

Talking with *al Qaeda*: Is There a Role for Track Two?

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Abstract

Despite saying that they will never “talk to terrorists,” many countries have done so. Often these dialogues have included a component of so-called “Track Two Diplomacy.” This article examines whether such a dialogue could be held with *al Qaeda* and other such groups. Research demonstrates that dialogues have been useful in ending terror campaigns in certain circumstances, but that they were never the decisive element. Where they have been useful, dialogues have helped to distinguish those members of terror organizations who are willing to talk from the hardliners, in helping to develop ‘acceptable’ players on the other side, and in allowing the two sides to better understand each other. The article finds that a dialogue with the hard core of *al Qaeda* is likely impossible, but that some elements may be willing to talk. Such dialogues will be localized and will be about specific concerns and, like in other cases, will be about seeing if there are elements of the movement that can be detached from the hard-core base. Track Two may have a role to play in these dialogues, but expectations should be kept modest.

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Keywords

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Many countries state that they will never “talk to terrorists,” but few are so absolute in reality (Wilkinson 2001; Neumann 2008). A famous example was John Major’s response to a question in Parliament: “If the implication of his remarks is that we should sit down and talk to Mr. Adams and the Provisional IRA, I can say only that it would turn my stomach, and those of most Hon. Members; we will not do it. . . . I will not talk to people who murder indiscriminately” (cited in Cronin 2009: 35). In fact, Major’s government had already initiated secret discussions through intermediaries. Indeed, ‘backchannel’ contacts had been underway since the 1970s (O Dochartaigh 2011). Major later wrote; “We were well aware of the unlikelihood of success, but we felt we had a responsibility . . . to see if the leadership of the Provisionals, if offered fair and equal treatment, had the will and the ability to move away from terrorism” (Major 1999: 443; quoted in Toros 2008: 416).²

Often these talks have included Track Two diplomacy. Track Two in such circumstances is no panacea, but it does seem to be used in these cases, and sometimes with positive effect. Are there any lessons that emerge from this general experience with respect to the question of whether Track Two might be a useful mechanism in helping to initiate and sustain talks with a terror group such as *al Qaeda*? This article will attempt to explore this question. First, however, we must review what Track Two is and also explore the definition of “terrorism”.

What Is Track Two Diplomacy?

The term “Track Two diplomacy” entered the lexicon in 1981. It was coined by a US Foreign Service Officer, Joseph Montville (Davidson & Montville 1981). He later defined Track Two as:

...unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversarial groups or nations with the goals of developing strategies, influencing public opinion, and organising human and material resources in ways that might help resolve the conflict (Montville 1991).

² Examples of the US Government talking with terrorists are found in Quinney & Coyne 2011: 6–7.

Track Two arose in the early 1960s when John Burton and colleagues convened discussions over a dispute between Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia involving individuals close to, but not representing their governments (Fisher 2002; Jones 2008). Using facilitation techniques designed to encourage discussion of the underlying issues, rather than exchanges over official positions, Burton believed his “controlled communication” constituted a new method of informal workshops, chaired by a third party who facilitated mutual analysis by the protagonists to develop solutions (Burton 1969; Mitchell 2005). There had, of course, been examples of informal dialogue of the kind that would later be called Track Two before Burton, but he and his colleagues were perhaps the first to try to systematize it and produce a theory of how it might be useful across cases.

Different definitions and interpretations of Track Two have since arisen. Kelman and Fisher have defined specific types and kinds (see Kelman 1996; Fisher 1997), while others have developed models which stress the concept of a peace process as the sum of activities on different levels (see Diamond & McDonald 1996; Saunders 1996). Nan and others have developed the concept of “Track One and a Half” – unofficial dialogues within which all or most of the participants are officials participating in their “private capacities,” and rely on a third party to facilitate in secrecy (Nan, Druckman & El Horr 2009). Chigas (2007) has explored the idea that different kinds of activities taking place under the name ‘Track Two’ have different audiences and objectives – some aimed at Track One, while others (which Chigas and others have called “Track Three”) are oriented towards influencing civil society, often as a means to bring about changes in policies, or even in governments.

