**Negotiating with Terrorists**

Dr. James K. Esser

University Professor of Psychology  
College of Arts and Sciences

Negotiating with Terrorists  
For most of us terrorism hit home on September 11, 2001. On that day al Qaeda  
terrorists hijacked three commercial airplanes, destroyed the Twin Towers in New York,  
and severely damaged the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Almost 3000 people were killed  
in the attacks.  
The response by the United States, led by President George H.W. Bush, was a  
declaration of war – the “global war on terrorism”. The implication was that we would  
find those crazy terrorists who were responsible for this outrage and we would kill them.  
  
We certainly were not going to talk to the terrorists. We were not going to negotiate with  
them and try to persuade them to stop killing U.S. citizens.  
It seems obvious. We are the good guys; terrorists are the bad guys. The common  
arguments are that “democracies must never give in to violence, and terrorists must never  
be rewarded for using it. Negotiations give legitimacy to terrorists and their methods and  
undermine actors who have pursued political change through peaceful means. Talks can  
destabilize the negotiating government’s political systems, undercut international efforts  
to outlaw terrorism, and set a dangerous precedent” (Neumann, 2007, p. 128). In  
addition, negotiations can give time to terrorists to rearm themselves for the next act of  
terrorism. Finally, negotiations can cause splits between moderates and hardliners within  
the terrorist group and this can lead to more violence by the hardliners (Duyvesteyn &  
Schuurman, 2011).  
Yes, it seems obvious that we should not and do not negotiate with terrorists. But  
we do it all the time. Here are just a few examples. The Afghan government and  
moderate elements of the Taliban have been “talking” since 2003 (Wither, 2009). And  
earlier this year there were news reports that the U.S. and the Taliban have been involved  
in some preliminary talks. Just last year (Michaels, 2011) Israel negotiated a prisoner  
exchange deal with Hamas. An Israeli soldier kidnapped by Hamas and held for more  
than five years was exchanged for approximately 1000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons.  
Previously, Israel had negotiated several prisoner exchanges with Hezbollah (Levy,  
2011).  
What is terrorism?  
  
Most of us think we know terrorism when we see it, but exactly what is terrorism?  
There are lots of definitions, but we can say that terrorism is, at its core, “the strategic use  
of fear to advance one’s objectives” (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006, p. 46). Usually, that  
means that terrorism is violence targeting civilians and its purpose is to destroy their  
support for leaders and/or policies that the terrorists find objectionable (Carr, 2003). It  
also means that terrorist violence is a tool or a method used by the terrorists to achieve  
their goals (Carr, 2003; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006; Telhami, 2004). This is important  
because, at least potentially, most terrorists have other tools in their toolbox as well –  
tools such as media campaigns, diplomacy, and, in the right circumstances, even  
negotiation.

Who is a terrorist?  
It is often said that one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter. This  
statement highlights the fact that we apply the terrorism label to those whose politics we  
oppose, but not to those we favor. During the Arab Spring of 2011, we in the United  
States did not consider the insurgents in Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya to be terrorists.  
However, because of our strong support of Israel, insurgents in the Middle East such as  
Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) are considered  
terrorist organizations. From the perspective of the terrorists their cause is just.  
Occasionally, the terrorist is a single individual. For example, Ted Kaczynski,  
also known as the Unabomber, carried out his private campaign of terrorism while living  
as a hermit in a cabin in Montana. However, most acts of terrorism are carried out by  
members of terrorist organizations. In 2010 the U. S. State Department listed 55 foreign  
terrorist organizations. This number is larger when other countries add their favorite  
terrorist groups to the list.  
And what about the individual terrorists – the members and leaders of terrorist  
organizations? Are they crazy fanatics? Psychological research (see review by Horgan,  
2005) seems to say “no.” There is no psychological trait or psychopathology that  
distinguishes terrorists from the rest of us. Likewise, there is no evidence for some direct  
situational cause, such as poverty or lack of education (Bodansky, 2001; Krueger &  
Maleckova, 2002). Instead, we can view individuals who become terrorists as the end  
result of a four stage funneling process (Moghaddam, 2005). Initially, the pool of  
potential terrorists is huge – these people perceive that they and/or their people are  
deprived and unfairly treated relative to others. Some of these people attempt to improve  
themselves, but if they can see no way to eliminate the perceived injustice, they will be  
vulnerable to influence by leaders who encourage them to direct their frustration and  
anger toward an enemy. Some of these people gradually begin to buy in to the morality of  
the terrorist organization and begin to see terrorist violence as justified. Some of these  
people are recruited into the terrorist organization. Conformity and obedience are  
required, and their thinking continues to evolve toward a rigid us-versus-them worldview  
which legitimizes the terrorist organization. Finally, some of these people are selected  
and trained for specific acts of terrorist violence – these few individuals view anyone  
outside their own secret group, including civilians, as part of the enemy (Sageman, 2004).  
