

Linking the August 2017 Attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils to Islamic State's External Security Apparatus Through Foreign Fighters

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Abstract

The Ripoll cell, to which the jihadists who perpetrated the August 2017 attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils belonged, is best understood as a cell linked to the central structures of Islamic State (IS) through displaced or returned foreign fighters of Western European origin. This can be deduced, on the one hand, from a contextual and in-depth analysis of IS notifications and pronouncements in the aftermath of the attacks, unveiling the role played by the jihadist organization's "external security" apparatus in instigating and guiding the Ripoll cell in attack planning and preparations. On the other hand, this can also be deduced from a study of both direct and circumstantial evidence about the cross-border movements and international contacts of the main cell members, particularly in and out of Belgium in approximately the year and a half prior to the August 2017 attacks. In addition, information emerging from intelligence sources corroborates, or is consistent with, this perspective

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Introduction

On 17 August 2017 in the city of Barcelona and on the following day in the town of Cambrils—both in Catalonia, Spain—six jihadists armed with vehicles and knives launched a series of terrorist attacks, killing 16 people and wounding 137.[1] These jihadists belonged to a 10-men cell that had initially planned to carry out far more ambitious and lethal attacks on 20 August in Barcelona using the explosive TATP. But they changed and accelerated the plans after an abandoned house in the municipality of Alcanar, southeast of Catalonia, that they used as a bomb factory blew up accidentally on the night of 16 August. Two cell members—including imam Abdelbaki Es Satty, the cell leader—died because of this explosion. Six others—actually, those who participated directly in the execution of the attacks—were shot dead by the police. The remaining two cell members were arrested and subsequently convicted of terrorism offences. Additionally, the cell benefited from the collaboration of an individual upon whom a prison sentence was also imposed. [2]

The cell started to form in 2015 in Ripoll, a small locality in northern Catalonia, after Es Satty arrived there and radicalized some young Muslims, a few of them already sympathetic to Salafism. Es Satty and eight of his followers in the cell were Moroccan nationals and one was a citizen of Spain. Nine were second-generation Muslims, born or raised in Spain but descendants of Moroccan immigrants. The one exception, the imam himself, migrated from Morocco to Spain in 2002. All were legal residents in Spain. Under the charismatic authority of the imam, kinship was an important factor for recruitment into the cell, since there were four pairs of brothers, with one set of brothers being cousins with another set of brothers. Aside from the 44-years old leader, the three other core cell members—Mohamed Hichamy, Youssef Aalla and Younes Abouyaaqoub—were aged 24, 22 and 22 at the time of the attacks, respectively. Secondary to them, five more cell members were between 18 and 24 year of age, whereas the youngest and only minor among them was aged 17.[3]

Although the Ripoll cell members were pro-Islamic State (IS), it was possible from the very beginning to rule out the possibility of the cell being integrated into IS's structures. IS directorate had introduced changes in its strategy in the West after the March 2016 attacks in Brussels, the last attacks in Western Europe involving IS-trained militants who were part of a centrally-directed operational network.[4] The modified strategy was

implemented in May 2016 and lasted until 2019, around the time when the caliphate that IS had proclaimed five years earlier across vast territories of Syria and Iraq lost most of its territorial base. In the framework of this modified strategy, IS continued using propaganda to instigate attacks by lone actors and inspired cells on their own but added the option of remotely guiding supporters willing to attack.[5] For this latter option, IS “external security” apparatus—part of the security *diwan* or central bureaucracy of the caliphate—was charged with selecting and designating activists, especially among foreign fighters of Western European origin in Syria and Iraq or returnees, to liaise with prospective attackers and to act as virtual planners or field supervisors.[6]

In that respect, our article offers a scholarly analysis, based on documented evidence, to concisely explain why the Ripoll cell behind the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils is best understood as a cell linked to the “external security” apparatus of IS. No other aspects of the cell and its members or other facets of the attacks are dealt with in this article. Our contribution is part of a larger research initiative on the case and draws basically from primary sources. These include: twelve long individual and group interviews as well as additional shorter communications with officials from Catalonia’s autonomous police or Mossos d’Esquadra (ME), from the statewide law enforcement agencies Cuerpo Nacional de Policia (CNP, National Police) and Guardia Civil (GC, Civil Guard), from the Centro de Inteligencia sobre Terrorismo y Crimen Organizado (CITCO, Center for Intelligence on Terrorism and Organized Crime), from the Centro Nacional de Inteligencia (CNI, National Intelligence Center), and from the Prosecutor’s Office or Fiscalía of the Audiencia Nacional (AN, National Court), all of them knowledgeable about the case;[7] and judicial documents and police reports related to the August 2017 attacks.[8] Occasionally we relied also on credible open and secondary sources.[9]

Imam Es Satty and his Followers Inside the Ripoll Cell: “We, the Soldiers of the Islamic State in the Usurped Land of Al Andalus”

Among the ruins of the house in Alcanar that the Ripoll cell members occupied and used as a bomb factory—the house where on the night of 16 August 2017 a good part of the between 200 and 500 kilograms of TATP produced by members of that terrorist cell during the preceding days had accidentally exploded—police investigators of ME found three Arabic-language manuscripts handwritten by Es Satty. These texts are of interest to learn how he defined himself and his followers as members of the jihadist cell that they formed in Ripoll. The first of these handwritten samples is a note that Es Satty wrote on the back of a passport-type photograph of himself. Its translation into English is the following:

“Soldier of the soldiers of the Islamic State. The one who comes is more astute and ordered: Wait! I am also one of those who wait.”[10]

This note makes it plain that Es Satty saw himself as a “soldier” of IS. But aside from that it is also worth observing, even at this early stage in our analysis on the links between the Ripoll cell and IS “external security” apparatus, how the more cryptic words of such a brief note seemed to insinuate that Es Satty’s activities and movements with respect to the terrorist plot under way depended on orders given by someone who was above him and further afield. Es Satty was waiting on someone—either in person or virtually—before he and his followers in the Ripoll cell attempted to execute the plot. This would have been someone to whom Es Satty was subordinated and had better aptitudes or skills for guiding or supervising the intended purpose than the Moroccan imam, as this note acknowledged.

