



## International Terrorism and Public Opinion in Spain

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**Theme:** Perceptions of Spanish public opinion of the current threat from international terrorism, its causes and the expectations of further Jihadist attacks.

**Summary:** A large majority of Spaniards are very concerned by the threat to Spain from international terrorism. Following the invasion of Iraq and the bombings in Casablanca there was a notable increase in the social perception of international terrorism as a threat to Spain, and this perception has subsequently persisted, among other reasons, due to the 11 March attacks. The prevailing view among Spanish public opinion is that international terrorism is linked more closely to ideological or cultural factors than to socio-economic or political variables. However, in the case of the attacks of 11 March 2004, people here seem to highlight political causes. Four out of every 10 people now think that Spain could be the target of another act of international terrorism, although a higher proportion of Spaniards attribute a significant likelihood to Islamist terrorists perpetrating attacks in order to claim Ceuta and Melilla.

**Analysis:** Since November 2002, Elcano Royal Institute has been conducting a series of statistically representative public opinion surveys of the Spanish population, known as the Barometers of the Elcano Royal Institute (BRIE). These periodical surveys reveal the attitudes of Spanish citizens to a number of issues relating to international politics or to the projection of Spain's image abroad. International terrorism and its manifestations are one of the recurring themes. Accordingly, the questionnaires used to conduct the surveys normally include questions regarding the way in which Spaniards perceive international terrorism in the wake of the attacks on 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington, their views regarding the causes generally linked to such an extraordinarily global phenomenon –and regarding the attacks in Madrid on 11 March 2004 in particular– and also the possibility of Spain again being targeted for attacks like the coordinated explosions of that day in Madrid or the suicide bombing on 3 April of the same year in the southern Madrid suburb of Leganés.

### *How the Social Perception of the Threat has Evolved*

Overall, data from the various waves of the BRIE show that a vast majority of Spaniards is decidedly concerned by the threat to Spain from international terrorism. Specifically, up to 85% of those surveyed in November 2002, almost one year after the 9/11 attacks in the US, and more than 90% between October 2003 and December 2006, understood that international terrorism is either a 'significant', or 'extremely or highly significant' threat to, as the question was worded in the survey, 'Spain's strategic interests' (see Table 1). In March 2006, 98% of those surveyed agreed on one of the above assessments, perhaps due to the fact that the fieldwork was performed on dates close to the commemoration of the second anniversary of the Madrid bombings and public opinion was somewhat more sensitive to the reality of international terrorism and its effects.

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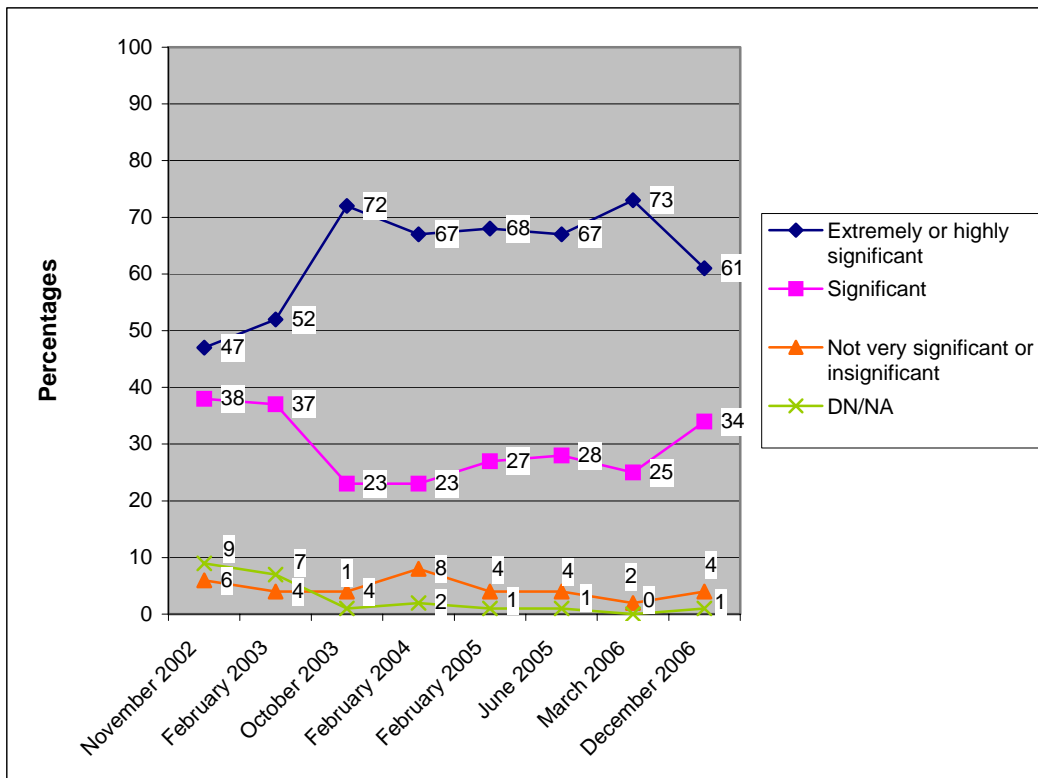
**Table 1. Social perception of the threat to Spain's strategic interests from international terrorism, 2002-06 (%)**

