



**BARCELONA
ATTACKS:
THE IMPOSSIBLE
EXPLANATION,
THE POSSIBLE
EXPLANATIONS**

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CIDOB REPORT
02- 2018

One imam, one cell of young people and one mosque. At first glance, the configuration of the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks on 17 and 18 August 2017 (17A) seems to justify studies that focus on religious and cultural aspects of radicalisation processes. The perpetrators were all Moroccan, their guru was an imam and all were Muslim. Nevertheless, two distinctive factors of 17A have perplexed observers: the attackers came from a small town on the foothills of the Catalan Pre-Pyrenees and they were apparently well “integrated”; belying common assumptions about links between radicalisation, urban marginalisation and lack of integration. Despite the questions these two points raise, little attention has been paid to them. Some explain this lack of reflection by quoting the broad political agenda of the time, which was dominated by the Catalan independence challenge. Others have interpreted it as a reluctance to face up to sensitive debates about migration, peaceful coexistence and the feeling of belonging. A further possibility is that we find ourselves trapped in debates on interculturalism and merely socio-economic integration, which inhibits a deeper reflection on the questions raised by these attacks.

Beyond the reasons why this episode disappeared from public debate, do we understand what the events in Barcelona and Cambrils last August motivated? Above all, have we learned lessons from this drama? To address these questions this chapter first looks at the analytical frameworks that have been applied to 17A. It then proposes some lines of reflection for promoting a holistic, multidimensional approach to the radicalisation phenomenon. Such an approach is long overdue in a context in which the terrorist threat, far from being tackled, remains present.

The terrorists' "Moroccanness"

Barcelona's reaction to the terrorist attacks of 17A was different from other countries as Garcés-Mascareñas (2018) points out in this volume. It was not followed by a declaration of war by the Spanish state, nor by pointing the finger at an internal enemy. Nevertheless, the attacks raised debates similar to those in other European countries. Part of the discussion centred on the origin – and by extension the country of origin – of the terrorists. Various analysts and journalists claimed this was a key explanatory variable in the radicalisation process. They followed a three-stage process of reasoning: first, the perpetrators of 17A were all Moroccan; second, the vast majority of those responsible for the attacks in Paris (November 13th 2015) and Brussels (March 22nd 2016) were also Moroccan; and, finally, particular attention must be paid to the cultural and religious dimensions, as Catalonia – where 29% of the Moroccans resident in Spain live – is the region from which most of those imprisoned for jihadism come¹. As a result, this line of reasoning concludes that a potential relationship can be drawn between nationality and the propensity to commit acts of jihadist terrorism.

While the facts are indisputable, the reasoning is problematic in terms of its interpretation and the consequences it might entail. The existence of a supposed "Moroccan connection" has been highlighted repeatedly in various articles (Feuer & Pollock, 2017). Without sufficient care regarding the distinction between Moroccans residing in Morocco and members of the diaspora, some analyses linked issues of identity and related context directly or indirectly to the perpetrators of 17A. Emphasis was placed on apparently transnational ties, which might explain a possible ideological "contamination" of members of the diaspora by their families living in Morocco. The significant number of foreign combatants of Moroccan origin in the ranks of organisations such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq was mentioned in order to draw conclusions about the radicalisation of a certain segment of the Moroccan population. The role of Moroccans was stressed; creating a seemingly organic chain from Raqqa to Ripoll that gave the phenomenon a cultural dimension. Finally, the hypothesis was advanced that the "failure to reform Islam in Morocco" would explain why violent extremism remains attractive to some Moroccans living in Europe.

1. According to Reinares *et al.* (2017), they are the 23.2% of all prisoners for activities related to jihadist terrorism.

