

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

On August 17, 2017, a van drove into a crowd of people in a popular tourist area of Barcelona, killing 13 and wounding more than 100 others. After escaping the scene, the van's driver stabbed another individual to death in a car hijacking. Early the following morning, there was another vehicle-ramming attack in Cambrils, a coastal town south of Barcelona. After injuring seven people, the car overturned and five men emerged from the vehicle. Before they were shot and killed by police, one of the men managed to stab a woman to death. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils via the group's official media channels. Authorities have linked the perpetrators to a single cell that had planned a series of bomb attacks around Barcelona. The cell had reportedly decided to carry out the vehicular attacks after a premature explosion destroyed their explosives. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [1], [BBC News](#) [2], [BBC News](#) [3], [BBC News](#) [4], [Guardian](#) [5], [Associated Press](#) [6], [Reuters](#) [7], [Guardian](#) [8], [Independent](#) [9], [Independent](#) [10])

Overview

Since the early 1960s, the Basque nationalist and separatist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) has killed more than 829 people in its effort to gain independence from Spain. The group was designated as a terrorist organization by Spain, the United States, Britain, France, and the European Union. ETA declared a "definitive end" to armed activity in October 2011 and announced that it was officially dissolving in a letter dated April 16, 2018. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [11], [France](#) [12], [Guardian](#) [13])

Spain has also been a target for Islamic extremists. Up until the late 15th century, large parts of Spain and Portugal were under the control of an Islamic caliphate. Consequently, ISIS, [al-Qaeda](#) [14], and other Islamist groups have vowed to "re-conquer" what they refer to as "al-Andalus," the historic Arabic name for the Iberian mainland. In 2014, a Spanish-speaking ISIS member declared: "I tell you, Spain is the land of our forefathers, and, Allah willing, we are going to liberate it, with the might of Allah...." Moreover, in the year leading up to the 2017 attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, Spain was reportedly mentioned 45 times in ISIS propaganda. (Sources: [ABC News](#) [15], [El País](#) [16], [MEMRI](#) [17], [Time](#) [18])

Spain suffered "the worst Islamist attack in European history" on March 11, 2004 when blasts from 10 bombs killed 191 people on four Madrid-bound commuter trains. In the decade following the attack, Spain reportedly arrested 472 suspected Islamist militants. By 2014, approximately 1,800 security officials were dedicated to fighting terrorism in the country. In the wake of the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris, France, Spain raised its terror threat level to a four (in a five-tiered system). Between June 2015 and December 2016, Spain arrested 177 suspected terrorists. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [19], [CNN](#) [20], [U.S. Department of State](#) [21], [El País](#) [16], [Euro Weekly](#) [22])

In June 2017, *El País* reported that the Spanish government had more than 3,000 individuals working to prevent terror attacks in Spain. Among those working to prevent terrorism were the Spanish police, who were reportedly monitoring 259 individuals and tapping 500 telephones. Despite these measures, in August 2017 Spain suffered two vehicular-ramming attacks that claimed a total of 14 lives and injured more than 100 others. (Sources: [El País](#) [23], [Reuters](#) [7])

Spain recognizes the importance of international cooperation and information sharing in preventing terrorism and is currently a member of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Spanish police have also worked closely with security forces in Morocco, Germany, and other countries to dismantle transnational jihadist networks. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [21])

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Radicalization

The Spanish government's 2019 counterterrorism strategy concluded that "the activity of lone actors and cells radicalized by themselves in Spanish territory" present the greatest threat to Spain. The 2004 Madrid train bombings and the 2017 attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils were orchestrated primarily by Moroccan nationals that had been radicalized while living in Spain. Of the 21 Moroccans implicated in the devastating 11-M attacks, 19 had reportedly been radicalized in Spain. Similarly, eight of the 10 individuals involved in the 2017 Barcelona and Cambrils attacks were Moroccan nationals

