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## ARE RELIGIOUS ACTORS RELEVANT IN THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM?

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**It is common in public discourse in Europe to draw a direct line between a strict observance of Islam and the jihadi Salafi ideology. Thus, the correlations that may exist between “quietist” Salafism and jihadism are used to justify the surveillance of communities labelled as Salafi.**

**However, the main findings of the research we present in this Nota Internacional on the Muslim communities in the Catalan municipalities of Reus (in the province of Tarragona) and Salt (Girona province) question the use of the Salafi label among scholars and the police. They also reveal the part religious and social actors play in the Muslim community.**

**From this standpoint, we can see how religious actors could perform a major role in prevention of violent extremism (PVE) strategies, not just as potential informants as has been the case in the past, but also as real agents for the implementation of these strategies.**

jihadist Salafism. Various governments, academics and intelligence services have worked on the assumption that Islam plays a central role in the use of political violence of a jihadist nature. The popularisation of concepts such as radicalisation – derived from the Latin *radix*, meaning root –, fundamentalism and (violent) extremism in public discourse on jihadist violence reflects the idea that jihadism stems from an extreme conception and observance of Islam (Sedgwick, 2010).

In Europe, several governments impacted by jihadist terror attacks, like those of France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom, have taken measures to combat jihadism based on that reading. This has included, among other initiatives, the creation of institutions devoted to promoting “moderate Islam” (an often vague concept), agreements with third countries to hire “moderate” imams, or the use of indicators to detect radicalisation. As a result, political actors and those from the security and intelligence sector have turned the spotlight on Muslim communities; to be more precise, on two of the tendencies that make up those communities: Salafism, which we might define as a strict movement largely opposed to violence, and political Islam, represented chiefly though not exclusively by the Muslim Brotherhood (Seniguer, 2022).

**T**he wave of jihadist terror attacks that has struck Europe since 2015 has reignited a now common debate over the connection between Islam and political violence. This debate, which has loomed large in the West since 9/11, attempts to get to the root of the violence perpetrated by groups claiming allegiance to

Given this, is there a connection between the presence of Muslim communities adhering to non-violent Salafism and violent radicalisation in Europe? If the answer is yes, do these communities foster the adoption of jihadist ideology? Or, conversely, do they act as a brake on processes of violent radicalisation? This *Nota*

*Internacional* summarises the findings of research into the role of the Muslim communities in two **Catalan cities regularly branded** as nests of jihadist radicalisation: Reus (in Tarragona province) and Salt (Girona province). After briefly setting out the main points of the debate on the relationship between Salafism and jihadist radicalisation, this study focuses on the practical implications of the debate, before finally arguing that local religious actors could play a significant role in prevention of violent extremism (PVE) strategies.

### **Pietistic Salafism and jihadist Salafism: correlation does not mean causality**

Over the last decade in Europe, as the profile of the jihadist has evolved, and with the emergence of new jihadist actors like Islamic State (IS) and changes in

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recruitment strategies, questions have been raised about the role of the Muslim religion in processes of violent radicalisation. In the debates on jihadist terrorism, be it among politicians, academics or in the media, Salafism is often taken to constitute a breeding ground for jihadism. Moreover, there is thought to be a direct line between Salafism – a strict, minority religious orientation, yet one followed by tens of millions of Muslims – and jihadist Salafism, the political-religious ideology to which jihadist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda claim to belong. To support this assertion, the theory of the “**radicalisation of Islam**” holds that Salafism and jihadism share a series of theological principles, such as the need to restore Islam to its origins, a decontextualised reading of holy scripture, a distinction between “true believers” and the rest, or the rejection of any political system that is not based on divine sovereignty.

Salafis, then, are potential “entrepreneurs of hate” who foment what the French political scientist Gilles Kepel has dubbed “**atmospheric jihadism**”, that is to say, a kind of ecosystem that stresses the dichotomy between Muslims and non-Muslims, to the extent of dehumanising the latter and legitimising violence against them. The argument of ideological similarities is often made with another line of reasoning that insists on the “physical proximity” between Salafism and jihadism (Blanc and Roy, 2021). Salafi prayer centres, so the argument goes, are genuine echo chambers of the illiberal and anti-Western rhetoric that is typical of this religious tendency, meaning that moving in these circles could precipitate a gravitation towards jihadism. From this point of view,

close monitoring of Salafi environments is considered not only advisable but is also about limiting their reach within Muslim communities in order to diminish their potential role as catalysts of violent radicalisation. The law passed in France in February 2021 to combat so-called “**Islamist separatism**”, for instance, is informed by this view.

