

# Always Try Engagement

Erik Solheim

What do Yasir Arafat, Menachem Begin, Nelson Mandela, and Meles Zenawi have in common? They were all considered terrorists in their time.

It is commonly said that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. While any attack on innocent civilians must be condemned, many individuals affiliated with terrorists or terrorist groups are reasonable people. Quite a few even evolve to become heads of state. When discussing the issue of engaging terrorists, one must ask: what is the rational thing to do if your own daughter is kidnapped by a militant group? Should talks be encouraged if it increases the likelihood of release and improves her well-being? Is it reasonable to try to find out how she is treated and on what terms she is being held? Conversely, should any communication be excluded as a matter of principle? Is it rational to oppose anything less than an unconditional release to uphold a principle of never speaking to terrorists? To put it bluntly: would you let such principles take command? This essay argues that it is right to try to talk to terrorists. The strong opposition to the idea of talking to terrorists is somewhat surprising, since negotiation arguably seems to be the common sense position.

## **Always Try Talks**

At the Oslo Forum, the biggest global gathering of peace negotiators, the participants once discussed whether invitations should be extended to "pure" terrorists like Osama bin Laden. The majority view seemed to be: yes, it is worth trying.

Talking is a practical approach rather than a moral conviction or ideological doctrine; it is a principle based on the notion that armed conflict is so devastating that any alternative is nearly always preferable. Wars usually

cause death and suffering while destroying economies. In December 2013, the young state of South Sudan broke down due to a power struggle between President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar. The country imploded in ethnic violence. Tens of thousands of people were killed, nearly two million were displaced, and the country was left in a humanitarian crisis. The two leaders, who once fought together for independence in the Sudanese civil war, became sworn enemies, and much of what they once fought for and built up together was lost. They both craved power, and it is difficult to imagine that it would not have been better for everyone if they had managed to reach a negotiated outcome.

The African Development Bank has estimated that the economic costs of conflict in Africa are equivalent to 35 years of development. In 1980, Liberia was among the most prosperous states in Africa, with a national income of \$1269 per person. After years of conflict and war, it declined by around 90 percent and was down to \$163 when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected to pick up the pieces in 2005.<sup>1</sup>

The only alternatives to negotiations are outright military victories or stalemates with endless spirals of violence and revenge. Due to the extremely high human and economic cost of conflict, anything that can be done to avoid conflict is worth trying.

Engaging with an enemy is difficult, but negotiated agreements can only be reached if enemies talk to each other. Dialogue does not mean giving in and forsaking one's beliefs. Dialogue merely means talking to a hostage taker before taking action if there is any chance of success. Engagement does not necessarily mean that the threat of force should be taken off the table, but it is worthwhile if it can help prevent, stop, or shorten wars. Though engagement and conflict prevention are considered difficult and costly, they should essentially be compared to the cost of conflict.

A policy of never engaging with brutal dictators, terrorist leaders, or warlords can be difficult to carry out. History shows that in many cases governments end up talking to those they once branded as terrorists. A policy of always trying to talk would be more consistent. Talking to the Taliban right after the allied invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 could have resulted in a negotiated solution when the Taliban was at its weakest. Instead, the idea of talking to the Taliban only gained traction after they had regained their strength.

The International Criminal Court's Darfur genocide charges against Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir made it difficult for the international community to engage with him during the peace negotiations with South Sudan. In the end, he let South Sudan go ahead and establish the new nation in 2011. Many American envoys consequently wanted to reward Sudan for this through reduced sanctions and increased contact. However, none were able to carry this policy through in Washington.<sup>2</sup> Omar al-Bashir is still an influential man in the region and has met with his South Sudanese counterpart Salva Kiir during the course of the ongoing Ethiopian-led negotiations. A policy of holding leaders accountable for crimes is obviously important, but talking to al-Bashir was also necessary for those wanting to create lasting peace in the region.

### **Counter Argument: Munich**

A common example used by those opposed to engagement with terrorists and dictators is the 1938 Munich Agreement between Chamberlain and Hitler. It is argued that Chamberlain's peace efforts in Munich led to appeasement; dialogue is said to have only encouraged and emboldened Hitler. Once again, this argument should be further examined.

