



Vehicular Attacks in Spain: The Current Situation (Updated to noon, August 20, 2017)

August 20, 2017

Overview

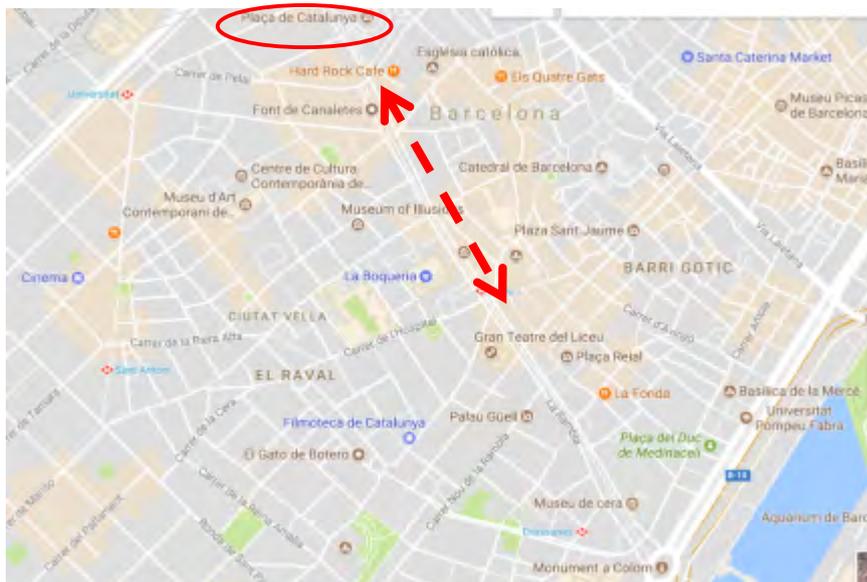
- ▶ **On August 17 and 18, 2017, two vehicular attacks were carried out in Spain:**
 - ◆ **A vehicular attack on Las Ramblas Boulevard in Barcelona**, crowded with tourists. It was carried out by a terrorist who drove a van for 530 meters along the boulevard. **Fourteen people were killed and more than 130 wounded**. The terrorist driving the van escaped and as of this writing the Spanish security forces were still conducting a manhunt for him.
 - ◆ **A vehicular attack in the vacation town of Cambrils**, southwest of Barcelona. It was carried out by five terrorists driving a van. They were shot and killed by the Spanish police. **A woman was killed and five people were wounded**. The five terrorists had **an axe and knives** in their possession, indicating they might have been planning to carry out a **combined vehicular-stabbing attack**.
- ▶ Behind the two attacks was **a network of 12 operatives**, most of them young men who were immigrants from Morocco. Most of them lived in Ripoll, a small town near the French border. Apparently the network was headed by the **imam of one of the two mosques in Ripoll, under whose influence the young men had been radicalized**.
- ▶ **ISIS claimed responsibility for the two attacks**. Initially ISIS issued a short announcement about the attack in Barcelona (a few hours after it had been carried out). The following day ISIS issued a more detailed announcement about Barcelona and Cambrils. **It contained a great deal of inexact information** and in ITIC assessment may have been composed on the basis of the first media reports. However, given the initial information about the radicalization of the network's operatives, and after the claim of responsibility, it is possible that **the attacks were inspired by ISIS** (which has yet to be verified).

According to reports in the Spanish media based on police information, **the network planned a mass-casualty attack** much larger than the vehicular attacks carried out: **three vehicles loaded with gas balloons and explosives were supposed to be placed in crowded locations in Barcelona.** However, the mass-casualty attack was prevented by a "work accident" which occurred on the night of Wednesday (August 16), **prompting the terrorists to act more quickly and use the alternative, simpler plan of vehicular attacks.**

► **Until now ISIS and/or its supporters had not carried out terrorist attacks in Spain. Most of their attention was turned towards other Western European countries (France, Belgium, Germany, Britain).** However, it would appear that ISIS has a large number of supporters in Catalonia. According to the media, **Catalonia is a focal point for Spanish Islamist activity,** and during the past year more detentions have been carried out there than in any other region in Spain. However, the jihadist network responsible for the attacks was exposed after the fact, indicating **it had operated under the radar of the security forces.** The police said that none of the network operatives was being monitored (Reuters, August 20, 2017).

