

THE BARCELONA TERRORIST ATTACK- A FIRST ASSESSMENT

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From the information published by the media, most of it from official sources - police and local politicians - a profile of the terrorist cell responsible for the Barcelona and Cambrils vehicle attacks emerges.

The sequence of events

Alcanar

The series of events began on the night of August 16, at 23:17, when a huge explosion destroyed a house in the city of Alcanar, some 200km. south-west of Barcelona, killed at first one person and left seven wounded. Initially the blast was blamed on a gas explosion, as some 20 canisters of propane and butane were found in the ruins. The body of a woman was discovered among rubble along with a man who was taken to hospital in a critical condition. The house had been occupied for just a few months before the blast.

Police believe Alcanar residence was being used to prepare bombs, as among the debris traces of the explosive triacetone (TATP) have been found, proving that the terrorist cell had plans to commit far-reaching attacks.

The house, the center of operations "for many months", was owned by a bank, since it had been left after the pair of owners could not face the mortgage. Taking advantage of the fact that it was empty, the terrorists occupied it and lived "entrenched" in it, to the point that many thought that there was a drug laboratory and their tenants, all young, were drug traffickers. They did not go out to the street, and if they did to go to buy to the supermarket, they went unnoticed because of the large number of foreigners who live there.

Barcelona

On Thursday August 17, at around 5pm, a white van zig-zagged trying to hit as many people as possible along the crowded pedestrian area of the Barcelona renowned Las Ramblas avenue, packed with tourists, killing 13 persons of various nationalities and wounding some 100.

Younes Abouyaaqoub, a 22-year-old Moroccan resident of Ripoll, is the main suspect in the attack in central Barcelona, according to the Mossos d'Esquadra, the Catalan Police. The

hypothesis that he is the material author of the tragedy was gaining weight throughout the second day of the investigation.

Cambrils

While La Rambla of Barcelona lived its nightmare attack, five members of the jihadist cell headed to Cambrils (Tarragona) aboard a second rented van, used to flee central Barcelona after the attack. The initial plan of the terrorists, according to research still open, was to load that van with gas cylinders, but these had exploded in Alcanar the night before (according to some reports the attackers had tried to hire a lorry, which was foiled when the driver failed to produce the necessary permit). But they had a second setback as the van broke down and was found in Vic, 70 km north of Barcelona and 37km from Ripoll. The five left the abandoned van on the side of the freeway and picked up a black Audi A3 and, around one o'clock in the morning, managed to reach Cambrils, a tourist resort south of Tarragona, 110km south-west of Barcelona.

The Audi A3 ploughed into pedestrians in the popular seaside resort: a woman was critically injured and later died in hospital. Five other civilians and a police officer were hurt. The five terrorists, some of whom were wearing fake suicide belts, got out of the car and started to attack the terrified onlookers with knives and axes, and finally were shot dead by police.

The key suspect for the Barcelona ramming attack had been Moussa Oukabir, 17, who was said to have used documents belonging to his brother, Driss Oukabir, 28, to rent the van and the one found in the town of Vic and believed to be a getaway car.

After it became clear that Moussa Oukabir was one of the five shot dead in the Cambrils attack, Younes Abouyaaqoub became the main suspect.

Ripoll

Ripoll is a mountain town northwest of Barcelona of about 10,000 people.

The two brothers, Driss Oukabir, 28, and Moussa Oukabir, 17, both of Moroccan descent, lived in Ripoll with their mother. There were few indications that the two had come under the influence of radical Islam.

Moussa Oukabir was not known previously to the security services, but social media accounts linked to him contained a series of Islamist comments. In one post, when asked what he would do on his first day as absolute ruler of the world, Moussa replied: "Kill all infidels and only allow Muslims to continue the religion." His process of radicalization began a few months ago when he began to make contact through Internet with other radicalized Muslims in France. **Moussa Oukabir returned to Spain about ten days ago after a visit to Morocco.**

The elder brother, Driss, spoke perfect Catalan as well as Spanish and was not religious, according to a childhood friend. He was known as a small-time marijuana dealer, with a criminal record, imprisoned in Figueres until 2012.

The police is investigating if the imam of the Annur Muslim community in Ripoll, Abdelbaki Es Satty, may have acted as leader of the group in the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils. According to some sources, this 45-year-old individual is a radical Salafist and, by age and profile, could have acted as leader of the terrorist group. Es Satty was practicing there since the center opened earlier this year. He was chosen because it is "very difficult to find an imam in this area and he was free," according to the president of the community. **Last June,**

Es Satty announced that he was going to Morocco for three months on vacation, although the person with whom he shared the floor saw him last Tuesday.

Younes Abouyaaqoub, born in 1995 in a small town in Morocco is, next to Imam Es Satty, one of the two still to be found. He went assiduously to the mosque in Ripoll. He has rented one of the three vans used by the terrorists.

Official evaluation

Sources of the investigation consider that a single cell, comprising a dozen people, planned for months and without raising suspicions one or several attacks with explosives to cause "hundreds of dead" in Barcelona. One of the targets was possibly the towering basilica of the Sagrada Familia, the most visited monument in Spain.

