

A Case Study of the January 2008 Suicide Bomb Plot in Barcelona

By Fernando Reinares

BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 00:40 and 05:00 on January 19, 2008, 12 Pakistanis and two Indians were arrested during a counter-terrorist operation in Barcelona, Spain's second largest city.¹ Spanish authorities accused the suspects of involvement in a plot to carry out multiple suicide bombings on the city's public transportation system. Ten of the detained men, plus an additional suspect arrested on March 14 in The Netherlands, are expected to go on trial early in 2009.

This article offers a case study of the foiled January 2008 Barcelona terrorist plot. First, the article will provide detailed information about how the security operation evolved. Second, it will analyze the exact characteristics and scope of the presumed bombing plot, in particular whether the attacks were confined solely to Barcelona. Third, it will present the known demographical and sociological profiles of the 11 individuals finally indicted in the case as well as their concrete Islamic affiliation. Fourth, it will present existing relevant evidence on the linkages that the terrorist cell might have with the current web of global terrorism, basically through a prominent collective actor such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Finally, the article will briefly assess the implications of the case on the jihadist terrorism threat to Spain and the European Union as a whole.

The Terrorist Plot and Subsequent Counter-Terrorist Operation

The January 19 police operation was carried out by the Guardia Civil (Civil Guard, GC). It was authorized by Judge Ismael Moreno, one of six investigative magistrates of the Audiencia Nacional (National Court, AN) in Madrid, which is the special criminal jurisdiction dealing with terrorist offenses throughout Spanish territory. Judge Moreno became convinced on the basis of a report from the GC and additional information

provided by the Centro Nacional de Inteligencia (National Intelligence Center, CNI) during a meeting held on the evening of January 18 that attacks in Barcelona were imminent and that preventive action was urgent to thwart the plot. The central unit of the GC charged with preventing and fighting international terrorism was briefed by the CNI at around 13:00 hours on that same day.² The CNI most likely received its information about the plot from the French intelligence services; it is believed that a Pakistani national part of the group was acting as an informant for the French.³ At the time, authorities likely suspected that the attacks would target railroad, underground or urban bus facilities.

Measures were immediately adopted to identify the suspected terrorists and locate their whereabouts to effectively neutralize the threat. Soon afterwards, CNI agents placed some of the suspected terrorists under close surveillance. On January 17 at 22:00 hours, one of the CNI agents recovered from a street garbage container a disposal bag left there shortly before by one of the suspects being followed. An initial examination of the bag's contents yielded various elements likely to be used in the manufacture of explosive devices, including clock mechanisms, batteries, electrical cables, latex gloves and pasteboard cylinders with residues of a powdery substance.⁴ On January 18 at around 18:00 hours, eight of the suspected terrorists, carrying backpacks and handbags, were spotted moving to another quarter of Barcelona's old town, an urban space inside the city center where around 15,000 Pakistanis reside. Security services quickly confirmed that the suspects were heading toward the same address at which two other individuals also arrived carrying similar bundles. As a result of these combined developments, the terrorist threat was assessed as critical, and the

decision was made to intervene as soon as special operations personnel could deploy to the scene and formal judicial authorization could be obtained.⁵

The GC initiated the actual police operation at around 23:50 on January 18, entering and searching six premises located in the area, including four private homes, an industrial site turned into an Islamic worship place and a bakery shop. As indicated, the operation concluded with the detention of 14 individuals in four different but neighboring locations. Among them was the individual who collaborated with the intelligence services; he became a protected witness under specific provisions of Spanish legislation.⁶ In one of the searched locations on Maçanet Street, authorities found more materials likely to be used in the manufacture

“It appears that the group had connections to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).”