However, while this line of reasoning may provide a plausible explanation for the rise of jihadist terrorism in Europe, it has its theoretical and practical limitations. On a theoretical level, it casts jihadism as a by-product of Salafism, failing to consider the diversity of currents that make up the latter movement. While Salafis follow an interpretation of Islam that is at odds with certain liberal values – such as democracy, freedom of speech or gender equality –, there is greater disagreement among several tendencies over the use of violence. The American political scientist Quintan Wiktorowicz (2006) distinguishes **three types of Salafism**: “purist” (or quietist) Salafism, which is fundamentally apolitical and followed by the vast majority of Salafis; “politico” Salafism, which sees politics as a legitimate means of reflecting its views; and “jihadist” Salafism. This latter group, which represents a tiny minority within Salafism, is the only one that legitimises the use of violence to ensure the defence of Muslims, unite them under a caliphate and restore Islam to the “pious predecessors”. Whereas both purist and politico Salafists unreservedly condemn the use of violence by jihadist organisations. Therefore, to overlook this fundamental difference is to risk mistaking Salafism per se – which denotes a non-violent religious practice – for jihadism, which is a violent extremist ideology. This confusion leads to framing certain problems of coexistence as security problems.

On a practical level, the theory of a direct line between Salafism and jihadism lacks a solid scientific basis (Blanc and Roy, 2021). While there are cases in which a transition from Salafism to jihadism has been observed – in historic leaders such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (from IS), or European jihadists like the imam of Ripoll in Spain or the Kouachi brothers in France, for example –, it cannot be said to occur in most cases (Khalil, 2014). In Europe, the low level of religious understanding regarding jihadists and foreign fighters aligned with jihadism prompted scholars such as **Alain Berthot** (2016) and **Olivier Roy** (2017) to put forward the theory of an “Islamisation of radicalism” to counter to the idea of the “radicalisation of Islam”.

Consequently, while the relationship between Salafism and jihadism may be contingent, it does not follow that Salafism is a prelude to jihadism. Yet, in spite of that, public discourse on jihadism in Europe tends to embrace

this disputable and disputed premise. What does this mean in practice?

### **From the criminalisation of a tendency to the stigmatisation of a community**

Given the lack of empirical data on this matter, we conducted fieldwork in two Muslim communities in Catalonia that have often been labelled as “radical” over the course of the last two decades: those of Reus (Tarragona province) and Salt (Girona province). We reviewed the literature and analysed press reports on the subject in the two municipalities. We also conducted a series of semi-structured interviews and organised focus groups with members of the boards of As-Sunnah Mosque (Reus) and the Imam Malik Islamic Centre (Salt); institutional actors (city hall, office of religious affairs); civil society organisations; and actors from the security and intelligence sphere (Catalan police, Spain’s Civil Guard gendarmerie, local police forces, etc.), as well as scholars who have addressed these issues. In addition, we held an international seminar featuring experts who have researched the links between Salafism and jihadism in order to share views from several European and North African countries. This spotlighted the practical limitations of the debate on the possible transition from Salafism to jihadism.

The first limitation we found relates to the precise definition of the target of our study. While Reus and Salt have repeatedly been referred to as “cradles of Salafism”, it is hard to observe the actuality of “Salafi communities” on the ground. Firstly, because individuals sympathetic to the Salafi movement no longer publicly refer to themselves in that way. In a climate marked by several jihadist terror attacks in Europe, notably those in Madrid (March 2004) and in Barcelona and the seaside town of Cambrils (August 2017), the religious actors we interviewed spurned the Salafi label because of the growing criminalisation Salafism has undergone. Secondly, a distinction should be made between the board of a prayer centre and the community that frequents that place of worship. According to the various security and intelligence service actors we interviewed, there are several indicators that characterise a Salafi centre of prayer. These indicators mainly relate to the content of the Friday sermon (*khutbah*), interpersonal and institutional relations (the organisation of conferences with Salafi notables, for instance), or the ideological affinities expressed by the community leadership.

