Terry Waite was appointed as an advisor on international affairs to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1980 and became known for his humanitarian efforts to negotiate the release of Western hostages in the Middle East. His first experience was the successful negotiation of the release of hostages held in Iran (1980-81), followed by the freeing of four hostages in Libya (1984-85).

In 1987 he was himself taken captive while attempting to negotiate the freedom of British and American hostages held in Beirut. The hostage-takers, linked to Hizbollah (an Iranian-backed armed group from the Lebanese Shia Muslim community), were demanding the release of prisoners held on terrorist charges in Kuwait.

Waite, who was known to have met Colonel Oliver North, was seized soon after the exposure of the Iran-Contra affair in which North and other members of the US administration were revealed to have been selling arms to Iran. Waite spent 1,763 days in captivity before his release in November 1991.

**Accord: As a humanitarian actor intervening in Iran, Libya and Beirut, how important was it to you to understand hostage-taking groups’ political aims, strategies and relationships, and how did you try to do this?**

*Terry Waite:* I tried to do as much background work as I could, but looking back I realize I was learning as I went along. In the case of Iran, a country I had never been to before, I consulted a lot of people on Iran's perceived political aims, but I depended more on getting on the ground, listening to people and picking up what they were saying to me. I tried not to go in over-prejudiced one way or the other, keeping an open mind and listening to what was said to me.
In a sense I was working highly intuitively rather than according to a set formula. I have to say I did have a pattern of working – which was extremely risky and one that I wouldn’t recommend for every situation at all – and that was seeking a face-to-face meeting, which is obviously very dangerous in these situations. If such a meeting could be established, then I would try to build a relationship of trust, and if that could be done, then try and explore the root issues, i.e. *why are you doing what you are doing?* I would try and resolve issues in a face-saving manner, by which I mean in a manner in which all parties can walk away with their dignity intact, insofar as is possible. In the process of following that strategy, it is important not to behave in ways that would be illegal or would mean engaging in exchange or ransom-paying – I’ve never believed in that and stuck by that throughout. That was the sort of model that was in my mind, but it was treading one step at a time largely using intuition.

The problem was where to begin. When hostages were taken, the different groups had different names. The problem for me from the outside was: is it one group using different names to confuse, or are there different groups competing with each other or not necessarily liaising with each other?

Information came in from different contacts, from people who had high level contacts in Lebanon, but I cannot think of any information that really was a great deal of use. Walid Jumblatt [leader of the Druze community] did provide me with protection by his militia when I came in from the airport, but I dismissed them when I got into town. I went to see Jumblatt when I was in Lebanon, but I can’t think of any really interesting information anyone provided; aside from the usual sort of things said about Hizbollah (about the involvement of Syria and Iran and so on) – nothing that would help me in terms of an *intervention strategy*.

It shows that you can surround yourself with thoughts and understandings and analyses, but what really counts is your ability on the ground to have a degree of sensitivity to people in situations, to be able to get yourself onto the wavelengths of the people with whom...
If I were to criticize myself, I suppose I was fairly weak on detailed analysis because it was a totally complex field and I don't speak Arabic. If I wanted to have complete analysis I would have to speak Arabic.

**It is one thing to see what a group is saying to you in terms of language but there is probably a lot that can also be learned from their behaviour.**

There were so many real difficulties. They recognized they were extremely vulnerable. When I eventually met them, they would be concerned about whether I was being followed. Was I wearing a locator device? They'd search me for that. In some respects it almost took as much courage for them to come and meet me as for me to meet them. Of course it was easier for them because they had people all over the place and were certainly observing me as I went to meet them, and in their minds would be: where are the Americans or British observing us observing him? So you're walking through a hornet's nest, coupled with the fact that there was a civil war in Lebanon at the time.

Another obstacle was that when I met them I had to be blindfolded. As a negotiator you depend on the signals given out by body language. When that is denied to you, you are put in a more difficult position. The degree of rapport and understanding you can have is limited.

**How did you identify their objectives?**

They had a very specific agenda as far as I was concerned, and it was about the release of some prisoners held in Kuwait. But I almost made a fatal mistake trying to find out. I'd been to the US, and I was asked to try and get a meeting and clarify what it was the kidnappers wanted, and whether it was money or not. I said I would clarify their demands because I too wanted to know, but if it was money I wouldn't be a conduit.

