



The Madrid Massacre: Mistakes Made and Mistakes to be Avoided

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Subject: The terrorist outrage of 3/11 was the work, according to available information, of an al-Qaeda cell, probably trying to force Spain to withdraw its troops from Iraq.

Summary: The main suspect arrested so far has ties with the Spanish al-Qaeda cell alleged to have taken part in the preparation of the 9/11 attacks. The Madrid bombings are the European equivalent of that fateful attack and they oblige Spain and the EU to make defence against the *Jihadine* threat the number-one priority of their security policy.

Analysis: With a police investigation in full cry and only some initial findings to go on, any assessment of the terrorist attacks that occurred in Spain on 11 March is probably over hasty. There is, however, one solid basis for reflection: a bomb in a sports bag which failed to explode and could therefore be examined by the police. The SIM card of the mobile phone in the bag led to the arrest on 13 March of three Moroccan subjects resident in Madrid. Existing police knowledge of one of them, Jamal Zougam, is enough to conclude that the attacks were carried out by people linked to the hard core of the al-Qaeda network.

There is reference to Jamal Zougam on sheets 85 and 86 of the judicial inquiry number 35/2001 of 17 September 2003 begun on the initiative of the magistrate Baltasar Garzón on the grounds that various Arabs living in Spain were suspected of belonging to al-Qaeda and having played a part in the attacks in the US on 9/11/2001. There is, therefore, a possible relation between 9/11 in the US and 3/11 in Spain. Let us look more closely at the evidence provided by the Garzón inquiry.

The home of Jamal Zougam in Madrid was searched on 10 August 2001, a month before the attacks in the US, at the formal request of the French authorities, who also asked for the house of Mohamed Maher Halak, known as Cheij Maher, to be searched. Maher was known to have contacts with Islamist extremists in France. In Zougam's house the police found four telephone numbers which turned out to be significant. One of them was that of Maher, a Syrian, whom Garzón believed to be linked to the terrorist organisation Ansar al Islam, to which we shall return later. The others were those of Amer Azizi (known as Othman al Andalusi), Said Chedadi and Abdalrahman Alarnaot Bualier, all three of whom have been charged for being members of the al-Qaeda cell in Spain led by Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, alias Abu Dahdah. The police also found a video tape of Islamic fighters in Dagestan, showing two people charged in the same inquiry, the brothers Salaheddin Benyaich, alias Abu Muhgen, and Abdelaziz Benyaich, both subsequently arrested, the former in Morocco and the latter in Spain, for their alleged involvement in the terrorist bombings in Casablanca on 16 May 2003.

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Having these telephone numbers in his possession was insufficient evidence of misdemeanour on which to try Jamal Zougam, and he was set free. But it can be seen that the presumed contacts connected him with:

- (1) The attacks of 9/11 in the US, via the Abu Dahdah cell.
- (2) Via Cheij Maher with Ansar al Islam, a terrorist organisation linked to al-Qaeda and operating in Iraqi Kurdistan.
- (3) Via the Benyaich brothers, with the Casablanca bombings, one of whose targets was a restaurant-cum-club called 'Casa de España'.

We are faced, therefore, with one of the typical characteristics of individuals linked to the leadership of al-Qaeda: connections with participants in other crimes committed in different parts of the world. Jamal Zougam was potentially, to go by the evidence, one of the most dangerous individuals in Spain. Which leads us to our first doubt: Had he been kept under surveillance since 9/11? Or did people think that the chance of a jihadist attack in Spain was too remote?

The initial reaction to the Madrid bombings, which most people in Spain (including the writer of this article) initially attributed to ETA, shows that no one had taken on board the real extent of the threat posed by al-Qaeda. (True, the aborted bomb attempts in Madrid by ETA previous to 3/11 explain why Basque terrorists were the prime suspects.) There were, however, sound reasons why a jihadist attack on Spanish soil was a distinct possibility. They can be summarised as follows: a ring apparently connected to the individuals responsible for the 9/11 attacks had been discovered and its members arrested in Spain; in May of last year a Spanish establishment had been blown up in Casablanca; and Spain is a member of the international coalition which has troops in Iraq.

With respect to the first reason, the link between Abu Dahdah and the preparations for 9/11, this has not been proved, but the evidence collected by the magistrate Garzón appears to be sound. It is clear that Abu Dahdah and his followers were in contact with the Hamburg ring led by Mohammed Atta, as detailed on pages 87-91 of the inquiry 35/2001, and that Mohammed Atta himself travelled to Spain in July 2001 where he met an important member of al-Qaeda, Ramzi Binalshib (currently in detention in Guantánamo Bay), and members of Abu Dahdah's group, apparently to finalise preparations for the pending attacks (pages 316-327). The investigation proceeded, and on 23 February two Algerians, who had provided Binalshib with a passport and visas, were arrested in Torrevieja, near Alicante. Recently, it was known that Binalshib had confessed to his American interrogators to having met Atta in Tarragona. All this means that al-Qaeda has had a more or less permanent set-up in Spain for some time. How big it is we do not know, but some of its members are sufficiently close to the heads of the organisation to have helped them prepare the attacks of 9/11.

