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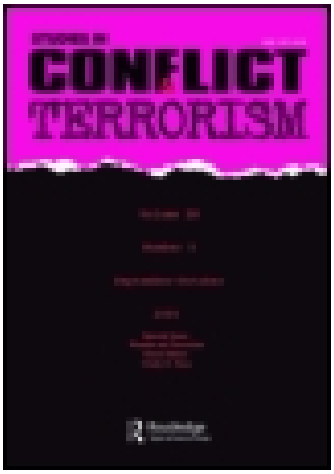

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Selective Engagement with Islamist Terrorists: Exploring the Prospects

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Despite claims to the contrary, governments have frequently talked to groups branded as terrorists in their efforts to find peaceful solutions to longstanding armed conflicts. The rhetoric of the so-called War on Terror has tended to portray an uncompromising and extreme, monolithic Islamist enemy with whom such accommodation is unthinkable. Therefore, it is not surprising that the potential for dialogue and negotiation with Islamist terrorist groups has been relatively neglected. This article examines the character of the contemporary Islamist threat and explores the prospects for selective engagement with terrorist groups that may not share Al Qaeda's global jihadist agenda.

In April 2006, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Yayyip Erdogan, declared that the Turkish government would not sit at the negotiating table with representatives of the resurgent Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), whom he described as "murderers" and "traitors."[1] In 2002, President G. W. Bush had expressed similar sentiments in a speech in support of America's Global War on Terrorism (GWOT): "No nation can negotiate with terrorists. For there is no way to make peace with those whose only goal is death."[2] Both leaders' comments illustrate the long established international norm that democratic governments do not talk to terrorists.

In reality, like many supposed taboos, the proscription on talking to terrorists is notable for the number of exceptions to the general rule. Democratic governments have often opened a dialogue with violent extremists, even after they have condemned them officially in the strongest terms. French President Charles De Gaulle conducted secret talks with National Liberation Front (FLN) terrorists in Algeria, the Spanish government has negotiated with Basque Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) separatists and British officials spoke with the leadership of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland long before the group eschewed violence. Even in the case of the United States, officials have been talking to "terrorists" in Iraq since 2005,[3] an approach endorsed by the authors of *The Iraq Study Group Report* who recommended dialogue with militia and insurgency leaders as an essential prerequisite to end the violence.[4] Government officials, intelligence agents and members of the security forces commonly open channels of communication with terrorist groups even whilst actively seeking to eradicate them. Sometimes dialogue has created

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the conditions for formal negotiations that, as in South Africa and Northern Ireland, have brought about the peaceful resolution of long-standing internal armed conflicts.

Terrorism analyst Brian Michael Jenkins has described a political decision never to negotiate with terrorists as "an ideological trap."[5] Much of the rhetoric of the War on Terror has reflected this "trap" by portraying an uncompromising and extreme, monolithic Islamist[6] enemy with whom accommodation is unthinkable. Because principle rather than *realpolitik* has tended to drive counterterrorism policy, particularly in the United States, the potential for engagement in the form of dialogue and negotiation has remained relatively neglected.

The purpose of this article is to examine the character of the enemy in the War on Terror and assess the potential for selective engagement with Islamist terrorist groups as part of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. The article is divided into five sections. The first two set the context by examining the evolution of the War on Terror and the theoretical and practical considerations involved in talking to terrorists. The third section addresses the character of the terrorist enemy and the need to differentiate between the plethora of avowedly Islamist groups. The final sections assess the potential for productive dialogue with specific Islamist terrorist groups and the barriers standing in the way of such engagement.

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The Evolution of the War on Terror

The GWOT, as launched after the "9/11" attacks, depicted the struggle against terrorism in broad and uncompromising terms. The first U.S. *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* in February 2003 was directed at all terrorists of global reach and implicitly included national and regional terrorist groups that posed no direct strategic danger to America or its vital interests.[7] Although the strategy paper acknowledged that a successful fight against terrorist networks would require every instrument of national power, the emphasis in the document was on active law enforcement and military operations intended to locate, disrupt, and destroy terrorist groups across the globe. The use of military force was the most obvious international manifestation of America's determination to root out terrorism, with the campaigns in Afghanistan in 2001 and, less plausibly, against Iraq in 2003 being portrayed as preventive operations in a war on terror. The phrase "War on Terror" itself arguably influenced a tendency to frame the problem in military terms, although there was far from universal acceptance of the notion that America was at war against terrorism and the failure of GWOT to discriminate between militant organizations that differed markedly in origins, methods, and objectives attracted widespread criticism from strategic analysts.[8]

As late as summer 2006, White House officials still described the terrorist threat in extravagant terms. Typically, a spokeswoman briefing reporters at the time of the war in Lebanon declared that ". . . all of this violence and all of the threats are part of one single ideological struggle, a struggle between the forces of freedom and moderation, and the forces of tyranny and extremism."[9] Despite U.S. government rhetoric, by the fifth anniversary of the "9/11" attacks, a growing number of commentators on both sides of the Atlantic were calling for a more nuanced approach to terrorism and questioning the leading role played by the Department of Defense (DOD).[10] Less idealistic, more pragmatic thinking on terrorism was also evident in U.S. government strategy papers. The *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* of February 2006 had already acknowledged that there was "no monolithic enemy network"[11] and focused more directly on the threat from Islamist terrorism. The paper also identified "extremist ideology" as the terrorists' strategic center of gravity. Similar emphasis on the ideological struggle against Islamist terrorism

was also evident in the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* released in September 2006, which acknowledged that winning the War on Terror meant winning the "battle of ideas."[12]