of explosive devices. Authorities analyzed 18 grams of a white substance discovered among the materials, and experts concluded it was “a mixture of nitrocellulose and potassium perchlorate,” commonly employed to manufacture certain industrial explosives.⁷ The amount found in the bag would not have been enough to stage a major attack, but would serve for training and experimental purposes. Spanish security officials believe that large quantities of hidden explosives were not found because the counter-terrorist operation was launched prematurely, prompted by information from the protected witness who was notified by a cell ringleader that a call made to his wife on January 18 was to be his last.⁸ An alternative hypothesis would suggest, however, that the terrorist group was waiting to receive the amount of substances necessary to

1 The city of Barcelona concentrates at least one-third of Spain's South Asian immigrants.

2 Dirección General de la Policía y de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información U.C.E. 2 / G.I.E., Sección de Investigación 7ª Zona de Cataluña, Servicio de Información, *Diligencias Previas 30/08, Juzgado Central de Instrucción no. 2, Atestado 01/08*, Tomo 1, p. 1.

3 *El País*, January 25, 2008; *El Periódico*, January 27, 2008.

4 Dirección General de la Policía y de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información U.C.E. 2 / G.I.E., op. cit., Tomo 1, p. 3.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

6 In particular, article two of Ley Orgánica 19/1994.

7 Dirección General de la Policía y de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información U.C.E. 2 / G.I.E., op. cit., Tomo 1, p. 8.

8 Dirección General de la Policía y de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información U.C.E. 2 / G.I.E., op. cit., Tomo 3, p. 728.

create the explosive devices.⁹

The protected witness declared that the metro was the preferred target in Barcelona because, as a prominent member of the group told him, “if an explosion takes place in the metro, the emergency services cannot come.”¹⁰ Moreover, the explosive devices were to be carried in backpacks or bags—not around the body—ready for remote detonation. Different stations of the underground were to be designated by the group leader as locations for the blasts. He also declared that the terrorist plan included first a suicide mission followed by at least two other ones in that same city, and then similar attacks to take place, consecutively, in Germany, France, Portugal and even in the United Kingdom. These four countries, as well as Spain, contribute troops to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. According to the protected witness, the timing and sequence of the series of attacks across Western Europe would have depended on how the situation evolved since “al-Qa`ida would make some demands through the amir Baitullah Mehsud.”¹¹

All 14 individuals arrested were subjected to incommunicado detention for five days beginning January 19—the maximum period allowed by Spanish legal provisions—and transferred to Madrid for interrogation at the GC headquarters. Two of them were released on January 22 and two others were freed without charges by Judge Ismael Moreno on January 23. Yet the magistrate, in the same decision, ordered the unconditional provisional imprisonment of the remaining 10 individuals, identified as nine Pakistanis and one Indian. On March 14, an additional suspected terrorist, who was also in Barcelona with the rest of the group but left the city shortly before the police operation, was finally detained in the Dutch city of Breda.¹²

9 *El Periódico*, January 27, 2008.

10 Dirección General de la Policía y de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información U.C.E. 2 / G.I.E., op. cit., Tomo 3, p. 725.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 726. It is important to note that on November 29, 2007, the website al-Ekhlaas posted an audio message from Usama bin Ladin in which he called upon Europeans to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan and threatened to continue revenge attacks against them.

12 He took a flight to Frankfurt on the morning of the

Following a request from the public prosecutor, Judge Moreno decided on June 3 to formally indict 11 people in relation to the foiled plot in Barcelona. Eight of them are accused both of being members of a terrorist organization and of possessing explosives. They have been named as Maroof Ahmed Mirza, Mohammad Ayub Elahi Bibi, Mohamed Tarik, Qadeer Malik, Hafeez Ahmed, Roshan Jamal Khan, Shaib Iqbal and Imram Cheema. Three others—Mohammed Shoaib, Mehmooh Khalid and Aqueel Ur Rahmnan Abassi—were only charged with belonging to a terrorist organization. As required by the legal system in Spain, the formal indictment for all of them was again confirmed on October 9 by a tribunal dealing with serious criminal offenses and formed by three judges of the Audiencia Nacional.¹³

