

Fighting Terrorism Democratically

Aug 9, 2005 Álvaro de Vasconcelos

Bombings in London and Turkey have brought to the fore the old ideas that authoritarian regimes are better equipped than democracies to combat terrorism, and that such attacks are the price we pay for liberty. For some, that is a price worth paying; for others, the costs seem too high.

But a look at the record shows that democracies possess more effective weapons to fight terror than do authoritarian regimes. Indeed, it is when democracies abandon their ethics and fail to resist the authoritarian temptation that they become weaker. Of course, the logic behind calls to restrict our freedoms has a simplistic appeal: extremists use our freedoms to commit their crimes, so preventing the abuse of freedom requires curtailing freedom's scope. The mistake, however, is to assume that open societies are more permissive and vulnerable to terrorism than those who live under authoritarian regimes. One need only look at today's Russia, or recall Algeria in the 1990's. True, democracy and the rule of law provide no foolproof security guarantee. But such a guarantee is a mirage anyway, whereas respect for basic freedoms and due process when repressing terrorism is a powerful instrument to isolate extremists and diminish their legitimacy in the eyes of those that might identify with their cause. It is because Britain is a democracy that respects the rule of law that it has been able to mobilize vast sectors of its Muslim community. By contrast, authoritarian regimes' repression of civilians, and their non-differentiation between civilians and killers, provides extremists with fertile recruiting conditions by discrediting the government in the eyes of a significant part of its population. An undifferentiated approach towards political Islamism that fails to distinguish between those who reject violence and those who resort to terror only facilitates the extremists' work, for they emerge as champions of causes that do not reflect their true goals. Russia provides conclusive evidence of the impotence of authoritarian violence and disregard for the rule of law. President Vladimir Putin undertook a scorched-earth policy in Chechnya, driving many Chechen nationalists straight into the extremists' arms. Terrorist attacks on Russia did not cease or decline. Indeed, recall the terrorism in Beslan in September 2004, in which a single attack on a school killed over 330 people.

Iraq also is demonstrating the limits of illegitimate violence when combating terrorism. The Bush administration now seems to realize this. It would be a mistake to believe that the deaths of thousands of civilians, along with arbitrary imprisonment and torture, do not contribute to the spread of terror in Iraq. After all, torture victims are the best possible advertisement for terrorist recruitment.

When it comes to fighting terrorism, moreover, democracies are more effective both politically and operationally, particularly in terms of their intelligence services. Intelligence forces in authoritarian states are either highly centralized or tend to become autonomous power centers. In either case, they are subject to no public scrutiny and accountability. As a result, they lose their ability over time to evaluate critically their own actions and errors. Intelligence services in democratic contexts usually have oversight mechanisms that serve to limit abuses of power, and to guarantee effective action by punishing top officials that fail to do their jobs properly. In the United States,

a powerful bi-partisan Senate committee directly monitors the intelligence services. Its report on the inability of the intelligence services, notably the CIA and the FBI, to prevent the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks also contained a series of recommendations for restructuring these services to render them more effective. Europe's response to terror requires, first and foremost, strengthening its intelligence services so that they can detect and dismantle terrorist cells while respecting basic rights and due process. It also requires greater coordination among all the European Union's member states and their allies and partners. At the same time, the rule-of-law approach to fighting terrorism must be a pillar of European cooperation with third countries, namely with those of the Mediterranean, or with Pakistan, thereby contributing to a security culture that is conducive to democratization. Deepening democracy in turn means allowing full civic participation, including non-violent Islamic groups. The right to public speech and peaceful assembly must be defended for those who feel marginalized and indignant at what they – and most Europeans – view as injustices committed against the Palestinians, the Chechens, and the Iraqis. Last, but not least, combating identity-based extremism calls for a greater capacity to integrate all those who live within the EU. The response to terrorism should be to reaffirm the value of the rule of law over arbitrary repression, and of the diversity that is the hallmark of Europe's cities, particularly London and Paris, but increasingly many others across the Union. We cannot – indeed, must not – cede to terror by building walls around and within our societies. The best response to intolerant extremism is to cultivate an open and pluralistic society that treats all those who live within its borders as full citizens. Europe turned diversity into one of its constitutional traits, and this is why it has had such an impact on the world. Protecting that essence is the best way to honor the memory of the victims of terror, be they from London, Sharm el-Sheik, Madrid, Casablanca, or New York.