In reviewing, briefly, the history of Track Two, a nuanced approach must be taken to when various kinds of Track Two can usefully occur. Above all, one needs to define carefully the interplay between goals and methods. Some Track Two projects are aimed at bringing together those close to governments for a dialogue aimed at *managing* the conflict. Others aim to bring together civil society leaders to develop means to affect changes in the structures of power as a prelude to a *transformation* of the underlying conditions that the organizers feel have brought about the conflict. There are many different kinds of Track Two in between (Miall 2004; Babbitt & Hampson 2011).³ Assessing whether “Track Two” is appropriate for opening up talks with *al Qaeda* has

3 In recent years, concerns have arisen within the conflict transformation field that the US military’s evolving conception of counterinsurgency has grown to include a corruption of conflict transformation, which utilises the tools and concepts of what is supposed to be an elicitive process intended to empower local actors towards the transformation of a situation, to suit ends congruent with US interests. See Sheehan 2014: 121–128.

much to do with determining about what *kind* of Track Two one is talking and what objectives it is meant to achieve.

Key Issues in the Field

A review of the literature on Track Two reveals a number of issues which arise repeatedly.⁴ The first is over the question of *how to determine the optimal moment to initiate a conflict intervention*. Much research has gone into “ripeness.” This concept holds that there is an optimal moment to intervene when both sides perceive themselves to be in a “mutually hurting stalemate,” but one where at least some individuals also perceive a possible way out through compromise (Zartman 1990). Others have applied ripeness to a “cycle” of conflict phases, finding that specific kinds of Track Two processes are more likely to succeed in the Low, Rising and Declining phases of a conflict, while the High intensity conflict phase tends to be where official diplomacy alone has the best chance of success. They have also found that, in some cases, Tracks One and Two should be utilized in a sequenced manner, whereas simultaneous application is called for in other cases (Crocker, Hampson & Aall 2003). Fisher has developed what he calls a “Contingency Model” of Track Two that calls for the application of certain kinds of processes at certain points, depending on the specific circumstances (see Fisher 2012: 683–700). Others argue that the issue is not so much when a conflict may be “ripe” for resolution, which can often only be known in retrospect, but rather when some participants are “ready” to begin to talk (Pruitt 2007, 2005). Ripeness may thus be more relevant to Track One (or perhaps Track 1.5), while “readiness” embraces the question of whether credible people are ready to begin informal discussions aimed at exploring ways to re-frame the dispute in both practical and psychological terms.

A second area of research surrounds the question of *the “transfer” of the results of Track Two processes into the official diplomatic realm*. Burton’s effort in the 1960s assumed that the ideas generated would make their way to the official process. Burton included people who had very close links to the official process and spent little time planning for transfer. Kelman and collaborators began to consider transfer in the 1970s. They identified two basic elements: 1) the changes in individual perceptions and attitudes; and 2) how these changes affect the policy-making process on both sides (Kelman 1972; Chataway 2002). An associated issue is known as “re-entry,” the question of how those who have participated in Track Two projects, and whose attitudes have been altered, are affected when they “re-enter” their own side and interact with their officials

4 These issues are discussed in Jones (2008). Not all of the issues identified in this earlier study are discussed here for reasons of space.

and broader publics. How can Track Two processes be designed to encourage participants to introduce into their domestic debates the notion that change is possible, and to maintain that view in the face of considerable skepticism or even hostility?

Çuhadar (2009) has explored transfer in the context of specific Track Two projects between Israelis and Palestinians. Her findings indicate that Track Two is relatively poor at transferring specific policy proposals into official negotiations, particularly if they are expressed in terms of “draft agreements.” Officials tend to prefer to come up with written agreements themselves and are skeptical of draft agreements which are “negotiated” between non-officials, even those who were once officials. Where Track Two can make a contribution is in the development of new concepts and ideas which officials can then take and develop. Track Two can also help break down previously monolithic interpretations which each side may have held of the other.

Capie’s (2010) analysis of transfer in the case of Track Two in South East Asia identifies successful transfer as requiring: “Structural opportunity” (moments when officials are looking for new ideas); “sound ideas;” and “influential, respected proponents.” All of these must come together to provide a moment when Track Two ideas will be best able to penetrate official diplomacy. Capie does not argue that this means that Track Two should only be active when these three conditions are present; it takes time to develop networks of people who can generate ideas and to create the levels of trust required for the development of alternate approaches to intractable problems. Waiting for these moments will likely mean that there will be no products for Track Two to put forward when they do arise.

