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Comments

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William Rose and
Rysia Murphy

Does Terrorism Ever Work? The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings

Max Abrahms

To the Editors:

Max Abrahms's argument that terrorism rarely works is compelling.¹ He is not correct, however, that terrorist groups that primarily attack civilians never achieve their political objectives. The March 2004 Madrid train bombings offer an exception to Abrahms's thesis. The terrorist group that carried out the attack sought to compel Spain to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and especially Iraq. The result was a partial success, because Spain did withdraw its forces from Iraq. This case study, developed below, helps to identify the uncommon conditions under which at least partial terrorist success is possible, and the findings have implications for counterterrorism policy.

Two additional arguments follow from this case. First, Abrahms's concentration on official foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) is too narrow to capture the emerging phenomenon of ad hoc terrorist networks that do not have formal affiliation as a cell of a recognized FTO. Second, his focus on compelling governments to make policy concessions misses an important distinction between the impact of a terrorist attack on a government and on a country's citizens. The Madrid attack never compelled the government led by the Popular Party to change policy on Spanish troops in Iraq. Instead it mobilized voters to elect a new government led by the Socialist Party because, in large part, this party campaigned on the promise to pull Spanish troops from Iraq.²

To be fair, the strengths of Abrahms's analysis outweigh its weaknesses. Contrary to some recent scholarship on terrorism, he convincingly shows that terrorist organizations rarely achieve their political objectives. Although he is not the only scholar to argue that terrorism usually fails, he is the first to analyze systematically a large number of terrorist organizations and campaigns. Further, he clarifies the conditions under which success can occur: when terrorist groups have limited objectives and, more important, when their main targets are military and not civilian. His analysis is theory informed, as he adapts correspondent inference theory to explain his observations. His article also stimulates contemplation, discussion, and new research projects—including our Madrid case study.

Abrahms asserts that terrorism rarely succeeds in achieving its political objectives, especially when a terrorist organization primarily targets civilians. To support his the-

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Max Abrahms is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of California, Los Angeles.

1. Max Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 42–78.

2. For a more extensive treatment of this case study, see http://www.conncoll.edu/academics/web_profiles/rose-murphy_long_IS_letter.pdf.

sis, he sensibly forwards historical examples that demonstrate the argument's plausibility. All twenty-eight FTOs that he examines meet his expectations. He then turns to three case studies that match his predictions perfectly, and he explores them in depth to show how causation unfolded. His research is a shining example of a plausibility probe. We looked in vain for any acknowledgment that his thesis might be wrong at least sometimes, however, or that the degree of certainty of his conclusions is not high. Likewise, we hoped to find a section in which he would encourage scholars to find cases that challenge his thesis. Finding none, in a brainstorming session we thought of a case that does not fit: the Madrid train bombings.

On March 11, 2004, Spain was the site of the most devastating terrorist attack in Europe since World War II. Ten bombs exploded on three commuter trains full of passengers making the morning trip into Madrid. The attack resulted in 191 deaths and 1,500 wounded.³

Suspicion initially fell on the Basque separatist movement ETA, which had been the only active terrorist group in Spain. Evidence soon indicated, however, that an Islamic terrorist organization was responsible for the attack. The reality was that the individuals who helped plan, fund, and carry out the attack constituted an ad hoc jihadist network and not a particular terrorist organization.⁴ A number of these individuals had ties with high-profile members of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, but some were linked to other groups or were unaffiliated. Many were homegrown radicals acting on their own rather than being directed by al-Qaida, the Moroccan Group, or any other organization. Spanish journalists and scholars refer to the ad hoc group that carried out the March 11, 2004, attacks as the 11-M network.

The primary political objective of the perpetrators was to compel Spain to end its military support for the U.S.-led occupations in Afghanistan and especially Iraq.⁵ The terrorists may also have hoped that Spain would be the weakest link in the U.S. coalition in Iraq, whereby its withdrawal would cause other coalition partners to follow.⁶ The document supporting this latter assertion was posted on an Islamist message board four months before the 11-M attack, and it contained a rational analysis of politics in Britain, Poland, and Spain and implications for the jihadist policy agenda. For two reasons, the document's author sensibly concluded that attacks on the Spanish would be most effective: public opposition to the war was greatest in Spain, and Spain was thought to have lower tolerance for casualties than Britain or Poland. Although the analysis focused on harming Spaniards in Iraq rather than in Europe, it set the stage for the 11-M network to predict at least some success.