Although efforts to combat ideological support for Islamist terrorism have moved to center stage of the War on Terror, most published measures for what is commonly referred to as Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism (CIST) have tended to be high-minded, but unfocused and weak on specifics.[13] Typically, there is talk of fostering common interests and values and of isolating and marginalizing extremists by empowering mainstream Islamic voices and demonstrating respect for Muslim cultures.[14] Belief in the universality of American values and ideals is central to the U.S. approach to CIST. The *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) of 2006, for example, asserted that ". . . the appeal of freedom is the best long term counter to the ideology of the extremists."[15] In principle, America should have no trouble winning the battle for hearts and minds in the War on Terror. As an editorial in *The Economist* commented ". . . (a) brand that stands for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is an easier sell than a brand that stands for beheading unbelievers and reviving the Middle Ages."[16] However, the gap between the rhetoric of democratic freedoms and the reality of America's continued support for oppressive governments in the Middle East has damaged U.S. credibility, while well-publicized attempts by the authorities to circumvent international law in pursuit of the War on Terror have further undermined perceptions of U.S. integrity. Successive opinion polls offer clear statistical evidence of the enormous challenges that the United States faces with respect to its public image in Moslem states, where anti-Americanism is driven by an aversion to U.S. foreign policies, including the War on Terror and support for Israel.[17]

Not surprisingly, it is hard to be optimistic about the prognosis for CIST. Efforts to counter terrorist ideology are also hindered by the relative neglect of public diplomacy since the end of the Cold War. As a result, critics have claimed that analysis has suffered from an ethnocentric approach that fails to provide insights into regional thinking, culture, and politics.[18] This is particularly unfortunate as, unlike the ideological struggle of the Cold War, the West's message is no longer aimed at people from an essentially similar cultural and religious background and there is widespread suspicion of Western motives in many Moslem countries. Karen Hughes, appointed by President Bush in 2005 to lead the ideological struggle against Islamist extremism, acknowledged failure and resigned from her post as Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy in late 2007.[19]

Measures to counter terrorist ideology have to compete with the kind of rapid radicalization process that has turned young, middle-class British Muslims into prospective mass murderers. First and foremost, CIST measures need to discredit the religious ideology that underpins Islamist terrorism, but Western efforts to promote so- called Islamic moderates run the risk of being perceived as an illegitimate interference in a debate best left to Muslim scholars. A report by the *Combating Terrorism Center* in November 2006 cautioned Western governments against mounting a direct intellectual challenge to Islamist ideology, concluding that "Western Governments have neither the local credibility nor cultural expertise necessary to diminish the popularity of Salafism."[20] CIST efforts may be better directed at longer-term projects to encourage political, economic, and educational reform in Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) countries. Although these initiatives might undermine the appeal of extremism over time, they are unlikely to have more than minimal impact on the immediate threat.

Notable successes have been achieved since "9/11" in killing and capturing terrorist leaders, curtailing terrorist financing and preventing attacks on the U.S. homeland. Nevertheless, the overall perception is that current efforts to combat Islamist terrorism

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are floundering and new approaches are needed. This was certainly the opinion of the bi-partisan group of foreign policy experts surveyed by the journal *Foreign Policy* in its *Terrorism Index* of September 2007, 84% of whom concluded that the United States was not winning the War on Terror.[21] This perception of failure alone makes the case for a serious examination of the hitherto neglected potential for selective engagement with the terrorists.

Selective engagement could support recent strategic thinking that has sought to bring greater sophistication to the War on Terror. Australian analyst David Kilcullen, for example, has advocated a strategy of "disaggregation," one that seeks to break, rather than cement, links between local conflicts involving Moslem groups and Al Qaeda's global *jihadist* campaign.[22] Engagement would also be integral to a new strategy of "containment" as advanced by political scientist Ian Shapiro. Echoing George Kennan's advice early in the Cold War regarding the threat from communism, he argues that Islamism too should not be treated as a monolithic movement. Like Kilcullen, Shapiro sees opportunities to exploit the natural tensions between national and transnational Islamist militant groups through diplomatic engagement and incentives.[23] Terrorism analyst Sebastian Gorka has suggested a doctrine of "marginalization," which he describes plainly as making the enemy look bad instead of attempting to make our own side look good.[24] Opportunities may exist for dialogue with Islamist groups repelled by the violent excesses of some *jihadists*, as illustrated by the engagement with disillusioned, former allies of Al Qaeda in Iraq that has helped to marginalize the extremists in Al Anbar province.

