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Monitoring the Jihad in Spain

By [Aaron Hanscom](#)

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With the three year anniversary of March 11, 2004 just around the corner, the trial of 29 individuals charged in connection with the Madrid train bombings that killed 191 people began in Madrid on February 15. The trial is being held in the Audiencia Nacional -- the highest criminal court where Islamic cases are investigated. The Audiencia Nacional, it should be remembered, was the target of one of many [disrupted plots](#) by Islamist terrorists since March 11. Indeed, Spain continues to be in the crosshairs of jihadists intent on reconquering all of historic Al-Andalus.

In contrast with some of the Madrid defendants who are [refusing](#) to answer questions about their roles in the attacks, Professor Javier Jordán of the University of Granada speaks with great clarity about the terrorist threat facing his country. The proprietor of the website [Jihad Monitor](#) and one of Spain's foremost experts on Islamic terrorism answered some questions for me last week, only a few days after the start of Spain's trial of the century.

Q: You have [written](#) that the backgrounds of many members of the jihadist network responsible for the Madrid bombings reveal "that the process of radicalization is not so much dependent on social exclusion as it is on effective propaganda, creation of radical countercultures, and recruitment based on established social networks." Can you elaborate?

A: The analysis of personal profiles of more than 300 jihadists arrested in Spain shows that there is a significant proportion that belong to the middle-class, have family, are fluent in Spanish and have even obtained Spanish citizenship. For example, in the Abu Dahdah network, an Al Qaeda cell dismantled at the end of 2001, half of the members would be classified as "socioeconomically integrated."

Social exclusion, imprisonment or arriving to Spain without family and work are factors that can make an individual even more vulnerable to the recruitment process. Under these circumstances, the jihadist group offers friendship, camaraderie and material support, while inculcating the subject with radical ideas. Nevertheless, the process can occur without any material favors being offered. To explain it in simpler terms, the key ingredient is the "bad company" one keeps. In most cases, jihadist values are spread through confidential ties and friendships.

The personal contact can be established in different ways. Sometimes it is through family ties or old friendships, but the contact can frequently be traced back to established "social networks": social networks surrounding a specific mosque, religious movements like the Jaima'a al-Tabligh, and through discussion in halal butcher shops, parlors, gyms, tea stores, and other leisure places.

After the contact has been established and confidence is gained, the recruiters usually invite the potential recruits to private meetings in apartments or back rooms of stores, where they watch jihadist videos, listen to recorded sermons or comment on the writings of radical authors.

These private meetings have a crucial function in the indoctrination process and are continued even after the candidate has joined the group. In this way, the "jihadist counterculture" is kept alive. Internet propaganda also plays a very important role: it allows smaller cells not to feel like isolated groups. Thanks to internet forums, the downloading of videos and the availability of news about the details of attacks, the jihadists see themselves as members of a greater community of mujahadeen, whether they are in London, Peshawar or Tangier.

Q: There seems to be little doubt that the jihadists were inspired by Al Qaeda, but did the actual order to commit the Madrid bombings come from

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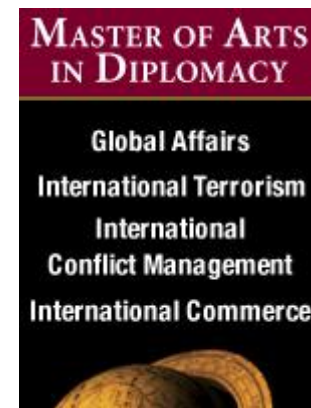
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Osama bin Laden's organization?

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A: That's a question that still hasn't been answered definitively. It's not known from what level the idea for the attacks arose. At first it was thought that the brains behind them were the leaders of the Madrid group themselves, originally inspired by Al Qaeda propaganda (hundreds of jihadist documents download from the internet were found on their computers). However, subsequent police investigations have discovered ties between the Madrid terrorists and members of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group in Belgium. This connection is strongest with defendant Yousef Belhadj. In conclusion, the direct connection with Al Qaeda is not clear.

