



Conference

**“COMBATING TERRORISM AND PROTECTING
DEMOCRACY:
THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY”**

Peace Research Center
Centro de Investigación para la Paz (CIP-FUHEM)

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Summary

On May 19-20, 2005 the Peace Research Center organized a conference in Madrid, "Combating Terrorism and Protecting Democracy: The Role of the Civil Society," with the participation of prominent international specialists on terrorism and the Muslim world. After reviewing the concepts, causes and factors which promote extremist ideologies, the conference examined the possibilities and limits of democracy and protecting human rights in responding to terrorism. The conference paid special attention to the influence of terrorism in electoral processes and democracy. Several case studies were analyzed, among them the example of Spain after March 11. The following is a synthesis of the main ideas presented.

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International Terrorism and violence against the West

International terrorism is rooted in the Islamic myths of the 80's, which have fed radical Islam in the last 35 years. It is carried forward by particular groups of neo fundamentalists, who aspire to re-Islamize society from the bottom up, as well as international terrorist groups, which consummated their strategy on September 11, 2001.

Among the questions regarding international terrorism treated by the conference is whether it is a consequence of the pervasive injustice in the Arab world, if it is a new phenomenon fed by hate against the West, or whether it is pathology of an Islam incapable of overcoming its apocalyptic ideology. While the Arab press favors a thesis of resentment, the United States tends toward a more conspiratorial interpretation; the European Union defends the idea that the origin of terrorist violence is in unresolved political and social problems. In that sense, solving the Palestine/Israel conflict would heal at least one source feeding international terrorism.

The new terrorism is related to the Westernization of the Moslems, as well as middle class Moslems living in the West, including those who have been uprooted from their country of origin yet with which they still identify. Moslems often accuse their homelands of betraying the values of Islam. In a certain sense, international terrorism is the result of the failure of political Islam. Al Qaeda, a form of transplanted terrorism, distinct from implanted terrorism, as the groups operating in Palestine,

represents a globalized Islam. The Jihadist terrorism of Al Qaeda often represents a situation of hopelessness, feelings of impotence and a strong sense of the impossibility of change. This situation excludes the chance of dialogue with "the other." Nevertheless, these Jihadists are not synonymous with the Arab world. While localized (implanted) terrorism, fades when the causes disappear, the de-localized (transplanted) terrorism do not.

Regarding the debate on the link between poverty and terrorism, several analyses show that this link is weak and indirect, and not relevant to all cases. However, both the United States and the European Union are adding a security component to their development aid policies. Failed and rogue states as well as areas of armed conflict are ideal scenarios for the development of terrorist groups.

The terrorist threat implies a risk of military escalation, which in turn generates added risks of conflict. At the same time, Arab regimes are still not offering much of a political opening. Current responses are putting security as first priority in the strategies. However, some analysts believe that the priority should be to promote political change and democracy. Others cautioned that democratization is a complex strategy and must not be applied uncritically or solely within the context of the Western experience. It should also not be taken for granted that democracy will automatically result in diminution of terrorism-- at least in the short-term. There was general agreement in the efficacy of finding local solutions to local problems.

International response

The United States and the European Union have agreed to emphasize terrorism as the central problem today, and it leads to relegating to the back burner other threats of equal importance. The war on terror also has been a justification for the use of violence against certain groups and a denial of their civil rights.

With the United States the following points were made and elaborated upon. 1) The current response of United States towards terrorism shows a strong tendency to regard terrorism as practiced by various groups, especially Al-Qaeda, an end in itself. 2) The US also continues to exploit counterterrorism in political terms. 3) The invasion and occupation of Iraq has proved counter-productive, fomenting and expanding, not curbing, the incidence of terrorism. The fight against terrorism has to be leaded with respect to human rights.

Case studies: Spain after 11 March

There are several hypotheses regarding the change of government in the elections only three days after the terrorist attacks in Madrid 2004. Among them was a latent desire, stemming in part from a critique of its foreign policy, for a change of government; the shock among Spain's citizens after the attack; and the vote as punishment for government's having supported the war in Iraq and sent a contingent of Spanish troops in defiance of the vast majority of Spaniards. However, a critical and perhaps decisive factor was the mismanagement and manipulation of information by the Spanish government after the attacks for what appeared to be electoral purposes. The outgoing Spanish President, José María Aznar, appeared not to acknowledge the facts and to blame the Basque separatist group, ETA, in the belief that an ETA attack of this magnitude would rally support among Spaniards for a government that had taken a hard stand against Basque terrorism. Al Qaeda authorship of the atrocity would raise the

issue of the Aznar government's enthusiasm for the war in Iraq, a posture rejected by 90% of the country's citizens. These factors were necessary, complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Madrid, 30th May 2005