qaeda’s core pursues a narrowly defined Salafist concept of a new caliphate that would mean overturning the international system as we now know it. There is no way to alter the cost-benefit analysis of fanatics. And the vast majority of those killed in al-Qaeda attacks are Muslim: the terrorist group is killing the very people it claims to represent, casting doubt on that audience’s reciprocal ability to affect its behavior (though they clearly affect its rhetoric). Popular antipathy is reflected in public opinion polls of majority Muslim countries: al-Qaeda continues to excite very dangerous young recruits, but its broader support has diminished.<sup>7</sup> Al-Qaeda’s core is unresponsive to its own professed constituency. It is violent, dangerous, irreconcilable, and bent on revenge—and must be destroyed.

But what about the broader al-Qaeda nebula of affiliates? They present a much more complicated dilemma. In the years since the 9/11 attacks, the al-Qaeda organization has evolved into a more horizontal decentralized movement, a development that represents both a strength and weakness. The broader the ties, the more dilute and opportunistic the global vision becomes (Bin Laden now even bemoans climate change!); but the bigger the network also the more differences there are with local groups. It is a broad tent supported by shallow poles. There is little commonality, for example, in the local aims of Kashmiri, Chechen, Uighur, Indonesian, Filipino, and Palestinian Muslims. The specific goals of groups within this constellation differ dramatically, and the core does not have the means to control far-flung associates in any case. Attempting to engage al-Qaeda’s core in order to reach its affiliates would be a waste of time, not to mention counterproductive.

Approaching the affiliates themselves is another matter. The question of whether to negotiate directly with associates of al-Qaeda is best approached on a case-by-case basis,

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taking into account specific local agendas. Answers for each of the affiliates should be the outcome of in-depth, tailored research, beyond the capacity of this report. There are no shortcuts: addressing the question takes time, patience, deep familiarity with local cultures and histories, and excellent intelligence. But our list of promising and unpromising conditions offers guiding principles after that spadework is done. The most promising include a political stalemate between the parties, strong leadership on all sides, third-party mediators or sponsors, the absence of suicide attacks, effective government handling of splinter groups and spoilers, and an auspicious international context. These conditions do not apply to al-Qaeda's nucleus, but they are relevant to groups that may be loosely or recently aligned with the international movement and primarily concerned with long-standing local grievances. Groups such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, al-Shabaab, and Jemaah Islamiya are highly dangerous and have proven ties to al-Qaeda; but they should be analyzed on the basis of their local roots, histories, constituencies, and differentiated agendas, rather than primarily on their relationship with al-Qaeda.

Many associates use the term "al-Qaeda" as a kind of evocative brand name, a way to increase their profile and gain strength. Local affiliates in Indonesia, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey, for example, have more in common with the classic ethnonationalist separatist groups of the twentieth century than they do with al-Qaeda's ambitious struggle. Successful negotiations with groups such as the Philippine Moro Islamic Liberation Front or the more moderate of the Kashmiri separatist factions, for example, have already yielded fruit and are entirely within the grasp of our allies. The key, again, is to determine exactly what local groups want, in their own terms and within local conditions, highlighting divergences with al-Qaeda's Salafist agenda and steadily working with governments to compromise when there are legitimate grievances. Such talks carry the added bonus of turning the logic of al-Qaeda's strategy on its head: in addition to stabilizing local conditions and reducing violence over time, negotiations will undermine a global Salafist movement that draws its venom from a rigid and undifferentiated concept of the enemy.

