

## Negotiate with Terrorists! or: Why Terrorism Cannot be Deterred

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**H**ow can terrorism be deterred? With violence! This answer seems to be obviously right, because terrorism has »a connotation of evil, indiscriminate violence, or brutality« (Lutz, 2004: 9). How can one negotiate with terrorists like Usama bin Laden or Hassan Nasrallah who kill innocent men, women and children? This proposition is, at the very least, absurd. Right?

I believe that the real absurdity is not an alternative security strategy – even one that relies on negotiating with terrorists – but a security architecture that rests first and foremost on the threat of massive military force. »Coercion or negative sanctions are found to have little effect [on terrorism, A.B.] and, in important instances, are even counterproductive« (Frey, 2004: IX). That is something we could have learnt from everyday experience in Israel, Palestine, Iraq, and, of course, from the (failed) attacks on American and European cities. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu puts it: »Retaliation against a suicide bomber only gives rise to more suicide bombers« (quoted in Govier, 2002: 94). In other words: fighting terrorism by force is of no use; it does not even have a deterrent effect. On the contrary, the employment of massive military force makes it easier for terrorists to justify their attacks, to find broad support, and to recruit new followers.

Nonetheless, if we are talking about fighting terrorism, we are talking about fighting terrorism by force. The security policy of the USA is the prime but not the only example.<sup>1</sup> French President Jacques Chirac de-

1. The national budget for weapons and security under President George W. Bush has received »the largest increases in funding since the Reagan Administration, and this Budget builds upon that record. The 2006 request represents a 41-percent increase over 2001, and a 4.8-percent increase over 2005. The Department has used these resources to transform our Nation's military capabilities to meet future threats, to improve the quality of life for our troops and their families, and to fight the Global War on Terror« ([www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy06/pdf/budget/defense.pdf](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy06/pdf/budget/defense.pdf), p.3). In 2006, spending increased overall to USD 419.3 billion.

clared at the beginning of 2006 that his country was prepared to launch a nuclear strike against any country that sponsors a terrorist attack that threatens French interests – a threat the USA added to its security strategy as early as 2005.<sup>2</sup> And Israel has been fighting the threat of Palestinian terrorism for decades and a few weeks ago started its own »War on Terrorism« against Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah's Hizbollah. »A war Hizbollah has already won,« as Zaid Al-Ali explains on »opendemocracy.«<sup>3</sup> Hizbollah was able to hold its own on Lebanese territory and defend itself in spite of Israel's massive military efforts. But most of all Hizbollah won because Israel's attacks killed hundreds of innocent people, thereby not only increasing public support for the organization but also helping it to recruit new fighters.

Underlying all these measures is the contemporary concept of deterrence, based on warding off the threat of (global) terrorism with enormous military power and strength. In contrast to the Cold War, when deterrence meant the credible threat of retaliation in case of an attack, it now encompasses the threat of preemptive self-defense.<sup>4</sup>

However, both retaliation and preemption need a real target, such as the USSR during the Cold War. In his »Mutual Deterrence« speech Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara explained in 1967 that »if the United States is to deter a nuclear attack [...], it must possess an actual and a credible assured-destruction capability.«<sup>5</sup> As defined by McNamara, this meant the capability »to destroy 50 percent of its [the USSR's] population and industry in a retaliatory strike« (Lebow, 1994: 349).

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2. »Here [to influence terrorists] deterrence [i.e. nuclear deterrence] may be directed at states that support their efforts as well as the terrorist organization itself« (Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations, March 2005, under: [http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/jp3\\_12fc2.pdf](http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/jp3_12fc2.pdf), p. 21). Note that »[t]he US does not make positive statements defining the circumstances under which it would use nuclear weapons« (ibid., p. 22).
  3. Zaid Al-Ali: »Whatever happens, Hizbollah has already won,« on: [www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle\\_east\\_politics/hizbollah\\_victory\\_3809.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/hizbollah_victory_3809.jsp).
  4. »The United States has long maintained the option of preemptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively« (»The National Security Strategy of the USA«, September 2002, under: [www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf), p. 19).
  5. »Mutual Deterrence« Speech by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, under: <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Deterrence/Deterrence.shtml>.

I will not discuss the internal problems of any deterrence strategy, such as: What is an (unprovoked) attack and what is merely a defensive measure?<sup>6</sup> How can both sides be sure they are speaking the same language (cf. Jervis, 1976: 356–82; Morgan, 2003: 42–78; Davis: 2000, 10–25)? – but let us focus on the essential problem: Terrorism cannot be deterred. Why?

