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**Spanish police raided a militant recruiting network in Melilla this September (Source: Spanish National Police)**

**FRENCH JIHADISTS NAMED AFTER ISLAMIC STATE KILLINGS**

*James Brandon*

The videotaped execution of 18 Syrian soldiers and the U.S. aid worker Peter Kassig by the Islamic State organization garnered fresh international notoriety for the militant group when it was posted online on November 16. In addition to underlining the group's brutal tactics, the French government's rapid naming of two of the executioners as suspected French nationals also highlighted the large number of French Muslims who have joined the Islamic State organization and a range of other hardline Islamist militant organisations in Syria during the last few years. The extent of this trend was further confirmed in the wake of these events when the French prime minister said that "close to 50" French citizens were so far thought to have died in Syria," far more than from any other European country (BBC, November 19). This echoes earlier statements by French officials; in September, the country's interior minister said that an estimated "930 French citizens or foreigners [residing] in France are today involved in jihad in Iraq and Syria" (France24, September 15).

In the days following the release of the footage of the execution, a French prosecutor put the two men under investigation for murder, joining a terrorist organisation and conspiring to commit crimes. The first to be officially named, Maxime Hauchard, was identified as a 22-year-old from a small rural village in Normandy who had converted to Islam at the age of 17 after living an apparently unremarkable suburban life. French officials said that he had travelled to Syria in August 2013, having previously gone to Mauritania in 2012 (RFI, November 17). Hauchard, who now operates under the name "Abu Abdallah al-Faransi," had previously given a Skype interview in July describing his life in Syria, which he described the training camp "as like a holiday" before saying that he wished to die "as a martyr" (*Le Monde*, November 18). The second man to be identified by prosecutors, Michaël Dos Santos, a Portuguese national who gained French citizenship in 2009, was already well-known to the French security services (*Le*

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*Figaro*, November 19). Dos Santos, under his nom de guerre Abu Uthman, had already appeared in several online videos threatening attacks on France and had also maintained an active twitter account where he posted Salafist material and graphic photographs from Syria. Following these developments, and further underlining the involvement of a significant number of French nationals in ISIS, a further video was released by the Islamic State's al-Hayat Media Center onto YouTube on November 19, showing three French Muslims in Syria burning their French passports; the video has since been removed from YouTube (*Le Figaro*, November 19).

The French government has sought to take tough action against the developing jihadist threat. Although the number of French citizens in Syria remains disputed, with maximum numbers being estimated at around 1,000, the government has initiated a crackdown against jihadists seeking to return to France. In the week prior to the above events, on November 13, Flavien Moreau, the first French citizen to stand trial in France for involvement in the Syrian jihad, was convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison. Unlike committed extremists like Dos Santos, Moreau's trial revealed him to be a somewhat eccentric jihadist. Of South Korean origin, but adopted and brought up in France, he had first travelled to Syria in November 2012, but left after two weeks after being unable to deal with giving up cigarettes, as his jihadist comrades in arms had demanded. Back in France, he then tried to return to Syria, but was prevented as various European countries denied him entry; he was arrested soon afterwards in France (France24, November 13). In addition to putting such returning jihadists on trial, the French government has also taken a number of other measures, for instance, preventing around 70 people from leaving France due to suspicions that they intended to go to Syria. The government has not, however, so far outlined a broader strategy for dealing with the longer-term challenges posed by the large number of experienced jihadists who may someday return to France; given the number of French jihadists now active in Syria, such a strategy is likely to become increasingly necessary in the coming months. Indeed, prison sentences alone are unlikely to be the solution and may in fact make matters worse; an estimated 60 percent of the French prison population is Muslim and prison radicalisation is already a significant concern for the French authorities (*Le Figaro*, October 23; Reuters, May 17, 2013).

#### Note

1. His twitter account, @abou\_uthman\_6, has since been suspended.

## ISLAMIC STATE SUICIDE BOMB ATTACK IN ERBIL RAISES STAKES IN KURDISTAN

*James Brandon*

On November 19, the Islamic State organization dramatically raised the stakes in the group's ongoing conflict with Iraqi and Syrian Kurds by carrying out a suicide car bomb attack on a local government building in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. Although the bomber failed to breach the building's perimeter, the attack killed at least six and injured 29 (Rudaw, November 20). It was the worst attack in the Kurdish autonomous region since August 2013, when a suicide bomber killed seven in an attack on the headquarters of the Asayish, the Kurdish internal security organisation, also in Erbil; this attack was purportedly an Islamic State, then the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), attempt to free prisoners being held there (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 8, 2013). Responsibility for the latest attack was reportedly claimed by the Islamic State in an announcement distributed online on November 21. The statement reportedly identified the bomber as Abdulrahman al-Kurdi, presumably an ethnic Kurd, and gloated that the attack had "breached all the security checkpoints... reached the heart of the city of Erbil" (*al-Arabiya*, November 21).