Group Connections and Profile of Suspects

In his decision to imprison and indict all 11 suspects, Judge Ismael Moreno concluded that they “constituted an organized group with a clear and specialized assignment of tasks, cohered ideologically by their adhesion to an extremist Islamic belief.”¹⁴ Indeed, all of those indicted consider themselves Sunni Muslims and either are members of or were closely related to the traditionally non-violent Tablighi Jamaat movement. Additionally, a number of books, pamphlets, compact disks and cassettes containing radical Islamist ideas—including those exalting jihad and martyrdom—were found by the GC in four of the six locations searched during the police operation.¹⁵ Based on the declaration of the protected witness, Judge Moreno wrote in his June 3 indictment that all of the 11 individuals charged composed a group whose members were involved in frequent meetings and activities, both in worship places and private homes.

police operation. It is believed that this individual ended up in The Netherlands presumably because the attacks in Barcelona did not take place.

13 As already mentioned, these suspects are expected to go on trial in the early months of 2009 and the judicial verdict should be public by spring this year.

14 Audiencia Nacional, Juzgado Central de Instrucción no. 2, *Diligencias Previas 30/2008*, various *Auto* of January 23, 2008, and *Auto* of June 3, 2008.

15 Dirección General de la Policía y de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información U.C.E. 2 / G.I.E., op. cit., Tomo 3, pp. 752-755.

He distinguished the suspects as two who played the roles of ideological and operational leaders—one of them was the imam of Tarik ben Ziyad mosque in Barcelona—three who had expertise in the manufacture of explosive devices, four who were prepared to act as suicide bombers and two other more relevant members. According to the magistrate,

“The protected witness also declared that he received training on the use of weapons and explosives in the Waziristan area of Pakistan as well as in Afghanistan.”

the group had achieved operational capability in terms of manpower and “was apparently very close to achieving full technical capability in terms of explosive devices to carry out several suicide terrorist attacks between January 18 and 20 against means of public transportation in Barcelona.”

Interestingly, five of the individuals of Pakistani origin who have been indicted for terrorist offenses as a result of the foiled plot in Barcelona were born in medium-sized or major cities of the Punjab, two others in nearby Islamabad and the not too distant Kohat, while another was from Karachi; there is no exact data on the remaining two countrymen. The Indian citizen happens to be a native of Mumbai. Unsurprisingly, all 11 are male. They were aged 25 to 63 at the time of their arrests.¹⁶ Diverse in their educational background and occupational status, at least four are married, one is a widower and at least five have children. Six were legal immigrants in Spain, residents in or around Barcelona, and in most cases settled as far back as 2001. Five others, however, arrived to the country and the city in the three months prior to the police operation. Among them were two of the presumed suicide bombers who

16 Although their average age is almost 36, five of the 11 men prosecuted were between 25 and 29—including the four designated as suicide bombers—and a total of nine between 25 and 40. Only two men, aged 50 and 63 when arrested, are older.

had landed in Barcelona on flights from Pakistan via different routes with stops in Sweden and Germany, one who came directly from Portugal, and a fourth who traveled from Paris by train—the latter of whom was the informant. These were interpreted as suspicious moves in itself, even more so because the man whom the CNI and the GC consider as head of the subgroup commissioned with explosives and explosive devices—Hafeez Ahmed—had returned to Barcelona from a five-month stay in Pakistan himself, weeks before the others started to arrive in the city. This same person reacted fiercely to his detention and threatened openly the GC agent who arrested him, loudly saying, “in my country I have killed many policemen like you.”¹⁷

