Dealings with the Devil: Can, and should, ISIS be negotiated with?

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> *No Nation can negotiate with terrorists, for there is no way to make peace with those whose only goal is death.*
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> President George W. Bush, April 4, 2002[1]

For decades, politicians have insisted that civilised governments cannot and will not negotiate with those who resort to terrorism. Yet a brief glance through history reveals an entirely different picture. In Northern Ireland, British negotiators sat with Irish Republican Army (IRA) representatives to produce the Good Friday Agreement. And in Afghanistan, the United States is now pursuing direct negotiations with the Taliban.[2] In all cases, negotiations were finally considered once each side concluded that other strategies could never resolve the conflict.

Yet when this strategy is suggested in reference to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the reaction is almost always one of ridicule and confusion. How can you negotiate with a group which only wants the destruction of Western society and a complete overhaul of the Middle Eastern map, they would ask? And now that the coalition forces have seized ISIS's last stronghold, what's the point?

Yet the reality is not quite so simple. ISIS remains a potent threat, and their ability to destabilise the Middle East and project terror around the world remains significant. As late as February

[1] George W. Bush, 'Extracts from Bush's Speech', (Speech, April 2002), BBC News, online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1911665.stm (Here and subsequently, all internet links were last accessed on 2 April 2019.)

[2] Mashal, Mujib & Eric Schmitt, 'White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations', *The New York Times,* 15 July 2018, online at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-direct-negotiations.html.

2019, the head of the US Military's Central Command, General Joseph Votel, warned that ISIS 'retains leaders, fighters, facilitators, resources, and the profane ideology that fuels their efforts'.[3]

Despite this public acknowledgement of the group's resilience to current strategies, the literature and rhetoric surrounding ISIS has remained static. Analysts assert that 'the notion of negotiating with ISIS seems fanciful'.[4] ISIS's goals are too extreme. Public opinion would never permit any government even to countenance negotiations. And military action has rendered negotiations unnecessary. There has, therefore, been a growing divergence between the reality on the ground, and the unwillingness of analysts to even consider negotiations.

This paper intends to rectify this divergence. Through combining the wealth of research concerning negotiations with terrorists, with the latest assessments of the fight against ISIS, this paper demonstrates that negotiations with ISIS *can* and *should* be considered. Current strategies have failed to destroy the organisation effectively, negate its ability to project power, and deal with the underlying issues which allowed ISIS's rise in the first place. Indeed, in many cases, a mixture of poor planning and inadequate resources have exacerbated the problem, thus giving ISIS the chance to rise again. At the same time, years of assumptions concerning the group's cohesion, stubbornness, and extremism has perpetuated a simplistic and sensationalistic view of ISIS, whilst also undermining conflict resolution efforts in the region. As analysis shall show, negotiations offer a unique opportunity to gain intelligence on the group, whilst also dealing more directly with underlying grievances.

Accordingly, this paper consists of five sections: firstly, 'negotiating with terrorists' will be defined; secondly, the core arguments used against negotiating with ISIS shall be explained; thirdly, an explanation of why we *should* negotiate; fourthly, why we *can* negotiate with ISIS; And finally, an analysis of limitations to negotiations. This, of course, neglects some important questions regarding the subject of these negotiations, the complications surrounding logistics, and the potential future of negotiations. These issues, unfortunately, are beyond the scope of this paper. Yet it is my hope that this paper will erase many assumptions and stereotypes

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[3] BBC News, 'IS "Caliphate" Defeated but Jihadist Group Remains a Threat', *BBC News*, 23 March 2019, online at https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-45547595

[4] Samir Puri, *Fighting and Negotiating with Armed Groups* (Routledge, 2016), p. 157.

surrounding the impossibility of negotiating with ISIS, and thereby open avenues for policymakers and academics to begin exploring this as a realistic option.

