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TALKING TO TERRORISTS

How to end armed conflicts

JONATHAN POWELL

'Fascinating'
Sunday Times



VINTAGE

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About the Book

From jungle clearings to stately homes and anonymous airport hotels, *Talking to Terrorists* puts us in the room with those who seek to change the course of history. Here are the terrorists, secret agents and go-betweens who make up the invisible world of negotiations between terrorists and governments.

Across the world governments proclaim that they will never 'negotiate with evil'. And yet they always have done and always will. Why then do we ignore the lessons of this history of clandestine communication, often with devastating consequences?

Jonathan Powell has spent nearly two decades mediating between governments and terrorist organisations. Here he argues that no conflict – however bloody, ancient or difficult – is insoluble. With attention to the lessons of the past, patience and above all political leadership, they can be solved, even where previous attempts have failed.

Talking to terrorists will always be practically difficult and morally hazardous. But it is the right thing to do. Drawing on conflicts from Colombia and Sri Lanka to Palestine and South Africa, this optimistic, wide-ranging, authoritative book is about why we should and how best to go about it.

About the Author

Jonathan Powell has spent half a lifetime talking to people and organisations labelled as terrorists.

He runs Inter Mediate, a London-based charity for negotiation and mediation that focuses on the most difficult, complex and dangerous conflicts, where other organisations are unable to operate.

In 1997 he met Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness and became instrumental in negotiating peace in Northern Ireland. In 2008 he suggested publicly that western governments should open talks with the Taliban, Hamas and al-Qaeda. Today, he works on different armed conflicts around the world and is the UK Prime Minister's special envoy to Libya.

He is the author of two books, *Great Hatred*, *Little Room* and *The New Machiavelli*. He lives in London with his wife and two daughters.

ALSO BY JONATHAN POWELL

Great Hatred, Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland

*The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern
World*

To all the victims of terrorism, in the hope there will be fewer
of them in the future if we learn the lessons of the past

Talking to Terrorists

How to End Armed Conflicts

Jonathan Powell



THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

INTRODUCTION

Peace hath her victories
No less renown'd than war.

John Milton, Sonnet XVI, 'To the
Lord General Cromwell'

'ALL TERRORISTS, AT the invitation of the government, end up with drinks in the Dorchester,' said Hugh Gaitskell, the former leader of the Labour Party. What he meant was that governments of all political colours and in all countries repeatedly say they will never talk to terrorist groups and yet they nearly always do so eventually, and in the end usually treat their leaders as statesmen. The British government called Menachem Begin a terrorist and tried to kill him, they described Jomo Kenyatta as a terrorist and imprisoned him, and they labelled Archbishop Makarios a terrorist and exiled him to the Seychelles – and yet later welcomed all three to London as distinguished leaders of their countries.

From 1997 to 2007 I was the chief British negotiator on Northern Ireland. On the basis of that experience, when I left Downing Street in 2007 I proposed publicly that we should talk to the Taliban, to Hamas, and even to al-Qaeda. A Foreign Office spokesman said: 'It is inconceivable that Her Majesty's Government would ever seek to reach a mutually acceptable accommodation with a terrorist organisation like al-Qaeda.' Only a few years later, NATO countries are now talking to the Taliban, and the US and Israel have talked to Hamas, at least indirectly. And in her excellent 2011 Reith Lectures, Eliza Manningham-Buller, the former head of MI5, called on governments to talk to al-Qaeda.

I don't mind the hypocrisy of governments on the subject – that is part and parcel of politics – but I do mind the fact that they never seem to learn from past experiences, often with devastating consequences. Each time we meet a new terrorist group we start again from scratch, partly because governments change so regularly while the leaders of the terrorist groups tend to stay in place far longer. Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness have seen eight British prime ministers come and go while they have been in the leadership of the Republican movement. One of those involved in the disastrous 1998–2002 negotiations with the Colombian terrorist group FARC said 'One gets the impression sometimes that the guerrillas think that every four years a new group is going to arrive [in government], to try the same thing over again.'

As a result, when governments do engage with terrorists they almost always leave it far too late. General David Petraeus admits that in Iraq the US government delayed too long before talking to those 'with American blood on their hands'. In the case of the Taliban, despite a long mating ritual, a sustained peace process with the US has still not begun, even though NATO forces will leave Afghanistan in the course of 2014. The process of engaging with these groups and winning their trust takes a lot longer than people realise. They need time to adjust to the outside world and grasp what might be a realistic demand and what is not. When we do eventually engage, we forget the techniques and skills we learned last time. Terje Roed-Larsen, the Norwegian facilitator of the Israeli–Palestinian talks in Oslo, says 'what is truly shocking to me is that it seems as if every new set of negotiators . . . [is] trying to reinvent the wheel once again as they make exactly the same mistakes'. Even if individual governments do not stay in power long enough to learn these lessons, surely we can do so collectively.

