

## The Growth of Militant Islamist Micro-Diaspora Communities: Observations from Spain

By Kathryn Haahr

THE APPARENT EASE with which predominantly foreign jihadists of the Salafist ideology are able to continually penetrate and manipulate the social, religious and professional spaces of micro-diaspora communities in support of global jihad indicates the strengthening of grassroots jihadist support structures. While the majority of Spanish Muslims are law abiding and consider themselves to be a part of Spanish civil society, increased numbers of what can be called a “third jihadist generation” are extending their base by leveraging socio-cultural and ideological variables.<sup>1</sup> This emerging jihadist space is concerning primarily because it indicates that a strict and orthodox ideology advocating violent jihad is motivating and convincing Muslims to radicalize. Spanish police and intelligence sources are increasingly concerned about the growing influence of young, second generation militant Islamists.<sup>2</sup> The aggressive nature of jihadist planning and recruitment activities in Spain highlights the need to have a counter-terrorism strategy that emphasizes the multifaceted social, cultural and political variables of grassroots Muslim communities throughout Spain.

### Cultural and Demographic Variables in Recruitment Activity

The growth of micro-diaspora communities—predominantly formed of Maghrebis, Algerians and Pakistanis—is due to the continued influx of immigrants who travel to Spain for primarily family reasons and, therefore, employment. The importation of Salafist Islamist ideologies and jihadist sources of information, the growth of jihadist

terrorist cells, radical imams, and the allure of defending the plight of the global umma have created new socio-cultural and ideological reference points for Spanish Muslims. Since before the March 11, 2004 Madrid attacks, Salafist Islamists have been using international and localized cultural variables to influence the attitudes and behaviors of Spanish Muslims toward radicalization. Cultural variables are physical and non-physical local cultural characteristics in a demographic environment that shape attitudes and behavior patterns in response to ideas, and include:

- Physical transmitters: mosques, imams, educational institutions, books and tapes, family, social, prison and professional networks. This includes public spaces bordering ethnic and “native” communities.
- Non-physical transmitters: internet (online ideas), symbols and images, observable behaviors and activities, and codes of conduct.

Available information indicates that jihadist recruiters have been successful in exploiting cultural variables in distinct micro-diaspora communities to recruit Muslims in support of operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Spain, North Africa and elsewhere in Europe. This development is evidenced in the increased numbers of recruits to radicalization throughout Spain. For example, senior recruiters (typically the leaders of networks), spiritual leaders and explosives experts will identify, vet and then recruit new network or cell members for specialized activities, such as suicide operations, propaganda, or incorporation into logistical networks. As part of their recruitment tactics, recruiters seem to use different religious and socio-cultural variables to influence their recruits, and to facilitate their own integration into the micro-diaspora communities in which they are living and operating. Spanish counter-terrorism operations and investigations into jihadist cells and their recruitment activities will provide useful insights into and context about the ways that radicalized actors manipulate cultural variables to their advantage.

### Case Study: Cultural Variables in the Recruitment Patterns of 11-M and 2007 Barcelona Suicide Cell

In the cases of 11-M and the 2007 Barcelona terrorist plot, senior members were radicalized abroad and had direct links to militant Islamist organizations. They maintained a strong commitment to global jihad, were devoutly religious, and were able to successfully recruit and radicalize Spanish Muslims from various ethnic pools of diaspora communities.

*The Dhadah Network:* Recruiters centered their recruitment activities at the Madrid Abu Bakr mosque, and at social/professional and religious gatherings to recruit sympathizers. Most of the Dhadah network's members shared professional, social and family connections. Dhadah used a sophisticated step process, similar to a recruitment process, to identify and vet. As part of his recruitment activities, Dhadah would pass out jihadist propaganda in mosques in and around Madrid. His network recruited circa 20 new members during the 1990s: some were sent to training camps in Afghanistan, some of whom returned to Spain or traveled to other jihad fronts. In an attempt to identify prospective recruits, he studied the faces of people leaving the mosque after prayer sessions to approach those whom he considered to be of most interest. Once the potential of the individual was assessed, the recruiters would invite the individual to participate in innocuous meetings where they would discuss the situation of Islam. It is not clear from available information what the vetting process was for these members, or if the recruiters provided financial or other incentives (assistance with work, support to family members, etc.).

*Barcelona Kamikaze Recruitment Cell:* In March 2007, Spanish security personnel broke up a jihadist recruitment cell that had trained and sent to Iraq an estimated 32 jihadist suicide bombers. Spanish National Police sources noted that the recruiter, Moroccan Mbark El Jaafari, used a strategy to “Westernize” his typically young recruits so that they could better integrate into Catalonian society. He purportedly encouraged the suicide bombers to wear jeans and modern dress, and to refrain from growing long beards; he would then

1 The third jihadist generation concept is based on Mustafa bin `Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Nasar's (also known as Abu Mus`ab al-Suri) strategic thinking. See Murad al-Shishani, “Abu Mus`ab al-Suri and the Third Generation of Salafi-Jihadists,” *Terrorism Monitor* 3:16 (2005). Spanish intelligence authorities believe that al-Suri played a direct role in planning the Madrid bombings.

