

# Spain, 11th March and International Terrorism

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On 11th March 2004, terrorists inspired by a neo-Salafist conception of the Islamic faith perpetrated a slaughter in Madrid. As a result of this attack, the bloodiest yet seen in Spain and second-ranking in terms of numbers killed of all attacks in Europe, 191 people died and there were about 1500 wounded. On that day, ten bombs hidden in backpacks and plastic bags, consisting of between eight and twelve kilograms of dynamite each, exploded in the carriages of four suburban trains travelling in the early morning on the section between Alcalá de Henares and the station of Atocha. Two days later, Abu Dujhan al Afgani, as spokesperson for al-Qaeda, claimed responsibility for the attacks, in a statement which made no reference to the imminent general elections, but in which it was pointed out that two and a half years had passed, namely exactly 911 days (the preceding February had been a leap-year month) since the attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

The reason that there were no suicide terrorists in the Madrid massacre, although this is a characteristic frequently associated with current international terrorism, is that the perpetrators did not succeed in concluding their plans. Barely three weeks later, they attempted to attack again, this time with the target of a high-speed train, but their attempt came to nothing. Seven of the terrorists involved in these events decided to kill themselves on 3rd April in the building in Leganés where they had been found and sur-

rounded by the police. Spain became the first European country in which Islamist terrorists chose to immolate themselves, surrounded by their own explosives, while chanting litanies from the Qoran. In the same way, our country was now the first in this geopolitical scenario in which individuals and groups connected with the global neo-Salafist jihad movement had successfully completed a terrorist act without precedent, as they planned to do once again months later and in the same city, thus highlighting the existence of a real and persistent threat.

Among the numerous questions triggered by the attacks of 11th March 2004, I intend to focus on two: since when has Spain been a target for al-Qaeda and, therefore, for bodies associated or aligned with that terrorist structure? And what lessons can we learn from the events of 11th March 2004 about the way in which international terrorism is currently structured, linked to the global neo-Salafist jihad movement?

## Since when has Spain been a target for al-Qaeda?

Spain has been a general target for al-Qaeda since at least 1996, a specific target since the latter part of 2001 and a declared target since October 2003.<sup>2</sup> Why has it been a general target since at least 1996? In August of that year, a short while after Osama bin Laden and his men returned to Afghanistan after having consolidated their terrorist structure in Sudan, a fatwa or edict issued by the leader of al-Qaeda him-

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<sup>2</sup> Fernando Reinares. *Al Qaeda, neosalafistas magrebíes y 11-M: sobre el nuevo terrorismo islamista en España*, pages 15-43 in Fernando Reinares and Antonio Elorza (eds.), *El nuevo terrorismo islamista. Del 11-S al 11-M*. Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2004; idem, José M. Irujo. *El Agujero. España invadida por la yihad*. Madrid: Aguilar, 2005.

self made it very clear what was the extent of the objectives and the range of targets of a violence taking its inspiration from the most aggressive form of Islamic fundamentalism. This document states: "the order to kill USA citizens or their allies, civilian or military, is an individual obligation for every Muslim who can do this in any country where it may be possible." Two years later, in February 1998, the leaders of al-Qaeda launched the so-called World Front for the Holy War against Jews and Crusaders. Some time before, the ideologues of the global neo-Salafist jihad had included Al Andalus in the territories which were under Muslim rule and which had to be recovered by violent means.

In what sense has Spain been a specific target since the latter part of 2001? The attacks which took place on 11th September in that year in the United States helped to make it clear that our country had, since the middle of the 1990s and apparently without anyone noticing, become al-Qaeda's principal base in Europe. In autumn of that year, a legal action taken by the national court following police investigations carried out by the Central Unit for External Intelligence substantially dismantled the first cell which followers of Osama bin Laden had established in Spain. The same jihadists, of whom some were already in prison for alleged involvement in the webs of international terrorism and others had evaded possible trials, harboured from that time onwards unbridled desires for revenge. It would therefore be a simplification to directly and exclusively link the slaughter committed on 11th March in Madrid with the presence of Spanish troops in Iraq.