By happenstance I have spent the last seventeen years of my life talking to terrorists of different sorts. I have not always been in favour of such dialogue. The first time I met a terrorist, I did so reluctantly. My father had been hit by an IRA bullet in an ambush in 1940, and my eldest brother was on an IRA death list for eight years while he worked for Margaret Thatcher. When I met Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness in 1997, I declined to shake their hands – a petty gesture I now regret, but interestingly one that recurs again and again in the stories in this book. Tony Blair was more sensible and shook hands normally as if he were meeting any other human being. Immediately after the meeting we went on a walkabout in a shopping centre in Protestant East Belfast. It started off calmly enough but after a few moments we were mobbed by a crowd of old ladies waving their fists and who then started throwing rubber gloves at Tony. He was puzzled and asked me what it was about, half wondering if it was a protest about washing-up. I had to explain they were suggesting he should have worn gloves if he was going to shake hands with murderers.

My experiences have, however, changed my mind and convinced me that talking is the right thing to do. A few days after the meeting I got a call from Martin McGuinness asking me to come and meet him in Derry, incognito. He asked me not to tell the ‘securocrats’ and to come alone. I flew to Aldegrove, took a taxi to Derry and stood on a street corner feeling mildly foolish. After ten minutes or so, two men with shaved heads approached me saying ‘Martin sent us’ and pushed me into the back of a taxi. They drove me round in circles for an hour until I was completely lost and then ejected me when we arrived in front of a neat modern house on a small estate. I knocked on the door and Martin McGuinness opened it on crutches, making a not very funny joke about kneecapping, the IRA’s favoured method of punishment. I spent three hours with him in front of an open fire with tea and sandwiches left by the considerate owner

of the house. We didn't make any breakthroughs, but it set a pattern and I spent a good part of the next ten years flying across the Irish Sea to meet Adams and McGuinness in safe houses in West Belfast, Derry and Dublin, going on to their turf rather than demanding they come to grand government buildings. These encounters weren't really dangerous. In fact the only time I was under any threat was once on the Falls Road, hanging around on the street waiting for a Sinn Féin office to open. Republican leaders worried we might become targets for dissident Republicans and made sure it didn't happen again. But it was the shared risks that helped establish a relationship of trust where progress could be made. Something that holds true of most of the stories in this book.

The Northern Ireland negotiations were the most frustrating and most difficult challenge I faced in my life, but also, at least in retrospect, my most important and most satisfying achievement. Since leaving government I have continued working to try to end conflicts between governments and armed groups, first with the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, also known as the Henry Dunant Centre (HDC), and later founding Inter Mediate, a London-based NGO which aims to open up contacts between governments and armed groups where they do not exist and, where possible, to turn those contacts and channels into negotiations.

My experience in Northern Ireland convinced me that no conflict – however bloody, ancient or difficult – is insoluble. With attention, patience and above all political leadership, they can be solved, even if previous attempts at making peace have failed repeatedly. In her Reith Lectures, Eliza Manningham-Buller said some of the lessons we learned from Northern Ireland 'are relevant to thinking about the very different threat from al-Qaeda. One is the belief that the divisions in Northern Ireland society, manifested in terrorism, could not be solved militarily. Nor could

intelligence and police work, however successful in preventing attacks and informing government, resolve those divisions, although that work could buy time for a political process. Intelligence was critical in helping ministers manage that process, the aim of which was to reach long-term political resolutions with those who had prosecuted the terrorist campaign. These lessons apply elsewhere as well.' I am not suggesting that there is a Northern Ireland 'model' that can be deployed elsewhere unaltered – that would be ludicrous: each conflict has different causes and will have different solutions – but it would equally be nonsense to suggest that none of the lessons we learned in the negotiations in Northern Ireland, from our successes and our failures, could be applied elsewhere. If people are going to make mistakes negotiating with terrorists, they should at least make their own, new, mistakes rather than repeating those already made by others.

I was curious to know which of the lessons we learned in Northern Ireland had also applied in peacemaking efforts elsewhere in the world. I am a practitioner, not a theorist or academic, and while there are plenty of books on the theory of negotiation and even more on the theory of dealing with terrorists, there are precious few on the practice of negotiating with terrorists. This book is designed to fill that gap.