In the same line of argument others insisted on the historical humiliation and repression of the Amazighs in Morocco prior to 17A. This inherited past was placed alongside the current problems of integration and exclusion among members of the Moroccan diaspora in Europe. In similar fashion, an article in the newspaper *Le Monde* carried the evocative title “Morocco exports its jihadists” a few days after 17A (Khosrokhavar, 2017). While it is true that the sense of exclusion may constitute a factor in radicalisation, can we really explain 17A by reference to Moroccan context and history, even though its perpetrators were raised in Spain,? Can we seriously conclude, as Farhad Khosrokhavar (2017) did in the *Le Monde* article, that “the Moroccan diaspora shows signs of radicalisation, especially those of Amazigh origin”?

Origin as the main explanatory variable is attractive because it helps to simplify a complex phenomenon: It guides the debate towards causes and guilty parties that are outside society and changes the terms of the debate. If the perpetrators are Moroccan, the problem must arise from their education, their culture or their religion., From this perspective, the questions no longer concern the society in which the individuals live or their personal history. Instead, the role of origin becomes the focus of the debate as a key factor in the vulnerability to the Salafi-jihadist ideology. However, instead of extrapolating certain conclusions based on their origins, would it not be more appropriate to focus on their life histories (background, primary and secondary socialisation, etc.) to better understand the subjective dimension of their commitment? This chapter seeks to show that if we do not take this subjective dimension into account we run the risk of turning the radicalisation process into a form of cultural or territorial determinism, instead of focussing on the conditions that allow this phenomenon to take shape.

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The sense of belonging: The crux of the integration issue

Recent studies of the life stories of jihadists in Syria and Iraq (above all in the 2014–2015 period) indicate a growing diversification of profiles of those who commit acts of violence: the image of the jihadist terrorist as marginalised and hailing from the suburbs does not jell with the facts (Roy, 2017). In the case of 17A, two surprising statements about the thorny issue of “integration” were often repeated: as the boys from Ripoll were “integrated”, a perfectly integrated individual can be radicalised. The argument of “full integration”

was based on doubtful criteria, mostly their perfect Catalan (according to this criterion, most European jihadists are “perfectly integrated”) or them having jobs and playing sports. The statement by Núria Perpinyà, a social worker from Ripoll, that the young people “were integrated” (Ávila, 2017) was eagerly picked up without reflecting on the definition of “being integrated” or the pros and cons of the current integration model in Spain.

Under what criteria can someone declare that another person “is integrated” without making reference to their feeling of belonging? In this sense, the statement by one of the terrorist’s cousins provides a contrast: “Yes, we

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grew up here and do not have integration problems, but we are and always will be Moors. At school we were Moors and the girls did not want to go out with us. And the older ones thought we sold hashish” (Carretero, 2017). The contrast between the descriptions given by a member of the host society (social worker) and of the group we refer to here (Moroccan immigrants) invites us to reflect on the use of the concept of integration. If integration is understood as the “the process of becoming an accepted part of society” (Penninx & Martiniello, 2004), it is essential to bear in mind the three dimensions that shape this process: the politico-legal dimension (residence, political rights, etc.); the socioeconomic dimension (socioeconomic position, access to and participation in institutions, etc.) and the cultural and religious dimension. If the first two can be measured using objective criteria (having residency, having a job, going to

school, etc.), the third is much more difficult to identify as it “pertains to the domain of perceptions and practices of immigrants and the receiving society as well as their reciprocal reactions to difference and diversity” (Penninx & Garcés-Masareñas, 2016). Identification of the cultural and religious dimension is difficult first, because more than objective differences it relates to perceptions of diversity (ethnic, cultural, religious) and second, because those perceptions are expressed in different ways depending on the level being analysed (individual, group, institution). As a result, the idea that the “Ripoll boys” were integrated is based in large part on two of the three dimensions of integration, excluding a dimension that is fundamental and difficult to measure: the cultural dimension relating to the feeling of belonging to society.