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Talking to Terrorists: Theory and Practice

The media tends to portray all talks with terrorists as negotiations, which contributes to governments' reluctance to be open about such activities. However, a distinction should be made between the terms "dialogue" and "negotiations." Negotiation tends to be a formal process intended to create options to bring about the resolution of a conflict and involves concessions and compromises by both governments and extremists. On the other hand, dialogue is normally informal, often covert, with no fixed agenda or commitments. Dialogue with terrorists almost always precedes negotiations; an exchange of views and information can take place for many years before the start of a recognized peace process. In the case of Northern Ireland, the British government established backchannel contacts with the Provisional IRA as early as 1973.[25] Even if the prospect of a negotiated settlement is far away, dialogue can help conflicting parties develop mutual understanding, buy time, and possibly set limits to violence. Hamas, for example, has offered a deal with Israel to restrict its operations to purely military targets if Israel similarly refrains from attacking civilians.[26]

In their study of terrorist motivation, psychologists Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova argue that there is already a form of dialogue between terrorists and the governments of the states that they target in the form of both reciprocal acts of violence and exchanges of rhetoric.[27] They claim that this form of violent dialogue is ultimately self-defeating because it tends to undermine core values on both sides of a conflict. Instead, they advocate talking and listening to terrorists, not as a radical departure, but rather as a means of moving a dialogue that is already taking place through violence in a potentially more peaceful and productive direction. At the very least, dialogue with terrorists may help to halt what international negotiations analyst P. Terrence Hopmann has identified as the vicious spiral that occurs when escalating conflict reduces people's ability to analyze

problems in complex and nuanced ways. This results in ever more simplified and stereotypical arguments that in turn nourish further violence.[28]

Scholars and policymakers have discussed the pros and cons of talking to terrorists for decades,[29] although understandably a growing number of analysts have addressed the subject since the "9/11" attacks.[30] It is useful to summarize and discuss some of the arguments here as they provide insights into the "who, what, when, and how?" of engagement with terrorist groups. Negotiations specialist I. W. Zartman, for example, classifies terrorists into three categories: "contingent terrorists," who actively seek to negotiate as part of their strategy, "total absolute terrorists," whose objectives and methods allow for no compromise, and groups in between that he labels "conditional absolute terrorists." So-called conditionals do not necessarily actively seek to negotiate, but have something tangible to bargain about such as territory or autonomy even if their methods, such as the use of suicidal terrorism, categorize them as "absolutes." Zartman advocates dialogue with these terrorists stressing that it is ". . . important to divide the terrorists, pulling the contingents and conditional absolutes away from the absolutes, which means giving the prospect of something real and attainable . . ."[31] Islamist "conditional absolutes" would appear to be the natural target of an engagement policy, whereas Al Qaeda is commonly assumed to be "beyond the pale" as regards talks because of the "absolute" character of its methods and objectives. Nevertheless, many analysts would not rule out dialogue with the most apparently uncompromising Islamists.[32] Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, in particular, has questioned the prevailing wisdom that Al Qaeda is irrational and apocalyptic, arguing instead that the organization's political goals should be distinguished from its religious rhetoric. He has advocated deliberate engagement by the United States to address Al Qaeda's stated grievances.[33]

It is easy to frame the problem in theoretical terms, but in practice, the reluctance of governments to talk to terrorists is understandable. A monopoly of the legitimate use of violence is a basic characteristic of a nation-state. Thus, violent non-state actors mount an existential challenge to a state government's credibility and legitimacy and more broadly to the whole international "Westphalian" state system. Talking to terrorists represents a betrayal of fundamental values and principles as it appears to legitimize illegal violence and promote discourse with individuals who have rejected the rules and norms of international society. It means setting aside the extremists' ideology and record of violence in the interests of political expediency, especially difficult in a post-"9/11" environment that has demonized terrorism as uniquely evil. Apart from ethical and legal dilemmas, governments take considerable practical policy risks when they engage with terrorists. Terrorists may be emboldened by what they perceive as government appeasement and weakness, which may lead to an increase in violence.[34] Negotiations can lead to splits in terrorist movements between moderates and hard-liners that the latter can exploit. Engagement by the Official IRA with the British government in the early 1970s facilitated the takeover of the movement by the younger, more radical "Provisionals," which removed any early prospect of peace.[35] Terrorists sometimes take deliberate advantage of talks or cease-fires to buy time. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, for example, has repeatedly used such opportunities to regroup and rearm for their next offensive.[36] Talking to terrorists can also cause political embarrassment and damage relations with allied states. When the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office contemplated open dialogue with Hamas and Hezbollah in 2005, it provoked an outcry from Israel and the initiative was dropped.[37]

It might be tempting to conclude that a policy of "no negotiations" is less dangerous for governments than one of selective engagement with terrorists. In the circumstances, it

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is hardly surprisingly that governments are rarely open about communication with terrorist groups and usually set tough preconditions for formal negotiations, such as a complete cessation of violence. Nevertheless, the experience of numerous counterterrorist campaigns suggests that it is very difficult, especially for democratic states, to defeat extremist groups that enjoy a measure of popular support by military or law enforcement means alone, unless governments are prepared to tolerate significant human rights abuses by their security forces and the erosion of core democratic and constitutional values. If attempts to suppress a terrorist movement fail, governments are invariably forced to contemplate some form of political engagement.