The aim of the attack is likely to have been to strike back at the Iraqi Kurdistan government, which since late October has deployed its peshmerga forces in Kobane. Kobane is the Kurdish-majority Syrian town that has been a focus for recent conflict between the Islamic State organization and Kurdish militants, who are backed by U.S.-led international forces. The bomb attack is also likely to be an attempt to undermine local and international confidence in the abilities of the Kurdish government to maintain security in Kurdistan, including business confidence in the economically-fragile region. Investor sentiment in Iraqi Kurdistan had already been badly shaken in August and September when the Islamic State's rapid advance in northern Iraq seemed to threaten Kurdistan; foreign businesses in Iraqi Kurdistan responded rapidly, with international airlines reducing their services and some foreign oil companies scaling back their operations. The latest attack likely intended to dent such confidence further (Bloomberg, August 7; August 13). Moreover, the Islamic State's decision to allegedly use an ethnic Kurd as the bomber, while no doubt partly undertaken for operational reasons, was also likely intended to send a powerful message to both the Kurdish government and its international political, military and economic backers that the Islamic State threat in Kurdistan is not just an external threat; the militant organization also draws on elements within Kurdish society.

Despite this, the net effect of the November 19 bomb attack may be to strengthen Kurdish and international opposition to the Islamic State organization. In the short term, for example, the attack is likely encourage the various Kurdish groups, many of which are long-standing rivals, to work more closely together. For instance, Masoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurdistan region and leader of the Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has traditionally favoured cultivating political and economic links with Turkey in preference to working with the anti-Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkên Kurdistan – PKK), whose offshoots have played the leading role in combating the Islamic State in Syria. The bombing is likely to renew awareness that both the KDP and the PKK face a common threat in the Islamic State organization and to encourage closer co-operation between these long-time foes. Turkey responded to the bombing by reaffirming its ties with Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, visiting Erbil on a pre-planned trip on November 21, two days after the bombing, publicly stressed the important of Turkey-Kurdistan security ties: “Turkey will provide support through any necessary means for the Kurdistan Region’s security” (Rudaw, November 21). In a further expression of Turkish solidarity with the Iraqi Kurds, Davutoglu publicly expressed his condolences for the victims of the November 19 bomb attack. Another impact of the attack is likely to be to bolster international support for both the Iraqi Kurdish government and for Kurdish militants in Syria who are on the frontline in the fight against the Islamic State organization; indeed, on the same day as the bombing, Barzani publicly appealed for the international community to supply more heavy weapons to the Kurds. For instance, in an interview the same day as the bombing, he called for the West to supply armored personnel carriers (APCs), helicopters and artillery to Kurdish forces (France24, November 19). On balance therefore, while the Islamic State’s successful bomb attack in Erbil has no doubt struck a powerful psychological blow at the Iraqi Kurdish government and its supporters, in the longer-term the attack is likely to further unify the Islamic State’s opponents and to cement military and political opposition to the group.

## The Maldives-Syria Connection: Jihad in Paradise?

*Animesh Roul*

The Maldives, the Muslim-majority archipelago country in the Indian Ocean, is going through a tumultuous time, facing increasing Islamist activities at home, an exodus of radicalized youth to join the jihad in Syria and a growing domestic clamor for the implementation of Shari’a law. This has been accompanied by the targeted abduction and intimidation of local Maldivians who hold progressive ideals and secular values. Although the country is better known as a romantic honeymoon destination, these developments – which include the establishment of the “Islamic State of the Maldives” (ISM) group – have exposed the deep extremist undercurrents in Maldivian society and are increasingly drawing the attention of local and international security forces.

