

The evolution of the structure of jihadist terrorism in Western Europe: the case of Spain

JAVIER JORDAN
Department of Political Science
University of Granada (Spain)
E-mail: jjordan@ugr.es

Preprint version: Javier Jordán, “The evolution of the structure of jihadist terrorism in Western Europe: the case of Spain”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 37, No 8 (2014), pp. 654-673.

Abstract

This article studies the structure of jihadist terrorism in the West from the perspective of the existence or absence of links between grass-root militants and organisations such as Al Qaeda Central and its regional affiliates. It undertakes a comprehensive case study of jihadist militancy in a European country (Spain) over a period of almost two decades, from 1995 until December 2013. The study analyses the results of 64 anti-terrorist operations carried out during this time.¹

Introduction

Recent years have seen the publication of a number of studies which have examined the structure of jihadist terrorism in the West from the perspective of the existence or absence of links between grass-root militants and organisations such as Al Qaeda Central and its regional affiliates.¹ The majority of the studies have centred their analysis on individuals and groups who have perpetrated terrorist plots, which is a logical choice given the importance of such cases and the greater information available on them.

The present article continues the above line of investigation further but broadening the scope to include individuals and groups whose militancy has consisted of logistics tasks or Internet-based propaganda activities. It undertakes a comprehensive case study of jihadist militancy in a European country (Spain) over a period of almost two decades, from 1995 until December 2013. The study analyses the results of 64 anti-terrorist operations carried out during this time.

In March 2004, mid-way through the period, terrorists planted bombs on four commuter trains in Madrid. For that reason the analysis has been divided into two parts: the first covering the period prior to the train bombings and the second covering the period following the attacks. For the purposes of the study,

¹ The content of this article is part of the research project CSO2010-17849 “International Terrorism’s Organizational Structure: Analysis of its Evolution and Implications for the European Security” funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

abundant information has been compiled from indictments, trial papers, court rulings, annual reports issued by Spain's Interior Ministry and Attorney General's Office, and appropriately verified media reports. Interviews have been conducted with senior officers from the National Police, the gendarmerie (Civil Guard) and the regional police force of Catalonia (Mossos d'Esquadra)

The 64 police operations constitute a sufficiently representative sample (possibly the entire universe) of operations against jihadist terrorism in Spain. Annex 1 gives a detailed list of all the operations. It is worth noting at this point that a significant number of the suspects arrested were not convicted of terrorism offences in the end. This has been a frequent occurrence in the aftermath of the Madrid train bombings for two reasons: the preventive approach adopted by police to avert new terrorist actions and the inadequacy of Spain's Criminal Law to address the special characteristics of jihadist activism.² This latter problem has been resolved to a large extent following the reform of the Penal Code enacted in 2010, which was preceded by two Framework Decisions by the Council of the European Union (2002/745/JHA and 2008/919/JHA). It is likely that a significant proportion of those acquitted before the reform was enacted would have been convicted if the new version had been in force at the time.

Logically, the 64 operations are only the "visible part" of jihadist militancy during the period studied. It is impossible to know the proportion they represent of the true number of jihadist groups who, for obvious reasons, act in clandestine manner. It is very likely that there have been many cases of jihadist groups who engaged in recruitment and logistics activities in Spain during the last two decades without being detected or broken up as a result of anti-terrorist operations. This information gap has important repercussions from the methodological perspective given that it limits, with a margin difficult to establish accurately, the validity of studies that explain the causes of the evolution of the structural organisation and activities of jihadist militants. Accordingly, the present article will focus mainly on description and offer comprehensive systematised data to complement other works on the structure of jihadist terrorism in the West.

A distinction will be drawn in the article between linked and independent actors. The former term refers to cells which, according to police or judicial sources, possessed links of some kind to a bigger organisation. Bearing in mind the large number of cases making up the sample, it is not possible to provide an in-depth study of the exact nature of these links. Moreover, the informal ties between militants from different groups and the inclusion of elements of global jihadism on the political agendas of organisations such as the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC), the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) Al Qaeda or Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) help explain why, in several cases, connections exist between the same cell and various organisations.

In the case of independent actors, the article differentiates also between independent cells and 'lone wolves'. Independent cells are groups of individuals who do not possess links to a higher organisation, even if some members have tenuous ties with cells that do or may themselves have been members of an organisation previously. One such example is the cell dismantled in Operation Nova which allegedly planned to carry out an attack on Spain's National

Criminal Court in Madrid. Some of the members belonged to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) during the 1990s and had ties to members of cells linked to organisations, including the one responsible for the Madrid train bombings. For its part, ‘lone wolf’ refers to individuals who, following radicalisation, decide to commit a terrorist attack on their own or support the jihadist cause by using internet to spread propaganda. These individuals can often suffer from social adjustment or psychiatric problems, as was the case of the man apprehended in Gerona in October 2007 with a car filled with butane gas cylinders and pyrotechnic material.³ Although such problems are a common characteristic of lone wolves, since their actions are designed to serve political ends they are by nature acts of terrorism and are therefore considered in the present study.⁴

