

Addressing Terrorism: Does Conflict Resolution Have a Role?

Should efforts be made to talk to terrorists? This important question has been largely overlooked by governments, militaries and members of the peace and conflict resolution communities.

The dominant working assumption today is that terrorists are irrational; indeed, that they no longer wish to come to the table to discuss their demands. Rather, they want to destroy the table itself. Increased security measures, enforcement, and hostile engagement to neutralize them follows.

The [Canadian International Institute of Applied Negotiation](#) (CIAN) is generating research and dialogue on the following questions:

The definition of terrorist

Insurgents, freedom fighters, rebels, terrorists. What is the internationally adopted working definition of terrorist? What has changed in the definition? What are the implications for current policy and practice? What corrections should be made?

What drives contemporary terrorists?

Are the motives of today's terrorists always negative? Are their actions rational in any sense? Does their cause ever have legitimacy?

Lessons from History

What does past experience with known terrorist groups offer today (e.g. IRA, FLQ, Binerr-Minhoff Group)?

How can terrorists be dealt with more effectively?

Are terrorists beyond engagement through dialogue? Can soft and hard power be combined effectively? Is there a role for conflict resolution practitioners?

In order to help address the above questions, this article summarizes some of the main research on the role of conflict resolution in addressing terrorism.¹

Main Findings

There is some research that has begun to help answer the question of whether conflict resolution can address terrorism and clearly from this brief review of the available literature it is evident that further study is warranted. Nevertheless, a few main messages emanate from the existing research, as follows:

- Negotiation, mediation, and dialogue with terrorists is often (incorrectly) viewed as a sign of weakness or compromise. Refusing to talk with terrorists and/or using military force is often viewed as the most powerful response.
- There is a risk that negotiation, mediation, and dialogue with terrorists might inadvertently justify their actions and/or provide false legitimacy.
- Terrorist organizations exist and operate both domestically and internationally – it is too narrow a view to not account for this fact.²
- There are often technical/practical problems related to negotiation with terrorists because their organizations can be structured in a manner that can make it hard to physically locate them, identify the leadership, and then transmit messages to them.
- Not having open channels of communication can increase isolation, mistrust, misunderstandings, and hatred thus increasing the possibility for the escalation of

¹ This summary was prepared by Dr. Evan Hoffman for CIAN on May 12th 2006 as part of a new CIAN research project on this topic.

² For example there was a call to define the Hells Angels as terrorists.

further violence by terrorists. Counterterrorist methods that only rely on violence can further increase terrorism because of the hatred that it could spark.

- Terrorism inflicts terror and fear – therefore responses to terrorism are often undertaken from the perspective of increasing security. The best security strategies are not based on pre-emptive and illegitimate violence.
- Mediation, dialogue, and healing activities with the victims of violence for the purpose of preventing them from becoming terrorists or perpetrating further violence is an area worthy of further research.
- Mediation and dialogues are one important tool (inside of a larger counterterrorism strategy) for dissuading people from resorting to terrorism or supporting it.

Key Articles

Some of the key articles that CIAN has located on this subject are summarized in the following section of this report.

ACCORD

In 2005 Conciliation Resources dedicated an edition of their Accord publication to the topic of armed groups and peace processes. In the introduction to this edition of Accord, Robert Ricigliano states that it is increasingly important to engage armed groups in peacebuilding (even if we do not agree with their perspectives) despite the risks and sensitivities required in doing so. While armed groups aren't the same as terrorists, there may be some overlap such that some armed groups are viewed, "as potential terrorist organizations and possible new cells in an ever more menacing international terrorist network".



Ricigliano then proceeds to outline reasons why it is important to engage armed groups, when this could be done, and then some of the different engagement options (ranging from simple information gathering to pre-mediation sessions to actively negotiating a behavior change to undertaking political negotiations). In summary, he states that there are certainly times when it makes more sense not to engage with armed groups, but for the times that it does make sense, a specific plan needs to be developed for each situation and each party. This plan should include who will be engaged, the purpose of the engagement and the issues to be addressed.

Source: <http://www.c-r.org/accord/engage/accord16/index.shtml>

MARTIN BRIGHT

The topic of talking to terrorists was also recently addressed by Martin Bright in an article in the New Statesman Magazine.

In his article Bright reports that the British Foreign Office is ready to risk international fury by opening a dialogue with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (one of the Middle East's most militant groups which is banned in many countries in the region and considered a terrorist organization by the United States).

Bright states, "the change of policy is a high-risk strategy in the war against terror, but the Foreign Office justifies it by arguing that western governments will be better able to influence the direction radical Islam takes if they develop a dialogue."

Source: www.newstatesman.com/brotherhood



DAVID A. CHARTERS

David A. Charters, in his article entitled Canadian Foreign Policy, Terrorism, and Non-Traditional Security Threats: Temporary Aberration or Permanent Condition?, explores whether terrorism and non-traditional security threats are genuine and serious for Canada, whether the threats represent a permanent change or temporary condition, and the security implications for Canadian foreign policy.