Some analysts, acknowledging the perils involved for democratic governments in talking to terrorists, have attempted to identify ground rules to minimize the risks. Peter Neumann, for example, stresses that a terrorist group's leadership must offer the prospect of being a good negotiating partner in the sense of having coherent objectives, being prepared to modulate its approach to violence, and able to control the movement's rank and file members. He also recommends that governments consider engaging terrorists groups when the latter are at a "strategic juncture," questioning the continued utility of violence as the primary means to achieve their aims.[38] Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief negotiator in Northern Ireland, draws similar conclusions. He also highlights the importance of strong, consistent leadership and bi-partisan political support to weather inevitable setbacks. Powell stresses the need to avoid setting pre-conditions, such as the cessation of violence, before engagement begins,[39] although, like Neumann, he maintains that an agreement to end violence will be necessary before the start of formal peace negotiations. However, a lesson from Northern Ireland is that undefeated terrorist groups are unlikely to enter negotiations if an agreement to end violence is interpreted by governments as surrender. The Afghan government has held talks with "moderate" Taliban since 2003, but these cannot progress to peace negotiations because the government insists that Taliban first lay down their weapons, disavow armed insurrection, and accept the presence of foreign troops.[40]

Governments also seek to avoid political embarrassment by eschewing direct talks between government officials and terrorist leaders in the early stages of a bargaining process. Governments may release statements in the media or through intermediaries that signal a willingness to seek some sort of accommodation. British parliamentarian and former Shadow Foreign Secretary, Michael Ancram, has described "signals" made to the IRA in Northern Ireland, which led to what he calls "exploratory dialogue" without pre-conditions or commitments on either side.[41] Dialogue is facilitated when a terrorist organization has a well-established political wing that allows government officials to talk with political representatives rather than with the militants who directly participate in violence. Contacts are often made through trusted neutral parties or sometimes on the government's side by the use of domestic or foreign intelligence officials acting covertly. The involvement of the latter has plausible deniability and carries less political risk than formal governmental contact. In 2005, for example, the German foreign intelligence service held talks with the Taliban, with the apparent knowledge of their U.S. and French equivalents.[42] Even if such talks do not advance the prospects for peace, they may offer benefits for the government side. As Harvard terrorism analyst Louise Richardson stresses, dialogue can help security officials assess terrorists' motives, their capabilities, and the caliber of their leadership and organization.[43]

From the terrorists' perspective, Scheffler has argued that extremists are often keener to seek dialogue and negotiations than the governments that oppose them. Apart from tactical benefits, such as time to reorganize and better treatment for their prisoners in government

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jails, talks offer the opportunity to gain recognition as a legitimate party to the conflict and strengthen the movement's leadership against competing extremist splinter groups.[44]

Discriminating Between Enemies in the War on Terror

Defining the enemy in the War on Terror poses significant problems for policymakers. Nearly seven years after "9/11" the enemy remains ill defined. The *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* of February 2006 described the threat broadly in the following terms:

> ... a transnational movement of extremist organizations, networks, and individuals—and their state and non-state supporters—which have in common that they exploit Islam and use terrorism for ideological ends.[45]

Unfortunately, the use of terms such as "Islam," "Islamist," or "Jihadist" in connection with terrorism offends many Moslems, whereas other phrases, such as "violent extremists," are too vague to provide a focus for counterterrorism analysts or practitioners. These definitional problems have contributed to an overall lack of coherence in defining the character of the War on Terror and perhaps encouraged a tendency to assume that all professed Islamist groups are united by demands that are unconditional and universal. Such an approach assists extremist ideologues anxious to promote the idea of a clash of civilizations, where every local conflict involving Muslims represents part of a Manichean clash between the West and Islam. Unfortunately, definitional problems are likely to remain, although identifying the enemy simply as Al Qaeda might avoid many of the current generalities, including labels that Muslims find offensive. It would also tacitly remove Islamist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah from the front rank of America's enemies.

It is hard to resist Israeli terrorism analyst Boaz Ganor's logic that the deliberate targeting of civilians constitutes terrorism regardless of the objectives, ideology, culture, or circumstances of the perpetrators.[46] However, defining terrorism is not synonymous with identifying the threat. Whereas most non-state militant groups engaged in contemporary conflicts meet Ganor's definition, they do not directly threaten Western states or interests. Besides the pejorative label "terrorist" is by no means restricted to groups that only or mainly target civilians. As irregular fighters employ methods outside the normal rules and conventions of war, they are invariably stigmatized as terrorists by their opponents. For law enforcement purposes, states tend to make little distinction between groups that exercise restraint in their use of violence and those that target indiscriminately. The common label terrorist has been applied both to nationalist–separatist groups such as ETA, which normally issues warnings before attacks on civilian targets, and to Al Qaeda affiliates that deliberately attack non-combatants. A practical counterterrorism strategy cannot address every non-state, violent organization that targets civilians. Instead it must focus limited human, technical, and material resources on those groups that pose the most existential threat, although discriminating between the plethora of militant groups engaged in contemporary conflicts poses a daunting challenge. Terrorists can be inspired by nationalist, economic, political, and religious causes, the desire to take revenge, exploit opportunities for criminality or simply to generate violence. As the campaign in Iraq graphically illustrates, boundaries are increasingly blurred between fighters warring for local autonomy, criminals seeking self-enrichment and groups waging global *jihad*.

Although not a prerequisite for terrorism, an overarching ideology offers a particularly potent justification for acts of violence. As ideologies offer sets of principles, systems of

