

## Jihadist Radicalization and the 2004 Madrid Bombing Network

By Fernando Reinares

ON MARCH 11, 2004, terrorists launched a series of coordinated bombings against Madrid's commuter train system, killing 191 people. The terrorists who planned and perpetrated the attacks belonged to multiple different groups and organizations, but they shared a common jihadist ideology. The attacks have often been labeled a case of "homegrown" terrorism, a result of extremist attitudes caused by the war in Iraq, or the product of a self-radicalized cell. Yet a closer look at the individuals involved in the network behind the attack reveals a more complicated picture.

It is important to examine the network responsible for the March 2004 Madrid plot in more detail, since the incident constituted the most lethal terrorist attack in a Western country since the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. Analysis of the network will help provide a deeper understanding of terrorist radicalization, a process that continues to occur within open societies. Indeed, the individuals responsible for the March 2004 Madrid bombings did not become prone to terrorism at the same place, the same time or through the same processes. A detailed examination of the case, based on official information extracted from judicial documents, reveals interesting variations in the radicalization process.<sup>1</sup>

### The Madrid Bombing Network

The terrorist network responsible for the March 11, 2004 attacks in Madrid was assembled between March 2002 and November 2003. During this time period, the desire and then the decision to execute a terrorist attack in Spain

1 Unless marked otherwise, all of the facts in this article are drawn from the criminal proceedings for the 2004 Madrid train bombings, which in Spain accumulate 241 tomes and 30 separate volumes with previously secret records, containing a total of 93,226 paged files. In addition, judicial documentation includes records from the central investigative judge responsible for the case and sentences both at the National Court and the Supreme Court. Also, from related criminal proceedings and sentences delivered in Milano and Sale.

caused the coalescing of four relatively small clusters of individuals. Two of the clusters were interconnected because they evolved from the remnants of an al-Qa`ida cell established in Spain during the mid-1990s. This cell was led by Syrian-born Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, better known as Abu Dahdah, and was partially dismantled during the months following 9/11.<sup>2</sup>

A third cluster of individuals who eventually became part of the network was linked to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), which established structures across Western Europe in the 1990s, particularly in France and Belgium. The fourth cluster was initially composed of a criminal gang active throughout Spain and specialized in illicit trafficking of drugs and stolen vehicles.

There are 27 individuals about whom there is currently both empirical data and legal grounds to implicate in the preparation or execution of the Madrid bombings.<sup>3</sup> Of the 27, 13 have already been convicted in Spain, two in Morocco and one in Italy, all on charges of involvement in the March 2004 plot. Seven individuals committed suicide in an apartment safe house in the Spanish town of Leganés on April 3, 2004. The four remaining individuals are known fugitives, although one of them was handed over to the Moroccan authorities

2 This al-Qa`ida cell in Spain was detected by the police at the end of 1994. Among its founding members were Anwar Adnan Mohamed Saleh, also known as Chej Salah, who moved from Madrid to Peshawar in October 1995 and Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, better known as Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, who relocated to London four months before and then settled close to Usama bin Ladin in Afghanistan. This al-Qa`ida cell was connected to the Hamburg cell that spawned the 9/11 attacks. Abu Dahdah was in contact with Mohammed Atta since the early 1990s. The former and 17 other individuals were convicted of terrorism related charges by the National Court on September 26, 2005.

3 The number of people directly or indirectly involved in the attacks may exceed 27. It would be beyond the deontological boundaries of academic work, obliged to respect fundamental human rights and rule of law guarantees when researching and publishing on terrorism, to include persons who were detained following the attacks but never charged, or prosecuted but absolved of all charges. Others, condemned for dealing with stolen explosives that ended up in the hands of the terrorists, did not exactly belong to the jihadist network as such and therefore are excluded from this analysis.

after being arrested in Syria in 2007 and still awaits trial in Morocco.

All 27 individuals were men, born between 1960 and 1983. More than half were between 23 and 33 years of age at the time of the bombings. Most were native Moroccans, except for three Algerians, one Egyptian, one Tunisian and one Lebanese.<sup>4</sup> None were originally from Spain.

At the time of the attacks, 24 of the 27 were living in Spain, a country in which the vast majority of Muslims are of Moroccan descent.<sup>5</sup> Two of the group lived in the Belgian city of Brussels and one in the northern Italian city of Milan. Most of the men were economic immigrants and included both legal and

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illegal foreign residents. Many of the men were single, although a significant number were married and a few had children. Although the sociological profile of the group was diverse, they were generally poorly educated and did not have high-paying jobs.