Yet, assuming these criteria can help to identify the Salafi leanings of a prayer centre, to what extent does the presence of a leadership sympathetic to Salafism

in that space allow us to deduce that the community frequenting it is also Salafi? While we can accept that the Salafi orientation of a religious leader or of the board of a mosque can influence a community (through sermons, courses, interpersonal relations, etc.), we cannot automatically pin the Salafi label on the entire community. Attending a prayer centre also depends on non-ideological factors such as geographical proximity, the assistance the mosques provide or even the social and professional relations cultivated in these settings. In other words, labelling a whole community Salafi is an impediment to understanding the diversity of tendencies, opinions and practices that make it up. In addition, such an approach overlooks the ideological and generational struggles playing out inside certain boards: for example, the debates sparked over whether to open a prayer centre to the rest of society, the readiness to use languages other than Arabic, or the desire to take part in non-religious activities. It is, then, virtually impossible to say who is Salafi and who isn’t, which questions the

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use of the “Salafi” label when it is attached to the whole community in a given place.

In practice, however, these limitations do not stop members of the security sector from employing the “Salafi” category to refer to certain communities. The religious actors interviewed in Reus and Salt recognise that the notion of the transition from Salafism to jihadism is the prevailing one today. In their view, the organisation of Salafi conferences by religious actors, the statements of political leaders pointing to Reus and Salt as “cradles of radicalism”, as well as **arrests** over jihadism-related activities, have helped to cement the idea that there is a link between the presence of persons expressing Salafi sympathies and jihadism. And while they acknowledge there have been cases of radicalised individuals who attended their prayer centre, they point out how hard it is to detect a case of radicalisation in that environment. This task of detection is all the more difficult, they say, as violent radicalisation is increasingly taking place away from the prayer centres. In any case, our interviewees insist that, despite the fact they condemn the use of violence without reservation, Salafism’s association with jihadism serves to stigmatise and criminalise Muslim communities as a whole in the municipalities under study. Security actors, meanwhile, counter that the transition from Salafism to jihadism has occurred in the past, demonstrating that the two tendencies share a common world view that regardless of differences exists all the same. This stigmatisation of Muslim communities



is compounded by a dynamic of securitisation of a group that is referred to as “Muslims” on some occasions and as “immigrants of Maghrebi origin” on others.

Even so, there are regular contacts between religious actors from these communities and members of the security and intelligence universe – at state and regional level – as both sides believe such collaboration is necessary since it opens channels of communication and allows for the exchange of information. Yet religious actors say they feel under constant surveillance, as these contacts focus almost exclusively on detecting possible threats of a jihadist nature, disregarding other legal, cultural and social matters of fundamental importance, such as addressing the rise of Islamophobia or honouring the **cooperation agreement on religious matters of 1992**<sup>1</sup>.

## There is a dual dynamic regarding religious actors with Salafi affinities: while in security circles distrust and surveillance of this group prevail, in the local institutional sphere these same actors are considered top-level interlocutors.

At the same time, the empirical study has brought to light the crucial role religious actors play in terms of dialogue with local institutions (city halls, social services, association networks, etc). They are, moreover, key players in all matters relating to Muslim immigrant populations or Muslim communities of immigrant origin. Thus, despite the suspicion they may arouse in terms of security, on an institutional level these actors come to embody the interests of a community that, in fact, they do not fully represent. Not all people of Maghrebi origin necessarily define themselves on the basis of their faith, nor do they necessarily share the same religious orientation as the mosque boards in the town where they live. Actually, in both Reus and Salt several members of the Muslim communities decried this form of “monopolisation” of contacts with the administrative bodies on the part of religious actors.

We can see how there is a dual dynamic regarding religious actors with Salafi affinities. While in security circles distrust and surveillance of this group prevail, in the local institutional sphere these same actors are considered top-level interlocutors for several matters pertaining to the integration and inclusion of immigrants or people of immigrant origin. Under these circumstances, can we envisage collaboration of religious actors in PVE efforts?

## Religious actors and PVE: preliminary findings

The research and fieldwork conducted in the cities of Reus and Salt delivered some interesting findings on the role of religious actors in preventing violent extremism. For one thing, it is worth noting that the religious actors we interviewed believe that a large part of their everyday activities at the prayer centres in themselves already contribute to PVE. In this vein, community spokespeople highlighted the importance of the Arabic courses given in the mosques for the children in the communities, for example. As well as teaching the language, these courses also project a certain vision of Islam, presenting it as a religion of peace in both the personal and social realms. From their perspective, the socialisation of the new generations in these values of coexistence and universal peace makes a fundamental contribution to the prevention of intolerant or violent attitudes and conduct among the youngest members of the community. Another everyday activity at the

mosques, which is also considered key preventive action by their executive committees, is preaching that explicitly rejects the use of violence, particularly in the sermon delivered before the midday Friday (*jummah*) prayer, the time of the week when mosques are at their fullest.

