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March 11 Terrorist Attacks in Madrid and Spain's Elections: Implications for U.S. Policy

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Summary

This report discusses the March 11, 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, Spain and their impact on Spain's March 14 parliamentary elections, which resulted in the surprise victory of the Socialist Party over the ruling right-of-center Popular Party. The report also examines some of the possible implications of the attacks and the elections for the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, the war on terrorism and U.S.-Spain relations. This report will be updated as warranted. See also CRS Report RS21794, *Iraq Coalition: Public Opinion Indicators in Selected European Countries*, by Julie Kim.

March 11 Terrorist Attacks in Spain

During the morning rush hour of March 11, 2004, bombs hidden in 10 backpacks exploded within 15 minutes of each other on four trains along a nine-mile stretch of a commuter line from the suburb of Santa Eugenia to the busy Atocha rail terminal in Madrid. Three other backpack bombs were defused by police. The explosions killed 191 persons and wounded over 1800 others. The death toll was by far the largest ever for a terrorist attack in Spain and was the largest in Europe since the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland. The attacks took place exactly two and one-half years after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001.

The Spanish government, led by Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar of the right-of-center Popular Party (PP), quickly insisted that the attacks were the work of the Basque terrorist group ETA and downplayed any suggestion that Islamic extremists could be involved. In justifying their view, Spanish officials noted that they had stopped an ETA effort to place bombs on trains on Christmas Eve 2003 and had intercepted on February 29 a Madrid-bound van loaded by the ETA with one thousand pounds of explosives. On the day of the attack, at Spain's urging, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1530, which condemned ETA's alleged role in the bombing. However, skeptics noted that the scope of the attacks, the detailed planning and precision needed to carry them out, and

above all, the huge casualty toll were more likely to be hallmarks of Al Qaeda or an Al Qaeda-like organization, not ETA.

The credibility of the government began to crumble quickly as indications emerged of the possible involvement of Islamic extremists in the bombings. Less than four hours after the attacks, police found several detonators and an audiotape of verses from the Koran in an abandoned van in the town of Alcala de Henares, through which the bombed trains had passed. About 12 hours after the attacks, police found a cellphone from an unexploded backpack bomb. They traced it to a business owned by a Moroccan immigrant named Jamal Zougam, who was suspected of having links to Al Qaeda. Despite these discoveries on the day of the attacks, the government continued to insist publicly that ETA was responsible until hours before the polls opened on March 14, when police arrested Zougam as well as two other Moroccans and two Indians suspected of involvement in the attacks.¹

The government's perceived mishandling of the crisis sparked outrage among many Spaniards. Critics of the government charged that it had deliberately tried to focus blame on ETA rather than Al Qaeda, knowing that if the public believed that ETA had committed the attacks, the government's popularity could be enhanced, due to the broad public support for its hard-line stance against ETA. On the other hand, if Al Qaeda or an affiliated group was responsible, critics asserted, the government feared that it would lose support because many voters would believe that it had brought the attacks on Spain by its highly unpopular support for the war in Iraq.

Spanish police have made progress in breaking up the terrorist cell responsible for the attack. On March 30, Spanish Interior Minister Angel Acebes said that the government suspected the Al Qaeda-linked Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group with involvement in the attacks. Spanish and Moroccan officials believe the group was also involved in May 2003 suicide bombing attacks in Casablanca, Morocco which killed 45 people, including several Spaniards. On April 2, an unexploded bomb was found on railroad tracks between Madrid and Seville. On April 3, seven men suspected of involvement in the Madrid attacks were killed when they blew themselves up after they were surrounded by police. The dead included the alleged leader of the terrorists, Serhane ben Abdelmajid Farkhet, known as "the Tunisian." Police found evidence that the group was ready to commit additional attacks. Police have said that the group financed its activities through drug trafficking and other crimes. In June 2004, Italian police arrested Rabei Osman Sayed Ahmed, known as "Mohammed the Egyptian." Ahmed, a former explosives instructor in Al Qaeda training camps, was one of the principal planners of the March 11 attacks, according to police. By September 2004, nearly two dozen persons charged with involvement in the attacks were in police custody. A parliamentary commission began an investigation into the March 11 attacks and the government's response to them in June 2004.

¹ Leslie Crawford and Joshua Levitt, "A Place in the History of Infamy — How the Government's Assumption and Misjudgement Shook Spain," *Financial Times*, March 26, 2004, 15.

Spain's March 14 Election

The terrorist attacks took place just before Spain's March 14 parliamentary elections, leading some observers to conclude that they may have been intended to influence the vote. In a public opinion poll taken in February 2004, two-thirds of those polled said that the war in Iraq had increased the threat of terrorism, and 85% were concerned about a possible terrorist strike against Spain.² Nevertheless, although the opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) led by Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero campaigned in part on the strong public opposition to the government's Iraq policy, the ruling PP appeared to be poised for a narrow victory, based on its record of a largely successful economic policy and its tough stand against ETA. The PP campaign was led not by Aznar, who is retiring from politics at the end of his term, but by his successor as PP leader, Mariano Rajoy.

