



Analysis of the Spanish Suicide Bombers Case

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I. The Case

The case in discussion is based on the following document which was filed in the Spanish court in January 2008.

Case 30/2008-C
Before Judge Ismael Moreno Chamarro, Magistrate Judge
Central Court of Instruction #2
Madrid, January 23, 2008

All citations are taken directly from this official court document, and translated by the author.

The case centers on 10 individuals, nine of them citizens of Pakistan and one of India, who were detained shortly before carrying out what police describe as an imminent terrorist attack on Spanish soil. It is worth noting that Spain (al Anadalus in the Muslim world) is broadly viewed in Islamist circles as part of the original Muslim Caliphate, and by virtue of that, is Islamic territory. Al Andalus, referred to specifically by Osama bin Laden and other al Qai'da leaders as a target of re-conquest, refers to the parts of the Iberian peninsula that were ruled at various times by Muslims from 711 to 1492 A.D. Because of this status in the jihadist conception, attacks on Spanish soil are justified as "defensive jihad," or an attack that is aimed at reasserting Muslim control over areas that rightly belong to Muslims. While the concept of "offensive jihad" is not broadly accepted in Islam (although it is by al Qai'da and other violent Islamist groups), the concept of defensive jihad is not nearly as controversial.

During the past two years, the region around Barcelona, known as Catalonia, has been a particularly attractive target for jihadist attacks and planned attacks. In that region, "once seemingly disparate Salafi Islamist groups and neophyte militant Muslim grassroots networks coalesced into radicalized Islamist collectives throughout Catalonia to pose a national threat to Spain, as well as to Western interests in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East."¹

¹ For a more complete look at the *jihadist* model in Catalonia, see: Kathryn Haahr, "Catalonia: Europe's New Center for Global Jihad," *TerrorismMonitor*, Jamestown Foundation, June 7, 2007.

According to the court document, police found a house where those arrested allegedly stored explosives and detonators. The building also served as living quarters for some of the suspects. From this base, the suspects allegedly illegally entered numerous other houses, garages, and vehicles to gather information, find cars to move people and equipment, steal mobile telephones and items useful to their purposes.

The case consists of almost identical charges against all 10 individuals, so only one summary will be given. The summary in use, unless otherwise cited, is the case against Maroof Ahmed Mirza, the person police labeled as the leader of the group. The 10 individuals are identified as:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Passport</u>	<u>DOB</u>	<u>Nationality</u>
Maroof Ahmed Mirza	X-02788381-W	Oct. 5, 1969	Pakistan
Mohamed Tarik	X-4499735-S	Aug. 11, 1971	Pakistan
Qadeer Malik	X-06555426-N	Jan. 15, 1976	Pakistan
Hafeez Ahmed	X-03155855-W	May 1, 1967	Pakistan
Sarosh Aki Mohamed	X-03546577-T	Dec. 22, 1974	India
Mohamed Imren (Roshan Jamal Khan)	F1218579	Aug. 3, 1957	India
Shaib Iqbal	X-03520796-W	Feb. 15, 1981	Pakistan
Imram Cheema (Mohammad Elahi Bibi)	46773122T	March 3, 1944	Pakistan
Mohammed Shoaib		Nov. 29, 1982	Pakistan
Mehmoo Khalid	FA0153701	Jan. 13, 1980	Pakistan

II. The Composition And Ideological Grounding of the Cell

The cell, according to the court document, was “an organized group, with a clear and specialized division of labor, ideologically coherent based on their acceptance of an extremist Islamic message, directed by individuals with deep religious knowledge, and who exercised a notable influence over the rest of the group. The ideological base is the Tabligh e Jamaa movement. Tabligh e Jamaa is based on a strict interpretation of Islam, and its structure has been used to espouse a most radical form of Islam, including the indiscriminate use of violence as a legitimate tool to achieve their political and religious goals.” (p. 2).

