

# Conversations with Terrorists

Middle East Leaders on Politics,  
Violence, and Empire

Reese Erlich

Foreword by: Robert Baer

Afterword by: Noam Chomsky



## **Praise for *Conversations with Terrorists***

“*Conversations with Terrorists* takes us inside the minds of people sometimes labeled as enemies by successive U.S. governments. Rather than relying on State Department or Pentagon sources, Erlich interviews key Middle East players and presents their unvarnished views. Some have acted despicably; none of them are described as ‘terrorists’ by U.S. officials. A must read for anyone who wants to understand the phony War on Terror.”

—**Daniel Ellsberg**, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*

“Since I was present at two of these conversations with terrorists, I feel fully qualified to tell you that book you’re holding is true, accurate, thoughtful, and eminently readable. I would expect no less of a man who would walk up to Khalil Meschal, the head of Hamas, at a Syrian embassy reception and ask for an interview. He got it. I traveled with Reese from the Souks of Damascus to the killing grounds of Al Sukariya near Iraq, where we investigated a secret U.S. raid together. It was like traveling with a pit-bull who is trailing a truck of raw meat. Reese locks on to an objective and will not be deterred until he has unpacked and deconstructed it from at least seven angles.”

—**Peter Coyote**, *Sleeping Where I Fall*

“In an era when the Bush Administration has defined the world as good vs. evil, it’s great to read a book that reminds you things aren’t all black and white, but rather shades of grey. *Conversations with Terrorists* shows you that the term *terrorist* is subjective and that one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist.”

—**Maz Jobrani**, comedian/actor/American citizen

“One of the most courageous journalists I know.”

—**Amiri Baraka** (aka **LeRoi Jones**), poet/playwright/political activist

“What is terror? A word. What is in that word *terror*? Reese Erlich introduces us to people whose names are associated with that word. He gives them the chance to speak. When we listen, we find ourselves provoked by unexpected insights and challenges to our stereotypes.”

—**Stephen Kinzer**, *All the Shah’s Men*

“Reese Erlich is an investigative reporter par excellence: fearless, dogged, and someone who can’t be snowed. Plus, he’s a great writer.”

—**Matthew Rothschild**, editor, *The Progressive*

# CONVERSATIONS WITH TERRORISTS

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## Foreword: An Ex-CIA Perspective

I served as a field officer in the CIA from 1976 to 1997, experiencing firsthand many of the incidents described in *Conversations with Terrorists*. Erlich tells the personal stories of both well- and little-known Middle East players, weaving together a fascinating mosaic of how U.S. officials and media have misled the American people about the Middle East. He makes valuable suggestions on how to change U.S. policy and undermine extremists in the region.

I joined the CIA out of curiosity about other peoples and cultures. I first served in India, quickly moved to the Arab world, and was stationed in Lebanon during a very tumultuous time. I was particularly interested in the April 18, 1983, bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. It was a very good operation from a technical standpoint. The car bomber drove into the lobby, obstructed the guards' line of fire, and detonated the explosives—killing over 60 staff, CIA, and military personnel. We never did identify the driver; the truck was stolen and not traceable. On October 23, 1983, a similar truck bomb attack killed 299 American Marines and French soldiers in Beirut.

The U.S. government still blames Hezbollah for both bombings, part of the rationale for declaring it a terrorist organization today. As



someone who personally investigated at the time, however, I can tell you that we still don't know who was responsible for the two bombings. We do know that the perpetrators were sophisticated militants attempting to drive the United States out of Lebanon.

Nevertheless, the Reagan White House and other American leaders denounced both bombings as unspeakable acts of terror. But it's just dumb to call the bombings "terrorism." Many Lebanese looked at the United States as colonizers. The Lebanese were waging a war of national liberation to get the foreigners out of their country. Lebanon had been a formal French colony until 1943; the United States landed Marines in Lebanon in 1958. Our presence in 1983 became a rallying cry for Shiites and other Lebanese opposed to foreign occupation. The attackers used bombs to kill foreign diplomats, soldiers, and intelligence officers. They were horrific, violent attacks, but they weren't acts of terrorism.