How negotiations with terrorists work  
The Oslo Talks. To understand the way that negotiations with terrorists actually  
work, we start with a psychological theory of how the good guys (leaders of democratic  
governments) and the bad guys (leaders of terrorist organizations) decide to begin  
negotiating. Readiness theory (Pruitt, 2007, 1997) is a revision of Zartman’s (1989, 2000)  
earlier ripeness theory. According to readiness theory, the readiness of each leader to  
negotiate depends on his motivation to end the conflict and his optimism about the  
success of the negotiation. A leader’s motivation is higher when he believes that the  
conflict cannot be won militarily or that it is too costly or risky to continue. The leader’s  
motivation can also be increased by pressure from allies or powerful third parties. A  
leader’s optimism is increased when he perceives that the other side has a valid  
spokesman and when he perceives that negotiation will not require the sacrifice of his  
side’s core objectives. Full readiness for negotiation is higher when the situation is  
symmetrical – when the leaders of both sides are motivated and optimistic.  
Now consider an example – the 1993 negotiation between the government of  
Israel and the terrorist group the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The  
negotiation has come to be called the Oslo talks and the resulting agreement is known as  
the Oslo Accords. In the years leading to the beginning of the Oslo talks, the desire to end  
the conflict had been growing. The PLO, led by Chairman Yasser Arafat, had been  
supported both politically and financially by the Soviet Union and most of the Arab  
countries. This support first was reduced by the breakup of the Soviet Union. More  
recently, the Arab countries had reduced their support of the PLO in retaliation for the  
PLO’s support of Iraq during the first Gulf War. Arafat was also finding it difficult to  
effectively lead his terrorist movement in Palestine and Israel from his headquarters in  
exile in Tunis. On the other hand, Israel had recently had to contain a Palestinian uprising  
(or intifada). Thus, maintaining control over both the West bank and Gaza was seen by  
many Israelis as a costly and thankless task (Lundberg, 1996; Makovsky, 1996). In  
addition, the rise of militant Islam in the form of the Hamas movement in Palestine was a  
new and important motivator for both sides. Hamas was a threat to replace the PLO and  
with it Yasser Arafat’s position as leader of the Palestinians (Corbin, 1994). From the  
Israeli perspective, if Hamas were to replace the PLO, then this fundamentalist  
Palestinian group could ally with Iran (a fundamentalist country) and together they would  
represent a serious military threat to Israel (Makovsky, 1996). So both the leader of the  
PLO and the Israeli leadership had reason to be motivated to negotiate. However, it could  
be argued (Pruitt, 1997) that Arafat’s motivation was greater, because his control of  
Palestinian politics was seriously threatened.  
In June 1992 Yitzhak Rabin became Prime Minister of Israel; his Labor Party  
platform had included the promise to negotiate some sort of autonomy for the  
Palestinians. This was cause for some increased optimism on the part of Arafat and the  
PLO. However, because the PLO was a terrorist organization, it was not recognized by  
Israel and it was illegal for Israelis to talk to the PLO. Israeli optimism was increased by  
its awareness of the PLO’s weaknesses – its losses of financial support and political allies  
and the growing strength of Hamas.  
The Oslo talks were organized in a roundabout, secret way (Pruitt, Bercovitch &  
Zartman, 1997). A Norwegian sociologist (Terje Larsen) was studying the living  
conditions of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Larsen’s wife (Mona Juul) was a  
senior officer in the Norwegian foreign service. During the 1992 election campaign,  
Larsen met with a senior Labor Party member (Yossi Beilin). They discovered that they  
both held the opinion that direct talks between Israel and the PLO were necessary for  
peace in the region. After the 1992 election Beilin became Israel’s Deputy Foreign  
Minister. Because as a member of the Israeli government he could not talk to the PLO,  
Beilin asked Larsen to help set up an indirect contact with the PLO. So Larsen hosted a  
meeting in London between Yair Hirshfeld, a senior lecturer at Haifa University, who  
had close ties to Palestinian community leaders, and Abu Ala, who was Yasser Arafat’s  
economic advisor. This initial contact led to a series of 12 secret negotiation sessions  
from January to August 1993. The meetings were held in various locations in or near  
Oslo, Norway. The cover story for the first meeting was that this was an academic  
seminar. The meetings were hosted by Larsen, his wife Juul of the foreign service, Jan  
Egelund from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, and (at later sessions) the Norwegian  
Foreign Minister Johan Jorgan Holst (Pruitt et al., 1997). There were three PLO  
representatives: Abu Ala, Hassan Asfour and Maher el-Kurd (Pruitt et al., 1997). The  
Israelis were represented by two academics, Hirshfeld and Ron Pundak, who were not  
authorized as official spokespersons for the Israeli government. Their instructions were to  
try to determine what the PLO really wanted and how serious they were about the  
negotiations; however, the PLO representatives did figure out that the Israelis were not  
just there as academic researchers (Abbas, 1995).  
The negotiators quickly decided to focus on substance, rather than on procedure.  
They developed plans for Israel to turn over Gaza to the PLO and refined these plans  
during several early meetings. The Norwegians provided the facilities and were available  
to help the negotiations progress as smoothly as possible; but they did not try to impose  
their ideas or suggestions on the substance of the talks. When the talks were not in  
session, Larsen also promoted the process by acting as a messenger between the Israeli  
and PLO representatives.  
