Handout 6. Responses to Terrorism

Historically, there have been a number of responses to terrorism. These have included the use of violence to oppose terrorists, the use of negotiation, and finally the use of international conventions to create international norms in opposing terrorism. While these three are not, by any means, the only ways in which governments have sought to address terrorism, they certainly have been among the most popular.

The use of force and violence against terrorism has been demonstrated periodically. U.S. military action against the Taliban in Afghanistan is an example of the use of force against terrorism. The Taliban, harboring the al Qaeda organization, was the target of U.S. military action. In another example, in 1988 three suspected members of the Irish Republican Army were shot and killed in Gibraltar by members of the British Special Air Services. Force, in this case, was used against suspected members of a terrorist organization. The use of force is both a tit-for-tat strategy, as well as an attempt to hinder the terrorists' ability to operate.

Negotiation is a second method for dealing with terrorism. While nations may refuse publicly to negotiate with terrorist groups, they may follow a different strategy in secret. For example, Great Britain had long refused to negotiate with the Irish Republican Army and its political wing Sinn Fein. Yet, out of the public view negotiations did proceed, ultimately leading to the Good Friday Agreements, which went far in ending terrorist attacks in Northern Ireland. Another example is the negotiation that took place between the African National Congress (ANC) and the apartheid government of South Africa. The ANC had been proscribed as a terrorist organization, and the government foreswore any negotiation with the ANC. Yet, behind the scenes negotiations did take place, ultimately resulting in the end of apartheid in South Africa.

International agreements are another attempt at addressing terrorism. International organizations, such as the United Nations, pass resolutions and seek to foster greater political action among member states. For example, the 1997 International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings requires that parties to the convention must make it a criminal act to unlawfully and intentionally use explosives or other deadly devices in public with the objective of causing death or injuring a person. Another example of action by the international community was UN Security Council anti-terrorism resolution 1373, "Improving International Cooperation."

You may wish to reflect on these approaches to handling terrorism in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Particular approaches or combinations of approaches may be more appropriate in a given context.