3. Raj S.Chari, "The 2004 Spanish Election: Terrorism as a Catalyst for Change?" *West European Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (November 2004), p. 954.

4. Javier Jordán and Nicola Horsburgh, "Spain and Islamism: Analysis of the Threat and Response 1995–2005," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (July 2006), pp. 209–229; and Gordon Corera, "The Legacy of the Madrid Bombings," *BBC News*, February 14, 2007.

5. Javier Jordán and Robert Wesley, "The Madrid Attacks: Results of Investigations Two Years Later," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (March 9, 2006), pp. 1–4.

6. See Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihad Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (September–October 2004), pp. 368–371.

Translating the terrorists' desire to compel Spanish troop withdrawal into terms consistent with Abrahms's analysis, it was a "limited objective" associated with demands over territory.⁷ Spain complied partially when it pulled its troops out of Iraq. This response does not follow two key predictions of Abrahms's theory. First, with civilians as the primary target, the public is expected to interpret the attack in maximalist terms. This predicted consequence did not occur. A day after the attack, newspapers throughout Spain conveyed that many people viewed the attack as a result of Spain's involvement in Iraq war.⁸ One Elcano poll found that 49 percent of Spaniards believed that troop withdrawal would make Islamist attacks less likely. This finding supports the assertion that a significant segment of the Spanish public correctly saw the limited objectives of the terrorist group.⁹ Second, Abrahms's theory predicts that countries whose citizens are targeted will not make policy concessions. Again it is wrong. In national elections three days after the attack, voters defied earlier polls and voted out the government (led by the People's Party) that supported Spain's intervention in Iraq. The surprise winner was the Socialist Party, which during the campaign had called for removing Spanish troops from Iraq. The troops were withdrawn several months later.

Earlier in March the incumbent Popular Party led the polls by 5 percent, and commentators agree that it would have won the election had it not been for the terrorist attack. The opposition Socialist Party, headed by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, won 42.64 percent of the votes compared with 37.64 percent for the Popular Party. With 164 out of 350 seats in the Congress of Deputies, the Socialists were in a position to form a minority government.¹⁰ During the campaign Zapatero had promised to remove Spanish troops from Iraq by June 30, 2004. Twenty-eight percent of voters said that the bombings had influenced their vote; and when Spanish troops were withdrawn a month earlier than expected, a strong majority supported the move.¹¹ A methodical analysis concludes that the Madrid attack and the political atmosphere surrounding it affected election results by mobilizing about 1,700,000 voters who had not planned to vote and by discouraging approximately 300,000 voters from voting—leading to a net 4 percent increase in voter turnout. In addition, more than 1 million voters switched their vote to the Socialist Party.¹²

Scholars highlight three factors to explain the surprise election outcome, although

7. Abrahms writes, "A terrorist group is said to have limited objectives when its demands are over territory. Specifically, the group is fighting to either (1) evict a foreign military from occupying another country, or (2) win control over a piece of territory for the purpose of national self-determination." Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," p. 53.

8. Quotations from two newspapers can be found in Jose A. Olmeda, "Fear or Falsehood? Framing the 3/11 Terrorist Attacks in Madrid and Electoral Accountability," Defense and Security Working Paper, No. 24 (Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, May 5, 2005), p. 25.