Referring now to the jihadists in the Ripoll cell who, like Es Satty himself, were ready to die while killing as many as possible in Barcelona, the cell leader used two expressions that appeared respectively on a sheet of paper and on a separate fragment of white paper, as fragments of an open letter or declaration that he was drafting the same day that he lost his life. The declaration was to be made public on 20 August or very shortly thereafter, since that is the date that appears on these fragments. Both expressions reiterated the denomination “soldiers of Islamic State” for the Ripoll cell members and included a mention of the Ripoll cell’s setting when alluding to the medieval Islamic dominion over most of the Iberian Peninsula—or “Al

Andalus”—which holds a special meaning for the jihadists.

Moreover, the first expression remarks the situation that jihadists attribute to what they still consider to be a Muslim land, whereas the second uses five terms commonly used in the propaganda of IS to broadly identify the addressees of the declaration, a typical range of enemies designated commonly in IS rhetoric. Translated into English, these sentences read as follows:

“[...] We the soldiers of the Islamic State in the usurped land of Al Andalus.”[11]

“In the name of Allah, the merciful, the beneficent. 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 corrupt.”[12]

The Ripoll cell members were major consumers, through different electronic devices, of the propaganda that IS had been spreading online since 2014, when the organization was constituted as such, and when their leaders adopted its new name while proclaiming a caliphate over the territories of Syria and Iraq then under IS control. That propaganda included speeches by IS’s emir at the time, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, and by Abu Mohamed al Adnani, its main strategist until his death in August 2016.[13] Members of the Ripoll cell also showed adherence to IS in many other ways, from carrying images with the jihadist organization’s flag on their mobile phones to drawing the same banner on at least one of the many pillowcases they used to dry TATP in the house of Alcanar.[14]

Likewise, the cell members who launched the Cambrils attacks emulated hours before a behavior observed among young Muslims that IS had recruited in Western Europe mainly as foreign fighters: they met to burn their passports and other identity documents in a ceremony seen as a ritual of loyalty to IS and as an open renouncement of their nationalities in favor of the ummah or the nation of Islam.[15] In short, the Ripoll cell members considered themselves IS “soldiers” and saw IS as their go-to jihadist organization. But the foregoing does not yet make it possible to clarify whether Es Satty and his followers formed an IS-inspired cell or an IS-linked cell. To elucidate it we must continue by understanding what IS said about the members of the Ripoll cell and especially when and how IS disseminated statements on the matter.

What the Amaq News Agency and a Sequence of Notifications Afterwards Revealed about the Relationship between the Ripoll Cell and IS

On 17 August 2017, just four hours after the vehicle-ramming attack in La Rambla, Amaq News reported through the Telegram messaging application that IS was taking credit for what had happened. Since its creation in 2014, Amaq News agency was part of the IS central propaganda structures, and, as of 2016, became the preferred tool to claim as quickly as possible responsibility for attacks in the West, though only if authorized by the aforementioned “external security” apparatus. This formula created some distance between IS leadership and the attackers, placing on the latter the responsibility for the outcome of their attacks.[16] The notification issued by Amaq News, citing a “security source”, included the following statement:

“The perpetrators of the attack in Barcelona were Islamic State soldiers and the operation was carried out in response to calls for targeting the coalition countries.”[17]

Hence, the Ripoll cell members’ description of themselves as “soldiers of the Islamic State” coincided with the way Amaq News described them in this sentence.[18] This is relevant if only because in 2017 IS spread notifications of at least six terrorist incidents in Western countries without calling the perpetrators “Islamic State soldiers.”[19] However, that does not sufficiently clarify whether the Ripoll cell was an IS-inspired cell or an IS-linked cell. Nor does it help clarify the real meaning of the second part of the sentence. Since September 2014, IS leaders had been making calls to their supporters living in countries that, like Spain, contributed to the international coalition created earlier that month to combat and defeat the jihadist organization, inciting them to attack from within as a form of retribution and deterrence.[20] But such calls, which became more frequent in 2015 and 2016, could have been answered in 2017 by IS-inspired cells as well as by IS-linked cells.

However, in the Amaq News notifications about the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils there was a detail which revealed the existence of a link between the Ripoll cell and IS. The detail was in the source cited in these notifications. In the case of the August 2017 attacks, as with regard to other terrorist attacks outside IS' core territory, the "security source" cited was an obvious reference to IS's clandestine "external security" apparatus.[21] Incidentally, this was not the only detail to be noted because the first of these Amaq News notifications—the one that appeared just four hours after the attack on La Rambla—referred in the plural to "the perpetrators". However, only one terrorist, namely Younes Abouyaaqoub, was involved in the attacks that had occurred up to that moment. But in IS's central propaganda organs it was known, from the information held beforehand by the "external security" apparatus, that he was not a lone actor and that others were involved.

Also, in addition to Amaq News communications, IS started in 2017 using its central and related propaganda outlets to claim responsibility for acts of terrorism in Western Europe. That happened notably for the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks. On 19 August Nashir News republished Amaq News' claim, with the required authorization from IS "external security" apparatus, calling the Ripoll cell members "soldiers of the caliphate".[22] On 24 August, IS's weekly newsletter Al Naba offered, also with the approval of IS "external security" apparatus, infographics on the attacks along with an image of Barcelona's Sagrada Familia church.[23] Yet is important to bear in mind that the communications from Amaq News, Nashir News and Al Naba were primarily addressed to audiences inside territories under IS control.[24] The same applies to the propaganda disseminated by IS's provinces media outlets. Two of them, the Wilayat al-Khayr and the Wilayat al-Furat, contributed content about the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils.[25]

To address audiences outside IS territory, particularly in Western Europe, IS's central media diwan or bureaucracy relied on the productions of Al Hayat Media Center, also under the supervision of the "external security" apparatus.[26] Al Hayat Media's main production since September 2016, and during the year of the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks, was the magazine *Rumiyah*, which appeared in up to eleven different languages, including English, French and German. Issue number 13 of this magazine, released online on 9 September 2017, devoted its cover page to these attacks as well as a good portion of its Foreword and a special page under the heading "The Spain Attacks". Ripoll cell members were described as "a group of Islamic State soldiers" divided in "two covert units comprised of several mujahidin." This is a description appropriate for members of an IS-linked cell, particularly considering the basic distinction made by IS between "military operations" taking place on caliphate territory and "covert operations" carried out in enemy lands. The attacks that six of them committed were justified by IS as punishment of Spain for its contribution to "the war against the Islamic State", i.e. training the Iraqi army and participating in the anti-IS coalition.[27]

