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 neoclassical 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-

Gerard Alexander is associate professor of politics at the University of Virginia and author of The Sources of Democratic Consolidation (Cornell University Press).
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 dramati-
cally 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 assis-
tance 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 develop-
ing countries. They might have start-
ed by opening their own markets to
textiles and especially agricultural
products from developing countries.
But instead they’ve chosen to main-
tain 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 coun-
tries 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 evi-
dence for this thesis, too, is not per-
usive, to say the least. But have
Europeans launched a major initiative
aimed at resolving or even substan-
tially mitigating this dispute? Here is
the one candidate on this list on
which Europe’s leaders have expend-
ed effort and (some) treasure trying to
encourage progress and increase their
leverage over events, mostly by fund-
ing 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 Euro-
pean leaders been focusing the bulk
of their counterterrorism efforts? Since
9/11, and again since “3/11” in
Madrid, they have dramatically inten-
sified surveillance, gathered intel-
gence, 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 ene-
my’s overall assault. Dick Cheney
points out that such a law-enforce-
ment strategy “leaves the network
behind the attacks virtually
untouched,” able to continue recruit-
ing, 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 dif-
ference between European and Amer-
ican 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 think-
ing 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 dis-
rupting 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 immedi-
ately after 9/11, when violent
Islamists seemed to be treating
Europe only as a staging area for
attacks on America. But in the suc-
ceding 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 con-
vincing of their root-causes theories as
their talk would suggest. Their skitt-
ishness over the Iraq operation in
particular and the “greater Middle
East initiative” in general leaves the
distinct impression that it is Euro-
peans who are averse to transforma-
tional 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 pres-
sures and crises. Yet what has angered
Europeans most is not America’s fail-
ure to pursue an ambitious strategy
but its insistence on doing so—start-
in Iraq.

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