*First*, a terrorist organization like al Qaeda has no territory (on which it could be attacked) and it has no population and no infrastructure (that could be killed or destroyed). Al-Qaeda is invisible. Its training camps and headquarters in Afghanistan have apparently been hit by the American war machine – but not the network itself. Al Qaeda is an ideology: followers join it, believe in it and fight for it, but they do not settle within it, unlike a state. Al Qaeda can be anyone and everywhere. That is one advantage of a terrorist organization over a conventional military power. Al Qaeda is never ultimately threatened because its invisibility makes the threat of retaliation and preemption less credible.

The same applies to an organization like Hizbollah. Maybe one can argue, as Israel does, that it has a territory from where it launches its attacks and where it can be hit (a conviction the USA also holds<sup>7</sup>). However, in this way Hizbollah as such is not affected. Instead, merely its camps and rocket launchers but unavoidably also the Lebanese people are hit. Holding innocent men, women and children collectively liable for violent acts for which they are not responsible<sup>8</sup> will surely foster the belief that Hizbollah is fighting a necessary and justified war.

This means, generally speaking, that attacking countries which are under suspicion of supporting or harboring terrorists will only strengthen the ideology these organizations stand for. In other words, these attacks

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6. The »War on Terrorism« can easily be used as evidence for a crusade against Islam and terror attacks can be used as an argument to expand the »War on Terrorism.«
  7. The »National Security Strategy« (NSS), published in March 2006, is decisive: »The United States and its allies in the War on Terror make no distinction between those who commit acts of terror and those who support and harbor them, because they are *equally guilty of murder*« ([www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/nss2006.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/2006/nss2006.pdf), p. 17, italics added).
  8. Or do we really want to argue that the Lebanese people are collectively responsible because they support this organization or at least did not resist it? But then we have to accept that the same applies to us: that citizens of democratic states are held collectively responsible for the acts of their governments because they support it or did not actively resist it ...

give terrorists a pretext for their attacks and make it easier for people to believe in their ideology and justifications.

*Secondly*, the threat of death and destruction has no purchase on someone who is willing to sacrifice his or her life in a suicide bombing.

I will pose a simple question to back my thesis: Has the world become more secure because of the »War(s) on Terrorism«? I don't think so. But that is something we could have learned from the Cold War: deterrence leads to more insecurity.<sup>9</sup> The same holds true of the fight against terrorism: »Deterrence is based on a negative approach: terrorists are threatened with punishment if they continue their activities. Coercive action is answered by coercive action. Such interaction tends to degenerate into a *negative sum game* between the parties involved, making each of them worse off: both countries engaging in the coercive response and the terrorists lose« (Frey, 2004: 34 – italics in original). The conclusion is clear enough: Deterrence (even when combined with preemption) is neither the right nor an adequate answer to the threat of terrorism.

To reduce the threat of terrorism we must reduce people's willingness to engage in terrorism. Our »line of defense« must run through areas where we know (and fear) that new terrorists will be recruited: the less support is offered to extremists like Usama bin Laden, the lower the danger of additional attacks. But how can this be achieved if not by negotiations?

If we are willing to negotiate with terrorists we open up a window of opportunity for them to attain some of their objectives in a peaceful way. We can reward them if they are cooperative – for example, by instigating a ceasefire or releasing hostages – by accepting them as a negotiating partner. But this should not be misinterpreted to mean that we should acknowledge all their objectives or accept all their actions. It means merely offering them the same reward as that offered to rogue states like Libya: becoming a negotiating partner. And offering terrorists and their supporters a real and credible chance of achieving some of their objectives without violence will challenge the terrorists' claim that they have no other choice than to use deadly force. Of course, there always will be some supporters of violence for the sake of violence. But it will become more difficult for an organization to find support and to recruit new followers for its violent

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9. To claim that »Mutually Assured Destruction« (that reveals its true meaning in its acronym: MAD) increases security is the same as claiming that »Russian Roulette« is a safe game just because one has survived it.

actions if there is a credible peaceful alternative. This is the most convincing argument. By offering negotiations to terrorists, even when it seems taboo,<sup>10</sup> we start to fight terrorism at its source: in a setting where violence is perceived, for whatever reason, as the only option.

