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## **Huge Terror Attacks in Madrid**

Just before Sundays general elections, Madrid has been rocked by ten blasts at three railway stations, amounting to a huge synchronised attack that has already killed almost 200 and injured over a thousand.

Despite the Spanish authorities almost immediately having the confidence to blame the carnage on the Basque separatist group ETA (Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna – Basque Homeland and Freedom), information concerning the attacks is contradictory. Although it is true that the timing, coming just prior to the elections, hints at a domestic actor, in many other ways the bombings poorly match known ETA procedures. Most often ETA has provided due warning prior to bombings. Also, whilst it has targeted civilians (as in the shopping centre bombing in 1987 when 21 civilian were killed), ETA is better known for selective assassinations against members of the Guardia Civil and politicians. To date separatist violence has claimed the lives of 800 people over 35 years and as a result the Madrid attack would represent an unprecedented increase in the lethality of ETA attacks. Last year ETA was responsible for only three fatalities. The leader of the radical Basque separatist party that is closest to ETA has also denied an ETA connection.

Until a tie can be made, or until ETA accepts responsibility, there are therefore several other potential explanations that may be posited. The one theory that has already seen the light of day is that the bombings are the first successful European mass-casualty attack to be executed by an extremist Islamicist group allied to Osama bin Laden. There is much logic to this possible scenario, given that ETA is not famed for mass attacks; that synchronised attacks are more a mark of al Qaeda; and finally, given that the Aznar government has been one of the most vocal and tangible supporters of the Bush White House “war of terror” campaign in Afghanistan and Iraq. The second possibly is that the attacks are the work of a separatist group that has broken with the main body of ETA and the radical Basques. This too is possible, especially if one considers the fact that during recent governmental talks with the separatists, one of the threats made was that a stop to violence would be brought in Catalonia but not in the rest of Spain. This threat coincided with the interdiction two weeks ago of a lorry carrying 500kgs of explosives towards Madrid. At the time, Interior Minister Angel Acebes said that the chloratite and dynamite were to be used in one massive attack.

The positing of a more violent splinter faction of ETA (akin to the Real IRA), would fit with the analysis that has seen general support for ETA wane, with mass public demonstrations in the seven autonomous regions and all over the country questioning the legitimacy of the organisation. (The turning point for the loss of support coming in the late 1990s after the kidnapping and murder of councilman Miguel Angel Blanco. After his death several million protesters took to the streets in anti-ETA marches) The creation of such a faction could be a likely result of disaffected members sensing that



the cause was losing momentum and the conflict should be re-ignited. It should be noted, however, that even Acebes has already stated that the authorities are ruling out no possibilities with regards to who may be responsible for the attack.

### Preliminary Conclusion

Given the fact that al Qaeda has been wise to limit its attacks almost exclusively to USA targets - thus exacerbating tension within classic alliance structures - it would indeed be surprising if the attack were linked directly to bin Laden and his organisation (this does not mean, however, that another extremist Islamicist group could be responsible, one that is not strategically limited by the tactics of al Qaeda). More likely still, is that ETA has realised that it is losing ground fast. International estimates place its active membership at only 200 or so. Subsequently these deadly attacks may be the sign of ultimate weakness and desperation. Whichever turns out to be the case, the event represents a watershed in European terrorism.