

Negotiating with Terrorists

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Gordon Corera

Hello, welcome to Chatham House and this lunchtime event. I'm Gordon Corera, security correspondent at the BBC, here to introduce Jonathan Powell, who will be giving a short talk. Just the logistics first of all. This event is on the record, not under Chatham House rules. It is also being live streamed, so people around the world might be watching us on the internet as we speak. If you want to tweet about it, the hashtag is #CHEvents. Please could you switch off your mobile phones to avoid any interruption. I'll introduce Jonathan. He's going to talk for about 20 minutes or so and then take questions, of which I'm sure there will be many.

Jonathan will be well-known to many people here, so just a brief introduction. He began his career in the Foreign Office, in the diplomatic service, became chief of staff to Tony Blair, serving in Downing Street and most relevantly in this context of course was chief negotiator on Northern Ireland. Now, after leaving government, works primarily for Inter Mediate, where he's taken some of that experience in Northern Ireland to broader issues of conflict resolution, and particularly this issue of talking to terrorists. It's a fascinating book, provocative, and takes a very strong line, but is also backed up by huge amounts of very interesting research and stories about different experiences in different conflict situations. So Jonathan, over to you.

Jonathan Powell

Thank you very much, Gordon, and thank you all for coming. As Gordon described, I've ended up largely by accident dealing with terrorists for the last 17 years. It wasn't anything that I planned at all. Indeed, the first time that I met terrorists, I didn't feel at all warm and cuddly about that. I met Adams and McGuinness towards the end of '97. We did it in a room where there were no windows so they couldn't be filmed meeting us through the windows. The IRA had injured my father in an ambush in 1940 in Northern Ireland. My brother, who worked for Mrs Thatcher, was on their death list for eight years. I'd just spent a year trying to stop Adams getting a visa to go to Washington.

So when I met them, I declined to shake hands with them, as did Alistair Campbell actually who was with me. Neither of us would shake their hands. We sheltered behind a table and they proffered their hands to us. Tony Blair was more sensible and shook their hands warmly as he would with any other individual. It's interesting; it's a story that recurs again and again when I started researching talks with terrorists around the world. It's an issue that always come up. Should you shake hands the first time round?

About three days after that meeting, I got a call from Martin McGuinness and he said, would I come and meet him in Derry and come incognito, not tell the secur-icrats, the police or the army? So I asked Tony Blair and he said, 'Yes, go.' I got on a plane, flew to Belfast airport and took a taxi to Derry. I stood on a street corner feeling rather foolish, like some sort of sub-agent in some plot. Two guys with shaved heads turned up and pushed me into the back of a taxi and drove me around for an hour until I was completely lost.

They then pushed me out of the door by a little modern house on the edge of an estate, and knocked on the door and Martin McGuinness answered the door on crutches, making a not very funny joke about kneecapping, the IRA's favourite way of punishing people.

We sat there for three hours. We didn't really make any breakthroughs of any sort. But then for the next 10 years, I spent my time once or even twice a week crossing the Irish Sea to go and meet them in safe houses in Derry, in Belfast, in Dublin or elsewhere. It came home to me that what was required, if you were going to make peace, is the ability to go onto the other side's turf, not to insist they came to Downing Street, not to insist that they came to Stormont Castle, but be prepared to take some shared risks and meet with them in those circumstances.

It's about building trust, and of course there are limits to how much trust you can build. I remember in 2004 when we were negotiating, we'd negotiated late and we were in a monastery in west Belfast and the monks very kindly gave us dinner in the refectory. I was very worried I was going to miss my plane back to London. I kept looking at my watch and the minute hand had become loose and was swinging around uselessly.

Martin McGuinness very kindly said he would take my watch and get it fixed. There was a very good watch mender at the end of his street in Derry. I said, 'No, no, honestly, really. You don't need to bother. Please don't worry.' He insisted and he took my watch away. He gave it back to me two weeks later and of course, I had to give it to the security authorities to have it checked for trackers. They took it to pieces and broke the minute hand again, so I had to have it fixed at great expense. I'd say there are limits to how much trust you can build in such circumstances.