Vehicular Attack in Barcelona

► On August 17, 2017, at around 16:50, a vehicular attack was carried out on **Las Ramblas Boulevard in Barcelona.** The site was crowded, as it is one of Barcelona's most famous tourist attractions.



The route taken during the vehicular attack on Las Ramblas Boulevard in Barcelona. The Plaça de Catalunya (encircled in red) (Google Maps).

► The vehicle used in the attack was a van. The terrorist drove it for 530 meters, ramming into people on the way until he was stopped. **Fourteen people were killed**

and more than 130 wounded, 13 of the them critically. The victims, most of them tourists, came from about 35 countries, including Spain.



Right: Woman injured in the vehicular attack lies on the ground on Las Ramblas Boulevard in Barcelona (Twitter account of Egy.MyHome, August 17, 2017. Left: Return to routine daily life on Las Ramblas Boulevard after the vehicular attack (Twitter account of Bostjan Cernensek @bcernensek, August 19, 2017)

► According to information from the Spanish police, **the driver of the van escaped.** He was **Younes Abouyaaqoub**, born in 1995, son of Moroccan immigrants, and lived in Ripoll, a town near the French border. The other network operatives behind the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils also lived in Ripoll.



Younes Abouyaaqoub (Spanish police photograph) (El Pais, August 19, 2017).

Vehicular Attack in Cambrils

► On Friday, August 18, 2017, at around 13:15, a vehicular attack was carried out in the vacation town of Cambrils, southwest of Barcelona. An Audi carrying five terrorists rammed into several people. A Spanish woman was killed and five people were wounded (including three Spanish officers). The vehicle overturned and the terrorists got out, **armed with knives and an axe. They were shot and killed by the Spanish police.**



The overturned car used by the terrorist organizations in Cambrils (Twitter account of BenJones @benjones1k, August 18, 2017)

The five terrorists wore explosive belts which turned out to be fake. They were armed with an axe and knives, which might indicate that **they were planning to carry out a combined vehicular-stabbing attack** (a modus operandi familiar from Palestinian terrorism). That type of attack also explains why there were five terrorists in the car instead of one, which is the usual modus operandi for vehicular attacks.

► So far the names of three of the five have been made public: **Mousa Oukabir, Said Aallaa and Mohamed Hishami.**

Preparations and Planning That Went Wrong



Barcelona (2) and Cambrils (3), where the vehicular attacks were carried out. Ripoll (1), where the operatives lived. Alcanar (4), where the "work accident" occurred, preventing a mass-casualty attack (Google Maps).

- ▶ According to the Spanish media, **behind the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils was a terrorist network of 12 operatives based in the town of Ripoll. All 12 were young Moroccans or of Moroccan origin.** According to an announcement issued by the Spanish ministry of the interior, **the network was destroyed**, although two of its operatives have not yet been captured. So far it is unclear when the network began operating and for how long it had been planning the attacks. According to reports from the Spanish police, the following is known about the network operatives: five were killed by the police in Cambrils; one was killed in an explosion in the town of Alcanar (see below); four have been detained. Two others, including the one who carried out the vehicular attack in Barcelona, are currently being searched for by the Spanish police.
- ▶ **The small town of Ripoll**, which lies at the foot of the Pyrenees near the French border, has a population of about 11,000. **Close to 700 Moroccans live there**, whose families moved there during the past 20 years (Reuters, August 20, 2017). **Abd al-Qadi al-Sati** is the imam of the local mosque. He arrived in Ripoll in around 2014 and became the imam of the mosque the following year. He may be the head of the network and **may have radicalized its members.** Following the attacks the Spanish police searched ten houses in Ripoll, including the house of the imam.