This is not utopian: »In the Netherlands, for example, terrorist sympathizers are granted access to the media to a considerable extent. As a consequence, they do not have to turn to illegal means, and possibly bloodshed, in order to communicate their views« (Frey, 2004: 111). In Switzerland the »Front de Libération Jurassien,« that used violence in the 1960s for the independence of the Bernese Jura, was even integrated into the political process. The Swiss government agreed to hold a referendum on the future of the Bernese Jura and the attacks decreased immediately. The majority voted against independence. And when the »Front« attempted to recommence the struggle, »they lost popular support and soon ceased to exist« (Frey, 2004: 112).

One may object that it is impossible to negotiate with, say, al Qaeda or Hizbollah, because they make unrealizable claims. But of course in negotiations demands are never completely realized. Which objectives will be realized and to what extent is a matter of negotiation. And even organizations like al Qaeda or Hizbollah have demands that could be partially realized: for example, both justify their attacks with reference, among other things, to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. An offer to negotiate could be based, for example, on Security Council Resolutions 242<sup>11</sup> and 1544<sup>12</sup> and link the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state with an unconditional commitment to acknowledge and respect Israel’s right to exist.

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10. As Frey notes, both the USA and Israel, that officially follow a strict policy of no negotiations with terrorists, at times make an exception to that rule and negotiate on the freeing of hostages (see Frey, 2004: 58–59).

11. »Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territory occupied in the recent conflict [...]«, under: <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NRO/240/94/IMG/NRO24094.pdf?OpenElement>.

12. »*Reiterating* the obligation of Israel, the occupying Power, to abide scrupulously by its legal obligations and responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949, *Calling* on Israel to address its security needs within the boundaries of international law, *Expressing* its grave concern at the continued deterioration of the situation on the ground in the territory occupied by Israel since 1967 [...]«, under: <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/357/21/PDF/N0435721.pdf?OpenElement>, italics in original.

A second objection, as an author suggests in *The Conservative Voice*, is that negotiations with terrorists are futile because they have no interest in keeping their part of the bargain, and they are not honest about their wishes. That means, »killing terrorists is the only practical means of coping with them.«<sup>13</sup>

But even if these objections are correct, they do not invalidate my argument. As mentioned above, negotiations tend not so much to influence the terrorists as their supporters and environment. Attempts to satisfy some terrorist objectives peacefully will, in the long run, reduce support for and belief in the need to use violence. And, unlike the demand to hunt terrorists down, the offer to negotiate will not provoke more violence. It is rather a rational attempt to break the vicious circle in which violence only causes more violence.

However, an alternative security strategy that relies on negotiation with terrorists is hard to imagine – at least as an official strategy. President Bush meets with Usama bin Laden (or his successor) to negotiate the conditions of a ceasefire. Handshake, cameras flash, incredible.

But why are negotiations with terrorists so hard to imagine; why do they seem to be taboo?

Do we not negotiate even with rogue states that support or harbor terrorists, or disregard human rights and international treaties. To put it bluntly: Are we going to stop talking with Iran or North Korea and bomb their nuclear facilities? No, of course not. Talking to rogue states is not to be condemned, but something we expect from responsible politicians.

What about negotiations with, say, Muammar al-Ghaddafi? Libya's involvement with and support for terrorism were confirmed in the late 1980s. It delivered weapons to the IRA and masterminded the bomb attack on Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie on December 21, 1988, which killed 270 people, everyone on the airplane plus eleven inhabitants of Lockerbie. Libya was a rogue state and its revolutionary leader a supporter of terrorism. Nevertheless, in 1997 South African President Nelson Mandela and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan negotiated the repatriation of two Libyan suspects involved in the attack to the Netherlands for trial under Scottish law. In return, UN economic sanctions were suspended.

Of course, one may object that this was just a »pawn sacrifice« because Gaddafi went unpunished. However, Gaddafi stopped supporting ter-

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13. See under: [www.theconservativevoice.com/article/16842.html](http://www.theconservativevoice.com/article/16842.html).

rorism and became a moderate Arab leader, becoming involved in the search for a peaceful solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, a metamorphosis that even the USA has acknowledged. On May 15, 2006 the US State Department announced that it would restore full diplomatic relations with Libya and that it would be removed from the list of nations that support terrorism.<sup>14</sup>

Negotiations with Gaddafi have been vindicated, having reduced the threat of terrorism. That is surely a positive outcome, regardless of the fact that Gaddafi can be viewed as having been »rewarded« to some extent.

In the end we have to ask ourselves, what is more dubious: negotiating with terrorists or fighting them?

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14. See under: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4773617.stm>.