

## The Madrid bombings: the 'war on terror' comes to Europe

By Paul Rogers,  
Created 2004-03-15 00:00

Whoever was responsible for the atrocities on the Madrid railway system on Thursday 11 March, the implications will go far beyond the traumatic effects on the bereaved and injured.

If the Basque separatist organisation, Euskadi ta Askatasuna ("Basque homeland and liberty", ETA), had any involvement, the domestic security implications for the incoming Spanish government will be profound. The Madrid attacks were so substantial, and so precisely organised to kill and injure large numbers of people, that they would represent an action of a far greater order of magnitude than anything previously attempted by ETA.

Join our global [forum](#) [0] of responses to the Madrid bombings and the growing number of terrorist atrocities around the world

Four days after the attacks, though, it looks far more probable that a radical Islamist paramilitary group was responsible. Indeed, the initial insistence on ETA involvement by the government of Jose Maria Aznar evidently contributed substantially to the defeat of his *Partido Popular* (PP) in the general election of 14 March. That, though, is only one of the implications of the Madrid bombings if a group associated with al-Qaida was indeed involved.

### The politics of massacre

The attacks on 11 March were carefully planned and coordinated. They involved ten bombs planted on four different trains and set for near-simultaneous detonation, with other bombs intended to kill those in the vicinity. The entire operation was devastating in its impact - killing or injuring over 1,500 people - and would have required months of preparation by a large group of people, including those with access to finance, technical ability, safe houses and many other aspects of what was a major paramilitary operation.

The Spanish police, security and intelligence agencies had been working extensively to track radical Islamist groups and had also worked closely with agencies of other countries. The group responsible for the attacks was therefore operating in an antagonistic environment, yet was apparently able to commit the atrocities without coming under suspicion. One Washington security source commented within a few hours of the attack that it was most probably ETA because if it *had* been al-Qaida or an associate, some advanced indication of an attack, if not the details, would have become known.

In the event, not only did the perpetrators avoid detection, but they were able to act in a manner designed to damage the credibility of the Aznar government immediately before an election. They even produced a video that specifically drew a connection between the Madrid bombings and the Spanish government's support for George Bush's war on Iraq. This degree of determination and sophistication is likely to be of profound concern to security agencies in other countries - especially Britain, Italy, and the United States.

## **A European dimension**

Assuming the Madrid bombings were undertaken by an al-Qaida associate, the attacks serve as a reminder that such paramilitary movements have not declined, either in terms of capability or support.

Read also Richard Torné's assessment of Spanish politics in "[Spain's 3/11: democracy after atrocity](#)" [0]

Since 9/11 there have been many actions by al-Qaida and others - including attempts in Rome, Paris and Singapore, and many actual attacks such as those in Karachi, Islamabad, Bali, Mombasa, Casablanca, Riyadh, Jakarta, Djerba, and Istanbul. That these latest mass killings have happened in Spain causes particular shock in western Europe because (apart from Bali) there had been no incidents of large-scale killing of Europeans. This is despite the involvement of some European countries, most notably Spain and Britain, with the United States in the President Bush strategy of a war on terror and the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime.

The atrocities in Madrid are rightly seen as abhorrent in the extreme, but their significance is also that they bring this war on terror closer to the countries that are pursuing it. Among supporters of al-Qaida and its associates, they will all too readily be viewed as an example of straightforward retaliation. Much of this, in turn, has to do with the impact of the 2003 Iraq war on Arab and Islamic thinking in many parts of the world - an aspect that is almost entirely unrecognised among western governments.

On 11 March, 200 ordinary people were killed in Madrid. Just under a year ago, over 8,000 ordinary Iraqi civilians were killed during three weeks of war, equal to 400 people for every day that the war lasted ([www.iraqbodycount.net/](http://www.iraqbodycount.net/) [1]). The coalition said it did not "do body counts", and for the most part the western media did not report this huge loss of life. This was not the case in much of the "majority world", especially across the Middle East, where satellite channels and other outlets consistently reported and recalled the escalating loss of civilian life.

## **The costs of war**

Madrid forms part of a much greater pattern of human loss. On 11 September 2001, 3,000 people died in New York and Washington. Within four months, about 3,000 civilians had died in Afghanistan in the first phase of George W. Bush's war on terror. Until last week, another 400 people had died in further paramilitary attacks across the world, and more than 8,000 civilians had died in the initial three-week phase of the Iraq war in March-April 2003.

Almost all of the loss of life after 9/11 was outside the countries of the Atlantic community. That is now no longer the case.

European citizens now face a direct involvement in Bush's 'war on terror'. The eventual impact is difficult to predict; Europeans are barely starting to come to terms with what happened in Madrid. However, the results of the Spanish general election suggest that the public mood in parts of Europe may start to have a substantial impact on the prosecution of the war. It could be that support for Washington's war will become harder to muster. The result will be an increasingly isolated United States.

---

### **Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-madridprevention/article\\_1787.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-madridprevention/article_1787.jsp)

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.iraqbodycount.net/>



Copyright © Paul Rogers, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.