The following is based on open-source reporting.

September 4, 2015

Overview

In August, there were at least four counterterror arrests made in Europe in or with links to Spain, including the arrest of a former Spanish resident who attempted to carry out a mass-casualty attack on an Amsterdam-Paris train. Additionally, Spanish authorities have raised the terrorism alert level twice this year in response to Islamist terrorist attacks in the region; it currently stands at Level 4, indicating that there is a high risk of a terrorist attack. While there are currently no known, credible Islamist terrorist threats against the U.S. private sector in Spain, the interrupted train attack in France serves as a reminder that Islamist terrorists have the intent to carry out mass-casualty attacks, and require relatively limited resources to do so. This report provides an overview of the Islamist terrorism threat, and related recent developments, in Spain.

Recent Developments

There hasn’t been an Islamist terrorist attack in Spain since the 2004 Madrid train bombings, which claimed 191 lives and were linked to al–Qa’ida. However, Spanish authorities have interrupted a number of plots and detained nearly 600 suspected Islamist extremists over the past decade. So far this year, authorities have detained over 50 suspected radicals, with the two most recent arrests on August 21 and 25:

- On August 25, Spanish authorities detained Abdeladim Achriaa, a Moroccan resident of San Martín de la Vega (located approximately 15 miles south of Madrid). Achriaa is being held on terrorism charges and is suspected of operating an ISIL-affiliated radicalization and recruitment network out of Morocco; Moroccan authorities detained 13 suspects in related raids in the country on the same day.

- On August 21, Ayoub el Khazzani, a Moroccan national and former resident of Algeciras and Madrid attempted to carry out an attack on a high-speed train traveling between Amsterdam and Paris; he was thwarted by several passengers in the early stages of the attack, likely preventing a mass-casualty incident. El Khazzani is being held in France on preliminary charges of “participation in a terrorist association and attempted murder of a terrorist nature,” though currently there are no confirmed links to any transnational terrorist organizations. Some reports suggest that el Khazzani may have traveled to Turkey earlier this year, though he denies having traveled there or to Syria.

Other arrests this year have mostly included individuals suspected of radicalization and recruitment of foreign fighters, though some were reportedly planning attacks in Spain and in other locations in Europe. This year’s arrests have included:

- **August 12, 2015** – A Spanish citizen was detained near La Coruña for promoting extremism, in part by selling clothing with ISIL symbols.

- **August 5, 2015** – A Moroccan resident of Spain suspected of recruiting women to travel to Syria was detained in Stuttgart, Germany. The suspect had previously escaped counterterror raids on Spain’s Canary Islands.

- **July 22, 2015** – A Spanish citizen was detained in Madrid on suspicion that he was recruiting women to travel to Syria and Iraq. The man had previously lived in Melilla.

- **July 7, 2015** – A female Spanish national was detained in Arrecife (Canary Islands) on suspicion that she was recruiting women to travel to Syria and Iraq. The woman is believed to be a convert to Islam.
Counterterror operations, Islamist extremists are located disproportionately in disadvantaged communities and the southern regions of Spain. As of March, 98 are devoted to Syria since the start of the civil war, with 15 of them employing rates in the country. By contrast, some of the Islamic fighters raised in France or Britain. Spanish Interior Minister Jorge Fernandez Diaz is worried about the threat of radicalization in economically marginalized and with a lot less education than some of the Islamic fighters raised in France or Britain.

As demonstrated by the location of recent counterterror operations, Islamist extremists are located throughout Spain, though many are concentrated in Spain's eastern and southern coastal regions. Spanish Interior Minister Jorge Fernandez Diaz said that of the 1,264 mosques in Spain, 98 are devoted to the strict Salafist version of Islam; of those, 50 are reportedly in Catalonia. Authorities are especially worried about the threat of radicalization in economically disadvantaged communities and the southern regions of Spain have some of the highest unemployment rates in the country. According to media reports, "Islamic radicalism in Spain has been limited to people economically marginalized and with a lot less education than some of the Islamic fighters raised in France or Britain."

Islamic Extremism in Spain

Despite the number of arrests of suspected Islamist extremists over the past decade, a relatively small number of Spanish nationals have traveled to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters. According to Spain's Interior Ministry, 118 Spanish nationals have traveled to Syria since the start of the civil war, 15 of whom have returned to Spain. One of the reasons for the lower recruitment rates in Spain as compared to those in some nearby countries is that Spain has one of the most established Muslim communities in Europe; Andalusia was historically under Islamic rule for seven centuries as the far northwestern extent of the Umayyad (Islamic) Caliphate. Spain’s 1.8 million Muslims, who make up approximately four percent of the country’s population, are mostly moderate.