For me, Northern Ireland, at least in retrospect, was the most important and most satisfying thing I've done in my life, or am likely to do in my life. I was very interested to try and find out how general the lessons I'd learnt from Northern Ireland were, whether they really applied elsewhere. Certainly there is no Northern Ireland model. You can't take what happened in Northern Ireland and put it down somewhere else. That would be ludicrous. The causes of conflict and the solutions are different in every conflict.

But it's interesting for me having looked back over the last 30 years and actually longer, at pretty much all of the terrorist conflicts around the world, particularly those since the end of the Cold War. Actually, there are patterns. There are patterns to what works and patterns to what doesn't work. When something fails in Sri Lanka, it may well be for the same reason it failed in Colombia. If it succeeds in El Salvador, it may have succeeded for the same reason in the Philippines. Therefore, I think it is worth trying to draw some lessons.

The first lesson for me at least is that we always say that we are never going to talk to terrorists and we always do in the end. Lloyd George in 1919 said, 'We will never talk to this murder gang,' the IRA. Two years later, he was reaching out through an agent to try and get hold of the leadership of the IRA. He was trying to get them into negotiations. He used his young private sector, who also had a Welsh name, to try and engage Sinn Féin in negotiations and he had a negotiation even in the same room that we negotiated with Adams and McGuinness in Downing Street.

We repeated that throughout our colonial history. If you think of Begin, we called him a terrorist, particularly after the King David Hotel, we hunted him down. We welcomed him later as a statesman. If you think about Kenya, [indiscernible], we locked up in the north of the country as a terrorist. We released him to come and negotiate with us. We signed a treaty with him and called him a statesman. We did the same with Archbishop Makarios, who we sentenced to exile in the Seychelles. We brought him back, negotiated peace with him, and had him elected as the first president of Cyprus.

It's not just us who do it. If you look at the French, too, in Algeria, very much the same position. President Mitterand, who at that time was the interior minister of France when the war with the FLN started said, 'We'll never talk to the terrorists.' By the end, de Gaulle was negotiating with them secretly in Switzerland and that's what brought the conflict to an end. It wasn't just us.

But what we seem to suffer from is a sort of collective amnesia. We never remember what happened last time and we never remember the lessons that we learned from the time before. As a result, we nearly always start negotiating too late. As General Petraeus put it in the case of Iraq, where he says that the Americans left it too late to talk to people with American blood on their hands. You need to be prepared to do that. Hugh Gaitskell I think captures it best when he says that, 'All terrorists end up with tea at the Ritz as guests of Her Majesty's Government.' That is largely the history of our decolonization.

Now the arguments against talking to terrorists are fairly obvious. Appeasement, George W Bush made a speech to the Knesset in 2004, in which he said talking to terrorists was tantamount to appeasement, it was similar to Munich. It seems to me that the point of Munich is that it was not necessarily a mistake trying to talk to the Germans to avoid another catastrophic world war. It was a mistake to think that you could buy Hitler off with a slice of Czechoslovakia.

Talking to terrorists is not the same as agreeing with terrorists. The British government would never have negotiated a united Ireland at the end of the barrel of a gun against the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. That was never going to be a subject we even discussed with Republicans. Nor should it be with any other of these groups. So talking is not agreeing. Agreeing is appeasement. Talking is not necessarily.

The second argument is that you give legitimacy to an armed group by talking to it. That is undoubtedly true. Terrorist groups, in my experience, always crave legitimacy. They want to be talked to. They want to be seen to be talked to. So you are rewarding them in doing so.

I don't, however, think that that is a conclusive argument against talking to them. That legitimacy is largely temporary. In other words, to take for example the FARC, in 1999, President Pastrana started negotiations with the FARC at Caguan. They got legitimacy; they got time on TV; they were able to get their message across. However, when it became clear that they weren't at all serious about negotiations, when it became clear that they were simply fooling around and went back to war, they lost legitimacy and indeed they became even more delegitimized as a narco-terrorist gang. So it seems to me that you can at least argue that legitimization is a temporary price worth paying, because it will only be a temporary price.