IS's communications on terrorist attacks in Western Europe during 2016 and 2017 tended to exhibit a sequence. Al Amaq News published a notification first. Only then the central propaganda outlets would republish it through Nashir News and Al Naba. Finally, Al Hayat Media may expand the coverage.[28] When assessing the importance that IS leadership gave to the Ripoll cell and its activities, it is telling to notice that, of the 14 terrorist incidents in Western countries for which the jihadist organization claimed responsibility in 2017, the complete sequence of communications was found in only two cases: after the May attacks in Manchester and after the August attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils.[29] Because the "external security" apparatus had the prerogative to approve the diffusion of information and commentaries on attacks in Western Europe, the existence of a full communicative sequence best fits attacks conducted by IS-linked cells.

Explaining the Inaccuracies Observed in IS's Media Communications as well as the Lack of Video Recordings Made by the Terrorists

Two facts could lead to the wrong deduction that the Ripoll cell was just an IS-inspired cell having neither direct nor indirect contact with the jihadist organization's operational and propaganda structures which at that time were still based in Syria. On the one hand, the fact that the series of communiqués disseminated by a succession of IS's central media bureaucracy and related agencies in the aftermath of the Barcelona

and Cambrils attacks contained noticeable inaccuracies. On the other hand, the fact that none of these propaganda outlets, despite repeatedly describing the Ripoll cell members as IS “soldiers” or soldiers of the caliphate, were capable of airing any video recorded by the terrorists themselves.

Certainly, the first Amaq News statement after the attacks on La Rambla, like the second one issued after those which took place in Cambrils, contained many inaccuracies that other IS propaganda organs subsequently reproduced.[30] Most likely this was due to the speed with which the original statement announcing IS claim of responsibility was made public. Amaq News may have learned details of the attacks from mainstream media and, as in the case of reporting other terrorist incidents in Western Europe, got those details wrong, as the mainstream media also did initially. However, the claiming of credit typically flows from an Amaq-specific source.

It is also very likely that some inaccuracies were construed deliberately, meaning that Amaq News or Al Naba manipulated the information on the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks, as it had done in the case of other terrorism attack claims in Western countries, magnifying the incidents and their impact with the aim of enhancing the image of pro-IS actors and of their actions. These stories were primarily aimed at internal audiences within a caliphate at a time when the once vast territory of the caliphate extending across Syria and Iraq was diminishing due to international coalition airstrikes. The purpose was to stimulate IS fighters active within that territory and boost their morale, while simultaneously intimidating local populations by projecting the image of a jihadist organization still capable of carrying out spectacular mass-casualty attacks outside its own core territory and specifically in Western Europe.[31]

It is also true that, during the second half of 2016, IS claimed responsibility for several terrorist incidents in Western countries, through Amaq News and other propaganda channels, providing video images that portrayed the jihadists involved in their execution as they were preparing to carry them out, voicing their motivations, and pledging obedience to the then-caliph.[32] Amaq News’ publication of such video images indicated the existence of some contact between the attacks’ perpetrators and IS operatives.[33] But the fact that neither Amaq News nor any other IS media outlets offered pre-recorded video messages pertaining to Ripoll cell members does not imply that the latter were merely part of an IS-inspired cell. On the one hand, throughout 2017 Amaq News did not use these types of recordings when reporting attacks perpetrated in Western Europe. This may have been a precaution adopted to avoid the risk that the videos could be intercepted during their transfer, which would allow the police or the intelligence services to detect terrorist plans in progress.[34]

The fact is, however, that the members of the Ripoll cell did make video recordings to be broadcast on 20 August 2017 or very shortly thereafter. On the 14th of that month, cell member Mohamed Houli Chemlal was tasked with recording several videos inside the Alcanar house in which Youssef Aalla, Mohamed Hichamy and Youness Abouyaaqoub—the cell’s senior members next to their leader—appear speaking in Castilian, Catalan, and Arabic while they insert TATP into metal cylinders to make explosive vests and hand grenades.[35] During the videotaping of the recording session, Houli Chemlal is heard pointing out to the three members of the cell’s core that the recordings “could be cut down,” alluding to a further selection of the takes, and saying that these were made “so that they can see how you work on that— a reference to the people expected to watch (after the planned attacks were carried out) how they had manufactured TATP and built the explosive devices utilized.[36]

It is unknown who was meant to receive these recordings or in what way. That was a matter probably handled personally by Es Satty. However, core members of the Ripoll cell also discussed such issues, using a dead mailbox when communicating by email or by using several secret phone numbers when communicating by mobile phones. What we know, however, is that the video recordings were to be delivered, most probably between 17 and 19 August, to “some people who would be coming”, people “related” to Es Satty, because Houli Chemlal heard about this from Youssef Aalla, Mohamed Hichamy, and Youness Abouyaaqoub on the afternoon of 14 August, when the four were together in the bomb factory house of Alcanar.[37] Inevitably, all this is reminiscent of the handwritten note by Es Satty, reproduced earlier in this article, where he made

a reference to “the one who comes.”[38]

The August 2017 Attacks as a Demonstration of the Potential Impact of Links between Europe-based Supporters and Foreign Fighters

The speed with which IS endorsed the killings in La Rambla through Amaq News, and other “clues compiled in the investigation,” led the ME experts on terrorism who were officially working on this case to conclude that there was a prior link between the Ripoll cell and IS. It was not because of the complete sequence of IS communications on the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, or because of the extraordinary importance that *Rumiyah* attributed to these acts of terror, or because of the recorded videos, in one of which Mohamed Hichamy says about himself and his cellmates that “Allah has chosen us among millions of men to make you cry blood.”[39] In their final report on the Ripoll cell members and their activities these experts used the following phrase to characterize the kind of linkage that existed for the Ripoll cell before August 2017:

