

International Links and the Role of the Islamic State in the Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks in 2017

by Carlos Igualada

Abstract

Barcelona and Cambrils were the latest Spanish cities hit by jihadist terrorism. The attacks that occurred on August 17 and 18, 2017 have been brought back to the spotlight with the start of the trial at the end of 2020 and the judgment published in May 2021 on the three surviving members linked to the Ripoll cell. The purpose of this article is twofold. On one hand, it addresses the purpose behind the foreign trips made by members of the terrorist group in the cell formation process and planning phase of the attacks. In order to examine this issue, this study is basing itself on the court documents and the monitoring of thirty-two sessions held in the trial related to these attacks. On the other hand, the degree of proximity between the Islamic State and the terrorist cell that perpetrated the attacks will be analyzed, with special emphasis on the evidence gathered in Alcanar and the study of the propaganda subsequently issued by the Islamic State.

Keywords: Terrorism, jihadism, Barcelona, Cambrils, Ripoll cell, Spain, Islamic State

Introduction: The Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks

Until August 2017, Spain had managed to escape the wave of terrorist attacks experienced by other countries in Western Europe that began two years earlier. The attack on the headquarters of the French magazine Charlie Hebdo carried out by the Kouachi brothers and claimed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in January 2015 was the first of many more to come. A year earlier, the impact of the network formed by Abdelhamid Abaaoud, linked to perpetrators of other attacks such as the one on the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014, committed by Mehdi Nemmouche, could already be felt. Since then, European cities, including Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Manchester have been the scene of terrorist attacks committed by Islamic State cells or by individuals without any direct links to IS but inspired by its ideology.

In this context, and regardless of the fact that Spain has been one of the most active European countries in the fight against jihadist terrorism in recent years [1], it seemed to be only a matter of time before the country would also be successfully targeted. Specifically, the city of Barcelona had been a target of various terrorist plots in previous years. One of the most revealing examples was the dismantlement in Barcelona and Girona in January 2003 of a terrorist cell linked to Al-Qaeda that was preparing a chemical attack. Later, in January 2008, eleven members of a cell directly linked to Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan who had been planning to commit an attack on the Barcelona metro system had been arrested.[2] In April 2015 another anti-terrorist operation carried out by the Mossos d'Esquadra (Catalonian police) dismantled in Barcelona and Tarragona an eight-member-strong terrorist cell that was inspired by the Islamic State and aimed to carry out attacks in several locations of Barcelona including the Montjuic Olympic Stadium and the Parliament of Catalonia.

It should not be forgotten that in recent years, the Islamic State urged Muslims in Europe to commit attacks in their countries of residence, given the increased difficulties of them to move to the so-called caliphate established in Iraq and Syria. For this reason, Spain was directly mentioned in jihadist propaganda broadcasts, both by official channels of the Islamic State and by other outlets created by IS sympathizers.[3]

While in Western Europe some of the attack plots began to unfold, in Spain, an imam with extremist ideas named Abdelbaki Es Satty, who had already been convicted of drug trafficking in 2010, began to form a terrorist cell after indoctrinating and radicalizing a group of young people in the town of Ripoll, in the province of Girona. Prior to his time in prison, Es Satty had already been known for having connections with other jihadists, as evidenced in various Spanish police reports. Es Satty had links to Belgacem Bellil, an Algerian

suicide bomber who attacked the Italian military base in Nasiriya, Iraq, in November 2003, killing 28 people. Es Satty and Bellil had shared an apartment in the summer of 2003, after both met in Vilanova i la Geltrú (Barcelona).[4] Es Satty's name also appeared in the summary of a police operation known as *Operación Chacal* in January 2006, in which Spanish security forces managed to dismantle an Al-Qaeda network in charge of sending fighters to Iraq. However, Es Satty's role was, after investigation, considered irrelevant in this particular AQ network and it was decided not to proceed with his arrest.[5] In any case, Es Satty's long association with jihadism is of no surprise, since "people who acted as entrepreneurs in Europe during the 2000s and even the 1990s have reappeared in plots by Islamic State since 2014." [6] Likewise, Es Satty's connection with drug trafficking highlights a relationship that has previously been observed between several European jihadists and persons linked to organized crime, as manifested in the cases of Khalid Masood, Mohamed Lamsalak, and Khalid Zerkani.[7]

After leaving prison in 2014, Es Satty settled in Ripoll, where he managed to get a job as an imam at the *El-Fath* mosque. During the four months in which he served in this mosque as imam, Es Satty made contact with some young Muslims who would end up forming what later became known as the Ripoll cell. After a brief stay in Belgium between late 2015 and early 2016, Es Satty decided to return to Spain in mid-2016, having been offered the position of imam in the newly created mosque of *Annour*, also located in Ripoll. It was at this point that the imam took advantage of his position of authority and intensified the indoctrination of three older brothers of the Abboyaqoub, Hichamy, and Allaa families, who, in turn, would progressively introduce their younger brothers and friends into the cell that was beginning to take shape.[8] In this particular case, Marc Sageman's theory about terrorist cell formation seems to apply, since the radicalization process seems to have started from within the community without any help from outside.[9]

Es Satty's sermons were considered moderate and he managed to conceal the relationship he had with those young Muslims he was in the process of indoctrinating. However, in private circles, Es Satty showed his true face, radicalizing young Muslims based on his extremist postulates and accompanying his discourse with Islamic State propaganda material that he distributed to them with the help of a shared tablet. Es Satty's house and van were some of the most frequented places during the radicalization process of the emerging extremist cell, which soon began to take preventive measures to avoid arousing suspicion and being monitored by Spanish security forces.