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values or proposals for ideal societies, zealots can claim that their brand of terrorism is perpetrated for the good of humanity in the longer term. Radical Islamism has replaced revolutionary Marxist-Leninism as the most prevalent terrorist ideology. Islamists may purport to despise secular philosophies such as Marxist-Leninism, but as many commentators have highlighted, there are many similarities between the two movements.[47] Both Marxist-Leninism and radical Islamism are universalistic, revolutionary ideologies characterized by utopian ideals and coupled with a disregard and even contempt for alternative political or religious systems and beliefs. Ideologically inspired terrorist groups tend to reject negotiation and political accommodation with their enemies. To do so would involve compromising essential core values, a stance summarized by Osama bin Laden's mentor, Abdullah Azzam's slogan "The rifle and jihad alone; no negotiations, no conferences, no dialogues."[48] Bin Laden himself poured scorn on Muslims who sought to negotiate rather than fight "crusaders" in an audiotape released in April 2006.[49] As ideologically inspired terrorists, Marxist-Leninist groups of the Cold War era were quite prepared to use ruthless violence to achieve their objectives. Nevertheless, large-scale attacks on civilians such as the Lod Airport massacre by the Japanese Red Army in 1972 were rare. European revolutionary terrorist groups, like the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades, essentially targeted representatives of the government, the security forces or leading capitalists, not members of the general public. In contrast, the rise of Islamist terrorism since the 1980s has been accompanied by a growing trend toward mass-casualty attacks against civilians, justified by the perpetrators on ideological grounds. As bin Laden has stated on a number of occasions, all American civilians are regarded as legitimate targets, being guilty of crimes against Moslems by association with their government.[50]

Islamist terrorism, which combines an uncompromising ideology with a willingness to inflict large numbers of civilian casualties, presents the West with its most implacable early twenty-first-century security threat. But "Islamist Terrorism" is too general a term for a discriminating counterterrorism strategy. The Islamist brand includes a very broad range of militant organizations. These usually share a religious agenda, have a common antipathy to Israel, are anti-American, and oppose Moslem governments perceived as corrupt, but many have no ambition to create a new caliphate or wage global *jihad* against non-believers. Just as with communist-inspired movements formed to fight military occupation or colonial rule in the twentieth century, the achievement of local political objectives is often a greater imperative than the maintenance of ideological purity. British academic Tarak Barkawi, among others, has argued that Islamist extremism is best understood as a "hybrid form of anti-colonial resistance," a continuation of the Islamic world's historical struggle to resist Western military, economic, and cultural expansion.[51]

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines is an example of such a resistance movement. The group has waged a secessionist campaign for an Islamic state since 1978, but the roots of the campaign go back 300 years with opposition to Spanish and, later, American colonial rule. The MILF's nationalist goals are at odds with Al Qaeda regional affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)'s vision of a pan-Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia. Unlike JI, the MILF's leadership has been willing to negotiate with the government of the Philippines over regional autonomy.

Some Islamist groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas, share characteristics with earlier nationalist separatist terrorist groups, such as the IRA and ETA, in that they have clearly articulated local political grievances and are therefore, like the latter, potentially open to engagement. A willingness to participate in the electoral process alone sets groups like Hamas and Hezbollah apart from the most hard-line Islamists. Al Qaeda ideologue Ayman al-Zawahiri has proscribed democratic elections as blasphemous because they place

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human choices above those of God. For this reason, he has denounced Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood as apostates and more recently condemned Hamas's decision to take part in elections in Palestine in 2006 as well as the attempted power sharing agreement with al Fatah in March 2007.[52] Hezbollah members may ritually chant "Death to America," but their leader, Hasan Nasrallah, has stated that he is not at war with the American people. He has also condemned the "9/11" attacks and the atrocities committed by Al Qaeda in Iraq.[53] The contrasting statements by al-Zawahiri and Nasrallah during the war in Lebanon in summer 2006 provide further illustration of the divergent perspectives of Al Qaeda and Hezbollah. While al-Zawahiri highlighted the conflict's place in global *jihad*, Nasrallah stressed its regional character, aiming his rhetoric at both Muslims and Christians in Lebanon.[54]

The employment of suicidal terrorism sets Islamist groups apart from earlier generations of separatist fighters. Yet even in this respect, direct comparisons with Al Qaeda and its affiliates are inappropriate as suicide attacks by members of the military wings of Hamas and Hezbollah have been restricted to specific territories and justified as resistance against military occupation rather than the advancement of a universalistic religious ideology. Robert Pape was perhaps the first to argue that the peculiar brand of Islamic suicidal terrorism should be viewed not as a religious or cultural aberration, but rather as a rational strategy to attain the independence of Moslem people, property, and way of life from foreign influence and control.[55] A recent study of suicide bombings during the second intifada appears to support Pape's argument, as it found that Palestinian militant leaders had only given a religious justification in 7% of such attacks.[56] Similarly, religious zeal and martyrdom does not appear to have been the primary motivation of Chechen suicide bombers.[57]

Local Islamist groups may have an ideological agenda, but it tends to be bounded by practical political considerations and nationalist ambitions. A struggle between religious extremists and relative moderates within these organizations for the soul of the movement is not unusual, as illustrated by the differing and often contradictory statements emanating from Hamas spokesmen after their success in the Palestinian elections of January 2006. Most Islamists share a common religious perspective but they often differ in their interpretation of contemporary politics and events. Under the Islamist umbrella are found scholars who focus exclusively on nonviolent methods of conversion, political activists who seek to achieve power through the ballot box, and militant *jihadists* who reject the concept of the nation-state and advance their aims through violence and revolution.[58] The spectrum of politically motivated Islamists runs from moderate mainstream political parties, such as Morocco's Justice and Development (PJD) party, to the extreme violence of Algeria's former Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Significantly, the latter alienated much of its potential support because of atrocities against the civilian population during its campaign in the 1990s. Militant Islamist political organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah exhibit both "political" and "*jihadi*" characteristics. Engagement with these groups should naturally seek to recognize and support those militants inclined toward peaceful political approaches to achieve their objectives and attempt to isolate the most violent elements. In practice, such a process can be problematic. As noted earlier, dialogue can provoke violent challenges from within terrorist movements by those opposed to compromise. Dissident elements of the military wings of Hamas and Fatah have frequently ratcheted up the level of violence to curtail cease-fire, truce, or peace talks with Israel. However, a policy that precludes engagement leaves terrorist groups to be dominated by their most extreme members. If there is no prospect of dialogue then the more violent members of a terrorist organization's leadership can point to the lack of alternatives to the armed struggle. Arguably, it was