The communities also believe that proper training of imams is another key aspect of PVE. On this point, however, they call for the various levels of public administration to get involved, since, although selection of imams falls to the communities, only those who need to be authorised to officiate weddings with civil effects are obliged to register with the Ministry of the Presidency, following approval from the Islamic Commission of Spain. In practice, this means that, on the one hand, there are imams who have no more endorsement to perform their duties than that of their own community, who hires them; and on the other, even when the commission has taken steps to improve the training of imams and mosque leaders via the signing of agreements with universities, that training is not obligatory. That is why mosque boards say it is necessary to regulate the figure of the imam and their work.

Another point worth noting is that these boards claim that radicalisation currently takes place away from the prayer centres and that it is rather a product of poor or scant transmission of the values of Islam within the family, on the one hand, and the dynamics of “online radicalisation”, on the other. In both cases, it proves extremely difficult for religious leaders to

1. Law 26/1992, of November 10th, approving the Cooperation Agreement between the Spanish State and the Islamic Commission of Spain, which is the representative body of the Muslim communities in the country.

detect these processes. It is also worth mentioning that the evidence gathered in this research shows that the boards of mosques with Salafi leanings are keen to disassociate themselves from any individual who embraces violent militancy. Both the members of the boards and the security actors we interviewed agree on this point. In the view of the latter, the former avoid engaging with radicalised individuals at all costs because that could put the entire community at risk. The way they see it, the communities are the product of a huge effort in which their promoters have invested many years of their lives. They are too valuable to jeopardise by supporting jihadist sympathisers. Still, the security actors believe that since there have been cases of radicalised individuals from a Salafi background in Catalonia in the past, that warrants continued monitoring of Salafi-oriented prayer centres.

The fieldwork revealed that the real interest of mosque leaders lies in being able to exert a cultural influence over the members of the communities, be it by instituting certain lifestyles, instilling certain individual values or bolstering a distinct group identity. What they pursue, essentially, is the construction of “moral communities” with their own lifestyles who engage with local institutions and other social groups from outside their own community only when necessary. It is clear mosques and prayers centres are important agents of socialisation for the Muslim population and they also play a crucial role as a bridge between the authorities and the immigrant Muslim communities living in Catalonia. That is why their leaders’ attitudes and perceptions regarding the institutions are key in the potential development of PVE action.

Ultimately, our research shows that Muslim communities have a series of long-held grievances that the various levels of administration of the Spanish state have failed to address, and this is an obstacle to establishing relations of greater trust between the two sides. As well as the problem of imam training mentioned above, there is a need to extend the teaching of Islam in schools or address the lack of specific burial sites for this sector of the population, both of which are included in the 1992 agreement. All this compounds the perception among members of the communities that Muslims are considered second-class citizens in Catalonia. On top of this are the stigmatisation these people feel, the rejection that the establishment of their places of worship triggers and the sensation of being under constant surveillance, which compound the general sense of injustice.

## In conclusion

In both Catalonia, where the fieldwork was carried out, and in Spain and other European countries, the essentially security-based approach taken to Muslim communities, particularly those considered Salafi, has meant that security and terrorism specialists have been most engaged in research in this field. At the same time, this has resulted in a complete lack of empirical research based on contact with representatives of the very communities under study.

This article shows that research and fieldwork with Salafi communities are not just necessary, but also provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the internal dynamics of this group of doctrinal tendencies.

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It also highlights that Salafi communities are important sources of bonding social capital for their members, since they afford them social connections and solidarity, making a major contribution to reinforcing their identity.

Accordingly, representatives of Muslim communities must be included in the design of PVE programmes. They should be seen as potential partners in the implementation of any prevention strategy, not merely as informants for security actors. And not only because of the social capital they possess, but also because, on the one hand, they channel the grievances of the community they represent (they can provide a peaceful solution to their complaints, serve as interlocutors and prevent Muslims from seeing themselves as second-class citizens) and, on the other, they are deeply invested in disassociating Salafism from jihadism.

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