Looking at the question of negotiation through a local prism likewise relates to the Afghan Taliban, for instance. We must be scrupulous not to conflate all enemies inside Afghanistan under one banner: Just because they are all shooting at us does not make all "Taliban" the same. Many are just as alienated from the kind of global agenda that al-Qaeda represents as they are from the presence of Western troops. Taliban factions have different motivations, interests, structures, and aims. Above all, the United States and its allies need patiently gathered, detailed intelligence about each element of what we loosely call the Taliban. (Unfortunately, this is precisely the kind of detailed intelligence that we are lacking, or so lamented Major General Michael Flynn in December 2009).<sup>8</sup>

Excellent intelligence about the nature of a group's ends and means is a prerequisite to any formal negotiations. Some in the United States have argued that the solution in Afghanistan is a grand bargain with Mullah Omar in a coalition government from the top. But given the culture and recent history of that state, not to mention the lack of centralized command and control over many local groups, it would be more promising to begin by working with individual tribal leaders and villages. The lessons of "talking to terrorists" should drive us to determine exactly what local members value, how they make decisions, how their organizations are structured, and what the nature of their constituency is. To what audience is the violence aimed? Are they motivated by ideological concepts or something more prosaic—such as revenge, lack of employment, a dearth of alternatives, or even intimidation by other forces? After achieving some clarity here, we can assess whether local grievances are legitimate, concrete, and reconcilable.

The United States must keep its focus on the reason it became involved in Afghanistan to begin with: devastating al-Qaeda attacks on its homeland. Those who are closely aligned

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with the core of al-Qaeda and have incorporated into their goals and purposes an Islamist “jihad” against the United States and its allies, including against the current Afghani government, are irreconcilable. Here we would include the Haqqani network, which has pioneered the use of suicide attackers in Afghanistan and whose leadership is believed to be based in North Waziristan, as well as Mullah Omar, titular leader of the Taliban, whose ties to al-Qaeda have been strong (although his former Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence directorate trainer now claims that he could be ready to split with al-Qaeda). In the absence of clear evidence of such a break, perhaps through back channel “pretalks” brokered by the Pakistanis (who are making their own calculations in any case), these factions are irredeemable. Others in this complex cast of characters are primarily concerned with drug trafficking and criminal behavior aimed at their own personal enrichment, with no concern for the political future of Afghanistan or its people. There is no point in entering negotiations with them as there are no negotiable terms. Finally, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a jihadist supporter whose Hizb-i-Islami party already participates in the Afghan Parliament, has announced his willingness to separate himself from al-Qaeda and break with the other major Taliban factions to cut a deal with the Kabul government. With deep wariness the coalition should at least support back channel talks about talks with him, as long as Kabul is willing.

Numerous smaller factions of the Afghan Taliban are ripe for talks, and the United States and its allies should work from the bottom up. In some villages, elders have already been eliminated and replaced by Taliban; thus it can admittedly be difficult to know with whom to speak. And the mere presence of Western troops may be changing power structures in ways that are threatening to local actors. However, siphoning off the rank and file through offers of security and employment (such as in Helmand) holds potential. Many local tribes have been indicating that they are uninterested in ideology and have no ambitions beyond their members and their local areas within Afghanistan. Their motives may be mixed, including a hefty dose of corruption and deceit. But they are also surrounded by a tired public, anxious for respite from the violence, with a palpable fatigue that provides a promising political context for talks. In any case, there is no evidence that the Afghan people would support additional violence in order to reestablish a Talibanized Afghanistan; efforts by Mullah Omar to mobilize them in broad opposition to the United States and in support of a return to the extremism of the 1990s have failed. While many locals are deeply conservative, indications are that the global Islamist ideology has peaked and is on a downward trajectory. The coalition must distinguish between those who have global ambitions and those who merely want local stability, security, and a measure of prosperity in Afghanistan.

***While many locals are deeply conservative, indications are that the global Islamist ideology has peaked and is on a downward trajectory.***

## **Conclusion**

The lessons of negotiating with terrorists lead to the conclusion that talks with some global affiliates of al-Qaeda, as well as some elements of the Taliban, may hold promise. When focusing on Afghanistan specifically, however, the picture is mixed. On the negative side, the presence of suicide attacks in the country makes resolution of the conflict there especially problematic, and the weakness of the Afghan government portends difficulty in making any settlement stick. On the other hand, the involvement of third-party sponsors to the talks (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the United Nations) holds potential, though it is not enough in that complex environment to consider talks only with major factions led by Omar, Haqqani, and Hekmatyar. Just as important is engaging the large number of strong local leaders. Here we see a political context of widespread war fatigue among the country's population and a clear failure on the part of the Mullah Omar Taliban to mobilize grassroots popular support—all amid waning international enthusiasm among Muslims for the global Salafist ideology that has so exacerbated Afghanistan's misery. Experience indicates that

splintering of opposition forces represents an advantage to be exploited, though much will depend on what the parties do when the inevitable spoiler attacks occur. Making a plan in advance of talks will be important.