“A previous and direct connection with operational senior officials of the terrorist organization Islamic State-DAESH.”[40]

In that same report, the same police experts further argued that:

“It can’t be ruled out that the cell leaders have had some direct contact with one or more members of the terrorist organization based in Syria or Iraq, possibly by telematic ways.”[41]

The alluded “cell leaders” included Es Satty and three other core members of the Ripoll cell, namely Momahed Hichamy, Youssef Aalla and Younnes Abouyyaqoub. As the ME experts concluded, the “previous” and “direct” connection made it possible for the leader and the senior members of the Ripoll cell to receive “advice” and “strengthened the ideological decision of carrying out the terrorist action”.[42]

Moreover, the existence of a “previous” and “direct” connection between key members of the Ripoll cell and IS operators is entirely consistent with another crucial piece of information on the subject matter. In January 2018, the sixth report of the United Nations Secretary-General on “the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat” includes the following words with respect to the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils:

“Member States report continued links between Europe-based ISIL supporters (including Al-Qaida facilitators) and foreign terrorist fighters located in conflict zones and elsewhere. The attacks carried out in Spain in August 2017 demonstrated the potential impact of such transnational links.”[43]

As it is, the intelligence services of at least one member state of the United Nations were in a position to share, within the framework of the UN Security Council, the critical information that behind the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils there were ample cross-border links between IS supporters residing in European countries—such as the IS supporters who constituted the Ripoll cell—and IS foreign fighters acting from Syria and Iraq or as returnees from one or more Western European countries. Interestingly, the point about Al Qaeda facilitators is also relevant, since the Ripoll cell leader Es Satty was embedded, during the previous decade, in jihadist circles based in the Catalanian localities of Vilanova i la Geltrú first and then Santa Coloma de Gramanet that were dedicated to facilitating the transfer of human and material resources, mainly from Spain and Morocco, to Al Qaeda’s branch in Iraq (AQI) before this entity was disowned by Al Qaeda and evolved into IS.[44]

The UN report was prepared jointly by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) and the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, in collaboration with the Office of Counter-Terrorism and with other UN agencies. In-person exchanges with a CTED-related senior official made it possible for us to reduce to four the list of member states whose intelligence services could have provided the most valuable information contained in the report: France, United States, United Kingdom and Russia.[45] Later on, we were told that the information had to have come from either France or the US.[46] This makes sense since, on the one hand, the foreign fighters who traveled from France to Syria acquired, together with

those from Belgium with whom they often intermingled in French-speaking groups, a remarkable status in IS operational structures and more specifically in its “external security” apparatus.[47] On the other hand, US intelligence agencies were the main Western intelligence services observing most closely the evolving threat posed by IS from Syria and Iraq.

This leads us to the question: who could have facilitated the set-forth link between the Ripoll cell core members and foreign fighters operating out of the Middle East or located inside Western Europe—or out of various countries from both geopolitical regions at the same time—under the coordination of the “external security” apparatus of IS?

Among the Unveiled Contacts of Core Ripoll Cell Members, Who was Related to Foreign Fighters and Able to Become an IS Facilitator?

A first answer to the question that closes the preceding section reasonably points to Es Satty himself, whose known record of relationships with foreign fighters can be traced back to 2003. Shortly after his arrival in Spain, he shared lodgings in the Andalusian province of Jaén with an Algerian who later that year blew himself up in an attack in Nasiriyya claimed by the organization which from September 2004 onwards became known as AQI.[48] When Es Satty moved to Catalonia he lived alongside militants of the now-extinct Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (MICG) who relied on connections first with Ansar al Islam and then also with AQI to funnel foreign fighters from Spain to Iraq, including members of the network behind the 2004 Madrid train bombings who escaped and became foreign fighters for AQI in Iraq.[49]

Between October 2015 and April 2016, Es Satty resided in Belgium, preaching radical Islamism in a mosque in Diegem. From there he had been moving across the Brussels-Antwerp axis, the area in Belgium where foreign fighters bound for Syria were predominantly recruited.[50] On 13 April 2016, Es Satty resettled in Ripoll, determined to lead his previously radicalized followers to perform acts of terrorism. In March 2017 he traveled back to Belgium for a few days. According to those who paid for his trip and provided lodging, he went there to purchase books on Islam. However, they never saw that he had bought any books.[51] On the other hand, his most senior followers in the Ripoll cell had also traveled together by car to France and Belgium from 26 to 28 December 2016.[52] With respect to France, a peripheral cell member, Driss Oukabir, one of the two survivors, had a relationship with a Moroccan living in the country named Mohamed Boumansour, who held a foreign identification number issued by Spanish authorities. He was a ‘person of interest’ to the French security services due to his extremism. He might have had previous knowledge of a plot under way in Spain as he met Oukabir around Ripoll in July 2017.[53] This could be related to a declaration made 15 September 2017 by the other survivor, Houli Chemlal, before the investigative judge in charge of the August attacks. On that occasion he said that there was a group of like-minded people in France, willing to coordinate with the Ripoll cell, or even to participate in an attack in Spain.[54]

However, these contacts in France were rather personal ones, and involved a latecomer and the less committed member in the Ripoll cell. They are therefore of limited interest for the purpose of assessing links between the Ripoll cell and the “external security” apparatus of IS when compared to the possible role of Mohamed Hichamy, Youssef Aalla and Younes Abouyaaqoub, who were senior members of the Ripoll cell who had gone to Belgium at the end of December 2016.[55] Their presence in Belgium coincided with the precise moment when Es Satty began to take an interest in manufacturing explosives. For the GC experts charged with investigating their travels, this is what that stay in Belgium was: “An important milestone in the subsequent evolution of the cell’s terrorist plans.”[56]

Those same police experts have also highlighted the similarities between the way the Brussels terrorists of March 2016 produced TATP explosives in the building in the Belgian town of Schaerbeek and the way in which the explosives were produced in 2017 in the Alcanar house.[57] These similarities included the precursor substances utilized, the way refrigerators and ventilators were employed, and even the type of shrapnel included in the improvised explosive devices manufactured with TATP.