Lastly, people argue that you should not reward bad behaviour. You should not encourage other people to take up weapons by talking to terrorists. But that, it seems to me, is to assume that talking to someone is a reward and not talking to them is a punishment. At least for adults, that's not usually the approach we take in our normal life. If you talk to someone, you can discover more about what they think. You can find out where they're coming from. It seems to me thinking of it as a punishment is a very odd way to do it.

The really conclusive argument, I think is that if you look back over history, there doesn't seem to be a very obvious alternative to talking to terrorists if you want to end an armed conflict. Now, I am excluding from that miniscule groups that have no political support. So if you lump in a Baader-Meinhof, a Symbionese Liberation Army, or even the Brigati Rossi into that category, they seem to me to be something completely different. They do not enjoy widespread political support.

But if you're dealing with a group, like the FMLN in El Salvador, like GAM in Indonesia, has real political support... In the end, you need to find a political solution. Certainly Hugh Ward who was the chief constable in Northern Ireland when the Troubles ended says he knows of no example anywhere in the world of terrorism being policed out. General Petraeus said of Iraq that we could not kill and capture our way out of an industrial strength insurgency. I think that applies anywhere where you have this political element.

Some academics have suggested that we can deal with terrorist groups by decapitation, by taking out the leadership. But the examples of that are not at all promising. If you look at Öcalan and the PKK, Öcalan was arrested and for a short while, PKK violence went down. But it went back up again and exceeded what it had been when Öcalan was free shortly afterwards.

The same is true of Hamas after the killing of Sheikh Yassin. There are not many examples of where taking out the leadership really changes things. There's Shining Path, which I deal with in the book, even that, it seems to me, it not a proof of it. The one example that's quoted as how you can end terrorism by violence or by security measures is Sri Lanka. I think that does bear looking at. However, I don't think Sri Lanka really sets a model that any Western county could conceivably follow in dealing with terrorist organizations.

If you talk to the Norwegian negotiators who worked on the Tamil Tigers, they will tell you that Prabhakaran, the leader of the Tigers, was considered to be a military genius. In the end, he turned out to be a military fool. He decided to fight a conventional campaign against a conventional army. He suffered from hubris. Had he actually fought a guerrilla campaign, he would still be out in the bush fighting, because it would have been impossible to defeat him. He made it possible to suffer a defeat.

Secondly, the methods used by the Sri Lankan army to finish off the Tigers and a very large number of civilians, at Nanthi Lagoon, would simply not be available to a Western government or a democratic government in our sense.

Lastly, the Rajapaksas actually failed to deal with the political issue at the heart of the problem. Even after they had victory, they did not give the sort of representation, the sort

of autonomy to the Tigers that the Tigers craved. That of course is one reason why they lost the election recently and why now there is a government that is addressing the political problem.

So it is true that in a dictatorship you can suppress terrorism simply by security means. Stalin had no difficulty whatsoever in dealing with terrorists. The problem even in dictatorships is that when you've dealt with them in that way, they tend to come back again. When the Soviet Union collapsed, we had Chechnya back again. We had the rest of the Caucasus back again. These conflicts are frozen. They're not dealt with. You haven't dealt with the political issue and it will come back and get you.

It is, of course, extremely difficult for democratic governments to be seen to be talking to terrorist groups. John Major stood up in the House of Commons and said it would turn his stomach to talk to Gerry Adams. He would never do it. At exactly that moment, he was corresponding with Martin McGuinness, the commander of the IRA, and thank goodness he was. If he had not been doing so, we would not have got to peace in Northern Ireland. That had to happen.

Government leaders are often very keen to deny such contacts. In Spain, every Spanish prime minister up to now had denied they are talking to ETA, and up to now, every single Spanish prime minister has negotiated with ETA. Adolfo Suarez, the first prime minister after Franco, got up in the Cortes and said he would never speak to ETA. The leader of the opposition, Felipe Gonzalez, got up and said, 'But last night over dinner, Prime Minister, you told me you were talking to ETA.' Suarez got up again and said, 'I'm not talking to ETA and will never talk to ETA,' while he was negotiating with them.