This dimension is decisive because radicalisation processes systematically involve three breaks, which materialise consecutively (Crettiez et al., 2017): a break with society, considered “unholy” for not applying “holy law” and at war with Muslims; a break with the family, considered too lax in religious terms (i.e., not following the Salafi-jihadist creed); and a break with the Muslim community which, if it does not share the same ideology, is considered “infidel” (or to be “false Muslims”). The existence of this triple break makes the analysis of the feeling of belonging essential (as long as it can be identified) to understanding the processes of radicalisation, as it influences the personal and intimate journeys of individuals. Numerous studies and biographical accounts of terrorists have shown that a personal experience often constitutes a trigger for these processes, for example perceived injustice or exclusion (Gurr, 2012). These experiences nourish a feeling of exclusion that either preexists the process of radicalisation or is fed by the jihadist ideology – or both at the same time. According to the vision of the world promoted by jihadism, it is impossible for Muslims to live harmoniously in the West. On the one hand, it maintains that any kind of exclusion suffered by Muslims (racism, discrimination, Islamophobia, etc.) shows the anti-Islamic nature of the West; while on the other hand this conflict is spread to the international level by the multiple interventions by Western nations in Muslim countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Mali, etc.). This dimension of exclusion plays a central role in the propaganda of the jihadist terrorist organisations, as it can offer a logical and coherent explanation for the feeling of exclusion an individual suffers and, in short, convince them that their salvation lies in taking revenge against the society accused of excluding them and/or killing other Muslims.

From this point of view, the idea that a perfectly integrated individual can become a terrorist deserves greater attention. If the “objective” criteria of integration are taken for granted it can lead to a culturalist approach that posits that the cultural, ethnic and religious origins constitute per se factors of vulnerability to jihadist ideology. Put another way, the culturalist focus runs the risk of equating the geographical areas with the greatest concentration of immigrants and children of immigrants – in this case Moroccans – with a necessarily higher risk of radicalisation. From here arises the need to go beyond this poorly defined conception of integration to be able to go deeper into the radicalisation factors. Firstly, by including a socioeconomic perspective, given the role of certain push factors such as the sense of injustice, experiences of discrimination, the rejection of institutions and the feeling of exclusion (Lahnait, 2018). Secondly, the socioeconomic perspective should be combined with a mapping of the human geography of radicalisation (terrorist networks, places of socialisation, family ties) in order to understand the spread of Salafi-jihadist ideology.

From an objective to a subjective approach: The necessary change of scale

The explanation focussing on the cultural or religious dimensions of radicalisation is not only inadequate it is also dangerous. It is insufficient to the extent that it does not explain why, with socioeconomic, geographical, cultural and religious conditions being equal, some are radicalised while others are not. In this sense, such an explanation prevents us from understanding, to quote but one example, the overrepresentation of European converts in the ranks of jihadists. What is more, this reading tends to interpret radicalisation as a causal phenomenon rather than understanding it as a process. Nevertheless, radicalisation is above all a multidimensional process in which four dimensions interrelate: a personal/psychological dimension (see the push factors mentioned above); a socioeconomic dimension (relative deprivation theory); a political dimension (see the following section); and a religious dimension (Salafi-jihadism). These dimensions may combine or they may not. That is why it is as mistaken to base analysis on a single dimension as it is to consider abnormal a situation in which one of these dimensions is not present. So, for the “children of immigrants” from socioeconomically marginal areas, radicalisation can give shape to the hate generated by the feeling of exclusion, while for a middle-class convert it might be an answer to an authority vacuum. Both origins and motivations vary from one individual to the next, so it is impossible to build on linear schemes of analysis.

On the other hand, by overemphasizing the religiousness of certain individuals or even their tendency to identify themselves with the Muslim community, the culturalist reading does not take into account the numerous studies that underline many European jihadists’ lack of theological knowledge (Perliger & Milton, 2016), or the importance of individuals in introducing radical ideas to a group. As Nafees Hamid (2017) points out “Contrary to what many people believe, identification with Islam or the Muslim ummah (worldwide Muslim community) does not strongly predict willingness to fight and die for jihadist ideals. Instead, transcendent beliefs shared with close friends increased willingness to commit violence”. In other words, radicalisation is first and foremost a process of socialisation, whether it works by introducing a violent extremist ideology to a group and normalising it, recruiting friends and acquaintances, or sharing a vision of the world and committing to a project decided by the group or organisation to which they swear loyalty (*hijra* towards Syria or Iraq, attacks). This process often occurs in closed circles of friends and relatives (the members of the Ripoll cell included the partners of cousins and siblings) and places that are safely out of sight (outside the Ripoll mosque) (Ordiales, 2017).