### Syrian Connections

In October 2013, some of the first cases of radicalized Maldivian youths attempting to travel to Syria were reported when two youths were detained at the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport (INIA) in the capital Malé (Haveeru Online, June 1). Since then, about 100 Maldivians are believed to have joined the Syrian conflict and most of these are said to have joined up with al-Qaeda’s official affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (or al-Nusra Front/the Support Front). Several recent incidents shed further light on the ongoing jihadist exodus. In October, Sri Lankan security officials detained three Maldivians, including an 18-year-old woman, who were suspected of planning to travel to Syria through Turkey. Separately, another Maldivian family – comprising a 23-year-old radicalized man, his mother and his 10-year-old sister – was reported to have travelled to Islamic State-held territory in Syria or Iraq, from where they sent a message home stating that the Maldives is a “land of sin” and an “apostate nation.” These statements were perhaps an early indication that jihadists might someday regard the Maldives itself as a legitimate target (Minivan News, October 30). Meanwhile in November, it was reported that at least six more people from the Fuvahmulah and Meedhoo areas of the Maldives had travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State organization, illustrating that the flow of jihadist recruits to the Middle East continues (Minivan News, October 30; November 6).

As of November 8, at least five Maldivians have reportedly died in Iraq and Syria fighting alongside Jabhat al-Nusra.

The dead have been identified, under their assumed jihadist aliases, as Abu Turab, Abu Nuh, Abu Dujanah, Abu Ibrahim and Abu Fulan. Of these, Abu Turab and Abu Nuh were reportedly killed in late May; both died in Syria fighting alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front's (IF) Suqur al-Sham brigade (Minivan News, May 27). Prior to his death, Abu Turab sent a message via YouTube that he was joining the jihad to establish an Islamic State and to implement "Allah's Shari'a." Urging all Muslims to join the struggle, he said, in his native Divehi language, that "Enemies of Allah are spreading democracy all over the world, as fast as they can. So in return for every person they lead astray, I want to – even if by myself – kill as many enemies of Allah as I can." [1] Some of these militants appear to have also made an impression on other foreign fighters; an Australian jihadist with Jabhat al-Nusra has feted Maldivian fighters as "courageous and well-mannered mujahideen." [2]

As with other foreign jihadists in Syria, social media is vital for relaying their message to audiences back home. A key social media tool used by Maldivian jihadists is their online media forum, Bilad al-Sham Media (BASM), is run by a group of Maldivians in Syria to publicize the activities of Maldivian jihadists and their perceived heroics on the battlefield. According to information circulated in the BASM-run blog, the group currently fighting in Syria are mostly young university students of Maldivian origin who have travelled to Syria through a third country with the aim of "liberating" the Islamic world and establishing the global Islamic caliphate. The managers of BASM appear to be closely involved in fighting units; the latest slain Maldivian fighter killed in early November was Abu Fulan, who was a disciple of another slain Maldivian identified as Abu Dujanah. Dujanah was BASM's founding editor. According to reports, Abu Dujanah was killed in September this year and since then BASM has been run by another group of Maldivian mujahideen. [3] Abu Dujanah was later identified as Yameen Naeem, from the Maafannu area in Malé; he had decided to travel to Syria while studying in Egypt (Haveeru Online, November 8; Minivan News, September 2).

Amid these fast unfolding developments, the establishment of the so-called "Islamic State of Maldives" (ISM) group, which claims to be a local organization affiliated with the Islamic State organization, emerged in the last week of July. This coincided with the Maldives' Independence Day celebrations and an Islamic State flag was hoisted for the first time in Malé's Raalhugandu area in the same month. Islamic State flags were also seen during an early August protest march against the Israeli attacks on Gaza City. On September 5, hundreds of pro-Islamist protesters, including veiled women and children, marched in the streets of Malé

holding Islamic State flags and banners, calling for the implementation of Shari'a law in the country. Some of the banners read: "We want the laws of the Quran," "Islam will eradicate secularism" and "Shari'a will dominate the world" (Minivan News, September 6).

### Domestic Radicalism

The flow of recruits to Syria has been accompanied by radical elements in the Maldives becoming more assertive and violent. Most notably, this has involved taking liberal and progressive individuals hostage or threatening them with serious consequences if they speak out against radical Islamism. The latest victims of such Islamist vigilantes are the journalist Ahmed Rilwan, who has been missing since early August, and a web administrator of the Ranreendhoo Maldives pro-opposition Facebook page (Minivan News, November 13). In addition, Islamist-linked criminal gang members (e.g. from the Bosnia, Kuda Henveiru, Dot and Buru gangs) have participated in attacks on scholars, journalists and free speech activists for their allegedly "anti-Islamic" activities (Minivan News, September 22). The gangs have also issued threats through text messages on mobile phones, threatening to violently attack anyone they regard as "laa dheenee" (non-religious) (International Federation of Journalists, August 8). Physical attacks on such dissenters are also common, and there are also reports of Islamist vigilantes abducting and interrogating young men in order to force them to identify online activists advocating secularism or professing atheism through social media sites (Minivan News, June 9).

