

## Book Reviews

**Peter Taylor. *Talking to Terrorists: A Personal History from the IRA to Al Qaeda*. London: Harper Press. 342 pp. ISBN 0007325533. £9.99; US \$ 9.99.**

**Reviewed by Richard Phelps**

Veteran investigative reporter Peter Taylor is a familiar author and documentary maker to students of the conflict in Ulster. His trilogy *Brits*, *Loyalists*, and *Provos* has long entered the canon of authoritative and informative books on the subject. His documentaries have a Louis Theroux-like quality in allowing his interview subjects to open up and speak for themselves about the conflict and violence they are involved in. In recent years though, the BBC journalist has turned his attention to a more fashionable source of violence: Islamist militants. Having made a number of remarkable investigative documentaries on the subject, his transition from the confines of Northern Ireland to the landscapes of the global jihad is the subject of his latest book *Talking to Terrorists: A Personal Journey from the IRA to Al Qaeda*.

*Talking to Terrorists* reflects the methodology of the reporter in producing this book – he interviewed suspected terrorists and their families – more than an argument he makes with any force within it. In the book, Taylor’s treatment of the conflict in Northern Ireland is an extended discussion of one particular case study, and the author is clearly supportive of the approach, highlighting the fruits that it can bring. “Northern Ireland offers a possible template for the resolution of other conflicts” he writes, “[b]ut what about Al Qaeda?” Taylor never answers his question. Indeed, he avoids the swirling debate over whether governments or their intermediaries should or should not engage in dialogue or negotiations with Islamists who perform violence against civilians for political ends, though he seems to be broadly supportive of the potential that it may offer. Instead, what Taylor offers are snapshots and case studies of Islamist terrorism around the world: he meets with suspects and their families, offering narratives and reflections on their experiences.

Heavy on description, light on analysis, the case studies that Taylor offers represent glimpses of various themes and issues in the “war on terror”. They offer in book form what Taylor earlier presented in an accompanying documentary series. However, whilst such cursory treatment of the issues proved highly effective in his documentaries, in written form it strikes the reader as being a superficial investigation - even though this is not the case. Frustratingly, little in *Talking to Terrorists* appears new, although those who have watched the documentaries will know that much of it *is* new. As such, the account he gives of a British Muslim fighting in Pakistan surviving the experience of the house in which he was sleeping collapse after being hit by a drone missile, appears alongside tired accounts of the Madrid, Bali, and 9/11 attacks. Aimed more as a taster for a generalist readership, Taylor offers an introductory picture. However, the lack of precisions will irk readers who are more informed: “200.000” died in the Algerian civil war, “*significantly, he [the British jihadist] had no beard*”, the Taliban and Al Qaeda share “*basically the same ideology*”, Mullah Omar is an “*eminent Islamic scholar*”, are examples of this. Taylor’s experience and journalistic skill should have given this book the potential to offer far more.

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The author's journey "*from the IRA to Al Qaeda*" is precisely that: rather than offering a spectrum of experiences involving the range of everything in the continuum of non-state militancy *from the IRA* – at one end – *to Al Qaeda* – at the other – what Taylor offers instead is a jump from the former to the latter. The jump however, is far from seamless. In the first 50 pages he talks about the IRA and Northern Ireland; in the remainder of the book he talks about the Islamist militancy. The resulting disconnect may perhaps accurately reflect the progression of Taylor's career as a journalist, but when presented in book form the product feels rather disjointed. He states that there is wisdom to be harvested from experiences-past, but he does little to elaborate what he thinks history's lessons are. As a result, the Northern Irish section of *Talking to Terrorists* reads more like an appendix to an earlier work than an integral section to the present book. Northern Ireland aside, the reader is left with a patchwork of dispatches without real conclusions.

Chatty and reflective, the book is neither the *personal journey* expected of a memoir, nor is it particularly authoritative or informative. Yet nor does he attempt that – for Taylor states explicitly that he has not set out to write a global study of terrorism or an academic analysis. Nevertheless, the snapshots that he presents leave the reader to search for conclusions, since Taylor does not draw many. The technique he applied to great effect in filmmaking often falls flat in written form: "I asked him if he was a terrorist [...] Boukhari's reply was, 'I'm not a terrorist. I think people see me as a terrorist, but I'm not. I'm a mujahid'". *Talking to Terrorists* accompanies a powerful documentary series. Yet the written word without the images in his book at times appears cliché and tired, failing to produce the same impact as his documentaries.

**About the Reviewer:** Richard Phelps is an Adjunct Fellow at the Quilliam Foundation (London). He focuses on the history and development of Islamist dissent in the Arabic world.