	Nov 2002	Feb 2003	Oct 2003	Feb 2004	Feb 2005	Jun 2005	Mar 2006	Dec 2006
Extremely or highly significant	47	52	72	67	68	67	73	61
Significant	38	37	23	23	27	28	25	34
Extremely or highly significant and significant	85	89	95	90	95	95	98	95
Not very significant or insignificant	6	4	4	8	4	4	2	4
DK/NA	9	7	1	2	1	1	0	1

Source: the authors, based on the BRIE surveys from November 2002, February 2003, October 2003, February 2004, February 2005, June 2005, March 2006 and December 2006.

There have, however, been some interesting variations in the way Spaniards perceive the threat of international terrorism over the past four and-a-half years. Accordingly, for example, the number of persons surveyed who consider international terrorism as nothing more, and no thy less, than a 'significant' threat to Spain has fluctuated between 23% in October 2003 and February 2004 and 38% in November 2002. Meanwhile, the number of people who believe that the threat to Spain and its strategic interests is 'highly significant' or 'extremely significant' was 47% in the first survey of the BRIE series, and reached 73% in March 2006, while before and after that date it has normally remained at amply over half of those interviewed (see Graph 1).

**Graph 1. How social perception of the threat to Spain's strategic interests from international terrorism has developed, 2002-06 (%)**



Source: the authors, based on the BRIE surveys from November 2002, February 2003, October 2003, February 2004, February 2005, June 2005, March 2006 and December 2006.

\* February 2005 questionnaire differentiated between the categories 'Not very significant' and 'Not significant at all', but here they are represented together.

Between February and October 2003, there were major variations in the degree of significance which Spaniards attributed to international terrorism as a threat to the nation's strategic interests. From the Winter survey to the one conducted in Autumn that same year, there is a 14 percentage point decline in the number of persons surveyed who considered that international terrorism was a 'significant' threat (from 37% to 23% of the total sample). However, at the same time, there was an outstanding increase of no less than 20 percentage points (specifically, from 52% to 72% during the eight months between the two surveys) among those who saw international terrorism as an 'extremely or highly significant' threat to Spain's common strategic interests. This is the critical turning point in the upswing of the social perception of international terrorism as a threat of considerable significance to Spain. When it comes to explaining this surprising increase, it is worth referring to the impact on public perception from the military intervention in Iraq which commenced in March 2003 by an international coalition led by the US, and the fears of an increase in international terrorism, and, without doubt, the attacks in the Moroccan city of Casablanca in May of the same year which, among other targets, were aimed against a Spanish restaurant.

Also, the suicide attacks in July 2005 in London might have contributed to explaining a slight increase in the percentage of people who perceive international terrorism as an 'extremely or highly significant' threat, which in the survey of March 2006 reached its maximum so far, 73% of all those surveyed. This implied six percentage points more than in the previous survey conducted in June 2005, perhaps because –as we have said– the fieldwork for this Barometer of the Royal Institute Elcano was performed around the date of the second anniversary of the Madrid bombings, since in the very next BRIE survey, conducted in December 2006, the figure declined by 12 percentage points. Accordingly, the variations between November 2002 and December 2006 in the way Spanish public opinion perceives the threat from international terrorism seem to respond to the crisis unleashed by a regional conflict or attacks in neighbouring countries, as well as the memory of the bombings of 11 March 2004.