Although politicians in the Maldives have engaged in a public blame game over the visibly deteriorating situation, there is little doubt that the root cause of the rise in visible Islamist radicalism is the growing popularity of Salafist ideologies among some sections of the population, notably the younger generation. In particular, years of grooming by visiting clerics and radical preachers have played a key role in fermenting radicalism and anti-Western sentiment in the archipelago. Known radical English-language preachers with substantial online presences such as Bilal Phillips, Zakir Naik and Anjem Choudary have also notably played a key role in popularizing radical Islam in Maldives, a trend which is now merging into rising support for transnational jihadism. [4] At present, however, the government seems oblivious to the serious long term implications of this grassroots Islamist surge and it is likely to continue to attempt to sweep such issues under the carpet, even as evidence grows that the Islamic State organization's brand of Islam has now reached its shores.

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#### Notes

1. Please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6ZIn3B33EA>.
2. Shaykh Abu Sulayman al-Australi said that “Maldivians are some of the most courageous and well-mannered Mujahideen,” on his now suspended Twitter account (@abusulayman321) on May 25, 2014.
3. See, “Q & A with Bilad al-Sham Media: Maldivians in Syria,” <http://biladalsham.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/part-1.pdf>.
4. See video message of UK-based Anjem Choudary exhorting Maldivians to protect Islam and take up jihad: <http://www.maldivestimes.com/video/message-muslims-maldives-anjem-choudary-shariah4maldives>.

## After Fatal Attack on Shi’as, Saudi Arabia Gets Tough on Terrorism

Zaina Konbaz

On November 3, five people were shot dead and nine others wounded when three masked gunmen attacked a group of Shi’as who were leaving a mosque at the village of al-Dalwa in Ahsa governorate in Saudi Arabia’s eastern region. The attackers reportedly used machine guns and pistols in their attack, which took place as the victims were leaving a Shi’a ceremony commemorating Ashura, which marks the death of Imam Hussain, the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson. Within 24 hours, Saudi security forces reported that they had arrested six suspects as part of “simultaneous security operations implemented in Shaqra governorate in Riyadh region and Ahsa governorate and Khobar city in the eastern region” (*al-Riyadh*, November 4). Two members of the Saudi security forces and two suspects were reportedly killed in the operations. Further arrests have been made since then, with a total of 26 suspects reportedly being detained to date (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 7).

The attacks, the most significant to take place in Saudi Arabia in several years, have refocused attention on Saudi Arabia’s efforts to tackle domestic extremism. The attack is also significant for two further reasons. Firstly, the attack is an ominous example of a planned sectarian violence taking place in Saudi Arabia and the attack clearly had much in common with anti-Shi’a attacks elsewhere in the region. Secondly, the attack points to the dangers posed to the kingdom by the large numbers of Saudis fighting abroad. Such fears are underlined by several developments which followed the attack. In particular, media reports indicated that while some of those arrested in follow-up operations were directly linked to the al-Dalwa attack, others with no relation to the attack were detained after armed attacks against security forces during these subsequent raids (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 7). In addition, several of the arrested suspects were reportedly Saudi citizens who had infiltrated back into Saudi Arabia after being involved with militants in Iraq, Syria and Yemen (*Saudi Gazette*, November 4; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 7).

The government’s response to the al-Dalwa attack did, however, also highlight some positive developments. For instance, the Saudi security forces’ rapid response to the attack and their public announcement just hours after the incident that the suspects had been apprehended is evidence that Saudi authorities recognize the importance of taking firm steps against sectarian violence, as well as evidence of

effective Saudi policing work. In the same vein, the Saudi Supreme Council of Clerics also issued a quick condemnation describing the attack as “criminal” and urged Saudis to “close ranks” against “the enemies of our religion and our homeland [who] aim to attack our unity and stability” (*al-Riyadh*, November 4; BBC, November 4).