4 The Moroccans include: Hassan el-Haski, Youssef Belhadj, Mohamed Larbi ben Sellam, Jamal Ahmidan, Said Berraj, Mohamed Afalah, Jamal Zougam, Othman el-Gnaoui, Fouad el-Morabit Anghar, Saed el-Harrak, Mohamed Bouharrat, Rachid Aglif, Abdelmajid Bouchar, Rifaat Anouar Asrih, Abdenabi Kounjaa, Mohamed Oulad Akcha, Rachid Oulad Akcha, Abdelilah Hriz, Mohamed Belhadj, Hamid Ahmidan and Hicham Ahmidan. The Algerians include: Allekema Lamari, Daoud Ouhmane and Nasreddine Bousbaa. The Egyptian is Rabei Osman el-Sayed Ahmed. The Tunisian is Serhane ben Abdelmajid Fakheth. The Lebanese is Mahmoud Slimane Aoun.

5 Most of those part of the bombing network who lived in Spain resided in or near Madrid.

### A Case of Homegrown Terrorism?

At least four of the 27 individuals part of the Madrid bombing network clearly internalized an extremist ideology outside of Spain. These four include Hassan el-Haski, Youssef Belhadj, Rabei Osman and Allekema Lamari. Hassan el-Haski was already a leading member of the GICM by March 11, 2004, although it is not clear whether he was radicalized in Morocco or in Belgium. Youssef Belhadj, on the other hand, was clearly radicalized in Belgium, where he joined the GICM. Rabei Osman allegedly espoused jihadism while in Egypt, where he was born; while in Egypt he joined Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which merged with al-Qa`ida in 2001. Allekema Lamari was a member of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) by 1996, even before arriving in Spain from Algeria. As for Daoud Oughnane, who was also born in Algeria, it is not clear whether he acquired a violent interpretation of Islam prior to his arrival in Spain, which occurred in the 1990s.

Yet the 2004 Madrid terrorist attacks have often been labeled a case of “homegrown” terrorism because at least 21 of the 27 individuals part of the network adopted a jihadist ideology while in Spain, although a few of them were certainly influenced during temporary stays abroad. Nevertheless, the Madrid attacks were not a case of “homegrown terrorism” in the strictest sense of the word.<sup>6</sup> Among the network’s members were individuals linked to international terrorist groups such as the GICM and al-Qa`ida. Two of the group members who radicalized abroad, Rabei Osman and Youssef Belhadj, acted as external radicalizing agents for members of the network living in or near Madrid, who as a result of Osman’s and Belhadj’s propaganda decided to become involved in the plot. In addition, none of the 27 members of

6 A delimitation of the phenomenon useful for an informed discussion on this and other cases can be found in Evan F. Kohlmann, “Homegrown Terrorists: Theory and Cases in the War on Terror’s Newest Front,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 618:1 (2008): pp. 95-109. The network responsible for the commuter train attacks of 3/11, however, accommodates better to the concept of a grassroots jihadist network as proposed by Javier Jordán, Fernando M. Mañás and Nicola Horsburgh in “Strengths and Weaknesses of Grass-root Jihadist Networks: The Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31:1 (2008): pp. 17-39.

the network were born or naturalized in Spain or in any other European Union member-state. Most of the network arrived in Spain between 1990-2001 as first generation immigrants in their late teens and mid-20s. Moreover, while in Spain, their daily routines placed them in constant interaction with people of the same background.

Only one member of the group, Rachid Aglif, could be considered a “homegrown” terrorist. Aglif settled in Spain with his father and other close

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Moroccan relatives when he was only 10-years-old. Moreover, he attended public schools in the Madrid region, and started work at his family shop when he was 16-years-old.

#### Iraq and the Radicalization Timeline

Another assumption about the March 2004 Madrid bombing network is that they were mostly radicalized as a result of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Only 12 to 13 individuals part of the network internalized a jihadist ideology after the invasion of Iraq. At least five of those who radicalized into terrorism after the invasion of Iraq belonged to a band of criminals under the leadership of Jamal Ahmidan, or “The Chinese.” Another four from the group of 12 to 13 were slightly connected to past members of the Abu Dahdah al-Qa`ida cell in Spain.