What Do We Mean by ‘Terrorism’ and Can One Talk to ‘Terrorists’?

The issue of defining terrorism has long bedeviled legal scholars and policy-makers (Young 2006). In their study of 109 definitions of terrorism, Schmid and Jongman report that violence emerged as a key theme in 83% of the definitions, political objectives emerged in 65% of them and the linkage between violence and the achievement of political objectives was mentioned in 51% of the definitions. They further report a strong theme running through the definitions is that the individual acts of violence are explicitly meant to influence a broad mass of people beyond the immediate targets (Schmid & Jongman 2005; Hoffman 2006: 40–41). The word “terrorism” has an intensely negative public connotation, but is merely a tactic for employing violence to achieve an end. Indeed, the political act of formally ‘naming’ terror groups has the effect

of making dialogue with them very difficult; those opposed to dialogues may promote the designation of this or that group as terroristic in order to prevent dialogue (Bhatia 2005: 5–22). Though this article will use the terms “terrorists” and “terror organizations,” this does not imply value judgments.

Not surprisingly, in the wake of 9/11 there has been a surge in studies on terrorism. One specific area of study has been the question of negotiating, or “talking,” with terrorists. As one might expect, the views are diverse and often have as much to do with the preconceptions and predispositions of the authors as with any objective analysis. They are also frequently deductive; trying to use “lessons” from one case to develop generalized rules (see Powell 2008; Perry 2010). Yet others decry such attempts, arguing that apparent success in one case does not mean that the same ideas can usefully be applied elsewhere – and that, indeed, the attempt to do so is misdirected and possibly dangerous (Bew *et al.* 2009). Yet other studies are journalistic and seek to understand the motivations of terrorists and what levers are available to try to engage at least some of them (Taylor 2011). Rigorous and comparative analyses of the issue of “talking with terrorists” are relatively rare, however.⁵ Cronin has studied hundreds of cases over the past 50 years with a view to finding how terror campaigns end and why. Cronin’s (2010: 8) findings indicate that there are essentially six patterns as to how such campaigns end:

- Decapitation (capture or killing of the group’s leading figures);
- Negotiation (entry of the group into a political process that leads to resolution);
- Success (the group achieves its aims);
- Failure (the group implodes);
- Repression (the group is defeated and eliminated by force); and
- Reorientation (the group transforms from terror to other methods, which can include other forms of violence).

On negotiation, Cronin (2009: 35–72; 2010) found that 18% of the terror campaigns studied involved negotiations over strategic objectives linked to ending or transforming the campaign (many more terror campaigns involved periodic negotiations over tactical things like hostages; Faure & Zartman 2010; Faure 2003: 469–494; Gaibullov & Sandler 2009: 739–756). The majority of the

5 For exceptions, see Cronin 2009, 2010; Byman 2006; Reiss 2010; Jones & Libicki 2008; Zartman and Faure 2011. See Quinney & Coyne 2011 for a ‘how to’ guide for (primarily) officials who are considering whether, when and how to ‘talk with terrorists.’

cases of negotiations featured a terror campaign that was more than 5 years old and in which the group had achieved a disciplined structure. Of the 18% of cases where negotiations were among the patterns by which the campaign ended, very few of these negotiations ended in outright failure (about 10%). However, this does not mean that the other 90% of such talks ended in success. Effectively, the talks were one of several factors in the ending or the transformation of the campaign. Violence continued during the talks, though usually at a lower level of intensity. Thus, the ability of the two sides, and especially the 'official' side, to absorb violence even as talks are under way was a key element in whether the talks kept going.

For the governments concerned, talks, or the promise of talks, can result in lower levels of violence; important intelligence about the terror group – its real objectives and composition – can be gleaned; talks can also help to disentangle the “hard core” of the group from more moderate elements; and talks may also help to create a situation whereby the more moderate elements of the group – or its public supporters – may come to believe that an alternative to violence is possible. Of course, the creation of a perception that a government was forced to the table due to violence may convey upon the terror group the perception of strength. Against this, a refusal to talk plays into the narrative of hardline members of a terror group who say that there is no alternative to violence. Interestingly, while each case is specific, there does not appear to necessarily be a correlation between political “concessions” to terror groups (such as entering into dialogue) and subsequent increases in terror activity.⁶