A key to the early negotiations was the fact that the PLO delegation included  
Abu Ala who had the authority to speak for the PLO and Chairman Arafat. However, the  
Israelis did not initially know if Abu Ala had this kind of relationship with Arafat. So  
they asked Egyptian President Hosni Mubarik, who was able to confirm that Abu Ala  
was in a position within the PLO to speak for Arafat (Savir, 1998). The Israelis also  
tested Abu Ala by asking for concessions from the PLO outside of the Oslo talks. When  
Abu Ala passed these tests (Peres, 1995), Israeli optimism about these talks was  
increased; Rabin now believed that he was dealing with a valid spokesperson for the PLO  
and the Palestinians. Therefore, Rabin and Shimon Peres, the Israeli Foreign Minister,  
decided to send Uri Savir, the Director General of the Foreign Ministry, to join the  
negotiations after the fifth meeting. And Joel Singer, a legal advisor to the Foreign  
Ministry, was added to the Israeli delegation after the sixth meeting. Upgrading the level  
of authority of the Israeli delegation by providing a valid Israeli spokesperson, in turn,  
created greater optimism on the part of Arafat and the PLO.  
The remaining negotiation sessions produced increasing working trust between  
the two sides as each side made more concessions. However, the negotiation involved  
hard bargaining and at least twice the talks threatened to break down. In each case the  
Norwegians intervened and convinced the two sides to continue the negotiations Corbin,  
1994; Pruitt et al., 1997). And the final details of the agreement were concluded in a  
series of telephone calls from Stockholm, Sweden in which Norwegian Holst talked to  
Arafat and his key advisors in Tunis, relayed their comments to Peres who was with  
Holst in Stockholm with two advisors; Peres then consulted by telephone with Rabin in  
Israel, while Holst relayed Peres’ comments to Arafat (Abbas, 1995; Peres, 1995; Pruitt  
et al., 1997).  
After the Israeli cabinet approved the agreement, an official signing ceremony  
was held on September 13, 1993 at the White House in the United States. The Oslo  
Accords represented a major breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian relations. They set the  
stage for the establishment of the Palestinian Self-Government Authority in the Gaza  
Strip and in Jericho, which later was extended to other West Bank towns. They also  
authorized the PLO to establish its own Palestinian police force. Rabin and Arafat  
exchanged letters in which the PLO renounced terrorism and recognized the existence of  
the state of Israel and its right to security, and Israel recognized the PLO as the legitimate  
representative of the Palestinians. The Oslo Accords also committed Israel and the PLO  
to future negotiations (Pruitt, 1997).  
The Oslo talks were typical of negotiations with terrorists because they involved  
secret, backchannel talks. The advantage of secret talks is that the possibility of full  
blown negotiation can be explored without the declaring a ceasefire, which could be seen  
as a sign of weakness or which could allow the terrorists to rearm themselves. Secret  
talks also have the advantage that they prevent the political opposition within each side  
from using the talks to brand the leader as “soft” or disloyal and to attempt to oust the  
leader. In the Oslo talks most of the secret, backchannel communication involved direct  
talks between high level Israeli and PLO representatives. However, the Oslo talks also  
included a few instances where these backchannel talks were conducted indirectly  
through intermediaries; the Norwegians talked separately with the PLO members and the  
Israelis, then relayed messages between them.  
Usually, secret backchannel talks are used in a pre-negotiation phase to explore  
the possibility of more official, publicized negotiations. The secret talks allow each side  
to determine whether the other’s demands are flexible, without committing to irreversible  
concessions. Secret talks in the pre-negotiation phase are often used to set procedures and  
narrow the gap between the two positions before official negotiations begin. So when  
they are successful, secret backchannel talks often produce the optimism needed for each  
side to be willing to meet the other’s preconditions (such as a ceasefire or a statement  
renouncing violence) for official, publicized negotiation.  
So the Oslo talks were also atypical because the entire negotiation process was  
conducted in secret. In this case the Israeli cabinet and later the whole world was  
surprised when the agreement was announced. The fact that the entire negotiation was  
secret was partially responsible for the failures of the Oslo Accords, as well as its success  
(Pruitt, 2006). More hawkish groups on both sides of the conflict who had no input in the  
negotiations – most notably Israeli settlers and Hamas – did not feel bound by the  
agreement; in fact, they actively opposed it. The result was suicide bombings by Hamas  
and the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Rabin in 1995 by a disgruntled, right-wing  
Israeli. In the end the extremist spoilers derailed the peace process.  
The Northern Ireland peace process. As a second example of how negotiations  
with terrorists work, now we turn to the Northern Ireland conflict. Let’s start with a little  
background. The island of Ireland had been ruled by Britain for hundreds of years, but  
the native Irish people had always resented it. After a three year guerilla war, in 1922 the  
southern 26 counties achieved their independence and later became the Republic of  
Ireland. However, Northern Ireland, composed of the northern six counties, remained  
under British rule. The reasoning for this was that two-thirds of the population of  
Northern Ireland considered themselves British. Those who considered themselves  
British were called “unionists” and were mostly Protestants, descended from Scottish  
settlers. The minority in Northern Ireland who considered themselves Irish was called  
“nationalists.” They were mostly Catholics, descended from the original, native Irish  
people.  