Comparing the social perception of international terrorism with citizens' perceptions of other likely threats to Spain's strategic interests in the next decade (questions regarding this issue are also included in the BRIE surveys of the Spanish population), it is observed that no other problem incites such high levels of agreement among most interviewees in considering them an 'extremely or highly significant' threat than that kind of global violence (see Table 2). This is the case in seven of the eight surveys performed between November 2002 and December 2006, in other words, all except the one of June 2005, when in the opinion of the surveyed population, global warming exceeded international terrorism as a threat described as 'extremely or highly significant' for Spanish strategic interests, although only by one percentage point, which is less than the survey's margin of error and in practice places both threats on an equal footing; the same is true, although in the opposite order, in the survey conducted in December 2006.

**Table 2. Threats to Spain's strategic interests in the next 10 years which most persons surveyed consider to be 'extremely significant', 2002-06**

	First	Second
<b>November 2002</b>	International terrorism (47%)	Arrival of large numbers of refugees and immigrants (43%)
<b>February 2003</b>	International terrorism (52%)	Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (43%)
<b>October 2003</b>	International terrorism (72%)	Arab-Israeli conflict (57%) and US militarism (57%)
<b>February 2004</b>	International terrorism (67%)	Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (51%)
<b>February 2005</b>	International terrorism (68%)	Global warming (56%)
<b>June 2005</b>	Global warming (68%)	International terrorism (67%)
<b>March 2006</b>	International terrorism (73%)	Global warming (62%)
<b>December 2006</b>	International terrorism (61%)	Global warming (60%)

Source: the authors, based on the data from BRIE surveys from November 2002, February 2003, October 2003, February 2004, February 2005, June 2005, March 2006 and December 2006.

*Views on the Causes of Islamic Terrorism*

There is currently a widespread social and political debate regarding the causes of international terrorism. In the BRIE questionnaire for the survey conducted two months after the attacks on 11 March 2004 a specific question was included in this connection. The question was repeated in the following year's survey, in February 2005. In both, the persons surveyed were asked to express their opinion on the possible causes of international terrorism; they were allowed to give a maximum of two causes. The aim was to find out what Spaniards blamed for the phenomenon. In both the May 2004 survey and that of February 2005, six out of every 10 interviewees said that religious fanaticism was the main cause of international terrorism. Poverty and social inclusion in Arab countries, rejection of the US due to its foreign policy, hatred towards the West and its values or dictatorship and corruption in Arab countries, are all referred to, each by about two out of every 10 interviewees (see Table 3). In short, there is a perception among Spanish public opinion that international terrorism is more closely linked to ideological or cultural factors than to socio-economic or political variables.

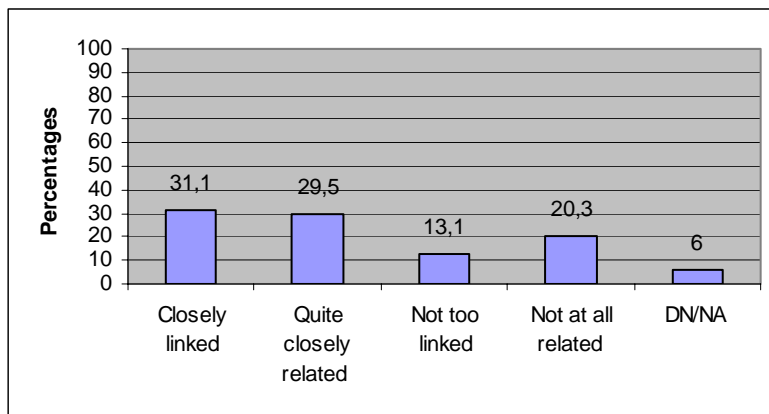
**Table 3. Social perception of the causes of Islamic terrorism, with a maximum of two responses, 2004-05 (%)**

Causes of Islamic terrorism	May 2004	February 2005
Rejection of the US due to its foreign policy	23.6	17.3
Hatred towards the West and its values	20.6	21.9
Religious fanaticism	59.0	63.3
Poverty and social exclusion in Arab countries	23.7	18.8
Dictatorship and corruption in Arab countries	16.4	15.0
DK/NA	4.9	4.3
N	(1,219)	(1,203)

Source: the authors, based on data from the BRIE surveys conducted in May 2004 and February 2005.