In fact, a study by the Real Instituto Elcano reflects this social dimension of radicalisation: over 95% of those detained for jihadist terrorism in Spain belonged to cells, groups and networks while the proportion of “lone wolves” was less than 5% (García-Calvo & Reinares, 2016). This trend is also observed at the European level: more than a third of Belgian jihadists were recruited by just two people (Van Ostaeyen, 2016), while in France, as Pierre Puchot and Romain Caillet showed in their recent book (2016), the terrorist networks that have existed since the end of the eighties – affiliated with the Algerian GIA first and later Al-Qaeda – have played and continue to play a crucial role in the spread of jihadism in France and Europe. These transnational networks are structured, disband and restructure depending on circumstances both local (individual life paths, intelligence services) and international (conflicts).

Finally, the reading that focuses on cultural and religious criteria presents a risk when implementing counterterrorist measures such as surveillance focussed on areas populated by Muslims, immigrants and the children of immigrants. It should be noted that mass surveillance, as well as being costly and ineffective, can create a feeling of alienation among the groups mentioned, casting suspicion on the Muslim community in general.² This was the case with the PREVENT programme in the United Kingdom. Similarly, the *Protocolo de prevención, detección e intervención de procesos de radicalización islamista* (Proderai) has recently prompted numerous criticisms from Catalan civil society due to the risk of stigmatisation it involves (França, 2017).

Ultimately, what is at stake here is the changing of the scale of the analysis of the radicalisation processes of the perpetrators of 17A. It means combining analysis based on cultural aspects (macro scale) with subjective analysis (micro scale), focussing on the actors (networks, interactions) and, through a horizontal comparative process, putting this analysis into perspective with other forms of radicalisation, whether religious, sectarian or political. In this sense, the jihadist radicalisation phenomenon draws on indoctrination and recruitment methods similar to sectarian movements and extremist politics (for example, certain far-right groups): selective recruitment, gradual isolation, inclusion in a closed group, identification of an enemy, identification of a noble cause justifying any act, familiarisation with the group’s codes and norms, and moving on to an act of violence.

2. On this point, see the extensive report: Amnesty International, “Dangerously Disproportionate: The Ever-expanding National Security State in Europe” (17 January 2017) (online) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur01/5342/2017/en/>.

This approach serves a dual purpose: it allows our understanding of the phenomenon to be “deculturalised” while opening up new possibilities when understanding this phenomenon and providing answers to the challenges it presents (prevention, counter-narratives and alternative narratives, etc.). From this perspective, debates that are less impassioned and more pragmatic may emerge such as that on the relationship between prison and radicalisation. The case of Abdelbaki Es Satty (García, 2017) is one of many to remind us that prison is conducive to the development of jihadist terrorism (recruitment, radicalisation process and planning attacks). According to a study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), one in six European jihadists was radicalised in prison (Neumann, 2016). In some cases jihadism appears as the continuation of a criminal career through a politico-religious commitment.

In other words, it is necessary to develop – in parallel to an “objective” analysis framework at the macro level – readings that focus on the subjective dimension of the commitment to violent extremism.