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

that had been radicalized in Spain by Abdelbaki Essati, a local imam from the city of Ripoll. Analysts believe that Essati, who died in an explosion on the day before the vehicular attack in Barcelona, communicated with members of ISIS's external operations wing. (Sources: [El Pais](#) [24], [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [25], [BBC News](#) [26], [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [25], [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [27], [New York Times](#) [28])

Of those arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2016 for Islamist-terror related activities, 42 percent were Spaniards and 43 percent were Moroccans, according to an empirical study published by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center. The study found that 90 percent of the detainees had been partially or entirely radicalized while living in Spain. (Source: [Combating Terrorism Center](#) [29])

As of February 2019, 139 individuals were imprisoned in Spain on terrorism-related charges. The government has identified 120 inmates in Spanish prisons—all imprisoned on non-terrorism-related charges—at risk of radicalization. Spanish authorities have also identified 49 inmates imprisoned on petty crime charges who have been radicalized and work to recruit others in prison. A reported 81 prisoners show signs of increasing radicalization. Since 2018, Spanish authorities have broken up at least two extremist recruitment networks inside Spanish prisons. According to authorities, these networks sought to radicalize Muslims imprisoned for non-extremist crimes. A February 2019 prison raid identified a recruitment ring offering €500,000 to €1 million to any prisoner willing to commit suicide attacks after their release from prison. The money reportedly came from international drug trafficking. (Sources: [El Pais](#) [24], [Government of Spain](#) [30], [El Pais](#) [31])

Like other European countries, Spain has seen a rise in online radicalization. "Islam en Español," a Facebook page that glorified ISIS and promoted militancy, had approximately 32,500 followers in September 2016. Following the 2017 attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, ISIS reportedly released its first propaganda video in Spanish. In the video, a man identified as Abu Lais Al Qurdubi from Cordoba, encouraged Muslim viewers to "carry out jihad where you are" and said that "Allah willing, Al Andalus will become again what is was, part of the caliphate." (Sources: [Reuters](#) [32], [Deutsche Welle](#) [33], [USA Today](#) [34])

Islamic extremists have targeted women, in particular, in online recruitment. In December 2014, Spanish and Moroccan police arrested seven individuals that had reportedly recruited 12 women online to travel to ISIS-held territory to join the terrorist organization. Following ISIS's Paris attacks on November 13, 2015, ringleader [Abdelhamid Abaaoud](#) [35], reportedly "tried to recruit Spaniards, especially women, through social networks to join and fight with Daesh... to repopulate the caliphate." (Sources: [Reuters](#) [36], [International Business Times](#) [37])

In recent years, Spanish cities in North Africa such as Melilla and Ceuta have increasingly become a locus for recruitment. In August 2014, Spanish and Moroccan police broke up a nine-person cell that was radicalizing and sending new recruits from Ceuta and neighboring cities in Morocco to ISIS-held territory in Iraq and Syria. A month later, another ISIS recruitment network was dismantled in Melilla and Nador, a city in Morocco. On May 20, 2014, Spanish authorities broke up a Melilla-based cell reportedly responsible for radicalizing and sending 26 individuals to fight with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). According to an NPR article published in 2015, several female ISIS recruiters have been arrested in Ceuta for targeting Spanish women online. (Sources: [Business Insider](#) [38], [Al Arabiya](#) [39], [New York Post](#) [40], [CNN](#) [41], [El Mundo](#) [42], [NPR](#) [43])

According to an *Arab Weekly* report in October 2017, Catalan authorities have noticed an increased Muslim Brotherhood presence in the region. The Brotherhood in Catalonia have reportedly been trying to organize forums, build schools, and provide social services in an attempt to gain legitimacy in the region, sparking concerns about a greater spread of extremist ideology. (Source: [Arab Weekly](#) [44])