One may argue that Chamberlain's biggest mistake was speaking to Hitler and trying to negotiate a peaceful solution. However, negotiating to avoid the potential horrors of war was surely worth trying. Chamberlain should not be judged by history for talking to Hitler, but rather for what he said; by giving up Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain indicated his desperation to accommodate Hitler at the expense of his principles. Hitler obviously understood and reacted to this weakness. Therefore, Chamberlain's biggest mistake was giving in to Hitler, not the mere act of engagement.

Another example is Sarajevo. In 1914, the major European states stumbled into an unwanted war. Leaders with narrow visions were unable to consider their adversaries' perspective. The leaders brought upon the world a war much longer and bloodier than anyone could have anticipated. The First World War took a great toll on all parties, and there was hardly anyone who gained. Three empires went under, while Communism and Nazism flourished.

It is hard to imagine that the First World War could not have been avoided through negotiations. Preferable outcomes may have been achieved if visionary and flexible leaders had really tried.

## **Counter Argument: Evil**

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George Bush said, “No nation can negotiate with terrorists, for there is no way to make peace with those whose only goal is death.”<sup>3</sup> Vice President Dick Cheney came out even more forcefully stating that, “We don’t negotiate with evil; we defeat it.”<sup>4</sup> Bush and Cheney’s remarks reflect the position according to which dialogue is hopeless and no settlement is feasible, as terrorists are perceived as mad psychopaths and irrational evil-doers.

This is, quite simply, wrong. In any case, one would have to speak to terrorists to verify or reject the notion of “evil terrorist.” It is probably true that some terrorists will stop at nothing and must be defeated militarily. But many others are rational actors seeking power and influence through violent means. Several terrorist groups have been convinced to lay down their arms and integrate into democratic politics.

The U.S., on many occasions, talked to terrorists and even provided mediators to negotiate with them. Northern Ireland is one of many examples. Another example is the Nepali Maoists who were once condemned by most diplomats as “mad terrorists” beyond reason. This image was proven wrong when mediators spoke to Nepali Maoist leaders Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai in India, leading to a breakthrough in the negotiations. Later, these leaders returned to Kathmandu as democratic politicians after 20 years of conflict, finally winning the 2008 election. Both later became Prime Ministers of their country.

Prior to this summit, the U.S. and many other nations refused any contact with them. However, a meeting between the American ambassador to Nepal and the Maoists, which was held in the Norwegian embassy in Kathmandu, was a crucial first step. Through talks, it quickly became apparent that the Maoists were not as crazy as their reputation may have suggested.<sup>5</sup>

## **Counter Argument: Do Not Reward Terrorists**

The third argument against talking to terrorists emphasizes the fear that speaking to perpetrators of violence may be seen as rewarding such behavior.

Some may question the value of engaging violent actors while ignoring a peaceful opposition; they may claim that if arms and a history of violence are a prerequisite for engaging in negotiations, more groups may be encouraged

to arm themselves. There is some truth to this assertion, and the argument should not be dismissed. However, the unfortunate reality is that peace processes must involve those who command the arms. The potential benefits of talking must be weighed against the cost of not doing so.

It can be argued that all relevant parties should be included in the talks, regardless of the basis of their relevance and influence. The more inclusive the peace process, the more successful it is likely to be. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela brought everyone into one “big tent.” Even white fascists advocating for continuation of apartheid and black extremists who wanted to expel all the whites out of South Africa were invited. Their views were heard, but the voices of progressive whites accepting the tide of history and blacks preaching reconciliation were the dominant force leading the negotiations.

Mediators faced this dilemma from the very beginning during the peace negotiations in Sri Lanka. The Tamil Tigers claimed to be the sole representative of the Tamil people. They insisted on talks being an exclusive exercise between themselves and the government of Sri Lanka. This inevitably excluded many other relevant groups. Most importantly, it excluded the Muslim community and the Sinhala opposition party. But it also excluded Tamils who were opposed to the Tigers and Tamils who agreed politically with Tigers but did not support violence. Negotiators constantly tried to make the peace processes more inclusive, but with little success. Both the Tamil Tigers and the government accepted that negotiations were solely for the two entities that commanded an armed force.

Peace processes ought to be as inclusive as possible. It is extremely important to try to involve those with broad public support but no army. However, at the end of the day, peace is about keeping weapons off the playing field. Generals and guerrilla commanders are normally more important in this regard than civil society activists. If terrorists win huge concessions after taking up arms, others may indeed be tempted. But once again, talking is not the same as giving in to unreasonable demands.

