More terror arrests in Spain, but still no evidence presented

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On September 15 ten Pakistan nationals were arrested in Barcelona and are now being held in Madrid's Soto del Real prison under the orders of Judge Ismael Moreno.

The Spanish and international press reported that the ten were suspected of "Islamic terrorism" and had been arrested as part of a major "terror swoop", but in reality the detainees are being held on charges of falsifying documents and drug possession. It seems that investigations will continue to establish if they maintain links with "any Islamic terrorist" group.

A full week after the arrests, the detainees' identity was unknown. Reports stated that raids on the homes of the ten had uncovered several videos and books of a "religious" character. The press gave major prominence to reports that the videos related to the activities of Osama Bin Laden, although a judge ruled that this was not a crime since they can be obtained in any bookshop. A court spokesman subsequently confirmed that so far no video had been found that linked those arrested to Al Qaeda.

The judge has declared that the case may not be sent to the High Court and it may instead be tried under normal criminal law at a local court. The Catalan police, Mossos d'Esquadra, who made the arrests, had denied from the beginning that the detainees constituted a cell of Al Qaeda. The latest arrests were a spin off from a previous investigation by the Mossos who, on September 1, had dismantled a group reportedly falsifying credit cards, passports and videos.

That case did go to the High Court as it involved currency and document falsifications. Twenty-six people, nineteen of whom were Pakistanis, were arrested on that occasion. It was stated at that time that some of the documents seized appeared to indicate connections and links to fundamentalist groups. Yet most of the 26 arrested on that occasion were either released or charged with petty criminal offences. Still a case is being made that such criminal activities could be used to finance radical fundamentalist groups.

There has been a whole spate of arrests and detentions of individuals and groups of Muslim people of various nationalities in Spain since the 9/11 terror attacks in New York, and particularly since the terror bombings of several trains in Madrid on March 11, 2004. But no one has been brought to trial and little information has been produced as to why most have been detained, despite accusations of involvement in some of the worst terrorist outrages in modern times.

The Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon has spearheaded the campaign against supposed Al Qaeda terrorists. It had been reported at the time that the Al Qaeda cell that planned and carried out the outrage in New York had been based in Spain.

In September 2003 Garzon formally charged 35 men, including Osama Bin Laden, with involvement in 9/11. Al Jazeera journalist Tayseer Alouni, who interviewed Osama Bin Laden shortly after the New York attack, is among the 12 people later charged. Al Jazeera insists Alouni is innocent and has accused the United States and Israel of inciting Spain to incriminate him.

An alleged Al Qaeda leader currently imprisoned in the US concentration camp in Guantanamo Bay apparently denounced Alouni. An FBI communication sent to Spanish police claims that Alouni was in charge of Al Qaeda's relations with the media. The FBI note did not identify the source of its charge, but this has not prevented Judge Garzon from including Alouni in his indictment.

Alouni, 56, a Syrian married to a Spaniard, has rejected the charges against him. His lawyer, Jose Luis Galan, described the FBI note as "juridical trash". "The declarations of a prisoner, obtained in Guantanamo, a place where the interrogations are obtained under torture and without the most basic rights, has no validity," he said.

Those arrested and their lawyers suggest that the Al Qaeda cell theory was an invention of the Spanish state.

Immediately following the March 11 Madrid bombings that killed 192 people and wounded 1,500 others, the police arrested 11 people that they claimed were connected to the attacks. These were later identified as three Moroccans, four Arabs, two Indians, one Algerian and one Spanish person. Due to undemocratic measures put in place in the name of the "war on terror", they can be held for up to four years without trial.

Some 55 people in all were subsequently arrested in connection with the Madrid attack. All but 16 of those detained, plus a minor currently held in a specialist centre, remain in jail without charge. Two others suspected in involvement in the Madrid bombings, Rabei Osman El Sayed "Mohamed el Egipcio" and Moroccan Hicham Ahmidam, are in prison in Italy and Morocco respectively on other indictments.

Also in March, an American lawyer was arrested in connection with the Madrid bombings. Brandon Mayfield, 37, was released after two weeks when police discovered that fingerprints found on a bag near the bombsite containing detonators similar to those used in the train attacks were those of an Algerian. The US authorities had previously said the fingerprints belonged to Mayfield.

The investigation into the train bombings took a spectacular turn on April 3; one day after an unexploded bomb was found on the high-speed rail track between Madrid and Seville. Police raided an apartment building in the Leganés suburb of the Spanish capital. Before they could make any arrests, up to six suspects inside were blown up in a massive explosion that also killed a policeman. Among the dead was Serhane ben Abdelmajid Farkhet, a Tunisian who was the suspected ringleader of the Madrid attacks. The investigation into those attacks focused on the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group

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(MICG), a group that allegedly had links to Al Qaeda.