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Russia's refusal to countenance negotiations with Moslem rebels in Chechnya in the 1990s that allowed an essentially nationalist–separatist resistance movement to fall under the influence of Wahhabi *jihadists* from 2000 onward. A report from the *International Crisis Group* in 2005 highlighted the dangers of ignoring potential fault lines within militant Islamist organizations in the following terms:

> American and European policy makers risk provoking one of two equally undesirable outcomes: either inducing the different strands of Islamic activism to band together in reaction, attenuating differences that might otherwise be fruitfully developed, or causing the non-violent and modernist tendencies to be eclipsed by the jihadis.[59]

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Opportunities for Dialogue with Islamist Terrorists

The isolation of Al Qaeda, physically, morally, and ideologically, is the common theme of the emerging counterterrorism strategies highlighted in the first section of this article. Although some commentators do not rule out talks with even the most extreme Islamists, the most fruitful prospects for dialogue are likely to be with those terrorist groups that do not share Al Qaeda's vision.

The U.S. and other Western governments have already established contacts with non-violent Islamist political parties in Morocco, Yemen, and Jordan.[60] This process is intended to promote peaceful, democratic change and address the underlying political and social grievances that lead to radicalization. Some states in the front line of the war against Al Qaeda, such as Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines, have also sought to normalize relations with Zartman's "conditional absolutes" and provide political alternatives to armed struggle. President Bouteflika of Algeria, for example, implemented an amnesty in 2006 for remaining combatants from the civil war. This process was intended to isolate Al Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM), which had refused any accommodation with the "apostate" Algerian government, from the majority of Algerian Islamist militants.[61] Engagement with extremists who have not renounced violence is a controversial and risky matter. Nevertheless, the relative failure of current counterterrorism policies has already led to many calls for dialogue. In December 2004, Alistair Cooke, a former senior MI6 officer who served as the European Union's (EU) official link with Muslim radicals, requested Western policymakers to reassess their approach to groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood and convene formal talks with their representatives.[62] More recently, figures as diverse as Mullah Abdul Salam Saif, former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, and U.K. Defence Secretary Des Browne have called for dialogue with Taliban fighters to promote the resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan.[63]

Although opportunities exist for informal, exploratory, and non-committal dialogue to seek out areas of common ground, potential openings have been lost because of the general tendency for policymakers to overlook the differences between the objectives of terrorists engaged in regional conflicts in Moslem countries and those waging a broader *jihad* against the West. Efforts by local Islamist groups, for example, to disassociate themselves from Al Qaeda central have sometimes been overlooked. Somalia is a case in point. In June 2006, the leader of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia wrote to the U.S. State Department and the embassies of several countries insisting that his country would not become a haven for international terrorists and rejecting links with Al Qaeda.[64] This initiative was all the more surprising because the United States had previously funneled money to the Union's

opponents, the secular warlords. Although the ICU is an umbrella organization that includes Al Qaeda affiliates, during its brief period in control before being driven from the cities by Ethiopian forces, it brought a period of relative stability and rule of law to Somalia, which even allowed the economic outlook to improve.[65] The West's indifference to dialogue with the ICU in summer 2006 arguably played into the hands of the extremists as nothing was done to encourage or support more moderate elements in the movement.

Given the centrality of the Palestinian situation to Muslim grievances against the West, talks with Hamas are an essential element of an engagement strategy with militant Islamists. Unfortunately, an opportunity for substantive dialogue with Hamas was lost after its electoral victory in January 2006. Neither the Western powers nor Israel would enter talks with Hamas leaders in the Palestinian Authority, even those who were on record as supporting a two-state Israeli–Palestinian solution or a long-term truce (*hudna*) with Israel.[66] Hamas's formal refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist is the greatest barrier to negotiations, but recognition need not be a pre-condition for talks. Egypt and Jordan, for example, provided no such agreement until the end of their peace negotiations with Israel. The Saudi government attempted unsuccessfully to persuade the U.S. administration that shutting off aid to the Palestinian government and isolating Hamas leaders would further radicalize the Palestinian population. At the time, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal, pointedly commented that "If we don't talk to them, how do we convince them they should change their attitude towards peace?"[67] An *Oxford Research Group* paper published in March 2006 also advocated conditions-free dialogue with Hamas and criticized the stance of Western governments that somehow punishing the Palestinian people by financial sanctions would encourage more moderate behavior.[68] It is fair to speculate that the West's boycott of Hamas contributed to the collapse of the Palestinian government into warring Fatah and Hamas factions and allowed the hard-line wing of the latter to take control in Gaza. Although there is evidence of growing support in Israel and the United States for direct talks with Hamas, official government policy in both states remains opposed to dialogue.[69]