For the terror group, motives for entering into talks are similarly mixed (Byman 2006: 405–408). For example, if a group has defined itself through unyielding opposition to the state it opposes, entering into discussions can open schisms between those within the terror group who wish to continue to rely primarily on violence and those willing to explore other avenues. This may be a necessary stage in the evolution of the group, but it may also open the group to “divide and conquer” strategies. Violence can thus cover up a multitude of differing views within a terror group, which have to be faced if an uncomfortable discussion erupts within the group over whether to talk. For some, violence is an end in itself. For others, criminal activity is a significant

6 Crenshaw points out that Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, West Germany, Italy, and others have acceded to selective terror demands and yet seen a decline in terrorism for a variety of reasons. See Crenshaw 1991: 79.

incentive. These elements of a terrorist movement may have no incentive to talk or to want to end the conflict (see Alonso 2011).⁷

A study by Jones & Libicki (2008) is also instructive. Of 648 terror groups that existed between 1968 and 2006, Jones & Libicki found that 43% of those groups that ended did so when they transitioned to a political process – which implies that dialogue was part of the transition as it is difficult to imagine a transition without discussions. Most of these groups had held relatively narrow policy goals in the first place. For groups that cannot make the transition to a political process, policing is the best strategy (some 40% of those that did not transition to nonviolence were brought to an end through policing). Some 10% of groups that remained violent ended their campaigns because they had succeeded, while 7% were ended through military action.

Since 9/11 a debate has emerged as to whether or not *al Qaeda*, and other such groups, represent an entirely new kind of terrorism. Those engaged in this debate include people who argue that *al Qaeda* is a new form of threat and that the lessons of the past are largely irrelevant (see Benjamin & Simon 2003; Bremer 2001). Many others, however, dispute this, believing that *al Qaeda*, while perhaps new in some respects, is composed of diverse groups and entities, some of which may be willing to talk.⁸ The question is how to talk with these groups. For this article, that question involves whether Track Two could be part of this process.

Track Two and Talking to Terrorists

What Kind of Track Two and with Whom?

Though today we tend to assess the question of ‘talking to terrorists’ in the context of 9/11, there is a long history of using informal dialogue to open channels of communications with groups once known as terrorists. From South Africa (Lieberfeld 2002), to Mozambique (Bartoli 1999), to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute (Agha *et al.* 2004), to Northern Ireland (Powell 2008; Popiolkowski & Cull 2009; Richardson 2006; O Dochartaigh 2011) and beyond, Track Two has established contacts between ‘terror’ groups and governments that did not recognize them to explore possible solutions.

7 For a discussion of the impact of the role of negotiations (and the promise of negotiation) in promoting schisms within the ETA and among its supporters, see Alonso (2011: 707–710).

8 See Cronin (2000: chapter 7); Crenshaw (2000: 405–420). See also Zartman (2003: 443–450), who holds that even terrorists whose goals are absolute may at times wish to discuss some things.

In all of these cases, however, the “terrorist” groups, or at least significant elements within them had, over time, come to share certain characteristics which made dialogue possible:⁹

- they had developed elements which were “states in waiting,” or at least political parties in waiting, and which aspired to take over from an existing government and then to take a place within the existing nation-state system;
- as such, they were highly hierarchical organizations with a distinct leadership structure which valued its own continued control over the agenda (though there were also “splinter” groups which had broken away); and
- though they espoused an ideological veneer, these groups had evolved into pragmatic political organizations, or at least had authoritative groups which functioned as such.

The key point is that there were authoritative figures within these groups for whom violence was not an end in itself and who had begun to recognize that some form of dialogue would be a way to advance an agenda linked to an objective such as the attainment of power over a government or territory. Of course, this may not have been the original objective of the group; some groups have begun with essentially ideological objectives and modified them over time (Lieberfeld 1999). There was also in each case a leader able to reorient the group, or the broad mass of it, to a different path (Crenshaw 2007: 7).

Under these circumstances, Track Two has several different objectives including:

- to help each side understand the other better;
- to create possibilities to differentiate the hard core from those who may be willing to talk;
- to help create “the other side,” a group with whom talks are possible even if the main body of the terror movement remains unwilling to talk – conversely, Track Two talks can hurt those who could be the other side if done badly (Quinney & Coyne 2011: 36); and
- to help identify and define the outlines of possible compromises.