2 *El Pais*, June 17, 2007; *El Pais*, July 2006.

send the recruits to smaller towns in Catalonia where a “sponsor” would help them find employment. After this socio-demographic preparation, the “trainees” would travel to Iraq, Algeria, or Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

Most recruits seem to be driven by two motivations: professional (to serve the global jihad), and spiritual and personal (a belief in martyrdom). While it is not clear from available information how strong the desire for martyrdom was for the recruits detained in Spain to date, the majority upheld an extreme religiosity. It is evident that Spanish Sunni Muslims are a recruitment target. What is not clear is what kind of Muslim becomes a target for jihadist recruiters, although the majority of recruits have come into contact with the recruiters in shared religious and social networks. Some characteristics of potential recruits include:

#### *Socio-Demographic Factors*

Radicalized Spanish Muslims are predominantly young, first generation adult males who attend any number of Muslim social and religious settings. Many are middle class, have been educated in Spain (some have advanced technical degrees), have family, and are fluent in Spanish. Some have obtained Spanish citizenship, but the majority possess work permits. It is likely that these young recruits have a strong spirituality and probably navigate in Islamist ideological circles, particularly mosques and organizations, such as Tablighi Jama'at (JaT) of the 11-M and Barcelona '08 typology.

#### *Authority Figures and Ideology*

The imams and spiritual leaders recruiting for jihadist networks are marketing the religious concept of offensive jihad. Offensive jihad coincides remarkably with Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's strategic concept that emphasizes “individual terrorism” and urges that mass mobilization and participation in individual terrorism is necessary for the jihadist movement's success.<sup>4</sup> These

imams seem to have been radicalized overseas and travel to Spain under special permits to instruct in mosques.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Motivational Factors: Intent to Engage in Offensive Jihad*

Detailed accounts of militant Islamists detained and imprisoned from 11-M to date indicate that the majority of jihadists were associated with Salafism prior to their radicalization to militant Islamism.<sup>6</sup> Experts now term these radicalized individuals as “neo-Salafists,” whose basis of jihad is founded on “an inflexible and timeless reading of the Qur'an and the hadiths. Neo-Salafists are socialized in an intense hatred of those they consider to be infidels and, among other possible interpretations, they accept the most clearly bellicose definition of jihad, both in terms of defense and aggression.”<sup>7</sup> Al-Qa'ida's and other Islamist organizations' hostile rhetoric is aimed at recuperating al-Andalus (the Iberian Peninsula and Northern Africa during the Umayyad Caliphate) and at Spain's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Virtual and physical propaganda extolling the virtues of jihad could motivate curious, religiously motivated Muslims to seek out ideological and spiritual havens that lead them down the radicalization path.

A detailed window into the existence and strengthening of micro-diaspora communities is Jordi Moreras Palenzuela's singular examination of the dynamics of Catalan Islam. His most recent work focuses on the El Raval neighborhood in Barcelona in which the recent JaT-associated Pakistani suicide bombing cell operated. El Raval is primarily dominated by Pakistanis who

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5 Since 2004, Spanish security services have detained, and in some cases, expelled, approximately 17 imams from primarily the northeast of Spain. For more information on this, see Javier Jordan, “Las Redes Yihadistas en Espana: Evolucion desde el 11-M,” October 4, 2007, available at [www.athenaintelligence.org](http://www.athenaintelligence.org). This article does not include the January 2008 arrest of the Barcelona imam in El Raval.

6 Javier Jordan, Fernando Manas and Humberto Trujillo, “Perfil Sociocomportamental y estructura organizativa de la militancia yihadista en Espana: Analisis de las redes de Abu Dhadah y del 11-M,” *Jihad Monitor*, March 8, 2007.

7 Fernando Reinares, “Conceptualizing International Terrorism,” ARI #82, Real Instituto Elcano, 2005.

own their businesses, many that include women as business partners. The places of worship are predominantly Pakistani, and the Islamic expressions that are celebrated in the neighborhood are organized by Pakistani Muslims. In sum, El Raval is a nationalistic space in which politics (close ties to Pakistanis in Pakistan and the United Kingdom), religion, work and social life revolve around Pakistani elements.<sup>8</sup> According to a Spanish report, jihadist networks recruit approximately three Spanish Muslims a month from Catalonia for either suicide bombings in Iraq, or for training in Afghanistan, Pakistan and North Africa.<sup>9</sup>

An emerging characteristic of the Spanish jihadist model is unaffiliated terrorists who are part of informal, Salafist-inspired groups that are not formally linked to any one terrorist organization and operate in a “beehive” organizational infrastructure. These individuals tend to organize themselves around a commonly shared ideology of global jihad, one in which the religion of Islam is molded to serve their violent objectives. At times, small groups of “independently” inspired radical Muslims appear in villages and towns throughout Spain, especially in agricultural areas, to troll for recruits. These individuals operate exclusively within Spain to recruit young Muslims into jihad after they have settled in Spain, as opposed to relying on foreign jihadists. Some recruits are converts, hence the concern about homegrown terrorists.