For obvious reasons I cannot write about live negotiations in which I am involved – if I did, no one would ever talk to me again. Instead, this book is based on the experiences of government figures, leaders of armed groups and intermediaries who have been involved in talks to end armed conflicts around the world over the last two decades or so. It tries to establish why some succeeded (including in El Salvador, South Africa, the Oslo talks on the Middle East, Mozambique, and Aceh in Indonesia), and why some have failed (including in Sri Lanka, Colombia and Angola), as well as looking at those that are somewhere in between (such as

ETA in Spain and the Maoists in Nepal). All these experiences show that there is a remarkable pattern to what works and what does not.

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon, even if we treat it as such. Most histories of terrorism try to take the story back to the 'Sicarii' in first-century Judea, who used their small daggers or *sicae* to attack Romans, and 'the Assassins' in medieval Persia who murdered religious rivals in the certain knowledge they themselves would be killed. While it is true that political and religious violence is as old as man, it is stretching the meaning of the expression to suggest it goes back that far. The term 'Terror' in this context was first coined in the French Revolution, where it was used to describe the government's campaign to protect the revolution and had a thoroughly positive connotation for those using it (although Edmund Burke at the time attacked the Jacobins as 'Hell hounds called Terrorists'). Probably the first use of the term 'terrorist' was to describe the men who attacked Napoleon's coach on Christmas Eve 1800 in the 'Infernal Machine' plot (named after an earlier bomb attack in Flanders during the sixteenth-century revolt against the Spanish).

The first armed group that we might consider terrorists in our terms were the Fenians in the nineteenth century, who grew out of an ancient tradition of insurrection in Ireland. Their most ambitious attempted attack was in Chester in February 1867, where they planned to seize 30,000 rifles which were to be shipped to Holyhead by train and then on to Ireland. The attack was to be mounted by Irish American veterans of the Civil War, together with several hundred Irishmen from Liverpool. The plot was easily frustrated by the police who had penetrated the movement. The American veterans fled to a heroes' welcome in the US, while those captured in Britain were imprisoned. *The Times* thundered that "'Terrorism" must be repelled by harsh terms.' Friedrich Engels, whose wife was a Fenian, wrote

perceptively that 'The only thing the Fenians lacked were martyrs. They have been provided with these.' By locking them up, treating them as political prisoners and hanging their leaders, the government gave them a cause.

There is something familiar about the Fenians' approach. Their objective was to spread fear and panic in order to sap the morale of the 'imperial enemy'. Because there was insufficient support for an uprising in Ireland itself, they had to resort to terrorism on the mainland led by an 'enlightened vanguard'. They brought in their weapons and bombs from the US and set up assassination units to kill agents and informants. Their targets were familiar too, including government buildings in Parliament Street, the gasworks in Glasgow and, in 1883, the District Line in the first London Underground bombing at the same station targeted by one of the 7/7 bombs nearly 125 years later. Like later terrorists their methods were driven in part by developing technology. In December 1867 they used gunpowder in a thirty-six-gallon beer cask to try to blow down the walls of Clerkenwell prison to release their comrades; but they had to relight the fuse three times and then take the bomb home on a trolley when it didn't explode. They came back the next day, and when it did finally go off, the direction of the blast went the wrong way and destroyed a series of tenements, killing civilians including a small child.

The arrival of nitroglycerine – dynamite – gave the Fenians a great boost, just as the arrival of Semtex did to their successors, the Provisional IRA, a century later. It was small, safe and could do great damage. They set up bomb factories and one of their leaders, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, became known as 'O'Dynamite' because of his repeated use of the explosive to mount a mainland campaign in the 1880s. The Fenians, and their successors, used dynamite in part for its psychological impact so that the killings would not be interpreted as mere ordinary

murder. The Fenians disappeared when Parliament started discussing the Home Rule Bill for Ireland in 1886, and the issue at the heart of their campaign looked as if it would be resolved politically; but the movement was reborn as the Irish Republican Brotherhood a couple of decades later when those hopes were frustrated by political impasse in Westminster.

Another early group we would recognise as terrorists were the nineteenth-century anarchists and nihilists, who coined the expression 'propaganda of the deed' which has been the inspiration of all subsequent terrorists – to win attention for their cause by acts of wanton violence. Louise Richardson, a leading author on terrorism, says 'The whole point is for the psychological impact to be greater than the actual physical act.' The first suicide bombing was carried out in March 1881 by a Russian nihilist who assassinated the tsar. An officer who survived the attack said 'Through the snow, debris, and blood you could see fragments of clothing, epaulets, sabres and bloody chunks of human flesh.' The violence of the nihilists and anarchists provoked harsh government repression, but this crackdown was exactly what the terrorists wanted. The anarchist in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* says: 'Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat and his like take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public. Half our battle would be won then; the disintegration of the old morality would have set in.'

