

Europe and the Campaign against Terror

Nov 14, 2001



Brief Analysis

Since the 1970s, nearly every European country has been afflicted by terrorism. The majority of these acts, however, were homegrown and warranted a domestic response rather than an international one. International connections did exist, but they were peripheral rather than central to the enterprise. When acts of international terrorism were committed, the accepted strategy was to ignore them as long as they did not take place within one's own territory. Occasionally, terrorists would strike within a European state, and the first response of the given government was to appease the terrorists. The strategy was to work out a side deal with the terrorists, to get them to carry out their dirty work elsewhere. The assumption was that friendliness would elicit thankfulness -- the implicit message was, "Do what you want, just don't do it here." Thus, some European governments did not side with the United States when it bombed Libya, and they reluctantly agreed when the United States applied sanctions on Iran. Even the United States was not immune to this principle of international relations; for years the IRA could freely collect funds in the United States, and various administrations have made friendly overtures to rogue states and terrorist groups in the hope of appeasing them. Such actions show that states are hesitant to become entrapped in conflicts that they do not see as central to their national interests. Many countries are quite happy to extract some advantage by making propitiatory gestures toward terrorist groups.

The coalition that the U.S. administration has arranged since September 11 is remarkable in its scope and in the extraordinary skill and speed with which it was assembled. Never in the history of diplomacy have so many been harnessed by so few in such a short time. The fact that nations in Europe and elsewhere have suddenly rallied around America is a historical step that warrants an explanation. What has happened to render the conventional wisdom inoperative?

For one thing, Europeans understand that those who carried out the September 11 attacks are a different breed of terrorists. Al Qaeda and its subsidiaries are the products and profiteers of globalization. The perpetrators of these attacks used passenger jets, studied in Hamburg, took flying lessons in Florida, used cellular phones, and accessed high-speed networks, e-mail, and a globalized banking system. If the staging post was Germany, the banking system for terror was based in Britain. Clearly the nature of terrorism has changed profoundly. In the past, limited operations for limited purposes were the model. Today the terror is global in scope. The perpetrators are no longer dispatched to a country simply to execute their mission; rather, they are deeply buried in the fabric of the society. Even if governments wanted to cut a side deal with such terrorists, they would find it extremely difficult because of this new global arrangement. Governments are realizing that the only solution is to root out these groups.

Furthermore, many countries -- Germany in particular -- felt guilty about the attacks. Mohammed Atta -- the apparent mastermind of the World Trade Center bombing -- and four of his accomplices all lived and studied in Hamburg. As the full extent of the terrorists' infiltration of German society became clear, Hamburg was seen as but one staging post. There were six other cells in various German cities. Groups such as Hamas, Hizballah, the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front, and Islamic Jihad have a home in Germany. Germany was not the only country faced with this problem, though it may have been a choice location for terrorists. It has arguably the fewest controls of any country in Western Europe, which facilitates the covert operations of terrorists.

More generally, the international coalition formed since September 11 is the first serious attempt on the part of states to regain control over globalization. This broad coalition is signaling that all nations, democratic or despotic, will not allow freelancers like bin Laden to dictate the terms of global intercourse. The historical comparison that springs to mind is that of the freebooters and buccaneers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Like today's terrorists, these ruffians were initially supplied and supported by various nations to undermine each other's armadas and shipping fleets. Once states realized that they could no longer control these pirates, the same countries fought them to extinction. Just as states reasserted their power against freelancers of that age, governments today are standing up to those who use globalization to undermine states. This coalition is not the birth of a new world order, as some of the rhetoric has suggested; on the contrary, this is the assertion of an old world order, where power is in the hands of states, not freelancers. This is the reason such a coalition is much more resilient than expected.

This diagnosis raises an important question. Can these thugs be destroyed without destroying globalization, the setting in which they flourish? The answer is yes, as long as states harness the force of their asymmetric power. This is not done by exploiting military superiority alone, but also by sifting through millions of pieces of information, coordinating them in real time, putting sky marshals on airplanes, investigating bank transactions, and putting more police on the streets. Not only the United States but also Western European countries are revising domestic-security laws, making it easier for the security apparatus to target and preempt such groups. The United States and its allies are spelling out a simple yet powerful message: there will be no more sanctuaries. That will be a lethal blow to terrorists, who must have a territorial base from which to operate.

In short, this war is being fought not only by soldiers but also by bankers, police, customs agents, and information-technology experts. Essentially, this conflict is a clash between good and bad globalization.

The conflict is also a civilizational struggle, but not in a Huntingtonian sense. The inner ring of the coalition consists of North America, most of Europe, much of Latin America, the highly developed countries in the Pacific Rim, Australia, and New Zealand. This is the "West" in a much wider sense than Samuel Huntington predicted. These regions correspond precisely to the system of alliances that the United States built in the 1950s: that is, the "free world" of the anti-Soviet days. These regions are in essence the globalized world, tied together by a myriad of common and enduring interests. It is not clear whether this can be said about the second ring of the coalition, which consists primarily of Russia and China. But the countries of the second ring are genuinely trying to join the globalized world, so they belong in the coalition. But the third, outer ring of the current coalition -- the Arab Middle East and the Islamic world in general -- is not part of globalization and does not share the basic impulses that motivate the rest of the alliance. Therefore, it might have been a mistake to include these nations in the coalition. It could be argued that the nations of the outer ring of the coalition detract from its strength.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Mohamed Abdel Dayem.

Policy #583

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)