The terrorist cell was fully structured by the first half of 2016, having a pyramidal structure in which Es Satty was the leader who was giving direct instructions to the three older brothers: Younes Abouyaaqoub, Youssef Allaa, and Mohamed Hichamy. The base of the Ripoll cell was formed by their younger brothers and some friends with whom these brothers had grown up together since childhood in Ripoll. Between June and July 2016, and coinciding with the month of Ramadan, the indoctrination process was completed. The members of the cell decided to begin preparations to carry out terrorist attacks.

By that time, members of the cell had begun to live in an uninhabited house owned by a bank in the town of Alcanar, in Tarragona, transforming this property into a safe house to isolate themselves and begin the manufacturing of TATP explosives.[10] Between July and mid-August 2016, members of the cell acquired the necessary precursor materials from a dozen supply centers in the provinces of Girona, Barcelona, Tarragona, and Castellón, acquiring in total 345 liters of hydrogen peroxide, 500 liters of acetone, twenty bottles filled with butane, 400 containers for mixing substances, and various electrical and laboratory equipment.[11] Such quantities of material would have allowed them to manufacture between eighty and 120 kilograms of TATP. [12] Thus, by mid-August, the Ripoll cell had practically everything ready to carry out attacks. These were originally planned for August 20, 2017, as evidenced by a manuscript attributed to Es Satty and found in Alcanar [13] (see below). Taking into account that the suitcases used in the Brussels airport attacks contained fewer than twenty kilograms of TATP explosives, had the original plan of the Ripoll cell materialized, it would have been of a "great magnitude" [14] and the number of victims would have been notably higher.[15]

According to the Spanish police investigation, the terrorist plan aimed to pack the explosives into three vans, strategically placing them in three neuralgic centers with a high presence of tourists. The selected targets were

the Sagrada Familia Cathedral, the Camp Nou stadium (where a league match was scheduled that day), both in Barcelona, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris.[16] In addition, an explosive vest was found at the Alcanar location, ready to be used, along with nineteen homemade hand grenades.[17] From this, one could conclude that the terrorists might have decided to create panic by strolling through the streets or placing these grenades in different parts of Barcelona.

However, during the night of August 16, and apparently while Es Satty and Said Allaa were moving the explosives from one room to another, the TATP was accidentally activated, causing a large explosion that killed both of them. The only survivor was Mohamed Houli, who was taken to the hospital. Thus, the original plan of the Ripoll cell had collapsed and the presumed mastermind of the planned attacks was dead.

It took more than twelve hours for the members of the Ripoll cell to learn that the house in Alcanar had exploded. One of them, Younes Abouyaaqoub, learned the news while he was on a highway driving a rented van to Alcanar. Faced with the impossibility of carrying out the original plan, he decided to act on his own, changing direction and heading toward Barcelona. Once there, he drove the vehicle into the well-known pedestrian street of Las Ramblas and ran over everyone in his path, zigzagging with the van.[18] At the moment the van stopped, the terrorist fled the scene of the attack in which fourteen people had been killed. Minutes later, another young man, Pau Pérez, was fatally stabbed by Younes Abouyaaqoub near the university area while he was stealing a vehicle for escape. For four days, a major police operation was set up to find him. He was finally found and killed on August 21 in Subirats, thirty kilometers away from the place where the car he had stolen on the day of the attack was found.

While Younes Abouyaaqoub was fleeing from the city center after the attack at Las Ramblas, five other terrorists in the cell, three of them minors, met to outline an alternative attack plan. Finally, they decided to head toward Cambrils, a town frequented by tourists during the summer months, and drove a car alongside the seafront promenade, running over pedestrians. Subsequently, they got out of the vehicle and tried to stab other pedestrians with bladed weapons they had acquired hours earlier in a bazaar, murdering a woman before they were shot by security forces.

The investigations carried out in Alcanar during the hours following the explosion on the night of August 16 pointed to the existence of a drug laboratory or a space used for the purchase and sale of butane gas canisters. Mohamed Houli, the only survivor of the apartment explosion, asserted that in his first statement taken in the hospital by government investigators. These hypotheses remained valid until a second explosion occurred the following day in the same house in Alcanar during the rubble removal. Between this second explosion and the moment in which the terrorist cell members in Barcelona drove their vehicle into the Las Ramblas passage, there was only a time difference of a few minutes. The key fact to establish a link between the two events was that Houli's passport was found in the van in Las Ramblas, which facilitated the work of connecting the dots and proceeding to his arrest at the hospital.