The main hypothesis is that this plan varied after the accidental detonation in Alcanar, where they met and lived. Police sources say that in the backyard of the house were also found two small warehouses with material potentially used in explosives such as acetylene, found in operations against ISIS cells in Europe. The terrorists also handled high amounts of gunpowder.

All the other members of the cell are born in Morocco but with Spanish nationality.

According to *El Pais*, there are four detainees for their relationship with the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils: Driss Oubakir, 28; Sahal El Karib, 34; And Mohamed Aallaa, 27. All of them were arrested in Ripoll (Girona). The fourth, Mohamed Houli, survived the explosion of the Alcanar chalet on Wednesday August 16.

It is believed that the authors, all residents of Ripoll, were part of a cell that was radicalized by Ripoll's imam, Abdelbaki Es Satty, a radical Salafi cleric that had contacts with detainees of the March 11, 2004 deadliest terrorist attack in Spain and Europe.

From the 7 dead terrorists, five have been killed by police in Cambrils: Moussa Oukabir, 17 years old; Said Aallaa, years old; Mohamed Hychami, 24 years old; Omar Hychami and Houssaine Abouyaaqoub (the two less than 18). The other two died in the explosion of the Alcanar chalet.

The three missing are: Younes Abouyaaqoub, the main suspect as driver of the ramming vehicle in Barcelona, Abdelbaki Es Satty (imam of Ripoll) and Youssef Aallaa. It is not ruled out that the latter two are the dead in Alcanar.

The Islamic State's Amaq News Agency has issued a short statement on August 17, claiming responsibility for the terror attack in Barcelona. Citing a "security source," Amaq claims the "perpetrators of the attack in Barcelona were Islamic State soldiers and the operation was carried out in response to calls for targeting coalition countries."

Background of the Barcelona events

The Barcelona and Cambrils are the most serious terrorist attack in Spain since the March 11, 2004 bombing of trains in the Atocha railway station in Madrid, in which 198 people were killed and more than 1400 injured. It should be stressed that since then the Spanish Police and security services have been very efficient in foiling dozens of planned terrorist attacks and arresting hundreds of Islamist and jihadi terrorists since that most deadly attack in Spain and Europe.

The Spanish newspaper *El Periodico* reported that CIA warned the Mossos two months ago that Barcelona, and in particular the Rambla, could be the scene of a terrorist attack, but no other source confirmed this information.

Spanish Police alerted about a year ago that internal channels used by jihadists had intensified the dissemination of videos with tutorials that explained step by step how to attack vehicles loaded with butane gas bottles to cause the greatest possible damage.

On September 9, 2016, three women were arrested in Paris in connection with a Peugeot 607 car laden with seven gas cylinders, found in a side road near Notre Dame cathedral. They had planned to attack the Gare de Lyon. On April 8, 2017, the driver of a hijacked beer delivery truck that careered into crowds on Stockholm's largest shopping street had put an explosive device in the front seat that failed to properly explode on impact.

Before the Barcelona attacks, 51 suspected jihadists had already been detained in Spain this year, while 69 were detained last year, and 75 were detained in 2015, according to *El Pais*.

In April 2017, nine men were arrested in a series of raids in and around Barcelona, in connection with the March 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels. Eight of the nine men were Moroccans, and one a Spaniard. All were ages 30 to 40 and most have criminal records.

On 23 May 2017, police in Madrid arrested two men suspected of belonging to a jihadist cell with links to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The two, both Moroccans aged 43 and 22, are alleged to have strong links to a cell that recruited, radicalized and trained would-be terrorists for suicide attacks. They were suspected of being “cyber soldiers” involved in more than one hundred internet sites aimed at training ISIS members to carry out attacks, including video tutorials on how to make homemade explosions.

On June 28, 2017, police arrested six suspected members of ISIS, four in Spain in Mallorca, where the cell was allegedly based, and one each in Britain and Germany. The man arrested in Birmingham at Spain's request, was a 44-year-old Salafist imam who led the group and who was sought by several countries. A 28-year-old Spanish citizen was detained in the city of Dortmund as part of the operation. He maintained contact with the cell and helped make propaganda videos.

On July 1, 2017, a 29-year-old Danish man, born in Syria, was arrested in Malaga in southern Spain. He was suspected of having fought in the ranks of Daesh for at least two years in Syria.

A first personal evaluation

The Catalan cell based in Ripoll and Alcanar was formed by some 12 quite young and very young Spanish citizens of Moroccan origin, led by the 45-year-old imam of Ripoll, Abdelbaki Es Satty, also born in Morocco.

This was most probably a local auto-radicalized cell, based on family (two pairs of brothers, Oukabir and Hychami), personal and neighborhood relations. At least two of them had petty criminal records. They were under the influence of the strong personality of the older imam, leaving in a small almost secluded environment of an immigrant community in a small provincial town.

It seems they didn't have serious previous training, which explains the “work accident” with explosives. More interestingly they didn't have hand or automatic weapons or operational suicide belts and had to use car ramming, knives and machete in their terrorist cavalcade.

The important point in the investigation now will be to track the visits to Morocco by imam Abdelbaki Es Satty and Moussa Oukabir and possible links to jihadists at the other side of the Pyrenean border, in France. It is well known that some 2500 Moroccans have fought in Syria and Iraq, many have returned and many if not most of the jihadists involved in terrorist plots on Spanish soil were of Moroccan origin.