So governments do deny that. I had a rather moving conversation the other day with Colin Parry, the father of Tim Parry, the 12 year old child who was blown up by the IRA in Warrington. Colin said if someone had told him that the British government was talking to the IRA when his son lay dying in his arms, he would have been horrified.

If someone had told him that six months later, he would have been delighted, because then he knew that there was going to be a peaceful settlement to this conflict, that his son would not have died in vain and there would be something that his death signified. I think that's something you actually find in quite a few places around the world.

Because of this, it's often intelligence agencies that start these contacts. Nearly always, it's an intelligence agency that opens the first channel. In the case of here, the British, we opened a channel in 1972 with the IRA through SIS, and that channel was crucial at a number of points – the 1974 ceasefire, the 1980 hunger strike, and crucially, between 1991 and 1993 and the correspondence between Major and the IRA. A similar thing happened in South Africa. It was the NIS who started the first conversations with Mandela, and they who opened the first channel of conversations with the ANC in exile in Switzerland.

Making contact is not always that easy. Armed groups don't sit in nice offices that you can pop in and call on them. They don't have addresses you can easily get to them. They are covert groups. Approaching them is quite hard. Sometimes the oddest ways can work. One of my colleagues who was trying to negotiate with the Nepalese Maoists just couldn't

find a way to get to them. Eventually he fired off an email to their website, shiningpath.com, in honour of the Peruvian rather horrible Maoists. And to his great surprise, he got a reply. After several months, that turned into a meeting in an unfinished skyscraper in Delhi.

Another had to contact the leadership of GAM in Stockholm, had no idea how to get hold of them, but knew the name of the leader and worked his way through the Stockholm telephone directory until he got the right person with that name, who interestingly wanted to see him and said no one had talked to him for 30 years of conflict. Finally, someone had come to talk to him and he was ready to negotiate.

The one thing I'd say about these sorts of contacts is that they take a lot longer than people think. There is an educative function you have to go through which really is time consuming. Many terrorist groups live in ghettos, often literally as well as figuratively, and they only talk to people who share their views. To try and break them out of that, and indeed for the governments to understand better what they think, you need really quite a long period of conversation. People think that you can just suddenly go like this, and you're going to have a negotiation. That is not the way that it works.

I'm going to have to miss out most of the things I wanted to say, because I do want to get to the questions, which will be a lot more interesting than what I have to say. But let me just say two or three things.

One is that I'm saying you should always talk to terrorists. I'm not saying it is always the right moment to negotiate with terrorists. Those are two different things. Looking back over history, the times when negotiations seem most likely to succeed are when there are two factors in play.

The first is what the academics call 'a mutually hurting stalemate'. You need to have in place not just a military stalemate, not just 'nice, I can win'. But both sides hurting and realizing that they cannot win. In Northern Ireland, for the British army it happened towards the end of the 1970s, beginning of the 1980s, they realized they could contain the IRA forever, but they were not going to be able to annihilate it.

Likewise, I think Adams and McGuinness realized in about the mid 1980s that they could go on fighting forever, that they were never going to be wiped out by the British security authorities, but nor were they going to drive the Brits out. They could see their sons, daughters, cousins, getting killed, getting arrested. This could go on forever, and that's when they reached out to John Hume, to the Irish government, eventually to the British government.

There is a generational aspect to this, interestingly. They had joined the Republican movement very young. By the mid 1980s, they were well past fighting age and they could see the fruitlessness of it. You see the same thing with the FARC in Colombia at the moment. Most of the members of the seven man secretariat are in their 60s. It's a lot less fun running around in the jungle with gout or lumbago or things that we elderly people suffer from, than it is when you're younger and you therefore tend to sue for peace.

The second factor that tends to have a big impact is having strong leaders. I think one of the reasons in the Middle East there isn't success at the moment is the lack of that sort of strong leadership in a negotiation. If you think of South Africa with Nelson Mandela, and F.W. de Klerk, you needed to have both of them to succeed in a peace process. That seems to be generally true when processes succeed.