Radicalisation as a politico-religious commitment

In reaction to readings that focus on the cultural and religious dimension, other discourses focus on the environment in which the perpetrators of 17A grew up to explain the “why” of the attacks. In this way, questions arise that are linked, for example, to socioeconomic marginalisation in Spain. In contrast to the reading analysed above, this interpretation articulates the debate in other terms: instead of focussing on the origin or country of origin, it places emphasis on the life stories of the 17A perpetrators themselves. As a result, it insists that the tragedy is also related to the society in which they find themselves. In this way, the socioeconomic variables overlap with the cultural ones to demonstrate that other factors – socioeconomic in nature – play a role in the radicalisation process (Morera, 2018). This reading therefore has the merit of approaching this problem from a different perspective: it is devoted to establishing relations between the socioeconomic position and possible factors that may give rise to radicalisation processes.

Notwithstanding the merit of these discourses in changing the terms of the debate, they seem – like the other readings – to undervalue a dimension that is almost obscured in the post-17A analysis: the political dimension of radicalisation and, by extension, of jihadist terrorism. Though radicalisation processes relate to personal life paths and surroundings, in certain cases they are also the result of a process of commitment that has a political dimension (Burgat, 2008). In this sense, a necessary distinction has been hidden: what differentiates the ideologies of jihadism from its executors?

While the perpetrators of 17A were undoubtedly recruited, indoctrinated and manipulated by Abdelbaki Es Satty, the fact is that this was effectively a structured terrorist cell that was affiliated to a transnational organisation (Islamic State) and a politico-religious ideology (Salafi-jihadism).

Although marginal in the Muslim world, jihadism has become a consolidated political and religious movement on a global scale – even in Europe – especially over the past three decades. Among the rank and file, the ideologues have constructed a coherent and renewed ideological paradigm with a clear political project: creating a state with its own institutions. In other words, these are not clueless people who are violent for violence's sake, but followers of a trend that has its references, its rational reasoning and its own religious logic. As Puchot and Caillet note, in their eyes, the ideology forms a coherent whole: they have not contracted a disease, they have embraced a vision of the world (2016: 288). Thus, attributing the radicalisation processes of the perpetrators of 17A to a mere matter of disoriented young men who are victims of the lack of integration, or to issues exclusively related to socioeconomic marginalisation, obscures this dimension of radicalisation. This means we run the risk of failing to consider jihadist ideology's attractive power: by considering it morally unacceptable we neglect to study it in depth so as to understand the vision of the world and the future it promises its followers.

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Therefore, a precise analysis of these cells and networks is essential not only to move beyond culturalist readings but also to propose other keys to understanding the motives and modes of participation within jihadist terrorist organisations.

Conclusion

From the analysis point of view, 17A shows that the debates on radicalisation processes are open. Two antagonistic readings prevailed: an approach focussing on the religious and cultural dimensions and another that focussed on the role of the socioeconomic background. Of course, in Barcelona, just like in any other part of Europe, neither of the two explanations is enough to understand what happened. The culturalist reading moves the debate towards the "other" whose cultural and religious particularities are factors in their vulnerability. And, while

the socioeconomic reading has the merit of presenting fundamental problems, it does have a disadvantage: it obscures the “agency” of the actors involved and the politico-religious dimension of radicalisation (role of recruiters, jihadist ideology, terrorist networks, etc.).

Just as in other parts of Europe and the world, the debate on radicalisation suffers from a major problem: it systematically leads to a continuous confrontation between those in favour of different visions and disciplines. Nevertheless, given its process-centred, multidimensional nature, the analysis of radicalisation phenomena cannot leave out the pluridisciplinary focus that takes in the four dimensions involved in the radicalisation process: personal, socioeconomic, political and religious.

At a time when many celebrate the end of the proto-state of the so-called Islamic State, which they mistakenly interpret as the end of the movement of the same name, the speed with which the in-depth debates were eclipsed after 17A is troubling. It is as if the event was treated like a tragedy that arose by accident, with no deep reflection on its details. At the time this paper is written, hundreds of foreign European combatants are attempting to return from Syria and Iraq to Europe and European countries remain on high alert: it is more urgent than ever to take a holistic view of the terrorism phenomenon, instead of reacting periodically and hastily to its consequences.

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