A target since October 2003? What does that mean? Effectively, it was in that month when a message from Osama bin Laden was broadcast on a Qatari television network mentioning Spain in a list of countries threatened because of their involvement in the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. In his statement, the leader of the well-known terrorist organisation said: "we reserve the right to retaliate whenever and wherever we feel it is suitable against all the countries involved, especially the United Kingdom, Spain, Australia, Poland, Japan and Italy, not forgetting the Muslim States which are involved, especially the Gulf countries, in particular Kuwait, which has transformed itself into a launching pad for crusade troops." Shortly after, documents making references to the Holy War

in Iraq and urging attacks against Spanish troops deployed there and against Spanish interests outside this area appeared on a webpage known for its jihadist sympathies and affinity with al-Qaeda's positions.<sup>3</sup> Prior to 11th March 2004, the leaders and the faithful of the global neo-Salafist jihad had made an unsuccessful attempt to commit some equally indiscriminate and lethal attack on other countries in our immediate European surroundings. A series of terrorist acts which would hit German, French, British or Spanish targets in southern Asia, the Middle East or North Africa brought forward what finally happened on European Union soil. On that notorious date it became obvious none the less that the networks of international terrorism would find Spain sufficiently accessible, vulnerable and opportunity-laden. Spain's proximity to the Maghreb, its remote Hispano-Muslim past history making it a special attraction for Islamist terrorists, the antiterrorist measures, well-developed but barely adapted to combat the challenge of the neo-Salafist jihad and, finally, a situation of tense internal political debate over the alignment of the Spanish government with the United States in the military intervention in Iraq was to create a relatively propitious framework for an attack as spectacular and bloody as the Madrid attack.

### **What does 11th March tell us about al-Qaeda?**

One year after 11th March, what we know about the massacre enables us to understand a little better the set-up and strategy now being adopted by international terrorism. An analysis of the people and processes involved which culminated in the linked series of explosions that took place on that fateful day in Madrid shapes an image which is more than approximate of the violent Islamist network whose basic core and reference structure is al-Qaeda. Now, the reach and the dimensions of this phenomenon have gone much further than the outlines of this terrorist structure established during the latter part of the 1980s and consolidated during the first half of the 1990s. Thus, the complex scheme of international terrorism today denotes three basic components with differing compositions and stages of activity, in pursuit of a common final objective. This objective con-

<sup>3</sup> See, Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer. *Jihadi strategic studies: the alleged Al Qaida policy study preceding the Madrid bombing*. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. vol. 27, No. 5 (2004), pages 355-375.

sists, according to the ideologues of this jihadist violent movement, in installing a caliphate geared to the rigorous neo-Salafist concept of the Muslim faith, a kind of Islamic political empire extending from the extreme west of the Mediterranean to the borders of south-east Asia.

The first of these components is none other than al-Qaeda itself. Once the sanctuary that it had enjoyed in cohabitation with the Taliban regime had been seized from it, as a result of the U.S. military intervention implemented after the attacks of 11th September, the organisation fragmented, decentralised and even fell into an operational decline. A large part of its leaders have been captured over the last three and a half years. However, it is possible that it retains a degree of coordination in leadership and planning, as well as having funds available, and more than is often imagined.<sup>4</sup> The second component of international terrorism is made up by the various Islamic fundamentalist armed organisations operating nationally or regionally which are associated with al-Qaeda. Some of these have been formally affiliated with it since February 1998 and others joined later, having been set up more recently. These entities are, in one way or another, responsible for the vast majority of incidents attributed every year to international terrorism, since the cadres of al-Qaeda usually limit themselves to preparing and executing just a few attacks, including some that have been particularly spectacular.

