

What Would Happen If We Did Negotiate With Terrorists?

Written by Tanzil Chowdhury

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TANZIL CHOWDHURY, MAR 7 2013

I know what answer to the above question you're thinking- 'A republican Islamo-Judeo-communist-Basque-Tamil-separatist-animal liberated hybrid society, right?' It's not just that it is so obvious, but also that it roles off the tongue. Indeed, what would the complexion of our world be? Who would be the new ruler or rulers of the world? And perhaps most pressing, which military detention camp would Tony Blair be in? If one imagined that such an avulsive outcome would be the result of negotiations with terrorists, does it presuppose that negotiating would actually lead to such an avulsive change?

It would be impractical to singularly go through every actor that has been vilified with the accolade of terrorist designation and judge each case on its merits. But this has less to do with my questionable work ethic and more to do with the rife uncertainty that contaminates this debate. Firstly, such designation is skewed around an Anglo-Euro centric lens that causes all sorts of problems. That is not to mention that there continues to be no consensus over its definitions; and who could forget that impenetrable implicature that *'one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist.'* Indeed, there are many that would justifiably designate this honourable title to the masters rather than the apparently disobedient student. So then how else can we answer such a question without drowning in a quagmire of 'oughts'?

Before we even start to ask the question, therefore, how do we alleviate ourselves of this subjectivity crisis? It is time to take a short visit to 'Assumption City'- population, we can't be sure. I invite you to, however, *assume* we go down the route of positivistic analysis and *assume* that what 'is' expounds a hypothetical objectivity. In other words, let us *assume*, for arguments sake, that although we may not agree with it, all those that *are* considered terrorist organisations by the primary designators actually *are*. Thus, it seems that our initial criticisms will formulate the basis on which to continue this discussion.

As of the 28th September 2012, the **US State Department** identifies 58 groups as Foreign Terrorists Organisations (FTO) which read like a veritable smorgasbord of Islamist, separatists, communists and every other -ist group one can imagine (they've even thrown in a Jewish and Republican group in there for good measure). The legal criteria for designation requires that the group must be foreign (this is in case the US forget who they are and accidentally designate themselves a terrorist group) that they must engage in terrorist activity as statutorily stipulated (which we have so well **defined**) and that they must threaten the security of the United States.

Here in the UK, we trail slightly behind the country we so dignifiedly serve (as a lap dog to) with **49 groups**, and similarly, statute empowers the Home Secretary to proscribe any organisation she or he wishes, along with certain other discretionary criteria, depending on how she or he is feeling that day. Perhaps where the UK does win is on its diversity, with the surprise introduction of a Sikh group and the wonderful miscellany of unionist organisations too- but of course no terrorist list would be complete without the Jihadi hegemony.

Peter Neumann, in an article he wrote for **Foreign Affairs**, said that such a mantra of supposed principled absolutism is, in reality, populist rhetoric and governments often do 'negotiate with terrorists' (whilst I would disagree with many of the analogies Neumann makes and his overall conclusions, his article does make interesting reading in

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places). Whether negotiating is done in a *meaningful way* is another matter altogether but Neumann cites that popular anxieties are routed in that if we “*give legitimacy to terrorists and their methods and undermine actors who have pursued political change through peaceful means. Talks can destabilize the negotiating governments’ political systems, undercut international efforts to outlaw terrorism, and set a dangerous precedent.*” But a belief like this is merely oratory appeasement- as Neumann’s article illustrates. Such rhetoric establishes a presumption that negotiating would manifest these anxieties.

I’ve yet to see quacking republican Flamingos coming out of 10 Downing Street yet. But perhaps the title needs to be re-jigged slightly to ‘what if we did negotiate with terrorists in a *meaningful way*?’ Whilst both right wingers and liberals (or even right wing liberals!) are probably getting all hot and bothered at the sight of such an amendment and, that I fear my name may now be on a list, such an addition is imperative.