What it means to 'negotiate' with terrorists:

When one imagines negotiating with terrorists, a plethora of images spring to mind: crisis-management negotiations to release captured civilians; secretive communication back-channels operated by intelligence agencies, as British officials established with the IRA in 1972.[5]; or public negotiations, culminating in high-level summits. All these situations can be accurately described as negotiating with terrorists. Of course, it would be both unwise and impossible to analyse all these different forms of negotiations in this paper: considering whether one could negotiate for hostages on a plane is very different to analysing the negotiation of a peace settlement. A more precise definition is therefore necessary.

As Hedley Bull noted in *The Anarchical Society*, 'when two men meet to conduct business, two things are noticeable. One is that they are dealing with each other: when one speaks it is the other whom he is addressing. The other thing is that they both assume at least the possibility that they have some common interests'.[6] Carl Miller expanded upon this when he wrote that negotiating with terrorists is 'a specific function of diplomacy – a formal dialogue – as a tool of strategic conflict resolution'.[7] Taken together, these quotes illustrate what is precisely meant when this paper refers to 'negotiating with ISIS'. Firstly, ISIS and the relevant state actor must direct their remarks *at each other,* as opposed to primarily addressing a third party. Negotiations, therefore, must not primarily be publicity stunts. Secondly, the talks must be conducted in the overall hope that they will lead to a resolution of the conflict. In this sense, negotiations are strategic in that they are pursuing political goals.

There are varying levels of strategic talks: public and secret. Typically, the anger and resentment elicited by conflict with terrorist groups prevents formal, public negotiations. In addition, it is

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[5] Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists: How to End Armed Conflict,* (Vintage, 2014), p. 78.

[6] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics,* (Palgrave, 2002), p. 168.

[7] Carl Miller, , 'Is it Possible and Preferable to Negotiate with Terrorists?', *Defence Studies,* Vol. 11, No. 1 (2011), p. 155.

common for both parties to prioritise winning militarily, rather than resorting to negotiations. As such, talks between states and terrorist groups generally remain secret until time and changes in the political environment persuade both parties, and their respective publics, of the need for public conflict resolution efforts. In Northern Ireland, for example, over 15 years passed before secret negotiations between the IRA and the British were publicly acknowledged.[8] In light of this reality, considering the high levels of anger with which Western and Middle Eastern societies regard ISIS, it would be unrealistic to imagine public negotiations taking place anytime soon. Instead, this paper shall focus primarily on secret negotiations. More precisely, those secret negotiations which are conducted in such a way as to foster relationships between sides, maintain channels of communication, and are intended as precursors to public conflict-resolution negotiations.

The Case Against Negotiating with ISIS

In his book, *Talking to Terrorists,* Jonathan Powell lists five arguments against talking to terrorists, and a further seven concerning how negotiating can be counter-productive.[9] Mitchell Reiss similarly dedicates multiple pages of his book, *Negotiating with Evil,* to detailing why states do not negotiate with terrorists.[10] Engaging with all these issues in such a short paper is, unfortunately, impossible. However, we can discern three distinct points which typically form the base of all arguments made against negotiating with groups like ISIS.

It is often assumed that ISIS, and other religious terrorist groups, simply cannot be negotiated with, due to their desire to overthrow the current order. As President George Bush said in 2005 of al-Qaeda: 'We're not facing a set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed. We're facing a radical ideology with inalterable objectives: to enslave whole nations and intimidate the world'.[11]

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[8] Powell, *Talking to Terrorists,* p. 113

[9] Ibid., pp. 18-30

[10] Mitchell B. Reiss, *Negotiating with Evil: When to talk to Terrorists,* (Open Road Media, 2010), pp. 12-18

[11] George W. Bush, 'President Discusses War on Terror at National Endowment for Democracy', (Speech, Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Centre, 6 October, 2005), *White House Archives,* online at https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html.

