

The International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security Madrid, 8 – 11 March 2005

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Summit working groups

Two hundred experts, in different working groups, discussed aspects of terrorism over the several months leading up to the Summit. Their conclusions were presented at the Summit itself. The expert working groups' deliberations were grouped under four thematic subject areas: the causes or underlying factors of terrorism—responses to terrorism—the specifically democratic responses to terrorism—and the role of civil society.

Many different causes or contributory factors for terrorism have been proposed and analysed by theorists of terrorism. These proposed causes include individual or social attributes which can be analysed statistically by standard social science techniques so as to provide objective correlates for terrorist actions which can be used predictively. The proposed causes also include the range of justifications which terrorists themselves have offered for their own actions, taking these at face value or seeing them as the product of false consciousness, and assessing their coherence or conformity to known cultural world views. Different working groups considered individual and psychological explanations—political explanations—economic explanations—religion and religious extremism—and cultural explanations. Their conclusions reflected the different disciplines, and thus the different modes of discourse, represented within each group.

Responses to terrorism were categorised based on the capacity of those responding; that is, as a member of a specialised profession directly concerned with the fight against terrorism, or through the democratic process as a citizen or political leader. The specialisms that confront terrorism directly were represented by working groups on the following subjects: policing—intelligence—military responses—terrorist finance—and legal responses. Democratic responses to terrorism were considered by working groups on human rights—promoting democracy and accountable government—and international institutions.

The role of civil society was considered by working groups on—citizens as actors [in the strengthening of democracy and countering terrorism]—civil society and political violence [the relationship between citizens and terrorists]—and civil society strategies [for mobilising to counter violence].

Some common threads running through the working groups' reports were

- an emphasis on the multi-faceted and situational nature of terrorism
- a rejection of the view that terrorism is a response to, or is caused by, poverty
- the total unacceptability of violence against civilians and non-combatants
- a strong preference for countering terrorism through legal proceedings rather than military action, while also allowing for political processes to address the underlying factors
- the need to defend the rule of law and reject counter-terror measures which weaken the rule of law, such as extra-judicial detention

Discussion questions

- Can analysis and policy recommendations be developed in the absence of an agreed operational definition of terrorism?
- Can terrorism be best analysed using traditional political concepts of authority, legitimacy and order?
- What could be inferred from Spain's response to the Madrid bombings, and what might be the effects on cohesion within society if a similar event were to occur in another European country?
- Do Europeans and Americans see their response to the common threat from terrorism in very different ways?
- How far does the legal/ human rights discourse of the Madrid Summit resonate with the public?
- How far is it possible for society to learn to live with a certain level of terrorist violence?
- Western governments' regulatory responses to terrorism (for example, financial regulation; immigration control; requirements for identity cards) impose costs on society: how can the acceptability of these costs be assessed?