9. Charles Powell, "Did Terrorism Sway Spain's Election?" *Current History*, November 2004, p. 380.

10. Chari, "The 2004 Spanish Election," pp. 957–958.

11. Powell, "Did Terrorism Sway Spain's Election?" pp. 379, 381.

12. Narciso Michavila, "War, Terror and Elections: Electoral Impact of the Islamist Terror Attacks on Madrid," Public Opinion Working Paper, No. 13 (Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano April 6, 2005), p. 31.

they may disagree on their relative importance. First, the Popular Party continued to blame ETA even after the leadership learned that an Islamic group was responsible for the attack. Admitting that Islamists were to blame would have exposed Prime Minister José María Aznar to the charge that his foreign policy contributed to the terrorist attack. Segments of the Spanish population sought to punish his party for the apparent deception. This factor is linked to a highly partisan “framing contest” between the government and the opposition, whereby the opposition presented the situation to the public more effectively than did the government.¹³ Second, a significant part of the public mistrusted the Popular Party even before the Madrid attack. In reaction to several negative events since the party assumed an absolute majority in 2000, many Spaniards had begun to sense that the party was complacent and arrogant and that its decisionmaking process lacked transparency.¹⁴ Third, when the terrorists effectively signaled devastating punishment for Spain’s involvement in Iraq, the public’s antiwar views became more pressing. Previously, many had opposed the war but supported Aznar. Following the 11-M attack, however, a significant segment was no longer willing to support the Popular Party and its war policy.

The confluence of conditions present in the Madrid case is probably quite rare and possibly unique. There may be additional, less obvious factors, and perhaps sometimes they carry more causal weight than these three. Although the generalizability of our findings is low, the case does show that Abrahms’s theory is not always right. Further research is needed to learn more about the reliability of his findings. We encourage scholars to conduct studies with a larger collection of cases as well as to seek out cases that may be exceptions to the rule. If more exceptions can be found, scholarly understanding of variations in outcomes can widen and deepen.

If successful terrorist attacks against civilians are indeed rare like we expect, then the impact of our findings on Abrahms’s four policy implications would not be extensive. Our findings, however, suggest additional policy implications. They derive from the above-mentioned observation that the 11-M terrorist network probably targeted Spain because it was the weakest link among European members of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. To the extent that such an analysis influenced the terrorists, therefore, several implications follow. First, more such attacks are likely in the future, because even partial success breeds support for them. Thus at least some terrorist groups will concentrate on targets where success is believed possible. Second, several relevant elements for countering terrorism are prescribed. One is that scholars and analysts worried about terrorism should conduct parallel analyses that could provide early warning signals for countries at higher risk for terrorist attacks. Because the terrorists are somewhat more

13. Olmeda, “Fear or Falsehood?” pp. 3–4. Narciso Michavila calls this circumstance the “dual news manipulation hypothesis.” Michavila, “War, Terrorism, and Elections,” pp. 20–22. Javier Jordán and Nicola Horsburgh are concerned about the partisan politics that this factor revealed, whereby the two parties were “playing politics with terrorism.” Jordán and Horsburgh, “Politics and Terrorism: The Madrid Attacks Case,” in George Kassimeris, ed., *Playing Politics with Terrorism: A User’s Guide* (London: Hurst, 2007), p. 2.

14. For an elaboration of these negative events, see Chari, “The Spanish 2004 Election,” pp. 954–955.

likely to succeed in such countries, another recommendation is to give higher priority to preventing or foiling attacks. If an attack occurs, it should be handled with less partisanship over framing the issue than occurred after the 11-M attack. Finally, because distrust of the government led by the Popular Party contributed to the terrorists' success, governments have an interest in building and maintaining the trust of their publics.

—William Rose

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—Rysia Murphy

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The Author Replies:

I appreciate William Rose and Rysia Murphy's thoughtful comments on my recent article in *International Security*.¹ We agree on two main points: (1) terrorist groups that primarily target civilians fail to coerce their governments into making policy concessions; and (2) future research is needed to determine if there are any exceptions to the rule. Rose and Murphy focus on the second point and purport to identify an important outlier that "does not fit" the rule: the March 2004 Madrid train bombings.