The parallels with modern terrorism are striking: the nihilists fantasised about getting their hands on weapons of mass destruction so they could kill and maim ever larger groups of people; they used suicide bombers; they engaged in robberies to fund their activities; their threat appeared to be global rather than confined to one country. They even dug a tunnel from a cheese shop under a street in St Petersburg and filled it with explosives with the aim of killing the tsar when he drove by, just as ETA dug a tunnel under a

road in Madrid and filled it with explosives to kill Franco's prime minister a century later.

Terrorist groups have always been keen to learn from each other. The Fenians studied the techniques of the nihilists, and the original IRA studied the Boers in South Africa. According to the historian Rory Miller, the Jewish terror groups Irgun and the Stern Gang in Palestine in the 1930s and 40s 'viewed the Irish precedent as an important historical model, not least because it provided evidence that it was possible to force the British to enter into negotiations with those responsible for violent insurrection'. Avraham Stern, the leader of the Stern Gang, adopted the name 'Yair', after the leader of the ancient Sicarii. Menachem Begin, the leader of the Irgun in the 1940s, studied both the IRA campaign of 1919-21 and the campaigns of the Russian anarchists. His memoir *The Revolt* was in turn found in an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. Louise Richardson quotes Osama Bin Laden as saying 'Happy is he who learns from others' mistakes.'

In modern times the expression 'terrorist' has been so overused as to lose virtually all its meaning. The Nazis described partisan groups in Europe during the Second World War as terrorists. Bernard Ingham, Mrs Thatcher's spokesman, described the ANC as terrorists in 1987, according to Thabo Mbeki. In 2000 Nelson Mandela said on *Larry King Live*, 'I was called a terrorist yesterday, but when I came out of jail, many people embraced me, including my enemies.' Addressing the UN General Assembly in 1974, Yasser Arafat said 'The difference between the revolutionary and the terrorist lies in the reason for which each fights. For whoever stands by a just cause and fights for the freedom and liberation of his land from the invaders, the settlers and the colonialists, cannot possibly be called terrorist.'

The question of who is a terrorist and who is a freedom fighter has bothered commentators for decades, but the world can't agree on a definition of terrorism. The UN

requires states to 'take the necessary steps to prevent the commission of terrorist acts' but there is no international consensus on what constitutes terrorism. Diplomats have been trying to draft a comprehensive Convention on Terrorism since 1996, without success. International jurisprudence has been no more successful in finding an agreed definition. Official definitions in Russia and China are very broad indeed and hard to distinguish from enemies of the state. President Assad's definition is certainly not the same as ours. The official British version has three parts: serious violence against a person or serious damage to property; designed to influence a government or an international organisation or to intimidate the public or a section of the public; with the aim of advancing a political, religious, racial or ideological cause. But it is not accepted by others and it is highly unlikely we will resolve the debate any time soon. Professor Lawrence Freedman rightly concludes that 'The question of how to define terrorism has become familiar to the point of tedium.'

Even if there were a commonly agreed definition, it still wouldn't make 'terrorist' a useful term to define a group. Terror is a tool used by governments to instil fear at home or support the enemies of their enemies abroad, and by insurgent and separatist groups to attract attention when they are ignored or see no peaceful political route to achieving their objectives, or to scare a government into giving in to the demands of a minority. Academics David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith say that 'For a strategic theorist the notion of terrorism does not exist as an independent phenomenon. It is an abstract noun. More precisely, it is merely a tactic – the creation of fear for political ends – that can be employed by any social actor, be it state or non-state, in any context, without any necessary moral value being involved.' Indeed the word 'terrorist' is usually deployed as a calculated pejorative term, a way of demonising the enemy. The main impact of labelling a group

as 'terrorist' is simply to make it harder to talk to them. The Maoists in Nepal, for example, were added to the US list of terrorist organisations in 2003, making it impossible for any American organisation to engage with them. (It didn't, however, prevent them ending up in government in 2008.)

Sometimes the discussion gets side-tracked into the distinction between insurgents or guerrillas and terrorists. Bruce Hoffman of Georgetown University believes terrorism is 'often confused or equated with, or treated as synonymous with, guerrilla warfare' but there are 'fundamental differences between the two. "Guerrilla" . . . is taken to refer to a numerically larger group of armed individuals, who operate as a military unit, attack enemy military forces, and seize and hold territory . . . Terrorists, however, do not function in the open as armed units, generally do not attempt to seize or hold territory, deliberately avoid engaging military forces in combat and rarely exercise any direct control or sovereignty either over territory or population.' On the other hand, David Kilcullen, an Australian soldier and terrorism expert who advised General Petraeus, concludes 'Terrorism is a component in virtually all insurgencies, and insurgent objectives (that is, a desire to change the status quo through subversion and violence) lie behind almost all terrorism.' ISIS in Syria and Iraq, for example, is clearly a terrorist organisation but is also operating informed units and taking and holding territory as if it were a guerilla force.