Far-Right Extremism

In its 2019 counterterrorism strategy, the Spanish government recognized the rise of identity-based extremism, based on the promotion of a superior ethno-nationalist identity. The Interior Ministry labeled the ideology "one of the most worrying issues today" because it could cause "violent dynamics and support for terrorism among minority sectors of our society." One such group in Spain is Generación Identitaria, a branch of the transnational identitarian group Generation Identity (GI). GI believes it is defending European culture from the so-called Great Replacement, which GI describes as "the process by which the indigenous European population is replaced by non-European migrants." Though Generation Identity

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

is officially non-violent, the ideology has spurred followers to physically defend against the alleged invasion. The March 2019 New Zealand attacker, who killed 50 people in two mosques, subscribed to the Great Replacement theory and believed that the European character of New Zealand was under attack. Generación Identitaria has attracted hundreds of followers on social media. The group further attracts followers through demonstrations and protests. GI targets youth by casting migrants as responsible for the economic and social problems of indigenous Europeans. (Sources: [El País](#) [24], [Generación Identitaria](#) [45], [Generation Identity United Kingdom and Ireland](#) [46], [Facebook](#) [47], [Twitter](#) [48], [Vox](#) [49], [Internet Archive](#) [50])

ETA and Basque Separatism

The Basque Country is a geographic area in the western Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France. The area is home to the Basque people, who have largely maintained autonomy in Spain-held Basque territory. Violent Basque separatist group Euskadi Ta Azkatasuna (“Basque Homeland and Freedom” or ETA) caused hundreds of deaths in the latter half of the 20th century. In 1937, Spanish dictator General Francisco Franco occupied Spain’s previously autonomous Basque country. In the 1960s, Franco banned the Basque language and imprisoned and tortured Basque leaders. ETA emerged as a student protest movement against Franco in 1959 to protest for the creation of an independent Basque homeland. In the group’s first act of violence, it tried to derail a train carrying Spanish politicians in 1961. In its first fatal attack, ETA killed Meliton Manzanas, the police chief in the Basque city of San Sebastian, in 1968. In December 1973, the group assassinated Spanish Prime Minister Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco. In 1995, ETA almost assassinated opposition leader Jose Maria Aznar, who would become Spain’s prime minister in 1996. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [51], [BBC News](#) [52], [Reuters](#) [53], [Reuters](#) [54])

ETA formed its political wing, Herri Batasuna, in 1978. Spain permanently banned Herri Batasuna in 2003. Prior to the ban, the party reportedly represented 15 percent of Basque people in local and regional government organizations. The United States and European Union designated the party a terrorist organization shortly after. In October 2007, Spanish police arrested almost the entire Batasuna leadership on charges of glorifying terrorism. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [55], [BBC News](#) [52], [Independent](#) [56])

From its emergence in 1968, ETA has set off dozens of bombs targeting civilians, police, and tourists in Spain and France, killing more than 820 people. In the 1970s, the group reportedly killed an average of 100 people per year. In 1980, considered ETA’s deadliest year, the group killed 118 people. The group announced multiple ceasefires in the 1990s and early 2000s, but it continued to violate the declarations. In October 2011, ETA declared a ceasefire and announced the end of its violent campaign. In April 2017, the group revealed the locations of its weapons caches and claimed to unilaterally disarm. In April 2018, ETA published an apology in two Basque newspapers for the deaths of victims without “a direct participation in the conflict.” ETA also announced that month it was completely disbanding. The following month it released an audio statement to the BBC that it had “completely dismantled” and ceased all political activity. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [57], [BBC News](#) [51], [BBC News](#) [58], [Agence France-Presse](#) [59])

Foreign Fighters

As of March 2019, the Spanish government believed that 237 Spanish citizens or residents had traveled abroad to become foreign fighters. The foreign fighters primarily traveled to the Middle East, but some also went to Mali and the Philippines. Of the 237, the government believed that 130 remained abroad and 61 were dead. Of the 21 who have returned to Spain, 12 have been jailed. Another 24 have traveled to other European countries, where eight have been imprisoned. The government reportedly lost track of one individual. Approximately 80 percent of Spain’s foreign fighter contingent is made up of foreign nationals, mostly Moroccans living in Spain. (Source: [El País](#) [31])