It would be naïve to assume that a group like Hezbollah, despite its long-standing involvement in mainstream politics in Lebanon, could be persuaded to abandon its armed struggle as long as it perceives a continuing threat from Israel. Hezbollah is rightly regarded with considerable suspicion by Western officials, not least because of its client status with Iran. Formal engagement would not tame Hezbollah, but might help to forestall attempts by Al Qaeda to reach an accommodation with the organization and encourage moderates committed to peaceful political change. Although Hezbollah retains the potential for global terrorist activities, it has not mounted attacks against U.S. or European targets for over a decade. Hezbollah has shown itself to be a sophisticated and highly disciplined organization with a respected leadership that retains a firm grip on its rank and file members. In these respects, it meets some of Neumann and Powell's criteria for a viable negotiating partner noted earlier. Formal engagement could provide recognition of Hezbollah's status as a significant non-state actor with a responsible role to play in resolving longstanding conflicts in the Middle East. Such recognition would not be unprecedented. In 1996, the United States even granted Hezbollah's military wing, Islamic Resistance, the status of a "resistance" movement rather than "terrorist" group during efforts to broker an agreement on rules of engagement in South Lebanon.[70]

Western negotiators have little prospect of undermining the ideology of Al Qaeda as the religious refutation of Salafi–*jihadist* thinking can only credibly be left to Muslim scholars. However, mutual concerns about the excessive brutality of some Al Qaeda–linked groups can potentially provide common ground for dialogue and encourage limits to violence.

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Extremists are vulnerable to criticism, even from fellow Salafists, for attacks on women and children, for declaring other Moslems apostates (*takfir*) and for promoting political and economic chaos. The leaders of Egypt's largest former militant groups al Jihad and al Gammaa Islamiya have called on Al Qaeda fighters to change their tactics.[71] Some influential scholars of *jihad*, namely Abu Basir al Tartusi and Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, have also renounced the methods employed by violent self styled *jihadists*, including the London bombings.[72] Even Al Qaeda's leadership appears to have recognized the negative impact of the extreme sectarian violence perpetrated by their former commander in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.[73] Overt acts of brutality, such as indiscriminate car bombings and the videotaped beheading of captives, have helped to prompt a growing Muslim conservative reaction that offers the prospect of marginalizing Al Qaeda and its allies.[74]

Barriers to Dialogue with Islamist Terrorists

Many commentators view Islamist terrorists as uniquely uncompromising and violent, setting up barriers to engagement that did not exist in the case of Cold War–era terrorist groups. Robert Satloff, Director of the Washington Institute, reflected the common suspicion of Islamist motives in his advice to Karen Hughes in 2005:

> Don't try to accommodate, co-opt, or "dialogue" with Islamists. They are much better at this game than we are and, in the process, we confuse and demoralize our allies.[75]

Melanie Phillips, author of *Londonistan,* has condemned the British government as naïve for retaining what she terms as a "neo-colonial mindset," which believes that Islamist terrorism is caused by discrete political grievances.[76] For some analysts, the religion of Islam itself is the problem, being in essence violent and unreformable. British religious scholar Patrick Sookhdeo opposes engagement with any group that takes the concept of *jihad* seriously, including Hizb ut Tahrir and the Muslim Brotherhood, despite their stated eschewal of violence.[77] Commentators have seized on the Koranic principles of *hudna* and *al-Taqiyyah* to suggest that Islamist militants will never negotiate a lasting peace or be trusted to express real intentions, opinions, and feelings when engaged in dialogue with infidels.[78] Those who oppose engagement with Islamists can support their arguments with reference to the all too frequent statements of well-established radical clerics who make no secret of their support for aggressive military *jihad* against non-Muslims.[79] Suspicion of Islamist motives extends to those militant groups that have already taken part in the democratic political process. Terrorism analyst Alexander Ritzman, for example, cautions against accommodation with Hezbollah, describing it as a *jihadist* terrorist organization that plays politics rather than a political movement that sometimes commits terrorist acts.[80] Thomas Friedman has asserted that Islamist groups in the Middle East have deliberately exploited electoral success to spark further wars with Israel.[81]

Ideology is not the only barrier to dialogue. The loosely networked character of contemporary terrorist groups makes productive engagement especially difficult. Splinter groups have always broken away from a terrorist organization in response to changing operational circumstances. However, historically, as in the case of the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland, a tightly disciplined, dominant faction normally retained overall political and military control of the movement. This is patently not the case with many Al Qaeda–inspired *jihadists*, particularly those operating in Europe. These self-styled *jihadists* believe that Islam is under attack from the West and that it is their duty to fight back. They form

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associations with small groups of similar radicals loosely linked with the global terrorist network inspired by Al Qaeda's ideology. In the case of these informal terrorist groups there is no leadership with whom to establish dialogue or political wing with which to negotiate; nor, given the apparent extremism of European-based Al Qaeda terrorists are there common interests to provide a basis for discussion. Even when, as in the case of Hamas, there is a well-established political wing to articulate and rationalize campaign objectives, the fractious nature of contemporary terrorism means that an organization's leaders can rarely speak for all the fighters under their nominal command. It is sometimes difficult to establish whether terrorist negotiators can actually speak for the leadership of the group. This was the main reason for the German intelligence service calling off their talks with Taliban representatives in 2005 and has complicated attempts by the Afghan government to establish dialogue with the movement. The distinction between regional-based Islamist groups and global *jihadists* is not always as clear cut as advocates of disaggregation and containment strategies might contend. The case of the Kashmiri separatist group Lashkar e Taiba illustrates the problem. Lashkar e Taiba leadership condemned the rush-hour train bombings in Bombay in July 2006 as inhuman and stressed that it waged *jihad* only against the Indian Army, not civilians.[82] Like Hamas and Hezbollah, the organization has also touted its humanitarian assistance and relief operations to garner legitimacy. However, any illusions that Lashkar e Taiba operations had a purely regional focus were shattered when the group was implicated directly in the transatlantic airline bomb plot uncovered in the United Kingdom in August 2006.[83] As discussed earlier, engagement may only be effective when a terrorist group's political wing is able to maintain overall leadership of the movement and exercise enough internal influence and discipline to ensure that rank and file members accept their decisions. Unfortunately, the networked and transnational character of contemporary terrorism means that fewer groups are likely to meet these criteria than in the era of so-called traditional terrorism.