Nonetheless, while the academic debate continues, the word 'terrorist' is in common currency and there is no point in pussyfooting around it. In this book when I talk about 'terrorists' I use the word to mean non-state armed groups that enjoy significant political support and which deliberately use the tactic of terror by attacking civilian as well as military targets to advance their political aims. Writing about it like this does not mean I excuse in any way the use of terrorism by any group. The acts of mass murder

of innocent people that were carried out by many of the groups described here were horrific, and familiarity with them over time does not make them any more acceptable or justifiable than current attacks. As Rudy Giuliani, the ex-mayor of New York, puts it: 'Let those who say we must understand the reasons for terrorism explain those insane, maniacal reasons to the children who will grow up without fathers and mothers!'

The most familiar prism through which government officials look at the issue is counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency. Counter-insurgency is an old discipline. Colonel Sir Charles Callwell wrote the definitive book on the subject in 1896, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, drawing on nineteenth-century campaigns in India, Upper Burma, Afghanistan and South Africa. He says that unlike conventional warfare, these battles 'stand on a very different footing. They are necessarily internal not external campaigns. They involve struggles against guerrillas and banditti. The regular army has to cope not with determinate but with indeterminate forces. The crushing of a populace in arms and the stamping out of widespread disaffection by military methods, is a harassing form of warfare even in a civilised country with a settled social system; in remote regions peopled by half-civilised races or wholly savage tribes, such campaigns are most difficult to bring to a satisfactory conclusion, and are always most trying to the troops.' This is true today, except that in a good part of the world crushing armed groups in this way is no longer acceptable within our norms of democracy and human rights.

Governments, like terrorists, have tried to learn from past experience in adapting their counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency strategies. The campaign in Malaya in the 1950s was regarded as a breakthrough by the British military. They had armed and trained the Malayan Communist Party to fight the Japanese, but after the war the Communists turned

on the British. In 1948 a state of emergency was declared and at first the army struggled to cope with the threat, but under the leadership of Field Marshal Gerald Templer and General Harry Briggs, they realised the answer lay 'not in pouring more troops into the jungle but in the hearts and minds of the people'. They set about driving a wedge between insurgents and the broader population with the aim not of solving but of reducing violence. In this they were learning Chairman Mao's lesson, who wrote that 'The guerrilla fighter, like a fish out of water, gasps helplessly until he dies' if he is separated from the local population, the water they swim in. The British resettled rural inhabitants in new villages to keep them from infiltration by the guerrillas, and opted for intelligence-led rather than large-scale military operations against the guerrilla groups. The counter-insurgency strategy handbook Templer and Briggs wrote, *The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya*, is still drawn on by the British military.

The revision of the *US Army Marine Corps Manual on Counter-Insurgency*, or *COIN*, led by General Petraeus in 2006 followed this approach. It concludes that insurgencies cannot be defeated by military means alone and argues that, as in Malaya, the military needs to focus on removing the grievances that build support for the insurgents and splitting off individuals or groups through 'reconciliation' and 'rehabilitation'. Richardson writes that 'Successful counter-terrorism almost invariably requires a combination of coercive and conciliatory policies. It is imperative for success to ensure that these policies do not undermine one another by being used against the wrong audiences. Coercive policies should be restricted to the few actual perpetrators of the violence, while conciliatory policies ought to be focused on their potential recruits.'

While this is a useful advance, it is not enough. In my view there needs to be a third strand to *COIN* in addition to the security response and the 'hearts and minds' campaign, and

that is talking to the armed groups. The argument of this book is that each time we meet a new terrorist group we say they are different and that we are never going to talk to them. But if they have significant political support, we end up doing so – usually too late. As a result a large number of people die unnecessarily and we forget how we went about it last time.

I am categorically not saying that security measures are unnecessary in tackling terrorism. Unless the position of the armed group is rendered uncomfortable there is no reason for them to talk, especially if they still think they can win. Equally, security measures are not enough by themselves. If there is only military pressure and no political way out other than surrender, the armed group will resist to the death. If you accept that you cannot kill them all – and that in attempting to do so you will create martyrs and more recruits for the cause – then, at some stage, you will have to talk, and however long you continue fighting you always arrive back, sooner or later, at that same point.