7 Two individuals belonging to the Madrid bombing network, Mohammed Larbi ben Sellam and Abdelilah Hriz, subsequently engaged, from Spain as well as Turkey and Syria, in activities aimed at facilitating travel to Iraq for Muslim extremists who radicalized in Europe and wanted to join the terrorist campaign of al-Qa`id-related organizations in the country. One of the fugitives, Mohamed Belhadj, was arrested in Syria in 2007 and another, Mohammed Afalah, actually made it to Iraq, where he allegedly perpetrated a suicide attack in May 2005.

On the other hand, 13 to 14 of the network’s members adopted a violent ideology before the invasion of Iraq. Of these, five to six individuals were radicalized after the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent military intervention in Afghanistan. Eight became prone to terrorism before the 9/11 attacks.<sup>8</sup> The network’s members who radicalized before 9/11 were the main actors in the March 2004 attacks, and they were also critical radicalizing agents for the rest of the group.

#### How They Became Jihadists

Members of the network who radicalized before 9/11 and were in contact with Abu Dahdah’s al-Qa`ida cell attended Madrid’s main Islamic worship sites, such as the Abu Bakr mosque and the M-30 mosque. It was at these locations that they were spotted as possible followers.<sup>9</sup> In addition to being indoctrinated at these locations, where extremist materials were disseminated, they were then usually invited to countryside gatherings next to the Alberche River, near the rural town of Navalcarnero. At these informal countryside gatherings, recreational activities were mixed with proselytizing sessions on religion, jihad and conflicts involving large Muslim communities, such as in Bosnia. Individuals who attended these meetings were persuaded

8 Four of the eight include Hassan el-Haski, Rabei Osman, Youssef Belhadj, and Allekema Lamari, all of whom were part of jihadist groups before the 9/11 attacks. Three of the eight who became prone to terrorism before the 9/11 attacks were already part of Abu Dahdah’s al-Qa`ida cell. They included Jamal Zougam, Said Berraj and Sarhane ben Abdelmajid Fakhet, “The Tunisian,” who radicalized while in contact with a prominent member of the cell, Amer Azizi. Amer Azizi, also known as Othman al-Andalusi, was identified by the Spanish national police when conducting investigations on the Abu Dahdah cell to which he belonged. Before 9/11, Azizi was active in radicalizing Maghrebi immigrants and sending them to training camps in Afghanistan, where he personally traveled, probably more than once. He was one of the charismatic figures whose impact as a radicalizing agent in Spain was accurately stressed by Rogelio Alonso in “Procesos de radicalización de los terroristas yihadistas en España,” Real Instituto Elcano, ARI 31/2007.

9 It is worth mentioning that before he was radicalized into a jihadist ideology, Serhane ben Abdelmajid Fakhet had joined Tablighi Jama`at. It was also inside this group, for instance, that Amer Azizi met for the first time Moustapha Maymouni, the man who initiated the formation of the Madrid terrorist network in 2002 but was arrested during a trip to Morocco in 2003.

to donate money to the mujahidin fighting in these conflicts, as well as invited to undertake military training at jihadist camps in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, select individuals were chosen and then secluded to private residences where they were indoctrinated. Indoctrination processes included watching videos of fighting in Bosnia and Chechnya, and listening to taped sermons from radical preachers such as Abu Qatada.

Weeks after the 9/11 attacks, however, Spanish authorities dismantled Abu Dahdah's al-Qa`ida cell, and the countryside gatherings on the riverbank ceased. Meetings became more discreet and behind closed doors in city flats and storefronts, such as a barber's shop located in a quarter of Madrid where Maghrebi and other immigrant populations are concentrated.

During this period after 9/11, some individuals part of the network were socialized into jihadism by influential people traveling to Spain from abroad, such as Mimoum Belhadj and his brother Youssef Belhadj, who were already members of the GICM. Network member Abdelmajid Bouchar, for example, was radicalized in this way. Others who later became part of the 2004 Madrid bombing network were observed in 2002 outside worship sites in Madrid where they were subjected to proselytizing by Rabei Osman. Fouad el-Morabit Amghar is an example of a network member radicalized by this method. Others were radicalized while serving time in Spanish prisons, such as Mohamed Bouharrat.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Said Berraj, for example, was on his way to Afghanistan in 2001 when he was arrested in Turkey. Said Berraj was traveling in the company of three other followers of Abu Dahdah, more concretely Amer Azizi himself, Salaheddin Benyaich, also known as Abu Muhgen, and Lahcen Ikassrien, who was captured by the U.S. military in Afghanistan following 9/11, imprisoned for a few years at Guantanamo Bay and finally extradited to Spain in 2005, where he was released.