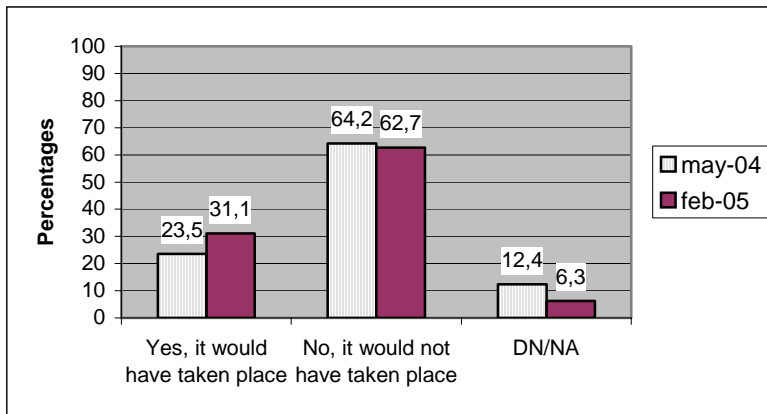
Furthermore, both Elcano Barometers (May 2004 and February 2005), also sought to ascertain the degree to which Spaniards link the Madrid bombings of 11 March to the foreign policy of its government or the latter's support to the US in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In the survey conducted in May 2004, 66.6% of those surveyed considered that the massacre in Madrid was "closely linked" or "quite closely related" to Spain's foreign policy of the time (see Graph 2). Furthermore, six out of every 10 surveyed in May 2004 and in February 2005 (64.2% and 62.7%, respectively) were convinced that if Spain had not aligned itself with the US in the Iraq war the terrorist massacre in Madrid in March 2004 would not have taken place (see Graph 3). Nevertheless, between one survey and the next, there was an increase from every two to every three people out of 10 in the number of persons surveyed who considered that the attacks would have taken place regardless of the support from the Spanish authorities to the US in the Iraq conflict, which perhaps is due to press reports concerning plans for other Jihadist attacks in Madrid which have been thwarted in the course of a number of preventive police raids since the end of 2004.

**Graph 2. Social perception of the link between the 3/11 attacks and Spain's foreign policy, 2004 (%)**



Source: the authors, based on data from the BRIE surveys from May 2004.

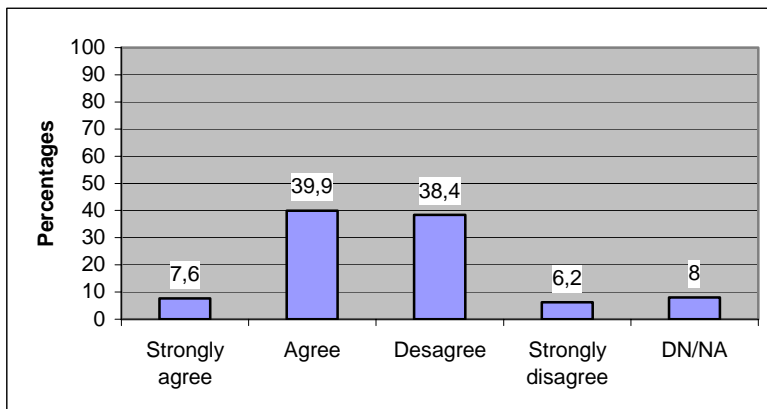
**Graph 3. Social perception of the link between the 3/11 attacks and Spain's support for the US in the Iraq war, 2004 and 2005 (%)**



Source: the authors, based on data from the BRIE surveys from May 2004 and February 2005.

Delving further into these same questions, namely the supposed causality between a specific conflict, such as the Iraq war, and the trend of international terrorism, in the Barometer of the Elcano Royal Institute in February 2005, the persons surveyed were asked to give their view on whether a possible withdrawal of the US troops deployed there would reduce international terrorism world-wide. While 47.5% 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the question posed in the survey, another 44.6% 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with the idea that a withdrawal of the US troops deployed in Iraq could lead to a reduction in current global terrorism (see Graph 4). Since the distance between the two figures is within the limits of margin for error, it is safe to say that Spanish public opinion is divided in its attitudes in this respect.

**Graph 4. Social perception of the link between a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and a reduction in international terrorism worldwide, 2005 (%)**



Source: the authors, based on data from the BRIE surveys from February 2005.