Although the PP held a lead in opinion polls in the weeks prior to the election, its projected margin of victory shrank steadily. According to the final opinion polls published on March 7 (Spanish law imposes a blackout on public polls five days before an election), PP was expected to win 42% of the vote and the PSOE 38%. These totals would have meant that the PP would likely have lost its absolute majority in parliament, but would have likely stayed in power in coalition with smaller regional parties. Another late poll taken before the bombings put the PP's lead at 2.5%. Internal polls of both parties on the day before the attacks reportedly had the two parties in a virtual dead heat.³

The results of the election surprised many observers. The Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE) won 42.5% of the vote to the PP's 37.6%. The Socialists won 164 seats in the Congress of Deputies, up from 125 in the previous parliament. The PP won 148 seats, down from its previous total of 183 seats. The Socialists fell short of an absolute majority, so they will have to form a coalition, perhaps among the United Left, a tiny, hard-line Communist party, and several regional parties. The PP maintained control of the Senate, the regionally-based house of the parliament.

Turnout for the vote was 77.2%, up from 68.7% in the 2000 elections. It should be noted that this turnout, while high, is not unprecedented in Spain's recent electoral history, and is often associated with changes in government. Turnout in 1996 was 77.38% and 79.97% in 1982, each case corresponding to a victory by the opposition of the time.⁴ Some Spanish observers attributed a large part of the PSOE's success to the votes of about 2 million young, first-time voters. Madrid-based observers noted that the news of the arrest of Al Qaeda-linked figures on the evening of March 13 was transmitted rapidly among young people by cellphone, as was the exhortation, perhaps encouraged by Socialist supporters, to punish the government at the polls.⁵

² AP/Ipsos poll, March 5, 2004.

³ Lizette Alvarez and Elaine Sciolino, "Parsing Spain's Result: Many Voters Felt Misled," *New York Times*, March 18, 2004, 1.

⁴ El Pais newspaper website, [<http://www.elpais.es>].

⁵ Neomi Ramirez and Luis F. Fidalgo, Elecciones Generales 14-M. Resultados. Evolucion del Voto, *El Mundo*, March 16, 2004, p. 17.

Implications

A Victory for Terror or Spanish Democracy?

After the elections, a delicate issue raised by political leaders and analysts in Spain and throughout the world has been: did Al Qaeda “win” this election by intimidating the Spanish electorate (thereby perhaps setting a troubling precedent for other countries), or did the election result demonstrate the strength of Spain’s democracy? Some Spaniards, especially supporters of the Socialists, said that the result did not reflect a desire to appease terrorists, but was due to public anger at an allegedly arrogant government that had made decisions on Iraq and other issues without the support of the Spanish public. They note that public opinion polls had shown that up to 90% of the public was opposed to the government’s support for the war in Iraq and rejected a link between the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq. The effort to blame ETA for the March 11 bombing was the final straw for many voters, they assert. As for the charge that the terrorist attacks had determined the outcome, Zapatero’s supporters point to a post-election poll in which only 8.8% of those polled said that the terrorist attacks had affected their vote.⁶

Those critical of the election result note that the government appeared to be headed for a narrow victory just days before the attack, appearing to make the attack the decisive factor in the result. Some observers, including some in the United States, have criticized the election results as dangerous appeasement of terrorists. On March 17, House Speaker Dennis Hastert said, “Here’s a country that stood against terrorism and had a huge terrorist act within their country, and they chose to change their government and to, in a sense, appease terrorists.” Representative Henry Hyde, chairman of the House International Relations Committee, said “the vote in Spain was a great victory for Al Qaeda.”⁷ Administration officials have avoided making statements directly critical of the election results, perhaps fearing their impact on relations with the new government.

Like their Socialist adversaries, Spanish conservatives reject any implication that the election result revealed cowardice by the Spanish people, noting Spain’s struggle of more than three decades against ETA and its continued commitment to the deployment in Afghanistan after a May 2003 plane crash that killed 62 Spanish soldiers returning from the country. However, according to one view, some Spaniards may be laboring under a delusion that they can opt out of the dangers of globalization, while enjoying the benefits. According to this interpretation, many in Spain may believe that their country is a secondary player in world affairs and should not get mixed up in great power politics. This supposed attitude is said to be a result of Spain’s historical development, which has included a centuries-long decline from great power status and international isolation under the Franco regime. These observers believe that this attitude may be bolstered by

⁶ “Spanish Socialists Ten Points Ahead in First Post-Election Poll,” *Agence France Presse*, March 22, 2004.

