

ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF PRO-IS GROUPS ACTING IN NORTH AFRICA ON SPAIN

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Spain today is one of the European countries with a relatively low number of jihadist foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, the Islamist terrorist threat remains present in the country and security experts consider that it can be originated from several fronts: those foreign fighters who may return from international jihad zones unnoticed by authorities and possibly interested in perpetrating attacks (as in the cases of the November 2015 Paris attacks), lone-wolves inspired by the IS ideology (as in the case of the 2016 Nice attack), or even foreign fighters who leave Syria or Iraq for a different country.

Considering that still 70% of the Spanish foreign fighters who joined terrorist groups in Syria or Iraq have not returned to Spain, **the defeat of Islamic State may provoke a mass return of these jihadists to their home country.** Some of them could choose to return to Spain knowing they would probably be arrested and sentenced, but others could move to other countries, where the Islamic State enjoys support and where it is easier to join jihadist networks.

One of such host countries for Spanish jihadists may become Morocco. This is not surprising given that the country shares a common border with Spain and many of Spanish jihadists are of Moroccan origin. Other possible host countries are Libya and Tunisia.

As of December 2015, Libya was considered as the North African country with the highest number of pro-IS groups and a country with one of the highest number of IS supporters (outside Syria and Iraq).

Tunisia is also known as a hotbed of IS terrorists and 3 of its terrorist groups: Okba Ibn Nafaa Battalion, Jund al-Khilafah in Tunisia and Mujahideen of Tunisia of Kairouan have pledged allegiance to Islamic State

None of these groups which pledged allegiance to Islamic State so far has threatened Spain. However, since the beginning of the year a pro-IS media group called 'Al-Wafaa Media Foundation' has released 2 statements threatening Spain. 'Al-Wafa' belongs to a group of semi-official media organizations called "The Media Front to Support the Islamic State" that promotes IS propaganda online, mostly via Telegram. It is so far the only group that has recently threatened Spain in a direct manner.¹ The group does not

¹ Jihadica, "Come Back to Twitter": A Jihadi Warning Against Telegram, 2016.

seem to be the media arm of any specific terrorist organization, but the fact that it has published a large number of articles praising the presence of Islamic State in the Sinai and criticizing the Egyptian government suggests that most of their editors may be actually based in North Africa.

In one of the documents threatening Spain, published on March 28 under the title 'Message to the citizens of Spain and to all Spanish-speaking countries', an apparently German author called Abu Al-Baraa Ibn Malik argues the following:²

“We are the followers of Islamic State, whose capital is Raqqa in the Levant [...] your leaders have killed at least 300 innocent civilians in Syria and Iraq [...] we are going to kill any Spanish unfaithful if we find him in Muslim lands [...] you will be killed in your cities and villages as was stated, in the same way that you kill our families [...] this is your opportunity to stop this devastating war if you really want to continue living in peace”.

Another document published on July 18 under the title 'Spain of Fernando, We Vow Revenge' and written by an author called Abu Marya Al-Aseef is far more direct than the previous one because it specifically suggests the types of attacks and targets that jihadists should attack:³

“In Spain everything has been done to destroy the Koran [...] Spain is a criminal state that encroaches our land [...] troops are still killing Muslims in the eastern and western parts of the earth, sometimes with bomb-carrying air jets and other times with direct participation on the ground [...] wherever they are: find out the train and flight routes, spread pesticides in aerosols in order to poison water and food [...] target nightclubs, shopping centres [...] loyal Muslims from countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania or Libya, attack the interests of Spain in these countries and kidnap Spanish professionals in North Africa [...] stand up, kidnap and behead in response to the killings of our brothers [...] the actions of their ancestors are the reasons of our acts today”.

None of these statements have reportedly unleashed any attempt by returnees or lone wolves to execute an attack in Spain. **The last network that was allegedly planning an attack was dismantled on February 23, 2016, in Ceuta when 3 suspects were arrested.**

The fact that the statements were issued by particular authors through a non-official IS media outlet suggests that the threat they pose is relatively low, at least in the short term. However, long-term consequences of such publications and an increasing number of references to Spain in online propaganda of IS supporters should not be underestimated.

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² Seguridad Internacional, Referencias a España en la propaganda yihadista, 2016.

³ Abu Marya Al-Aseef, 'Spain of Fernando, We Vow Revenge', 2016. Available at: http://www.lainformacion.com/2016/07/27/160727_From_Fernando_to_today.pdf?hash=9d3f1bb41a11718486038c9e3cec18288a1f35c9