Moreover, both the known telephone calls made by Es Satty and the three other core members of the Ripoll cell while in Belgium and the address book found in the mobile phone concretely used by Mohamed Hichamy, reveal contacts which are extremely important to assess the type of individuals who may have facilitated the linking with IS operational structures via foreign fighters who went from Western Europe to Syria or had returned from there. For instance, here is (translated) what the Belgian Federal Police conveyed to the judicial and police authorities of Spain about a particular phone number (ending with the digits 5208) identified by the CNP in the traffic of calls made or received in at least one of terminals used by Es Satty or any of the three core members among of the Ripoll cell:

“The telephone number is known in the national databank and can be associated to ABRINI Hajar (14/02/1995)—known for money laundering, attitudes related to violent radicalism and infractions associated to terrorist group”.[58]

Hajar Abrini, one of the contacts the main members of the Ripoll cell had in Belgium, was 22 years-old when the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks took place. She is the cousin of Mohammed Abrini, with Belgian and Moroccan nationalities, involved in the IS-directed operational network behind the November 2015 attacks in Paris and the March 2016 attacks in Brussels. His presence was confirmed alongside the two suicide bombers who blew themselves up at Brussels’s Zaventem airport.[59] Hajar Abrini was arrested on the Greek island of Corfu, when attempting to travel to Syria, on 18 August 2017, determined to marry a foreign fighter one month after a criminal court in Liege imposed a prison sentence for jihadist-related terrorism offences on the man she was religiously married to.[60] She was related in person and online to a significant number of foreign fighters who traveled from Belgium to Syria to join the ranks of IS. She was also convicted in Belgium, in 2019, of participation in a terrorist organization.

Preacher Revered by Ripoll Cell Members, Two Months Before the Attacks: Muslims Should Take Up “Armed Punishments in the Secular Lands”

Much more relevant than the above is in our view the fact the mobile phone used by Mohamed Hichamy while in Belgium kept him connected to the phone number (ending in 4551), identified in an investigation of the GC, which happened to be the contact phone number of four extremists “all of them known in Salafi-Jihadist milieus”, as literally stated by the Belgian Federal Judicial Police.[61] One of those four extremists listed by the Belgian police was Tarik Chadlioui, also known as Tarik Ibn Ali, a Moroccan-born Salafist preacher widely followed inside the Tamazigh or Berber diaspora in general and particularly inside the Moroccan diaspora in many Western European countries that he has visited regularly. The other three names in the list are closely related to him.

Chadlioui lived in Antwerpen, Belgium for more than a decade and had obtained a Belgian passport by the time he moved temporarily with his family to Cairo when the Belgian government banned Muslim women from wearing face veils in public. Later, in 2015, he settled in Birmingham, UK, where a main hub of Salafism in Western Europe exists.[62] Around the time Chadlioui left Antwerpen, he made clear his bellicose understanding of jihad as nothing else than “combat in the path of Allah” which has a “high place” and is of “great merit” according to the Quran. In a video posted on April 2010, he preached the following:

“He who dies in jihad (combat in the path to Allah), Allah will forgive him all his sins since the first drop of blood. His soul, when leaving his body, goes directly on a bird to Paradise [...] The day of the resurrection, he will bring in 70 people from his family who were heading to Hell because of too many disobediences, but the martyr will bring them back with him to Heaven.”[63]

Chadlioui was an influential doctrinaire for several jihadist groups which are now dissolved or outlawed in Belgium and Germany—groups like Sharia4Belgium, Millatu Ibrahim and Dawa FFM, dozens of whose members went to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters.[64] His extremist sermons in a mosque in Luce, in the Paris suburb of Courcouronnes radicalized Omar Mostefai, one of the terrorists who also traveled to Syria and as returnee was among the terrorists who belonged to the above-mentioned IS-directed operational

network and participated in the attacks of 13 November 2015 in Paris. In short, Chadlioui, a talented fundraiser and speaker, was assessed over the past decade to be an important facilitator and financier of West European foreign fighters active in Syria. He himself had traveled at least in the fall of 2013 to Syria, personally transporting funds raised in Western Europe.[65]

Not surprisingly, the reports of Operation Gomero, carried out by the CNP in 2017, refer to at least one foreign fighter who had traveled to Syria to join the ranks of IS and who was a “close friend” of Chadlioui. [66] During this counter-terrorism operation, the CNP arrested four jihadist suspects in Spain, concretely on the island of Majorca, where Chadlioui had traveled repeatedly in 2014 and 2015 to meet with them. Instigated by the preacher, they jointly developed activities of jihadist radicalization and recruitment in and out of a mosque in Palma de Mallorca. This included the production of the video “Taoufiq went to Syria” based on the story of a foreign fighter who traveled from Spain to the conflict zone across Syria and Iraq. Chadlioui himself was arrested, in the framework of that same police operation in Birmingham in 2017, and handed over to the Spanish authorities in early 2018 for pre-trial detention.[67]

In this context, it is important to emphasize Chadlioui’s long and lasting connections in Catalonia and his specific influence on the Ripoll cell members. On the one hand, the Muslim communities of Catalonia were not unknown to Chadlioui. Already in 2013, for example, he had visited several, such as the community in Salt, the location of one of the main Salafist mosques in Catalonia and Spain as a whole. In the summer of 2015, two years before the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks, he preached in Islamic places of worship in at least six other Catalan towns: Vic, Terrassa, Granollers, Tárrega, Mollet del Vallès, and Manlleu. Notably, the mobile phones of some members of the Ripoll cell had saved the image of the poster announcing a Chadlioui sermon scheduled for 6 July 2015 on the premises of the Muslim Community of Manlleu, 24 kilometers south of Ripoll.[68]

It was also found that the laptop used by Es Satty between February and August 2017 stored a vast amount of content created by Chadlioui.[69] It is telling as well that the youngest member of the Ripoll cell, Moussa Oukabir, did a specific search on his Tablet PC for information on Chadlioui’s arrest in Birmingham just four days after it occurred.[70] Meanwhile, on 11 June 2017, slightly two months before the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, when the caliphate was collapsing mainly because of the frequency and intensity of the international coalition airstrikes, Chadlioui voiced in a YouTube video that Muslims should carry out “Armed punishments in the secular lands.”[71] An admonition of this type provides a religious justification for terrorist attacks such as initially planned by the Ripoll cell in Barcelona on 20 August 2017 or the ones that they finally carried out a few days earlier in the same city and in Cambrils.