After 1922 Northern Ireland was dominated both politically and economically by  
the unionists, which created tensions between the unionists and the nationalists. But the  
real conflict, known as “the Troubles” started in 1968. The Troubles began after several  
nonviolent nationalist demonstrations were violently disrupted by pro-unionist police and  
other unionists who viewed the demonstrations as a threat to the unionist power in  
Northern Ireland. This led to fighting between nationalists and unionists. The British  
response was to send in troops; then in 1972 the British replaced the local government,  
which had been unable to deal with the violence, with direct rule by Britain. During this  
time the terrorist group the Irish Republican Army (IRA) began its fight to support the  
nationalists. The IRA mainly targeted the unionist police, British soldiers, and  
government officials; but unionist civilians were also killed or injured. Several unionist  
paramilitary groups also began terrorist activities by retaliating for IRA attacks with  
attacks on nationalist civilians. The British then attempted to regain control of the  
situation by arresting and imprisoning alleged IRA members without trial – a policy  
called internment. Internment did not work; it led to the imprisonment of innocent people  
and produced a backlash among the nationalist population. It produced new recruits for  
the IRA and more IRA violence (Beggan, 2006; McKittrick & McVea, 2002; Moloney,  
2002).  
By the late 1980s and early 1990s the British government first led by Margaret  
Thatcher and then by John Major began to question whether the IRA could be defeated  
militarily (Pruitt, 2007). At the same time Sinn Fein, the political arm of the IRA, was  
attracting increasing numbers of supporters. In terms of Pruitt’s (2007) readiness theory  
these concerns about the strength of the IRA and Sinn Fein should have increased the  
British leaders’ motivation to end the conflict. The British had also begun working more  
closely with the Republic of Ireland to fight the IRA, especially when terrorists fled to  
safe havens in the south. And the Republic of Ireland began pressuring the British to  
negotiate (Mallie & McKittrick, 2001) – another source of motivation to end the conflict.  
For the IRA and Sinn Fein the realization that their aims could not be achieved by  
acts of terrorist violence occurred earlier – by the mid 1980s (Pruitt, 2007). In 1987 Gerry  
Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein, stated in a published interview that he believed that no  
military solution was possible and that Sinn Fein’s goals could only be attained by  
political means (Taylor, 1997). This admission that the IRA could not win is a good  
indication that Sinn Fein was motivated to end the conflict. Also during the mid 1980s  
Sinn Fein began looking for political allies, namely the Irish government, the Social  
Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP; the largest nationalist political party in Northern  
Ireland and which advocated nonviolence), and the Northern Ireland Catholic Church  
(English, 2003). The Catholic priest Alec Reid became an important intermediary in the  
secret communications between Sinn Fein leaders and the Irish prime minister and  
between Sinn Fein leaders and John Hume, the leader of the SDLP (English, 2003;  
Moloney, 2002). These new allies agreed with Sinn Fein’s goal of a united Ireland, but  
they also argued that this solution required the consent of the unionists (Moloney, 2002:  
Taylor, 1997). So the pressure from their moderate allies was another source of  
motivation for Sinn Fein and the IRA to end the conflict by negotiating. After being  
granted a visa by the Clinton administration, in 1994 Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams made  
two trips to the United States to try to add the Irish American population to the coalition  
of allies supporting the goal of a united Ireland. These trips were quite successful because  
Adams responded to the American desire for an end to the violence by calling for a  
peaceful solution to the conflict and because the IRA began a ceasefire in August 1994  
(O’Clery, 1997). So pressure from another ally (the Irish Americans) was another source  
of motivation for Sinn Fein and the IRA to end the violence and attempt to negotiate an  
end to the conflict.  
Starting in 1988 optimism about the favorability of the outcome of a potential  
negotiation increased fairly steadily for both sides (Pruitt, 2007). During this time secret  
backchannel communications between Sinn Fein and the British allowed each side to  
assess the other’s interest in negotiation and to signal its own interest. These secret talks  
led to several important concessions by each side. The British approved of the idea of  
Irish self-determination, made public statements that they had no self-interest in  
maintaining control over Northern Ireland, and indicated a willingness to negotiate with  
Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein accepted the presence of British troops in Northern Ireland for an  
unspecified number of years, acknowledged that unionists must also be  
consulted/persuaded in order to move toward a united Ireland, and dropped their socialist  
political philosophy. This spiral of reciprocal concessions represented a lowering of  
aspirations by each side and produced increased optimism that a mutually satisfactory  
negotiation outcome was possible. The secret talks and the concessions which they  
produced also fostered the development of working trust – the belief that the other side  
would be flexible enough that a successful negotiation to be possible. So by 1996 enough  
motivation and enough optimism had been developed for the two sides to have the  
readiness for peace talks to begin.  
The Northern Ireland peace process is more easily understood if we recognize the  
fact that on both sides of the conflict there were several different groups which  
participated in the conflict and who influenced the course of the peace process. Central  
coalition theory ((Pruitt, 2007) generalizes readiness theory with its focus on only two  
opposing parties to the conflict to the multiparty case. According to central coalition  
theory, all who participate in a negotiation can be thought of as a coalition of parties who  
are working together to resolve the conflict. All these parties have sufficient readiness to  
enter and stay in the negotiation. However, the degree of readiness differs among these  
parties. We can think of the parties as forming a political spectrum ranging from hawks to  
moderates to doves on one side of the conflict and from doves to moderates to hawks on  
the other side of the conflict. Doves on either side of the conflict have a higher readiness  
to negotiate, are more flexible in the concessions they are willing to make, and share  
more values with their counterparts on the other side of the conflict. Hawks, on the other  
hand, have a lower readiness to negotiate, hold more extreme views, and are less likely to  
trust those on the other side. A central coalition is composed of neutrals plus doves, who  
form the center of the political spectrum, and often includes moderates on both sides of  
the conflict. Generally, a very narrow central coalition, which includes only doves, may  
negotiate an agreement, but it is unlikely to be honored by the moderates and (especially)  
the hawks who were not included in the negotiating coalition. This is exactly what  
happened in the Oslo talks. On the other hand, when a broad central coalition is formed,  
including moderates and at least some hawks on both sides of the spectrum, the chances  
of a successful negotiated settlement are much higher. When the hawks are well  
organized and well armed, central coalition theory suggests that the central coalition must  
be even broader – broad enough to include the bulk of the hawks and politically isolate  
the remainder. Otherwise, the hawks are likely to use violence to sabotage the negotiation  
process or the negotiated agreement.  