#### **Observations of Trends and Indicators**

While there is no general culture of a global jihad movement among Spanish Muslims, Spain is experiencing the rooting of Islamist movements and ideologies. The most significant aspect of radicalization in Spain is Salafist Islamism's espousal of radical activities, namely recruiting for global jihad in sermons and outreach activities at official and unofficial mosques. Future trigger points are in the creation of parallel Muslim societies—already in place in countries like France and the United Kingdom—which would

3 Kathryn Haahr, “Catalonia: Europe's New Center of Global Jihad,” *Terrorism Monitor* 5:11 (2007).

4 Paul Cruickshank and Mohannad Hage Ali, “Abu Musab al Suri: Architect of the New al Qaeda,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30:1 (2007). Al-Suri is a Syrian-born, Spanish citizen, senior al-Qa'ida member whom the Pakistani security services arrested in 2005 in Wa-

8 Jordi Moreras Palenzuela, “Islam y Configuración Comunitaria entre los Paquistaníes en Barcelona,” *CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, núm. 68, p. 119-132.

9 *El Periodico*, April 2007.

certainly be more permeable to jihadist doctrines and activities. A characteristic to consider is where there are centers of gravity and what these centers and their pathways tell counter-terrorism analysts and operators about the variables involved in shifting attitudes and behaviors toward radicalization. Some of the more important signposts to assess are:

- Role and evolution of radical ideas. Transnational jihadist networks increasingly are influencing the perceptions, ideas and beliefs that contribute to the growth of Islamist radicalization and mobilization, and seek to target all Muslims in their global reach. Two important considerations should be noted: first, the appeal of neo-Salafism clearly has taken root in various diaspora communities that include both lower and middle classes; second, not all of the radicalized Spanish Muslims have been socially and economically marginalized. Therefore, it is crucial to understand in which ways religion and other doctrinal characteristics could be outweighing socio-economic considerations in influencing shifting attitudes and behavior patterns toward radicalization.<sup>10</sup>

- Current and future leadership of Muslim organizations. An understanding of who is emerging to inspire Spanish Muslims, as well as non-Muslims, in religious and intellectual ways is important for appreciating the future political and social sentiments of future generations of Spanish Muslims, especially those in positions of authority in religious and social organizations. Intra-ethnic tensions, which already play out in the competition among various Islamic and Islamist organizations, could cause a splintering between groups and their followers in crucial areas such as support for Islamic law. There are overt and subtle indicators of wedging for counter-terrorism operators to evaluate, the most important variable being the use of rhetoric in media and non-media sources, and indications of social stratification in the micro-diaspora communities.<sup>11</sup>

10 Of course, Salafist movements will continue to target immigrant populations that are socially and economically excluded and live in marginalized diaspora societies.

11 The author has developed a methodological approach to identify and weight the cultural variables that influence

- Changing role of the internet. A trend in Spain is the departure from "physical recruitment" activities toward virtual recruitment. CDs, laptops (11-M) and the internet are driving self-recruitment activity. Nonetheless, at some point, a spiritual leader has, thus far, been needed to further guide the young recruits toward deeper spiritual lessons. To date, almost all of the major jihadist networks had created structured recruitment activities; it is difficult to ascertain the *a priori* exposure of the recruits to internet recruitment, to Islamist ideologues such as Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, or to radical Islamic messages. For example, a Burgos jihadist indoctrination cell was the first plot detected and broken up in Spain that followed and promoted global jihad via the internet.<sup>12</sup>

- Strengthening of "mobile jihad satellite platforms"<sup>13</sup> that can only exist based on a grassroots support base. The primary nodes in this model are Barcelona, Madrid, Andalusia and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. The members of these jihadist networks are multiethnic and interconnected not only with each other, but with other jihadist networks in Europe. For example, senior members of the 11-M and Abu Dhada networks not only interacted closely, but maintained ties with several members of the Hamburg cell.<sup>14</sup> To date, all members of the jihadist networks have demonstrated a commitment to both regional (Iraq, North Africa) and local (Spain) jihads. This dual operational and doctrinal capability to carry out terrorist attacks becomes akin to a borderless entity and poses tough challenges to Spanish and European counter-terrorism operations.

- Increase in suicide bombing tactics and techniques. Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb and Pakistani jihadists who have trained in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan are bringing back not only

ideological and recruitment tactics from the international jihad, but also the combat techniques, such as IEDs, suicide bombings and potential chemical attacks. The Spanish Guardia Civil has assessed the January 2008 suicide cell in Barcelona as having an identical profile to the London group that perpetrated the 2005 attacks.<sup>15</sup>

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radicalized attitudes and behaviors.

12 *El Pais*, October 2007.

13 Analyst term; refer to Kathryn Haahr, "New Reports Allege Foreign Fighters in Iraq Returning to Europe," *Terrorism Focus* 3:20 (2006).

14 For specific details, see Jordan, "Perfil Sociocomportamental y estructura organizativa de la militancia yihadista en Espana: Analisis de las redes de Abu Dhada y del 11-M" and Kathryn Haahr, "Assessing Spain's al-Qaeda Network," *Terrorism Monitor* 3:13 (2005).

15 *El Pais*, January 2008.