What *meaningful negotiations* consist of is perhaps a topic for another day but what is today’s topic is why, whilst they would be better than what we have now, I think meaningful negotiations would be doomed for failure. To explain why, we need to take a more holistic view of the relationship which ensures.

Since I picked up a text book at University, I can’t help but look at everything in its temporal context. When I meet someone and I think ‘this guy is an ar**ole’, I’ll often tilt my head and think, ‘well he maybe just a nob, but surely something has compelled him like that.’ Whilst it may seem odd to make this analogy, I don’t think that the instance of ‘negotiating with terrorists’ is too dissimilar. Without getting into debates about the metaphysics of causation and temporality, the instance of negotiating with terrorists is often characteristic of ‘*competing temporalities*’. This temporal asymmetry defines such a discourse; on the one hand is a proscribed organisation that derives its ordinance from an historical injustice- its collective conscious is principally located in memory as that is the temporal indices from which it is legitimated. It thinks in the past- and of all the transgressions committed against it. On the other hand, we have the institution of the ahistoric state negotiator- located at the present, fixated with the future and with little consideration of the past- perhaps because it is the past that indicts him.

Thus, the relationship is defined with two competing conceptions of temporality which will inevitably miss one another. It is like two people having a conversation in different languages about different topics. So even if meaningful negotiations did take place, surely failure is inevitable?

If that slightly esoteric argument didn’t convince those shuffling uneasily in their chairs, perhaps this will. Do we think that there would be a revolutionary change if states did negotiate with terrorists? If you think yes, you have probably been the victim of the politics of fear and media sensationalism that affords far too much flattery and importance to many of these proscribed groups which have about as much popularity as erotic children’s fiction. But the cardinal sin that you commit is failing to see why such groups emerge. Without wanting to rally off points from the book of the academic do-gooder that says it is years of neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism and white privilege that has cultivated these groups, as uneasy as it is for many of us to bear, it is difficult to disagree.

Now there are groups which are on the list that perhaps do have a larger stake in the countries they inhabit and thus are likely to make more of an impact. But one designating them a terrorist group does about as much as the Pope did for combating aids in Africa. The US State Department cites that one of the effects of designation is that it *stigmatizes and isolates designated terrorist organizations internationally, heightens public awareness and knowledge of terrorist organizations and deters donations or contributions to and economic transactions with named organizations.[1]*” So what? What does that do to your purported aims? Hezbollah, for example, enjoy significant support in southern Lebanon amongst Sunnis, Shias and non-Muslims and compose part of the Lebanese legislature and the March 8 alliance alongside the second largest part in the Lebanese Parliament. We may think they are bad, but people in Lebanon, for various and convoluted reasons don’t. For example, Hezbollah boast an impressive social services program including the Jihad Al-Binna Foundation, an organisation set up to help with reconstruction efforts following the Lebanese Civil war and Israeli Invasion of South Lebanon in 2006.

But perhaps most importantly, such an unwillingness to speak with these groups that inspire support, pangs of an arrogance and bullheadedness that is good for no one. Indeed, Sinn Fein also illustrates a similar phenomenon in

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their affiliation with the Provisional IRA.

Attempted humor aside, negotiating with proscribed organisations, it seems isn't really a pertinent question to ask. Leaving for now the dizzying heights of Assumption City with its fictional objectivity and the prematurity of my inquisition, I'll end by putting my own hat on; even if we were to negotiate with proscribed organisations, rival world views would render them potentially doomed, and we'd find ourselves drunkenly wandering around the same old cul-de-sac time and time again. Perhaps the question is itself hastily posited- the definition of a terrorist is so frustratingly subjective and fluid- but yet so many lives depend on it. It seemed that we only appeared to be going somewhere when confined by the mythical strictures of Assumption city.

But you know what they say, if you assume, you make an ass of you and me.

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Tanzil Chowdhury is a PhD student in the School of Law at the University of Manchester and is currently researching on the temporality and the ahistoric nature of legal normativity. Read more from the e-IR editors' blog [here](#).

[1] "Foreign Terrorist Organisations" Bureau of Counterterrorism (2012)
<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>