While I believe in talking to terrorists, I am an unlikely peacenik. I grew up in a military family and was involved in the decisions on all of Tony Blair's wars. I do not think that wars are always wrong. Sometimes they are necessary to stop a dictator or prevent massive human-rights abuses or to expel an invader. But I also observe that in the modern world civil wars are the greatest threat to humanitarian security. If you want to fight starvation, or mass rape or the spread of disease, or to help suffering children, whether child soldiers or the victims of war, then the most important thing you can do is to help stop armed conflict, which is why I have decided to dedicate the rest of my life to that aim. My NGO, Inter Mediate, aims to spread the lessons that have been learned in resolving other conflicts so that governments and armed groups don't make the same mistakes over and over again.

This book tries to draw some common lessons from failures and successes in negotiations around the world to end conflicts with armed groups in the last couple of decades, and then looks back at earlier experiences to see if the same lessons applied then too. For the leader of a government or an armed group, it is all too easy to focus exclusively on the all-consuming minutiae of your own conflict and to insist that it is special, uniquely difficult and no one else can understand it. If you are going to succeed, however, it is important to lift your head and look around at the lessons from the past and from conflicts elsewhere. If this book contributes in even a small way to people learning from previous experiences in talking to terrorists, and as a result lives are saved, I will be immeasurably satisfied.

Talking to terrorists will always be practically difficult and morally hazardous, but I firmly believe it is the right thing to do. President Franklin Roosevelt justified Allied relations with Stalin during the Second World War by reference to his favourite Balkan proverb: 'It is permitted you in times of grave danger to walk with the Devil until you have crossed the bridge.' The same is true of talking to terrorists.

CHAPTER ONE

Why We Must Talk to Terrorists

Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.

John F. Kennedy

IN THE AFTERMATH of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush said 'No nation can negotiate with terrorists, for there is no way to make peace with those whose only goal is death.' His vice president, Dick Cheney, put it more pithily, saying 'We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it.' These few words capture the essence of the question. Is it moral to talk to terrorists? Is it effective to do so? And, in the end, is there any alternative?

Of course it is not just Bush and Cheney who have taken this uncompromising line. In 1901 Teddy Roosevelt called for a crusade to exterminate terrorism everywhere after President McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist. In 1985 President Reagan insisted 'America will never make concessions to terrorists. To do so would only invite more terrorism . . . Once we head down that path there would be no end to it, no end to the suffering of innocent people, no end to the bloody ransom all civilised nations must pay.' More recently President Obama's National Security Adviser, Susan Rice, said 'we don't negotiate with terrorists, that's the policy of the United States'. It is not just American presidents but French, Colombian, Sri Lankan, British, Spanish, Israeli, Turkish and pretty much all other world

leaders who have repeated, time after time, that they will never negotiate with terrorists.

At an emotional level the refusal to have any dealings with people who are prepared to engage in barbarous acts is understandable. It seems obvious that the only answer is to respond with force and to suppress the perpetrators of terrorism. No politician hoping for re-election would ever contemplate proposing anything else. Michael Burleigh, the author of a racy history of terrorism, says 'The milieu of terrorists is invariably morally squalid, when it is not merely criminal . . . If you imagine that Osama Bin Laden is going to evolve into Nelson Mandela, you need a psychiatrist rather than a historian.' This emotional response extends elsewhere. The play *Talking to Terrorists* by Robin Soans, which suggests that countering terrorism through force alone will only lead to more violence in the future, was opening in London when the 7/7 Tube bombings occurred. The *Telegraph* theatre reviewer, Dominic Cavendish, wrote the day after, 'when the threat of a terrorist strike seems only a remote possibility, it's easy to admire . . . these two hours of theatre', but 'the implacable, hate-filled face of terrorism has announced its arrival on these shores again - and I don't think it's asking for a conversation'.

Former soldier James Wither sums up the moral arguments against engagement: 'Talking to terrorists represents a betrayal of fundamental values and principles as it appears to legitimise illegal violence and promote discourse with individuals who have rejected the rules and norms of international society'. American lawyer and controversialist Alan Dershowitz takes an even more uncompromising approach: 'Never negotiate. By listening to terrorists you are fulfilling their aims, and encouraging them . . . The reason terrorism works . . . is precisely because its perpetrators believe that by murdering innocent civilians they will succeed in attracting the attention of the world to their perceived grievances . . . We must commit ourselves

never to try to understand or eliminate its alleged root causes, but rather to place it beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation. Our message must be this: even if you have legitimate grievances, if you resort to terrorism as a means toward eliminating them we will simply not listen to you, we will not try to understand you, and we will never change any of our policies toward you. Instead, we will hunt you down and destroy your capacity to engage in terror.'