While the security deployment known as *Operación Jaula* was being set up to find the terrorist who had fled the scene of the crime at Las Ramblas, the security forces simultaneously began a search for a second van that had also been rented by the members of the cell together with the one used in this first attack. Rapid police action allowed for this van to be found in a parking area in Vic, a place close to Barcelona.[19] Three hours after the attack in Las Ramblas, a second member of the cell, Driss Oukabir, was arrested in Ripoll, after it had been discovered that the van used in the Las Ramblas attack had been rented in his name.[20]

After the terrorist who had fled from Las Ramblas was killed on August 21, the Ripoll cell was completely dismantled. Since then, the investigation that lasted more than two years managed to reconstruct the structure and functioning of the cell, the work carried out by each of its members, the radicalization process of the young Muslims, and their preparations for the attacks, among many other aspects. However, there are still some questions that have not been answered and there are also lessons to be learned, especially regarding the need for Spain to have more effective collaboration and communication between various police forces.[21]

Questions without Answers

Did Es Satty receive instructions from abroad or was he capable of elaborating the plan for the attacks on his own? How can the numerous trips to Europe and Morocco made by the terrorists in the months prior to the attacks be explained? Did the Ripoll cell have any international connections? Was there another terrorist cell in France that was going to carry out the attack on the Eiffel Tower? How did Younes Abouyaaqoub manage to flee Barcelona with security forces surrounding the city and travel for four days without anyone finding him? What was the role of the Islamic State in the attacks on Barcelona and Cambrils?

There were great expectations that some of these questions would be answered when the trial of the members of the Ripoll cell began in November 2020. However, from the very beginning, Judge Félix Alfonso Guevara made clear that the primary purpose of the trial was to determine the degree of responsibility and involvement of the three defendants Mohamed Houli, Driss Oukabir, and Said Ben Iazza.[22][23] Therefore, to find answers to the other questions, it becomes necessary to make use of the original sources and court documents that detail the development of the police investigation.

Given that, the purpose of this article will be focused on two major known unknowns surrounding the attacks. On the one hand, the focus is on the trips abroad made by members of the Ripoll cell. It is plausible to assume that several of these trips had a logistical purpose for the preparation of the attacks on the originally envisioned targets. On the other hand, this study is looking for evidence pointing to a link, at least in terms of ideological inspiration, between the Islamic State and the Ripoll cell. Addressing both questions becomes a necessity in order to find out whether the Ripoll cell acted exclusively under the influence of a single imam with extremist ideas or whether other individuals and external factors played a role planning and preparing the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks.

The International Dimension Issue

Court and police documents related to this case reveal intense travel activities across Europe and Morocco by members of the terrorist cell from the moment they decided to prepare their plot. While it is true that it has not been possible to find out what the real purpose of some of these trips was and whether or not they were related somehow to the preparations for the attacks, in cases similar to this one it has been known that such travel activity had a logistical function directly related to the objective of carrying out attacks. Likewise, based on the documentation available until now, it is worth pondering whether the terrorists in Barcelona and Cambrils had connections with other European jihadists who might have influenced the radicalization process of Es Satty or contributed to the planning of the attack.

The first of these trips was undertaken by Abdelbaki Es Satty, mastermind and leader of the Ripoll cell, who after leaving his position as imam at the *El-Fath* mosque in Ripoll moved to Belgium, staying there from October 2015 to April 2016. His destination was Vilvoorde, a town north of Brussels that at the beginning of the last decade had become, along with Molenbeek, one of the two major hot spots of radicalism and Islamic extremism in Belgium. In fact, between 2011 and 2013, twenty-eight of the town's nearly 40,000 inhabitants decided to travel and fight in Syria, providing proof of the presence of extremism in Vilvoorde.[24] Although mobilization to jihadist extremism has since then been curbed thanks to the involvement of local authorities and leaders of the local Muslim population, violent Salafist discourse continues to be found in Vilvoorde. Upon his arrival there, Es Satty tried to find a job at the Diegem mosque where he performed various functions on a trial basis for the first few months. However, when Suleyman Akaychouch, president of the *Diegem* mosque, tried to hire him and asked him to present his criminal record, Es Satty refused and was eventually forced to quit his job at the mosque.

Es Satty's last weeks in Belgium coincided with the country's March 2016 attacks on the Brussels airport and the downtown metro network, in which thirty-five people died. However, there is no evidence to link Es Satty to these attacks. Despite the fact that there is little information on the activities carried out by Es Satty beyond his work inside the *Diegem* mosque, there is still a possibility that during the half year he lived in Belgium he

was in contact with individuals linked to jihadist circles. During his stay he could have, for instance, learned how to make explosive vests.[25] In any case, once Es Satty returned to Spain, he went to Ripoll, where he was hired as imam of the new mosque of *Annour* in May 2016 without first having to disclose his criminal record. It is from this moment that the process of radicalization of the members of the Ripoll cell whom he had already met before his trip to Belgium speeded up. At the time he returned to Spain, Es Satty might already have conceived the idea of carrying out terrorist attacks.

By the end of 2016, the Ripoll cell intensified efforts to manufacture explosives. There is evidence that during the last months of that year there were numerous Internet searches carried out on a number of electronic devices belonging to members of the group. For instance, it was found that from Es Satty's computer, a manual with the title "The manufacture of explosives for beginners, from scratch" was accessed.[26] In December 2016, the traveling of some cell members became increasingly frenetic. Younes Abouyaaqoub, Yussef Allaa, and Mohamed Hichamy, the three older brothers closest to Es Satty, began a four-day trip. The first stop was made on December 26 in Paris, where they stayed only a few hours before moving on to Brussels, arriving in the Belgian capital the next day. The following morning, they returned to Spain.