<sup>11</sup> Rachid Aglif, Otman el-Gnaoui and Mahmoud Slimane Aoun, all of whom radicalized into violence after March 2003, also served time in prison during the 1990s, but apparently it did not result in the adoption of extremist attitudes.

### Was the Internet a Significant Radicalization Tool?

The internet was not a radicalization factor for individuals who adopted a jihadist ideology before the 9/11 attacks. It was a limited factor among those who adopted a jihadist ideology between 9/11 and February 2003. As for those who radicalized into violence after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the internet appears to have been a greater factor in their radicalization process.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, those who radicalized after

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the 2003 invasion of Iraq also did so more rapidly than the others, although with varying degrees of intensity.<sup>13</sup> Judicial documentation from the March 2004 terrorist case provides valuable information about the internet sites visited by the members of the network.

Files recovered from a hard drive and USB devices found in the debris of the Leganés apartment explosion are revealing.<sup>14</sup> Before 9/11, leading members of the Madrid terrorist network paid close attention to the texts of Abdullah Azzam and Abu Qatada. Between 9/11 and February 2003, members visited websites such as www.jihad.net and downloaded writings in

<sup>12</sup> A longitudinal perspective on radicalization among those involved in the Madrid bombing network indicates the growing importance of the internet, although not to the point of self-radicalization or self-recruitment. For a broader discussion based on other examples, see Peter Newmann, *Joining Al-Qaeda. Jihadist Recruitment in Europe* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2008), pp. 53-62.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, a gradual sense of progressive involvement, usually considered a consistent quality among those becoming terrorists, seems to be absent for some latecomers in the Madrid bombing network. For an insightful perspective on these issues, see John Horgan, “From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 618:1 (2008): pp. 80-93.

<sup>14</sup> The files on the drives were created between July 1997 and February 2004.

Arabic by Sayyid Qutb. During this time period, members also downloaded the audiovisual productions of al-Sahab, al-Qa`ida's media production house. After March 2003, members visited sites such as www.tawhed.ws, www.almaqdes.com and www.alsunnah.info; they focused on the texts of Abu Qatada, Ibn Taymiyya, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Nasir bin Hamad al-Fahd, Abdul Munim Mustafa Halima, Hamid al-Ali and Muhammad Fizazi.

### The Role of Affective Ties

Other significant radicalizing factors were affective ties between individuals. Pre-existing ties contributed not only to the adoption of jihadism, but to individuals' actual inclusion in the terrorist network. These relationships were usually based on kinship, friendship and neighborhood links. For example, 11 of the 27 individuals were born in Tetouan and Tangiers in Morocco. Nevertheless, this fact is not a definitive causal relationship since more than 20% of the tens of thousands of Moroccans living in Madrid are from these two cities.<sup>15</sup> There are, however, cases where network members were active within the same city quarter, connections that date back to childhood and youth years. This is true of Jamal Zougam and Said Berraj with respect to Tangiers. In these circumstances, affective ties based on neighborhood become much more significant, particularly if they are recurrent during occasional stays in the same city of origin.

Regardless, it is not easy to establish the location of birth or residence as a causal factor since other variables are often involved. Jamal Ahmidan, Hicham Ahmidan and Hamid Ahmidan all come from Tetouan, yet they all share family bonds. Mohamed and Rachif Oulad Akcha, both members of the terrorist network and both born in Tetouan, are brothers. Indeed, 25% of the 27 individuals part of the network had at least one other relative involved in the plot.

As for friendship ties, it is difficult to make what would otherwise be an important analytical distinction

<sup>15</sup> Bernabé López García and Mohamed Berriane eds., *Atlas de la Inmigración Marroquí en España* (Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2005), pp. 499-500.

between relationships existing before individual socialization into jihadism and those forged within the four group clusters after extremist ideas were adopted but prior to the formation of a terrorist network. Nevertheless, in regard to individuals engaged in criminal activities headed by “The Chinese,” loyalty to the criminal gang and above all to its leader appears to have been the key motivating factor for involvement in the 2004 Madrid bombing plot.