⁹ These points are my own. However, for an expression of similar ideas, see the chart found in Quinney & Coyne (2011: 25).

In cases where Track Two has been an element of opening discussions with terror organizations, a key issue was deciding what kind of Track Two would be most appropriate. As noted above, different types of Track Two can engage different audiences for different purposes. The role of third parties in getting discussions under way is of critical importance. As might be expected, there are no set rules. Official third parties are states, which can offer a variety of rewards and inducements. Preliminary discussions – usually aimed at trying to see if more formal discussions are possible – have often been facilitated by unofficial groups or individuals.¹⁰

In considering how today's "absolute terror" relates to Track Two, the uncertainties inherent in all conflict situations can be magnified greatly when the players are unclear and subject to considerable internal divisions. This problem expresses itself in several ways. First, *al Qaeda* is not structured in the same way as groups that have been amenable to Track Two discussions in past, and its stated goals are generally perceived to be not so 'temporal' as has been the case with other groups. Second, those who run Track Two projects in such circumstances do not have the intelligence resources of states to determine whether they are opening avenues to the right people (though this is no guarantee of success).¹¹ Third, the risks of being seen as an individual who is "soft on terror" or prepared to legitimize terrorists are significant. But these concerns have existed for those who are involved in Track Two for many years. What may be new, and particularly for US NGOs and individuals, are concerns that dealings with those involved with *al Qaeda* or its affiliates could run afoul of new laws designed to prohibit contact between US citizens and terrorists (see Savage 2010; United States Institute of Peace; Dudouet 2010). However, for all of these considerations, while the attacks of 9/11 may have created a more sensitive environment around the idea of "talking to terrorists," the fundamental issues for those who do this work have not changed. These exist in any Track Two: what kind of dialogue; with whom shall we talk; for what purpose? The answers to these questions will always be context-specific.

10 There are individuals and groups who have carved a niche doing this such as former British intelligence officer and diplomat Alistair Crooke and his group, "Conflicts Forum." Their web-site is at: <http://conflictsforum.org/>. In Northern Ireland, see O Dochartaigh 2011, for a discussion of businessman Brendan Duddy, who was trusted by both sides, in getting informal discussions going and then sustaining them.

11 In 2010, NATO paid someone it thought was a senior Taliban figure to broker talks, only to find that he was not. See *Daily Mail* 2010.

Is one attempting to run a “Track 1.5” dialogue involving those close to senior decision-makers in both the terror group and the affected government to try to develop concrete proposals which can be transferred to an official track? Is one aiming more at a Track Two intended to set the ground, perhaps at a civil society level, for broader objectives to be realized? What are the objectives of the process – to affect a broad change within the situation as a whole; to facilitate the creation of a breakaway within the terror group or the government concerned that will be prepared to consider new approaches; or simply to find out whether any of these objectives are possible? What should be the indicators of “success”?

In terms of developing criteria of success for Track Two and terrorism, Cronin notes that talks were rarely the only way that a terror campaign came to an end, even in the 18% of cases where negotiations were part of the answer. Instead, negotiations were a part of an overall process of managing the terror campaign and initiating a transition towards a new reality on the ground. This observation, of course, tends to dampen the possibility that one could develop clear-cut criteria of success – if we are talking about a long-term transition, of which talks, formal and informal, are but one part, it becomes difficult to pin down where and when any given initiative might have played a role, except in retrospect (and even there it is often difficult to pin-point exactly which initiative played which role). But this is also the case with respect to most Track Two projects concerning more ‘conventional’ conflicts – it is always difficult to measure exactly what any particular Track Two may have contributed. One must recognize instead the overall changes which came about over time to which several Track Two projects likely made a contribution.

Another role for Track Two is in exploring whether “differentiation” is possible between those who may be willing to consider a political solution and those for whom violence is the objective. *Al Qaeda* is not monolithic; it is a network of disparate groups. It therefore seems likely that dialogue with *al Qaeda* will, in reality, be a collection of dialogues with various actors and interests around the margins of various *al Qaeda* affiliates in various locations around the world. These complexities raise questions as to the relationship between Track Two and Track One in these circumstances. It seems likely that Track Two attempts to identify and engage groups prepared to break away from absolutist objectives will have some degree of interaction with Track One. Each side will want to know that they are speaking with people who can deliver. It is thus likely that such discussions will be taking place at the “Track 1.5” level and aimed at developing a sense of whether official negotiations are possible. At the same time, there are conversations that need to be held at the grassroots

level over the conditions that have led some to take up arms in the first place and join with groups such as *al Qaeda*.