For its part, the U.S. government employed terrorist tactics to go after perceived enemies. In *Conversations with Terrorists*, Erlich provides valuable background about the ongoing turmoil in Lebanon. He describes how the CIA paid Saudi Arabians to assassinate Ayatollah Mohammad Fadlallah. The CIA was convinced Fadlallah had masterminded the Marine barracks bombing. The Saudis hired Lebanese operatives to plant a powerful car bomb outside Fadlallah's apartment building. He wasn't injured, but the bomb murdered 80 people and wounded 200.

The CIA had the wrong guy. Fadlallah was politically independent of Hezbollah and opposed Iranian influence in Lebanon. Today Fadlallah is a respected Grand Ayatollah seeking reconciliation among the various political factions. There have been far too many similar cases in the so-called Global War on Terrorism.

Today Hezbollah is a very different organization than it was in the 1980s. Its members aren't trying to convert Christians to Islam. Even Christian and Sunni Muslim leaders concede that Hezbollah is

an important parliamentary force. Christians form political alliances with Hezbollah and run as partners in its political coalition. In a very real sense, Hezbollah helps keep a lid on Lebanon's fractious and sometimes violent politics. Hezbollah stopped firing rockets across the Israeli border and, while it will fight if attacked, has no intention of starting a war with that country. Hezbollah has grown up.

The Palestinian group Hamas has changed as well. In the early 1990s, it carried out a series of horrific suicide bombings inside Israel and the occupied territories. Yahya Abd-al-Latif Ayyash, known as "the Engineer," became famous for terrorizing Israelis. He was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 90 people; Hamas killed a total of over 500 Israelis during the campaign. In 1996 Israel's Shin Bet intelligence agency assassinated Ayyash with a cell phone rigged with explosives.

By 2005 Hamas changed course and stopped all suicide bombings. Israelis are relatively safer today, not because of the wall they built between Israel and parts of Palestine, but because Hamas made a conscious decision to end suicide attacks.

In January 2006, Hamas won free and fair parliamentary elections in the Palestinian Authority. Hamas leadership indicated they were ready to make significant political changes, but the United States and Israel instead sought to attack and isolate the group. The United States should see if Hamas is serious about allowing implementation of UN Resolution 242, which calls for returning all Arab land and the creation of two states in exchange for peace. Simply calling Hamas "terrorists" does nothing to advance the peace process.

*Conversations with Terrorists* does an excellent job of showing that the definition of "terrorist" depends on who is throwing the bomb. Erlich writes about the Stern Gang and Irgun, two Zionist groups that used terrorist tactics against the British and Arabs in the 1940s. The Irgun blew up Jerusalem's King David Hotel in 1946, killing 90 Jews, Arabs, and British officials. The world has largely forgotten the

incident. Leaders of those terrorist groups, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, later went on to become prime ministers of Israel.

In more recent times, the United States has been happy to ally with groups using terrorist tactics. In the 1980s, the United States embraced the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces, whose members massacred civilians in Beirut's Palestinian refugee camps. That same militia kidnapped four Iranian diplomats and executed them. We have a habit of not looking too closely at the actions of our allies, but in the end, we get held responsible for their actions.

U.S. credibility around the world is similarly undermined by the use of torture and detention without trial. How can we claim to uphold the rule of law when we torture suspects, often innocent civilians, in places like Baghdad's Abu Ghraib, Bagram base in Afghanistan, and Guantanamo? The U.S. reputation certainly suffered by supporting the Contras in Nicaragua and other human rights violators in Central America, but the Bush years made things even worse. Today, what separates the U.S. policy from that of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East?

The American firebombing of Germany in 1945 was terrorism. We didn't focus on military or industrial targets. We wanted to terrify the civilian population so the German military would surrender. That's what al Qaeda wants to do on a smaller scale today. That was the intention of 9/11. But al Qaeda has no chance of success and has created the opposite effect. The 9/11 attacks rallied support for America around the world while alienating most of the Muslim population. There was a huge wave of Muslim revulsion. Most Muslims find bin Laden repulsive.