Q: March 11 focused the world's attention on the threat of homegrown terrorism. You have written a paper ("[The Threat of Grassroots Jihad Networks: A Case Study from Ceuta, Spain](#)") showing that this danger is still very real. What is happening in Ceuta?

A: The situation in Ceuta has returned to some normalcy following the police operation in December 2006 that dismantled a terrorist cell made up of at least 11 individuals. It appears that the group was in a mature phase, ready to prepare attacks in the city. Fortunately, the plan was neutralized in time.

Nevertheless, there remains a troubling issue: the possible admission of jihadists into the Spanish army. Individuals of Muslim origin make up approximately 30 % of the Spanish forces in Ceuta and Melilla (Spanish enclaves on the North African coast). The majority are honorable people and loyal to Spain. However, military intelligence has detected isolated cases of radical individuals whose contracts to continue serving in the Spanish army have not been renewed. This has provoked wild protests from the Muslim political party in Ceuta. For its part, the cell dismantled in Ceuta tried to recruit Muslim soldiers to help obtain arms and explosives for use in the attacks it was planning. While the situation in Ceuta is not critical at the moment, it is indeed worrisome.

Q: Jihadist rhetoric calls for the [liberation](#) of Ceuta and Melilla from infidel occupation. Unfortunately for Spain, calls for the liberation of all of historic Al-Andalus are just as common. Will Islamists always be obsessed with reconquering Spain, no matter the steps taken (i.e. pulling troops out of Iraq) by Spanish politicians?

A: For the jihadists, Spain is still an enemy country even after the sudden Spanish withdrawal from Iraq after the election victory of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. The counterterrorism activity against these groups goes back to 1995; it was intensified after September 11 and, of course, following the attacks of March 11. As I commented earlier, more than 300 individuals have been detained in counterterrorist operations conducted by police. As a consequence, terrorist groups harbor serious malice against our country. For example, at the end of 2004 police dismantled a cell that was planning attacks in Madrid as vengeance for the dismantling of the train bombers' network.

Other reasons for the enmity are the presence of Spanish troops in Afghanistan and Lebanon and Spanish collaboration with the governments of Morocco and Algeria in terrorism investigations. But it is true that the rhetoric about the reconquest of Ceuta and Melilla and old Al-Andalus is common in jihadist forums and could encourage violent groups established in Spain. Nevertheless, the real danger resides in the Islamic communities in Spain that can adopt this type of rhetoric, especially in the next decade when Spain will be home to much more than a million Muslims. Symptoms of this can be seen even now. Some examples are the desire of Muslims to share Cordoba's mosque-cathedral which could lead to claims of exclusivity in the future and commentaries about how they are going to dominate Spain when the Muslim population increases. If this type of rhetoric becomes normal in the next decade, it would polarize Spanish society and make it difficult for Muslims to integrate.

Q: According to a recent article in El Periodico, Catalonia is [emerging](#) as the continental European base of Jaish-e-Mohammed (the Army of Mohammed), a Pakistani terrorist group tied to the central command of Al Qaeda and implicated in the July 7, 2005 attacks in London. Pakistani sources told the paper that the terrorist group uses "mosques to recruit and mobilize volunteers for jihad, as they do in Great Britain as well." Is Spain the new Londonistan?

A: The jihadist and radical activities in Spain are undercover. There is definite pressure on them from police and intelligence agencies. Even though the existence of jihadist networks and recruitment is undeniable, it can't be said that Spain is a completely hospitable place for Islamists.

The jihadists know that they are being watched and that, as soon as there is evidence against them, they will be arrested and imprisoned. This explains why they conduct their meeting in private homes and not in mosques, where there could be police informants. They might meet potential recruits in mosques, but the recruitment process is developed outside of them.

On the other hand, the presence of Jaish-e-Mohammed is primarily found in the Catalonia region, where a small community of Pakistanis resides. Thus, they may have the ability to hide and pass unnoticed. Throughout the rest of Spain, the radical networks are composed mostly of members of Moroccan and Algerian origin.

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