

Negotiating with Terrorists – an Option Not to Be Forgone

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It is very tempting, in the wake of the many shocking terrorist attacks of recent times – such as those in Istanbul on 20 November 2003, in Madrid on 11 March 2004 and ongoing in Iraq – to follow through one's tough rhetoric and to shun negotiations, as most Western politicians, and above all the US President, have done. In this way they are following a line which has been dominant since »September 11« at the latest and has led the USA and its allies first into Afghanistan and then into Iraq. The results of the »War against Terror,« however, are only partly convincing: the allies have captured or killed a number of alleged ringleaders and their followers but unfortunately the network itself is clearly still functioning. Even worse, there is a strong suspicion that the chosen measures, above all the invasion and occupation of Iraq, as well as the omissions, above all the lack of pressure for a peaceful solution to the Palestinian conflict, have done little to put old terrorists out of action and, far from deterring new ones, in fact have encouraged them. If one includes the guerilla war in Iraq what we are facing is a clear net growth in terrorism.

Suicide Terrorism as a Strategy of Nationalist Movements

A more measured approach is not easy when we are confronted with the victims but it might help to avoid more victims in the future. The American political scientist Robert A. Pape has analysed the logic of suicide terrorism.¹ Terrorism serves strategic political aims. These aims are often shared by many people, even if the overwhelming majority repudiate terrorism as a means of their realization. Pape, who has examined all 188 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2001, has shown that almost all were part

1. Robert A. Pape, »The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism«, in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (August 2003), pp. 343–61.

of a coherent campaign for national self-determination directed towards militarily strong democracies acting in particular regions as occupiers or as an unpopular state power: Israel in Lebanon and Palestine, the USA and France in Lebanon, Sri Lanka in the Tamil regions, Turkey in the Kurd regions, Russia in Chechnya, and the USA in the Middle East.

The relevant political resistance movements have adopted various strategies in order to achieve their goals. Suicide terrorism is the extreme strategy of a minority which results from the fact that against their superior opponent other strategies such as non-violent protest, demonstrative terrorism (drawing a lot of attention, but killing few people) or classic terrorism (like the IRA, ETA, and the Red Army Faction) have little chance of success. They can feel justified in this belief: history shows that democracies are ready to give in to suicide terrorism (for example, the US withdrawal from Lebanon). Pape examines in more detail the course of two Israeli withdrawal movements in 1994 and 1995 in relation to which Israeli concessions after Hamas attacks had a positive effect and Hamas subsequently – at least for a longish period – halted its attacks. These cases show that terrorism can be politically controlled and that negotiated solutions are possible.

As soon as violence becomes a political instrument – for whatever reason – the following logic is inevitable. In order to enforce one's own interests against the will of the other side one raises the price – also in the form of innocent lives – which the other side will have to pay in order to realize its interests. Not only dictators such as Hitler or Stalin, but also democracies have resorted to such methods in conflicts and wars. Carpet bombing of German and Japanese cities (in the latter case including deployment of the atomic bomb) in the Second World War or the bombing of Vietnam took hundreds of thousands of innocent lives in order to put pressure on the enemy without at the same time, at least in the narrow sense, weakening his military combat strength. The fact that, nowadays, states have not only tactical nuclear weapons points to a fundamental readiness to put up with thousands of innocent victims in order to achieve strategic aims which will ultimately prove decisive. Even the more selective and more precise action of the armed forces of democracies today (for example, the USA in Iraq or Israel in Palestine) leads systematically to victims in the innocent civilian population.

Terrorists are not crackpots or simply »criminals,« even if their actions naturally constitute violations of every penal code. The official rhetoric acknowledges this by also talking about a war. This apparently coincides

with the self-perception of Islamic terrorists who likewise consider themselves to be at war with the West. The usual profile of criminals, who are often poor and badly educated, does not apply to them. More usually they are members of the elites of those nations or groups which have decided to enforce interests widely shared by their peers by terrorist means.²

From the War against Terror to Peace Negotiations

The demonization of the enemy and the announcement of correspondingly harsh measures may be tactically clever for the purpose of avoiding revealing one's weaknesses to the enemy and mobilizing public opinion which is important in democracies. However, in so doing democratic governments overestimate their own staying power. As the changes in American policy on Iraq (quicker Iraqization of the conflict) and the election results in Spain show, terrorist resistance does have an influence on the politics of Western democracies. Democracies are certainly ready to pay a high price when their fundamental interests are genuinely threatened. The terrorism of Al Qaeda raises the price that the West must pay if it is to maintain its military presence in the Middle East and its support for Israel's occupation of Palestine. But how important are these interests?