The unionist side of political spectrum in Northern Ireland in 1987 consisted of  
Britain in the middle as a neutral party (which leaned slightly toward the unionists), two  
moderate unionist political parties -- the United Unionist Party (UUP) and the  
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and two hawks – the paramilitary groups (the Ulster  
Defense Association or UDA and the Ulster Volunteer Force or UVF). These extreme  
unionists were also called loyalists. On the nationalist side of the political spectrum were  
the government of the Republic of Ireland (a dove), the moderate political party the  
Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and three hawks – Sinn Fein and the IRA,  
and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA; a small paramilitary group even more  
extreme than the IRA). These extreme nationalists were also called republicans. In 1987  
none of the parties were ready to negotiate and therefore there was no central coalition  
(Pruitt, 2007).  
By 1997 most of the parties had developed a readiness to negotiate. A central  
coalition had formed (Pruitt, 2007), including the British government (still a neutral  
leaning toward the unionists), the moderate UUP, the main loyalist paramilitaries (UDA  
and UVF) which had become more moderate, but not the DUP party which had become  
more extreme. On the nationalist side the central coalition included the Republic of  
Ireland government (a dove), the SDLP (a moderate), and the IRA and Sinn Fein  
(republican hawks who had become more moderate). Two small republican groups did  
not join the central coalition – the INLA (still the most extreme group) and the Real IRA  
(which had split from the IRA when the IRA chose to join the negotiations). Note that the  
nonviolent DUP was the largest party which opposed the negotiations, but since the DUP  
was not an armed group it was not a serious threat to sabotage the negotiations. On the  
other hand, the Real IRA and the INLA were armed and motivated to try to sabotage the  
talks by committing acts of terrorist violence. However, the IRA turned against these  
spoilers and, for the most part, was able to prevent them from acting.  
Secret backchannel talks set the stage and produced the broad outline of the final  
agreement. The formal negotiations began in early1997 and, after Sinn Fein entered the  
negotiations in September 1997, the negotiations proceeded more seriously. These  
negotiations included three parallel negotiation strands: (1) talks about a new form of  
governance of Northern Ireland, (2) talks about a new relationship between Northern  
Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and (3) talks about a new relationship between  
Britain and both parts of Ireland. Former U.S. Senator George Mitchell was the chair of  
the entire set of negotiations. Toward the end of the negotiations Mitchell set a deadline,  
indicating that all negotiation sessions would close with or without agreement on April 9,  
1998. On (Good Friday) April 10 an agreement was reached. The agreement has come to  
be called the Good Friday Agreement (or, less frequently, the Belfast Agreement). The  
agreement called for an end to British rule and the establishment of a provincial  
government in Northern Ireland, police reform, decommissioning of arms, release of  
paramilitary prisoners, and established a clear level of involvement for the Republic of  
Ireland in the affairs of Northern Ireland (and the Republic of Ireland formally renounced  
its claim to Northern Ireland). In a referendum held in May 1998 95 percent of voters in  
the Republic of Ireland and 72 percent of voters in Northern Ireland supported the Good  
Friday Agreement.  
The implementing of the Good Friday Agreement hit a rough spot in 2002. The  
IRA still had not fully disarmed and there were indications that the IRA had not totally  
given up their illegal activities. As a result the unionists were on the brink of pulling out  
of the provincial government. Therefore the British dissolved the provincial government  
and reestablished direct rule of Northern Ireland. However, most of the terms of the  
agreement have been honored. The IRA completed its disarmament in 2005. Although  
real problems still exist, the Good Friday Agreement has held and the armed conflict in  
Northern Ireland has ended.  
The Basques and Spain. Our third example of negotiations with terrorists is the  
case of the Basques and Spain. The conflict between Basque separatists and the Spanish  
government has been characterized by violence for more than 40 years. On the Basque  
side the terrorist group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna “Basque Homeland and Freedom”)  
and its political wing Batasuna (“Unity”) have the goal of the establishment of an  
independent Basque state. Batasuna has been outlawed by the Spanish government since  
2003. On the other side the Spanish government, represented by its ruling parties the  
center-left PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol “Spanish Socialist Workers Party”;  
1982-1996 and 2004- 2011) and the center-right PP (Partido Popular “People’s Party”;  
1996-2004 and 2011-present), has insisted that Spanish sovereignty over the Basque  
Country be maintained.  