Stage One: From 1995 to the Madrid train bombings

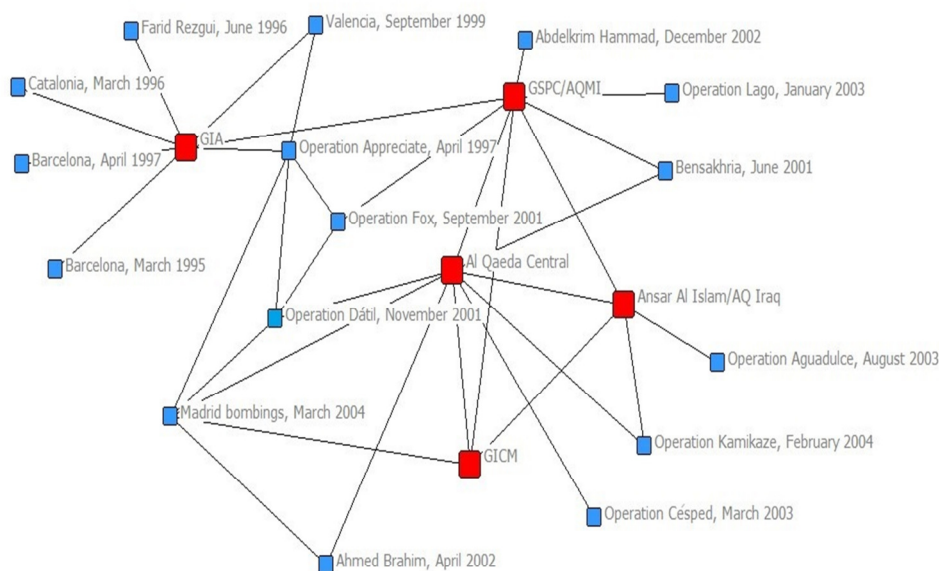
The 1980s saw various isolated police operations, as well as plots and attacks by Arab or Iranian extremist groups, including an attack on a restaurant close to the then United States Air Force base in Torrejón in 1985 and the break-up of a Hezbollah cell in Valencia in 1989 which was planning a strike in Europe. However, the first arrest as of which a continuous link with jihadist Salafism and subsequent anti-terrorist operations can be established took place on 11 March 1995, exactly nine years before the Madrid train bombings. On that day police arrested Ghebrid Messaoud, an individual linked to the Algerian GIA, as he was about to leave Barcelona with a suitcase full of weapons.⁵ From 1995 onwards, police conducted a series of operations against GIA networks.

The first aspect that stands out from an examination of this first period is the linkage between all the individuals and groups apprehended in operations and higher organisations, specifically the GIA, GSPC, GICM and Al Qaeda Central. Figure 1 illustrates the links between the different operations, and between these and “parent” organisations.

An initial finding thrown up by our analysis is that, prior to the middle of the 2000s, jihadist militancy in Spain was conducted exclusively via major organisations. There were, of course, individuals who sympathised with jihadist Salafism without possessing such links but the step up to collective action required the stimulus and support of formal organisations.

This circumstance is common to the rest of Western Europe. Prior to 2004, there were very few cases of individuals or groups who were active in jihadist Salafism without having ties to bigger organisations. These few cases were as follows: in France a network that allegedly planned to strike during the France vs. Algeria international football match in Paris was broken up in October 2001. In Italy “lone wolf” Domenico Quaranta was arrested in 2002; a small cell was dismantled in Rovigo in January 2003; and a Pakistani cell was arrested in Naples the same month. In Belgium police arrested an Iraqi in June 2003 for sending letters laced with toxic powder to various Embassies. Lastly, in the Netherlands police arrested various members of the Hofstad group during 2003 and 2005. In all, a total of just 6 cases out of the dozens of anti-terrorist operations carried out in Europe up to the middle of the 2000s.⁶

Figure 1. Links between jihadist organisations and police operations, 1995 – March 2004



The main characteristics of the cells broken up during this first period are outlined below. The cells are grouped into three categories depending on the organisation to which they are linked and their political agenda.

Algerian networks

The six anti-terrorist operations carried out in Spain during the second half of the 1990s and related to the GIA targeted individuals and cells dedicated to logistics functions (funding, document forgery and facilitating transportation of weapons and persons to Algeria). None of the groups was planning a terrorist attack in Spain.

However, from approximately 2000 onwards a change in trend is seen both in Spain and the rest of Europe. This change can be explained largely by two factors: the growing presence of Al Qaeda networks in Europe and the influence of Al Qaeda’s globalist strategies on militants trained in camps in Afghanistan, even if the camps were not under the direct control of Bin Laden’s organisation.⁷

This influence is particularly discernible among certain high-level GSPC operatives in Europe who had spent time in Afghan camps (in some cases, in Georgia and Chechnya also) and cooperated with Al Qaeda. Various Algerian networks planned to carry out attacks on European soil as a contribution to Al Qaeda’s strategy to defeat the “far enemy” in the first instance.⁸ Bearing in mind its past history (campaign of attacks by its forerunner, the GIA, in 1995 and

1996), it was no surprise that GSPC attention focused not just on the United States but on France also.

The presence of GSPC networks in Spain was weak compared to France and, as a result, the change in the political agenda of the Algerian networks merely translated to support given by those already established in Spain for terrorist operations in neighbouring countries. Anti-terrorist operations by the Spanish authorities against these networks were as follows:

- The arrest in June 2001 of Mohamed Bensakhria, who had links to the Frankfurt-based cell which planned to bomb the Christmas market next to Strasbourg Cathedral in France.⁹
- Operation Fox, which took place at the end of September 2001 in several Spanish provinces. The targets were a group of Algerians with links to the network run by Djamel Beghal, who was arrested in Dubai in July of the same year. The Beghal network was broken up in September 2001 as it was in the process of planning attacks in France and Belgium, including against the United States Embassy in Paris and the Kleine Brogel airbase in Belgium.¹⁰ Nizar Trabelsi, the suicide bomber who was to carry out the latter attack, was arrested in Belgium on 13 September 2001. Two months earlier, Trabelsi had been in Spain with other members of the Algerian network subsequently broken up by Operation Fox.¹¹ The Algerian cell in Spain also had ties to the network led by Tunisian Essid Sami Ben Khemais, which was dismantled in Milan in January 2001 as it was preparing an attack on the US Embassy in Rome.¹²
- Operation Lago, carried out in a number of locations in Catalonia in January 2003 and which led to the arrest of an Algerian cell headed by Mohamed Tahroui and associated with a jihadist network broken up in La Courneuve and Romainville (France) in December 2002 and which planned to attack unspecified targets in Paris.¹³ In turn, the French network had links to the Frankfurt-based cell and, therefore, to Mohamed Bensakhria also.¹⁴ Although the members of the cell arrested in Operation Lago were eventually convicted, they were cleared, due to lack of evidence, by the Spanish jury of plotting to attack the US Naval Base in Rota.¹⁵

