

Bush, Europe, and the Middle East:

Analyzing the Visit

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Mar 4, 2005

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Brief Analysis

There is a consensus in Europe that President George W. Bush's visit marks a transition after three difficult years of transatlantic relations. Europe cannot ignore this administration for another four years. Rather, it is in Europe's best interests to work with President Bush, because Europeans see the Middle East as a strategic priority. For its part, the Bush administration believes that it is better to have Europe on its side than on the sidelines.

Washington prefers to deal with all Middle East issues on the table. Europeans take the position that solving the Arab-Israeli conflict is central to solving all other regional problems. In this context, Bush's address in Belgium was well received, because it devoted so much attention to the Arab-Israeli conflict -- specifically that the United States accepts the principle of a contiguous and viable Palestinian state. This statement was designed to allay particular European fears that Washington might support continued Israeli rule over half the West Bank and the division of Palestinian areas into a series of disconnected "bantustans" (a goal that many in Europe wrongly attribute to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon).

Concern about their own Muslim minorities increasingly makes the Middle East a domestic issue for all European countries. There are 20 million Muslims within a European Union (EU) population of 400 million. If demographic projections are correct, there will be 40-45 million Muslims in Europe within the next twenty-five years. European Muslims will continue to take their lead from the Arab world. It is in the best interests of Europe for the message of Islam from the Middle East to be one that makes this growing minority easier to integrate into European society. Europe should be at the forefront in pushing for democracy and freedom in the region. Instead, the dominant European view remains one of skepticism, mistrust of American intentions, and the assumption that preserving the status quo is preferable to paying the price for change. At the rhetorical level, however, there is an increased willingness to accept democratization as part of the Middle East policy agenda.

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Coverage of the Bush visit has focused on every major international issue but counterterrorism. Yet counterterrorism remains one of the top items on the U.S.-European agenda. Since September 11, Europe has become one of the primary terrorism battlegrounds. A number of Western European countries face serious threats, in many cases from homegrown suspects. The killing of a Dutch filmmaker who made a controversial film about Islam, and the subsequent rioting and burning of mosques in Holland, were significant events because they took place in what was considered Europe's most tolerant nation.

Larger plots across the continent have been disrupted, but European counterterrorism efforts remain uneven. Only some EU member states have strong intelligence and law enforcement capabilities. For example, the French upset what they believe was a plot to blow up the American embassy in Paris. In this case, it appears that the plotters spent a considerable amount of time in Belgium, perhaps as a staging ground or perhaps because they were concerned about French security.

The fact Europe has an uneven security record and that a significant number of terrorist cells remain embedded in European countries has direct consequences for the United States. America remains the number-one target for Islamic terrorist groups, and many of the European-based operatives would undoubtedly like to strike U.S. targets. As the September 11 attacks demonstrated, terrorists such as those comprising the Hamburg cell, living and training freely in Europe, can present a serious national-security threat to the United States. Counterterrorism should therefore remain at the top of the U.S.-European agenda.

Three public misperceptions about transatlantic counterterrorism cooperation, and about European counterterrorism efforts in general, are balanced by far more nuanced realities:

1. U.S.-European counterterrorism cooperation has been exceptionally problematic. In reality, during the early stages of the war in Iraq, when Germany and the United States were very much at odds publicly, U.S. attorney general John Ashcroft and German interior minister Otto Schily were building a close relationship on counterterrorism issues.
2. Europeans and Americans view terrorism differently. The often-heated rhetoric of the past few years has obscured the fact that the two sides face many similar challenges and have utilized many similar counterterrorism approaches.
3. Transatlantic counterterrorism meetings are only symbolic, because the EU has no real authority in this area. While the EU played almost no counterterrorism role prior to September 11, it has gradually assumed more active -- if limited -- responsibilities, a trend that appears likely to continue.

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Europe and the United States differ profoundly in their perceptions of what lessons to draw from the experience in Iraq. Many in Europe argue the point that Washington has limits on what it can accomplish in the world and needs European cooperation to realize its objectives. In contrast, Bush's Brussels address upheld the duty of the West to promote democratic transformation in the region, suggesting that "a free and democratic Iraq" will be "a beacon of freedom" and "a source of true stability in the region."

European negotiations with Iran remain a major issue on the transatlantic Middle East agenda. The Iranian domestic political calendar, with presidential elections forthcoming in June, suggests that negotiations are unlikely to reach a decisive moment until summer. In the interim, international consensus about Iran should be broadened beyond U.S.-European unity, hopefully to include Russia and China. The Bush administration is confident that, faced with a broad international consensus, the Iranians may well make concessions to avoid international isolation. The Iranians should be made to see that they gain if negotiations proceed, and face real problems if negotiations fail.

But in reality, options are poor in the event that talks fall short. Comprehensive economic sanctions would be difficult to impose, given the key role Iran plays in balancing world oil prices. Moreover, Iran has \$25 billion in foreign-exchange reserves with which to cushion the impact of sanctions. Sanctions would also likely be used by Tehran as an excuse to accelerate its nuclear program. It is for this reason that the military option must remain on the table.

Those who believe that Iran's Islamic Republic is near collapse are the most optimistic about postponing the country's nuclear program. Those who believe that the regime will remain in place indefinitely are more pessimistic, believing that Iran's nuclear program cannot be postponed forever. That said, a broad consensus agrees that a resolution of this matter requires a slowing down of the nuclear clock and a speeding up of events that will lead to dramatic change in Iran's policies, if not in the regime itself.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Eastman.

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