The oil resources of the Middle East are at present an indispensable source of our well-being in the sense that the suspension of supplies would give rise to enormous economic costs. It is highly probable, however, that Arab states under whatever kind of regime would wish to sell their oil. Even after the fall of the US-backed Shah Iran continued to sell its oil. Nevertheless, the position of the West is strengthened insofar as it reduces its dependence on Arab oil as much as possible. As regards Israel's occupation policy a solution like the plan negotiated in Geneva by moderate Israelis and Palestinians is acceptable to the West, and one which will find more acceptance even in Israel if the price of the Sharon strategy continues to rise.

On this basis the West ought to seek a negotiated solution to conflicts of interest. To that end it would do better to avoid taking steps which

2. See Alan B. Krueger und Jitka Malecková, »Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?«, in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2003), pp. 119–44.

provoke more terrorism and amplify its effects. Under the former we might mention martial tones which confirm foe images and retaliatory attacks which fail to reach the perpetrators; under the latter are included exaggerated reactions grounded in fear which increase the economic cost (for example, a fall in tourism to Spain or Turkey) and the diminution of civil rights, which is the real attack on our freedom and democracy. The resolute police and secret-service investigation and judicial prosecution of possible and actual perpetrators would not be hindered by this course of action.

Unfortunately, a number of obstacles stand in the way of negotiation. Not least thanks to the apparently successful action in Afghanistan the structure of the Al Qaeda terror network has been decentralized.³ One would now have to negotiate with a multitude of cells and franchises which pursue a variety of individual goals and would not feel bound to a peace agreement. This happened to some extent even in the case of such a tightly disciplined and centrally led organization as the IRA. It would also be helpful if there were political organizations which were themselves not actively engaged in terrorism, but which share the political aims of the terrorists which are to be the subject of negotiation (such as Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland or the Basque nationalists).

It would constitute an equally significant obstacle if the terrorists' demands were totally unrealistic: for example, the establishment of a world caliphate. The Red Army Faction in Germany also pursued an aim – the abolition of capitalism – which could never be the object of negotiations – in contrast to operational-tactical demands for the release of prisoners or for money. Fortunately, the nature of Al-Qaeda's goals is to a large extent political and concrete.⁴ In such a context the object of negotiations must be to reestablish some sort of reference to reality and to isolate the incorrigibly unrealistic factions. »When fighting al-Quaeda, the lessons of counterinsurgency may prove more useful than those of counterterrorism ...«.⁵

3. See Jason Burke, Think Again: Al Qaeda, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2536.

4. See Daniel Byman, »Review: Al-Quaeda as an Adversary: Do We Understand our Enemy?« in *World Politics* Vol. 56, (October 2003), pp. 139-163, in particular the chapter »What Does Al-Quaeda Want?«.

5. *ibid.*, p. 160.

One of the side effects of the occupation of Iraq which favors the assumption of negotiations is the fact that it pushes into the background such tendentious, illusory, and scarcely negotiable aims as a world caliphate and causes the conflict to approximate more closely the pattern – of the kind analysed by Pape – of a national liberation struggle which is more apt for a negotiated solution. Apart from that, the US government's pro-Israeli policy is increasingly fashioning a united terrorist front against what are perceived to be occupying regimes with weak legitimacy under international law. In the eyes of the Islamic-Arab world images from Palestine and Iraq are becoming ever more similar as superior high-tech armies confront resistance forces in which terrorists, nationalists and civilian bystanders cannot be distinguished. This partially applies also to Afghanistan in which individual warlords represent similar positions. Such a front would constitute a better negotiating partner than a dispersed network of independent malefactors or small terrorist groups with diffuse and unrealistic aims.