Al Qaeda Central

Networks linked to Al Qaeda Central and providing support for terrorist operations outside Spain also existed during this first period. Moreover, in the two cases identified, the networks were directed by Khalid Sheikh Mohamed (KSM), Al Qaeda's head of external operations. The cases were as follows:

- The Abu Dahdah network (Operation Dátil). This group was led by Imad Barakat Yarkas (aka Abu Dahdah) and comprised mainly Syrians and Moroccans. Abu Dahdah was in contact with Mohamed Atta from the early 1990s and had ties with the Hamburg cell.¹⁶ According to the 9/11 Commission, there was no proof that the Abu Dahdah cell helped fund the 11 September attacks although it was established that the cell had transferred various amounts of money to a German of Syrian descent,

Mamoun Darkanzali. Darkanzali was the imam of the Al Quds mosque frequented by Atta and was in contact with members of the Hamburg cell.¹⁷ Furthermore, Spanish security services are convinced that the Abu Dahdah cell, particularly one of its leading members, Moroccan Amer Azizi, provided logistics support for the meeting held between Mohamed Atta and Ramsi Binalshib in July 2001 to discuss the final details of the 11 September operation.¹⁸

Abu Dahdah is a prime example of a middle manager, i.e. a cadre situated mid-way between the top-level Al Qaeda leaders and grass-roots militants.¹⁹ He boasted a host of international connections with radicals based in the United Kingdom (including Abu Qatada), Belgium, Germany, Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia. In Spain, in addition to the members of his cell in Madrid and Granada, Abu Dahdah was in contact with members of Algerian networks, in particular those broken up in operations Appreciate (April 1997) and Fox (September 2001).²⁰

- Of somewhat less importance compared to the Abu Dahdah network is Ahmed Rukhsar, a Pakistani who was arrested in Logroño in March 2003. He cooperated with Al Qaeda Central by transferring funds to the organisation from his hawala remittance business. Arrested along with Rukhsar was Enrique Cerdá, a Spanish business man (a non-convert) who arranged money transfers on the instructions of members of Al Qaeda in Pakistan, including Khalid Sheikh Mohamed. One of the transfers was used to fund the attack on a synagogue in Djerba (Tunisia) in April 2002 which killed 21 people. Rukhsar and Cerdá were sentenced in May 2006 to five years in prison for collaboration with a terrorist organisation.²¹

Terrorist plots against Spanish interests

The latter years of this first period were characterised by the desire on the part of Spain-based jihadist groups to commit attacks in the country or against Spanish interests. A number of such cases can be identified:

- The intent on the part of Amer Azizi to carry out an attack in Spain following his return from training camps in Afghanistan at the beginning of the summer of 2001. As noted above, Azizi was a leading member of the Abu Dahdah network which had close ties with Al Qaeda. His plan was foiled because the network was broken up in November 2001. He managed to escape and later met up with Al Qaeda members in the tribal regions of Pakistan. He was killed in a drone strike along with Hamza Rabia (the then head of Al Qaeda's external operations) in the early hours of 1 December 2005. In a biography posted on various radical websites in 2009, Al Qaeda's chronicler Abu Ubayda al Maqdisi reported that Amer Azizi had intended to strike against the "crusaders" in the "usurped lands" of Al Andalus.²² Had the attack been carried out, it would not have been a consequence of the presence of Spanish troops in Islamic countries (the military interventions in Afghanistan or Iraq had not taken place yet). The explanation would therefore be that Azizi and, in all

certainty, the members of the Abu Dahdah network had adopted a globalist agenda.

- The bombing of several targets in Casablanca (Morocco) on 16 May 2003, including the Casa de España restaurant, in which 20 people died, three of them Spaniards. Although no proof has been obtained of direct collaboration in the Casablanca attacks on the part of jihadists resident in Spain, several Moroccans belonging to the Abu Dahdah network, among them Jamal Zougam, had ties with jihadist groups in their home country, in particular with Mohamed Fizazi. Fizazi was a radical preacher who, between 1999 and just before the 9/11 attacks, preached at the Al Quds mosque in Hamburg which was frequented by Mohamed Atta, as noted earlier. Fizazi was convicted of the Casablanca bombings in August 2003.²³
- Mustafa Al Maymouni, a Moroccan recruited by Amer Azizi in Madrid, set up two cells in Kenitra and Larache (Morocco) following Azizi's departure and the arrest of Abu Dahdah. Maymouni travelled regularly to Morocco but lived in Madrid. In Spain, he and fellow-Moroccan Driss Chebli led a group of individuals who had dealings with the Abu Dahdah network but were not arrested due to a lack of incriminating evidence against them.²⁴ In a meeting in Istanbul (Turkey) in February 2003, the leaders of the GICM, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and a group of Tunisian jihadists agreed that, under the direction of the group led by Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, the cells in their respective organisations would carry out attacks in their countries of residence, with special attention to focus on Morocco and Spain. Maymouni was tasked with preparing a terrorist action in Morocco using his support infrastructure in the country. However, he was arrested by Moroccan security forces in May 2003.²⁵
- The Madrid train bombings of 11 March 2004. Following the arrest of Maymouni (and, in June 2003, that of Driss Chebli in Spain due to his former association with the Abu Dahdah network), Tunisian Serhane Al Fakhet - Maymouni's brother-in-law - took over as head of the Madrid-based group. Serhane was in contact by e-mail with Amer Azizi, who had joined Al Qaeda's external operations committee in North Waziristan.²⁶