Although the investigation has been unable to determine whether these trips were made for any specific purpose, for a variety of reasons it can be ruled out that this was a leisure trip of three young men. First, as the judicial investigation concluded, the Eiffel Tower was going to be one of the targets for a terrorist attack. In other words, this first trip to Paris could be linked to this objective. Moreover, the existence of Mohamed Boumansour, a contact of the Ripoll cell residing in France (see below), suggests that this trip could have had the purpose of (re-)establishing contact with him. Secondly, the radicalization process of the terrorists was so intense by the end of 2016 that some of them had begun isolating themselves from family and friends [27], relocating from Ripoll to Alcanar. For this reason, it is difficult to believe that the trips to France and Belgium were made merely for tourist purposes, given the growing emotional involvement of the cell members in attack preparations. Thirdly, it is known that the members of the Ripoll cell took many precautions to avoid attracting attention by the security forces. Therefore, it would be illogical to claim that, in the midst of searching for materials to manufacture explosives, some of the terrorists decided to make a trip crossing several European countries simply for pleasure.

In February 2017, Mohamed Houli decided to travel to Antwerp, where his uncle lived. This trip raises the least suspicion in terms of a possible association with logistical tasks during the preparation of the attacks. Houli could have traveled with the goal of finding work in Belgium, as his uncle stated, who saw him leaving his home in the mornings with several resumes in hand to deliver to different companies.[28] However, Houli did not manage to find a job and returned to Spain a month later.

A few days after Houli's return to Spain, another member of the cell traveled abroad. In this case, Es Satty, the mastermind behind the attacks, was the one who also traveled to Belgium between March 26 and 29 2017. The only known activity from this trip is that on the last day before flying back to Spain, he visited the mosque of Diegem, where the year before he had tried to become its imam. According to some people who were with him that day, the short trip of the imam to Belgium served the purpose of buying books in Arabic, since "it was cheaper to pay for the trip and buy the books in Belgium than to do it in Barcelona." [29]

A few days after returning from Belgium, Es Satty traveled again, this time to Morocco, where he spent practically the whole month of April, visiting his wife and children. The police investigation found that, while in Morocco, the cell leader continued to act as such, maintaining continuous contacts with the other members of the Ripoll cell. Most of these communications were made by using prepaid cards acquired under false names and without using his personal phone.[30] Likewise, during his stay in Morocco, he also continued to search for ways to manufacture explosives on the Internet from his own computer and cell phone.[31] This was only four months before the planned attacks. During this period there was a significant increase in the number of phone calls made between the members of the Ripoll cell.

Es Satty returned to Morocco sometime between mid-July and mid-August. However, there is no information indicating a possible link with the upcoming attacks. Given that his return to Spain took place on August 12,

this trip could be interpreted as Es Satty's goodbye visit to his family, given that at that time he already knew that the attacks were scheduled for August 20 while his disciples were, during those days, manufacturing the explosives in the house in Alcanar.

While Es Satty was in Morocco, Driss Oukabir also visited this country, staying in Tangier [32] and nearby towns between August 2 and 13. After being arrested, Oukabir justified this trip as a kind of spiritual retreat (*jalwa*) [33] to put an end to his previous life of excesses with drugs, alcohol, and other un-Islamic activities. However, this trip also fulfilled a logistical function with respect to the preparation of the attacks. As demonstrated by one of the conversations he had with his younger brother, also a member of the Ripoll cell, during his days in Morocco he had managed to fix several damaged cell phones that had been previously used by the terrorists and acquire new ones for a very affordable price. He also carried out searches with his cell phone that could be tied to attack preparations, as numerous Internet searches he made during this period were related to heavy vehicles [34] as well as firearms and various types of knives and axes.[35]

One piece of information that has been confirmed is that immediately after Driss's return to Spain, he gave his younger brother a phone number related to Mohamed Boumansour, considered to be the French contact of the Oukabir brothers, instructing him to call him "urgently".[36] It is known that Boumansour was in Ripoll a few days before the attacks and, due to this, he was subsequently arrested in France. However, the lack of convincing evidence to prove his involvement or having had knowledge of the plans for the attacks led to his release nine months after his arrest.