It appears that the group had connections to Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In a video interview recorded in August 2008, Maulvi Omar, the official spokesman of TTP—itsself a conglomerate of between 30-40 militant groups operating in agencies of Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—claimed that the organization was responsible for the foiled suicide bombing plot. When asked whether the TTP could ever carry out an attack against the West, Omar replied: “The one in Barcelona was conducted by twelve of our men. They were under pledge to Baitullah Mehsud and TTP has already claimed responsibility, because Spain’s military presence in Afghanistan.”¹⁸ The TTP’s initial claim of responsibility for the Barcelona plot likely referred to a February satellite telephone conversation between Omar and a journalist, in which he acknowledged that the TTP provided training to some of those involved in the plot. During that conversation, Omar specified that even with TTP’s assistance, the cell leaders “had their own plans” with respect to target selection and execution.¹⁹ These statements seem consistent with the already mentioned allusion made by the protected witness to demands by Baitullah Mehsud expected after the first

bombings were executed in Barcelona and during subsequent further incidents in Spain and other Western European states. Furthermore, the protected witness also declared that he received training on the use of weapons and explosives in the Waziristan area of Pakistan as well as in Afghanistan. In his testimonies, he refers even to personal contacts with the leader of the TTP, whom apparently designated him for suicide missions.²⁰ The fact that at least half of the Pakistanis indicted for the Barcelona plot come from Punjab and not from the tribal areas should not be a surprise, since by 2007 terrorists in the NWFP and FATA have been recruiting Punjabis.

Conclusion

In Spain and in the rest of the European Union, the primary jihadist terrorist threat comes from North African groups and networks, in particular from individuals and cells directly or indirectly related to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb. The case of the alleged January 2008 Barcelona plot, however, demonstrates that South Asian groups and organizations—in particular those based in the tribal areas of Pakistan and associated with al-Qa`ida, such as TTP—are also major counter-terrorism concerns.²¹ As to the specific nature of the threat, the thwarted plot would suggest a combination of both internal and external elements. Whereas the internal ones do not exactly correspond to a homegrown phenomenon (since those indicted who were local residents are first generation immigrants and the incident involved only foreigners), the external component seems to be that of a notorious, well-articulated terrorist collective actor with clear leadership and strategy.

The incident in Barcelona also calls attention to the disturbing role being played by the Tabligh movement. The movement is apparently suffering

from violent radicalization among its adherents, or the use of its meetings and sponsored travels between European states and South Asian countries for recruitment and training purposes by terrorist organizations; this allows the cross-border circulation of jihadists. In addition, what happened in Barcelona in January 2008 demonstrates the fundamental role of intelligence—in particular, the essential tool of informants—to disrupt terrorist conspiracies and dismantle terrorist groups. It also, however, reveals the difficulties of indicting suspects when preventive approaches are applied, as the usual police procedures to collect incriminatory evidence are limited, and relevant information emanating from intelligence cannot be fully incorporated into the judicial process. Finally, the case highlights how cooperation among the intelligence agencies of European states is critical to preventing and thwarting terrorist attacks.

Dr. Fernando Reinares is Full Professor of Political Science and Security Studies at King Juan Carlos University. He was appointed Director of the Program on Global Terrorism at Elcano Royal Institute—the leading Spanish think-tank in international and strategic studies—after serving a term as Senior Adviser on Antiterrorist Policy to the Minister of Interior, Government of Spain, following the Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004.

²⁰ Dirección General de la Policía y de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información U.C.E. 2 / G.I.E., op. cit., Tomo 3, p. 725.

²¹ In September 2004, there was already a previous counter-terrorist operation in Barcelona, this time conducted by the Mossos d’Esquadra—the Catalan autonomous police force—in which 11 other Pakistanis—again, 10 of them Punjabis—were arrested, although only five received final condemnatory sentences, dated May 2007, at the Audiencia Nacional.

¹⁷ Dirección General de la Policía y de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información U.C.E. 2 / G.I.E., op. cit., Tomo 3, p. 759.

¹⁸ The video interview with top Pakistani Taliban spokesman Maulvi Omar is available at www1.nefafoundation.org/multimedia-intvu.html.

¹⁹ *El Periódico*, February 11, 2008.