

Three Reasons Why We Should Negotiate With Terrorists

Contributed by Steve Gillman
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Are there ever reasons why we should negotiate with terrorists at all? It's easy to say no, but let's look at where that leads. First of all, many people take "negotiate" to mean conceding something of value, and so supporting the other side's evil intentions, or at least giving them credibility. Combine this with a broad definition of terrorists and you get the extreme view that we should never even talk to those who support terror.

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Now consider this dictionary definition of negotiate, "To confer with another or others in order to come to terms or reach an agreement on a matter." To "come to terms" by talking? That seems like a good idea, doesn't it? It doesn't necessarily mean supporting anything.

{bot_wrgoogle}As an example, suppose a terrorist group sets up camps in a country and promises some evil action. Representatives of the intended victims "negotiate" with them, meaning they sit down to talk. They outline how once attacked they will hunt down and kill all attackers. If the terrorists move out of the country and cancel their plans though, they'll be left alone. The bad guys come to terms with that and move out.

Unrealistic? There are many historical examples of aggressors backing down when confronted with the likely consequences of their plans. Other options are always available in any case. Doesn't it seem very unwise to say we'll never talk to bad people? Actually, it can be an incredibly immoral stance since the alternative to a talk may be to wait and watch thousands be killed by these criminals. For what? So a country or leader can display some kind of principled machismo in public afterwards?

Another scenario: A leader of some country plans to invade an innocent neighbor, one our government has promised to protect. Our president refuses to "negotiate with terrorists" so he makes threats which are on the news repeatedly, and talks about how evil the aggressor country or leader is. This leader is angered by the public criticism and invades as threatened, to which we respond. The resulting war kills thousands.

An alternative scenario: A representative talks to the leader in private, listening to what he has to say, and acknowledging any valid points (even the worst person can be right about something). At some point our negotiator quietly lets the leader know that we'll protect the invaded country, most likely resulting in the death of this leader and the total destruction of his regime. To be convincing, he lays out in some detail how this will be done. Because the leader hasn't been publicly humiliated or challenged, and he sees the consequences clearly, and he wants to live, he cancels his evil plan.

Keep in mind that we talked to leaders in the Soviet Union during the cold war in order to prevent simple misunderstandings from becoming a nuclear war - and theirs was certainly a regime that did great evil. We should be happy that none of our leaders said, "We refuse to talk to people who do such bad things, so we'll just get our nuclear bombs ready now."

Here's another simpler scenario. A bank robber takes hostages and a "hostage negotiator" suggests talking to him, but the chief of police declares, "we don't negotiate with evil," and sends in his officers guns blazing. Innocent hostages die along with the criminal of course. That seems stupid, but the same thing can result from saying we shouldn't negotiate with terrorists at all. We talk to bank robbers because many times in the past a hostage taker has been talked into surrendering. This saves lives. It may be a kind of negotiation, but usually the criminal is simply shown that he'll be more likely to survive if he surrenders.

There is a huge misunderstanding in many people's minds when it comes to "talking" to terrorists. A common impression is that it means encouraging them in their pursuits by giving them credibility or rewarding them. That's possible, and history abounds with examples of appeasement resulting in greater crimes, but this isn't the only possibility. Talking, and

choosing when to confront evil actions - and when not to - is just plain wise. When a man mugs you at gunpoint you're not supporting or agreeing with him just because you talk to calm him down and then hand over your money. There's a better time and place to deal with such a crime, and the same is often true in the international arena.

Why We Negotiate With Terrorists - Three Reasons

1. Warnings can be given and consequences outlined in private, so a leader or group is less likely to go forth with an evil plan because of public humiliation or challenges. Insulting and threatening people with evil intentions might feel good, but it makes as much sense as publicly daring a plane hijacker to start killing the passengers.

2. We can avoid misunderstandings that lead to greater harm if we talk. Isn't it better to avoid those battles which are unnecessary? Suppose a mugger incorrectly thinks you said something insulting and he wants to hurt you. Does it make sense to say nothing, or is it better to correct his mistaken idea?

3. Negotiating or talking delays fighting, which buys time to find the best options. Consider real life bank robbery examples. It's clear that talking to a hostage taker has at times allowed a sniper to get in position for a shot, right?

Do we give too much importance and credibility to rogue leaders and terrorists by sitting down to talk? It's a risk, but there are ways to handle it. Make it clear, for example, that you don't support their goals in any way, but that you'll talk to prevent unnecessary fighting or killing. Be careful not to give tangible support to evil intentions. You're not giving a man support when agreeing to not kill him if he stops attacking you.

Talking may not always help. Sometimes people really are beyond any rationality or even beyond the desire to survive. The latter is rare however, and talking doesn't rule out other options in any case, so again we ask; are there reasons why we should negotiate with terrorists? It seems criminally irresponsible to exclude the option, doesn't it?

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