One of the last trips undertaken by members of the Ripoll terrorist cell abroad can, without a doubt, be directly associated with a mission related to the preparatory work for the attacks. Younes Abouyaaqoub and Omar Hichamy traveled to Paris between August 11 and 12 in the same vehicle that would be used only a week later in the Cambrils attack. Once there, they bought a camera and two cell-phone cards. One of these they activated and used immediately. The camera was used to take photos and recordings of the Eiffel Tower. While this behavior could also be understood as typical for any tourist, the analysis of several photos and videos taken of the occasion showed clearly that the focus of interest was not the monument itself, but strategic points around it [37], particularly access points for vehicles, unloading areas, and the specific positions of security forces close to the Eiffel Tower. During their return, the two cell members slept near Villejuif, a city where just a few weeks after the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils a laboratory for the manufacture of TATP explosives was discovered.[38] Gérard Collomb, the French Interior Minister, said it was possible that those arrested in France as a result of this operation had some connection with another cell, including the one in Ripoll. According to one of the statements made by Houli after his arrest, Es Satty sent the two members of the cell to Paris "for some reason still unknown to him." [39]

What emerges from the analysis of the trips abroad made by these travelers is that most of them took place once the Ripoll cell had been fully established and preparations for the attacks were underway. Even if some of these trips do not appear to have a direct link with the attacks, it is revealing that there is a direct connection between the trips carried out during the weeks and days prior to the attacks and the logistical tasks linked to the plot. Furthermore, it is likely—but not proven—that the Ripoll cell members used these trips to establish or reinforce contacts with other individuals connected with jihadism in Europe. In this context, the role played by Mohamed Boumansour and the contact who might have taught Es Satty how to make an explosive vest during his stay in Belgium is likely to be a key confirmation of the hypothesis of an international link with other jihadist networks.

The Islamic State Nexus

One of the most important questions in the investigations of the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks has centered on the relationship between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State (IS). The appearance of the name of IS in a text claiming responsibility for the attacks, as well as the various press releases issued by the Islamic State in relation to the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks, suggests there was a direct relationship. However, it is important to analyze each of these elements in detail to determine exactly what role the Islamic State may have played in

these attacks.

At around 9:00 p.m. on the night of August 17, 2017, the Islamic State published a message through its news agency *Amaq News* that read: “*the perpetrators of the attack in Barcelona are Islamic State soldiers and carried out the operation on command on Khilafah of targeting coalition countries.*” This release could be considered a standard message used by the Islamic State to claim responsibility for attacks abroad, given that the vocabulary used and the lack of more precise information provided are its distinctive features. This was similar to other attacks claimed in the years before, such as the claim published after the Nice attack which read: “*One of our soldiers carried out Thursday night’s attack in response to calls to target nations of coalition states that are fighting Islamic State.*” However, the most distinctive feature of the claim of responsibility for the Las Ramblas attack is the speed and promptness with which it was published. Barely four hours had elapsed between the attack and the *Amaq* media release [40], making this the attack claimed most rapidly by the Islamic State when compared with all other attacks attributed or linked to IS in Europe between 2015 and 2017.[41]

Two days later, there was a second media release claiming responsibility for the attacks, this time including the Cambrils attack. On this occasion, the news channel chosen was not *Amaq* but *Nashir News*, a production company that creates content specifically for dissemination on social networks and publishes mainly in Arabic and English, but also in other languages such as German and Spanish. The release read:

“With the support of Allah, several mujahidin set out synchronously in 2 covert units targeting gatherings of Crusaders in Spain on the last Thursday. The first group of mujahidin targeting a gathering of Crusaders with bus in Las Ramblas in Barcelona. They also ran over 2 policemen at a police checkpoint. After that, they stormed a “bar” (restaurant) with their light weapons near Las Ramblas square, torturing and killing the Crusaders and Jews inside. Meanwhile, the other group ran over several Crusaders with a van in the coastal town of Cambrils. The blessed attack resulted in killing and wounding more than 120 of the Crusader Coalition citizens...”[42]

As will be noticed, this second news release contains several errors and inaccuracies about the events: the use of a bus in the Las Ramblas attack and a van in Cambrils, a simultaneous double attack that in reality did not exist, and the taking of hostages at a restaurant in Las Ramblas that also had no basis in reality. All these errors are a consequence of the several pieces of misinformation that circulated on social networks, especially Twitter, moments after the Barcelona attack. The fact that *Nashir News* published all this as if these were true facts and without providing any new information means that the Islamic State was in all likelihood unaware of the attacks, or at least of the improvised plan B that emerged after the first explosion in Alcanar.[43]

On August 23, the Islamic State mentioned the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks for the third time. Under the heading “*The first rain: The raid of Barcelona*”, the *Al Khayr* production company, based in the Syrian province of Deir-ez-Zor, released a video based on images recorded by Spanish media after the attacks. This video was accompanied by the testimony of two jihadists speaking in Spanish. One of them, well known to the Spanish intelligence services, Mohamed Yassin Ahram Pérez [44], stated: “*To the Spanish Christians, do not forget the spilled blood of the Muslims of the Spanish Inquisition. We will avenge your massacre, the one you are doing currently with the Islamic State*” and “*if you cannot make the Hegira to the Islamic State, jihad has no borders; make jihad wherever you are.*” It is most likely that this fragment in which “El Cordobés” [Cordoba] appears was recorded prior to the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils because there is no mention of these. That was not the case with the second individual who appeared in another fragment of the video with his face covered. He also threatened: “*May Allah accept the sacrifices of our brothers in Barcelona. Our war with you will last until the end of the world.*” This Spanish-speaking jihadist was introduced in the video under the name of Abu Salman Al Andalusi.