### **Counter Argument: Do Not Legitimize Terrorists**

Those opposed to talking often stress the fear of legitimizing terrorists. This argument is not without merit; there will often be many cameras present

when talks are initiated with terrorists. They will be given a platform from which to speak to the media. They may be seen from a more sympathetic angle and possibly given an opportunity to mobilize further support.

This was the main argument throughout the peace process in Sri Lanka. Critics argued that the dialogue with Tamil Tiger leader Prabhakaran was providing him legitimacy and respect. Consequently, at times the government of Sri Lanka was reluctant to allow any contact with him. The Norwegian negotiators in Sri Lanka became the only non-Tamils speaking to him. In essence, contact with Prabhakaran became a reward for “good behavior” on his part.

In the end, this isolation probably became the main obstacle for the peace process. It was only Prabhakaran who could make peace, not Tamil farmers or the rank and file of the Tamil Tigers. But he was isolated and knew very little of the wider world outside of Sri Lanka. The peace process would have benefitted from wider engagement with Prabhakaran. The international community should have overwhelmed him with visits, explaining what he could potentially achieve for the Tamil people and where the limits were drawn. International leaders could have legitimized Sinhalese views in the eyes of the Tamils and vice versa.

Isolated and with little contact outside the Tamil world, the Tamil Tigers made huge political and military mistakes. These mistakes, combined with a new and more aggressive approach with fewer restrictions on killing innocent civilians from the government in the capital Colombo, became a major reason for the downward slide of the peace process after 2004-2005. It is possible that those mistakes could have been avoided through more international contact and warnings to Prabhakaran from visiting ministers and diplomats. Few Tamils were able to give unwanted advice to the leader. The international community could have done that.<sup>6</sup>

Awarding terrorists legitimacy is a real concern. But this risk must be weighed against the benefits of talking. Providing legitimacy to valid points of view can be a good thing.

### **Counter Argument: Terrorists Refuse to Talk**

Just as many states refuse to talk to terrorists, many terrorist groups refuse to talk to states. A strong stance against talking is in many cases a public

position taken by the parties to a conflict, while in reality they are indirectly or directly engaging in other ways. However, in some conflicts it is an absolute position. How does one engage with terrorists if they themselves refuse to engage with you?

The most obvious solution is to explore the possibility of a third party mediator. One must accept that it can take time to prepare the ground for talks. But no conflict is static. Those who refuse to talk today may be compelled or feel forced to talk to each other further down the road. The key is to build broad networks and identify negotiators to whom states and terrorist groups may be willing to speak. Religious networks, tribal structures, civil society activists, and business leaders can be efficient intermediaries.

Prior to the “Anbar Awakening” (a Sunni movement that had risen in Iraq in 2006), terrorism was on the rise and Iraq was on the verge of full scale sectarian and civil war. By reaching out to tribal leaders and Sunni groups, U.S. General Petraeus was able to build alliances to combat foreign and al-Qaeda fighters while reducing violence. The “Anbar Awakening” was established through a local tribal leader who rallied other tribal leaders to fight and secure their communities while negotiating with the Americans for support. Many of the Sunni groups were involved in direct conflict with American soldiers, and it would have been very difficult to establish such an alliance without a mediator who understood tribal codes and concerns.<sup>7</sup>

States and terrorists often refuse to engage in deliberations, but that can change quickly. The Taliban in Afghanistan refused to negotiate in general, and the U.S. and many other states refused to talk to the Taliban. However, gradually everyone understood such a rigid approach did not work. Informal talks are a good way of building networks and preparing the grounds for the day when the warring parties are persuaded to talk. Religious, tribal, and business leaders can all play an important role as both informal and formal mediators of talks when parties to a conflict have rejected talks.

### **Engage on Behalf of the Powerless**

Negotiators facing moral qualms about whether or not to talk to terrorists or violent leaders should ask themselves one simple question: what do those suffering from the oppressing policies or the bloodshed want to achieve? Talking to a dictator who is persecuting his people and ruining an entire

country can feel futile. This was the sense when meeting Zimbabwean President Mugabe at his presidential palace in Harare. The once great freedom fighter was leading his country towards economic ruin and sending people to their deaths.