Are They Ready to Talk? Ripeness, Readiness and Talking to Terrorists

As noted above, all of this raises the question today as to whether *al Qaeda* and other such groups are so fundamentally different from their predecessors as to make lessons of the past irrelevant to those considering whether Track Two might be a useful way to begin a dialogue. As discussed, there is a strain of view which holds that the goals of *al Qaeda* are religious and absolute and that negotiation is not possible (see Benjamin & Simon 2003; Bremer 2001). The only way forward is to destroy such groups, though this has proved harder than proponents of these strategies advertised at the outset. Others take the view that *al Qaeda*, though perhaps new in the level of casualties its attacks aim to inflict, is the culmination of a long line of groups, rather than a radical departure; there have been groups with absolutist goals before and negotiations have been possible with some elements of these groups (Cronin 2009: chapter 7).

Thus, there are those who believe that a form of negotiation is possible (Hayes *et al.* 2003: 451–467). It may involve negotiations with those in orbit around the hard-core ideological center of movements such as *al Qaeda* rather than with central elements within such movements. The issue is thus not whether *al Qaeda* is prepared to enter into talks, but whether some people or groups affiliated with it are prepared to consider discussions. Such talks will have several, sometimes contradictory aims: to detach potential sponsors, allies, and those who could provide sanctuary from the hard-core center; to explore whether some who may be inclined to follow the hard-core center may be willing to shift their aims to ones which make settlement possible; and to help develop intelligence that will make it more likely that the hard-core center can be disrupted.

This issue speaks to a question of trying to classify terrorist groups not according to their motives or tactics, but according to whether dialogue and compromise might be possible with at least some elements of the groups. Both Reiss and Zartman have developed concepts around whether terrorists fit into one of three categories: *reconcilable*; *irreconcilable*; and '*contingent absolutists*' (Reiss 2010: 31; see Zartman 2003: 40). As the name implies, 'reconcilable' terrorists show a demonstrated or potential willingness to negotiate their central demands and even compromise on them. This does not mean that they will agree to stop the violence while talks are underway, but it does mean that talks

are possible; indeed, talks are a goal of such groups (Reiss 2010: 223; Zartman 2003: 446). So-called ‘irreconcilable’ terrorists tie their identity to the struggle; without violence their existence would collapse. Indeed, attempts to talk may only feed the sense of such groups that their efforts are having an impact and should be redoubled (Reiss 2010: 222–223; Zartman 2003: 446; Cronin 2009: 40). The final group, which Zartman has called ‘contingent absolutists,’ are the most challenging. They can oscillate – at some points being willing to talk, at other points rejecting dialogue. Sometimes these oscillations are made for tactical reasons, but they can also reflect the tensions and schisms within these groups. But these can be the situations where dialogue, and especially unofficial dialogue at first, can help to determine whether these groups, or significant portions within them, can be brought around to the idea that dialogue can lead to a political solution. Zartman distinguishes between what he calls the ‘agents of violence’ and the ‘organizers’ within such groups. He suggests that the agents of violence may adhere to absolutist principles long after at least some of the organizers have decided that the potential for talks should at least be explored (Zartman 2003: 447).

Neumann introduces another concept – a group’s thinking as to the purpose of violence and whether their thinking can evolve – that helps classify whether terrorist groups may be amenable to dialogue (Neumann 2008). Some groups may define themselves by violence; the fight in itself is a purifying objective. Bin Laden issued instructions to this effect to his followers; “Take note of the ground-rule regarding this fight. There can be no dialogue with occupiers except through arms” (Bin Laden 2004). For others, however, violence is a means to an end. There may be those within the group who are prepared to explore whether the end can be pursued other ways.