As noted earlier, the diplomatic costs of engagement may also rule out all but the most secretive contacts with many Islamist groups. Formal dialogue by the United States with Hamas or Hezbollah would be problematic, not least domestically, as long as its close ally Israel remains vehemently opposed to talks. Contacts by EU states might provoke less controversy and could lessen Muslim perceptions of a unified Western conspiracy against Islam. However, those leaders contemplating dialogue would need to remain mindful of the risk of tactical moves by terrorist groups to split the coalition against terrorism, a sort of disaggregation policy in reverse. Osama bin Laden's offer of a truce to Europe in 2004 arguably falls into this category, as does Taliban's call for negotiations with the new Pakistan government provided it abandons support for America's War on Terror.[84]

Conclusions

There is no easy or definitive answer to the question of whether or not to engage with Islamist terrorists. There is no doubt that selective engagement is risky and fraught with practical difficulties. Talks frequently end in failure and sometimes political embarrassment, especially when terrorists exploit a period of dialogue for operational advantage. The character of contemporary terrorism arguably compounds the problem as productive engagement with loosely networked, ideologically motivated terrorists is more difficult than with traditional, nationalist–separatist movements. Nevertheless, as with all facets of counterterrorism, each case has to be judged on its merits. As this article has argued, no potentially productive approach should be ruled out arbitrarily as a matter of principle. The war against Al Qaeda cannot be won by military action alone, nor is the ideological dimension of the struggle

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likely to prove successful in the foreseeable future, if ever. Ultimately, progress in the War on Terror will likely involve genuine political accommodation and compromise based on the recognition that some Islamist terrorist groups have long-standing political and social grievances that predate the War on Terror. Selective engagement could support the process of isolating and marginalizing the most violent extremists that threaten the West, but it will require leaders to take risks by seizing opportunities for dialogue without preconditions with Islamist groups they have publicly branded as terrorists. As Jonathan Powell states:

> It is very difficult for governments in democracies to be seen talking to people who are killing their people unjustifiably. But it is precisely your enemies, rather than your friends, you need to talk to if you want to resolve a conflict. Moreover, talking should not be seen as a reward to be held out or withdrawn. Without contact there is no way of making the first steps towards peace.[85]

Only through dialogue is it possible to find out where common interests lie and compromise might be possible, or where extreme positions rule out the prospect of any meaningful negotiations, either to limit violence or begin a search for peace. At worst, selective engagement may at least support the age old adage to know your enemy; at best, it may offer a route to a negotiated resolution of an armed conflict and the transformation of terrorists into legitimate political actors. Ex-terrorists such as Menachem Begin, Yasser Arafat, and Martin McGuiness have achieved international recognition and status as credible statesmen. It is hard to image Osama bin Laden joining their ranks, but perhaps not impossible that other, less extreme Islamist leaders, such as Hasan Nasrallah and Ismail Haniyeh, might one day be accorded the same respect.

Notes

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5. Brian Michael Jenkins, lecture to the Program in Terrorism and Security Studies, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 25 January 2008.

6. Islamism refers to political ideologies derived from those Muslims who believe that Islam is not only a religion but also a holistic system that provides the political, legal, economic, and social foundations for society. "Islamist" is a term often used by Western analysts to denote radicals at the extreme end of the fundamentalist spectrum that have resorted to terrorism. However, "Islamism" is not synonymous with "Terrorism." Many Islamist groups have renounced or avoided violence. Politics rather than violence gives mainstream Islamist groups their growing influence in many parts of the world. The *jihadis* who engage in terrorism share an ideology with the broader Sunni fundamentalist movement known as Salafism, although most Salafists do not advocate or support such violence.

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12. The White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism,* September 2006. Online edition, available at http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/71803.htm

13. See Anne Aldis and Graeme Herd, *The Ideological War on Terror: Worldwide Strategies for Counter-Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2007).

14. See, for example, U.S. Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes, Remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations, 10 May 2006, available at http://www.state.gov/r/us/66098.htm

15. U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office), 6 February 2006, p. 22, available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/dod/qdr-2006-report.pdf. See also National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley's speech to the United States Institute of Peace regarding the National Security Strategy delivered on 16 March 2006, available at http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/63257.htm

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21. *Foreign Policy & The Center for American Progress,* "The Terrorism Index," September/October 2007, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3924

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37. Ewen MacAskill, "UK Ponders Talking with Hamas and Hizbullah," *The Guardian,* 20 May 2005.

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82. Ashling O'Connor, "Kashmiri Militants Deny Carrying Out Attacks," *The Times,* 13 July 2006.

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