Two days later, issue 95 of the Arabic news bulletin *Al Naba*, a propaganda pamphlet of the Islamic State, echoed the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils through an infographic with the silhouette of Barcelona’s Sagrada Familia. In this publication, the same errors and inaccuracies of the previously mentioned *Nashir News* release were repeated. This is significant because such errors reveal the feedback loops that exist between various official news outlets of the Islamic State.

On September 9, Issue 13 of IS's *Rumiyah* magazine dedicated several of its sections to the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils (front cover, back cover, two articles comparing these attacks with those of 11 March 2004 in Atocha, and an infographic with the Sagrada Familia). This was noteworthy, since only the Paris attacks in November 2015 had managed to generate more media content within a single Islamic State publication. From the analysis of the information published in this particular issue of *Rumiyah*, it can be concluded that the information exposed is a compilation of everything that was already publicly known, but repeating errors of previous IS publications, while also propagating additional falsehoods. One of the most obvious errors was the statement that Spain was forced to raise the antiterrorist alert to level 4 (out of 5), whereas this decision had actually already taken place in June 2015.

There was interest in knowing what kind of content *Rumiyah* was going to publish in its upcoming issue in order to find out, as happened with the attacks in Paris and Brussels, whether new information would appear that could reveal a direct link between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State. However, in issue 13 of *Rumiyah* there were no biographies of the perpetrators of the attacks nor any other new information.

Finally, the production company *Al Furat Media Center* made reference to these attacks in Catalonia in two of its publications in its series "*Knights of the lone Jihad*".[45] In the first one, a call was made to Muslims to carry out new attacks on the West "following the example of the Barcelona and Cambrils group." In the second publication, although no explicit mention is made, an image was shown with the Barcelona skyline next to a hand covered with blood.

Regarding the influence exerted by the Islamic State on the members of the Ripoll cell, there are also several elements that require attention. The most important of these was a manuscript found among the ruins of the house in Alcanar, which was authored by Es Satty [46], according to the investigation carried out by the Mossos d'Esquadra. The manuscript fragment found corresponds to the heading of a release and reads as follows (translated from Arabic): "*In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate. Brief letter from the soldiers of the Islamic State in the land of Al-Andalus to the crusaders, the hateful, the sinners, the unjust, the corrupters.*"[47] The date of this document translated from the Islamic calendar would coincide with August 20, 2017, the day on which the terrorists were supposed to carry out their attacks on the Sagrada Familia, the Camp Nou stadium, and the Eiffel Tower. Likewise, the police in Alcanar also recovered other—but apparently unconnected to this case—manuscript fragments in which there were repeated allusions to the Islamic State ("*The Islamic State and its soldiers in every corner of the planet*" and "*The Islamic State through the descendants of Youssef*") and in which inflammatory rhetoric was used ("*Since the fall of Andalus in the hands of the envious crusaders*" or "*Western countries want to corrupt Muslims*").

On the other hand, among the rubble in Alcanar an electronic device with a video of great importance was discovered. This video had been recorded by Mohamed Houli days before the explosion in Alcanar. In this video, three of the terrorists appear manufacturing the explosives while issuing threats in Arabic and Spanish with statements such as: "*Look how you are going to suffer*", "*This is for you to know that the Muslim has dignity and strength with the power of God*", and "*Allah has chosen us among millions of men to make you cry blood.*" In another fragment of this video, Younes Abouyaaqoub, perpetrator of the Las Ramblas attack, is seen wearing an explosives vest and making the *tawhid* gesture.

It is difficult to determine what the usefulness of this video could have been. Taking into account the many security measures taken by the Ripoll cell in order not to be detected by Spanish security forces, it would not make sense to expose themselves this way with a homemade video before committing the attack since the video could have ended up in the wrong hands. Therefore, it is likely that this video recorded by the terrorists was meant to be sent to an intermediary who would have contacted the Islamic State or that it was meant to be published in other channels. It seems unlikely that the members of the Ripoll cell had a direct link with IS. Therefore, the video, together with the manuscript of Es Satty, could conceivably have been used as evidence to claim responsibility for the attacks in the name of the Islamic State.[48]

Another example of how the Islamic State and its propaganda had deeply influenced the Ripoll cell can be seen in what happened in the town of Riudecanyes. There, the five cell members who would commit the

Cambrils attack hours later decided to burn all their identification documents in a bonfire. This ritual, which renounces their identity as individuals along with their previous life, was a clear sign of their total commitment to the Islamic State and marked the beginning of a path of no return. Probably they decided to perform this ceremonial act inspired by many of the foreign fighters who had traveled to Syria and Iraq in recent years who had acted in the same way. An example was published by the Al Hayat media outlet in late 2014 when several French foreign fighters were seen burning their passports in a video.

Finally, one of the many pillowcases found in the Alcanar house during the investigation after the explosion [49] had an Islamic State flag drawn on it, being yet another sign of how the Ripoll cell had adopted as its own the symbology of IS.

The evidence that has surfaced so far does not allow us to affirm that the Ripoll cell had a direct connection with members of the Islamic State nor that cell members had received instructions from IS. However, there is strong evidence to assert that the Ripoll cell members were radicalized and decided to commit terrorist attacks under the influence of the propaganda and ideology of the Islamic State. This is demonstrated by the adoption of the symbols and narrative discourse of the Islamic State as their own and a text found among the rubble in Alcanar where they call themselves “*soldiers of the Islamic State in the land of Al-Andalus.*”

Conclusions

Four years after the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, there are still two fundamental questions that need to be answered. On one hand, it is important to figure out whether the terrorists had logistical support abroad from other individuals linked to the European jihadist movement during any of their foreign trips. On the other hand, it is pivotal to determine the degree of closeness between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State.

