



## NEGOTIATING WITH ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS

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As a negotiator I would often run “what if” scenarios through my head. One often running through mine is “what if” I was called to the scene of a hostage event and the hostage takers were terrorists? This “nightmare scenario” is an event akin to the infamous Beslan School Incident from 2004. In this incident terrorists took 1,100 people, including 777 children, hostage. By the time the event played out three days later 380 people were dead.

Most negotiators have the same nagging question in the back of their minds, “I know that the odds are slim that it will happen in my town but what if it does? “Maybe it’s not 1,100 people but its thirty-two 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, or maybe it’s not even school children but something like the Westgate Mall? This article will discuss the nature of such events and will offer some guidelines, based on my research, on how negotiations may be affected. One thing I can tell you for sure, it will be something vastly different than even the most experienced negotiators have ever dealt with.

One has only to look back to the events at Munich, Germany, in 1972, the Moscow theater incident in 2002, and the afore mentioned Beslan school incident, all of these incidents resulting in a large death toll, to understand the difficulty of negotiations with such dedicated and committed terrorists. Another key point is the nature of the terrorist organizations who have committed a long list of attacks such as those listed above. The common denominator is they are all Islamic extremists.

When I discussed this topic with an Army Colonel who has extensive training and experience in counter-terrorism, he stated it unlikely we will ever see commercial airliners flown into buildings again. A possible concern is that Americans could travel to the Middle East and join ISIS. Once “trained,” US citizens return home and try to carry out deadly attacks. That’s certainly conceivable. History shows the most lethal attacks post 9/11 by radical Muslims on American soil have been of a different species: “homegrown” terrorism like the Fort Hood shooting of 2009, involving Major [Nidal Hasan](#) who killed 13 people, and the Boston Marathon Bombing of 2013, which killed three people and injured more than 250. The perpetrators of these attacks were self-radicalized, or radicalized by individuals on US soil. They were people who, while in America, got alienated, got inspired by jihadist propaganda. These “Lone wolfs” are the individuals who I believe pose the greatest risk, and are the ones negotiators need to be prepared to face.

It is important to note, at this point, “terrorism” is a tactic, not an ideology, a religion, or a process. There are several popular definitions of terrorism, varying in degree of effect, but most are similar to the following: *The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence by a person or an organized group against people or property with the intention of intimidating or coercing societies or governments, often for ideological or political reasons.* While criminals can employ tactics similar to those of terrorists, the terrorist organization conducting a

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terrorist “operation” with the *“intention of ..., often for..., is the subject for this article and results in a focus on the Islamic extremist.*

Normally we negotiate in two ways;

1. Our standard mode of attempting to affect the subject’s thought processes in order to cause them to do what we want them to do so we can accomplish the best outcome. Generally speaking, our subject wants to live and we are their way out alive.
2. The tactical mode of affecting the subject’s thought processes so we can buy time for further intelligence or for a tactical team resolution.

While this is affected by the drive and motivation of the suspect, we are generally dealing with someone with a desire to achieve an outcome not involving their own demise. But the Islamic extremist terrorist group is usually focused on a pre-determined and planned outcome. Driven by a religious or fanatical zeal, the Islamic terrorist(s) is often willing and/or planning to die to accomplish the objective. In the Islamic extremist ideology, death is a significant component of the objective and is absolutely necessary to accomplish the highest personal goal. In these cases, death while accomplishing the organization’s objective holds the ultimate reward. As a result, the terrorist is dedicated, committed and very difficult to stop.

From the description above it becomes evident the “Negotiator101” training focusing on “hooks and triggers” will be less effective. Inherent within the “normal” process of negotiations is the suspects “will to live.” Even the tactical mode of negotiations will be difficult. Based on radicalization and the terrorist’s beliefs it will be difficult to change his thought processes. In order to have any chance of dealing with this type of situation it is important to understand the terrorist mindset.

Many of us have heard the word “Jihad” used in media reports discussing terrorism. What is Jihad? It is the divinely ordained duty of all Muslims to fight in the literal sense until man-made law has been replaced by God’s law, Sharia (*Sharia* is the moral code and religious law of Islam), and Islamic law is in place throughout the world. To properly understand the place of jihad in the Islamic extremist worldview, it is important to keep in mind that Islam has been, from its very beginning, not only a religion but a political community - the nation of Islam. Muhammad was not merely a prophet communicating the word of God, but a political leader and military commander. According to the traditional Muslim outlook, humanity is divided into two groups: the followers of Islam who are called “believers,” and all non-Muslims, who are called “infidels.” It is the duty of the Muslims to propagate the one true faith...Islam...throughout the world. Should the infidels refuse to embrace Islam, jihad is the means to be used to vanquish them. Islamic extremists have, as the category implies, taken this to a bloodthirsty extreme.

Some important tenets of the Islamic extremist belief system likely to affect negotiations are;

- ▶ When waging Jihad it is okay to lie, murder, steal, or do anything deemed necessary except back down from the mission.
- ▶ To die while engaged in Jihad is the greatest glory one can achieve (paradise).
- ▶ Non-combatants can be killed if they are aiding the enemies of Islam.
- ▶ Allah (God) will grant victory to his people against foes that are superior in numbers and firepower.
- ▶ Anyone who insults or even opposes Muhammad or his people deserves a humiliating death, often by beheading.
- ▶ Paradise is only guaranteed to those who ‘slay and are slain’ for Allah.

What are some of the key Islamic extremist objectives? Get the highest body count and carnage possible to inflict fear and instability within western populations, get as much media attention as possible to spread the word and shape the environment for the future of Islam, and die the greatest death in order to reach paradise.

By now it is apparent why traditional negotiation strategies are not unlikely to be effective in an Islamic extremist terrorist incident. As westerners, most of us cannot begin to grasp the commitment or the mindset of an Islamic extremist. To think as a negotiator we are going to change the terrorist's way of thinking after a few hours of negotiations is not only naive, but a highly dangerous way of thinking.

So what can we do? In such a difficult and complex situation negotiation efforts are vital and should be undertaken immediately, even though the prognosis for success is less. It is highly likely the best chance for the hostage's survival is a tactical intervention. Negotiators should be prepared to support a tactical intervention. Below are some suggested processes for utilization in attempting to interdict the terrorist operation and positively impact the potential outcome.

Get involved in support planning for the tactical intervention.

Gather Intelligence;

- Number of subjects
- Type of weapons
- Number of hostages
- Location of subjects
- Location of Hostages

Negotiate usually non-negotiable items (stall for time).

Negotiate the delivery of items enhancing intelligence gathering.

Negotiate the delivery of items such as food and drinks (allows for better intelligence gathering from delivery team and allows natural body processes to slow or interrupt the terrorist activities).

Assist the tactical element by influencing the subject(s) to a particular location aiding in the tactical resolution.

In conclusion, negotiations with Islamic extremists executing a terrorist operation will be vastly different than anything you have ever dealt with. The negotiator needs to understand the Islamic extremist mindset. A terrorist hostage event of this nature has a higher chance of becoming a tactical resolution, however negotiators can be of significant assistance in gathering intelligence and if possible, influencing the subjects behavior and possibly gain the release of some or all hostages. If negotiators are unable to gain the release of the hostages they must be prepared to aid the tactical resolution. Not the usual train of thought for a negotiator, but a necessary one.

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