By invading and occupying Afghanistan and Iraq, and carrying out another war in Pakistan, however, the United States has actually helped recruit extremists. The United States tries to link al Qaeda to every Muslim group opposed to U.S. policy, but it's a conscious lie.

The CIA agents and analysts I know are much more intelligent

than the propaganda fed to the public. They don't throw around the term "terrorism." Terrorism is a tactic; it's not a strategy. We understood that. When the CIA chief of station in Lebanon was kidnapped, it wasn't an end in itself. It was a tactic to get the United States out of Lebanon. We understood the differences between militant Sunni and Shia groups, and between the various governments of the Middle East. We never lumped them all together as terrorists.

But the CIA leadership with offices on the seventh floor of CIA headquarters goes along with White House policy. They are selling war to the American people. So they repeat the lie that the Muslims are coming to get us. If we don't stop them on the Kabul River, they'll be pulling up to the Delaware River.

Unfortunately, President Barack Obama is continuing these same, wrong policies. He's a prisoner of the U.S. military. Obama can't take on the generals. They may ask for 75,000 more troops for Afghanistan. He can't afford to tell the military that's enough, because he can't risk someone like General David Petraeus resigning. The last thing you need is an unhappy general when fighting tough battles on health care or similar domestic issues. The U.S. military didn't originally like going into Afghanistan, but once there, they want to make it look like they've won.

Continued troop escalations in Afghanistan won't win the war. We've got to get our troops out. Foreign troops in a country only succeed in rallying people against the occupier. We've got to undermine the jihadists politically. Individual countries must fight the battle against their own extremists. The jihadist movement collapsed in Saudi Arabia, for example, because people became repulsed with their violence against fellow Muslims.

*Conversations with Terrorists* offers many insights into the phony War on Terrorism. Today most Americans oppose the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They don't trust Washington, the wars cost too much, and too many American troops are dying. But the American

people don't necessarily understand the situation on the ground in those countries or the extent of the lying in Washington. *Conversations with Terrorists* provides that important background.

*Robert Baer*

*Beirut*

*March 28, 2010*

Former CIA field officer Robert Baer authored the book *See No Evil*, which later became the film *Syriana*.

## Will the Real Terrorists Please Stand Up?

AS I WALK DOWN THE STREET in Belfast, Northern Ireland, one day in 1985, British soldiers in armored vehicles point their assault rifles directly at my head. It isn't personal. They do that to every pedestrian. I am in Belfast to write a story about the Irish Republican Army (IRA), long vilified as terrorists by the U.S. and British governments.

That's where I meet Liam, a decommissioned member of the IRA. Decommissioned means that he was at one time an active-duty guerilla, but after his release from prison he joined Sinn Fein, the legal political party fighting to reunite the two parts of Ireland. They are not fighting a religious war between Protestants and Catholics, he explains. It's a political battle between republicans, who demand reunification, and unionists, who want the north to remain part of Britain.

Liam had just served seven hard years in a British prison for shooting at British soldiers stationed in Belfast. "Why were you locked up?" I ask. "I missed," he says with a devilish smile. Aha—a real terrorist in the flesh.

One night he offers to take me for drinks at the "feelin" club, which I initially think is some kind of Irish republican topless bar. The club stands surrounded by large boulders placed some distance away from the building's stone walls, which prevent cars packed with

explosives from parking too close. Nothing like a little plastique to ruin your Guinness.

When we arrive at the club, a man asks if I am a “feelin?” Noting my puzzled look, he explains in his heavy Irish brogue that a “feelin” is someone convicted of a serious crime, much worse than a misdemeanor. Only republicans convicted of felonies are allowed into the club. The place is packed.

I was arrested for felony conspiracy for organizing a large anti-Vietnam War demonstration in 1967. (I don’t mention my acquittal.) “That’ll do,” he says, stamping my hand and showing me in the front door. Over numerous pints of Guinness, Liam and I talk about politics and violence. I have one key question. Why does the IRA bomb innocent civilians as well as military targets?