The authors claim that the Madrid case undermines my article in two ways. First, they believe the attack shows that democracies are uniquely vulnerable to coercion because terrorists can sometimes influence policies by scaring the electorate into ousting the incumbent leader. Specifically, they argue that the Madrid attack represents a successful case of coercion because it bombed to power the antiwar candidate for prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who kept his campaign pledge to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. Second, the authors assert that the Madrid case does not conform to correspondent inference theory because the Spanish public interpreted the bombings as evidence of 11-M's intent to end the occupation, rather than to destroy the Spanish way of life, making coercion possible. The first claim is weaker than the second: the Madrid case is an empirically problematic example of terrorist coercion, but it helps to delimit the antecedent conditions in which terrorist attacks on civilians might theoretically be effective.

The Madrid case is an empirically problematic example of terrorist coercion for three reasons. First, the argument that the 11-M attack coerced Spain into withdrawing from Iraq is questionable, because Zapatero might have won the election and then altered Spanish policy even in the absence of the attack. The "surprise" defeat of Prime Minister José María Aznar was actually not that surprising. In the days preceding the attack, Aznar held a narrow lead in most surveys, but the differences between the candidates' voter estimates usually fell within the margin of error.² Indeed, by early March the gap

1. Max Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 42–78.

2. Ignacio Lago and José Ramón Montero, "The 2004 Election in Spain: Terrorism, Accountability, and Voting," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (July 2006), p. 17.

between the two candidates had closed: some surveys put Aznar ahead by a single point, while others had Zapatero winning by a razor-thin margin. In their study on the 2004 Spanish election, Ignacio Lago and José Ramón Montero state, "It must be remembered that if the attacks had not taken place, either the PP [Aznar's Popular Party] or the PSOE [Zapatero's Socialist Party] could have won the election: only days before 11-M, the polls pointed to a 'technical tie.'"³ Furthermore, in the lead-up to the attack, the majority of Spaniards believed the country needed a "change of government"; a large percentage of the electorate was undecided; and in Spain undecided voters tend to vote for left-wing candidates such as Zapatero.⁴ Postelection returns confirm that Aznar did not lose any electoral support after the attack; as expected, the undecided voters gravitated toward the left-leaning candidates.⁵ The extent of electoral change or interelectoral volatility was not atypical for Spanish national elections.⁶ The claim that the 11-M attack successfully coerced Spain into withdrawing from Iraq is based on the counterfactual argument that without the attack, Zapatero would have lost the election, which is uncertain from the polling data.

Second, Rose and Murphy imply that undecided voters gravitated toward Zapatero after the attack because it revealed the escalating costs of maintaining troops in Iraq, but Aznar compromised his electoral viability primarily by blaming the bombings on ETA. In testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Philip Gordon stated, "The [Aznar] government appears to have paid more of a price for misleading the public than for its policy on Iraq."⁷ In her study on the 2004 election, Georgina Blakeley found that "the point, therefore, is not that the bombings affected the general election, but rather, that the government's handling of the bombings had such profound consequences."⁸ The BBC likewise reported, "It is sometimes wrongly claimed that the bombings themselves led directly to the defeat of the Conservative government and its replacement just days later by the Socialists. In fact, it was the perception that the government was misleading the public about who was responsible that did [the] most damage."⁹ Other foreign outlets, including Spanish television networks and the French newspaper *Le Monde*, reached the same conclusion.¹⁰ In sum, the dominant in-

3. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

4. Georgina Blakeley, "It's Politics, Stupid! The Spanish General Election of 2004," *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (March 2006), p. 339.

5. See Enric Ordeix i Rigo, "Aznar's Political Failure or Punishment for Supporting the Iraq War? Hypotheses About the Causes of the 2004 Spanish Election Results," *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (December 2005), p. 613.

6. Ingrid van Biezen, "Terrorism and Democratic Legitimacy: Conflicting Interpretations of the Spanish Elections," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March 2005), p. 107.

7. Philip H. Gordon, "Madrid Bombings and U.S. Policy," testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 108th Cong., 2d sess., March 31, 2004, p. 2, <http://www.senate.gov/?foreign/testimony/2004/GordonTestimony040331.pdf>.

8. "The Legacy of the Madrid Bombings," *BBC News*, February 15, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6357599.stm>.