On the night of Wednesday, August 16, 2017, **there was an explosion in Alcanar** (a "work accident"), which lies to the southwest of Barcelona. The police are investigating whether the man killed there was the imam of Ripoll. **Twenty balloons of butane and propane gas** were found in the house, which the terrorists were planning to blow up. It was also reported that at the site of the explosion, remains of triacetone triperoxide (TATP), a component used in the manufacture of a very powerful explosive, were found. The same substance was reportedly used by Islamic State operatives in Paris and Brussels.¹ The investigators are of the opinion that the explosion was caused by a **"work accident," which ruined the network's original plan**. If successful, the attack would have been more deadly and spectacular, and made a greater impression than those carried out. According to reports from the Spanish police (August 20, 2017) the original plan was to detonate car bombs with gas balloons and explosives **in three crowded sites**: Las Ramblas Boulevard in Barcelona, the Sagrada Familia of Gaudi church and the port, where tourist ships dock every day (TheLocal.es and El Español, August 19, 2017). Thus apparently, after the explosion **the network decided to act quickly and carry out "simpler" attacks, that is, the vehicular attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils**.



Right: The ruins of the house in Alcanar, destroyed in the explosion. Left: Gas balloons found amid the ruins of the house (Twitter account of Ottawa Family Tree @ottawafamtree, August 19, 2017).

ISIS's Claim of Responsibility

- **ISIS claimed responsibility for both the vehicular attack in Barcelona and the vehicular attack in Cambrils.** The claim of responsibility was issued in **two stages**: **first ISIS issued a short announcement on the day of the attack** (August 17, 2017). It was issued about three hours after the attack and related only to Barcelona.

¹ According to another report, homemade improvised explosives were found.

The second version was issued on August 18, 2017 and **related to both attacks, Barcelona and Cambrils.**

- ▶ According to the first, short version, "The attack was carried out by soldiers of the Islamic State, who carried out the attack in answer to the calls in the countries of the international coalition" (Akhbar al-Muslimin, August 17, 2017). **That form of announcement is characteristic of claims of responsibility for ISIS-inspired attacks carried out in Western countries.**²



ISIS's claim of responsibility for the vehicular attack in Barcelona on the day of the attack
(Akhbar al-Muslimin, August 17, 2017).

- ▶ The second, more detailed announcement, included claims of responsibility for the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils. It was issued on August 18, 2017, the day of the attack in Cambrils, **in Arabic and English.** The Arabic reads, "More than 120 dead and wounded Christians and Jews in an attack of **Caliphate soldiers in Spain.** With the support of Allah alone, and putting assurance in him only, may his name be praised, on last Thursday [August 17, 2017], a number of jihad fighters (*mujahideen*) **left simultaneously in two security [sic] squads** with the intention of attacking gatherings of Crusaders in Spain. The first squad attacked a gathering of Crusaders with a bus [i.e., van] on Las Ramblas in Barcelona. **In addition, [the second squad] ran over two policemen at a police barricade and then used their light weapons to break into a nearby pub and killed and abused the Crusaders and Jews who were there.** At the same time, **another squad used a van to run over a number of Crusaders in the coastal town of Cambrils.** The blessed raid led to **the deaths of more than 120 nationals from the countries of the international Crusader coalition.** Honor to Allah, his messenger [the prophet Muhammad] and the faithful, although most people did not know, praise to Allah, ruler of the worlds" (Twitter account of ESFGZEZ6 @اخقُ مَأقُ الْحقُ, August 19, 2017).³

² See the August 15, 2017 bulletin, "Analysis of ISIS's Claims of Responsibility for Terrorist Attacks Carried Out Abroad," Overview in English, full version in Hebrew on the ITIC website.

³ From the Qur'an, Surah 12, Verse 21, "... [Allah] always prevails in his purpose, though most people do not realize it" (The Qur'an, Oxford World Classics translation, 2005).



Right: ISIS's Arabic claim of responsibility for the terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils (Twitter account of ESFGZEZ6 @حَقُّنَ الْحَقِّ, August 19, 2017). Left: ISIS's English claim of responsibility for the attacks (Twitter account of Kyle Orton @KyleWOrton, August 19, 2017)

The second claim of responsibility **contains a great deal of inexact information**, in ITIC assessment caused by the use of information issued by the media near the time of the events. The description of the vehicular attack in Barcelona, which was carried out by a lone terrorist, is prominently represented in the announcement as having been carried out by two squads. According to the announcement, one squad used the vehicle and the other shot its way into a pub near Las Ramblas plaza with light arms. The objective of the incorrect description is **to magnify the attack in Barcelona and thereby increase the prestige of ISIS, which is encountering considerable hardships in Iraq and Syria.**