Islamist terrorist rings in Spain. Current situation and future outlook

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Subject: In the past few years the presence of Islamist terrorist rings has been detected in Europe and in Spain. In the future these rings could become a direct threat to the security of Spain’s population.

Summary: We analyse the rise of Islamist terrorist rings, specifically those of Al-Qa’ida, in Spain. To date this country has been used merely as a rearguard area but in the future it could become a direct terrorist target. We examine the reasons for such a change of strategy and propose means to prevent terrorism on Spanish soil.

Analysis: Theoretically, Spain is a target of the global jihad being waged by Al-Qa’ida. In terrorist eyes Spain is one of those enlisted in the world conspiracy of ‘crusaders and Jews’ to wipe out Islam. It has been an ally of the US for several decades and its cooperation with Washington in the international fight against terrorism increased noticeably following the attacks of September 11. According to the declaration of war signed by Bin Laden in 1998, ‘the mission of killing Americans and their allies –both civilians and military personnel– is the personal duty of every Moslem in whatever country occasion provides’. So, for those who regard themselves as engaged in the worldwide jihad being fought by Al-Qa’ida, killing Spaniards could become one of their future missions. In fact, three Spaniards died in May 2003 when a group of suicide bombers linked to the terrorist ring blew themselves up in the Casa de España in Casablanca, Morocco.

Spain has, for decades, suffered the terrorist activities of ETA. But in the last few years the decline in the number of attacks by this terrorist gang has been met by sporadic news of the arrest of members of Al-Qa’ida or other Islamist terrorist groups. For most people these were purely incidental occurrences, given front-page treatment as a result of the events of September 11. To date such arrests have not generated great public concern, although this would quickly occur if Spain were to become a scene of attacks by such groups. What activities have the terrorists been engaged in so far? What factors could induce them to carry out terrorist attacks on Spanish soil?

The advent of Islamist terrorism in Spain and Europe
To be precise, Islamist terrorist activity in Spain dates back to 1985 when a bomb explosion in a restaurant near the US base at Torrejón, just outside Madrid, killed 18 people and injured a further 100. That made it the second worst terrorist attack in terms of loss of human life after the ETA massacre in the Barcelona hypermarket Hipercor in 1987. Responsibility was claimed by the Jihad group, but no arrests were made and little is known about the attack. The name carries no specific link to the Egyptian and Palestinian groups having the same denomination, referring generically to a holy war. But the target

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of the bomb, US personnel, and the timing, suggest that some regime opposed to the United States was responsible.

However, the establishment of Islamist terrorist groups and rings in Spain is more recent than this. The first arrests took place in 1997, indicating that terrorists began to take up residence in the country at the beginning of the 1990s. Those were the years when violence broke out in Algeria, as a result of which the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) transferred part of their infrastructure to the European rearguard. The leaders of these rings did not remain passive in their new locations. From countries such as Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain they issued propaganda designed to undermine the legitimacy of the Algerian military regime in the eyes of European governments but, particularly, in those of North Africans living and working in Europe. They also made contact with other Islamist groups in Europe composed of exiles persecuted in their own countries, thereby strengthening the rings of radicals and jihadists already present in Europe. Propaganda activities were accompanied by others relating directly to fund raising, recruitment of volunteers, procurement of arms, forging of documents and rearguard convalescence stations for front-line combatants.

The activities of the Algerian rings were not limited to the conflict back in Algeria. Terrorism always carries an international dimension; in this case it was accentuated by the extremists’ contacts with the global jihad waged by Al-Qaeda. Both the GIA and the Islamic Army of Salvation (the armed wing of the FIS) had veterans of the Afghan war among their members. From the outset Osama Bin Laden maintained close contact with the GIA; later on, some of its members underwent training in the camps that Al-Qaeda shared with the Sudanese Islamic regime. That relationship broke up in 1997 when the GIA adopted a brutal approach (killing hundreds of civilians in cold blood) that distanced it from the international jihadist rings. Thereafter Bin Laden put his money on a new faction called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which has worked closely with the Al-Qaeda world network since then and now poses an even more serious threat to the Algerian regime than the rapidly disintegrating Armed Islamic Group.