Various bands of radicals based in Spain played a part in the preparation and perpetration of the Madrid bombings. The main catalyst was the Serhane group, who were joined by several Algerians (including Allekama Lamari, who had been arrested in Operation Appreciate in 1997) and other Moroccans led by Jamal Ahmidan, a radicalised drugs trafficker who facilitated the purchase of explosives in exchange for drugs.²⁷ The outcome was a network linked to Al Qaeda Central through Amer Azizi and with some elements of the GICM as Hassan el Haski and Youssef Belhadj²⁸ However, judicial sources in Morocco and Spain admit that they still lack strong evidence that would allow them to unequivocally prove that the Madrid bombings (and even the Casablanca bombings in May 2003) were orchestrated by the GICM.²⁹

Although not a decisive proof, an indication of the coordination with Al Qaeda Central can be deduced from the group's response to public directives. It is worth noting that the terrorist cell led by Serhane issued a statement on 3 April announcing an end to a truce which had not actually been called by the cell. The Abu Hafs Al Masri Brigades, who claimed responsibility for the Madrid bombings in a fax sent to the Al Quds Al Arabiya newspaper, issued a further release on 15 March (the day after the Spanish general elections) through Al-Haya and Al Quds Al Arabiya. In this second statement it offered a truce to the people of Spain pending the new government's decision concerning the presence of Spanish troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. According to the statement, the leadership of the Brigades had ordered European cells to refrain from carrying out attacks while the truce remained in force. The statement was also published on the Global Islamic Media Centre website and was downloaded onto a laptop computer belonging to members of the Serhane group in Madrid.³⁰ Following the ending of the truce, which was attributed to the decision of the Rodríguez-Zapatero government to withdraw troops from Iraq but not from Afghanistan, the Serhane group placed a bomb on the high-speed train line between Madrid and Seville. On the same day, core members of the cell were detected and surrounded by police in a flat in Leganés near Madrid. After a stand-off lasting several hours, the terrorists blew themselves up in an explosion that destroyed the flat in which they were hiding.³¹

- A last operation deserving of mention is Operation Aguadulce, which led to the arrest in August 2003 of an Algerian linked to Abderrazak Mahdjoub, a German-Algerian who lived in Hamburg and was a middle manager in Europe for Ansar Al Islam (later Al Qaeda in Iraq) and had also been in contact with the Mohamed Atta cell. The Algerian arrested in Spain was allegedly plotting with Mahdjoub to carry out an attack on the Costa Brava, in Catalonia. However, no explosives or weapons of any kind indicating an imminent attack were found.³²

Stage Two: April 2004 – December 2013

The start of the second period was conditioned by the police response to the Madrid train bombings. More than one hundred people were detained in the weeks immediately after the attacks, although many were subsequently released without charge. Further anti-terrorist operations linked to the Madrid bombings also took place during the following months and years. In the majority of cases, those arrested had played minor roles in the plot, for the most part helping the main players make their way out of Spain. The police operations were as follows: Saeta (April 2005), Sello I and Tigris (June 2005), Chacal-Genesis (January 2006), Suez (November 2006), Sello II (January 2007) and Rizo (March 2007). In addition to the arrests of individuals allegedly linked to the Madrid attacks, three of the operations (Tigris, Chacal-Genesis and Sello II) helped break up two networks dedicated to recruiting and sending volunteers to Iraq.

Figure 2: Links between jihadist organisations and police operations, March 2004 – December 2013