On April 13, Spanish police arrested an Algerian man suspected of being a financial chief of Osama bin Laden's terrorist network. The Interior Ministry said that Ahmed Brahim might have been involved in the financing of the August 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

In July, Abderramed Hammadi Afandi was detained for "collaboration with a terrorist organisation" on the grounds that he had commented to various people that an attack on Madrid was being prepared.

High Court Judge, Juan del Olmo, freed Afandi, 32, a Spanish citizen of Moroccan descent, on September 24. Although no charges have been made against him, Afandi has to report to the court once a week, is forbidden to leave the country and has been asked to surrender his passport.

There has also been the case of Sarjane Ben Abdelmajid "El Tunecino". According to a police report, surveillance of Abdelmajid began early in 2003 based on information from "confidential sources relating to the existence of a group of an undetermined number of people of Arab nationality who could constitute what could be denominated as dormant cells in our country of Islamic terrorism."

The report claims that this cell had amongst its aims, the recruitment of new members and the funding Islamic fundamentalist organisations. The only personal data on the group related to two brothers of Syrian origin but with Spanish nationality by marriage. It was through this slight amount of evidence that Abdelmajid was apparently identified. Abdelmajid died in the Leganes explosion.

The police report continues: "To conclude, (we) state that neither the police investigation nor the telephone observations at any time were able to establish the character of the criminal activities of the assumed terrorist group and even less the genesis of a terrorist attack, even though the police interest not only in El Tunecino but the rest of the group persisted and in consequence the police operation never stopped."

Syrian Safwan Sabagh was also arrested on August 20 and released six days later, after being held incommunicado as a suspect in the train bombings. He told the press that during his imprisonment the police threatened him that he would not be released for 30 years. His family only heard of his detention through the media. Sabagh has said that he can "demonstrate that there are many Muslim citizens imprisoned who are innocent" and that from now on his duty will be to "help publicly all the innocent Muslims accused of belonging to any radical group, through contacting their families and finding them lawyers."

Sabagh was first arrested in March and again released without charge. He has said he is sure he will be arrested again. "They will arrest us as soon as they can as we are an easy target," he said. He also said he is preparing his children to "endure the suffering when they grow up for the mere reason of being Muslims, even when they have been born here (Spain) and are attending state schools."

Sabagh has lived in Spain for the last 22 years, and runs a roast chicken business in Valencia. He told the press that he had been surprised that his fingerprints had been identified on a book of verses from the Koran found by the police in the flat in Leganes where the seven alleged bombers blew themselves up, seven years after he sent it to Allekema Lamari, thought to be one of the victims.

The ousted Popular Party (PP) has been hysterical in its attempt to find any possible connection between the banned Basque separatist group ETA and Islamic terrorists. The PP is demanding to see documents in government possession that supposedly refer to relations between the two and has even accused ETA of being involved in the recent killing of seven Spanish intelligence agents in Baghdad.

However, after the examination of all the documents released by the National Intelligence Centre (CNI) and the government, the Commission of Enquiry into the bombings of March 11 has concluded that they show no involvement, directly or indirectly, of ETA in the March 11 outrage.

The PP was kicked out of office after it was revealed that it had falsely claimed ETA was responsible for the Madrid attacks so as to win re-election and divert attention from its massively unpopular support for the Us-led war in Iraq. The Ambassador to the Vatican and ex-director of the CNI, Jorge Dezcallar, has admitted that the then PP State Secretary for Communications, Alfredo Timermans, telephoned him on March 13 asking him to publicly give the lie to reports being broadcasted by radio "Cadena Ser" which said that police investigations were being concentrated "99 percent on the Islamic trail". Dezcallar obliged. He has also stated that when his organisation produced a report holding ETA responsible, crucial information relating to the bombing was deliberately withheld from him.

Dezcallar also insisted that the March bombings were the action of an Islamic group with no more connection with Al Qaeda than their ideological coincidence. "Bin Laden did not know what was going to happen on 3/11," he concluded.

The new Socialist Party (PSOE) government has continued what can only be described as a manhunt for people of Muslim origins, Spanish and foreigners. Upon election, SP leader Jose Luis Zapatero declared that he would "cooperate with the outgoing government to ensure the effectiveness of the fight against terrorism" and went out of his way to express "full support for, and faith in our police and state security forces."

He told reporters that his government's goal was "to finish off terrorism and ETA is not going to get a minute's rest."

Zapatero told PSOE members in the Basque country to remember that he had co-signed the Pact for Liberties and Against Terrorism with Aznar, which was drawn up in the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States.

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