Transfer

In thinking about transfer, a key consideration is, ‘Transfer of what, to whom?’ One’s strategy for transfer and the tactics one employs to achieve it depend upon this question. If one is engaged in a Track Two process meant to influence decision-making at the elite level, transfer strategies aimed at gaining the confidence of that elite are recommended, as a prelude to exposing them to the new ideas that have arisen from the Track Two process. Secrecy may well be necessary in such cases, to give the elites time to consider these ideas without the pressure of having to respond to new proposals in public – which will usually bring about a “no” if the elites are being asked to adopt a new approach to a long-standing problem. If, however, one’s objective is to influence a broad mass of people, possibly as a prelude to relying upon *them* to affect change at

the elite level, a media-savvy, grassroots approach will be necessary. In some cases, one will be trying to do both, though perhaps in a sequenced manner.

In terms of the mechanisms of transfer, Fisher's findings show that successful transfer takes place on a variety of levels and through a variety of means. These include personal contacts between Track Two participants and leading figures in Track One, often based on trust, which has been established on a personal level over several years; private briefings and memos to leaders and also to members of the larger bureaucratic establishments on both sides; and speeches, interviews, op-eds and other such mechanisms intended to reach a more public audience, where that was deemed an appropriate and useful goal (Fisher 2005: 225).

In their study of Israeli-Palestinian Track Two over time, Agha *et al.* probed the question of the internal processes whereby transfer takes place within governments that are receiving the results of Track Two dialogues. Agha and his colleagues identify a key to transfer as being the existence of an intermediary who acts between the Track Two process itself and the highest levels of the leadership on the official track. These people, whom they call "mentors," are defined as "... a high level political leader who serves as a chaperon for the talks." The mentors are the ones who take the risks associated with getting the Track Two going, and sustaining it, and they sometimes do this without the leaders' formal knowledge in order to insulate the leaders from negative fall-out should things go badly. They also "... brought the information and impressions gained in the talks, as well as understandings and agreements reached in their framework, to the leaders' attention" (see Agha *et al.* 2003: 4). The political penalties associated with "talking with terrorists" are so grave in the current *al Qaeda* context that mentors will need to be especially courageous.

The case of transfer intended upwards, towards the elite level, can be further sub-divided, according to Çuhadar, into two categories; transfers intended to affect the official *process* of negotiations and transfers intended to frame an *outcome* of an official process. The latter is very much the rarest and most difficult form of transfer and depends on timing as much as anything else (Çuhadar 2009: 643). This is an important distinction in that it adds a layer of necessary complexity to our understanding of how transfer can affect Track One. All too often, we seek evidence that a Track Two dialogue has directly affected the outcome of a negotiation when it is more appropriate to look for evidence that the ideas generated by Track Two somehow stimulated the official process to look further and more deeply at issues and problems. Even if Track One may eventually adopt outcomes at variance with what the Track Two process had

originally suggested, Track Two will still have had an impact by virtue of opening doors to new thinking.

Thus, where Track Two can make a contribution, if the political environment is such that officials are prepared to receive its results, is in the development of new concepts and ideas that officials can then take and develop into written agreements should the political environment allow them to do so. Track Two can help the two sides to 'learn' more about each other and develop much more accurate understandings of the complexities with which each side must deal. In this sense, Track Two is useful in terms of breaking down previously monolithic interpretations, which each side may have held of the other, and allowing for learning and differentiation on both sides as to the deeper realities and constraints that the other faces.

Another issue is that of "asymmetric transfer." How does one know that transfer is taking place on the other side with the same efficacy as it is on one's own? How does one know if those across the table have the kind of access that is required to affect transfer? How does one know if there is a 'mentor' on the other side who is helping to shepherd the results of the talks to where it matters? Absent reliable intelligence into the inner workings of the other side, or informal contacts between certain figures who can validate progress on an ongoing basis, one cannot know with certainty. Of course, if official discussions are going on at the same time as the Track Two discussions, then, presumably, the two delegations will note changes in official positions that reflect the learning that is taking place through the Track Two discussions. But what if there are no official discussions and knowledge of the other side's internal processes is incomplete?

This is a real problem for Track Two aimed at influencing outcomes. If one side erroneously believes that the other enjoys far greater access to its decision-making elite than they actually do, ideas may be sold to one's own leadership in the expectation of reciprocity at an equivalent level of seniority on the other side. When this fails to materialize, the entire process can be discredited in the eyes of those who took risks in the belief that the 'other side' was committed at a similar level of seniority. In her analysis of the cases of water and Jerusalem, Çuhadar provides examples of instances of asymmetric transfer, either because of competing channels on one or the other side (or both) or vastly different levels of access to decision-makers enjoyed by the two sides (Çuhadar 2009: 647, 650). All of this is yet another reason why, and particularly for those engaged in Track 1.5 (or 'outcome' oriented Track Two), it is necessary to have a sense that the other side is approaching the talks at a similar level of seniority. This may not be apparent at the outset, but will have to become so as

the discussions go on, or they may fail. It is less a problem for those engaged in Track Two intended to develop ideas that will be of use in a broader or background sense. One is not expecting these ideas to show up quickly in official negotiating stances on either side.