First, we need to review some history. Before the beginnings of recorded history,  
the Basques were already living in the valleys of the western Pyrenees straddling presentday  
Spain and France. Despite many invasions of the Iberian Peninsula, the Basques  
remained isolated, governed themselves, and maintained their own culture, language, and  
legal system (Douglass & Bilbao, 1975). The Basques retained their Fueros, the  
traditional laws established for the Basque people by their own representative assemblies  
(Bridges-Esser & Esser, 2006), until the mid 19th century when the Basque Country was  
fully incorporated into Spain. Then in the late 19th century industrialization of the region  
caused the immigration of large numbers of workers from other parts of Spain, which  
further undermined traditional Basque society. The final straw occurred when the Spanish  
Civil War ended in 1939 and the dictator Franco began a systematic “Spaniardization” of  
the Basque Country. Franco drove the Basque government into exile, outlawed political  
parties and trade unions, repressed the Basque language (and other regional languages),  
and tried to erase the Basque culture and historic national identity. The Franco regime  
singled out Guipuzcoa and Vizcaya for special punishment, naming them “traitor  
provinces” while conceding limited autonomy to the pro-Franco provinces of Navarra  
and Alava (Kern, 1995).  
After Franco died in 1975, Juan Carlos I de Borbon became King of Spain. He  
began a process of reform, which led to the establishment of a parliamentary monarchy.  
A new constitution was written and approved in a referendum in 1978. However, a  
majority of voters in the Basque Country either abstained or opposed the new  
constitution. This opposition was based on two concerns: (1) the new constitution did not  
grant the right of self-determination to the regions within Spain, and (2) the Spanish army  
was given the responsibility to preserve the unity of Spain (Idoyaga, 2002). The first  
concern was partially addressed the following year when the Statute of Gernika granted a  
degree of self-government to the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country  
(composed of three historical provinces: Vizcaya, Gipuzcoa, and Alava). From 1980 to  
2009 the Basque regional government was led by the center-right Basque Nationalist  
Party (Partido Nationalista Vasco; PNV). The PNV and other moderate nationalist  
Basque parties have promoted Basque nationalism without violence from within the  
Spanish system.  
ETA was formed in the late 1950s with the goal to defend the Basque language  
and culture and to resist Franco. Its methods became increasingly violent, progressing  
from robberies and bombings that resulted in property damage until 1968 when a member  
of the Spanish national police (Guadia Civil) was shot and killed at a checkpoint (Clark,  
1990). ETA accelerated its terrorist activities during the 1970s while Spain made the  
transition to democracy and has continued into the 21st century. The main targets of ETA  
violence have been police and politicians, but many civilians are also among ETA’s  
victims (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2009). The response by Spanish authorities has been harsh.  
Suspected ETA members and their supporters have been detained and sometimes tortured  
while in custody. In addition, during the 1980s a vigilante paramilitary group called GAL  
(Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberacion “Antiterrorist and Liberation Groups”) carried out  
kidnap, torture and murder of approximately 25 Basques in France. Most of those killed  
were members or supporters of ETA, but some were not (Woodworth, 2001).  
Subsequently, GAL was exposed as a collection of mercenaries apparently funded by the  
Spanish Ministry of Interior (Sanchez-Cuenca, 2009).  
Since the mid-1970s representatives of ETA and the Spanish government have  
had sporadic, behind-the-scenes contacts, both directly and through intermediaries. Most  
of these talks yielded no positive, tangible results. The most recent opportunity to  
negotiate an end to the “Basque problem” occurred in 2006 (Esser & Bridges, 2011).  
Applying readiness theory to the 2006 peace process, the readiness of both the Spanish  
government and the Basque terrorists (ETA and Batasuna) to negotiate seems to have  
increased beginning in 2004 (Esser & Bridges, 2004; Esser & Bridges, 2011). For ETA  
and Batasuna, the motivation to end the conflict seems to have been fueled by a loss of  
popular support for the tactics of violence, even among Basque nationalists, after the  
March 11, 2004 train bombings in Madrid (now attributed to an al Qaeda-related group)  
and by the weakness of ETA after the arrests of many of its members by Spanish and  
French authorities. After some 40 years, ETA was no closer to a military victory, but its  
activities were increasingly risky for its remaining members. On the other hand, ETA’s  
optimism that negotiation could be successful was increased after the March 2004  
Spanish election by newly elected Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero’s apparent flexibility  
on the Basque conflict. Basque optimism increased again after Zapatero’s May 2005  
offer to hold talks if ETA would end its violence. Secret backchannel talks conducted  
through intermediaries in Norway and Switzerland during 2005 produced a preagreement  
outlining the format and content of formal negotiations to be held in the  
future. So ETA and Batasuna were ready for formal negotiations: they were motivated to  
end the conflict and, perhaps more important, they were very optimistic that negotiation  
could lead to a successful resolution of the conflict.  
For the Spanish government, the Madrid train bombings also provided motivation  
to end the Basque conflict. Although the train bombings were not related to the Basque  
conflict, they drew attention to the costs of continued terrorist violence if the Basque  
conflict were not resolved. Despite the successful arrests and prosecutions of ETA  
members, ETA had always been able to recruit new members and continue its violent  
activities. So it was unlikely that the Spanish government would ever be able to totally  
defeat ETA. On the other hand, Zapatero’s Spanish government had increasing reason to  
be optimistic that negotiation was possible and that it could lead to a permanent end to  
ETA’s violence. In March 2004 ETA announced that it might be willing to talk with the  
new Zapatero government. Then in November 2004 Batasuna presented the Anoeta  
declaration – a peace proposal modeled on the Northern Ireland negotiations. Given a  
ceasefire, ETA and Batasuna would participate in separate negotiations involving  
different issues. ETA would negotiate with the Spanish government only on technical  
issues involving the release of ETA prisoners, the return of exiles, and disarmament.  