9. Blakeley, "It's Politics, Stupid!" p. 342.

10. See Ray Suarez, José Gijón, and Salvador Sala, "Terrorism and Politics in Spain," *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, March 16, 2004; and "L'Espagne Sanctionne le Mensonge d'Etat" [Spain punishes the government's lie], *Le Monde*, March 16, 2004, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/jan-june04/spain_03-16.html.

terpretation is that Zapatero's postattack election gains were due mostly to Aznar's mismanagement of the attack—not the Iraqi occupation that elicited it—undermining the claim that the attack itself bombed Zapatero into power and effectively coerced the Spanish withdrawal.

Third, it is doubtful that enlarging my sample of terrorist organizations or including ad hoc groups affiliated with al-Qaida would lend support to the claim that democracies are uniquely vulnerable to terrorist coercion. I agree with Rose and Murphy that “the Madrid case is probably quite rare and possibly unique” because terrorism historically shifts the electorate to the right—not the left—thereby empowering hard-liners who oppose accommodating the perpetrators.¹¹ The most obvious example is in Israel, but the trend is also evident in the United States, where the mere release of Osama bin Laden's videotape the weekend before the 2004 presidential election boosted George W. Bush's electoral lead by two percentage points over his comparatively dovish opponent, John Kerry.¹²

Rose and Murphy's stronger claim is that the Madrid case does not conform to correspondent inference theory. They point out that the train bombings targeted Spanish civilians, and yet the public did not revise its perception that al-Qaida and its affiliates aimed to achieve the limited policy goal of ending the occupation of Iraq. The Madrid case suggests that when a target country has strong preexisting beliefs that the terrorists are motivated by limited policy objectives, it will not always infer from attacks on its civilians that the terrorists are driven by ideological or maximalist objectives.

Before the September 11 attacks, most Americans had little knowledge of al-Qaida. They therefore inferred from the consequences of the terrorist acts that the perpetrators aimed to harm American society and its values. Similarly, until the September 1999 apartment bombings, the Russian public knew little about the Chechnya campaign and therefore inferred from them that the Chechens had maximalist objectives. By contrast, Spanish opinion of al-Qaida's limited policy objectives was broadly and intensely established prior to the train bombings. Before the attack, 90 percent of the public disagreed with Aznar's position that participating in the Iraq war made Spain safer from terrorism, an entrenched disconnect highlighted by two of the largest antiwar protests in history.¹³ Whereas news of the Chechnya occupation was withheld from the Russian public until it was targeted in September 1999, Spanish combat deaths in Iraq in August, October, and November 2003 were front-page news, reinforcing the perception that the terrorists aimed to end the occupation rather than Spain's way of life.¹⁴

The Madrid example suggests that, in theory, terrorist attacks on civilians may potentially lead to policy concessions if the target country has extremely firm preexisting beliefs that the enemy is motivated by limited policy objectives. When this is the case,

11. See Christopher Hewitt, *Consequences of Political Violence* (Sudbury, Mass.: Dartmouth, 1993), pp. 80, 97–98.

12. Claude Berrebi and Esteban F. Klor, “On Terrorism and Electoral Outcomes: Theory and Evidence from the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 50, No. 6 (January 2006), pp. 899–925. See also David Paul Kuhn, “Who Will ‘Osama Surprise’ Help?” *CBSNews.com*, October 30, 2004, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/30/politics/main652438.shtml>.

13. Mar Roman, “Spain Won't Bow to Calls to Pull Troops,” *Associated Press*, December 1, 2003.

14. *Ibid.*

attacks—regardless of target selection—will communicate the escalating costs of defying the terrorists' limited policy goals, making coercion possible. Future research is still needed, however, to identify a case of coercion where these antecedent conditions are present. Such a case would demonstrate not only that the attack(s) on civilians stoked the public's preexisting fears of defying the terrorists' limited policy objectives, but that these fears actually changed the country's policy. Rose and Murphy's case study on the 11-M attack provides convincing evidence of the former, but not the latter. It is a basic truism that insurgency works, but terrorism does not.

—*Max Abrahms*
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