Charters concludes that, “Canada faces a future of considerable uncertainty in the foreign policy and national security arenas. It confronts a number of non-traditional asymmetric threats whose intensity, scope, scale, targets and timing cannot be known with any precision. The risk of terrorist attack in Canada or against Canadian interests or citizens overseas may be remote, but the possibility can’t be ignored. And the nature of these threats means that Canada cannot address them in isolation; threats to us are also threats to our neighbours and allies.”

Charters outlines a number of recommendations to increase Canadian security that centre around increasing our intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities, plus increasing and better-equipping both the military and the JTF2.

KOFI ANNAN

Kofi Annan has just released a landmark report to the General Assembly that outlines a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. His recommendations centre around five interlinked D’s that are the fundamental components of a global counterterrorism strategy. They are:

1. Dissuading people from resorting to terrorism or supporting it;
2. Denying terrorists the means to carry out an attack;
3. Deterring States from supporting terrorism;
4. Developing State capacity to defeat terrorism, and;



5. Defending human rights

The various mediations and dialogues conducted by the UNDP, the Peacebuilding Support Office, the Department of Political Affairs, the SG Special Reps and envoys, plus the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization are all credited as contributing towards the first D in the fight against global terrorism.

Annan elaborates on the linkage between counterterrorism and dialogue in the section on the first D when he states, “a civil society campaign will need to work to convince those with genuine grievances that there exist alternative, non-violent strategies, and that these have in most cases proved more effective. Recent history offers numerous examples of non-violent opposition movements leading to significant change. Such success stories deserve to be highlighted more.”

Furthermore, “terrorism depends on the denial of the humanity of its victims. Extremist and exclusionary ideologies that dismiss the worth and dignity of others, and portray them as subhuman and worthy of extinction, are essential tools of mobilization and recruitment. Such extremist ideologies fan a culture of violence and intolerance and increase support for terrorist groups among constituencies.”

To counter these extremist ideologies, “we need to take on the challenge to match their narrative of hate with the narrative of victims; the narrative of communities divided and broken by terrorist acts; the narrative of courage of those who risk their lives going about their daily business; the narrative of the values for which the United Nations stands...”

Dialogues can also help to educate and unify people from diverse backgrounds. Annan states that, “the United Nations can also help to arrange highly visible constructive dialogues between respected representatives from different religions to counter terrorist groups’ portrayal of parts of the globe as being engaged in an epic struggle between good and evil, and to reinforce the fact that the killing of civilians is antithetical to all religions. By the same token, we must be vigilant against the defamation of religions. I am encouraged by the initiative on the Alliance of Civilizations, and eagerly await its final report.”



Annan also states that using Conflict Resolution for ending regionalized disputes can help reduce the prevalence of terrorism. To this effect he states, “many terrorist groups have emerged in the context of local or regional violent conflicts, some of which serve as a rallying cry for terrorist leaders in faraway regions. Prolonged unresolved conflicts in particular often create conditions conducive to exploitation by terrorists and as such must not be allowed to fester, however intractable they might seem. In addition, suicide terrorism campaigns often occur in the context of foreign occupation or perceived foreign occupation. It follows that successful conflict resolution efforts and attention to issues arising in the context of foreign occupation or perceived occupation can help to reduce the prevalence of terrorism in the long term.”

JOSHUA N. WEISS

Joshua Weiss, in his paper [Why Has Negotiation Gotten a Bad Name?](#) (2003), states that the negotiation option for dealing with terrorists or rogue states is viewed as a weak option or a compromise and it isn't if the negotiation is done properly.

First, it is essential that negotiation isn't confused with agreeing - it is about opening communications, stating your interests, and learning the same from the other party. More communication, not less, is what is needed in crises for de-escalation, reducing rumors, and correcting misinformation. Negotiation is one way of communicating and in the absence of this type of communication, information is spread by other less appealing methods such as acquiring weapons.

Source:

http://www.beyondintractability.org/documents/editorials/Why_Has_Negotiation_Gotten.pdf?nid=5228



JOHN PAUL LEDERARCH

Lederarch presented a paper entitled *Quo Vadis? Reframing Terror from the Perspective of Conflict Resolution* at the University of California shortly after the 911 attacks. In this interesting paper he highlights the paradoxes that surround the war on terror and states that two camps of thinking exist as to the causes of terrorism and the most appropriate responses.

The first camp holds that terrorists are the result of geo-political differences that create chronic injustice and massive inequalities. The only response should be making systemic changes to reduce economic disparities while reconciling perceived injustices. Whereas, the second camp holds that terrorists are from a specific territory with a specific leadership and that their one and only goal is to disrupt and destroy our way of life. This perspective implies that the only appropriate response is to hunt out and destroy enemy leadership in their territory.

Because these two camps don't recognize the paradox that both situations are partially correct they tend to think in overly simplified and inaccurate either/or patterns. Lederarch feels that such simplistic thinking is ultimately counter-productive to the task of ending terrorism and that the best choice is a well-informed specific combination of complimentary techniques.