With respect to the Casablanca bombings on 16 May, these were not the first jihadist attacks against Spanish targets, only the first since 9/11. There had been a precedent that is worth recalling as it shows that what we face is not a passing problem. It was the bomb attack against the 'El Descanso' restaurant just outside Madrid, which took place on 12 April 1985, killing 18 and injuring 100, responsibility for which was claimed by the 'Islamic Jihad', whose members were never brought to book. Eighteen years later, four more Spaniards died in Casablanca but the significant point about that attack was that it killed 20 people in an establishment called Casa de España, 'Spanish Home'. There is therefore good reason to think that this was a deliberate attack against a Spanish target, even though another bombing on the same day was directed against the small community of Moroccan Jews. As for the suicide bombers used in those two attacks, they were all young Moroccans, but their international connections have slowly been unravelled since and they include people of European origin such as the French convert Pierre Robert or residents in Europe such as the Moroccan imam of the northern Spanish city of Burgos,

Burchaib Maghder (now under death sentence), the Moroccan-born naturalised Spaniard Abdelaziz Hichu, the already mentioned Benyaich brothers (charged in Spain with being members of the ring led by Abu Dahdah) and, finally, Driss Chebli, a case worth looking at in greater detail. Chebli, on whom the Moroccan government sought information in connection with the bombings in Casablanca, is under arrest in Spain as part of the judicial inquiry into Abu Dahdah, whom Chebli telephoned on 5 September 2001, apparently in relation to the arrival in Madrid that day of Ramzi Benalship, as stated on pages 323-325 of the resume of the inquiry. There are, therefore, connections linking the terrorists who acted in New York, Washington, Casablanca and Madrid.

Let us now turn to the Iraqi connection. We saw how Jamal Zougam, the leading suspect of those arrested so far in connection with 3/11, was in contact with Cheij Maher, who the magistrate Garzón thinks is a member of Ansar al Islam, a jihadist organisation located in Iraqi Kurdistan, and which may well be implicated in the attacks on 1 February last against the headquarters of two democratic Kurdish parties. But the most relevant aspect of the Iraqi connection relates to the goals being pursued by the terrorists of 3/11.

Before that, however, we should ponder for a minute on some of the coincidences which, though possibly fortuitous, could have symbolic significance. On 9/11 four aircraft were attacked; on 3/11 four trains. Between 9/11 and 3/11 two and a half years elapsed, 912 days to be exact. Given that the English-speaking world refers to the US attacks of 11 September 2001 as '9/11', could it not be that the terrorists wanted the Madrid bombings to be attack number '912', ie, the second strike at the heart of the West? Those who still harbour doubts whether this was an attack of al-Qaeda itself and not that of a home-grown jihadist group point to the absence of suicide bombers and the failure to target symbolic buildings. On the first point, we could argue that the absence of suicides may have been simply because for the type of operation selected there was no need to die. On the matter of the symbolism of the target, a terrorist attack practically on the eve of a general election carries a huge symbolic charge: election time is, if you will excuse the expression, the 'holiest' day on the democratic calendar.

Symbolic or not, a public massacre when people are about to vote has a major practical effect; it generates an emotional state of mind which affects the result. This is not an easy subject to discuss, but it cannot be avoided. All the signs are that terrorists sought to defeat the Popular Party as a means of achieving an early withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq. Let us look now at the signs that this was their aim.

In the first place, it is clear that they very much wanted the attacks to be understood as the work of a *jihadist* movement. This explains why they left a van with detonators, fragments of explosive and a cassette tape of verses of the Koran in Arabic, in a highly visible place near the scene.

Secondly, Bin Laden himself had chosen Spain as a target on account of it having sent troops to Iraq. He said as much in a recorded message broadcast on 18 October by the Al Jazeera news channel, but recorded some weeks earlier. In that message a voice, supposedly that of Bin Laden, threatened all the countries participating in the 'unjust' war, in particular Britain, Spain, Australia, Poland, Japan and Italy.

And, thirdly, we have an interesting document written in Arabic, found in December on the Internet by Norway's FFI (Defence Research Establishment). It is an anonymous text, possibly written by a Moroccan according to the experts, which cannot be regarded as an official al-Qaeda document but which might reveal parts of the strategic thinking of the terrorist organisation and its fellow travellers. The text considers the battle being fought in Iraq to be crucial. It asks the question how foreign troops can be forced to withdraw. Referring to Spain it says: 'it is the leading and strongest European ally after the United

Kingdom,' but adds that the position on the war taken by the Aznar government, 'in no way represents the position of the Spanish people,' given that, 'the vast majority of Spaniards are against the war.' In view of this, the anonymous writer considers that a Spanish withdrawal could be obtained by 'painful strikes against Spanish troops' as the government could not withstand 'more than two or three such strikes, at most'. 'It is necessary,' continues the report, 'to take maximum advantage of the coming general election in Spain.' The writer calculated that if Spanish troops were kept in Iraq despite the casualties, the election would be won by the Socialists. This, in turn, would place tremendous pressure on the British presence, pressure under which Blair might buckle. 'After which the dominoes will fall one by one,' it says; except the first one: the US.