Most Western governments had a policy of isolating Mugabe. Even dialogue-preaching Norwegian colleagues questioned the purpose of talking to a man who had shown little interest in bringing his country forward. One particular meeting took place at the request of Tendai Biti, the Minister of Finance from the Democratic Movement. Only a few months earlier Biti had suffered beatings by the Mugabe regime and taken refuge in the Norwegian embassy. He pleaded for Norwegian ministers to meet Mugabe. The reason was that the weak coalition government needed to find a way forward and that path entailed showing Mugabe sufficient respect. The idea was to encourage him to walk along with the coalition government and not turn his back on them.<sup>8</sup>

Still, most Western countries refused to talk to Mugabe and they insisted that it was a matter of principle. A fair enough principle, but it is not Western heads of state or newspaper editors who suffer under Mugabe. It is important to remember that the ten million Zimbabweans living in extreme poverty suffer the most. The democratic forces like Biti and then-Prime Minister Tsvangirai were forced to deal with Mugabe every day and they believed that engagement was the right way forward.

Speaking with brutal leaders can raise a variety of moral dilemmas and personal qualms. However, a negotiation is not about the mediator's personal feelings or preferences. Conflict mediation is about setting it right for the victims of wrongs. It is about those who do not have a seat at the table, but are living with conflict and violence every day.

## **Engage Because Leaders are Isolated**

Merely trying to engage with others can provide insights that lead to solutions and help avoid mistakes. This is one of the most underestimated reasons for the efficacy of deliberations; leaders may appear crazy and often act in ways that defy logic, but this erratic behavior can be explained by the fact that they are isolated and misinformed. Many presidents and guerrilla leaders have never heard anything but praise. They are seemingly revered and may

even see themselves as God's gift to the Tamils, Singhalese, Zimbabweans, Sudanese, Iraqis, or humanity. They are constantly told that a greater, wiser, braver, and more benevolent leader never walked this earth. Such isolated leaders can easily become deluded.

There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein completely misinterpreted the military and political situation in both wars involving the U.S. Saddam's advisors were no more than petrified minions whose main objective was to try to figure out what Saddam most wanted to hear. Cases like Saddam's Iraq or North Korea are extreme. But this problem is much wider than we tend to anticipate, even in more democratic societies.

Mediators are often the only ones with nothing to lose from telling the truth. The peace mediator can be the only party with the ability to tell a leader that he or she is completely misinformed about what the international community believes, unrealistic in their goals, or plain wrong about the strength of the country or organization's military force.

The first crisis for the new state of South Sudan referred to sharing oil revenues with neighboring Sudan, which still controlled all the pipelines bringing oil to world markets. SPLM, the ruling party and former guerrilla group, wanted to stop the oil flow through the north and have China build a new pipeline to the sea across Kenya. The idea of cutting off Sudan in the north was hugely popular in the south. There was full support of this decision in the government. Only foreigners could tell them this was plainly irrational as oil revenues account for 98 percent of the South Sudanese budget. The government could not provide education, health services, and roads without the income from oil. People tend to take to the streets and rebel when governments stop providing services. It was equally unreasonable to think that the government could ask China to build anything after having berated them in the media, threatened to stop the flow of oil destined for China, and unilaterally raised tensions with China. Indeed, negotiators were able to get an oil revenue sharing deal six months later.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the world is often equally misinformed about the intentions of secretive governments or the true nature of guerrilla movements. Talking can prevent such misunderstanding and identify possible solutions. Conflicts are rarely about what the leaders of conflicting parties say in public. Leaders often make grand statements about historical injustice, national security,

or the wellbeing of the people. But leaders are more often concerned with their own wellbeing rather than with the noble cause they claim to front.

Talking through others is always an option. One of the main duties during the Sri Lanka peace negotiations was to channel messages and information back and forth between the Tamil Tigers, India, and the U.S. Both nations had proscribed the Tamil Tigers and did not want to engage directly. But both were eager to establish an indirect channel through Norway. Americans preferred to relate to the Tamil Tigers behind the scenes. There were also secret meetings between India and the Tamil Tigers. Then American deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage even came to Norway and shook the hands of the Tamil Tiger chief ideologue Anton Balasingham. The only condition was: no photos.

### **Engage Because You Can Resolve “Minor” Issues**

Not all engagements lead to declarations of peace, democratic breakthroughs, and high profile signing ceremonies. Some engagements lead to better conditions for prisoners or easier access for humanitarian workers. A few released prisoners of war mean everything to their families. Red Cross access to the rest means a lot to those who remain. No one who has seen the joy in the eyes of a mother getting her son back would disregard such victories as “minor” issues.

