

The Logic of a Political Solution

The FMLN experienced a fundamental transition from a terrorist organization to a political party in the 1990s. By the late 1980s, structural conditions created a window of opportunity for a settlement. The Soviet Union's withdrawal of support for Marxist movements in Latin America was a major blow to the FMLN, and the civil war had reached a stalemate. In this context, the FMLN's narrow goals made a negotiated settlement possible. Both sides had to make significant compromises. The FMLN did not get as much military or land reform as it had initially hoped. And the Salvadoran government agreed to more military and police reform, greater transparency of its human-rights abuses, and a more democratic political system than it had initially wanted. But the outcome was successful: the end of the FMLN as a terrorist organization.

What does the FMLN experience suggest about the end of terrorist groups more broadly? First, structural developments can create a window of opportunity for a settlement, such as pressure from outside powers or a stalemate between the government and the terrorist organization. As one study on peace settlement concluded, combatants almost always returned to violence "unless a third party stepped in to enforce or verify a post-treaty transition. If a third party assisted with implementation, negotiations almost always succeeded, regardless of the initial goals, ideology, or ethnicity of the participants. If a third party did not, these talks almost always failed."⁴⁴ The United States, regional powers, or even international organizations (such as the United Nations) can play an important role as a third party in helping enforce agreements. For example, the United States, Ireland, and outside bodies, such as the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, played fundamental roles in the end of the Provisional IRA as a terrorist organization. Second, when terrorist groups have broad goals (such as regime change, empire, or the transformation of a country's social order) the likelihood of a settlement with the government is low. This means that there is little likelihood of a settle-

⁴⁴ Walter (2002, p. 3).