In the first place, we can conclude that various trips undertaken by members of the Ripoll cell during the months, weeks, and days leading up to the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils must have served a logistical purpose related to the preparations of the attacks. Nevertheless, the fact that they obtained support or instructions from someone outside the cell while carrying out logistical tasks abroad could not be demonstrated clearly. However, the relationship of members of the cell with Mohamed Boumansour regarding preparations for the attack on the Eiffel Tower, as well as the discovery who taught Es Satty to make an explosives vest in Brussels, may be crucial for the existence of an international connection.

Regarding the degree of closeness between the Ripoll cell and the Islamic State, there is sufficient evidence to affirm that the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks were inspired by the ideology, symbolism, and narrative of this terrorist organization. This is demonstrated by the numerous propaganda videos made by the Islamic State found in electronic devices of some of the members of the Ripoll cell, the manuscripts claiming responsibility for the attack found in Alcanar, the video recorded by the terrorists themselves, the ritual performed in Riudecanyes by the five perpetrators of the Cambrils attack where they burned their identification documents, and the drawing of the flag of the Islamic State on a pillowcase found in Alcanar.

All these pieces of evidence lead us to believe that the Ripoll cell had planned to carry out its original plan and claim the attack in the name of the Islamic State, using the manuscript of Es Satty and the video in which three of the terrorists threatened Spain and the West while manufacturing the explosives. Both of these would almost certainly have been published later in media related to the Islamic State or even directly by an official producer of IS, thus following the same procedure by which the Islamic State had claimed responsibility for other recent terrorist actions in Europe.

To be on the safe side, given the currently publicly available evidence, it can only be asserted that the Islamic State was a model of inspiration for the Ripoll cell. However, in this author’s opinion, it might still be possible to discover international links with other terrorist individuals or cells in the future—links revealing that these attacks have not only been inspired, but also guided by someone else close to the Islamic State.

About the Author: Carlos Igualada, PhD, is director of the International Observatory for Terrorism Studies (OIET). He collaborates with several Spanish universities and contributes to academic publications of the Spanish Ministry of Defense and the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is a researcher for the European Commission's GF-AML/CFT Program. His line of research focuses on the evolution of global jihadist organizations.

Notes

- [1] According to official data from the Ministry of the Interior, since the Madrid bombings in 2004, 875 individuals linked to jihadist activity have been arrested in Spain in a total of 315 operations.
- [2] Fernando Reinales, Carola García-Calvo, "Spaniards, You Are Going to Suffer': The inside story of the August 2017 attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, no. 1 (January 2018).
- [3] As an example, the video published in September 2016 by the Islamic State's communication agency in the Al-Jair province under the heading "The Caliphate Generation" called for the recovery of Al-Andalus while illustrating the statement with images of the Alhambra in Granada.
- [4] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 21/2006, pp. 1276–1278.
- [5] *Ibid.*, pp. 1283–1285
- [6] Petter Nesser, "Military Interventions, Jihadi Networks, and Terrorist Entrepreneurs: How the Islamic State terror wave rose so high in Europe," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 3 (March 2019).
- [7] Rajan Basra, Peter Neumann, "Crime as Jihad: Developments in the crime-terror nexus in Europe," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 10, no. 9 (October 2017). José Luis Gil Valero, "Sicarios y Yihad: ¿Es posible la convergencia?" *Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo (RIET)*, no. 3 (August 2021).
- [8] The Ripoll terrorist cell was characterized by the existence of strong intrafamilial links between many of its members. There were four pairs of siblings and two of these pairs were cousins. These kinship ties helped to avoid arousing suspicion and strengthened the cohesion of the group as a whole.
- [9] TATP is a type of explosive formed from acetone triperoxide. It had previously been used for the Brussels bombings on 22 March 2016, and the Manchester bombing on 22 May 2017. Despite being highly unstable, TATP is relatively simple to make from easily accessible compounds. The Islamic State has been the terrorist organization that has made the most use of this explosive in recent years. Several of its partner producers have issued manuals that have circulated through jihadist forums and social networks providing instructions on how to make it. The Ripoll cell had several of these manuals in its possession, as emerged from the analysis of computer devices belonging to the group.
- [10] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018, p. 33.
- [11] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- [12] Audiencia Nacional, Diligencias Previas 60/2017: p. 1.
- [13] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018, p. 22.
- [14] Audiencia Nacional, Diligencias Previas 60/2017: p. 3.
- [15] Carlos Igualada, "Los atentados de Cataluña un año después. Reconstrucción de los acontecimientos, interrogantes y lecciones por aprender." *Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo*, 2018.
- [16] The analysis of the terrorists' electronic devices also found numerous searches for other targets that could have been considered for the attacks but were later discarded by the terrorists themselves. Among these alternative targets figured the headquarters of the National High Court in Madrid, the Alhambra in Granada, the Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, the Port Aventura Park, and several clubs on the Mediterranean coast.
- [17] National High Court, Summary 5/2018, p. 20.
- [18] Francisco J. Girao, "Atentado en Barcelona del 17-A. La calificación institucional y periodística de los hechos en las primeras horas en Twitter." *Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo (RIET)*, no. 2 (April 2021), pp. 18–42.
- [19] The intended use of this van is unknown. However, it is possible that this was the vehicle that the terrorists were planning to use to transport the explosives to Paris.
- [20] Driss Oukabir has always professed his innocence, claiming that other members of the cell asked him to rent the van for a move and that he was not part of the group. However, the investigation points to the fact that he was aware at all times of the planning of the attacks, being a component of the terrorist cell. However, he backed down at the last moment.
- [21] Rogelio Alonso, Jesús Castán, "The Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks: A case study of the impact of political decentralization and separatism on counter terrorism policing," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (October 3, 2020).
- [22] Ben Iazza was arrested in September 2018 when the investigation discovered that he had carried out logistical work for the terrorist cell and had visited Alcanar in August 2017—an indication that he must have been aware of the planning of the attacks.