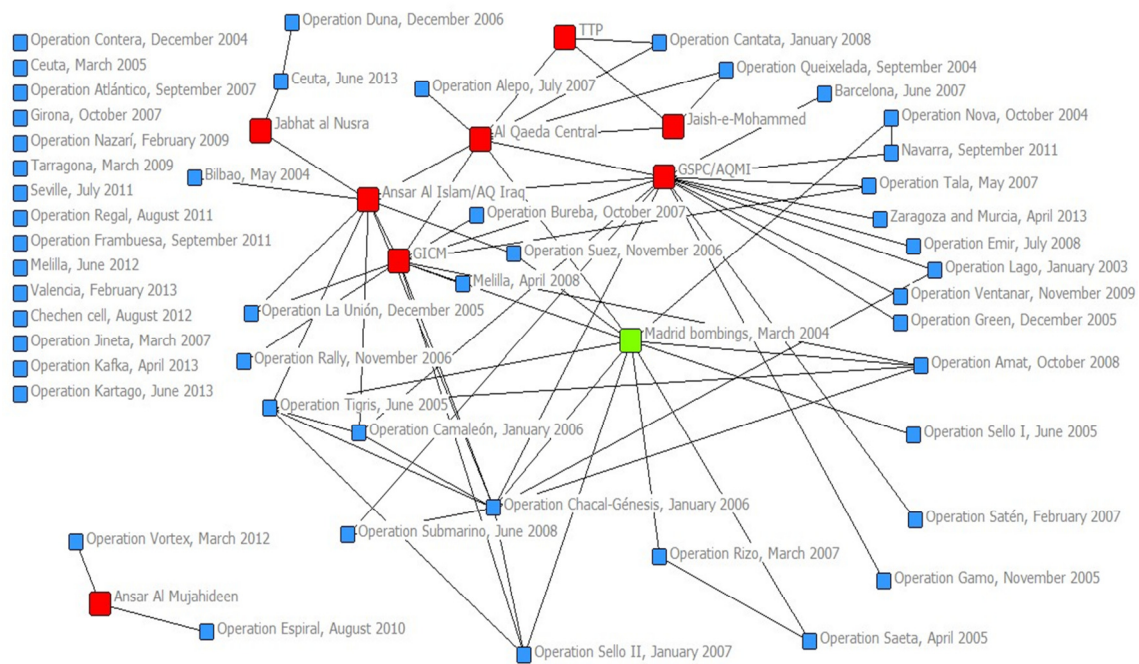


Figure 2 shows two important differences between the first and second periods of the study presented here. In the first place, the latter saw three times the number of police operations (48 compared to the 16 carried out between 1995 and March 2004). Secondly, in several of the operations the individuals arrested were not associated with a major jihadist organisation or a previous police operation. Nonetheless, in the majority of cases (33 compared to 15) a direct link did exist with a parent organisation, a finding which demonstrates the continued importance of major organisations during this second period. The most serious terrorist plot in the years that followed the Madrid bombings was the plan by a group linked to the TTP and Al Qaeda to bomb the Barcelona metro. However, the plot was foiled in January 2008.³³

The main characteristics of the different jihadist networks and actors during this second period are described below.

Algerian networks

Networks linked to Algerian organisations (GIA, GSPC and, of late, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM) have been a constant reality throughout the two periods studied. Moreover, they demonstrate a capacity for regeneration, as illustrated by the connections between various different operations over many years. Also evident is their ability to forge ties with cells related to other organisations, in this case the GICM, Al Qaeda Central and Al Qaeda in Iraq. To better illustrate these interconnections and durability, Figure 3 details the police operations carried out against cells linked to Algerian organisations for the entire time-frame covered by this article.

Figure 3: Algerian networks in Spain, 1995 – 2013

fact, both individuals contacted the organisation via Internet and there is no evidence that either ever held face to face meetings with AQIM operatives in Europe.³⁹

The fact that AQIM continued to have cells operating in Spain (several of them broken up in recent years) but none actually attempted to carry out a terrorist attack could be proof of the change in its political agenda. Contrary to what the organisation states in its propaganda, as far as Europe is concerned AQIM is more interested in preserving its logistics infrastructure than in using - and jeopardising - it for terrorist plots. In turn, this would appear to suggest that it prioritises its interests and regional agenda in Algeria and the Sahel countries ahead of Al Qaeda Central's globalist agenda. This would be consistent with the fact that, in terms of actions, AQIM has internationalised its choice of terrorist targets in Algeria and abductions in the Sahel.⁴⁰

“Iraqi” networks

Between April 2004 and October 2008 Spain's security forces carried out 13 operations against jihadist networks dedicated to recruiting, funding and sending volunteers to Iraq. An analysis of the operations throws up the following data:

- The GICM devoted the bulk of its resources to supporting the jihad in Iraq. Links to the group emerged in 9 of the 13 operations. In other words, the insurgency in Iraq became almost the sole reason for the GICM's existence in Spain.
- In 7 of the 13 operations a clear link is seen with Ansar Al Islam/Al Qaeda in Iraq, although in 6 of these it is simultaneous with the GICM. In all cases, the networks linked to Al Zarqawi's organisation engaged in logistics tasks (funding, recruitment and identity paper forgery).
- In only four cases (arrests in Bilbao in May 2004 and Operations Chacal and Satén in January 2006 and February 2007, respectively and operation Tala in May 2007) is GSPC/AQIM seen to be associated with logistics support for the insurgency in Iraq. This finding would reinforce the above hypothesis concerning the agenda priority accorded by Algerian networks to regional interests over global ones, as becomes even more apparent if a comparison is drawn with the GICM support for the Iraqi cause.

The last police operation in Spain against a network with ties to the insurgency in Iraq took place in October 2008 (Operation Amat), coinciding with the decline suffered by Al Qaeda in Iraq.⁴¹

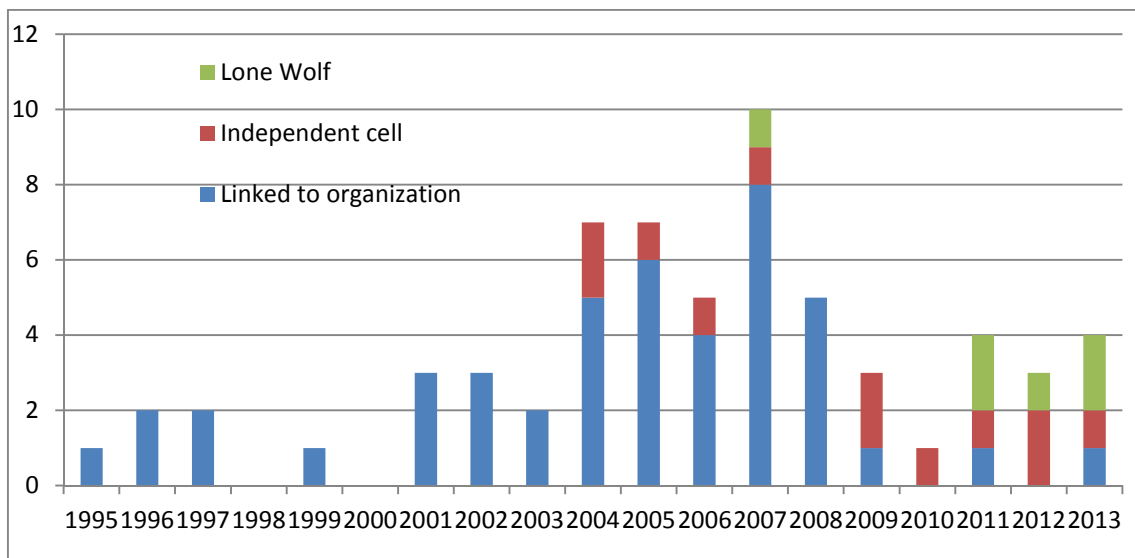
The conflict in Syria has sparked a new exodus of volunteers to join jihadist organizations in the country. For example Rachid Wahbi - a young man from the poor Príncipe Alfonso district of the Spanish city of Ceuta, on the African side of the Straits of Gibraltar - was killed in June 2012 whilst fighting alongside jihadist groups in Syria. Wahbi had travelled to Syria with two other young men from the same neighbourhood. According to a Spanish security forces official,

