

Political Science

Talking with al-Qaida?

by Hanno Charisius



Rehabilitation of a „terrorist“: Nelson Mandela on his release in 1990, after 27 years in prison. Source: Guy English/ddp images/AP

IRA, Shining Path, PLO. How can societies make peace with terrorist organizations? Political scientist Alexander Spencer looks to history for lessons on how to resolve the current conflict in Afghanistan.

When, in a tape-recorded message in April 2004, Osama bin Laden offered Europe a truce in his campaign of terror, the suggestion was received rather like a declaration of war. Three and a half years after the attacks of 11 September 2001, the world's most wanted terrorist addressed his "neighbors north of the Mediterranean." He was proposing a ceasefire in return for the withdrawal of all European troops from the Arab world; the offer would be valid for three months. Given that the proposition sounded more like an ultimatum than a confidence-building measure, it is hardly surprising that official reactions were emphatically negative.

Reconciliation after Terrorism?

Like other political leaders in Northern Europe, Gerhard Schroeder, who was then Federal Chancellor, categorically rejected the idea. Negotiations with terrorists were ruled out. To Western governments, the very idea of holding peace talks with someone whose actions had caused such widespread panic and revulsion seemed absurd. Schroeder viewed the message as a further provocation rather than as a turning point in an ongoing conflict.

In 2006 another message emerged, with a new proposal. Once again, governments

refused even to consider the option of entering into discussions with al-Qaida's leader. But why was their refusal so unequivocal?

"On the one hand, the rejection of such an idea is all too easy to understand," says Alexander Spencer, a political scientist at LMU's Geschwister Scholl Institut. "But it is puzzling that an accommodation with al-Qaida was not even contemplated, although any credible plan to end the conflict must address the issue."

In "Reconciliation after Terrorism: Strategy, Opportunity or Absurdity?," which Spencer assembled and edited together with Judith Renner of Munich's Technical University, a team of scholars attempts to answer the question posed in the title. The contributors approach the problem from different angles but, as the title suggests, there are no easy answers to the conundrum.

The point of departure for the book was the observation that reconciliation following interstate conflicts is clearly possible, as witnessed by the neighborly relations that now prevail between France and Germany. The obvious implication is that it is easier to look beyond State-sponsored acts of terror than those perpetrated by irregular forces like al-Qaida. "This insight was a surprise," says Spencer. "It ap-

pears that extreme levels of State terror resulting in countless deaths, as exemplified by the Nazi regime, do not preclude the possibility of reconciliation. In contrast, although terrorism exercised by small groups causes much less suffering overall, reconciliation seems to be more, rather than less, difficult. This doesn't seem to really make sense."

Three elements to bring opposing sides together

In order to resolve the paradox, the contributors to the book analyzed a number of conflicts involving governments and terrorist groups. The examples were chosen from different periods and different parts of the world, but by comparing them the authors hoped to identify common factors that were essential or simply facilitated the attainment of a peaceful resolution.

Spencer and Renner point to three elements that can help to bring opposing sides together. "Direct discussions are of fundamental importance." Personal encounters serve to develop an understanding of the other side's point of view, and give one's otherwise faceless opponents a physiognomy and a personality. In the 1990s, face-to-face conversations on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines transformed two sworn enemies →

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into fast friends, and together they got the process of reconciliation off the ground. "Of course, the establishment of a personal friendship does not in itself resolve a complex dispute, but it can help to de-escalate the situation by providing a model and having a positive impact on the atmosphere."

The initial contacts between adversaries, which may involve meetings between intermediaries or informal encounters with a go-between, are usually kept out of the public eye. This avoids provoking the charge that 'the government is selling out to terrorists.' "These early steps are very well documented in the case of the Northern Ireland conflict," says Spencer. There, the first meetings took place long before the perception emerged that it might be possible to bring the conflict to an end. Analogously, Spencer regards it as very likely that American or other Western envoys have long been engaged in secret discussions with Islamist extremists.

A second important, but very tricky, issue involves the question of amnesty. It is terribly difficult to resolve a conflict by rigorous coercion alone, although there are examples in which terrorist groups have been decisively defeated by purely military means. The defeat of the Communist Shining Path network in Peru is perhaps the best known. Following the capture and trial of the entire leadership of the movement, 6,000 activists surrendered their weapons and availed themselves of an amnesty.

"The prospect of an amnesty gives militants a new perspective," says Spencer. One must give ex-combatants a chance to find their place in normal society and take up regular employment. "One must have some idea of what to do with these people when the conflict is over." Again, such arrangements will not be enough

to end all conflicts, but they do give one the chance to get a peace process going.

Concessions by both sides and a willingness to engage with diverging views can only emerge if some degree of rapprochement has already been achieved. Hence, the first concrete signs of accommodation represent important milestones on the journey to a peaceful settlement, as in the case of South Africa. There the apartheid regime had long declared the African National Congress (ANC) to be an illegal terrorist organization. The lifting of the ban in 1989, a small step in itself, marked the beginning of a process of reconciliation that continues to this day.

