



TACTIC AGAINST TERROR

Findings from Spain and Turkey suggest ethnic-based terrorism wanes when states pursue reconciliation

By *per Concordiam* Staff

Thousands march in Bilbao, Spain, in support of a cease-fire proclaimed by Basque terror group ETA in 2010.

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Ethnic conflicts that breed terrorism have been a feature of the European landscape for decades. Examples include the Irish Republican Army in the United Kingdom, the Basque ETA in Spain, the Kurdish PKK in Turkey, and Northern Caucasus terrorist movements in Russia. In each case, the nations afflicted by ethno-terrorism resorted to military force to stem the violence, only to discover that the hard-power approach was insufficient to end the struggle.

A study released in 2013 suggests “soft-line” counterterrorism policies that target cultural grievances are the best long-term approach to neutralizing ethnic-based terrorism. In a work titled *PKK and ETA: A Comparative Analysis of Resolution Policies in Europe*, İrfan Çiftçi of the Turkish National Police argued that a

program focused on reconciliation rather than retribution initially increases terrorist violence but ultimately provides overall greater stability.

He focused his analysis on the experiences of Turkey and Spain, two countries that spent decades fighting ethnic-based terrorists while simultaneously evolving into participatory democracies.

“When the country continued to implement its soft-line policies targeting the ethnic grievance and reached the status of a well-established democracy, the level of violence considerably decreased in the long run since public support for the terrorist organizations was eliminated thanks to those governmental policies,” Çiftçi noted in an academic dissertation on the same topic in 2013.

THE CASE OF SPAIN

In the early 1960s, Spain’s ETA (known in English as Basque Homeland and Freedom) announced its arrival on the world stage by attempting to derail a Spanish train. The then-government of Francisco Franco responded by using military force and repression against the Basque separatists. While providing some short-term successes, such hard policies ultimately failed to resolve the problems separatists invoked to justify violence.

It wasn't until Spain began transitioning to democracy after Franco's death in 1975 that the country embarked on a series of reconciliation policies to address the Basque grievances that fueled the independence movement. Following approval of a new democratic constitution in 1977, Spain promoted the Basque language, granted the province autonomy and devolved power to a regional Basque parliament. The country's accession to the European Community, predecessor to the European Union, accelerated this trend toward protection of minority rights.

But as the Spanish government learned to its disappointment, the concessions it granted the Basque provinces didn't pay immediate peace dividends. For years afterward, the ETA escalated its violence, using bombs to target civilians. The death toll rose.

But public perceptions were changing. As author Frederick Babb wrote in a 2008 profile on the ETA: "The Spanish populous became fully aware that ETA was not the knights in shining armor they had thought. ETA, instead of using democracy to re-establish the dialogue of independence, became entrenched in continuing their killings."

In 2010, Spain's patience appeared to pay off when the ETA proclaimed a permanent cease-fire. For Çiftçi, the ETAs renunciation of violence was proof that decades of democratic engagement had finally succeeded where military force alone had failed.

THE CASE OF TURKEY

The PKK, based in Turkey's southeastern provinces where the Kurdish population is plentiful, is responsible for thousands of deaths in its nearly 30-year terrorism campaign against Ankara.

As was the case in Spain, Turkey, fearing Kurdish autonomy would fracture the country, initially treated the PKK (known in English as the Kurdistan Workers Party) strictly as a military problem. But as Çiftçi notes in his report, Turkey's increasing democratization after 1995 coincided with attempts to woo Kurdish citizens with social, cultural and political reforms.

A "returning home" law allowed nonviolent supporters of the PKK to reintegrate without retaliation into Turkish society. An "active repentance" law granted amnesty and curtailed punishments for terrorists. The "Kurdish opening" of 2009 sanctioned the adoption of the Kurdish language on road signs, in schools and across the media.

In most cases, such concessions were followed by increased carnage. Çiftçi theorized that the PKK leadership, in a pattern recognizable from the Spanish ETA example, felt its influence slipping away and attempted to sabotage the reconciliation process by stepping up casualties.

LESSONS

Addressing ethnic grievances is the best way to counter violence in countries afflicted by this particular form of terrorism, Çiftçi suggested. He carefully pointed out

that many Spanish and Turkish reconciliation policies were oriented not to the terrorists themselves, but to the aggrieved communities from which they gained their support.

Democratization that offers all citizens full participation in the electoral process is also critical. In the examples of both Spain and Turkey, the EU accession process inspired leaders to burnish their democratic credentials, including a deeper commitment to the rights of linguistic and ethnic minorities. Because the initial concessions were found to provoke more — not less — violence, persistence is critical. The PKK attacks that Turkey continues to suffer shouldn't provide an excuse to abandon Kurdish reconciliation, Çiftçi warned.

"Even if PKK violence increases to sabotage the current process, Turkey's democratization process should not be terminated," Çiftçi noted. "As we can see in the Spanish case, despite an increasing number of ETA attacks, the democratization process in Spain continued until the attacks were completely eliminated."

The findings could have implications for other terrorist movements in Europe, particularly those stemming from the struggle between separatists in the Caucasus and the Russian Federation. If Çiftçi's findings hold true



Then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, center, and the head of the autonomous Kurdish government in Iraq's north, Masoud Barzani, left, greet supporters in November 2013 in Diyarbakir, Turkey. Turkey has made overtures to Kurds in an attempt to end violence from the PKK.

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outside of Spain and Turkey, confronting cultural and political grievances in Russian provinces such as Chechnya and Dagestan could help reduce hostilities.

"While the country is fighting terrorist groups within its territory on one hand, it should not neglect to implement democratic reforms meeting all citizens' democratic demands," Çiftçi said. "The states thus may solve their protracted ethnic conflicts in the long run." □