the departure of volunteers for Syria was no surprise given that others had travelled previously to Iraq and Afghanistan from Ceuta. The leader of Ceuta's main Islamic community had no hesitation in relating the trips by these young men to the activities of Takfiri groups in the Principe Alfonso district of the city.⁴² Between June and September 2013, the Spanish police detained ten suspects (nine of them in Ceuta) on charges of belonging to a terrorist network with international connections, engaged in the radicalization and recruitment of individuals for jihadist organizations in Syria.⁴³ In March 2014 Spanish security forces arrested another network in Malaga and Melilla dedicated to recruiting and sending individuals volunteers to jihadist organizations in Syria and Lybia.⁴⁴

Al Qaeda Central

During the second of the periods studied here, Al Qaeda is found to be associated with one terrorist plot in Spain. Operation Cantata, carried out by the Civil Guard in January 2008, led to the arrest of 14 individuals who were plotting to bomb the Barcelona metro. They were convicted in December of the following year.⁴⁵ However, in contrast to the previous period, the militants who were to carry out the attack were not part of Maghrebi networks but were of Pakistani origin, with links also to the TTP.⁴⁶ In other words, despite having more or less formal links with the GICM and GSPC, Al Qaeda Central did not enlist the help of Maghrebi networks in Spain (perhaps because it had lost direct contact with them) following the Madrid train bombings and the break-up of the network with which ties had been maintained since the Abu Dahdah period.

Figure 4: Time-line of anti-terrorist operations against linked and non-linked actors



Non-linked actors: independent cells and lone wolves

A new feature to emerge in the second period is the dismantling of small groups, and even isolated individuals, with no links to a higher organisation. The 15 cases identified can be classified as follows:

- Five independent cells which were planning acts of violence. In December 2004, Spanish security forces broke up a terror plot in the province of Barcelona, (operation Contera). The suspects arrested had tried to obtain 220 kilos of Semtex explosive through an Eastern European trafficker for an attack in Spain.⁴⁷ In March 2005 Spain's Civil Guard gendarmerie arrested two prisoners in Ceuta jail who were allegedly planning to carry out an attack in Spain.⁴⁸ In December 2006 police broke up a cell in the Príncipe district, also in Ceuta, which was said to be plotting strikes in Spain (Operation Duna). In neither case were explosives found or proof obtained that terrorist action was imminent.⁴⁹ The fourth case involved the arrest in March 2009 of a man in Tarragona with links to a cell broken up in Morocco that was planning an attack in the country. Finally, in June 2012, police in Melilla arrested two members of a radical Salafist group which had killed two young men in Morocco. One of the men killed was a former member of the group and, at the time of his death, was involved in a relationship with a woman ex-member.⁵⁰
- Four small cells (just two members each) that disseminated jihadist content on the Internet, although in a rather amateurish manner: Operations Jineta and Nazari (March 2007 and February 2009 respectively) the arrest of two young Moroccans in Seville in July 2011, and the arrest of other five Tunisians in Barcelona (operation Kartago) in June 2013.⁵¹ To these four cases can be added the young Cuban loner arrested for a similar reason in Majorca in September 2011 and other young Moroccan arrested in Catalonia in April 2013 (operation Kafka).⁵²
- Three “lone wolves” who were planning to carry out attacks in Spain. The first was a Moroccan who was detained in Gerona in September 2007 on his arrival from Toulouse (France). His car was found to contain several gas cylinders and pyrotechnic material, together with a communiqué from the Islamic Army in Iraq praising acts of martyrdom.⁵³ The second, also a Moroccan, was arrested in Cadiz in August 2011 as he tried to procure the means to poison water storage facilities. This individual also managed an amateur jihadist website. He manifested on Internet his intent to carry out an attack and on one forum even requested assistance for his planned action. This lack of professionalism facilitated his capture.⁵⁴ The third, other Moroccan arrested in Valencia in February 2013 as he tried to procure weapons to assassinate a top official from an Arab country.⁵⁵
- Two “professional” managers of forums which had a wide following of jihadist sympathisers. In August 2010 Faiçal Errai, a young Moroccan charged with being one of the administrators of the Ansar Al Mujahideen and Ansar Al Jihad networks, was arrested in a small town in Alicante.⁵⁶ In March 2012 Mudhar Hussein Almalki (aka “the librarian”), who was also accused of being an administrator of the Ansar Al Mujahideen

Network, was arrested in Valencia. Almalki spent between 8 and 15 hours daily managing the forum, which published statements by Al Qaeda Central, AQIM and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.⁵⁷

Conclusions

Even bearing in mind the warnings given at the beginning of this article as to the inherent weaknesses of generalising case studies and the partial perspective (on what is probably a broader but occult reality) that comes with confining the analysis to anti-terrorist operations, a number of conclusions can nonetheless be drawn.