Success breeds success in peace talks. Any little agreement on a specific issue may bring the entire process forward. However, there are equally many smaller issues that can threaten to unravel the entire process. It usually takes a long time and many small victories before the larger issues can be resolved.

### **Engage Because Success is Possible**

There are many great success stories in the last decades, resolved through mediation and engagement: Nepal, El Salvador, and Mozambique, to mention a few. Both Colombia and the Philippines seem to be on the verge of triumph and peace as well.

The guerrilla leaders of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in 2001 were living in modest apartments in a working class district outside of Stockholm, Sweden. The Aceh conflict seemed intractable and it did not appear likely that they would ever return to their homes in Indonesia. However, the conflict

was peacefully resolved four years later thanks to the mediations by Finnish President Ahtisaari, the foresight of Indonesian President Yudhoyono, and the persistence and flexibility of GAM leaders. The GAM leaders returned from Stockholm and ended up elected leaders of the province. It was even more impressive when the Indonesian government and GAM pulled off the development miracle in Aceh, one of the most successful reconstruction efforts following a natural disaster anywhere in the world. Around 200,000 people died in Aceh during the Asian 2004 tsunami and much was destroyed, but today the province is a model of reconstruction.

Another example of a peace miracle is Myanmar. Many people in the West became “Burma activists” after the violent crackdown on democracy activists and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar in 1988-90. There was broad public support for a boycott of the military government. This strategy was increasingly questioned during the 1990s; in Norway, for instance, some were beginning to argue that engagement was more likely to succeed than isolation. Although criticized by activists and questioned by some allies, from 2005 the Norwegian government slowly began establishing links to the military junta.

Myanmar’s turn towards democracy was motivated by nationalism. The military leaders realized how underdeveloped Myanmar had become compared to neighboring Thailand and China. They decided to open the gates, and provide for development, economic growth, and prosperity. The nationalists also understood that national security is vulnerable when you only have one friend in the world, namely China. Myanmar’s isolation slowed down the reform process. It would probably have happened faster with more engagement earlier on.

## **Conclusion: Talking is Worth Trying**

Talking to terrorists may be meaningless, but we will never know unless someone tries. We may demonize each other but most humans are basically the same. Those involved in war and peace may agree that the process is haphazard and subject to factors such as mood and personality.

The fact that Jonathan Powell, the lead British negotiator, initiated peace talks with the IRA in a small farmhouse somewhere in Northern Ireland rather than the grand halls of London was probably influential. Food was a

recurring problem during the peace process between the Tamil Tigers and the government in Sri Lanka. Not everyone loves salmon, reindeer, and potatoes as much as Norwegians, and even \$1000 plates of Japanese delicacies can be a bad substitute for rice and curry in the eyes of Tamils or Singhalese. Issues related to venue, food, the shape of the negotiation table, or the set-up of chairs are crucial; pragmatism, hospitality, and flexibility may contribute to success. Solutions to conflicts do not only come from rigorous analysis, brilliant strategies, or flawless organizations. Breakthroughs can happen in chaotic exchanges of text messages or over a drink in the early hours of the morning. Talking is important because people start conflicts and only people can end them. Talking is the only way to find out whether the person sitting across is indeed a demon or a rational person worth talking to.

In conclusion, talking is worth trying because it can resolve conflicts and war. Talking is the most consistent policy. Talks will not always succeed, but talking will not make matters worse unless one gives in to unreasonable demands. Talks will succeed often enough to be worthwhile and are worth trying to avoid something as horrible as war, even if there is just a miniscule chance of success.

## Notes

- 1 M. Ncube, B. Jones, and Z. Bicaba, *Estimating the Economic Cost of Fragility in Africa, Working Paper Series No. 197* (Tunisia: African Development Bank, 2014), p. 24.
- 2 Erik Solheim, *Politikk er å Ville* (Politics is Wanting) (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2013), p. 88.
- 3 G. Bush, "Remarks on the Situation in the Middle East, April 4, 2002," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States 2002*, Book 1, p. 546, ISBN: 9780160723193.
- 4 M. B. Reiss, *Negotiating with Evil: When to Talk to Terrorists* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2010), p. 19.
- 5 Solheim, *Politikk er å Ville*, p. 97.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Greg Bruno, "Backgrounder: Finding a Place for the 'Sons of Iraq,'" Council on Foreign Relations, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/finding-place-sons-iraq/p16088>.
- 8 Solheim, *Politikk er å Ville*, p. 80.
- 9 Ibid., p. 87.