### Conclusion

The 2004 Madrid train bombing network should not be viewed as a case of “homegrown” terrorism, or as a case of a “homegrown” network of al-Qa`ida sympathizers. The network did not lack international connections with prominent global terrorism figures and entities, and its members, with one exception, were not disaffected people born or raised in Spain or in any other Western European country.

As for the network’s radicalization processes, individuals who radicalized into jihadism after the 2003 invasion of Iraq are a relative majority, and this issue appears to be a significant factor in their radicalization. Members who adopted jihadism before the 2003 invasion of Iraq were influenced by Islamic injustice frames, such as with respect to major conflicts involving Muslim communities. These include the conflict in Bosnia before 9/11, or Afghanistan immediately afterward; the invasion of Iraq also likely contributed. As for members who acquired a jihadist ideology before 9/11, their radicalization processes were slower, taking from months to years. A possible explanation is that the radicalizing agents needed more time to build trust among subjects for indoctrination, and they may have deliberately created various radicalization stages to advance a recruit’s socialization into jihadism.

It was in mosques, worship sites, countryside gatherings and private residences where most of the members of the Madrid bombing network adopted extremist views. A few adopted a violent conception of Islam while in prison. The internet was clearly relevant as a radicalization tool, especially among those who were radicalized after 2003, but it was more

importantly a complement to face-to-face interactions.

Nearly six years after the Madrid bombings, many of these same causal factors still exist. The country continues to host worship sites where a number of foreign radical Salafists preach. Prisons remain locations where jihadist radicalization occurs. The internet has only grown as an important radicalization tool, and extremist documents can now be found in Spanish. Iraq has become another radicalizing factor, joining other conflicts involving Muslims such as Afghanistan, Somalia and even North Africa.

There is also a new potential radicalizing factor to be considered. Spain is now experiencing the emergence of a second generation of descendants from immigrant Muslim parents coming of age. Although this second generation, as a large aggregate, is not yet old enough for university, schools may gradually become locations where peer groups of second generation adolescents are eventually affected by a lack of effective integration into Spanish society and a concomitant absence of identification with the country from where their parents came. This could be conducive to global jihadism as an alternative cognitive frame of reference among the several thousand pupils currently between 14 and 17 years of age. Failure to prevent and counter jihadist radicalization could finally result in real cases of “homegrown” terrorism in Spain, similar to incidents in other Western European countries.

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## The Past and Future of Deobandi Islam

By Luv Puri

AS THE BARACK OBAMA administration considers modifying the current U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, it is useful to understand the social, religious and historical forces that influence Pashtun society. Pashtuns form the single largest community in Afghanistan, consisting of approximately 38% of the population.<sup>1</sup> Pakistan also hosts a significant Pashtun population, primarily in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), where they make up 78% of the population, and in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where they make up 99% of the population.<sup>2</sup> Overall, 15% of Pakistanis are Pashtun.<sup>3</sup>

When developing a strategy involving the Pashtun community in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is relevant to understand the Deobandi school of Islam. Deobandi Islam is the most popular form of pedagogy in the Pashtun belt on both sides of the Durand Line that separates Afghanistan and Pakistan. Moreover, prominent Afghan and Pakistani Taliban leaders have studied in Deobandi seminaries. This article explains the history of Deobandi Islam, shows how Deobandi Islam in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been influenced by Saudi Wahhabism, and finally looks at the role of Deoband today.

### History of Deobandi Islam

The Deobandi school of Islam was founded in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was part of a series of revivalist movements that were sweeping British India during the time. After the 1857 revolt against the British colonialists, Muslims in British India were the primary targets during the

<sup>1</sup> See the UNHCR Assessment for Pashtuns in Afghanistan, located at [www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,MARP,,AFG,4562d8cf2,469f3a5112,0.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,MARP,,AFG,4562d8cf2,469f3a5112,0.html).

<sup>2</sup> “Population by Mother Tongue,” 2006 Pakistan Census Report, Pakistan’s Ministry of Economic Affairs and Statistics, available at [www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/pcostatistics/other\\_tables/pop\\_by\\_mother\\_tongue.pdf](http://www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/pcostatistics/other_tables/pop_by_mother_tongue.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Other Pakistani provinces host sizeable Pashtun populations: Baluchistan Province (29.84% Pashtun), Sindh Province (4.19% Pashtun), Punjab Province (1.16% Pashtun), and Islamabad (9.52% Pashtun).