These considerations seem to indicate that transfer in the case of Track Two and a regional *al Qaeda* franchise will be a complex business and very context dependent. If one is seeking to establish a Track Two process at the Track 1.5 level that can affect the outcome of official policy, a direct line to senior people in both the *al Qaeda* organization and the regional government concerned will be necessary, and mentors (to use the terminology of Agha *et al.*) may be required. But *al Qaeda* is complex and diffuse in terms of its leadership structure and knowing whether one is speaking with the 'right' people is very hard. The process will also likely take place with a high degree of secrecy. It will take time to find out if the process is real and if those who are talking on both sides are actually genuine and capable. Indeed, as noted previously, one goal of such dialogues may be to assist in the differentiation of those within the *al Qaeda* leadership in various regions who are will to talk and those who are not. Whether or not any particular set of discussions leads to concrete outcomes in itself may be secondary to this.

Track Two projects which are aimed more at exploring broader background questions are somewhat different. Here, a rapid acceptance of the new ideas by officials is unlikely and so the objective is to have new thinking gradually seep into the discourse – in effect, to create over time new possibilities for movement by slowly influencing the way people at various levels think about the issue and inculcating in them a sense that new approaches are possible. Under these circumstances, transfer will be less about trying to get leaders to 'buy-in' to specific ideas right away, but more about re-framing the nature of the argument. Finally, Track Two aimed at stimulating change at the grassroots level in societies in conflict will not be aiming its transfer strategies at officials. In their efforts to *transform* the conflict, such projects will seek to empower and motivate ordinary people to rise up and demand fundamental change. This is an altogether different form of transfer.

Conclusion

The idea of "talking to terrorists" is repugnant to many, and a political red-flag. While some may view today's terror threat as unique, the idea of talking to those considered by many to be beyond the pale is not new for those engaged

in Track Two diplomacy. Indeed, the notion of opening channels to those with whom dialogue is considered impossible and on subjects that are considered taboo in many circles is the very essence of many forms of Track Two. What may be new in the context of *al Qaeda* is the complexity of the situation, though previous instances of Track Two have certainly also been complicated.

Beyond that, Track Two talks involving groups who were once considered terrorist organizations have always had as their goals identifying potential moderates and determining if there might be at least some elements of the agenda which could be 'negotiable.' At least in that sense, there is nothing new today. In confronting the problem posed by organizations such as *al Qaeda*, we face, however, a group that specifically resists the notion of compromise and eschews the kind of structure that would make possible exploratory talks with an authoritative leadership. It is difficult to imagine, presently, at least, who would be the 'Gerry Adams' figure with whom talks could be explored from among the leadership of *al Qaeda*.

Instead, it will be necessary to approach this problem as a decentralized one and, where possible, to try to identify at the local level in various locations around the world groups and figures who have associated themselves with the *al Qaeda* franchise, but whose primary goals are related to more tangible local issues, rather than the absolutist global goals of Bin Laden. This will require a willingness in several places to talk with people who self-identify as 'absolute' terrorists to find out if they really are completely unwilling to entertain the idea of compromise; to see, in the terminology employed in this article, if they might be 'contingent absolutists' rather than 'irreconcilables.' As many governments have said they will not talk with such people, these discussions may have to take place at the unofficial level, at least at first, to explore whether there is a basis for talks.

In a sense there is nothing particularly new in this for Track Two, except perhaps for the intensity of the rhetoric that has been built-up around movements such as *al Qaeda* and the idea prevalent in some political quarters that all terrorism, and all terrorists, must be lumped together. Laws and rhetoric, which forbid discussion aimed at trying to differentiate with which 'terrorists' a productive conversation might be possible, are thus profoundly counter-productive to the goal of finding out whether any fellow-travelers are prepared to separate themselves from the radical base. But Track Two has a long tradition of venturing where many would fear to tread.

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