Such invocations of national unity and calls for the maintenance of the Saudi societal cohesion were further evident in other official statements and in both state and privately owned television stations, as well as in the Saudi press. This emphasis on social cohesion by the government and the religious authorities, combined with media reports celebrating Saudi society’s resistance to terrorist attempts to divide society, runs counter to the decades-long sectarian rhetoric that often surfaces in Saudi public discourse. The Saudi regime, for both domestic and regional reasons, has always backed the Wahhabi religious establishment, which is based on rigidly conservative interpretations of Islam and is often critical of Shi’a practices. Indeed, the international press has often noted the tendency of both Saudi institutions and individuals to label Shiites as “rejectionists” and “heretics” and justify attacking them (*Al-Monitor*, April 28, 2013; Reuters, November 5). Additionally, organizations such as Human Rights Watch have argued that Saudi Shi’as face systemic discrimination in “public education, the justice system, religious freedom and employment” (Human Rights Watch, November 6). While some such criticisms no doubt remain valid, the recent actions by various arms of the Saudi state may signal that the authorities are now seeking to define the limits of such speech inside the kingdom, as well as to demonstrate the state’s opposition to sectarian violence.

However, the need to contain the sectarian discourse and ameliorate systemic discrimination against Shi’a citizens is the not the only issue that confronts the Saudi government. While the kingdom has downplayed the number of Saudi nationals fighting in both Syria and Iraq, some reports estimate Saudi fighters in Syria “at 12,000, with 3,872 reported killed and 2,689 said to have disappeared” (BBC, September 3). Saudi Arabia’s active support for the removal of Syria’s president, Bashar al-Assad, has also helped to stoke the civil war there in which the Islamic State organization has emerged as a powerful and dangerous faction. In addition, aside from the government’s policy on Syria, thousands of private Saudi funders are alleged to have given money to help arm Islamist groups in Syria, while Saudi extremist clerics have also encouraged Saudi nationals to fight abroad against Shi’a “rejectionists” in Syria and Iraq and even against the Shi’a Houthis in Yemen (*The Guardian*, November 4). Although the government criminalized fighting abroad in February and March of this year – along with conducting

a series of arrests and convicting several terrorists – the Saudi government has yet to implement tougher regulations against private Saudi individuals who are funding armed groups in Syria. It also remains unclear how far Saudi Arabia will attempt to challenge the sectarianism that is embedded in much of its society. Although the government has made broken new ground in emphasizing Saudi social cohesion and taking steps to defuse intercommunal tensions, for instance, with officials visiting victims of sectarian violence in hospitals and attending their funerals, key challenges, such as restricting institutional and private support of militant groups in Syria, remain ahead.

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## Spain Grapples with Growing Islamic State Threat

John C.K. Daly

A recent report by the UN Security Council estimated that 15,000 people from over 80 countries have so far travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside the Islamic State organization and other extremist groups, “including... [from] countries that have not previously faced challenges relating to al-Qaeda” (*The Guardian*, October 30). One of these affected countries is Spain. On October 27, Spain’s Ambassador to NATO, Miguel Aguirre de Cárcer y García del Arenal, said, “The Islamic State with its barbaric and terrorist tactics, now presents the most serious threat to our society” (*LaInformacion.com*, October 27). Separately, the Spanish foreign minister, José Manuel García-Margallo, said during an interview in October: “There is a risk that a jihadist corridor stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean will be created” (*El Correo*, October 19).

Although Spain’s Islamic State volunteers are less well-documented than those from some other European countries, a number of separate but related threats are emerging. These include the danger posed by local terrorist cells and lone wolves inspired by al-Qaeda’s global jihadist ideology with no direct ties to terrorist groups, Islamist radicals who return home to Spain after undergoing instruction in combat zones, cells aligned with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and finally, extremists who have been released from the U.S. military’s Guantanamo Bay prison to return to Spain. Spain, however, is no stranger to Islamist terrorism and for some years has given a high priority to tackling jihadism; since 1995, according to the Spanish Interior Ministry earlier this year, Spanish security forces have arrested 472 suspected Islamists (Auditor Barcelona, March 10). Spain has also been directly targeted by Islamist militants previously; notably the March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombings (also known in Spain as 11-M) killed 191 people and injured more than 2,000. In addition, the Spanish government is aware, that given Spain’s history, it occupies a unique place in the jihadist worldview; speaking on the tenth anniversary of the 2004 bombings, Spanish Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz said: “Clearly Spain forms part of the strategic objectives of global jihad. We are not the only ones, but we are in their sights” (Grupo Milenio, March 14).

