

Madrid, London, and beyond: don't reinvent the wheel

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After the London bomb attacks of 7 and 21 July, many people have wondered how democracies can withstand the challenge from radical extremists, willing to blow themselves up on public transport and take dozens of innocent commuters with them. How can we make our cities safe, yet preserve the civil liberties we cherish? Is it still possible for ethnic communities to live in harmony with others, especially when the terrorists originated from several of these communities?

Also on openDemocracy, [Anthony Barnett \[0\]](#) urges world leaders to catch up with the "democratic network against terrorism" started by the [Madrid Summit \[1\]](#) and openDemocracy writers [debate \[1\]](#) democracy and terrorism in the wake of the London attacks

These [questions \[2\]](#) now seem to matter a great deal. Indeed, the British prime minister has announced that his government might hold a conference whose purpose would be to find answers to them. Tony Blair does not need to set the bureaucratic wheels in motion – because as recently as March 2005 the association of former heads of state and government known as the [Club de Madrid \[3\]](#) organised a unique meeting where these and related issues were discussed.

The moral and the practical

The purpose of the [International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security \[4\]](#) was to commemorate the victims of the terrible train bombings in Madrid on 11 March 2004 ("11-M"), and to formulate practical strategies to counter the threat from terrorism.

It was the largest gathering of terrorism and security experts ever held. Among the participants were twenty-three current and thirty-four former heads of state and government; the heads of the United Nations, Nato, the European Union, Interpol, and the League of Arab States; and 500 representatives from non-governmental organisations and civil society.

Moreover, in the approach to the summit, more than 200 scholars engaged in a four-month-long process of debate and reflection in which the key dilemmas of democracy, terrorism and security were discussed through a system of password-protected [weblogs \[5\]](#).

To the surprise of those of us involved in organising the summit (I worked as its content director) the summit produced a high degree of consensus in relation to the way in which terrorism should be fought. As its concluding "Madrid Declaration" showed, there was almost universal agreement that governments and civil society need to take the fight against terrorism seriously.

There are good grounds for this: terrorism is a violation of [human rights \[6\]](#) from which every citizen deserves to be protected by his or her government. But a conclusion of Madrid is that in

doing so, the rule of law must be respected. This is a practical imperative as well as a moral one. If terrorism is a form of psychological warfare that aims to create fear and provoke a repressive response, it is essential to maintain the moral high ground and deny the terrorists the legitimacy they seek.

The Madrid consensus

There are four further areas where the widespread agreement at Madrid is notable.

First, the working group on “military responses”, in which several high-ranking members of the armed forces participated, concluded that it was important to deal with terrorism as a crime whenever possible.

Second, the working group on intelligence, in which prominent intelligence practitioners from the United States and Britain participated, emphasised that methods such as extra-legal detention were of no practical value to the secret services.

It may still prove difficult to determine the correct balance between civil liberties and effectiveness in the fight against terrorism. Almost every European country affected by terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s passed emergency laws that included some restrictions on civil liberties. None of them ceased being democratic – in fact, some of the people who bitterly opposed these laws in the past now hold them up as the “European model [7]” of fighting terrorism. Indeed, on the basis of these experiences, the Madrid summit’s experts were able to develop some principles and insights that may be useful pointers for continuing discussion – such as the need to define limits by setting expiry dates for emergency laws [8], and ensuring that there are no legal vacuums.

Third, the imperative of improving international cooperation was recognised. The rise of international terrorist networks like al-Qaida [8] means terrorism has become a global challenge; narrow national mindsets are no longer useful. It seems only logical that international police, intelligence agencies and the judicial authorities need to collaborate more closely. In doing so, the guiding principle should be what works best, not political ideology [9]. In some cases, the most effective way of facilitating cooperation across national borders may be through bilateral agreements; in others, multilateral cooperation is a must.

The bottom line is that no nation can defeat terrorism alone, particularly when it comes to questions of international peace and security. Again, this is a moral *and* a practical imperative: a multilateral approach both allows the sharing of political and financial costs, and provides the international legitimacy needed to sustain national policies in the longer term.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, the Madrid conference recognised the need to strengthen and deepen democracy as the only viable long-term response to terrorism. The assembled experts were clear that while open societies make it easier for terrorists to operate, they are also less likely to see terrorists achieve their political objectives in the long run.

The reasons are evident. In societies where people themselves determine their futures, terrorists lack the growth medium of resentment and fear on which they thrive. Where people have access to institutions to address their most urgent concerns – economic, political or cultural – they have no reason to turn to the merchants of hate.

But if democracy is to become a “social immune system” against terrorism, it must consist of more than elections. It needs a vibrant civil society [10] and full respect for the rights of ethnic

and religious minorities as its basis. In this respect, even some established democracies have some work to do.

Building on Madrid

A single conference, even one as extensive and high quality as the Madrid summit, cannot reach every solution for the new problems that terror poses to democracy and security. There continues to be disagreement as well as consensus in certain areas. All the more reason for the summit organisers to continue to facilitate the strategic dialogue [11] Madrid started; and for scholars, policymakers and expert practitioners to carry on exchanging their views in a purposeful, strategic manner. There is, however, no need to reinvent the wheel: the debate has progressed much further than people like Tony Blair may imagine.

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/democratic_response_2708.jsp

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[1] <http://summit.clubmadrid.org/> target=_blank

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[5] http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,,sid9_gci213547,00.html target=_blank

[6] <http://www.un.org/rights/> target=_blank

[7] <http://www.globalpolicy.org/wtc/terrorism/2004/0329differ.htm> target=_blank

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[9] <http://www.howardlabs.com/3-04/Why%20Nobody%20Saw%209-11%20Coming.html> target=_blank

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