Overall, then, Spanish public opinion's view of the cause of the Jihadist attacks of 11 March is not entirely consistent with the social perception of the causes of international terrorism when this phenomenon is considered generically. While today's international terrorism, referred to in abstract, is viewed by Spanish public opinion to have mainly ideological or cultural causes, such as religious fanaticism or hatred towards the West, when it comes to explaining a specific expression of this Jihadist violence, such as the bombings of 11 March 2004 in Madrid, Spanish citizens tend to highlight political causes, such as the government's foreign policy and, in particular, its alignment with the US administration in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. This division among those surveyed in regard to the idea that a possible withdrawal of US troops from Iraq would lead to a reduction in international terrorism world-wide seems to stem from the aforementioned inconsistency.

*Regarding the Possibility of Further Islamist Attacks*

In December 2006, in the latest wave of the BRIE, a sample of Spanish citizens were questioned regarding the likelihood of further Jihadist terrorist acts on western democracies which have already suffered attacks. In other words, in the US (which was attacked on 11 September 2001), in Spain (which experienced the dramatic events of March 2004) and in the UK (where bombings also took place in July 2005). Eight out of every 10 persons in the sample population surveyed believe that it is ‘probable’ that such lethal kinds of attack take place again in the US, while seven out of every 10 say the same about the UK and yet only four out of 10 believe there will be another attack by international terrorism in Spain (see Table 4).

In view of the link which Spanish public opinion established between its government’s support for the United States in the Iraq war and what happened in Madrid three years ago, one might deduce that the prevailing perception is that the other two western democracies considered in the survey are more likely to suffer further Jihadist attacks because they are still involved at a military level in the Iraq conflict. Although underlying this view is also the idea –which al-Qaeda’s leaders reinforce in their discourse but which certainly does not really correspond to the targets and victims of their violent campaign of recent years– that today’s global terrorism is directed particularly against the US and its closest allies.

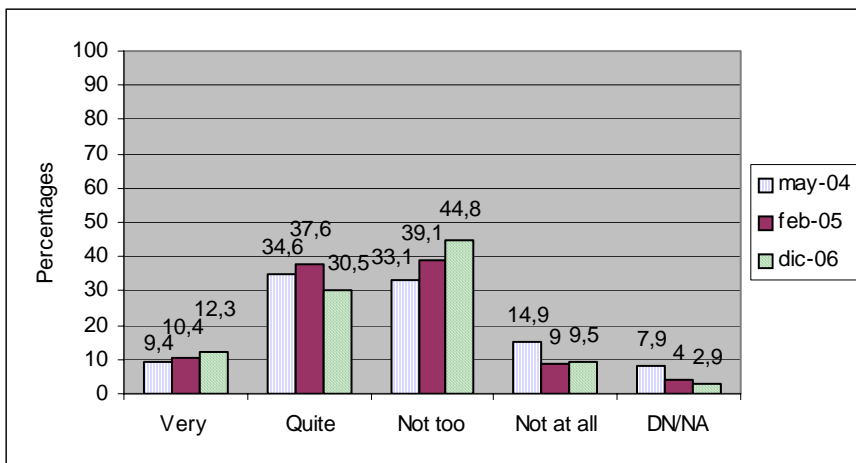
**Table 4. Social perception of the likelihood of further Islamic terrorist attacks in western democracies which have already suffered attacks, 2006 (%)**

Country	Very	Quite	Not very	Not at all	DK/NA	Total
In Spain	12.3	30.5	44.8	9.5	2.9	100
In the US	33.5	47.4	13.3	2.8	3.0	100
In the UK	25.1	46.3	21.6	3.2	3.7	100

Source: own research based on data from the BRIE survey conducted in December 2006.

But public opinion’s perception of the likelihood of a further Jihadist attack in Spain remained fairly steady between May 2004, two months after the 11 March massacre, and December 2006. In the BRIE survey of May 2004, 44% of those surveyed said it was ‘very’ or ‘quite’ likely that there would be another attack by international terrorism in Spain; this perception increased slightly, to 48%, in the survey in February 2005, and then fell significantly (to 42.8%) in the survey of December 2006. Only one out of every 10 persons interviewed is very convinced that Spain will again be the target of an Islamic attack, just as, on the contrary, one out of every 10 absolutely deny that this possibility exists. It could be deduced from these figures that between 43% and 48% of Spaniards consider that Spain is again likely to be the target of a terrorist attack perpetrated by individuals or groups linked to al-Qaeda (see Graph 5).