In November 2015, the Spanish National Police and INTERPOL’s National Central Bureau in Madrid co-hosted a meeting during which countries discussed the importance of information sharing to contain the threat posed by foreign fighters. Spain’s then-Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz expressed concern that returnees may perpetrate violent acts or facilitate recruitment within Spain and has highlighted the importance of international cooperation. (Sources: [The Soufan Group](#) [60], [INTERPOL](#) [61], [CNN](#) [41])

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

2017 Attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils

On August 17, 2017, a van crashed into a crowd of people on the Las Ramblas pedestrian walkway in Barcelona, killing 13 and wounding more than 100 others. Police arrested two suspects in the immediate aftermath of the attack, but the van's driver fled the scene on foot. After escaping the scene, the driver stabbed another individual to death in a car hijacking. ISIS released a statement through its Amaq News Agency referring to the perpetrators as "Islamic State soldiers." ISIS claimed that the attackers "carried out the operation in response to calls for targeting coalition states." Mariano Rajoy, the Spanish Prime Minister at the time, called the killings a "savage terrorist attack."

Early the following morning, five men attempted another vehicular-ramming attack in Cambrils, a coastal town located south of Barcelona. After overturning their car, the men were shot and killed by the Spanish police. Six civilians and a police officer were wounded in the attack and one woman was killed. The suspects were reportedly wearing explosive belts, which police later determined to be fake. Police identified the five as 17-year-old Moussa Oukabir, 19-year-old El Houssaine Abouyaaqoub, 19-year-old Said Aallaa, 21-year-old Omar Hychami, and 24-year-old Mohamed Hychami. All five were born in Morocco. The following day, ISIS issued an official statement claiming responsibility for the attack in Cambrils. Police believe that the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks were related and that the perpetrators belonged to the same cell. (Sources: [BBC News](#) [1], [BBC News](#) [3], [New York Times](#) [62], [Associated Press](#) [63], [New York Times](#) [64], [Guardian](#) [65], [Guardian](#) [8], [Reuters](#) [7], [Independent](#) [10])

On August 16, a house linked to the cell exploded in the coastal town of Alcanar Platja. Authorities believe that the explosion occurred while members of the cell were attempting to build a bomb. Inside the house, Catalan firefighters discovered 120 canisters of butane and propane. Police later found trace amounts of TATP, a popular explosive featured in a notorious ISIS bomb-making video. The initial explosion killed two individuals. A second explosion wounded first responders on the scene. One of the two people killed in the explosion was Abdelbaki Essati, a Moroccan imam living in the Spanish town of Ripoll. Essati is believed to have radicalized the cell and to have masterminded the attacks. (Sources: [Independent](#) [66], [Reuters](#) [7], [Guardian](#) [65], [Sky News](#) [67], [New York Times](#) [68], [New York Times](#) [69])

The cell had allegedly planned a bombing campaign through Barcelona before the premature explosion, according to Spanish authorities. Without the explosives, the cell instead turned to using their vehicles in ramming attacks. In the hours succeeding the Las Ramblas attack, police arrested four suspected members of the cell. By the following Monday, police reported that the cell had been completely dismantled. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [8], [Independent](#) [66], [Guardian](#) [70], [Reuters](#) [71])

After a five-day search, police shot and killed the driver of the August 17 attack, who was wearing what appeared to be a suicide belt. Police later identified the driver as a 22-year-old Moroccan immigrant named Younes Abouyaaquoub, who lived in Ripoll. Abouyaaquoub's credit card was reportedly used the day of the attack to rent three vans, including the one used in the Las Ramblas attack. (Sources: [Reuters](#) [72], [Associated Press](#) [73], [Guardian](#) [8], [Independent](#) [66], [Guardian](#) [70], [Reuters](#) [71])