Such views are often based on a gut reaction to the horrors of terrorism. The American academic Audrey Cronin says the debate on talking to terrorists 'produces plenty of heat but scarce light, having more to do with the emotional aftermath of an attack' than the practical questions of what to do to prevent further attacks. But it is too easy to dismiss such responses as purely emotional. The arguments against talking to terrorists deserve to be considered one by one.

The first argument put forward is that talking to terrorists is to give in to blackmail and simply encourages others to take up arms to achieve their aims. Democratic governments cannot allow terrorism to be seen to work. The leading academic in the field of conflict resolution, William Zartman, summarises this argument: 'negotiation actually encourages terrorism. President Richard Nixon's statement on hostage negotiations that "saving one life endangers hundreds" can be expanded by orders of magnitude in regard to negotiations with political terrorist organisations. It is irresponsible to let terrorists shoot their way through civilian casualties into policy decisions; rewarding their blackmail only encourages others to do the same.' Politicians go as far as to suggest that talking to terrorists is tantamount to appeasement. Speaking to the Israeli Knesset in 2008, George W. Bush said: 'Some seem to believe we should negotiate with terrorists and radicals', yet 'We have heard this foolish delusion before. As Nazi tanks crossed into Poland in 1939 . . . [We] have an obligation to call this what it is - the false comfort of appeasement.'

This represents a complete misunderstanding of appeasement. The issue in 1938 was not that Neville Chamberlain went to Munich to talk to Hitler – talking was a sensible attempt to avoid another apocalyptic world war – but in thinking that Hitler could be bought off with a large chunk of Czechoslovakia. The problem is not talking to terrorists, it is giving in to them. They are not the same thing. Talking would indeed be to reward blackmail if it consisted of conceding to all of the terrorists' demands, but no democratic government would survive if it were to do so. The British government talked to Irish Republicans but never gave in to their demand for a united Ireland at the barrel of a gun. Zartman concludes 'it is not the act of negotiating that encourages or discourages further terrorist blackmail; it is the terms of the negotiated agreement. If the terrorists win their goals in the negotiation process and give the state little or nothing beyond the end of conflict in exchange, others will indeed be encouraged to follow the same course.' Nick Burns, a former senior American diplomat, adds 'Talking to our adversaries is no one's idea of fun, and it is not a sure prescription for success in every crisis. But it is crude, simplistic and wrong to charge that negotiations reflect weakness or appeasement. More often than not, they are evidence of a strong and self-confident country.'

The next argument is that terrorists are psychopaths and talking to them is pointless as well as wrong. There are indeed psychopaths in the ranks of terrorist groups, but Louise Richardson says 'terrorists, by and large, are not insane at all. Their primary shared characteristic is their normalcy, in so far as we understand them. Psychological studies of terrorism are virtually unanimous on this point.' Marc Sageman, a psychiatrist, found little evidence of personal pathologies in the backgrounds of the 172 mujahedin he studied, and Martha Crenshaw of Stanford University states bluntly that 'the idea of terrorism as the product of mental disorder or psychopathy has been

discredited'. Richardson sums it up: 'terrorists are neither crazy nor amoral but rather are rationally seeking to achieve a set of objectives'. Terrorist groups have their own rationality, just one that we don't always understand immediately. It takes time and effort to talk to them to try and understand what has driven them to take up arms and what they really want to achieve. It is impossible to untangle their rationale without talking to them.

Thirdly there is the argument that talking to terrorists is immoral and that by engaging with them we reward their behaviour. As they are both unrepresentative and illegitimate they should not succeed by breaking the rules of society. Zartman and his French colleague Guy Faure put forward the argument that 'On the moral level, the terrorists' choice of means - violence against civilians - makes engagement and negotiation unethical. The very act of dealing with terrorists, particularly given the status and equality that engagement and negotiation imply, tarnishes the state, since the state is supposed to represent the highest values of legality and legitimacy.' Yet we are ready to talk to governments that use violence, even horrific violence, against their own people, so it is perverse to suggest we should refuse to talk to non-state armed groups that do the same. Furthermore we would never in our daily lives, at least not amongst grown-ups, use talking to someone as a reward and refusing to talk to them as a punishment. As the Saudi foreign minister Saud Bin Faisal pointedly asked when making the case for engaging with Hamas, 'If we don't talk to them, how do we convince them they should change their attitudes towards peace?' In the play *Talking to Terrorists* the 'ex-Secretary of State' character based on Mo Mowlam says 'talking to terrorists is the only way to beat them . . . If you want to change their minds, you have to talk to them.' From a more theoretical point of view, Robert Mnookin, the head of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard, argues in his book *Bargaining with*

the Devil that our ingrained biases often lead us to reject negotiation prematurely, and we should therefore establish a rebuttable presumption in favour of negotiating even with those who are evil.