The mutations that the Algerian jihadist movement exiled in Europe underwent in the 1990s was accompanied by the establishment of new Al-Qaeda cells in the West. This was a qualitative advance for the movement. Prior to this the Algerian rings and those of other nationals pursued in their native countries (Tunisians, Egyptians, Saudis, Jordanians, Moroccans, etc.) used the European continent primarily as a place of refuge and, later, as a rearguard for front-line combatants working actively against the apostate regimes in power back home. In order not to endanger the strategic depth provided by their European exile, the jihadists and radical Islamic groups tried to keep a low profile and, above all, refrain from damaging the interests of their host countries. The one exception was France where, in the two-year period 1995-96, the GIA carried out a series of terrorist attacks in an effort to end the aid supplied to the Algerian regime by Paris. The result was eight dead and 140 injured. According to the French authorities, the initial attacks were carried out by professional terrorists, but subsequent ones by amateurs (self-motivated or unsophisticated imitators from within the Algerian community in France). Except for these isolated incidents, possibly due to the particularly aggressive and notoriety-seeking approach of Yamel Zituni (the emir of the GIA at this time), most groups opted for a policy of discretion and safety.

However, the establishment of Al-Qaeda cells was a new development. It meant that the global jihad was now targeting western countries directly. The serpent’s head was the US, but Al-Qaeda did not exclude America’s European allies. In these circumstances, the appearance of Al-Qaeda cells responded to a different strategy from that employed by the other radical groups. The rings were the first tentative steps in a general offensive deployment. The pattern of activities was broadly in line with those of the other groups – propaganda, recruitment, fund-raising and other rearguard support activities – but in this
case in preparation for an attack that would take up the West on its own ground. To establish themselves in Europe and North America, Al-Qa'ida used the pre-existing rings of jihadists and other radical Islamic groups, including the GSPC, Tafkir and the Egyptian movements Yihad and al-Yama'a al-Islamiyya. The Al-Qa'ida cells aided each other and took advantage of the freedom of movement in Europe facilitated by the Schengen agreement. They also kept in contact with fellow terrorists residing on the other side of the Atlantic, in the US and Canada. At the same time, the growing presence of Al-Qa'ida cells on European soil motivated other radical groups, whose members had become increasingly aware of the difficulty of achieving victory back home, to gradually throw in their lot with the global jihad. That such co-option was successful is evidenced by the number of North Africans (Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians) discovered in the European Al-Qaida cells. Their organisations contributed to the Al-Qa'ida cause not only in Europe but in other parts of the world. Using their own infrastructures they recruited young radicals to send them to training camps in Afghanistan and raised funds to finance the mujahidins in conflicts such as Chechnya.

After devoting the second half of the 1990s to preparing the ground, Al-Qa'ida decided to strike the ‘crusaders’ on their home ground. At the end of the decade they sent to Europe at least two new Al-Qa'ida cells, trained in Afghanistan, with the clear intention of attacking symbolic European targets. One of them was the self-styled ‘Meliani Commando’, based mainly in Frankfurt, and the other an Italian cell led by the Tunisian national Essid Sami Ben Khemais. The latter cell was composed mainly of North Africans; it was entrusted with, among other duties, logistics. Some time later many of those who were later to become the suicide pilots of September 11 enrolled in US flying schools. However, most of the members of both cells were arrested before they could launch their attacks. In December 1999 the Algerian Ahmed Ressam was caught trying to smuggle a bomb into the United States from Canada with the intention of detonating it in Los Angeles airport. Ressam was a member of a cell trained in Afghanistan, which was subsequently sent to Montreal. A year later the members of the Meliani Commando were arrested in Germany, when they were preparing a string of attacks in Strasbourg and London. A few months later the leader of the Al-Qa'ida cell was arrested in Italy, thus aborting the planned attack on the US embassy in Rome. Yet, despite these setbacks, Al-Qa'ida succeeded in keeping under wraps and finally carrying out its most ambitious project, the hijacking of passenger planes to be used as suicide bombs in Washington and New York. After September 11 the Al-Qa'ida ring in Europe planned new actions, but failed to carry any of them out. The targets were US diplomatic buildings in Rome and Paris, an American Airlines flight leaving from Paris, which was to be destroyed in mid-air by Richard Reid, the ‘shoe bomber’. This series of failures was accompanied by a wave of arrests across the continent which resulted in over two hundred terrorists and sympathisers being placed behind bars. Many of them had already been under police surveillance but no action had been taken as they posed no immediate threat and, with time, so it was hoped, would provide more in-depth intelligence on the extent and depth of the jihadist network. The September 11 attacks brought matters to a head. The Al-Qa'ida infrastructure in Europe suffered a serious blow, from which it has probably not yet recovered.