Altogether, 130 people were wounded in the Las Ramblas and Cambrils attacks. These attacks were Spain's deadliest since the 2004 Madrid bombings, which killed 192 on commuter trains. It was also Spain's first fatal attack since July 2009, when Basque separatist group ETA killed two paramilitary officers on the Spanish island of Majorca. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [65], [Guardian](#) [5], [Reuters](#) [7], [Associated Press](#) [63], [Associated Press](#) [6], [BBC News](#) [4], [New York Times](#) [64])

2004 Madrid Train Bombings ("11-M" Attacks)

On the morning of March 11, 2004, Islamist terrorists murdered 191 people and injured approximately 1,800 in Madrid. The terrorists used cellphones to detonate 10 bombs that exploded on four commuter trains at three different stations. The chief perpetrators of the 11-M massacre were young men, primarily of North African origin. They were reportedly inspired by an al-Qaeda-affiliated website that called for attacks on the Spanish mainland leading up to Spain's March 14th general election.

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

Both the conservative People's Party (PP) incumbent, Jose Maria Aznar, and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) candidate, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, politicized the event. Aznar immediately pointed the finger at ETA, despite evidence showing that jihadists were responsible. (Sources: [Guardian](#) [19], [Deutsche Welle](#) [74])

On April 3, 2004, seven suspected perpetrators of 11-M committed suicide by detonating explosives strapped to themselves. Officers of Spain's Grupo Especial Operaciones (GEO) force tracked the men to an apartment in Madrid. The suicide explosion killed one GEO officer and wounded 15 other agents. (Sources: [Telegraph](#) [75], [El País](#) [76], [BBC News](#) [77], [CNN](#) [78])

By October 2007, 29 individuals were indicted for the Madrid train bombings. Their charges included murder, belonging to a terrorist cell, and providing material support for the bombings. Three of the individuals were sentenced to over a thousand years in prison but will only serve 40 (the maximum sentence that can be served under Spanish law). (Sources: [Reuters](#) [79], [Guardian](#) [80])