Spain's proximity to North Africa contributes to Spain's exposure to extremism – Morocco is approximately 10 miles away from the Spanish mainland and shares a land border with the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Ceuta and Melilla "are believed to be a key entry point for militants traveling between the Arab world and Europe." (See OSAC's ISIL Outside Iraq and Syria: Morocco report for more information regarding the implications of Morocco’s security challenges for the security environment in the enclaves.) Though many militants who pass through the Spanish enclaves may only use Spain as a springboard for access to Western Europe, the ongoing counterterror arrests highlight that networks exist on the ground, in part to recruit and help facilitate movement. Publicly visible group’s like Sharia4Spain may also be used for outreach and fundraising in Muslim communities.

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ISIL has incorporated Spain’s historic ties to the Arab world in threats made via social media (see below for example), partly in an effort to incite supporters and sympathizers.

Social media users have also posted images of ISIL’s flag next to major Spanish landmarks. ISIL has employed similar tactics with social media campaigns against several major European cities, including Rome, London, and Paris. These online threats are deemed to be aspirational, though they are concerning due to the risk that they may incite extremists, especially lone wolves and homegrown radicals.

Security Response

The fact that Spanish authorities are continuing to thwart attacks and detain suspected extremists highlights Spain’s capability to investigate and counter terrorist threats. Spain has taken additional security measures in response to recent attacks in Western Europe, including implementing tougher security laws. Also, following the thwarted train attack on August 21, Spain, along with eight other EU members, agreed to increase ID checks and luggage screenings on long distance trains. The nine countries also reportedly called for stricter border controls and the implementation of a Passenger Name Register (PNR) for public transportation.

Additionally, on May 27, the Spanish government launched a new Spanish Plan of Counterterror Prevention and Protection (Plan de Prevención y Protección Antiterrorista). The plan serves as a threat-warning system, establishing terrorism threat levels and the corresponding security response. Under the
previous system, launched in 2005, there were four levels, with each further broken down into a low and high category. Under the new system, there are five levels with no sub-categories (see chart below for an outline of the new system).

Spanish authorities raised the threat warning system to Level 3 following the attack in Paris in January. According to some media reports, for some “key strategic locations like embassies,” the threat level was increased to 5. Following an attack in Sousse, Tunisia on June 26, authorities raised the system to Level 4, which indicates a high risk of attack. (For more information on the terrorism threat in Tunisia, see OSAC’s Mounting Concerns over Tunisia’s Terrorism Threat report.) According to media outlets quoting Spanish authorities, the reasons for the increase included:

- The proximity of the attack in Sousse to Spain
- The first anniversary of ISIL declaring a caliphate
- Intelligence provided to Spanish authorities

U.S. Embassy Madrid issued a Security Message in response to the increase, advising U.S. citizens in Spain to maintain a high level of vigilance and take appropriate steps to increase security awareness.

Plan de Prevención y Protección Antiterrorista

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat Level</th>
<th>Security Measures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 5 – Very High Risk</td>
<td>Deployment of armed services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 – High (current level as of June 26)</td>
<td>Warning of armed services and increased communication between security forces and armed services. Increased protection of critical infrastructure, including nuclear power stations, electricity generation facilities, water plants, chemical plants, train stations, and airports. Increased security at some public gatherings, like sporting events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3 – Medium Risk</td>
<td>Increased security deployments and patrols in public.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 – Moderate Risk</td>
<td>Protection of critical infrastructure, including nuclear power plant and transportation hubs (train stations/airports)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 1 – Low Risk</td>
<td>Security services operate at normal levels; general counterterror measures are implemented.</td>
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Private-sector Impacts

There are currently no known, credible Islamist terrorist threats against the U.S. private sector in Spain. However, many U.S. private sector operations are based in highly visible locations, including in Madrid, Barcelona, and in tourist hotspots on Spain’s eastern and southern coasts. Such locations could be attractive targets symbolically but also for terrorists intending to carry out mass-casualty attacks.

The majority of Islamist terrorist attacks in Western Europe in recent years have been directed against the same several targets, including police and Jewish interests. However, several recently disrupted Islamist terrorist plots, including the attempted train attack in France, highlight the persisting threat against soft targets and the unabated intent of Islamist terrorists to carry out mass-casualty attacks. The majority of recently disrupted plots and attempted attacks have involved the use of small arms and other easily obtainable weapons rather than explosives.

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According to the State Department’s Worldwide Caution, “authorities believe the likelihood of terror attacks in Europe will continue as European members of ISIL return from Syria and Iraq. Additionally, there is a continuing threat in Europe from unaffiliated persons planning attacks inspired by major terrorist organizations but conducted on an individual basis.” OSAC constituents are advised to remain vigilant and register with the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (SMART), which will help constituents stay abreast of any messages disseminated by U.S. Embassy Madrid.

For Further Information

Please direct any questions regarding this report or the general security situation in Spain to OSAC’s Regional Analyst for Europe.