

Europe's Non-Strategy

The E.U. isn't taking terror seriously.

BY GERARD ALEXANDER

IN THE WAKE of the March 11 Madrid train bombing, Romano Prodi, president of the European Commission, said, "It is clear that force alone cannot win the fight against terrorism." Prodi was hardly the first continental leader to implicitly criticize U.S. policy as short-sighted and to suggest that there are clear and compelling alternatives to America's strategy in the war on terror.

Soon after 9/11 itself, French prime minister Lionel Jospin traced terrorist acts to "tension, frustration, and radicalism," which in turn "are linked to inequality," which would have to be addressed. In 2002, France's foreign minister famously termed U.S. policy toward terrorism "simplistic" precisely because it did not look to "root causes, the situations, poverty, injustice." Norway's prime minister, Kjell Bondevik, insists that "fighting terrorism should be about more than using your military and freezing finances," and convened two international conferences on the root causes of terrorism in 2003. And after Madrid, German chancellor Gerhard Schröder said that "terrorism cannot be fought only with arms and police. We must also combat the roots of terrorism."

This view isn't restricted to the other side of the Atlantic. John Kerry said in January 2003 that President Bush "has a plan for waging war [on terror] but no plan for winning the peace" over the long haul. "We need more than a one-dimensional war on

terror," he went on, requiring us to "recognize the conditions that are breeding this virulent new form of anti-American terrorism."

There are only two things wrong with this line of criticism. The United States *is* mounting a long-term strategy against terrorism. And Europe *isn't* offering any alternative.

American conservatives may not be famous for their "root causes" explanations of terrorism, any more than of crime. But in several major speeches that echo neoconservative thinking on the subject, President Bush has articulated what amounts to a root-causes theory of terrorism. "As long as the Middle East remains a place of tyranny and despair and anger," he says, "it will continue to produce men and movements that threaten the safety of America and our friends," because dictatorships incubate "stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export." And his administration has begun to implement a strategy based on this theory. It has outlined a far-reaching "greater Middle East initiative" aimed at offering incentives for political reform and democratization in the region. More pointedly, the United States invaded Iraq in no small part to create a new democracy which the administration thinks might catalyze liberalization throughout the Middle East.

The United States doesn't exactly have the strongest track record when it comes to transformational policies in the Middle East. And there are grounds to be skeptical of the "tyranny" theory of the origins of anti-Western extremism. But it cannot be denied that this administration is trying something bold and serious,

something expensive and risky, to solve the terrorism problem from the roots up. Britain, Poland, and several other European countries have of course joined in the Iraq initiative.

By comparison, what are European critics offering as an alternative? All European countries have mounted assertive intelligence-gathering and law enforcement policies against terrorists and plotters in their midst. And several have military forces in Afghanistan. But both those measures are parts of the bombs-and-bullets strategy they insist is not enough. So what major initiative have they—say, the governments of France, Germany, Belgium, and Scandinavia—launched to address what *they* consider terrorism's root causes, whether alone, jointly, or through the European Union? No such initiative is anywhere in sight.

Is it too early to expect more? It's only a little over a month since Islamist terrorists attacked a major E.U. capital, killing 191 people and wounding 1,500. But Europeans have had two and a half years since al Qaeda put terrorism on everyone's agenda. Moreover, they have had major domestic terrorist problems for decades, unlike the United States. So there has been ample time to formulate what French president Jacques Chirac has called for: a "European plan against terrorism." And Europe has the means. The E.U. countries have a total GDP of around \$8 trillion, and they stand at the crossroads of both international diplomacy and the global economy.

What are the leading candidates for a European "root causes" initiative? Sweden's Social Democratic Olof Palme Center declares that "world poverty, exclusion, and class divisions" are key root causes of extremism. As is well known, the link between poverty and terrorism is suspiciously difficult to establish. But let's assume many Europeans believe that poverty is generating a major threat to the security of the West. Several E.U. governments famously give foreign aid at higher rates than the United States, especially the Scandi-

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navians. But they have been giving at these rates for decades, the same decades in which anti-Western extremism was growing. In answer to post-9/11 calls for changes in policy, these leaders might have launched—or at least proposed—a major shift in which countries receive their aid or in how they monitor its effectiveness. Or they could have proposed to dramatically increase the amount of aid—the recipients of the Marshall Plan now “giving back” to the international community. But they haven’t done any of these things. For example, European official development assistance levels and practices generally remain steady.