In addition to local talks, however, there must be a clear U.S. policy on the possibility of negotiating from the top down, taking the measure of the changing international context that has been crucial to the success of past negotiations with terrorist groups. The United Nations, though not fully trusted by either Afghan president Hamid Karzai or his opposition, has an established track record as a sponsor. Several of Afghanistan's neighbors, notably India and Russia, seem to favor a broader settlement. If history is any guide, the United States should take advantage of the opportunity to place any serious negotiations within the architecture of a broader regional solution.

Yet the issue overshadowing all the rest is the first on the list of promising or unpromising conditions for "talks with terrorists": whether the parties involved perceive a political stalemate whereby additional violence in Afghanistan is seen as contrary to their long-term interests. More than anything else, this is the key to success or failure, and it is not merely an Afghan quandary. As Western publics cool in their political support for the conflict and coalition troops prepare for withdrawal, the answer is regrettably unclear.



## Notes

1. Employing dozens of comparative historical case studies and statistical analyses of hundreds of groups, the project examined standard pathways toward the endings of campaigns, including decapitation (targeted killings or arrests), success (achieving the objective), failure (implosion, provoking a backlash, or becoming marginalized), state repression (foreign intervention or domestic crackdowns), and group reorientation of the violence into other forms (insurgency, crime, conventional war, and so on). The comprehensive results of the project are explained in Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). This report draws in part from chapter 2 ("Negotiations: Transition toward a Legitimate Political Process") of this book.
2. Following the completion of this project, the MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base was transferred to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, [www.start.umd.edu/](http://www.start.umd.edu/).
3. The smaller database built for the project is accessible at [www.howterrorismends.com](http://www.howterrorismends.com). There is detailed information there and in the appendix of *How Terrorism Ends* (pp. 207–222) about coding, what was included or excluded from the database and why, the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, and so forth.
4. I have discussed the relationship between global ideologies and terrorism in greater depth in Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism," *International Security* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2002/3).
5. This argument about strategies of terrorism is explored in much more depth in Audrey Kurth Cronin, *Ending Terrorism: Lessons for Defeating al-Qaeda*, Adelphi Paper #394, International Institute for Strategic Studies (London: Routledge, 2008).
6. Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walters, "Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence," *International Organization* 56, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 264.
7. See, for example, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "Declining Support for bin Laden and Suicide Bombing," Pew Global Attitudes Project, September 10, 2009, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1338/declining-muslim-support-for-bin-laden-suicide-bombing>. In this poll, opposition to suicide attacks was strongest in Pakistan (87 percent), closely followed by Turkey, Indonesia, Jordan, Israel, and Egypt.
8. Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul Batchelor, "Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan," Center for a New American Security, January 4, 2010, [www.cnas.org/node/3927](http://www.cnas.org/node/3927).

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- *Why Youth Join al-Qaeda* by Colonel John M. "Matt" Venhaus, U.S. Army, Special Report 236 (May 2010)
- *Hamas: Ideological Rigidity and Political Flexibility* by Paul Scham and Osama Abu-Irshaid, Special Report 224 (June 2009)
- *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (2009) by Michael Semple
- *Thwarting Afghanistan's Insurgency: A Pragmatic Approach toward Peace and Reconciliation* by Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, Special Report 212 (September 2008)
- *Democracy and Counterterrorism* (2007) by Robert J. Art and Louise Richardson, eds.
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