In broad outline, the growth of Islamist terrorism in Europe as a whole is applicable to Spain, too. The jihadists used the increasing presence of Islamic communities in Spain to hide from and evade the persecution they were subjected to in their own countries. But they quickly took advantage of their place of refuge to undertake propaganda and support activities in the fight against what they regarded as apostate governments in Moslem countries. Subsequently Al-Qa’ida cells established themselves in Spain with plans to carry out attacks against the West. The cells cooperated with others in preparing attacks against European and US targets on Spanish soil. Theirs was a logistic role, providing support to the ‘combat’ cells.
The number of arrests carried out in Spain reflects the developments just described. The presence in Spain of Islamist terrorists was suspected as far back as 1994. At that time the security forces of France, Germany, Algeria and Tunisia began to warn their Spanish colleagues that Spain was being used as an entry point and sanctuary by terrorists. The first cell to be broken up in Spain took place in 1997, when the police arrested 15 Algerians in Valencia and Barcelona connected with the GIA (eleven of them were serving members and four others fellow travellers). Their duties were those typical of support groups, petty crime to finance themselves and acquire arms and equipment of dual use (binoculars, communications equipment, night-visors, etc) to send to Algeria.

There followed further arrests. Among them was that of Mohammed Benshakria, head of the ‘Meliani Commando’ who had taken refuge in Alicante following the arrest of most of his group in Germany. Benshakria moved around under the guise of a destitute immigrant and was arrested in June 2001. The subsequent arrests formed part of ‘Operation Date’, carried out under the orders of investigating magistrate Baltasar Garzón in the same year. The investigation is still open. Arrests took place in Madrid, Navarre, Gerona, Barcelona, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, La Rioja and Granada. They succeeded in breaking up a number of cells sponsored by Al-Qa’ida and the Salafist Group of Preaching and Combat. In practice it is difficult to draw a line between these two groups as the GSPC works closely in harness with the network led by Osama Bin Laden.

In all cases the cells were involved in the activities outlined above: propaganda, recruitment, sending off successful candidates to training camps, obtaining funds and transferring them to cells in other countries, forging documents, buying dual-use equipment, etc. They also provided sanctuary for mujahidins who had fought in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Bosnia. Many of these recovered from their injuries in rented farmhouses financed by the Al-Qa’ida network in Spain. In most cases their activities were low level. The number of recruits sent to the training camps in Afghanistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, or to the conflict in Bosnia, was very low and the amount of money sent abroad was, in the main, modest. But on other occasions the Spanish cells played a significant role. For instance, Mohammed Galeb Kalaje Ziaidi and Ghasoub Al Abrash Al Ghalyoun, alias ‘Ghusup’, were arrested in April 2002 accused of belonging to the financial arm of Al-Qa’ida and of having transferred a total of 700,000 euros to other cells outside Spain. The money was used, among other purposes, to finance those who recruited and trained Mohammed Atta. At the same time, some members of the cells established in Spain acted as key liaison officers. The person who headed the Spanish set-up, Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas (alias ‘Abu Dahdah’), coordinated on his travels with the heads of the training camps in Afghanistan and Indonesia, with the spiritual leader Abu Qatada in London and with other jihad followers in Belgium, Denmark, Jordan, Turkey, Australia and Yemen. In addition, he held telephone conversations with Al-Qa’ida members in the Middle East and even had several meetings with Bin Laden himself. Taysir Aluny, the former correspondent in Spain for the Al-Yazira network, was also in contact with members of the network in Europe, the Middle East and Afghanistan.

It is well known that Spain was used in the preparation of the September 11 attacks. Four of the terrorists who either planned or participated directly in the operation, among them Mohammed Atta, travelled to Spain in July 2001. There is no evidence that they contacted members of the Spanish cells during their stay here; in fact, this was relatively unlikely, because by then Abu Dahdar was aware that he was under police surveillance. Spain was simply a place they could all get to but, as was admitted by one of those who took part in the meeting, Ramzi Binalshib (arrested in Pakistan in September 2000), that meeting was to finalise the details of Al-Qa’ida most spectacular and bloodthirsty attack to date.

*Future outlook and possible remedies*
In the two years in which the international fight against the terrorism of Al-Qa'ida has been waged, the group has attacked on most occasions ‘soft’ targets such as hotels, commercial premises or mosques, mostly in Moslem countries (Tunisia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Morocco, etc). This strategy is probably due to operational difficulties which prevent the group from attacking the West on its own soil. But the relative ease with which the group can act in countries were it is easier to hide and obtain local support, also carries a significant social and political cost. Nobody likes having terrorists on their doorstep and the continuation of the present campaign could become counterproductive for the terrorists. The experience of Islamist terrorists who have waged their campaigns in countries with Moslem majorities is negative seen in the long term. Society ends up by rejecting them (as do many of the not entirely moderate Islamic movements) and the State security forces end by overcoming them in the field. Thus, the popular enthusiasm obtained by Bin Laden after the attacks of 11 September among a numerous Moslem minority could wane significantly if Al-Qa'ida terrorism damages the interests of Moslem communities.