Many small groups or local cells that have set themselves up and are relatively autonomous in their operation, but which tend to be connected with each other across borders within a contiguous geographical space form, taken all together, represent the third of the components seen in the current network of international terrorism. These small-sized groups govern their activities by the line set by the exponents of the neo-Salafist jihad doctrine through the Internet or other communication media. It is in this way that international terrorism has become an increasingly complex and widespread phenomenon, less predictable and more dangerous. To a large extent, it is based on a considerable list of entities with a varying degree of internal structure which align themselves with a

common leadership, whose loss of consistency scarcely seems to have affected its symbolic relevance. It is as inaccurate to reduce the phenomenon of global terrorism to al-Qaeda as it is to state that al-Qaeda has transformed itself into an organisation on the move. In reality, from the outset it was created as a basis for the development of a widespread multi-organisational sector of neo-Salafist jihadism in various countries in the Arab and Islamic world.<sup>5</sup> That it is gradually being subsumed by the results of its dynamics is another matter.

So, in the case of 11th March there are, in my opinion, sufficient data and signs to argue with justification that the perpetrators of the slaughter and the way in which they put their plans into practice reflect this tripartite structure of pan-Islamic international terrorism. Many of those allegedly involved in the Madrid massacre are individuals of Maghreb origin, enlisted into the neo-Salafist jihad inside local circles connected through links of friendship, neighbourhood or family. There were also cases it seems, of terrorists belonging to organisations expressly connected with al-Qaeda, like the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group. Finally, relations between certain individuals suspected of having been involved in last year's killings and others previously charged with alleged membership of the first al-Qaeda cell established in Spain, some of them connected with the central core of this terrorist structure, suggest the possible existence of connections with the decision-making circles of the body led by Osama bin Laden.

### **A strategy of the offensive jihad?**

Nonetheless, 11th March also alludes to the dual strategy designed by the leaders of Al Qaeda, particularly by Ayman al Zawahiri, once the neo-Salafist concept of the jihad had been reworked, approximately a decade ago, to be both defensive and offensive.<sup>6</sup> This strategy basically consists of practising violence in the manner of a Holy War, as much against the perceived enemy nearby as the one far-off. That is to say, on the one hand against the governments categorised as unbelievers and tyrants because they

<sup>4</sup> HOFFMAN, Bruce. "The changing face of Al Qaeda and the global war on terrorism." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 27, No. 6 (2004), pages 549-560.

<sup>5</sup> GUNARATNA, Rohan. *Inside Al Qaeda. Global network of terror*. London, Hurst and Company, 2002; see also REINARES, Fernando. *Terrorismo global [Global terrorism]*. Madrid: Taurus, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> SAGEMAN, Marc. *Understanding terror networks*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, especially pages 25-59.

govern countries with an overwhelmingly Muslim majority but do not adhere to a fundamentalist reading of the precepts of the Qur'an and, on the other hand, against Western societies which the belligerent neo-Salafists consider to be infidels, more specifically, Jews and Crusaders. These parties' interests and populations are considered legitimate targets for this jihadist violence, inside and outside the Muslim world. This last hypothesis explains the particular recourse to highly lethal, indiscriminate attacks, as was the case in Madrid. This fact, due to its slender probability but growing possibility, forces us to consider the predisposition of international terrorism to use chemical, bacteriological, radiological or nuclear weapons in order to increase the massive repercussions of the fear induced through the increase in the intended number of victims.

Moreover, what happened in the death trains tells us much about the obvious skill which those instigating and carrying out international terrorism have for taking advantage of our obvious vulnerability and perhaps also of situational factors, such as cracks in the

defence and security systems which allow them to detect good targets, as well as of political contexts they regard as favourable for the possible exploitation of the effects of a major attack. The events on 11th March remind us that, with regard to international terrorism, the major threat to European societies comes principally, but not exclusively, from North Africa and involves processes of radicalization which frequently occur in source regions and sometimes within immigrant communities. Likewise, it also reminds us that this phenomenon is, unusually, linked both to organized crime and to ordinary criminality, and is far from slackening off. Before 11th March 2004 some similar but unsuccessful attempt had been made in other countries of our immediate vicinity and nothing had caused us to believe that the attacks had ended, whatever claims the jihadists may have made since. In other words, international terrorism rooted from belligerent neo-Salafism continues to pose a serious problem for Spain and the rest of the European Union, as well as for the countries of the Mediterranean basin and other regional areas with geostrategic importance.