Investigating the influence of terminology and its use in the media

Of course, to have any chance of reaching agreement, the two sides must be willing to talk in the first place. Most governments refuse categorically to negotiate with terrorists. Therefore, if one is to have any hope of opening talks with terrorist groups, one must come up with a different name for them. In the case of Islamist extremism, there are signs that such a rebranding has begun. In his earlier book "The Tabloid Terrorist," Spencer investigated the influence of terminology and its use in the media on our perceptions of, and responses to, the phenomenon of terrorism.

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, not only the media, but also politicians and policymakers, equated al-Qaida with the Taliban. Spencer and Renner have documented this usage in several official reports issued by the US Government. Under President George W. Bush, the Administration consistently took the view that the two groups were equally responsible for the attacks in the US. And Bush declared that he would make no

distinction between those responsible and those who gave them sanctuary.

Since the arrival of Barack Obama in the White House, this has changed. Official statements now refer to "al-Qaida and its allies." For Alexander Spencer, this signals a decisive qualitative change in attitude. Furthermore, al-Qaida is no longer seen solely as the enemy of the US and the rest of the Western world, but also as a group that bears responsibility for the deaths of thousands of people in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile the media have also begun to adopt the new terminology and now take more care to distinguish between al-Qaida and the Taliban. Indeed, the media may be the driving force behind the change. It is difficult to distinguish between cause and effect here, given the high degree of interdependence that exists between the protagonists and the media that report and comment on their actions. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the nomenclature has evolved.

In the beginning, al-Qaida was primarily perceived in the West as a military threat. This was reflected in the incessant use of metaphors drawn from the military sphere, referring to the group as an "army" whose "soldiers" trained in terrorist "bases" and were led by terrorist "generals." According to Spencer this began to change in 2003, in favor of tags from the world of organized crime. The "general" became the "head of a terrorist gang." Spencer speaks of an insidious but far-reaching process.

Gradually, the new terms percolated into official communiqués and into the newspapers, both tabloids and quality papers. Spencer did not systematically analyze TV or radio reports, but it seems very likely that they were also affected by the trend.



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“There are two possible explanations for the switch, he says. “Either al-Qaida itself changed, from a group organized along military lines to a bunch of dispersed and uncoordinated units, or – and I think this is more likely – our perception of al-Qaida changed.” The images of 9/11 – the planes ploughing into the Towers, the ruins – all conformed to our expectations of an act of war. “Everything that came afterwards took place on a different level. The war metaphors didn’t fit the reports of the search for the culprits. After all, TV stations broadcast items like that every day. “So the media consumer was thrown back on something more familiar and almost normal: common criminality.”

That a process of reconciliation with the Taliban is possible and desirable no longer appears unthinkable. But al-Qaida, a group that is known to be extremely aggressive and ruthless, remains beyond the pale. Similarly, discussions may take place with “moderate” Taliban, but not with extremists. Nevertheless, the terminological distinction has made it possible to initiate discussions. Spencer is convinced that talks are indeed taking place “behind the scenes”.

True reconciliation takes a long time. And it is very easy for the process to be derailed or terminated by new attacks.

And even when talks make good progress, it is highly unlikely that any reasonable settlement will satisfy the most militant elements. As Spencer points out, that is still true of Northern Ireland. There the most extreme factions on both sides of the conflict refuse to have anything to do with the compromise worked out nearly 15 years ago. “And it takes time to gain the backing of the majority of the population.” Is it not just a matter of different generations? It’s not that simple, replies Spencer, while admitting that the passage of time is an important factor in the achievement of reconciliation.

The example of Germany and France after the Second World War demonstrates that reconciliation is possible. However, Spencer regards the case of the US and the Taliban as more problematic, because here the cultural differences are far more pronounced. “But, if the situation were totally hopeless, the US Government would not be thinking about it out loud. Simply entertaining the possibility of talks with the enemy leaves the Administration open to attacks from the opposition. If the government felt that there was no chance of a breakthrough, it would not have given the Republicans such an opportunity.”



Dr. Alexander Spencer has been a staff member of the Chair of Global Governance in the Geschwister Scholl Institute for Political Science at LMU since 2010. Born in 1980, Spencer studied Political Science, Spanish and History at the University of Sussex and the University of Granada, and International Relations at the University of Bristol. He came to LMU in 2005, obtaining his doctorate there in 2010. Spencer has also held teaching and research posts at the Technical University of Munich and the Free University of Berlin. *Reconciliation after Terrorism. Strategy, Possibility or Absurdity?* was published by Routledge in 2012, *The Tabloid Terrorist* (Palgrave Macmillan) appeared in 2010.



Translation: Paul Hardy