The likelihood is that terrorist leaders appreciate the political cost of their current campaign and try once again to strike in the heart of the West. Such a strategic change could be combined with the harassing tactics employed against US troops and those of its allies in Iraq. This is already happening on a broad scale and could cause serious problems for the forces deployed there. But the option of returning to terrorist action in Europe or North America is too tempting for Al-Qa'ida to give up the idea definitively. There is no reason to think of a repetition of a tragedy on such a scale as September 11. An attack of the size of that in Bali in 2002 (200 killed in two simultaneous attacks) would be sufficient in terms of human lives and political backlash.

Given its transcendental purpose, the terrorism of Al Qa'ida operates on a different timescale from that of its western antagonists. The infiltration of new cells and support groups in Europe and the United States could be undertaken on a horizon of many years. This circumstance allows, and counsels, the design of a long-term anti-terrorist strategy. Below we provide a number of pointers which may be of interest in developing such a strategy, specifically for Spain.

1. Assume that terrorists can carry out attacks in Spain and that the consequences could be extremely serious. Spain is not a sanctuary for terrorists as they well know. If to date no such attack has occurred it is because so far the terrorists have not targeted Spain, but the situation could change at any time. The fight against this kind of terrorism takes second place in Spain to the campaign against ETA terrorism. In the mid-1990s, obtaining intelligence on Islamist terrorism in Spain was seen as a useful means of exchange with which to encourage French anti-terrorist cooperation. Since September 11 the chief motive is Spain's own security and, above all, to demonstrate to the United States the firmness of the Spanish-US alliance. The successes obtained so far are undeniable, but Spain should not rest on its laurels. The departments responsible for the fight against terrorism should be given the necessary support in terms of human and material resources. The level of international cooperation, essential in the fight against terrorism of this nature, should also be maintained.

2. Involve the Islamic communities in Spain in the prevention and containment of Islamist terrorism. Islam is already the second most widely followed religion in Spain. The Islamic community is not as numerous as in other European countries but it has grown considerably in recent years and the prospects are that growth will continue. The rings of illegal immigrants encourage new flows, facilitating the arrival of immigrants of the same nationalities, and geographic proximity is another potent attraction. Experience shows us that terrorists have acted parasitically with respect to Islamic communities in the West, using their numbers to escape
undetected, their meeting places to spread unsolicited propaganda and recruit followers. In the case of the radical, though non-violent, Islamic groups, the terrorists have used their political platforms to justify the jihad. Where they succeed in infiltrating charitable associations, they divert the offerings of well-intentioned contributors to illegal activities. The Islamic communities themselves are not a security problem unless they are infiltrated by terrorists, who can use their prestige to further their illegal ends. It is thus crucially important for the leaders and member of such communities to keep their eyes and ears open and to cooperate willingly in the fight against Islamist terrorism. Moslems should be among those most interested in preventing a minority using the name of their religion to murder innocent victims. And the communities in Europe as a whole and in Spain in particular have a special interest; otherwise they could be seen unjustifiably as a threat. The attacks on Moslems in the United States shortly after September 11 did not receive much coverage on this side of the Atlantic, but they were very numerous. If an attack were to occur in Spain with a significant number of deaths, the general attitude towards Moslems, or people from Arab countries, could be seriously affected by panic reporting.

(3) **Encourage the integration of immigrants from Moslem countries.** Many of the followers recruited by the radical groups in Europe were second- or third-generation immigrants, inadequately integrated by their host countries. The economic and social integration of the immigrants now arriving and, even more important, of their children, is the most effective method of avoiding the adoption of radical attitudes. Without economic integration, ie, decent jobs and living conditions, this will be very difficult to achieve. But economic integration requires the right framework. Spain has opted for a multicultural integration that respects the cultures of those who come into the country but insists that they accept the law of the land, as Spaniards themselves must. In principle it is an approach that favours tolerance and mutual respect. The challenge will be in implementing this approach successfully and avoiding outside interference by, for example, religious leaders from overseas adopting a pro-segregationist line. The success or failure of integration, particularly for marginal and minority groups, could well be the key to prevent Islamist terrorism, now an alien phenomenon, from becoming a domestic problem.

**Conclusion:** To date Spanish soil has not been the direct target of Islamist terrorism. This could change in the future, given that the terrorists know that Spain is not a sanctuary for their activities and is also regarded as an enemy in the view of the jihadists. The way to avoid this threat becoming a reality is to continue preventing the establishment of terrorist cells on Spanish soil, maintain international cooperation to the same end, involve Spanish Moslems or residents in preventing such terrorism and integrate in Spanish society the Moslems who reach the country’s shores.

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