Batasuna and all political parties in the Basque Country would negotiate on all political  
issues. This proposed model for negotiation would free the Spanish government from  
criticism for “negotiating with terrorists.” The secret backchannel talks in 2005 and the  
resulting pre-agreement certainly increased the optimism of the Spanish government that  
this time a negotiated settlement was possible. Thus, the Spanish government was  
motivated and optimistic; the Spanish government was ready for formal negotiationa.  
In March 2006 ETA announced a permanent ceasefire. Zapatero’s first response  
was to take time to verify that ETA was honoring the ceasefire. Then, at the end of June  
2006, he announced that the Spanish government would begin talks with ETA during the  
summer. The talks were postponed several times, but finally began in the fall of 2006. In  
the meantime youth gangs of ETA sympathizers carried out a campaign of  
demonstrations and street violence. In late October ETA members carried out a robbery  
of more than 300 pistols from a French arms warehouse. The next day the European  
Union Parliament narrowly endorsed the Spanish government’s peace process. However,  
despite the endorsement, the close vote was generally seen as a setback for the peace  
process. In December ETA and Spanish government representatives angrily walked out  
of a negotiation session; and on December 30, 2006, ETA bombed a five-story parking  
lot at the new terminal of Madrid’s Barajas airport, killing two people. Although ETA  
issued a statement on January 9, 2007 that it considered the ceasefire still active, the  
airport bombing effectively ended the 2006 peace process.  
What went wrong? Central coalition theory illustrates a key difficulty in the 2006  
peace process. At the start of the peace process the government led by Zapatero and his  
socialist (PSOE) party represented the doves and moderates on the Spanish side of the  
conflict. The opposition PP (led by Mariano Rajoy) represented a sizeable minority of  
hawks. Although Zapatero reached out to the PP to join the peace process, Rajoy and the  
PP vigorously opposed the negotiations. This lack of bipartisan support for the peace  
negotiation meant that a large central coalition was not in place on the Spanish side of the  
conflict. The hawks on the Spanish side succeeded in delaying the start of the  
negotiations and prevented the Spanish government from taking conciliatory actions that  
might have kept the hawks on the Basque side from abandoning the peace process.  
On the Basque side of the conflict, most doves and moderates were represented by  
the moderate Basque nationalist political parties (those that supported Basque autonomy,  
but not violence as a means to achieve it). The largest of these was the PNV, which had  
lead the Basque regional government since the first post-Franco elections. The central  
coalition on the Basque side was broader than on the Spanish side, including many hawks  
represented by Batasuna and ETA. However, by the fall of 2006 the hawks who were not  
securely included in the central coalition continued to arm themselves, threatened to  
renewed violence, and ultimately carried out the airport bombing in Madrid, which  
effectively scuttled the peace process.  
Although many conditions favored the attempt to negotiate a settlement, the  
process failed for several reasons. On the Spanish side, Prime Minister Zapatero did not  
have sufficient political capital (or political will) to make conciliatory gestures or to  
reciprocate concessions quickly enough to keep the process on track. The opposition to  
the peace process by the powerful minority PP effectively tied Zapateo’s hands. On the  
Basque side, Batasuna was not strong enough to lead ETA, to keep the hawks in the  
central coalition. Meanwhile, the moderate PNV seemed strangely uninvolved. The  
Spanish government could have strengthened Batasuna by legalizing the party; Batasuna  
could have strengthened the Spanish government’s position by renouncing violence.  
Instead, each side played to its hawks.  
What about al Qaeda?

We have seen that negotiation with terrorist organizations is possible. It does not  
always lead to a successful resolution to the conflict, but when the timing is right and the  
groundwork is properly laid, negotiation is possible. But what about al Qaeda? Some  
(e.g., Neumann, 2007; Pruitt, 2006) would argue that al Qaeda is different. Al Qaeda is  
sometimes called an “absolutist” terrorist group because its demands are so extreme and  
so inflexible (Hayes, Kaminski & Beres, (2003). Therefore, the argument (Pruitt, 2006)  
goes, you cannot negotiate with al Qaeda; rather, the more appropriate strategy is to  
isolate al Qaeda and negotiate with those who support at least some of al Qaeda’s goals,  
but who are not members of al Qaeda (in central coalition theory terms, these are the  
moderates). Others (cf. Miller, 2011) argue that it is possible and preferable to negotiate  
with al Qaeda. The key is to lay the proper groundwork. At one time the PLO was viewed  
as too extreme, too absolutist to negotiate with. The same also could be said of the IRA  
and ETA. I believe that it is quite conceivable that at some point in the future secret,  
backchannel talks with al Qaeda will begin.

References  
Abbas, M. (1995). Through secret channels. Reading, England: Garnet.  
Beggan, D. M. (2006). State repression and political violence: Insurgency in Northern  
Ireland. International Journal on World Peace, 23, 61-90.  
