Terror Attacks and Elections:

The Challenge for Europe

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

Mar 15, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Simon Henderson (/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Brief Analysis

Three days after the terrorist bombings in Madrid, the pro-American, conservative Spanish government was defeated in general elections, to the surprise of many observers. Although officials have not yet confirmed that the al-Qaeda terrorist network was responsible for the attacks, the polling result was immediately interpreted as reflecting electorate anger at retiring Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, and the belief that his foreign policy had made Spain a target of foreign terrorists. An immediate pledge to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq by incoming Socialist leader Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero is a blow to the Bush administration's Iraq policy and represents, albeit unintentionally, a major political triumph for al-Qaeda.

Spain, Iraq, and al-Qaeda

In an interview today, the new Spanish leader, who will not take office for several weeks, was devastating in his comments: "The military intervention [in Iraq] was a political error for the international order, for the search for co-operation, for the defense of the United States." He continued: "It divided more than it united; there were no reasons for it; time has shown that the arguments for it lacked credibility and the occupation has been managed badly." According to Zapatero, the 1,300 Spanish troops in Iraq will be withdrawn by June 30, the scheduled date for the transfer to Iraqi sovereignty, "unless the United Nations takes control and the occupiers give up political control."

An alternative explanation for the motives of al-Qaeda terrorists, namely, the historical attitude toward Spain held by fundamentalist Muslims, was not mentioned by Zapatero in the interview. Spaniards regard the 700 years of resisting Muslim invaders in the Iberian peninsula, culminating in the 1492 fall of Granada, as the "Christian War of Reconquest." Osama bin Laden and other extremists regard this defeat as a setback to Islam that must be reversed.

The 1,300 Spanish troops constitute less than 1 percent of foreign forces in Iraq but still make up the fifth largest foreign contingent after the United States, Britain, Poland, and Ukraine. They are based at Diwaniyah, about 100 miles south of Baghdad, close to the Shi'i holy city of Najaf. Although the Spanish do not constitute a crucial component of coalition forces, their loss will be a major diplomatic embarrassment. Other members of the coalition under domestic political pressure may feel that the door is now open for their own exit.

Zapatero's comments indicate that Spain will no longer be neutral diplomatically on issues such as Iraq, the war on terror, and the preeminent international role of the United States. The new Madrid government is certain to position itself alongside President Jacques Chirac of France and Chancellor Gerhardt Schroeder of Germany, who envision a multilateral world with U.S. power subservient to the will of the United Nations. After his own easy reelection last weekend, President Vladimir Putin of Russia might also decide to become an active member of this grouping.

Attitudes in Britain

The extent of domestic pressure confronting U.S. allies in Europe should not be underestimated. The Iraq issue, in addition to his friendship with President George W. Bush, has seriously affected the popularity of British prime minister Tony Blair, even within his own ruling Labour Party. A diversity of British media relishes every opportunity to drive home the attack. For example, the first British detainees released from Guantanamo Bay arrived in Britain last week. Yesterday, while most newspapers displayed the horrors of the Madrid bombings prominently on their front pages, both the left-wing Observer and the right-wing Mail on Sunday carried an identical account -- running over several pages -- of three British detainees' allegedly dreadful experiences in U.S. confinement. Reportedly receiving lucrative payments from the two newspapers for telling their stories, the men claimed utter innocence of all links to al-Qaeda. They insisted that, apart from a group of Taliban mullahs, there were "no 'big-time' terrorists" at Guantanamo. They are reportedly hoping to sue the U.S. and British governments for illegal detention.

The fate of the British prisoners at the U.S. base in Cuba is a subset of the larger -- and still hotly debated -- issue over whether it was legal for Britain to go to war against Saddam Hussein. These issues are particularly sensitive among British Muslims, estimated to number 1.6 million. Acknowledging this, British foreign secretary Jack Straw (whose less-than-comfortable constituent margin of support is just over 9,000) regularly notes that he has 25,000 Muslims living in his constituency. A poll in today's left-wing Guardian paints a stark picture, predicting that only 38 percent of Muslims will vote Labour in the next election, compared with 75 percent in the most recent 2001 polling. Whereas across Britain, support for Blair's Iraq policy is thought to be evenly divided, this poll showed that 80 percent of British Muslims did not think war against Iraq to remove Saddam was justified. Most disturbingly, 13 percent of those British Muslims polled thought that further al-Qaeda attacks on the United States would be.

Blair continues to believe that action against both the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam's regime in Iraq was absolutely justified. In a major speech ten days ago, he noted his pre-September 11 concerns about "Islamic extremism and terrorism," along with "highly unstable and repressive states" developing weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles. He repeated his proposal, first outlined in a 1999 Chicago speech, for a "doctrine of international community, where in certain circumstances we do intervene, even though we are not directly threatened." He went on to say, "my judgment then and now is that the risk of this new global terrorism and its interaction with states or organizations or individuals proliferating weapons of mass destruction, is one I am simply not prepared to run."

Coincidentally rather than in response to the terror in Madrid, British police launched a major advertising campaign this weekend warning travelers on the London Underground of the dangers posed by terrorists, particularly by bombs left in luggage. As many as 3,000 police officers will be involved in special antiterrorist patrols.

Absent any September 11- or Madrid-style attacks in Britain or elsewhere in Europe, the first indication of whether Blair is winning the domestic political struggle will be the municipal and European parliament elections in June. In the meantime, Blair will emphasize his government's commitment to social policies. The Spanish election result, however, was an indication that the electorate not only decides the issues in a democracy, but can also be contrary in their judgments.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute.

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)