Many commentators today apply the same logic to ISIS. In his now infamous article, *What ISIS Really Wants,* Graeme Wood emphasised the dogmatic religious beliefs of ISIS members which, he argued, prevents them from accepting any current borders or peace treaties with states who have not pledged their allegiance.[12] ISIS's leaders, he argued, were anticipating 'within a year, the arrival of the Mahdi – a messianic figure destined to lead the Muslims to victory before the end of the world', and the expansion of their caliphate.[13] When faced with such extreme beliefs, compromise and negotiations seem, at best, a fantasy. We would neither willingly concede any of their demands, nor would they negotiate with those whom they intend to destroy.

The second argument relates to perceptions. In order to succeed, negotiations first require s sense of deadlock.[14] Without this sense of deadlock, neither side would feel obliged to offer meaningful concessions, or to reach out to their enemy to resolve the conflict. However, it is evident from most discussions of the conflict that ISIS's enemies still believe that military action or alternative political strategies can prove decisive. As Samir Puri notes, 'In 2014, ISIS, understandably, was also deemed too abhorrent as to never merit anything other than an effort to fight and collapse the group'.[15] Similarly, in 2015 former US Ambassador Ryan Crocker considered many options for ending the conflict, including forming a coalition to invade ISIS territory, and encouraging internal rebellion.[16] Not once, however, did he entertain the idea of negotiating with the group. More recently, Peter Krause has suggested that ISIS can yet be defeated by a combined strategy of countering ISIS ideology in the region, militarily rolling-back the group, and creating an effective system of regional governance.[17] Again, however, negotiations were

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[12] Graeme Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants', *The Atlantic,* March 2015, online at https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 168.

[15] Puri, *Fighting and Negotiating,* p. 120.

[16] Ryan Crocker, 'Fighting ISIS, Then and Now', in *Blind Spot: America's Response to Radicalism in the Middle East',* edited by Nicholas Burns & Jonathon Price, (Aspen Institute, 2015), pp. 70-75.

[17] Peter Krause, 'A State, an Insurgency, and a Revolution: Understanding and Defeating the Three Faces of ISIS', in *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications,* edited by Feisal al-Istrabadi & Sumit Ganguly (Brookings Institute,

not considered. The overriding belief that other options remain in the fight against ISIS, therefore, precludes realistically contemplating negotiations.

Finally, it is suggested that ISIS is simply too brutal and repugnant to negotiate with. This argument rests on the dual belief that states have a moral duty not to legitimise ISIS through negotiations, and that negotiations would fail due to public outcry. As Reiss describes, 'the very act of sitting down for negotiation confers a benefit that is better withheld'.[18] This argument is particularly relevant for ISIS due to the group's reputation for brutality and horror. Indeed, this image is not only propagated by Western media reports but is actively encouraged by the group in order to simultaneously discourage resistance whilst encouraging a disproportionate response by Western and Middle Eastern government.[19] Consequently, negotiations are considered not just morally wrong, but also impossible for politicians to sell to their electorate; many of whom have suffered horrendous violence in ISIS's name.

These three points typically form the base of any proposal against negotiating with ISIS. Yet, closer examination reveals serious flaws within these arguments, thereby opening the debate to serious discussion.

Why we should negotiate with ISIS

Public opinion, academic literature, and political consensus have created an environment in which the mere possibility of negotiating with ISIS is decisively ruled out. However, there is significant evidence to suggest that we *must* consider negotiations. Specifically, three critical points underline this belief: alternative options for resolving the crisis are severely limited; the potential benefits gained from secret negotiations could outweigh the costs; and morally we must consider all options in the effort to end this conflict. Each of these points shall be examined in this section.

As mentioned before, most commentators do not even consider negotiating with ISIS; instead they focus on alternative

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2018), pp. 235-241.

[18] Reiss, *Negotiating with Evil*, p. 13.