- [23] On May 27, 2021, the sentence on the three defendants was published. Mohamed Houli was sentenced to 53 years in prison, Driss Oukabir's sentence was 46 years, while Said Ben Iazza was given a sentence of 8 years in prison. Ben Iazza was the only one of the three who was convicted of the crime of collaboration, while Houli and Oukabir were convicted of belonging to a terrorist organization while their attempt was judged to be terrorist in nature.
- [24] Leo Cendrowicz, "Vilvoorde: The Brussels district fighting radicalisation with kindness," *The Independent* (December 30, 2015).
- [25] A protected witness who testified in one of the trial sessions pointed this out. Nor should we forget that among the belongings found in the Alcanar house was an explosive vest ready for use. According to a statement by Mohamed Houli, the person it was meant to be used by would have been Es Satty.
- [26] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018, p. 5.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- [28] Anna Teixidor, Los silencios del 17-A, *Dieresis*, 2020: 205.
- [29] *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- [30] The police investigation found that the cell members acquired at least nineteen "conspirativos" telephone numbers meant for calls exclusively between the members of the group.
- [31] One of the Internet searches conducted during those days, and later documented by the investigation, was "explosives manufacturing for beginners."
- [32] Tangier is considered to be one of the main centers of radicalization in northern Morocco, along with the cities of Tetouan and Castillejos. Since the rise of the Islamic State, it is estimated that several hundred people from these three towns traveled to the jihadist caliphate in Syria and Iraq.
- [33] The *jalwa* is a spiritual journey that some Muslims make in order to purify their souls and start new lives away from bad behaviors that lead away from the faith.
- [34] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 60/2017: pp. 370–371.
- [35] *Ibid.*, pp. 160–179.
- [36] This conversation was detected by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which revealed that the Oukabir brothers were at that very moment talking about the preparation of the attacks in a Facebook conversation.
- [37] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018: p. 17.
- [38] *La Vanguardia*, "Un tercer arrestado por el laboratorio de explosivos hallado junto a París" (Spanish edition) (September 7, 2017).
- [39] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 60/2017, p. 267.
- [40] It is important to note that the claim of an attack by the Islamic State does not necessarily imply the direct participation of the group, as has been shown on different occasions in which the role of the Islamic State has been reduced to the one of an ideological inspiration. On some other occasions, these claims have turned out to be false, as was the case with the attack in June 2017 on a casino in Manila or in October of the same year in Las Vegas.
- [41] To compare, the Islamic State claimed the Paris attacks by noon the following day, while in the case of the Brussels attacks it took seven hours after the explosions before the first statement was issued by Amaq.
- [42] Although the date of the headline would coincide with August 18, 2017, its publication occurred one day later.
- [43] In contrast, after the Paris attacks in November 2015, during the days and weeks that followed, the Islamic State released various pieces of information about the preparations for the attacks, as well as information about the perpetrators that had previously been unknown and had not appeared in the media. This hints that the Islamic State was aware of the plans for the attacks.
- [44] Also known as Abu Lais Al Qurdubi ("El Cordobés"), he is one of the sons of Tomasa Pérez, a Spanish woman married to Abdel Ahram, who has been serving a sentence for terrorism in Morocco since 2011. Tomasa decided to travel with all her children from Spain to the jihadist caliphate in 2014, following the Islamic State's call for "hijra".
- [45] This series of publications stands out because a large portion of its issues is aimed at followers of the Islamic State. It gives instructions and advice on how to commit terrorist attacks in the West.
- [46] The defense of the accused Said Ben Iazza criticized during the trial that the authorship of the manuscript was attributed to Es Satty without the presentation of handwriting reports to prove it.
- [47] Audiencia Nacional, Sumario 5/2018, p. 22.
- [48] The Berlin attack in December 2016 is an example of how the Islamic State claims an attack based on the publication of a video in which the perpetrator previously pledges allegiance to the organization.
- [49] The pillowcases were to be used by the terrorists to store the explosives. This would have made it easier to transfer the TATP into the vans that were to be used to commit the attacks.