Bodansky, Y. (2001). Bin Laden: The man who declared war on America. New York:  
Random House.  
Bridges-Esser, C. & Esser, J, K. (2006). A proposal for peace in the Basque Country: The  
Fueros and the Ibarretxe Plan. Lamar Journal of the Humanities, 31, 25-34.  
Carr, C. (2003). The lessons of terror: A history of warfare against civilians. New York:  
Random House.  
Clark, R. P. (1990). Negotiating with ETA: Obstacles to peace in the Basque Country,  
1975-1988. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press.  
Corbin, J. (1994). Gaza first: The secret Norway channel to peace between Israel and the  
PLO. London: Bloomsbury and New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.  
Douglass, W. A. & Bilbao, J. (1975). Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World. Reno,  
NV: University of Nevada Press.  
Duyvesteyan, I. & Schuurman, B. (20011). The paradoxes of negotiating with terrorist  
and insurgent organizations. Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 39,  
677-692.  
English, R. (2003). Armed struggle: The history of the IRA. Oxford, England: Oxford  
University Press.  
Esser, J. K. & Bridges, C. M. (2011). Negotiating with terrorists: The case of the Basques  
and Spain. Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 17, 60-76.  
Hayes, R. E., Kaminski, S. R. & Beres, S. M. (2003) Negotiating the non-negotiable:  
Dealing with absolutist terrorists. International Negotiation, 8, 451-467.  
Horgan, J. (2005). The psychology of terrorism. London: Routledge.  
Kern, R. W. (1995). The regions of Spain: A reference guide to history and culture. Santa  
Barbara, CA: Greenwood.  
Idoyaga, G. E. (2002). Spain and the Basque conflict: Sill looking for a way out.  
Searching for peace in Europe and Eurasia – 2002. Retrieved from  
www.conflictprevention.net  
Krueger, A. B. & Maleckova, J. (2002). Does poverty cause terrorism? The New  
Republic, 226, 27-33.  
Kruglanski, A. W. & Fishman, S. (2006). Terrorism between “syndrome” and “tool.”  
Current Directions in Psychological Science, 15, 45-48.  
Levy, E. (2011). Hezbollah instructed Hamas on Shalit talks. Ynetnews.com  
Michaels, J. (2011). Debate surrounds Israel’s deals to free captured soldiers. USA  
Today, 10/14/2011, News, page 07a  
Lundberg, K. (1996). The Oslo channel: Getting to the negotiating table. Cambridge,  
MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.  
Makovsky, D. (1996). Making peace with the PLO: The Rabin government’s road to the  
Oslo Accord. Boulder, CO: Westview.  
Mallie, E. & McKittrick, D. (2001). Endgame in Ireland. London: Hodder and  
Stoughton.  
McKittrick, D. & McVea, D. (2002). Making sense of the troubles: The story of the  
conflict in Northern Ireland. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books.  
Moghaddam, F. M. (2005). The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration.  
American Psychologist, 60, 161-169.  
Miller, C. (2011). Is it possible and preferable to negotiate with terrorists? Defense  
Studies, 11, 145-185.  
Moloney, E. (2002). A secret history of the IRA. New York: Norton.  
Neumann, P. R. (2007). Negotiating with terrorists. Foreign Affairs, 86, 128-138.  
O’Clery, C. (1997). Daring diplomacy: Clinton’s secret search for peace in Northern  
Ireland. Boulder,CO: Roberts Rinehart.  
Peres, S. (1995). Battling for peace. New York: Random House.  
Pruitt, D. G. (1997). Ripeness theory and the Oslo talks. International Negotiation, 2,  
237-250.  
Pruitt, D. G. (2006). Negotiation with terrorists. International Negotiation, 11, 371-394.  
Pruitt, D. G. (2007). Readiness theory and the Northern Ireland conflict. American  
Behavioral Scientist, 50, 1520-1541.  
Pruitt, D. G., Bercovitch, J. & Zartman, I. W. (1997). A brief history of the Oslo talks.  
International Negotiation, 2, 177-182.  
Sageman, M. (2004). Understanding terrorist networks. Pennsylvania: University of  
Pennsylvania Press.  
Sanchez-Cuenca, I. (2009). Explaining temporal variance in the lethality of ETA. Revista  
Intenacional de Sociologia, 67, 609-629.  
Savir, U. (1998). The process: 1,100 days that changed the Middle East. New York:  
Random House.  
Taylor, P. (1997). Behind the mask: The IRA and Sinn Fein. London: Bloomsbury.  
Telhami, S. (2004). The stakes: America in the Middle East. Boulder, CO: Westview  
Press.  
Wither, J. K. (2009). Selective engagement with Islamist terrorists: Exploring the  
prospects. Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 32, 18-35.  
Woodworth, P. (2001). Dirty war, clean hands: ETA, the GAL and Spanish democracy.  
Cork, England: Cork University Press.  
Zartman, I. W. (1989). Ripe for resolution: Conflict resolution in Africa (2nd ed.). New  
York, NY: Oxford University Press.  
Zartman, I. W. (2000). Ripeness: The hurting stalemate and beyond. In P. C. Stern & D.  
Druckman (Eds.), Conflict resolution after the Cold War (pp. 225-250).  
Washington, DC: National Academy Press.