It is worth noting the explicit tie made to the Tabligh movement, whose members act as missionaries for an austere version of Islam across the world. The group operates, with few restrictions, across Europe, the United States, Africa and Southeast Asia. Members of the Tabligh movement have been linked in the recent past to various terrorist organizations. While not directly espousing violence, the movement preaches a radical Salafist message of hate for non-Muslims and the reestablishment of the Islamic Caliphate.² The role of providing the ideological and theological underpinnings to the radical Islamist structures is in some ways similar to the role played by the Muslim Brotherhood. Both structures often serve as entryways for those seeking a path to radical, violent jihad. While not all Tablighs or Muslim Brotherhood members are violent or explicitly espouse violence, their respective structures give theological coherence and credibility to those seeking the violent imposition of Islam on the broader world.

² For more information, see: Alex Alexiev, “Tabligh Jamaat: Jihad’s Stealth Legions,” Middle East Quarterly, Winter 2005, accessed at: <http://www.meforum.org/article/686>

Using the Tabligh's theology as justification for their actions, the court states, "the group obtained an operational capacity and was very close to obtaining the technical capabilities to create explosives, with the intent of using these explosive devices to carry out terrorist attacks of a jihadist nature...the group intended to carry out diverse terrorist suicide attacks during the weekend of January 18-20, in the public transportation sector in the city of Barcelona." (p. 2).

The court notes that the group's cohesion was formed "by frequent meetings and activities carried out together, both in public and private." This cohesion was built on:

- Ideological and operational leadership of Maroof Ahmed Mirza and Mohammad Elahi Bibi, who were greatly respected by the members of the group,
- Specialists in the manufacture of explosive devices, led by Hafeez Ahmed,
- Suicide bombers, made up of Mohammed Shoaib, Mehmooh Khalid, and Imram Cheema.

III. The Planning Phase

In keeping with the compartmentalization and specialization of the group, the intended suicide bombers arrived in Barcelona separately and through different routes. It is unclear if they knew each other at all before embarking on their mission but it seems unlikely. Mehmooh Khalid arrived in Spain (Barcelona) on October 8, 2007. He traveled from Pakistan to Barcelona via Stockholm. On November 12, Mohammed Shoaib arrived from Pakistan via Germany. Imram Cheema arrived sometime between the middle of December and the middle of January, and appears to have entered via Portugal, the court said (p. 2). The fact that his exact time and place of entry is not known is indicative of the ease in which travelers can move across European borders, and indicates he most likely arrived by land, rather than by air.

The compartmentalization in the cell is "a common pattern in radical Islamic organizations," the court stated. "The suicide bombers are often deployed shortly before the attack is to take place. The arrival of these three Pakistanis took place about two months after the alleged explosives expert, Hafeez Ahmed, returned from a five month trip to Pakistan." (p. 2) Again, neither the court document nor other public information detail specifically what Hafeez Ahmed was doing in Pakistan, besides receiving advanced explosives training, nor is there information on the exact location of the training camps in Pakistan. What is clear, however, is that there is enough of a jihadist infrastructure there to allow a person to train for five months, then return easily to Europe.

While the court document does not go into details of the planning, published reports state that the Spanish police were tipped off to the possibility of imminent attacks by the cell by a French intelligence asset who had been working in northern Pakistan.³ The Spanish police had already been monitoring the activities of Tariq bin Ziad Mosque and its small, underground prayer room in the Raval neighborhood of Barcelona, where the alleged terrorist plots were discussed and planned.

While monitoring the movements of the suspects, police saw two of the men, Qadeer Malik and Shaib Iqbal, tossing out a plastic garbage bag. The agents found

³ The informant has been identified as "F-1" and French authorities accuse the Spanish of burning one of their premier undercover sources in the radical Islamic world. For a more complete look at the use of the informant and the information he provided, see: Graham Keeley and Paul Haven, "Spain, France at Odds Over Terror Probe," Associated Press, Feb. 8, 2008; and Elaine Sciolino, "Terror Threat From Pakistan Said to Expand," The New York Times, Feb. 10, 2008, p. A1.

wires, broken timing devices, latex gloves, wire cutters, computer connectors, lead ball bearings, and other items in the bag. The police moved in and made the arrests the following day after the informant warned the attack was imminent, and other indications of possible suicide bombings were seen. These included the purchase of a video camera for possible use in filming the suicide bombers' farewell messages.⁴ The court noted that, "while these explosive devices lacked the potential to carry out an attack that would guarantee widespread damages, they could be used for teaching how to use explosive devices while limiting the risk of physical danger to those who are learning." (p. 3). The court document states that Maroof Ahmed Mirza was arrested while in a meeting at the house where explosives were found. He was given special attention in the case because he was identified as the "religious and operational leader of the group...he was the person who picked and changed the times and places of the suicide attacks, and he participated in prayers that called people to jihad and sacrifice, particularly referring to those who were going to commit suicide attacks" (p. 3).

