

The Terror Hunt

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Articles & Testimony

The thwarted bomb attacks in London and Glasgow showed that Europe has become one of the most important battlegrounds in the global terror war. Not that further proof was needed, after the 2004 Madrid attacks, the 2005 London subway and bus bombings, and failed or disrupted plots in the U.K. and Germany last year.

In 2006 alone, European countries -- including Spain, Italy, Denmark, France, the Czech Republic and the U.K. -- arrested 260 Islamist terrorist suspects. In addition to those charged with plotting attacks, others were apprehended for terrorist financing, recruiting, facilitation, and for spreading propaganda.

While the threat is serious, the Europeans' ability to fight it is uneven. Some countries, such as France, Spain and Britain, have strong intelligence and law enforcement capabilities to address this menace. Unfortunately, that's not the case across the board. Many European countries are less cognizant of the danger -- still regarding it as primarily an American problem -- and lack the capacity to deal with terrorist threats. Of the 27 EU states, probably fewer than 10 have taken a real interest in counterterrorism.

Cooperation and coordination on counterterrorism remains problematic. Intelligence agencies are often reluctant to share information with their EU counterparts because of concerns about protecting sources. French terrorism investigator Jean-Louis Bruguiere has complained that information sharing in Europe is often laborious, when action is required "in real time."

Intelligence cooperation is particularly critical considering that many terrorist cells are not based in one specific European country, but scattered across the continent. For example, the six individuals convicted in 2005 of plotting to blow up the U.S. Embassy in Paris had set up cells in several countries including France, Belgium and the Netherlands. When France decided to disrupt the cell, French authorities had to secure the cooperation of law enforcement counterparts in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain. Ultimately, in addition to the convictions in France, other cell members were prosecuted in the Netherlands and Belgium.

The internal information sharing problems are particularly troublesome given the ease of movement and travel across the EU. With few internal borders, once an individual has made it into one member country, he or she can travel freely to most others in the Union. Consequently, Europe's counterterrorism efforts are, to some extent, only as good as its weakest link.

To address these deficiencies, Europeans can start by giving the EU a greater role in counterterrorism. While the EU has gradually assumed some additional power in counterterrorism efforts since the September 11 attacks, intelligence and police work remain almost entirely the purview of the member states. Member states have been reluctant to cede authority in criminal justice matters, including counterterrorism, to the EU, citing concerns about national sovereignty.

But with increased powers, the EU could press laggard countries to improve their domestic counterterrorism capabilities and to ensure that they are adequately focused on the threat. In fact, there are many instances where countries welcome pressure from the EU, as it allows them to take actions that their populations might otherwise oppose. The Spanish government has pressed for the creation of terrorism information sharing mechanisms at the EU

level. But Spain's ultimate goal -- which might otherwise be too controversial to implement at home -- is apparently to improve information sharing between its domestic intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

The EU could do worse than revisit former German Interior Minister Otto Schily's proposal for a European-wide network of agencies that would facilitate information sharing in real time between national intelligence and police services. Having an EU body, as Mr. Schily suggested, would be an important step forward. While the EU's Europol was ostensibly designed to improve police cooperation and coordination, it only has "non-operational" responsibilities and deals with the terrorist threat at a far more general level.

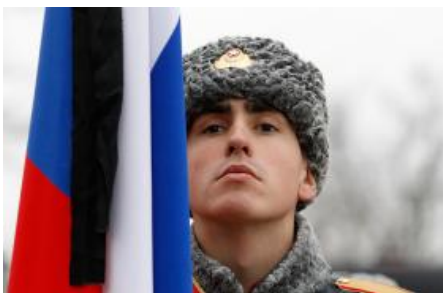
Skeptical European countries should take a look at the record so far of the European Arrest Warrant, which has largely resolved the frequent extradition battles between member states. Under the warrant, extradition requests from fellow EU countries are generally granted with minimal review, and member states can no longer refuse to extradite someone merely because the matter is not a crime in their country. Since it came into force in 2004, the average time it has taken to execute an arrest warrant across Europe has fallen from an estimated nine months to 43 days. Establishing a more unified European approach in other aspects of criminal justice and counterterrorism could have similarly successful results.

While many critics are dismissive of the EU's role in national security, the reality is that it is the governmental body best positioned to address this problem. Regardless of the effectiveness of any individual country, counterterrorism cannot succeed without assistance and coordination from all European member states. Given the serious terrorist threat facing Europe and the equally serious deficiencies, the Europeans need to move quickly and aggressively to bolster their counterterrorism capabilities.

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