Making Sense of the Threat Stream Against Barcelona Detected by the NCTC Three Months Before the Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks

The existence of a link between the Ripoll cell and the “external security” apparatus of IS through operators who were foreign fighters allows for a proper understanding of other extraordinarily important pieces of evidence regarding the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils. This evidence consists of the fact that the US National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) detected, three months before these acts of terrorism took place, a threat stream against Barcelona. Further, on 25 May 2017 the NCTC urgently shared both with ME and with the two police agencies endowed with the counterterrorism mandate covering the whole of Spain (that is, CNP and GC) a threat bulletin stating, word for word, the following:

“Unsubstantiated information of unknown veracity from late May 2017 indicated that the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) was planning to conduct unspecified terrorist attacks during the summer against crowded tourist sites in Barcelona, Spain, specifically La Rambla Street.”[72]

To carefully appraise such a significant piece of counterterrorism intelligence, we sought the judgment, separately, of two American experts highly reputed in the U.S. intelligence community, within which the NCTC occupies a central position. Both are top experts with deep counterterrorism knowledge and

experience, including in the Middle East and focusing on jihadist terrorism. One of them is Bruce Riedel, director of the Intelligence Project at Brookings Institution, and the other is a senior Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer, an acquaintance of the first author of this article, who asked us not to disclose his name. The two experts both thought that the piece of information most likely came from “outside of Europe” and, as Riedel remarked, was “collected in the Levant or Iraq.” It looked to this expert like “intercepted communications,” which refers to a SIGINT source, because “if it was HUMINT we would be able to get more details.” However, the senior CIA officer indicated that it could also be a HUMINT source, though “probably a relatively new asset without much of a reporting track record” or someone “who heard first-hand, or second hand, or maybe even third hand that IS elements were keen on launching an attack in Barcelona.”[73]

Since the threat bulletin prepared by the NCTC was sent to CNP, GC, and ME on 25 May and referred to information obtained at the end of that same month, it is reasonable to assume that the NCTC got that information just a few days before it was relayed urgently, if not the day before or even the same day. Be that as it may, the exact moment is very revealing for two reasons. From the IS organizational perspective, the timing is very revealing because seven weeks before, on 4 April 2017, its then spokesperson, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, issued a proclamation in which he called on the “supporters of the caliphate” in European and other countries to attack them from within.[74] From the perspective of the Ripoll cell, the moment is also very revealing because it was then, in any case shortly before the day on which the NCTC threat bulletin is dated, that ME experts situate the defining moment in the operational trajectory of Es Satty and his followers, which they describe in these terms: “Point of departure for the preparations to consummate the attacks.”[75]

May 2017 was, in effect, the month in which Es Satty left his post as imam at an Islamic place of worship in Ripoll.[76] It was also the month when Mohamed Hichamy, Youssef Aalla, and Younnes Abouyyaqoub—acting as Es Satty’s lieutenants—informed Mohamed Houli Chemlal, Omar Hichamy, El Houssaine Abouyyaqoub, Moussa Oukabir, and Said Aalla about the terrorist attacks they were planning, attacks that would entail the five men’s participation for their preparation and execution.[77] It was also in that month of May when Younnes Abouyyaqoub recorded himself on video singing a nasheed whose chorus was this: “We are those who yearn for martyrdom.”[78]

It was also in May 2017, the month in which the NCTC detected the threat stream against Barcelona, when members of the Ripoll cell began to distance themselves from family and friends.[79] That was also the exact same month when the terrorists began to acquire, under false identities and in locations far from Ripoll (so as not to arouse suspicion), prepaid cards for twelve or perhaps thirteen conspiratorial phone numbers, distinct from their personal numbers, which they acquired to communicate with each other safely while they prepared the attacks. These attacks were planned for 20 August but were finally perpetrated in a way quite different from what was planned on the 17th and 18th of August.

Conclusions

It can be concluded from the above that the Ripoll cell members did not belong to an IS-integrated cell. That was not the case because in 2017, due to the change in strategy that IS had adopted the year before, it was only possible for the Ripoll cell to be either IS-inspired or IS-linked. A recent descriptive and more limited study of the case has portrayed the Ripoll cell as a local *IS-inspired* cell.[80] A more analytical and more in-depth study, as the one we have sought to present in this article, substantiates the notion that the Ripoll cell was *IS-linked*. A careful study of the direct and circumstantial evidence about the transnational movements and connections of the main Ripoll cell members, particularly in and out of Belgium, over the approximately year and a half period leading to the August 2017 attacks, unveiled the operational role of foreign fighters in linking the cell with IS. Findings from intelligence sources corroborate, or are consistent with, our line of argumentation.

However, between IS’s announcement of its caliphate in June 2014 and the formal ending of its territorial domination in March 2019, a pro-IS cell that was established in a European country and whose members

intended to carry out attacks could be related to a foreign fighter without this implying any link with IS. For example, on April 2015, also in Catalonia, ME agents arrested in the provinces of Barcelona and Tarragona members of a pro-IS cell similar in size to the Ripoll cell, composed of Moroccan nationals and converted Spaniards, when they were preparing terrorist attacks in Barcelona. Members of that cell had relationships with foreign fighters in Syria who had departed from their own radicalized milieus in Catalonia—but this did not develop into a link with IS central structures.[81]

However, in the case of the Ripoll cell, the connection of its leader and core members with foreign fighters, both outside Western Europe or with returnees—possibly both types at the same time—as well as with foreign fighters’ facilitators, provided the right circumstances for an operational link with the central IS structures which at that time were still located in Syria, and more specifically with its “external security” apparatus. This is how IS played an important role in the Ripoll cell’s failed plans to perpetrate a series of major attacks in Barcelona on 20 August 2017 using TATP explosives and, consequently, in the alternative acts of terrorism than six of its members carried out a few days before, on 17 and 18 that month, in Barcelona and in Cambrils as well. The case illustrates the threat from IS-linked cells in Western Europe as from middle of 2016—a time the caliphate was beginning to crumble as the anti-ISIS coalition strikes were escalating in Syria.