⁷ “Spanish Politicians Rebuff U.S. Accusations of Appeasement,” *Associated Press*, March 18, 2004.

perceptions among some Spaniards that the United States, including the Bush Administration, knows little about Spain, and is insensitive to Spanish concerns.⁸

Possible Impact on the U.S.-Led Coalition in Iraq and the War on Terrorism

On April 18, 2004, the day after the new Spanish government took office, Zapatero announced the immediate withdrawal of the 1,300 Spanish troops in Iraq. The suddenness of the move came as a surprise to many observers, because during the campaign Zapatero had left open at least the possibility that the troops could stay, if certain conditions were met. In a five-minute phone call to Zapatero, President Bush expressed regret about the “abrupt” Spanish decision and warned against taking actions that would give “false comfort to terrorists.” All Spanish combat troops left Iraq by April 27. Unnamed U.S. officials sharply criticized the way the withdrawal was planned, saying it was done without proper coordination and in an “unprofessional” way that could unnecessarily jeopardize operations and lives.⁹ Given that Spain’s troops made up less than 1% of coalition forces in Iraq, it may be argued that the long-term military impact of a Spanish withdrawal may not be dramatic. However, some observers are concerned that the Spanish withdrawal could be part of a trend of declining public support for the Iraq mission in European members, which could undermine the coalition in the long run.¹⁰

Zapatero has stressed that his first priority is the fight against terrorism, and has called for closer cooperation among EU police and intelligence services. In September 2004, French and Spanish officials announced a joint unit of police and judges to combat terrorist groups, including ETA and Islamic extremists. However, the new government’s commitment to use military force to fight terror may be less certain. Zapatero has said that military force should be a “last resort” in the war against terrorism, claiming that it “can never be an effective method for eliminating or fighting fanatic, radical and criminal groups.”¹¹

Nevertheless, as a signal that it is still committed to the global war on terror, Spain expanded its contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan from 137 to 1,040 in August 2004, in order to provide additional security for Afghanistan’s October 2004 elections. However, Spain plans to withdraw 500 of the troops after the elections, despite Afghan pleas to extend the deployment of the entire contingent.

Possible Impact on U.S.-Spanish Relations

The change in government in Spain may have a significant effect on U.S.-Spanish relations. The close, personal relationship that developed between President Bush and

⁸ Pablo Pardo, “The Spanish Disposition,” *The Weekly Standard*, March 29, 2004.

⁹ Robin Wright and Bradley Graham, “Spain Plans to Hasten Withdrawal of Troops,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2004, 25.

¹⁰ For more on this issue see CRS Report RS21794, *Iraq Coalition: Public Opinion Indicators in Selected European Countries*, by Julie Kim.

¹¹ John Diamond, “Zapatero Wants to Alter War on Terror,” *USA Today*, March 22, 2004, 13.

Aznar is unlikely to be repeated with Zapatero. Aznar forged a close relationship with the United States in part because he believed that a partnership with the world's only superpower would enhance Spain's role in the world, making it a major international player. A close alliance with the United States also secured U.S. support and aid for Aznar's tough stance against ETA and Basque separatism. Aznar's critics said that the Spanish leader was motivated by a desire to enhance his own personal prestige rather than to serve Spain's real interests. In contrast to Aznar's closeness to the Administration, Zapatero appeared to be unconcerned that some of his initial remarks might be taken as insults by the White House. For example, he asserted that President Bush had based his Iraq policy on "lies" and suggested that the American people should vote him out of office in November 2004.¹² More recently, he suggested that the chances for peace in Iraq would be enhanced if more countries followed Spain's example and pulled their forces out of Iraq, causing the United States to seek a clarification of his remarks.¹³

According to Zapatero, the current focus of Spain's foreign policy is building closer ties to its European Union partners, particularly France and Germany, while still retaining good relations with the United States. Spain's new leaders say they will push forward more vigorously with EU integration. Zapatero's supporters say this policy will be in line with the foreign policy pursued by Spain in the post-Franco era, which they view as being based on a broad public consensus, as opposed to the allegedly autocratic style of Aznar.

On the other hand, as in the cases of France and Germany, which have also had difficulties with Washington, damage to U.S.-Spanish relations may be limited by common interests, including the fight against terrorism. In September 2004, Spain's attorney general announced that Spain and the United States plan to sign an agreement by the end of 2004 under which prosecutors from both countries could share information about Islamic militants. Both the National Intelligence Reform Act (S. 2845) and the 9/11 Recommendations Appropriations Act (H.R. 10) call for closer international cooperation in the fight against terrorism, including by eliminating terrorist sanctuaries and curtailing terrorist financing.

A question for the future is the use of U.S. military bases in Spain. The Administration was easily able to secure the use of U.S. bases in Spain for the Iraq operation. The bases played a significant role in the delivery of men and materiel to the Iraqi theater. Given the criticisms by Spain's new leaders of the concept of what they view as a U.S. policy of "preventive war," it might be more difficult to secure Spanish permission to use the bases in future operations, especially if the action did not have prior U.N. Security Council approval.

¹² Keith Richburg, "Spain's Next Prime Minister Says U.S. Should Dump Bush," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2004, 23.

¹³ "Zapatero Comments on Iraq Draw U.S. Demand for Clarification," *Agence France Presse*, September 14, 2004.