Firstly, the significant influence exerted by major organisations on the materialisation of jihadist militancy. In 46 of the 64 cases (71%) there was a link with at least one organisation. This influence was absolute (15/15 cases, 100%) in the first period studied, namely, from 1995 until the 2004 Madrid train bombings. In the second period, although non-linked actors shared the scenario also, organisations retained an important role (31/49, 63%). The case study therefore corroborates previous studies highlighting the role of major organisations in mobilising jihadist militancy in the West. At the same time, this article recognizes the growing importance of individuals and cells not linked to any organization. Thus the final result is a mixed or polymorphous scenario in terms of organisational structure.⁵⁸

Secondly, our examination of events over time shows that the nature and intensity of jihadist threat in Spain are closely bound up with the strength of external organisations and the changes in their political agendas. In other words, although in many cases the individuals signed up as militants when they were already living in Spain (and can therefore rightly be considered “homegrown groups”), their activity has depended on vicissitudes beyond Spain’s borders: the strength of the GIA and the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s; the rise of Al Qaeda Central and support for its globalist cause through logistics activities and the preparation of plots from the early 2000s; support for the jihad in Iraq from 2004 to 2008; exclusively logistics support for AQIM as of its mutation from the GSPC in late 2006 and early 2007.

The behaviour of AQIM’s infrastructure in Spain is particularly striking since, as noted earlier, it reflects a clear contradiction between the globalist rhetoric of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb and its political agenda with regard to its networks in the West. The impression given is that it has preferred to use these networks for logistics roles, benefiting its own interests, rather than (risking losing them) for terrorist attacks serving the global jihadist cause.

Jihadist militancy’s partial dependence on major organisations in terms both of agenda and activities and the latter’s mobilisation potential means that the future of jihadist activism in Spain (and elsewhere in the West perhaps) is largely bound up with the future of such organisations. Its decline or resurgence will depend to a large degree on what happens to organisations whose parent body is very strongly linked to Muslim-majority countries (Pakistan, Algeria, Syria, Mali, Iraq, Lybia etc). Spain will be affected by the repercussions of developments in these countries not just as a result of the spontaneous reaction of independent actors but, above all, by how the developments are translated

into different types of activities by the ramifications of the aforementioned jihadist organisations.

The study carried out here shows also that both categories of actors - linked and independent - have been involved in terrorist plots in Spain. In all cases, however, the most serious and truly or potentially lethal plans (as evidenced by a successful terrorist operation or a court sentence) have been the exclusive province of cells with links to a jihadist organisation: the Madrid train bombings of March 2004, the placing of a device on the high-speed train line between Madrid and Seville in April of the same year, and the planned attack on the Barcelona metro which was foiled in January 2008 (Operation Cantata). This finding lends support to the arguments of those who have highlighted the qualitative difference, in terms of danger, of terrorist plots linked to organisations.⁵⁹

Finally, in view of the sheer volume of information managed, the case study has been unable to provide a detailed examination of each of the 64 anti-terrorist operations. Nonetheless, the general analysis offered has served to draw attention to the existence and importance of middle managers: Abu Dahdah and Amer Azizi (Operation Dátil), Mustapha Al Maymouni and Serhane Abdelmajid (Madrid train bombings), Abderrazak Mahdjoub (Operation Aguadulce), Samir Tahtah (Operation Tigris) and Omar Nachka (Operations Chacal-Génesis and Camaleón). These individuals play an essential role by integrating the activities of grass-roots militants in the strategy of the parent organisation and affording trans-regional projection to the core of the organisations thanks to their contacts with grass-roots militants.⁶⁰ They constitute the links between the leadership of the organisations featured here and the militants arrested in the 64 anti-terrorist operations discussed. Further study of these important figures is warranted in future works.

Annex 1

| | Date | Name | Function | Type | Organization | At least one member Convicted by terrorism |
|----|------------------|-------------------------------------|---|-------------|--------------------------|---|
| 1 | March 1995 | Ghebrid Messaoud | Arms trafficking | Linked | GIA | Yes |
| 2 | March 1996 | GIA network in Catalonia | Refuge, Transit assistance | Linked | GIA | No |
| 3 | June 1996 | Farid Rezgui | Transit assistance | Linked | GIA | No |
| 4 | April 1997 | Operation Appreciate | Funding, Transit assistance, Document forgery | Linked | GIA | Yes |
| 5 | April 1997 | GIA network in Barcelona | Transit assistance, Document forgery | Linked | GIA | Yes |
| 6 | April 1999 | Soubi Khaoui | Funding, Transit assistance | Linked | GIA | Yes |
| 7 | June 2001 | Mohamed Benschakria | Strasbourg Cathedral bombing plot | Linked | GSPC, Al Qaeda | No |
| 8 | September 2001 | Operation Fox | Funding, Document forgery | Linked | GSPC | No |
| 9 | November 2001 | Operation Dátil | Funding, Recruitment | Linked | Al Qaeda | Yes |
| 10 | April 2002 | Operation Salat Syam (Ahmed Brahim) | Propaganda on the internet | Linked | Al Qaeda | Yes |
| 11 | December 2002 | Abdelkrim Hammad | Recruitment | Linked | GSPC | Extradited |
| 12 | January 2002 | Operation Lago | Funding, Document forgery, Recruitment | Linked | GSPC | Yes |
| 13 | March 2003 | Operation Cespéd (Ahmed Rukhsar) | Funding | Linked | Al Qaeda | Yes |
| 14 | August 2003 | Operation Aguadulce | Terror plot | Linked | Ansar Al Islam | Extradited |
| 15 | February 2004 | Operation Kamikaze | Document forgery | Linked | Al Qaeda, Ansar Al Islam | No |
| 16 | March-April 2004 | Madrid bombings network | Terror attacks | Linked | Al Qaeda, GICM | Yes |
| 17 | May 2004 | Ansar Al Islam network in Bilbao, | Funding, Document forgery | Linked | Ansar Al Islam | No |