Liam, conceding that the IRA sometimes uses terrorist tactics, explains a debate within the group. Some argue that they should attack only soldiers and British officials in order to sway Irish and British public opinion against colonial rule. Hard-liners, on the other hand, favor bombing civilian targets in London and other cities to show that the occupation is untenable. Yes, we alienate British public opinion, they admit, but the population will become so fed up with the violence that they will finally give in to IRA demands.

I express sharp disagreement with the hard-line view. Alienating so many potential allies is not only immoral but politically counterproductive. Precisely that debate would continue for many years within the IRA. At times the group stopped killing civilians, and at times the bombings resumed. Ultimately, the IRA gave up armed struggle in return for British guarantees of power-sharing and an end to discrimination against Catholics and the republican community.

My conversations with Liam have stayed with me all these years. The IRA was not a terrorist organization, although it certainly used terrorist tactics at times. The anti-Nazi resistance in Europe used

assassinations and bombings, but no one today calls them terrorists. That's important to remember when analyzing groups in the Middle East. After all, the U.S. government itself has used terrorist tactics numerous times to overthrow legitimate governments. So who is the real terrorist? Does the term even have any meaning in today's world? Sixteen years after my visit to Belfast, I was about to find out.

\*\*\*\*\*

I AM AWAKENED by an agitated caller on the morning of September 11, 2001. A producer friend traveling on the East Coast calls to tell me to turn on the TV. I see the footage of the planes smashing into the World Trade Center, and the chaos engulfing the Pentagon and downtown Manhattan. The images of people running down the street followed by billowing clouds of smoke are singed in my memory. Like millions of others around the world, I sit transfixed, trying to make sense of the events. The world is outraged. Even the American government's most ardent enemies—from militant Palestinian groups, to Muslim clerics in Lebanon and even the Taliban in Afghanistan—express sympathy with the victims of a senseless terrorist attack.<sup>1</sup>

Months later, I am on assignment, interviewing Muslim Chechen refugees forced out of their province in Russia. When they learn I am American, their first words are of sympathy for the victims of 9/11. Here are people living in tents in a hostile part of the world, completely dependent on international aid for survival, and expressing solidarity with America. Soon, however, U.S. government actions managed to transform this outpouring of international sympathy into unparalleled hatred, all because of what the Bush administration reduced to an ominous acronym: GWOT, the Global War on Terrorism.

The Bush administration claimed terrorists were everywhere. Terrorists were planning to explode nuclear dirty bombs in major



cities. Saddam Hussein was instructing terrorists to bomb our sea-ports with suitcase atomic weapons. Bush would eventually lump together al Qaeda, Palestinians fighting for a homeland, Iraqis and Afghans fighting foreign occupation, Basque separatists, and Marxist guerrillas in Colombia. Arabs and Muslims became the new scapegoats. The American people were led to believe that terrorists had sleeper cells deep inside the country that were waiting for words of incitement from Muslim imams. Boarding a plane while Muslim became a quasi-criminal offense. Congress passed a resolution authorizing war in Afghanistan that President Bush interpreted as *carte blanche* to invade anywhere.<sup>2</sup> The Bush administration decided it had unlimited powers for domestic repression as well.

But the War on Terrorism never made sense. You can wage war against an enemy country or insurgency, but you can't wage war on a tactic. Real wars begin and end. How can you tell when you've won the War on Terror? Because the war might never end, military intervention abroad and repression at home could also continue indefinitely. Even after the resounding Republican defeat in the 2008 elections, and the disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan, former vice president Dick Cheney continued to defend the Global War on Terrorism as the basis for unlimited military intervention. "Up until 9/11, it [terrorism] was treated as a law enforcement problem. Once you go into a wartime situation . . . then you use all of your assets to go after the enemy. You go after the state sponsors of terror, places where they've got sanctuary."<sup>3</sup>

Those places of sanctuary, apparently, keep multiplying. On September 10, 2001, the United States was not engaged in combat anywhere in the world. Nine years later, the United States has occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, and it sends troops to fight "terrorists" in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. U.S. drones fire missiles to attack targets in Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and East

Africa. The American people, not to mention civilians around the world, are far less safe today than before the start of GWOT.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