### Numbers

In September 2013, Spain’s CNI intelligence service reported that it had identified 95 people from Spain – 13 nationals and the rest Moroccans with Spanish residency papers from six different cities – who had travelled to Syria since the civil war broke out to join al-Qaeda in fighting the Syrian government. Of these, it said that at least 11 had died as suicide bombers. In particular, CNI identified three residents of Ceuta who died as suicide bombers in Syria. These included Rawhid al-Wahbi, who crashed a bomb-laden truck into a government military headquarters, reportedly causing 130 deaths, and Mustafa Muhammad Layachi and Mustafa Muhammad, who also died in suicide bombings (*El País*, January 26). The number of both active jihadists and fatalities is now likely to be considerably higher, although precise numbers remain unclear. For instance, on July 19, Spanish National High Court Prosecutor and Coordinator on International Terrorism Dolores Delgado said that the Spanish security agencies had identified 29 Spaniards currently fighting in Syria, although she said that the figure could be higher because others may not have been located (EFE, July 19).

According to the available evidence, most Spanish jihadists active in Syria came from Catalonia, Madrid, Málaga, Alicante, Ceuta and Melilla, with one anti-terrorism officer commenting to the media, on condition of anonymity, that “almost all of them went with the firm determination not to come back, according to their friends” (*El País*, September 18, 2013). According to the Spanish intelligence services, most Spanish Muslims fighting in Syria are of Spanish origin, being either second or third generation immigrants, or were born abroad and are legal residents in Spain. In addition, the Moroccan authorities have said that an estimated 1,200 Moroccans holding Spanish residency cards have joined the Islamic State organization (*El País*, August 25, 2013). This echoes previous experience of the issue; police analysts have reportedly found in the last decade that the greatest number of Islamists are concentrated in Catalonia, Granada, Valencia, La Rioja and Madrid (*El País*, March 10).

In addition, the networks that recruit Spanish Muslims to join the Islamic State organization are also becoming clearer. In August 2013, Spain’s Interior Ministry reported that 60 Spaniards had been recruited by networks operating within Spain (*El País*, August 25, 2013). The Spanish media has also reported that most volunteers have travelled to Syria via Turkey, as well as through Bulgaria, Greece and Tunisia, echoing broader patterns of Western European recruitment (*La Vanguardia*, July 19).

## Arrests

According to a September Ministry of Interior report, the number of arrests for terrorism-related jihadist activities in Spain has grown significantly since 2013, with 44 people taken into custody in Spain, Ceuta and Melilla in the year to date. By contrast, during the entire 2001-2013 period, Spanish security forces arrested a total of 78 individuals (ABC, September 26). The increase in arrests reflects that the Spanish government is increasingly worried about the return of jihadists from Syria and Iraq and their potential plans for attacks in Spain itself, as well as reflecting that the number of active militants is also increasing. However, the Spanish authorities have admitted that they have only a partial picture. A senior official in Spain's intelligence service, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the media in March that "we do not know how many went and how many returned. That is the danger, not knowing everything that we should know. Nobody is able to give reliable figures" (*El País Internacional*, March 25). There are also increasing fears that some of the militants are preparing to target Spain directly. According to Spanish terrorism expert José María Gil Garre, Spanish jihadists integrated into the Islamic State organization are now openly threatening to commit attacks on Spanish soil after returning from Syrian-Iraqi conflict zones, stating that their targets will include "churches," "local government councils" and "police stations" (Agencia Europa Press, September 28).

One of the most high profile series of arrests occurred on June 16, when the Spanish security forces arrested eight people in Madrid during a raid against an international network that was suspected of recruiting jihadists for the Islamic State. The recruitment organization was led by 47-year-old Moroccan national Lahcen Ikassrien, a former detainee at Guantanamo Bay prison (*El País*, June 16). Ikassrien had been arrested in Afghanistan in December 2001 and transferred to Guantanamo, where he was held until he was transferred to Spain's Torrejón de Ardoz military base in July 18, 2005. He was accused by the U.S. and Spanish prosecutors of cooperating with al-Qaeda; however, Spain's High Court acquitted him in 2006 due to a lack of evidence (*El País*, November 20, 2006). Ikassrien, who had been living in Madrid, had also been linked to a cell led by Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, alias Abu Dahdah (*El País*, March 10). Dahdah, a Syrian-born Spanish citizen, had also been previously arrested in November 2001 and had been sentenced to a 27-year prison term in Spain for his part in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and for his membership of al-Qaeda. Dahdah's sentence was subsequently reduced by the Spanish Supreme Court after it ruled that conspiracy charges against Dahdah were

