



# Peace and Security Summit

## New York, 30 June – 1 July 2010

### **WORKING GROUP: Negotiating with Terrorists**

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#### ***Session I: Historical Case Studies***

IRA: When faced with the Provisional IRA, the British government realised that “defeating” them – purely in military terms – was not possible; they had to readjust their strategy. The reason talks collapsed in the early to mid-1970s was a result of the refusal of the IRA to accept that Irish unity could not be brought about by force. A mixture of hard and soft power changed the context in which political talks could begin and the peace process could take shape. But negotiating with the terrorists was not a solution in itself.

ETA: Even within Europe, there are other cases where governments have been able to successfully tackle terrorist organisations without the need to go down the road of dialogue. For example, the Spanish government maintains that it will not negotiate with ETA and that organisation has been significantly weakened over the years, partly by being starved of political oxygen.

Tamil Tigers (LTT): In May 2009, the Sri Lankan government annihilated the LTT. This was a surprise to many observers because of the belief that the LTT could not be defeated militarily. Three lessons can be taken from this: first, a government *can* defeat a terrorist force by military means, particularly if that force does not have international support; second, the attitude of the surrounding states is crucial in dealing with terrorists, as the LTT did not have significant international support; third, such a resounding victory could only be delivered at great human cost and this ‘hard power’ approach would be extremely hard to transfer to other regions.

#### ***Session II: Afghanistan***

Sustained U.S. military investment has yet to stop the violence in Afghanistan. While there is an opportunity to bring levels of violence down by increasing political engagement with former insurgents, there is little consensus on how to do so. Working with intermediaries in order to establish communications is important; it is not necessary to go undercover to have communication with the Taliban. In ‘talking

to the Taliban', numerous strategic considerations must be taken into account; you have to understand who you are dealing with and what position your interlocutor holds within the movement. It is necessary to gauge the legitimacy (or otherwise) of the people you are talking with and the wider impact of such negotiations.

Some participants in the working group suggested that while terrorists may seem irrational to western policymakers, they are still rational actors, albeit shaped by different rules of engagement and a different understanding of history, war and conflict. It was also suggested that, were effective lines of communication with the Taliban to be established, NATO objectives in Afghanistan could be achieved with a smaller military force.

One of the US government's problems with Afghanistan is that the objectives have not been suitably or consistently defined. Many previously stated objectives are now unattainable, despite the substantial size of the military force. With a clearer definition of aims, it is easier to tailor a force to achieve these ends and to negotiate around them.

The Taliban will not negotiate if they think they are winning (and they do think they are winning currently). This reality can be changed but that process will not be easy; as a first step to any talks, it is crucial to show the Taliban that there are certain 'non-negotiable' realities, or bottom lines. Yet, while many people are saying that a political solution is necessary – and there is an ever-decreasing chance of defeating the Taliban militarily – no actual strategy or plan has been articulated.

### ***Session III: Hamas***

Some members of Hamas indicate that they are prepared to accept the 1967 borders (and a two-state solution) and this should be taken seriously. There is evidence to suggest that Hamas feels momentum is on its side, which makes negotiations a trickier prospect. In addition, there are a number of unanswered questions to answer and problems to face. For example, would U.S. talks with Hamas exacerbate problems relating to Fatah? In response to this, some participants suggest that the strategy of supporting and strengthening Fatah and weakening Hamas has been successful. Israel, in the current political climate, will not reach out to Hamas as a negotiating partner and is unlikely to do so in the future.

We must improve our understanding of the internal dynamics of such groups. Some participants commented that for governments to negotiate successfully with terrorists; these groups have to be sufficiently weakened to accept a deal short of their aims. Other participants challenged the labelling of such groups as terrorists and suggested that we need to reshape the paradigm and the language we use – that we might call them “armed actors” rather than terrorists. Instead of focusing on fundamental disagreements, it was suggested that common ground could be found by focusing on areas of mutual interest.

### ***Conclusions:***

In many difficult political situations, where violence is involved, history tells us it is hard to avoid talking to terrorists. At the same time, there are dangers in legitimising them by holding such discussions. Governments must be prepared to adjust their strategy towards negotiating with terrorists if hard power strategies are not working. Equally, governments must be clear about the aims of negotiations and the parameters of talks.

Security measures alone do not provide a comprehensive and conclusive counter-terrorism strategy. Communication with a terrorist group can yield greater results where pure military measures fail but should not be seen as a simple substitute for them. Above all, the specific *context* must be the key consideration in every case and there are no hard rules of engagement which can be applied across the board.