There has since been some discussion over just how imminent the attack really was, and police officials believe that one of the suspects who escaped may have taken the bulk of the bomb-making equipment with him. The case has also caused a reported rupture in intelligence cooperation between Spain and France because of the treatment of the confidential informant who brought the potential attacks to the attention of authorities.⁵

IV. Lessons From the Plot

The court documents and reporting about the case make several important points. The first is that there is some command and control in Pakistan that exercises control over a significant part of the jihadist network operating not only in Spain, but across Europe. The would-be suicide bombers were recruited in Pakistan, trained in Pakistan, and then sent to Spain to join already-existing networks of sympathizers. Some reports indicate the group was acting under the orders of Baitullah Mehsud, the new head of the Taliban in Pakistan, who has been publicly blamed for the assassination of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto.⁶ "That these people were ready to go into action as terrorists in Spain—that came as a surprise," said judge Baltasar Garzon, Spain's highest anti-terrorism magistrate. "In my opinion, the jihadi threat from Pakistan is the biggest emerging threat we are facing in Europe. Pakistan is an ideological and training hotbed for jihadists, and they are being exported here."⁷

Not only is the role of jihadists in Pakistan a new development, it shows the important role that diasporas from Pakistan and elsewhere play in allowing networks to operate and integrate across international boundaries and great distances. This specialized, stratified cell that operates with outside guidance is a significant qualitative step up from the homegrown jihadists operating on their own, in the hopes of bringing glory to Allah. This type of action is a hybrid of complicit homegrown networks within a country working with those from outside the network who have received special training and instructions. The ideological bond and connection is formed by itinerant preachers who bring their messages of radicalization to the expatriate communities, tying the radical groups in Pakistan to their ideological soul mates in Europe.

⁴ Sciolino, op cit.

⁵ Keely and Haven, op cit.

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The second lesson is that the Spanish cell reportedly had plans not only to attack the Barcelona metro system, but to carry out a series of attacks across Europe. According to the informant, after the initial bombing in Barcelona, Mehsud in Pakistan would issue a series of demands, including the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. If the demands were not met, there would be another series of suicide bombing in Barcelona, then across Europe. “If they didn’t comply, France. If they didn’t comply, Portugal. If they didn’t comply, Britain. There are many people ready there,” the informant told police.⁸

While the information is impossible to verify, if accurate it would mean not only that the cell in Barcelona had been set up, but that it had been set up in conjunction with other cells in other European countries. That, in turn, would imply that the network of networks was able to communicate and coordinate actions on a fairly significant level.

V. Conclusions

Because of the lack of verifiable information outside of the court documents, few firm conclusions can be drawn. However, the emergence of a cadre of suicide bombers being trained and sent from Pakistan to cooperate and operate in conjunction with homegrown Islamist networks in Europe represents a significant shift in complexity and sophistication from the homegrown terrorist networks operating alone. The shift also shows a new level of interest in Pakistani Islamist networks in working beyond their local and parochial concerns. Until now, the Taliban, unlike al Qai’da, has shown little interest in operating outside the narrow confines of their own regional jihadist struggle.

This shift is particularly dangerous because one can be sure that if this model is being developed to carry out attacks in Spain, it is being made operational in other countries in Europe, and possibly elsewhere, where there are significant Pakistani diasporas. The ease of travel and the fluidity of communications facilitated by the Internet have made networks ever more fluid and adaptable. Islamist networks have, in the recent past, shown themselves to be resilient and resourceful. The thwarted Barcelona attacks show that their ability to adapt and continue to pose a threat has not diminished.

⁸ Sciolino, op cit.