unproven. After serving 12 years, Dahdah was accordingly released on May 22, 2013 (EFE, May 23, 2013). The United States, however, had continued to include Dahdah on its blacklist of known al-Qaeda terrorists, alleging that Dahdah knew of the planned September 11 attacks and was deeply involved in their organisation. [1]

## Government Response

In response to the Islamic State organization's expansion in Iraq and Syria, Spain has adopted a proactive stance. On October 10, Spain's Minister of Defense Pedro Morenés announced that the country's Council of Ministers had approved sending around 300 soldiers to Iraq to train the Iraqi army for an initial period of six months, focusing on handling explosives, demining and special operations (*El Mundo*, October 10). The following week Morenés visited U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel at the Pentagon, where, among other topics, they discussed ongoing counter-Islamic State efforts, including Spain's role in the anti-Islamic State coalition. [2] The next day Morenés announced that while Spain had ruled out taking part in ground operations in Syria, and reiterated its intention to begin training Iraqi forces in the near future, telling reporters: "We could be starting up by the end of this year because the whole operation is evolving fast, all the time, every day; we have to adjust our abilities and what we are offering, in response to that evolution" (*El Mundo*, October 18).

Some among Spain's million strong Muslim population have also spoken out against the Islamic State. On September 4, Riay Tatary Bakry, Syrian-born president of the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain/Islamic Commission of Spain, issued a press release, entitled "The hijacking of grandiose words by extremists." In the statement, Tatary said:

Within the turbulent reality that for quite a long time has roiled the Levant, some extremist groups identify themselves with great and noble words, when their actions prove otherwise, as they terrorize with criminal violence and oppressive injustice. We are now encountering the self-styled "Islamic State," which is proving to be neither a state nor Islamic, usurping the name of religion, carrying out brutal actions which do not correspond to the values of Islam of peace and coexistence... We urge imams and religious leaders constantly to bear in mind the ongoing awareness of the faithful, so that no one may fall into the propaganda traps of terrorist or extremist groups and our young adults are not lost, who are our future and should be an example of coexistence. We reiterate once again, from the Union of Islamic Communities in Spain, and Islamic Commission of Spain, our firm condemnation of



violence, its purported religious justification and Daesh's [the Islamic State's] criminal acts and false propaganda. [3]

## Outlook

A decade after the 2004 Madrid bombings, Spain continues to grapple with the threat of Islamist terrorism as increasing evidence emerges of the Islamic State organization successfully recruiting Spanish Muslims. In attempting to tackle this issue, Spain faces some unique challenges. In particular, the proximity of Spain to Morocco and its Ceuta and Melilla North African enclaves allow jihadists extensive freedom of movement, greatly complicating the efforts of Spanish security forces. In addition, as some observers have noted, in order effectively to combat the Islamic State, Spain will accordingly have to integrate its counter-terrorism policies with Morocco; as Gil Garre observed: "Morocco and Spain have to face this challenge together because the threat is the same, the level of risk is similar and many of the returnees have ties (with both nations) and are linked" (*Red Marruecos*, March 22). An additional challenge, as some of the above government statements illustrate, is that Spain – not withstanding its extensive counter-terrorism capabilities – faces considerable challenges in identifying and tracking Islamic State recruits, and that compared to many other European countries, its counter-radicalisation capabilities remain relatively undeveloped.

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## Notes

1. Fernando Reinares, "The Evidence of Al-Qaida's Role in the 2004 Madrid Attack," CTC Sentinel, March 2012, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-evidence-of-al-qaidas-role-in-the-2004-madrid-attack>.
2. Readout of Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's Meeting with Spain's Minister of Defense Pedro Morenés, Department of Defense Press Release, October 17, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/Releases/Release.aspx?ReleaseID=16985>.
3. "El secuestro de las grandes palabras por los extremistas," Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España /Comisión Islámica de España, Madrid, September 4, 2014, <http://ucide.org/es/content/el-secuestro-de-las-grandes-palabras-por-los-extremistas>.