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Notes

[1] According to the Dirección General de Apoyo a Víctimas del Terrorismo at Spain’s Ministry of Interior, the victims of the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks included citizens of 34 different nationalities. Ten of those killed and 105 of those wounded were foreigners. Cf. URL: http://www.interior.gob.es/prensa/noticias/-/asset_publisher/GHU8Ap6ztgsg/content/id/9168091; adding persons which suffered psychological harm or sequelae derived from directly experiencing the August 2017 attacks, the total number of people affected is 345 - as estimated by the Barcelona-based Unidad de Atención y Valoración a Afectados por el Terrorismo; URL: <https://www.uavat.es>.

[2] Audiencia Nacional, Sala de lo Penal, Sección Tercera, *Sentencia 15/2021*.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2, p. 68, pp. 70-72.

[4] Jasmijn M. Remmers, “Temporal Dynamics in Covert Networks: A Case Study of the Structure behind the Paris and Brussels Attacks,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2019.1671373 (Published online: 18 November 2019).

[5] Staff member of the European Counter-Terrorism Centre at Europol, “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” The Hague: International Centre for Counter Terrorism, *ICCT Research Paper*, April 2019, p. 11.

[6] “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” *op. cit.*, pp. 4-6 and p. 23.

[7] The interviews were conducted by the authors between September and December 2017, in October 2020 and in June and July 2021, in Barcelona as well as in Madrid.

[8] Important background documents for this article are the following: “Audiencia Nacional, Juzgado Central de Instrucción” no. 4, *Diligencias Previas 60/2017* and *Sumario 5/2018*; Dirección General de la Guardia Civil, Jefatura de Información, Unidad Central Especial 2, “Solicitud de Comisión Rogatoria Internacional a las autoridades judiciales de Bélgica,” Madrid, 3 de mayo de 2018; *Sentencia 15/2021*, cited above; Mossos d’Esquadra, Comissaria General d’Informació, Àrea Central d’Informació Exterior, Unitat Operativa d’Informació Exterior 4, “Relación de indicios con vínculos con Francia. Caso Rambla,” 14 August 2018; and Mossos d’Esquadra, Comissaria General d’Informació, “Oficio de integración en organización terrorista,” Reference

680566/2017, 10 December 2018.

[9] Notably the analysis “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” op. cit.

[10] *Sentencia 15/2021*, pp. 474 and p. 731.

[11] *Diligencias Previas 60/2017*, Auto of 22 August, 2017, p. 4; *Sentencia 15/2021*, pp. 493 and pp. 731-732.

[12] *Sentencia 15/2021*, pp. 491, and pp. 732-733.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 75, pp.223-224, pp.229-230, p.233, pp.496-497, p.500, pp. 502-503, p. 514, p. 522, p. 528, pp.549-550, 5p. 81, p. 711, pp. 738 and pp. 744-766.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 404, p.492, pp. 730-731, p. 765.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 369, p. 404, pp. 414-419, pp. 727-728, p. 730.

[16] “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” pp. 5 and pp. 7-8 and p. 23.

[17] *Sentencia 15/2021*, pp. 618 and 723-724; Thomas Jocelyn, “Islamic State claims its ‘soldiers’ responsible for the Barcelona Attacks,” *Long War Journal*, 17 August 2017; URL: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/08/islamic-state-claims-its-soldiers-responsible-for-barcelona-attack.php>

[18] The same applied to those who perpetrated the attacks in Cambrils. See URL: <http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/?q=es/content/referencias-esp%C3%B1-en-la-propaganda-yihadista#seccion18>.

[19] “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” p. 12.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 3; Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal, “Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, issue 6 (2016), p. 5; URL: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/553>.

[21] “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” p. 8.

[22] *Sentencia 15/2021*, pp. 618-619 and p. 724.

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 619 and p. 724.

[24] “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” p. 8, p. 13 and p. 21.

[25] “The First Rain: The Raid of Barcelona. Wilāyat al-Khayr,” *Jihadology.net*, 23 August 2017; URL: <http://jihadology.net/2017/08/23/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-first-rain-the-raid-of-barcelona-wilayat-al-khayr>; Wilayat al-Furat disseminated several documents praising the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks as an example to be imitated by other Muslims living in Western societies. *Sentencia 15/2021*, p. 592, pp. 621-623, 7pp. 25-727.

[26] “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” pp. 8-9 and p. 23.

[27] *Rumiyah*, Issue 13 (September 2017), p. 5, p. 39 and p. 41.

[28] “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” p. 13.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[30] On this and related anomalies, see Manuel Torres, “Jihadism in the Spanish Language after the Barcelona Attacks,” Washington, DC: George Washington University Program on Extremism, August 2017.

[31] “Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018,” p. 18.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Sentencia 15/2021*, pp. 149-150.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 868-869.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 474 and p. 731.

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 151, p. 736 and p. 839.

[40] “Oficio de integración en organización terrorista,” p. 85.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] United Nations Security Council, “Sixth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat”, 31 January 2018, p. 6.

[44] Dirección General de la Policía, Comisaría General de Información, Unidad Central de Información Exterior, *Diligencia 466*, 9 January 2006, pp. 52-53 and p. 86; Audiencia Nacional, Sala de lo Penal, Sección Primera, *Sentencia 3/2010*, p. 70; Es Satty was the focus of counterterrorism investigations but, unlike others he was associated with, he was never arrested. However, he served a prison sentence between 2010 and 2014, after being convicted of drug smuggling.

[45] Interviews with CTED-related senior officials conducted by both authors in New York in June 2018.

[46] Comment received orally by the first author from a senior official of the CNI in Madrid in June 2021.

[47] Daniel Byman, *Road Warriors. Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 216-221.

[48] The Algerian man was Bellil Belgacem, who travelled to Iraq as a foreign fighter and blew himself up on 12 November 2003 in an attack against a base of Italian Carabinieri in the city of Nasiriyya. See Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2007), p. 155.