[19] A particularly interesting insight into ISIS's synonymity with terror is Michael Weiss & Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (Regan Arts, 2015).

ways to destroy the group. However, the effectiveness of these alternatives is highly questionable. Certainly, the military offensive against ISIS has been successful: all territory once belonging to the group has now been seized.[20] Yet the conflict is not over. ISIS retains extensive links in Syria and Iraq, particularly in communities riven by dissatisfaction and grievances against their governments. As a report by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres highlighted, 'ISIL has substantially evolved into a covert network in Iraq', in response to its eroding territory.[21] The potential for an insurgency therefore remains potent,

Research conducted by Gina Vale helps to explain ISIS's survivability without territory, through her analysis of indoctrinated children within IS territory.[22] According to Vale, the group put significant resources into indoctrinating children within its territories over the past few years. In May 2017, ISIS, in its publication *An-Naba*, boasted that it had 'educated 100,423 male *and* female students in 1350 IS-controlled primary schools'.[23] Some of these children have been used as soldiers: there are 'approximately 1,100 Syrian children under 16 who have joined IS, recording 52 battle deaths, including 8 as suicide bombers'.[24]

However, the most important issue is the depth of indoctrination. The education provided by ISIS was comprehensive and reliable, at a time when an estimated 2.8 million children were out of education in Syria.[25] Consequently, the group successfully highlighted the government's failings whilst filling an educational gap themselves. Vale thus warns that 'statelessness and displacement, combined with IS's immersive strategy of indoctrination and identity (re-)construction from birth, lead to a situation in which a child's only point of reference and self-identification is IS's jihadist caliphate'.[26] Failure to deradicalize these

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[20] BBC News, 'IS "Caliphate" Defeated but Jihadist Group Remains a Threat'.

[21] United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, 'Eighth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL to international peace and security and the range of UN efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat', *United Nations Security Council*, 1 February 2019, online at, https://undocs.org/S/2019/103.

[22] Gina Vale, *Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory* (International Center for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018).

[23] Ibid., p. 18

[24] Ibid., p. 7

[25] Ibid., p. 17

[26] Ibid., p. 27

children successfully and quickly will surely stimulate support for ISIS.

Indeed, the Iraqi and Syrian governments are resoundingly failing in this effort. Both governments face a monumental challenge. ISIS members are motivated by a range of incentives including protection, financial incentives, and ideology. And not all members have affiliated themselves to ISIS to the same degree: some joined for pragmatic reasons, whilst others were driven by ideology.[27] To rehabilitate all these different groups, each with their own specific needs, would require a vast and coordinated effort. Yet, so far, the various reintegration attempts in Syria have been seriously flawed. In Syrian Defence Force (SDF)-controlled areas, merely suspected IS-members are being housed with known IS-fighters in detention centres, many of which are filled to capacity and lack the funds to de-radicalise.[28] Consequently, 'the detention facilities could become breeding grounds for ISIS, a "radicalisation academy"'.[29]

Furthermore, there are growing tensions in recaptured territories: rebel and SDF forces are increasingly viewed as foreign occupiers due to their failure to govern these areas effectively.[30] In Iraq is the government is reportedly failing to rehabilitate and rejuvenate those areas which it has seized from ISIS, leading to a growing feeling of discrimination among the Sunni population.[31] Both Iraqi and Syrian forces are therefore resoundingly failing to differentiate between militarily defeating the group, and dealing with underlying grievances. The region is thus ripe for a future ISIS resurrection

Yet it would be wrong to assume that this problem only concerns Iraq and Syria. Among those former ISIS fighters, currently being detained by SDF and Kurdish forces, are between 800 and 1000 foreign fighters.[32] As the recent, tragic, case of Shamima Begum has demonstrated, many Western countries are struggling to reconcile

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[27] Haid Haid, *Reintegrating ISIS Supporters in Syria: Efforts, Priorities and Challenges* (International Center for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018), pp. 13-14.

[28] Ibid., p. 15.

[29] Haid, 'Reintegrating ISIS Supporters', p. 16.

[30] Ibid., p. 18.

[31] The Economist, 'Iraq's Recaptured Territory is Being Neglected', *The Economist*, 12 October 2017, online at https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/10/12/iraqs-recaptured-territory-is-being-neglected.

