

Terrorists' visit to France points to state foreknowledge of Barcelona attack

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A spate of news reports last week raised questions about US and European government foreknowledge of the August 17 terror attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils that killed 15 people and wounded more than 100, and how this attack was allowed to proceed. It is ever clearer that the Islamic State (IS) terror cell was under close surveillance by multiple intelligence services of NATO powers, including France, the United States, and Belgium.

Astonishingly, only days before the attack, several members of the terror cell visited Paris, a center of intelligence monitoring of Islamist activity in Europe. They were under surveillance, and French officials informed Spanish officials after they were spotted in France, driving the Audi A3 car that they used to plough into pedestrians in the seaside resort of Cambrils, killing one woman. The car was flashed by a speed camera in France.

BFM-TV reported, “Two members of the jihadist cell that attacked Barcelona and Cambrils, including Younes Abouyaaqoub, the suspected driver in the attack on Las Ramblas, made an ‘express’ round-trip to Paris” on August 11-12. The Audi was photographed at 1 p.m. on August 11 at the Lestelle toll booths in the Pyrénées traveling north, before being flashed by a speed camera for speeding. The two cell members reportedly spent the night in a budget hotel in the Paris suburb of Malakoff and visited a mall before returning to Spain.

French Interior Minister Gérard Collomb then tersely confirmed that Paris was following these individuals and had passed on this information to the Spanish government. He said, “The car was indeed flashed by a camera in the Paris area. Yes, we saw what was in the offing, but we did not know these individuals. We had passed on these reports ... This group came to work in

Paris, but it was a quick round-trip.”

Collomb's statements raise more questions than they give answers. If French authorities knew to follow someone not known to them, who gave them the tip-off? And if they saw “what was in the offing”—i.e., a terror attack—and then notified Spanish officials, why was no action taken even though both French and Spanish intelligence services were aware of the threat?

This question is all the more serious in that intelligence agencies in the United States had detailed knowledge from Abouyaaqoub of the group's plans.

Abouyaaqoub was in direct electronic communication via WhatsApp with Exeintel, a private US intelligence agency which proclaims on its Twitter account that it provides “actionable intelligence” that will “only be accessible to law enforcement.” According to a report in *Público*, an Exeintel operative posing as another jihadist terrorist texted Abouyaaqoub on July 31 and obtained extensive details from him about the terror cell's operational planning.

Abouyaaqoub confirmed to Exeintel that he was located in Spain, that his “emir” or leader was also in Spain, and that he was monitoring police deployments in order to be able to carry out multiple attacks in small towns across Catalonia. He said that the group used bitcoin transactions to hide from financial monitoring. He also claimed to be in contact with three “brothers” in the United States, from whom they were seeking to obtain weapons. *Público* writes, “what Exeintel Group Intelligence Service definitely says that it did, as it stresses on its web page, is that it launched a ‘Red Alert’ to US and European intelligence services. This was 17 days before the massacre.”

There has been no explanation given by security officials as to how this attack was allowed to proceed, although Spain was on high alert and France is under a

state of emergency that suspends basic democratic rights, ostensibly to allow the state to fight terrorism.

The Barcelona attacks follows a series of similar attacks by purported jihadists linked to the Islamic State (IS) in major cities in Europe. The attackers—including the shooters at *Charlie Hebdo* and the Bataclan theater in Paris in 2015 and the Brussels attack in 2016—were virtually all known to police and European intelligence services prior to the attacks. They all came from a network of Islamist operatives working in Europe and fighting in various NATO wars for regime change in the Middle East (see: “Intelligence accounts raise more questions on origins of Brussels, Paris attacks”).

Thousands of European Islamist fighters were traveling back and forth between Europe and Syria, as the NATO powers backed Islamist proxy forces to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s government. It appears that the Barcelona attackers were part of this network.

A key figure in planning the attack, Imam Abdelbaki Es Satty, reportedly lived between January and March 2016 in Belgium. He was in Vilvoorde, which police treat as a center of terrorist recruitment in Belgium. It remains unclear whether he was staying there during Brussels attack of March 22, 2016. Es Satty was killed along with another two others during the night of Wednesday, August 16 in an explosion at a house in Alcanar, a village south of Barcelona, that was reportedly being used as a bomb factory and headquarters by the jihadist cell.

French news magazine *l’Obs* writes that Belgian police reported Es Satty to the Catalan regional police, Mossos d’Esquadra, after he tried to become imam in a mosque of Diegem, Belgium.

The mosque ultimately refused to offer Es Satty the job. The president of the mosque, Soliman Akaychouch, stated, “He did not follow the Prophet, he went at it with more violence and he was more extreme ... Abdelbaki Es Satty came to ask us for a job as an imam. Of course we asked for his identity papers to check them. And when we asked for his documents, he behaved in a very suspect way.”

Belgian Interior Minister Jan Jambon insisted that there had been “contacts between the Belgian police services” and their Spanish counterparts about Es Satty, after this episode aroused authorities’ suspicions.

l’Obs, Belgian ~~Accord~~ police wrote to to ask, “Is it possible for you to give us information on the following person who wants to serve as an imam in Vilvoorde?” At the time, the Catalan police responded that it had no information related to terrorism on Es Satty in their database, but that he had served time in prison for drug trafficking in Spain.



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