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Switzerland open to dialogue with Bin Laden

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26-08-2008

Switzerland is prepared to start direct talks with Osama bin Laden to tackle global terrorism. That unconventional proposal was presented by the Swiss foreign minister Micheline Calmy-Rey on Monday during a meeting with 170 Swiss ambassadors and consular officials in Bern.

Black list

Unlike other countries, Switzerland does not have a black list of banned organisations with which a political dialogue is out of the question. The minister said that groups such as Hezbollah, Colombia's largest rebel group FARC, Tamil Tiger rebels in Sri Lanka and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda are all "essential in the search for a resolution" of various conflicts around the world. She did stress that dialogue did not mean "accepting the unacceptable."

"It is important to get away from a Manichean view of the world in black and white, where people and countries can only be allies or enemies." According to the minister, Swiss ambassadors and consuls need to talk with "heavyweight political figures" on the world stage even if they are considered persona non grata by other countries.

This is not the first time the minister raises eyebrows with her controversial style based on a prevalence of dialogue over sanctions and isolation.

Flexibility

Conflict and terrorism expert at the Clingendael institute Edwin Bakker is a proponent of the flexible Swiss policy. "Lists are a burden rather than an instrument that yields positive results. They cause conflicts among countries. Some, among which Switzerland and the Netherlands, try to avoid them."

Hamas, he says, has proven to be one of the largest problems in this context. "A number of countries refused to enter into a dialogue with Hamas even after they had won the elections. Not talking doesn't work. The Israelis, for instance, used to refuse to speak to the PLO, but they changed their minds when they realised that was not to their advantage."

Osama bin Laden

Bakker does not agree with Calmy-Rey that this flexible attitude should go as far as sitting down at the same table as Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

That, he thinks, is taking it a step too far. "Al Qaida is diverse in all its subdivisions. It is possible to talk to a number of them. But with the person Osama bin Laden that's a different matter, taking into account 9/11."

By talking to Bin Laden himself, Bakker says, one gives him far too much credit. He might no longer play the pivotal role he once used to. But by giving him a voice, he could regain that role. What is more, Bin Laden has made his appearance on the world stage fairly recently. "Should one grant that new kid on the block such a status straight away? No."

Criticism

Switzerland's openness to dialogue sometimes strains its relations with other powers who have a different approach. The country has played a high-profile role in negotiations with FARC, for instance, causing tensions in its relations with the Colombian government. And the United States

has fiercely criticised Calmy Rey's visit to Iran in March during which she signed an energy deal with Iran's state gas company, saying it sent "the wrong message" to Teheran.

Calmy-Rey's view has also caused friction within her own country. Her style has sparked a high degree of criticism among domestic political opponents, who have accused her of jeopardising Switzerland's standing in the eyes of key allies.

Tags: Al Qaida, dialogue, Hamas, Micheline Calmy-Rey, Osama bin Laden, Switzerland



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