I went to see the kidnappers in Beirut at the consulting room of a doctor who was acting as an intermediary, who I believe was acting in good faith as a member of the Shia community. I had to be blindfolded when the others came into the room, whoever they were. I first of all asked to see the hostages, and they wouldn't have that. I asked them to take a Polaroid camera and bring me pictures of the hostages, which they did. Then I raised the question of money, and it nearly wrecked the whole discussion. They said, “You know very well it isn't money.” I said I didn't know what it was. They said, “The Americans know very well what it is,” but I didn't know if the Americans knew or not – whether they'd had any other direct contact with America. Publicly the Americans were saying they would not negotiate with terrorists. Anyway, I was able to get over that hurdle, but it was a very nasty moment, and it almost wrecked things right from the beginning, and I regret even asking that question.

They said they had blood relatives in Kuwait being held on a variety of terrorist charges under appalling conditions, some facing the death penalty. They asked me to look into this situation, to take letters from their families, and to generally see what could be improved. I said I had no power at all to spring people from prison, but as a humanitarian I believed that all people detained by legal process were entitled to be treated fairly and properly according to due process. I offered to see if the prisoners were being treated properly, and if I could take letters.

These were the specific demands and they never strayed from them. There undoubtedly were broader political objectives, but in this specific instance in my dealings they never raised them whatsoever.

**You were eventually taken hostage yourself. What went wrong, and did you make mistakes as a third-party intervener?**

I think it is reasonable to surmise that one of the reasons they took me was that when Iran-Contra broke it came as a surprise to the Lebanese Hizbollah who were receiving guidance and arms from the Iranians. I think some of them said, “We'll take Waite and see what he knows about this whole business,” because they knew I was in touch with the Americans and the British – I wasn’t trying to keep that secret – and I think they were also concerned that I might have given away something that would lead the Americans or British close to them.

I still believe if I had been able to get to Kuwait and see the prisoners and do something to alleviate their conditions it would have done wonders for easing the
situation. But I can see why I didn’t get there, because politically there was an entirely different agenda: the Iran-Contra business, which was all about trying to get Iran to pressurize Hizbollah in Lebanon. I think this is the important point. An independent mediator/negotiator in that situation is faced with a very great dilemma. On the one hand you want to cooperate with those – let us say a government or government agency – you believe are trying to obtain the release of innocent people. On the other hand, you’ll know it is possible – in some cases highly likely – that governments will also have another political agenda that will be playing out over and above the hostage issue. How far do you cooperate and how far do you stand apart? Cooperate too much and you are compromised; your position as an independent negotiator is gone. But standing back from them totally is sometimes almost impossible because you need them for access, etc. It puts the humanitarian negotiator in a very vulnerable position, where you almost can’t trust either side.

What advice would you give to somebody engaged with armed groups for peacemaking or humanitarian purposes?

Don’t necessarily imagine that formulas for negotiation are going to work. It’s not a bad thing to have a general idea in your mind as to the process that is possible, but try and work with intuition, an educated intuition. Don’t depend on intuition alone because alone it will sometimes lead you astray, but don’t despise it – that’s what I mean by educated intuition.

There may be times you have to work alone because perhaps you are the only one who has access or is trusted, but always try and refer back and debrief in a debriefing team when you come back from a situation – as quickly as possible. The debriefing team must also observe the same rules you observe – absolute discretion. You must not pass on anything to do with the groups you are working on without their permission. In other words you’ve got to be impartial and discreet.

In summary, would you have any particular advice on this whole process of how you understand armed groups?

Be very careful about any analysis you make, and check it, check it, check it. And most importantly you must establish personal contact with key decision makers within the groups, and if you establish contact with a lower level decision maker, you’ve got to get them to get you to the person who is the key decision maker. It may take time, you may have to work up, or around, but never be satisfied until you get to a key decision maker, and when you get there – and if you are the right person – you’re in a very strong position.

And I would also say, if for any reason you realize you’re not the right person for the job for whatever reason, get out. Get somebody else in instead. Don’t be so proud and stubborn to say, “Hang on, I’m failing, and therefore I have to try even harder.” If you’ve got a good reason, and you share that with your team, then no fault, no shame. Not everyone’s right for every situation.

Hostage-taking in the Middle East is once again in the headlines. What does your experience tell us about how this should be dealt with, and what is different about the hostage-taking in Iraq today?

I think it is totally different in Iraq. The strategy that I followed as a Westerner all those years ago could not be followed. I don’t believe I could go into Iraq and talk directly with the head of a group that has kidnapped a Westerner. Why not? Because I believe the pre-emptive policies and heavy-handed military methods adopted in the West have polarized the situation. In such a polarized situation you can’t work the same way. The only ones who stand a remote chance are the Islamic leaders on the ground, and they’re fighting a losing battle in such a polarized situation. Perhaps if the allies eventually withdraw and a UN force goes in, things can start to be put back together.