[32] Michael Peel, Andrew Lincoln & Chloe Cornish, 'Europe Battles Problem of Returning ISIS fighters', *Financial Times*, 19 February 2019, online at https://www.ft.com/content/acf5a70e-3384-11e9-bd3a-8b2a211d90d5.

legal and moral pressures to allow these fighters to return against public opinion which opposes this. So, whilst Western government are debating and pondering this issue, fighters such as Shamima remain in Syrian camps, draining the already dwindling resources of SDF and Kurdish forces. The longer this issue lasts, the greater the probability that these fighters may escape their captivity, be accidentally released, or radicalise their fellow detainees. This, in turn, increases the risk that these fighters may attack the West.

Against this backdrop, we must seriously question whether we have any option *but* to negotiate. Military force has succeeded in reducing the group's ability to project substantial power in a conventional sense. Yet ISIS's support base and ideological resonance in the community remains strong. Instead, we must focus on challenging the underlying grievances. This could be done via a bottom-up approach: utilise Counter Violent-Extremism (CVE)[33] methods to rehabilitate and de-radicalise the population, whilst dealing with the grievances which permitted the rise of ISIS in the first place. However, the analyses provided by Haid and Vale suggest that not only are the Syrian and Iraqi governments failing to do this, but they are in fact exacerbating the problem. Additionally, the unwillingness of many Western governments to tackle the issue of foreign fighters abandoned in Syria or to provide adequate support to Iraqi and Syrian security forces will only make this issue worse. Even if it were done correctly, the de-radicalisation process could take decades, giving ISIS time to recover.

As an alternative, we must consider a top-down approach of negotiating with ISIS. In this way, we can broaden our understandings of the group's concerns, whilst also beginning to deal with them. Whilst this option may not appeal to many, the alternative would be to persist with a failing and flawed strategy which risks a future ISIS resurrection. Indeed, this point is critical when considering the moral qualms of negotiating with ISIS. As Abba Eban, former Israeli Foreign Minister, said: 'anything you can do to shorten war is ethical'.[34] Surely, therefore, we have a duty at least to attempt negotiations. If we do not, we risk further bloodshed

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[33] Counter Violent Extremism is an approach to tackling radicalisation which emphasises dialogue, inclusion, tackling underlying issues or grievances, and countering radical narratives. For more details, see, United Nations Security Council Counter Terrorism Committee, 'Countering Violent Extremism, online at https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/countering-violent-extremism.
[34] Abba Eban, quoted in Powell, *Talking to Terrorists*, p. 21.

and conflict.

Furthermore, from a pragmatic standpoint, history has proved that negotiating can bear significant benefits, even if the outcome of talks is limited. As Mitchell Reiss has noted, negotiations 'may provide the state with greater insight into the leadership, structure, and ideology of these organisations. They may allow it to recruit agents to work for the state. They may unsettle organisations by provoking internal mistrust'. [35] When confronted with a group as opaque as ISIS, gaining as much intelligence on the group's structure, aims, and personnel is vitally important. In addition, the opportunity to locate moderates and empower them through negotiations is not an opportunity which should be missed. Indeed, Jonathan Powell pays particular attention to this benefit, suggesting that it was hugely beneficial during the Northern Irish conflict both in locating IRA moderates, and in empowering moderates within the British government, thereby preventing an escalation of the conflict.[36] Therefore, even if we reject the concept of compromising with ISIS, many would undoubtedly acknowledge that negotiations offer additional benefits in the conflict.

Considering the above points, it is clear that negotiations are far too important to simply dismiss. Yet, the question remains: *can we negotiate?*

Why we can negotiate with ISIS

As many forcefully argue, even if we wanted to negotiate with ISIS, it would be impossible as the group would never compromise. This view would therefore suggest that we *cannot* negotiate. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that ISIS is not purely dominated by a singular hatred of the current status quo and a radical interpretation of the Quran. The presence of moderate, pragmatic voices in the group, therefore, presents an opportunity to negotiate.