Other Europeans argue that global economic inequality is a source of resentment. If so, France, Germany, and other E.U. countries could try to revise the rules of the global economic game to promote growth in developing countries. They might have started by opening their own markets to textiles and especially agricultural products from developing countries. But instead they’ve chosen to maintain import barriers and extensive subsidies to their own producers. By depressing the prices of goods made in Europe, these measures decrease incomes in the developing world, at levels almost certainly outweighing the value of Europe’s foreign aid. If anything, Europe (and especially France) has been playing a regressive role on agriculture in world trade talks in recent years.

Other European commentators highlight political root causes, such as the lack of political and human rights in many developing countries. Decades of experience suggest that mild pressure on developing countries to reform has little effect. So have these Europeans outlined a transformational strategy aimed at political reform in, say, the Middle East? So far they haven’t. Indeed, nothing has attracted their criticism as much as America’s pursuit of a democracy-seeking transformational agenda in the region.

Finally, Jacques Chirac and former French prime minister Alain Juppé

are among many who trace Islamist anger to “conflicts,” often a code word for the Arab-Israeli conflict. The evidence for this thesis, too, is not persuasive, to say the least. But have Europeans launched a major initiative aimed at resolving or even substantially mitigating this dispute? Here is the one candidate on this list on which Europe’s leaders have expended effort and (some) treasure trying to encourage progress and increase their leverage over events, mostly by funding Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Authority with over \$100 million a year. This has not solved the problem (and may well have made it worse), but it’s a rare attempt to follow through, however partially, on one root-causes theory of terrorism.

So where have continental European leaders been focusing the bulk of their counterterrorism efforts? Since 9/11, and again since “3/11” in Madrid, they have dramatically intensified surveillance, gathered intelligence, revealed wide-ranging plots and recruiting networks, and made a pleasing number of arrests of known and suspected terrorists in their midst. Pleasing, but not satisfying, because arresting on-site conspirators deals only with the tail end of an enemy’s overall assault. Dick Cheney points out that such a law-enforcement strategy “leaves the network behind the attacks virtually untouched,” able to continue recruiting, training, and dispatching new teams of bombers whenever it wishes. This is the furthest thing from a root-causes strategy.

The result is that there is a real difference between European and American strategies in the war on terror, but not the one you might think. It’s not that Europeans are thinking long-term while the United States is thinking short-term, or even that their theories of root causes are distinct (though they are). The real difference is that only the United States has translated a theory of root causes into a strategy and started to implement it.

What might explain this? One disturbing possibility is that the real long-term strategy of many Euro-

peans might be to lie low while the United States takes the heat: in other words, to take Osama bin Laden up on his “separate peace” proposal even while denouncing it. This might have made sense to some people immediately after 9/11, when violent Islamists seemed to be treating Europe only as a staging area for attacks on America. But in the succeeding months, al Qaeda affiliates and sympathizers repeatedly targeted E.U. citizens and assets—in Pakistan, Tunisia, Turkey, and on the open seas. The Madrid train bombing brought the war to an E.U. capital. And even since Spain’s elections, ongoing plots have been uncovered in Spain, France, and Britain. In the wake of Madrid, there is little evidence that many Europeans believe they can deflect the threat.

Another possibility is that Europe’s multinational nature makes coordination and implementation complicated. That’s no doubt true. But it does not explain the lack even of well-developed proposals for addressing the root causes of terrorism.

A more plausible explanation is that many Europeans aren’t as convinced of their root-causes theories as their talk would suggest. Their skittishness over the Iraq operation in particular and the “greater Middle East initiative” in general leaves the distinct impression that it is Europeans who are averse to transformational agendas and more comfortable with the muddling-through approach that the Bush administration now criticizes. The E.U.’s December 2003 “European Security Strategy” traces “violent religious extremism” to “the pressures of modernization, cultural, social, and political crises, and the alienation of young people living in foreign societies,” including in Europe. In which case, they should be the first to mount a bold initiative aimed at alleviating those very pressures and crises. Yet what has angered Europeans most is not America’s failure to pursue an ambitious strategy but its insistence on doing so—starting in Iraq. ♦