PART OF THE PROBLEM is how the United States defines terrorism. The State Department writes that terrorism is an activity that “(1) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure; and (2) appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking.”<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, the U.S.-government definition of terrorism assumes that terrorists are those who attack established governments; it makes no mention of government use of terrorist tactics. I prefer a different formulation. I think terrorism is the intentional murder or injury of civilians, or the destruction of their property, for purposes of intimidating the population and effecting political change. Terrorism of that kind can be perpetrated by individuals, groups, or countries. In addition, any definition of terrorism should consider whether the action takes place in the context of a war, including wars of national liberation. Terrorism would then include both the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center buildings and Israeli Defense Forces dropping 500-pound bombs on apartment buildings to allegedly kill one Hamas leader. The simple act of setting off a car bomb against enemy troops or assassinating enemy officers is not, by itself, terrorism.

From a practical perspective, however, the United States has rendered the term “terrorism” meaningless. Pro-United States insurgents who bomb innocent civilians are called freedom fighters. In the 1980s, such heroes included the U.S.-backed Afghan mujahedeen fighting the Soviet occupation and the U.S.-trained

Contras fighting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. On the other hand, every guerrilla using violence to oppose the United States and its allies is automatically labeled a terrorist. Even nonviolent opponents of the United States offering political and economic aid to alleged insurgents are defined as terrorist supporters. The United States government has shut down Islamic charities sending donations to schools in Palestine because of alleged connections to Hamas. The hypocrisy list is endless.

Students of recent American history shouldn't be surprised. Although claiming to be staunch opponents of terrorism, the United States and its allies frequently use terrorist tactics themselves.



IF YOU THINK of airplane piracy or car bombings, what image comes to mind? Most Americans picture a bearded Muslim extremist. The fact is, Lechi, a Zionist group also known as the Stern Gang, was the first to use letter bombs, thereby pioneering the use of terror tactics in the modern era. In 1947, when Britain controlled colonial Palestine, Stern Gang commander Yaakov Eliav orchestrated the mailing of letter bombs addressed to members of the British cabinet and other officials.<sup>5</sup> From 1945 to 1948, the Stern Gang and another right-wing Zionist group, the Irgun, engaged in kidnappings, assassinations, and car bombings against both British officials and Arab civilians. (For much more detail on early Zionist terrorists, see chapter 3.)

Several years later, in 1954, the Israeli government performed the first act of air piracy in the Middle East. Israeli planes forced a Syrian civilian plane to land in Israel in a vain effort to trade the passengers for Israeli agents captured in Syria. Israeli prime minister Moshe Sharett admitted that "our action was without precedent in the history of international practice."<sup>6</sup>

After World War II, the United States expanded its empire by seeking control of former European colonies around the world. But the United States didn't utilize the discredited system of colonies; it preferred to establish neo-colonies, formally independent countries that were actually under U.S. control. To consolidate power, the United States backed right-wing insurgents, monarchists, and militarists—often using terrorism to intimidate and confuse civilians. Below are some examples of those U.S. efforts.

The CIA instigated a destabilization campaign in French-controlled Vietnam in the early 1950s, backing militarists as a so-called third force opposed to both the French and the Communist Party. The CIA used terrorist tactics to intentionally kill civilians and sow confusion, as when a car bomb killed civilians in front of the Saigon Opera House in 1952.<sup>7</sup> The Graham Greene novel and recent film, *The Quiet American*, portrayed such incidents accurately.

In 1953, the CIA organized a coup against the democratically elected government of Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Iran had nationalized British petroleum. The United States and Britain wanted to maintain control over Iran's oil and establish military bases. In declassified documents, the CIA admits to carrying out assassinations and bombings to weaken Mossadegh and return the shah (king) to power.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in 1961, the CIA organized a vicious campaign of arson, bombings, and assassinations against Cuba. The U. S. government trained Cuban exiles to burn cane fields, destroy crops and livestock, and attempt to assassinate Cuban leaders, including Fidel Castro. The 1975 U.S. Senate Church Commission documented many of these attacks.<sup>9</sup>

After the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, the Reagan administration created a counterrevolutionary militia, known as the Contras. The U.S. Army- and CIA-trained and funded Contras