In the case of Northern Ireland, we were very lucky to have someone like Adams and McGuinness who actually risked their lives to get to peace as well as their jobs. And David Trimble and Ian Paisley, too, who also took very brave steps in order to bring about a peace settlement, and to have had Bertie Ahern in Ireland and Tony Blair in Britain in power for 10 years and willing to take risks for peace.

In his autobiography, Tony Blair accused me of saying he had a messiah complex, and that's why he was able to solve Northern Ireland. It was actually Mo Mowlam, who some of you may remember of rather colourful turn of phrase, who told me that Tony thought he was effing Jesus. Which is not entirely the same thing as a messiah complex, but it's sort of related. It does seem to be that if you have strong leaders, willing to take risks, who believe that they can solve peace, then you are more likely to have a chance of getting to a settlement.

There are all sorts of things I'd like to say to you, but I'm not going to dwell on it. I would like to in discussion come to ISIL and whether we should talk to ISIL, which I was going to cover but I'll cover that in questions. Let me try and conclude.

It seems to me that terrorism is not going to go away, even if we were by a miracle, to overcome ISIL and overcome Al Qaeda, there would still be new terrorist groups that would appear. Terrorism is not something you're going to cure. We've had it for several centuries and it will continue to be there. There's no technological answer, no number of drones or jungle penetrating radar will finish the problem for you. It makes it easier, but there's then an arms race for the terrorists who develop new ways of coping with those weapons.

The American military and marines have revised their counterinsurgency strategy twice in the last decade – once after Afghanistan, and once after Iraq. The first time what they did was they added something we learned in the campaign in Malaya, back in the 1950s, which is the importance of hearts and minds. How do you actually win over communities who are supporting the terrorist group, what Mao Zedong called 'the water they swim in'?

So they added that, and the second time around, they added what they call reconciliation. What they meant by reconciliation in that context was simply buying off groups of the Taliban, in that case, trying to persuade them to leave the insurgency. That doesn't really solve the problem.

My contention is you need both of those. You cannot conceivably deal with terrorist groups without security measures and intelligence. You also need to address the grievances that they feed on. My contention is you need the third element, which is talking. If you think about it, if you put military pressure down on a terrorist group, they will resist to the last man. They will fight to the death. They will not surrender.

If you offer them a political way out with no pressure, they won't take that political way out. You have to offer them the two together – the military pressure down, and the political way out. Fighting and talking at the same time. If we look back at history, that is what seems to succeed.

The other lesson is, you don't necessarily succeed the first time you try and end the conflict. In Northern Ireland, we had Sunningdale in 1973 – failed. Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 – failed. Downing Street Declaration in 1993 – failed. But the Good Friday Agreement didn't come from nowhere. It was built on those previous steps. If you look at other conflicts around the world, you'll find that same progression, a series of false summits that lead eventually to a successful peace process.

I would argue that even the Middle East peace process, for example, frustrating as it seems, endless as it seems, the fact that it's failed every time before does not mean necessarily it will fail again, if you had the components I was talking about.

There's an interesting thing that happens when you come to an end of the peace process and you move suddenly from the problem being insoluble, to the solution being inevitable. Northern Ireland, Churchill, Thatcher, everyone had thought Northern Ireland was insoluble. When we concluded the agreement, it was thought to be inevitable. It was about the economic circumstances; it was about 9/11 and it was about the penetration of the IRA.

It's very important that people understand both those things are wrong. There is no such thing as an insoluble conflict, and there is no such thing as an inevitable conclusion of a conflict. Unless you have people who work at it, you will not get to a conclusion.

I think what I've concluded by looking back over these 30 years, and longer, back about 100 years or so – you can solve a conflict, as long as you do have strong leadership, as long as you have the patience for the process which will take a long time, much longer than you expect. And if you can at least try and remember what happened last time, and make some new mistakes instead of repeating the mistakes of others again and again. Thank you very much.