When Graeme Wood concluded that ISIS was 'Islamic. *Very* Islamic', and consequently that its demands were hamstrung by their interpretation of the Quran, he made the mistake of basing this analysis primarily on interviews with religious figures employed to recruit foreign fighters.[37] Instead the evidence suggests that ISIS

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[35] Reiss, *Negotiating with Evil*, p. 18.
[36] Powell, *Talking to Terrorists*, p. 349.
[37] Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants'.

members in Syria and Iraq may not be as dogmatic as suspected. This is the view taken by Simon Cottee, who argues that, 'ISIS is not really about religion'.[38] As he highlights, evidence from West Point's Combating Terrorism Centre found that '70% of 4173 foreign recruits considered themselves novices about Shariah Law'.[39]

Indeed, research conducted by Dounia Mahlouly and Charlie Winter concerning ISIS's internal and external messaging priorities reveals that religion is not the sole focus of the group.[40] Whilst ISIS's foreign language publication, *Rumiyah,* 'tended to emphasise the ideological nature of the Islamic State war and reiterate the transnational reach of its cadres', its internal publication, *Al-Naba,* was focused on 'reframing day-to-day events – both defeats and victories – as logical progressions in the caliphate's insurgent project'.[41] Consequently, whilst over half of *Rumiyah's* content was religiously or ideologically focused, only 6% of *Al-Naba's* articles focused on ideological positioning.[42] Their findings importantly reveal that 'the Islamic State recognised that its in-theatre fighters and supporters – former, current, or future – are driven as much by pragmatic concerns as they are by ideological fervour, if not more'.[43] This is critical as it demonstrates that ISIS does have pragmatic and realistic fears, including military, social and economic concerns. Currently, however, these concerns are largely unknown. Engaging in secret talks could help reveal them and establish a base from which further talks could emerge.

It is also worth remembering here that perceptions and goals can change. One only needs to look at FARC, the IRA, or the Taliban to realise that terrorist groups can change their minds and moderate their views to the extent that peace negotiations become possible. Oftentimes, this change of mind has only manifested once military action proves inadequate for resolving the conflict. The recent military defeats of the group may therefore be providing a golden opportunity to negotiate, as increasing numbers within ISIS

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[38] Simon Cottee, '"What ISIS Really Wants" Revisited: Religions Matters in *Jihadist* Violence, but How?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism,* Vol. 40, No. 6 (2017), p. 440.
[39] Ibid., p. 444.
[40] Dounia Mahlouly & Charlie Winter, *A Tale of Two Caliphates: Comparing the Islamic State's Internal and External Messaging Priorities* (VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2018).
[41] Ibid., pp. 29-30.
[42] Ibid., pp. 31-33.
[43] Ibid., p. 41.

acknowledge that they cannot win military. It would therefore be premature, and indeed foolish, to write off negotiations due to a perceived lack of desire within ISIS to talk at this time.

From this evidence, we can clearly see that negotiations with ISIS are possible. The group does contain moderates and pragmatists, whose priorities lie in their legitimate grievances which facilitated the rise of ISIS in the first place. These are issues over which we can negotiate, and, in so doing, empower moderate voices. Furthermore, the group's declining situation greatly increases the likelihood that they will want to talk. Initiating this process now could pave the way for a future peace settlement.

Limitations to negotiations

Whilst this article strongly argues that negotiations can and should be considered, it would be negligent to ignore impeding factors.

As the Shamima Begum affair demonstrated, most people in Western states still regard the group, and any who affiliated themselves to it, with little sympathy. As such, it is difficult to imagine many politicians having the courage to publicly endorse negotiations. However, whilst this issue would certainly preclude public negotiations, it need not hinder secret negotiations from taking place. The experiences of Colombia, Northern Ireland and the Basque clearly show that it is normal to begin negotiations in secret. Ultimately, of course, an official peace treaty would require public negotiations, to allow the populations of both groups to acclimatise themselves to this new political reality. But this fact should not deter governments from reaching out in secret now, and thereby setting out the groundwork for a future settlement.