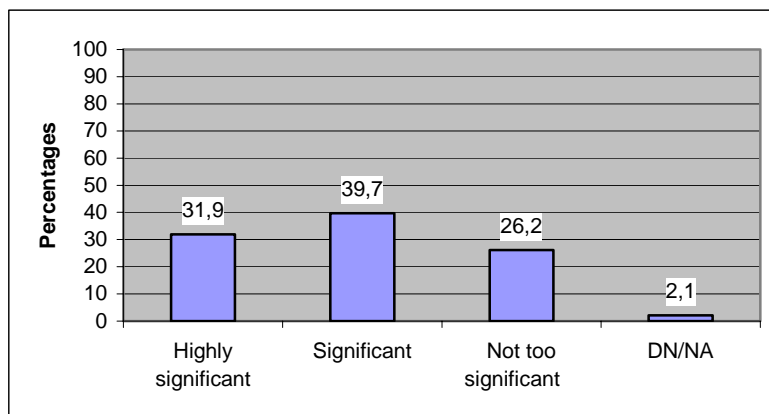
**Graph 5. Social perception of the likelihood of there being another attack by international terrorism in Spain, 2004-06 (%)**



Source: the authors, based on data from the BRIE surveys conducted in May 2004, February 2005 and December 2006.

The BRIE of December 2006 scrutinised the opinions of Spaniards in order to ascertain their assessment of the media reports that same month, as a result of a specific police operation, which pointed to the possibility that Islamic terrorist groups might attack Spain in order to claim sovereignty over Ceuta and Melilla. While this information was 'significant' or 'highly significant' for 71.6% of those surveyed, another 26.2% do not seem to afford sufficient credit to these reports, which received national coverage (see Graph 6). The previous assertion, then, that just four or five out of every 10 persons surveyed consider it likely that, in the wake of the 11 March attacks, there may be further Jihadist attacks in Spain, must be considered carefully from the perspective of Spain's two North African enclaves and the explicit dangers deriving from the information reported by the media.

**Graph 6. Social perception of the threat implied by the information suggesting that Islamic terrorist groups might attack Spain to claim Ceuta and Melilla, 2006 (%)**



Source: the authors, based data from the BRIE surveys from December 2006.

**Conclusion:** The vast majority of Spaniards are decidedly worried by the threat to Spain from international terrorism, as evidenced by the data from the various Barometers which the Elcano Royal Institute has conducted between November 2002 and December 2006. However, the significance which Spanish public opinion ascribes to this threat has varied throughout this time. Following the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the Casablanca bombings in May of the same year, there was a sharp increase in the social perception of international terrorism as a very considerable threat for Spain's strategic interests, and this has been maintained since 2004, due mainly to the memory of the 11 March attacks.

In short, there is a prevailing view among Spanish public opinion that international terrorism as a whole is more related with ideological or cultural factors than with socio-economic or political variables. Religious fanaticism, specifically, is considered to be the main cause of this phenomenon. However, when trying to explain a specific expression of Jihadist terrorism, like the bombings on 11 March 2004 in Madrid, Spanish citizens tend to highlight political causes, such as the government's foreign policy, especially its alignment with the US in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Consequently, one might say that Spanish public opinion on the causes of the 11 March bombings is not entirely consistent with the majority social perception of the causes which it attributes to international terrorism in general. The split in public opinions concerning the idea that a possible withdrawal of US troops from Iraq would lead to a reduction in international terrorism worldwide seems to stem from the aforementioned incongruence.

Approximately four out of every 10 persons surveyed in the Barometers conducted by the Royal Elcano Institute between May 2004 and December 2006 believe that Spain may again be the target of an attack by international terrorism. However, seven out of every 10 believe that something similar could happen in the UK and eight out of every 10 believe it is likely to happen in the US. Although only half of Spaniards think that in the wake of 11 March another attack by international terrorism is likely to occur here, this social perception must be examined in the light of the concern among public opinion of the threat (as they see it credible) of Islamist terrorist attacks to claim

Ceuta and Melilla. Anyway, the fact that an wide majority of Spaniards consider that international terrorism is a serious threat to Spain's strategic interests and that, at the same time, they tend to consider that there is unlikely to be a Jihadist attack in Spain, evidences another relative inconsistency in the attitudes of public opinion in regard to these questions of national security.

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