It might be the case that the anonymous author has no connection with al-Qaeda but, equally, it might express the terrorist logic underpinning 3/11, that of using the differences over the war in Iraq between the government of Spain and the majority of Spaniards to drive home a political wedge. The first blow was against seven members of Spain's National Intelligence Centre killed in an ambush in Iraq; the second against the civilian population of Madrid. The impact of 3/11 on the result of the election two days later is hard to ignore. It is true that before 3/11 the opinion polls were saying that the distance between the two parties was narrowing and, also, once the bombs went off, the government handled the crisis badly, but when all is said and done, the turnaround in public opinion between the Wednesday and the Friday can only be explained by a large number of voters reaching a very simple conclusion: we were bombed because of the Spanish presence in Iraq: let's get out of Iraq as soon as possible. In no way does this invalidate the result. Equally, it is very disquieting: for the first time the Jihad has helped topple a parliamentary majority in Europe.

This is not the place to begin a debate over the war in Iraq. The author of these few lines does not share the view that it was an 'illegal war' for the simple reason that he does not believe that, on the truly important issues, international relations are actually governed by law. Regrettably, they are still governed by force, as recently explained in a manner as succinct as it was clear by Tzvetan Todorov in his book (highly critical of the neo-conservative foreign policy of the Bush Administration) *Le nouveau désordre mondial: réflexions d'un Européen*. From a more practical standpoint, that of the effectiveness of the fight against terrorism, it was a very dangerous decision. If democracy prospers in Iraq, and all its religious and ethnic groups prosper with it, it will be a huge step forward in stabilising a crucial part of the world and Jihadism will be seen to have suffered a crippling defeat. However, if the country sinks into the horror of a prolonged conflict among its different communities, as seems to have been the thinking behind the recent bombings against Shiites and Kurds, we will have fuelled a perfect cauldron for terrorism. So, the support of Spanish troops in maintaining law and order in the crucial period of the democratic transition in Iraq is essential for the future of the region and of the world. It is precisely why al-Qaeda wants to force the troops out.

Conclusions: It is hard to avoid the painful recognition that we have made mistakes in the past. What is important now is not to commit more in the future. The past errors seem to have been two:

- (1) Not attributing sufficient importance to the jihadist threat. We Spaniards have spared no expense in the fight against ETA and have been largely successful in reducing ETA's homicidal capacity, thanks in part to help from our neighbours and friends. But we do not seem to appreciate the full extent of the threat to the world of a fanatical global terrorist organisation, intent on killing as many people as possible, embodied in the network centred round al-Qaeda. As of 3/11, the threat posed by al-Qaeda should be the number-one priority of the Spanish security establishment.

(2) Adopting a high profile in the initial military intervention in Iraq, when the majority of Spaniards were against it. That made Spain a significant, but also a very weak, link in the international coalition and thus a prime target for those seeking to break up that coalition. In the future, any Spanish government conscious of the need for this country to play a leading role in an international conflict should first try to convince the public that such is, indeed, the case.

In the future the biggest mistake we can make, either as Spaniards or Europeans, is to think that problems, if ignored, will solve themselves, and that the problem of al-Qaeda is not ours but someone else's.

(1) For Spaniards the mistake would be to think that the problem is José María Aznar's, for having got us into the Iraqi mess in the first place, on bad grounds and with tragic consequences. All we have to do is pull out of Iraq and... end of story. It is not as simple as that. The man who won the election, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, says that he will withdraw the troops unless there is a UN resolution justifying their presence there. This is a perfectly legitimate demand, stated prior to 3/11 and approved by the ballot, so it cannot be criticised as a surrender to al-Qaeda. But if the United Nations decides that the troops must stay in order to maintain law and order in the transition to democracy, Spain must keep its word.

(2) Regardless of whether we withdraw or not from Iraq, the jihadist threat remains. Spain has a significant North African immigrant community whose integration must be attended to if we want to prevent the spread of jihadist tendencies in its midst. Spain also has great interest in maintaining good relations with Morocco and the stability of Morocco is threatened by jihadist terrorism. Spain is a member of the European Union, NATO and the United Nations and, as such, should cooperate with other countries in the fight against a threat which affects us all.

(3) European anti-terrorist cooperation, something that Spain has fought long and hard for, is much more urgent now, post 3/11. This was not an attack against Spain but against Europe. Britain, Italy and Poland have all been threatened on the same grounds as Spain, while France has been threatened for its defence of a lay education.

In short, the significance of 9/11 and 3/11 for all democracies anywhere in the world may be summed up in Horace's pointed words: *de te fabula narratur*.

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