| | | | | | | |
|----|----------------|----------------------|--|-------------|--|------------|
| | | Barcelona and Madrid | | | | |
| 18 | October 2004 | Operation Nova | Terror plot | Independent | Former members of GIA linked to other operations | Yes |
| 19 | September 2004 | Operation Queixalada | Terror plot, Funding | Linked | Al Qaeda, Jaish-e-Mohamed | Yes |
| 20 | December 2004 | Hassan El Haski cell | Recruitment | Linked | GICM | Yes |
| 21 | December 2004 | Operation Contera | Terror plot | Independent | - | n/a |
| 22 | March 2005 | Redouan Ben Fraïma | Terror plot | Independent | - | n/a |
| 23 | April 2005 | Operation Saeta | Support fugitives of Madrid bombings network | Linked | GICM | No |
| 24 | June 2005 | Operation Tigris | Recruitment, Funding, Document forgery, Support fugitives of Madrid bombings network | Linked | Al Qaeda in Iraq | Yes |
| 25 | June 2005 | Operation Sello | Recruitment, Support fugitives of Madrid bombings network | Linked | GICM | No |
| 26 | November 2005 | Operation Gamo | Terror plot, Funding | Linked | GSPC | No |
| 27 | December 2005 | Operation Green | Funding | Linked | GSPC | Yes |
| 28 | December 2005 | Operation La Unión | Funding, Recruitment | Linked | Al Qaeda in Iraq | No |
| 29 | January 2006 | Operation Chacal | Funding, Recruitment, Refuge | Linked | GICM, GSPC, Al Qaeda in Iraq | n/a |
| 30 | January 2006 | Operation Camaleón | Funding, Recruitment | Linked | GICM, GSPC, Al Qaeda in Iraq | n/a |
| 31 | November 2006 | Operation Suez | Document forgery | Linked | Al Qaeda in Iraq | No |
| 32 | November 2006 | Operation Rally | Support Casablanca terror attacks | Linked | GICM | Extradited |
| 33 | December 2006 | Operation Duna | Terror plot | Independent | - | No |
| 34 | January 2007 | Operation Sello II | Recruitment, Support fugitives of | Linked | GICM, Al Qaeda in Iraq | Yes |

| | | | | | | |
|----|----------------|----------------------------------|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| | | | Madrid bombings network | | | |
| 35 | February 2007 | Operation Saten | Recruitment | Linked | Al Qaeda in the Maghreb | Extradited |
| 36 | March 2007 | Operation Rizo | Transit assistance | Linked | GICM | No |
| 37 | March 2007 | Operation Jineta | Propaganda on the internet | Independent | - | No |
| 38 | May 2007 | Operation Tala | Funding, Recruitment | Linked | GICM, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb | n/a |
| 39 | June 2007 | Moroccan cell in Barcelona | Recruitment | Linked | Al Qaeda in the Maghreb | Extradited |
| 40 | July 2007 | Operation Alepo | Funding | Linked | Al Qaeda | No |
| 41 | September 2007 | Operation Atlántico | Funding | Linked | Unknown | No |
| 42 | October 2007 | Moulay Abel Samad Lahrifi | Terror plot | Independent (Lone wolf) | - | No |
| 43 | October 2007 | Operation Bureba | Funding, Recruitment, Propaganda on the internet | Linked | GICM | No |
| 44 | January 2008 | Operation Cantata | Terror plot | Linked | Al Qaeda, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan | Yes |
| 45 | April 2008 | Moroccan cell in Melilla | Terror plot in Morocco | Linked | GICM | Extradited |
| 46 | June 2008 | Operation Submarino | Funding, Recruitment | Linked | Al Qaeda in the Maghreb | n/a |
| 47 | July 2008 | Operation Emir | Funding, Recruitment | Linked | Al Qaeda in the Maghreb | Yes |
| 48 | October 2008 | Operation Amat | Recruitment | Linked | GICM, Al Qaeda in Iraq | Yes |
| 49 | February 2009 | Operation Nazari | Propaganda on the internet | Independent | - | No |
| 50 | March 2009 | Member of Fatah Al Andalus cell | Terror plot in Morocco | Independent | - | Yes |
| 51 | November 2009 | Operation Ventanar | Funding | Linked | Al Qaeda in the Maghreb | Yes |
| 52 | August 2010 | Faïçal Errai (Operation Espiral) | Funding, Propaganda on the internet (Ansar Al Mujahideen Network and Ansar Al | Independent | - | Yes |

| | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------|---|---|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| | | | Jihad Network) | | | |
| 53 | July 2011 | Cell in Seville | Propaganda on the internet | Independent | | Yes |
| 54 | August, 2011 | Operation Regal (Abdellatif Aoulad Chiba) | Terror plot, Propaganda on the internet | Independent (Lone wolf) | - | Yes |
| 55 | September, 2011 | Operation Frambuesa (Ernesto Feliu Mora) | Propaganda on the internet | Independent (Lone wolf) | - | Yes |
| 56 | September, 2011 | Algerian network in Navarra | Funding | Linked | Al Qaeda in the Maghreb | n/a |
| 57 | March, 2012 | Operation Vortex (Mudhar Hussein Almalki) | Funding, Propaganda on the internet (Ansar Al Mujahideen Network) | Independent | - | Yes |
| 58 | June, 2012 | Operation Verde | Murder of former member in Morocco | Independent | - | Pending |
| 59 | August, 2012 | Operation Plomo | Terror plot in France | Independent | - | Pending |
| 60 | February 2013 | Mohamed Echaabi | Terror plot | Independent (Lone wolf) | - | Pending |
| 61 | April 2013 | Operation Kafka | Propaganda on the internet | Independent (Lone wolf) | - | No. Expelled to Algeria |
| 62 | April 2013 | Operation Nobel | Recruitment | Linked | Al Qaeda in the Maghreb | Pending |
| 63 | June 2013 | Operation Kartago | Propaganda on the internet | Independent | - | Pending |
| 64 | June 2013 | Cell in Ceuta | Recruitment | Linked | Jihadi organization in Syria | Pending |

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