



Is Al Qaeda asking to negotiate?

Plan A against terrorism isn't working, but listen closely, there might be a workable Plan B: political engagement.

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ISN'T IT CLEAR BY NOW that the U.S. and its allies are not likely to be able to wipe out Al Qaeda or ensure that we are not attacked again domestically? As the British acknowledged in July, the London attacks were just a matter of when, not if. To be sure, the terrorists can't win this war, but neither can we.

The most serious risk is that Al Qaeda will sooner or later be able to attack us with a biological or nuclear weapon, not merely the conventional bombs used in London and Madrid or the suicide car bombs being used to such gruesome effect in Iraq during the last few days. Long-term strategies to win Muslim hearts and minds — through democratization, public diplomacy and greater economic opportunity — are therefore likely to be a case of too little, too late. Even if, somehow, many are won over, such strategies will have no effect on the recruits who are being drawn to Al Qaeda every day, especially among Sunni populations where U.S. troops are stationed.

So is there a Plan B? The most recent videotaped message from Ayman Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's second-in-command, broadcast Aug. 4, is a reminder that there could be — in the form of some sort of political engagement.

Unthinkable? In his message, Zawahiri referred to Osama bin Laden's April 2004 offer of a truce to any European country that made a commitment to stop "attacking Muslims, or intervening in their affairs." European governments immediately dismissed the offer. Why?

For starters, because the West believes there is nothing to be negotiated when it comes to Al Qaeda. Terrorist acts are either senseless violence (which means there is nothing to talk about) or part of a plan to destroy our way of life (which is nonnegotiable). As White House spokesman Scott McClellan said, "Terrorists will use any excuse to carry out evil attacks on innocent human beings."

It's also believed that a truce is impossible because Bin Laden and company will not act in good faith. In the words of former Secretary of State Colin Powell, "How can you make a deal with a terrorist?" And finally, even if we *could* make a deal with Al Qaeda, we *shouldn't* — engagement with terrorists would only encourage them.

It's time to take a fresh look at this logic.

Does Al Qaeda have nonnegotiable goals? Zawahiri said: "There will be no salvation until you withdraw from

our land, stop stealing our oil and resources and end support for infidel, corrupt rulers." Some argue that this is an initial set of demands — that the real goal is imposing Islam on the West.

Maybe. But what if, instead, Al Qaeda's agenda is what its leaders repeatedly say it is: an end to the Western military presence in Muslim lands, to "uncritical political support and military aid" to Israel, and to support of corrupt Middle Eastern regimes. Most scholars of Islam argue that because *jihad* is a defensive concept, the attacks on us must be understood as retaliation for perceived provocations, and that Al Qaeda's stated agenda — which has been consistent since 1996 — should be taken literally.

But can one make a deal with terrorists? The British eventually dealt with the IRA, and the French with the Algerian FLN. A few months ago it was reported that U.S. Army officers negotiated with insurgent leaders in Iraq.

As to whether we *should* deal with them, there is a legitimate concern, but it's a Catch-22: If aggrieved parties are ignored by an authoritarian government, they often eventually resort to violence, and then if the government is loath to engage them for fear of legitimizing their tactics, the grievances remain and the violence continues. (Think of the American colonists and George III or the early Zionists and the British.)

Sooner or later we may find ourselves having little choice but to seek a truce with Al Qaeda, no matter how much it galls us. And waiting until there are many more American — and European, Egyptian, Saudi, Iraqi — casualties only weakens our position because it will then be clear that Plan A has failed and we are desperate.

Is all this hopelessly naive? Consider this: In the wake of the Beslan terrorist attack, none other than neocon theoretician Richard Pipes called upon Russia's Vladimir Putin to negotiate Chechen sovereignty with those terrorists, on the grounds that the conflict had historical roots (there were real grievances) and because the Chechens had "resorted to terrorism for the limited objective of independence ... not [destroying] Russia."

Pipes then tried to distinguish the Russian situation from "America's war with Al Qaeda," asserting that the latter was nonnegotiable because Al Qaeda's attacks, unlike the Chechens', "were unprovoked and had no specific objective. Rather, they were part of a general assault of Islamic extremists bent on destroying non-Islamic civilizations."

But Al Qaeda does feel provoked, and if, as I have suggested, it has limited and specific goals, then Pipes' advice to Putin applies to us.

Some argue that we should just unilaterally change the policies that provoke Al Qaeda. I would argue that if we do, we risk not getting the peace we seek, and we would then have already given away our negotiating leverage.

I'm not suggesting that we engage in direct meetings with Al Qaeda, nor that we stop pursuing those who commit or support acts of terror. But, through back channels, we should seek to determine if Bin Laden would withdraw his *fatwa* against Americans in exchange for certain policy changes, if Al Qaeda would settle for less than its maximum demands and if its far-flung followers would honor a truce.

There is evidence that the answer to all these is yes, but it's inconclusive. With the stakes this high, shouldn't we find out for certain?