The absolute moral arguments against talking to terrorists don't really stand up, and they certainly fall away in the face of the practical, if distasteful, need to talk to terrorists if we are to stop them killing. Even the toughest of American generals in the 'war on terror' accepts that we cannot kill all the terrorists, and that for each one we kill we probably create two more, so in the end we will have to talk to them and it is a question of when and how, not whether. General Petraeus recalls that central to the strategy in Iraq was that 'we would not be able to kill or capture our way out of the industrial-strength insurgency that was tearing apart the very fabric of Iraqi society'. A 'key element' of the strategy was an 'explicit decision to aggressively support reconciliation with Sunni insurgents who were willing to become part of the solution in Iraq rather than remain a continuing part of the problem – and, later, to do the same with Shia militia fighters'.

An unlikely ally for the moral case for talking to terrorists is Ami Ayalon, the former head of the Israeli internal security agency Shin Bet, who says 'anything you can do to shorten war is ethical'. The Israeli ex-foreign minister Abba Eban went further. He believed that negotiation is not an arbitrary option, but an unconditional duty: 'The issue is how to quench the fires, not to hold interminable debate about who kindled them . . . Negotiating with terrorists is not a question of forgiving or forgetting the past, but holding a pragmatic position about the future. It is an ethical perspective that is based on humanistic precepts that place the saving of lives and the cessation of bloodshed as the highest priority.'

This is not to say that it is morally comfortable talking to people who have committed unspeakable acts of murder.

Governments walk a thin moral line when they engage with terrorist groups. When we in the British government engaged with Irish Republicans we were very conscious of this narrow ground. On the one hand we did not want to tip the IRA into another Canary Wharf bomb by mistake, as John Major had done; but nor did we want to find ourselves negotiating under the threat of violence and allowing ourselves to be influenced by that threat, which would have been both immoral and extremely bad practice. Governments need to be conscious of the moral peril they run in talking to terrorists, while recognising that doing so is often the only way to spare lives. Antonia Potter, a humanitarian expert, says that mediators 'must be willing to live with what might kindly be described as moral ambiguity. They must be prepared to talk to and even befriend those whose hands may be stained with blood.' Martti Ahtisaari, the former Finnish president and a successful mediator, said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 'I have made my career by talking to people that have at some point been branded as terrorists. For me, this is the only way to have a successful peace mediation process. Reaching a solution that ends a conflict means talking to all those who are parties to the conflict.'

Although many academics and diplomats concede that despite the moral hazards it can sometimes be acceptable to talk to terrorists, there is an increasing genre of academic and political writing which argues that doing so can be counterproductive or wrong in practical rather than moral terms. One of its proponents, Mitchell Reiss, a former Northern Ireland envoy for President George W. Bush, discovered to his cost how controversial even such a moderated approach can be. His book *Negotiating with Evil: When to Talk to Terrorists* was dragged into the presidential campaign in 2012. Reiss was a foreign-policy adviser to Mitt Romney and had argued in his book that although it was often a mistake to talk to terrorists, in the case of the

Taliban it might be worth considering. During the TV debates between the Republican candidates, one of Romney's rivals raised the issue and demanded to know if he agreed. Romney immediately distanced himself from both the argument and his adviser, and said no negotiations should take place with the Taliban while they were fighting American soldiers. Alan Dershowitz, who belongs to this school, believes that talking to terrorists is nearly always a bad idea, and should only be considered when the terrorists are on the verge of giving up, at which point the government might as well finish them off militarily rather than talking to them. He claims the West has built up terrorism, especially Palestinian terrorism, by pandering to it instead of defeating it. This is a variant of the 'one last heave' argument that was common during British decolonisation and is heard sometimes about Northern Ireland, in retrospect at least, running as follows: the terrorist group is deeply penetrated and on its last legs as a result of security force successes; if the politicians would just stand back and let the military, police and intelligence finish the job without their hands being tied behind their backs by political considerations like respect for human rights, the terrorist group would be finished off without any need to negotiate with them. The politicians who try to talk to the terrorists are, in the idiom of the COMINTERN, 'useful idiots' who, although well meaning, play into the hands of terrorists and rescue them from defeat.

The former conservative Spanish prime minister, José María Aznar, takes this line: 'My personal approach is that any policy is appeasement if it means negotiating'; the government should enter negotiations 'only if a terrorist group is in failure'. In 1996 he said that 'the policy of a frontal battle against terrorism that we are leading gives good results, and that there is no other way. My responsibility is to hit at ETA as hard as possible, and that is what I'll do . . . There is no negotiation possible between the