

Terror Or Reform In The Greater Middle East

Mar 22, 2004 Álvaro de Vasconcelos

Last week's brutal bombing in Madrid is part of a wave of terror that has made victims of Christians as well as Muslims. Everywhere debate is focused on the best way to combat this form of terrorism and on the importance, in this context, of the Greater Middle East initiative that the United States wants the G8 and NATO to approve in June.

Agreement is uncertain. Unlike European leaders such as Joschka Fischer, Germany's Foreign Minister, the US excludes the Israeli-Arab conflict from the initiative, and wants to concentrate solely on the social and economic problems that feed extremism and terrorism in the Islamic world.

Concern with the region did not begin with the attacks in the US in September 2001 or with the Madrid bombings. Already in the 1980's and 1990's, Europe had launched the "Barcelona Process" to promote democracy, security and development in the region. Then, as now, fears about regional instability, economic stagnation, and social backwardness abounded. There were anxieties, too, that the increasing loss of legitimacy of Arab nationalist regimes would benefit radical Islamists - fears confirmed by Algeria's bloody civil war of the 1990's.

But if defending the status quo no longer seems possible, regime change incites its own fears. Many suspect that Islamist radicals will be the big winners in any democratic opening. This led some to support the Algerian government's military crackdown after Islamists won the first round of 1991 legislative elections. But the stubborn inertia of authoritarian regimes only encourages radicalization, so there is a clear need for a gradual process of liberalization.

This dilemma underscores the difficulty in crafting a democratization strategy for so vast a region as "the Greater Middle East," which stretches from Mauritania to Pakistan. After all, any such strategy must, by definition, ignore local specificities and regional realities. What is needed instead are policies that reflect particular circumstances in different states and regions, together with an awareness that democracy is, above all, a statement about national realities and depends primarily on domestic factors.

If imposing a single strategy is unviable, what should the European option be, and what policy should the G8 and NATO adopt? Any truly viable policy must get eight things right:

- *Court public opinion.* It is not only Middle East governments that should be involved. Civil society and public opinion must also be included.
- *Support democratic transition.* Incumbent leaders must have the proper incentives to initiate gradual processes of reform. Each positive initiative, whether it comes from governments or civil societies, should be supported. The historical parallel here is not,

as is often suggested, with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, but with the Marshall Plan, which provided real incentives, not lofty rhetoric and hortatory appeals, for integration and democratic consolidation.

- *Reinforce anti-terrorist cooperation.* The fight against terrorism, which requires short-term successes, must be differentiated from the long-term process of reform. The priority in fighting terrorism should be police and intelligence service cooperation, which produces much faster results and limits the capacity of extremists to mobilize.

- *Be coherent and consistent.* Human rights cannot be defended if antiterrorism activities fail to respect the rule of law. Nor can democracy be advanced if authoritarian regimes are supported simultaneously merely because - like Saddam Hussein's Iraq - they are secular and anti-Islamist.

- *Sustain long-term commitments.* Initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighborhood Policy need sustained political engagement and resources if they are to work. NATO's attempt to change public perceptions of its objectives and operations is also in effect a long-term effort. Larger projects, such as the Greater Middle East initiative, are much less sustainable than targeted initiatives and are more susceptible to the exigencies of electoral campaigns.

- *Get America's role right.* As with postwar European integration, America has a crucial role to play. It must contribute in its own unique way to resolving conflicts that hinder inclusion and feed radicalism. The main US focus must be on finding a fair solution to the Israeli-Palestinian question and to the Iraq crisis. Of course, America's economic support for political reform would be welcome.

- *Capitalize on institutional diversity.* Because NATO and the EU share complementary priorities, both can develop mechanisms for inclusive security cooperation in peacekeeping operations.

- *Address the question of political Islam.* None of these tasks can be achieved without serious reflection about political Islam. Its diversity must be recognized, so that groups that resort to violence can be differentiated from those that do not. There can be no democratic transition if Islamic currents that reject violence and accept democracy's ground rules are not integrated into the public arena.

A key factor in the success of any EU Middle East initiative will be the millions of European citizens of North African origin, who have a political, cultural, and economic role to play. That is why the current French debate on the headscarf is so important, for it concerns the rights of Muslim women in European societies and the protection of diversity.

Democracies can deal with political Islam *and* respect fundamental rights. They can fight obscurantism *and* respect diversity. Indeed, the main lesson of recent years is that their own security requires that they support democratic openings elsewhere.