We must also consider the practicalities of negotiations, specifically *who* would be talking. Currently, there are 79 states in the coalition against ISIS.[44] It would be both impractical and impossible to get representatives from all states to agree on a negotiating position without the entire effort collapsing. And even if it were possible, conducting negotiations with partnerships is rife with difficulties, as the problems inherent in negotiations multiplies as the partnership grows.[45] Consequently, states must decide for

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[44] US Department of State, 'The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS: Partners', *US Department of State,* online at https://www.state.gov/s/seci/c72810.htm.

[45] This issue is best examined by Samir Puri in his study of the negotiations

themselves whether they would prefer to negotiate bilaterally or multilaterally. Considering this, Syria and Iraq may be best placed to talk as they would have the agency to negotiate alone, since the conflict is taking place within their own borders. Admittedly, this is an issue which severely hampers prospects for negotiations. And whilst it is certainly worth analysing, there is unfortunately not enough space within the scope of this paper to analyse the multitude of complexities surrounding each individual state's prospects for successful negotiations. However, just because something is difficult and complex, does not mean there should be no effort made at all.

It would be foolish to pretend that negotiations would be simple. There are many factors which undoubtedly complicate efforts. At present, these limitations complicate the logistics of who would be conducting the negotiations, and would force talks to remain secret. More importantly, a lack of desire to talk from ISIS would prevent talks from ever occurring. However, whilst we know that these issues will cause problems, we cannot say for certain at this moment that they will make negotiations impossible. For this reason, if we truly value peace, we must not write off negotiations before we have tried them.

Conclusion

The reasons against negotiating with ISIS are numerous and often well-reasoned. At the core of many of these arguments are three distinct issues: ethically, it is seen as completely indefensible to offer legitimacy to such a heinous group though negotiations; practically, many still believe that current strategies being employed are working, and there are suitable alternatives to negotiating which will ensure victory; and lastly, there remains a common-held perception that ISIS simply cannot be negotiated with due to their outrageous and unbending desire to overthrow the current world-order. These factors have all contributed to a general belief among commentators, governments, and the general public that negotiations are neither wanted nor necessary.

However, as this paper has shown, the evidence on the ground reveals an entirely different reality. The war against ISIS is not over. The core ideology which held the group together has not

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conducted by the US-led coalitions during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Puri, *Fighting and Negotiating with Armed Groups,* pp. 97-124.

only survived, but has been spread to countless children of Iraqi, Syrian, and foreign fighters. Indeed, it is looking increasingly likely that ISIS will survive its loss of territory, and form itself into a potent insurgency, capable of striking targets all over the world. We are thus paradoxically congratulating ourselves that the fight is finished, whilst latent tensions and grievances threaten to allow the group to rise again. Whilst the military strategy has proved adequate for seizing ISIS territory, it is ultimately failing to deal with underlying issues. Furthermore, efforts in Iraq and Syria to control and de-radicalise former ISIS members are manifestly failing. The chances of ISIS forming a potent insurgency, therefore, are high.

At the same time, we must move beyond viewing ISIS as purely evil, whose aims cannot be compromised with. The group is a complex mix of thousands of people, all of whom have joined for diverse reasons. Within the group there will be practical and more realistic issues with which we can engage. Indeed, if our goal is to prevent ISIS, or a similar group, from ever rising again, we *must* engage and deal with these issues.

Certainly, there will be limitations to negotiations. It is difficult to imagine any government willingly admitting to negotiating with ISIS in public. Serious questions also need to be asked about the logistics of negotiations: both bilateral and multilateral negotiations would raise their own issues. Yet whilst these issues complicate matters, and will certainly cause problems, they alone are not reason enough to completely write-off negotiations before we have even tried.

At present, we have a golden opportunity to engage with ISIS; as the group loses power, land, and influence, it will increasingly want to talk. And whist many would object to this, we must be realistic about our options. If peace in this conflict is valued highly enough, then negotiations at least deserve to be considered and attempted. So, whilst negotiating may seem like doing a 'Deal with the Devil', it may be the only saving grace we have left.

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