[49] *Diligencia 466*, pp. 52-53 and p. 86; *Sentencia 3/2010*, p. 70. Fernando Reinares, *Al Qaeda’s Revenge. The 2004 Madrid Train Bombings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), chapter 13.

[50] “Solicitud de Comisión Rogatoria Internacional a las autoridades judiciales de Bélgica,” pp. 5-7; Guy Van Vlierden, “Molenbeek and Beyond. The Brussels-Antwerp Axis as Hotbed of Belgian Jihad”, pp. 49-61, in Arturo Varvelli, (Ed.), *Jihadist Hotbeds. Understanding Local Radicalization Processes* (Milan: ISPI, 2016); Anna Teixidó, *Los Silencios del 17-A* (Barcelona: Diéresis, 2020), pp. 173-194.

[51] “Solicitud de Comisión Rogatoria Internacional a las autoridades judiciales de Bélgica,” pp. 6-7.

[52] *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9; “Oficio de integración en organización terrorista,” p. 8.

[53] “Relación de indicios con vínculos con Francia. Caso Rambla,” p. 6, p. 9, p. 14 and p. 22.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[55] “Solicitud de Comisión Rogatoria Internacional a las autoridades judiciales de Bélgica,” pp. 7-9; “Oficio de integración en organización terrorista,” p. 8.

[56] “Solicitud de Comisión Rogatoria Internacional a las autoridades judiciales de Bélgica,” p. 11.

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

[58] [*Note from the authors: capitals in the original*]. This information was provided to the authorities of Spain, on 16 July 2018, by the Belgian Federal Police in the province of Antwerp, as part of the response to an International Rogatory Letter requesting information on phone numbers, SIM card numbers, persons, bank data and stays in hotels or similar places concerning Es Satty, Mohamed Hichamy, Youssef Aalla, Younes Abouyaaqoub and Houli Chemlal during their presence in Belgium.

[59] However, Mohamed Abrini deposited explosives in or next to a rubbish bin of the airport, escaped from the crime scene and was arrested in Brussels weeks later. His younger brother died in 2014 after joining IS in Syria, where Mohamed Abrini had also traveled.

[60] Curiously, Hajar Abrini traveled by air from Brussels to Barcelona in the evening of 15 August 2017 and apparently remained in a business center of Barcelona’s El Prat airport until she took a plane to Istanbul shortly before noon on 16 August. However, the Turkish authorities expelled her on arrival and she had to fly back to Barcelona. Again, she remained overnight on the premises of the airport, as it seems alone, until the morning of 17 August, when she boarded a Milano-bound flight. However, no interaction was found between Hajar Abrini and Ripoll cell members during the former’s stays at El Prat airport in the evening of 15 August, when the Alcanar house blew up, or during the two following days. *Sentencia 15/2021*, pp. 698-699.

[61] The data was offered to the Spanish authorities on 16 July 2018 by officials from the Belgian Judicial Federal Police based in the Province of Antwerp. Nevertheless, GC experts who investigated the contacts and connections that Ripoll cell members had

in Belgium complained, in a June 2021 meeting with the first author, of the cooperation provided by their Belgian counterparts, which they described as “imprecise and devoid of detail”.

[62] Counter Extremism Project, “Tarik Chadlioui”; URL: <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/tarik-chadlioui>.

[63] To date, the video can still be found here: “Ô toi qui délaïsse ou retarde la prière! [2/8],” *YouTube* video, April 11, 2010, 9:22:00; URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7wlhqnVtPA>.

[64] “Tarik Chadlioui”; URL: <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/tarik-chadlioui>.

[65] See the article by former Dutch government counterterrorism analyst Ronald Sandee, “Tarik Ibn Ali: An Important Jihadi Facilitator Operating in Europe”, Downrange, *Insights and Analysis* 5229, 16 September 2014.

[66] Information provided to the authors by the Unidad Central de Información Exterior (UCIE) of CNP’s Comisaría General de Información on 5 August 2021.

[67] In the Westminster Magistrate’s Court, Central Magistrates Court no. 1 of the Spanish Criminal Court v Tarik Chadlioui, *Judgement*, 3 October 2017. To the knowledge of the authors, Chadlioui is also investigated by The Netherlands’s Financial Intelligence Unit for belonging to IS and financing the jihadist organization. He is currently subjected to terrorism-related monitoring requests or specific control orders within the framework of international police cooperation, not only by the Netherlands (2019-2022) but also by Germany (2021-2022), France (2016-2022) and Belgium (2019-2022).

[68] *Sentencia 15/2021*, pp. 578-579.

[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 530-532.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 761.

[71] “92 Tarik Ibn Ali Home”, *YouTube* video, 1:35:02, 11 June 2017; URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROfBOJnuzTI>. Unfortunately, at some point in the past few years, the video ceased to be available on YouTube.

[72] A copy of the original document was reproduced in the pages of *El Periódico de Catalunya* on 31 August 2017 and on 1 September 2017; URL: <http://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20170831/mossos-recibieron-alerta-atentado-cia-25-mayo-6255194>; <http://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20170831/eeuu-reafirma-atentado-rambla-barcelona-alerta-mossos-cia-6257463>.

[73] The insight from Bruce Riedel was received by email on 21 July 2021; the one coming from the senior CIA officer, by means of an intermediary, on 8 August 2021.

[74] Abu Hassan Al-Muhajir, “So Be Patient. Indeed, The Promise of God is Truth.” *Al Furqan Media, Audio Recording*, 4 April 2017; URL: <http://jihadology.net/2017/04/04/new-audio-message-from-the-islamic-states-abu-al-%E1%B8%A5asan-al-muhajir-so-be-patient-indeed-the-promise-of-god-is-truth/>.

[75] “Oficio de integración en organización terrorista”, pp. 9-10.

[76] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[77] *Sentencia 15/2021*, p. 83.

[78] *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

[79] “Oficio de integración en organización terrorista,” pp. 11-14.

[80] Cf. Carlos Igualada, “International Links and the Role of the Islamic State in the Barcelona and Cambrils Attacks in 2017,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. XV, Issue 4, pp. 65-75.

[81] Audiencia Nacional, Sala de lo Penal, Sección Cuarta, *Sentencia 1/2018*.