- **August 20, 2018:** A man armed with a knife is shot and killed by Catalan police after entering a police station and shouting "Allahu Akbar." Authorities believe the man had entered the station with the intention of killing police officers. The attack occurred days after the one-year anniversary of the 2017 vehicular-ramming attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils. Sources: [Guardian](#) [81], [El País](#) [82]
- **August 17, 2017 - August 18, 2017:** On August 17, a vehicular-ramming attack on the Las Ramblas pedestrian walkway in Barcelona kills 13 people and wounds more than 100 others. The following morning there is another vehicular attack in Cambrils, a coastal town south of Barcelona. The August 18th attack kills one woman and injures seven others. ISIS claims responsibility for both attacks. Police link the perpetrators to a single cell that had planned a series of bomb attacks until a premature explosion destroyed their bomb materials the day before the Barcelona attack. Sources: [BBC News](#) [1], [BBC News](#) [3], [Guardian](#) [8], [Guardian](#) [5], [Reuters](#) [7], [Associated Press](#) [6], [New York Times](#) [64], [Independent](#) [10]
- **September 28, 2016:** Spanish, German, and Belgian authorities arrest five people, four Spanish citizens and one Moroccan, for allegedly forming an ISIS terror cell. The suspects promoted ISIS content on a number of social media sites, including a Facebook page with approximately 32,500 followers. Sources: [Reuters](#) [32], [Deutsche Welle](#) [33]
- **April 19, 2016:** Spanish police arrest a 26-year-old Moroccan national named Mohamed Harrak on the island of Majorca. According to Spain's Ministry of the Interior, Harrak recruited new jihadists for ISIS via online forums, organized covert travel routes between Europe and Syria, and was involved in the planning of a terrorist attack in Spain. Sources: [Daily Mail](#), [83] [International Business Times](#) [84], [New York Times](#) [85]
- **March 3, 2016:** Spanish authorities confiscate 20,000 uniforms and other supplies hidden in shipping containers at Spanish ports to be shipped to ISIS and other Islamic extremist groups. The seizure has been linked to the February 2016 arrest of seven individuals, five of Spanish citizenship, accused of providing logistical support to ISIS and the Nusra Front. Sources: [CNN](#) [86], [New York Times](#) [87]
- **December 11, 2015:** Militants explode a car bomb in the diplomatic district in Kabul, Afghanistan, after attempting to breach the premises of the Spanish embassy compound. The attack kills at least one Spanish security officer and wounds 10 others. The Taliban claims responsibility for the attack. Sources: [Reuters](#) [88], [Wall Street Journal](#) [89], [United Nations](#) [90]
- **November 13, 2015:** Three Spanish citizens are killed in an ISIS orchestrated attack in Paris. The attack claims a total of 130 lives and wounds 413. Then-Spanish Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz states that the attack's ringleader, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, had attempted to recruit Spaniards to fight with ISIS in Syria. Sources: [The Local](#) [91], [New York Times](#) [92], [International Business Times](#) [37]
- **July 2009:** ETA blows up a police car in the Spanish island of Majorca, killing two officers. The attack comes a day after ETA bombs a Civil Guard barracks building in Burgos, wounding 65 people. The attacks coincide with ETA's 30th anniversary. Sources: [Guardian](#) [93], [BBC News](#) [94]
- **December 30, 2006:** ETA sets off a van bomb in the parking lot of a new airport, killing two Ecuadorian nationals and injuring 19. The attack, known as the Madrid-Barajas Airport bombing, ends a unilateral ceasefire that ETA announced in March of 2006. Source: [CNN](#) [95]
- **April 3, 2004:** Seven of the 11-M suspects kill themselves and a police officer with suicide bombs after Spanish special forces track them to an apartment in southern Madrid. Sources: [Telegraph](#) [75], [CNN](#) [78]
- **March 11, 2004:** Islamic extremists place 10 bombs on four Madrid-bound commuter trains. The explosions kill 191 people and injure nearly 1,800. This attack becomes known as "11-M." Al-Qaeda claims responsibility for the attack two days later. Spanish investigators believe that the attack was inspired but not directed by al-Qaeda. Sources: [Guardian](#) [19], [CNN](#) [78], [Telegraph](#) [75]

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

- **November 21, 2000:** ETA murders former cabinet minister Ernest Lluch in Barcelona. Source: [Telegraph](#) [75]
- **July 1997:** Basque councilman Miguel Angel Blanco is kidnapped and killed, leading to demonstrations attended by six million people. Source: [Telegraph](#) [75]
- **August 1995:** Police foil an ETA plot to kill King Juan Carlos. Source: [Telegraph](#) [75]
- **September 9, 1985:** An American tourist is killed by ETA's first car bomb in Madrid. The explosion also wounds 16 civil guards Source: [Telegraph](#) [75]
- **1980:** ETA kill nearly 100 people: the deadliest year in the group's history. Source: [BBC News](#) [96]
- **December 20, 1973:** ETA kills Spanish Prime Minister Luis Carrero Blanco when his car passes over remote-detonated explosives planted in Madrid. The attack occurs after the prime minister attends a Catholic mass at the San Francisco de Borja Church. Source: [BBC News](#) [97]
- **July 18, 1961:** ETA is unsuccessful in derailing a train transporting politicians and supporters of Spanish dictator, General Francisco Franco. This is ETA's first attempt at a violent attack. Source: [New York Times](#) [98]
- **1959:** Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (or "ETA"), which translates to "Basque Homeland and Freedom," is founded with the objective of gaining independence for a Basque state in northern Spain and southwestern France. ETA grew from a leftist student resistance movement during General Franco's repressive military dictatorship. Julen Madariaga is one of the group's founders. Sources: [BBC News](#) [99], [Guardian](#) [100], [Human Rights Watch](#) [11], [Council on Foreign Relations](#) [101]

Domestic Counter-Extremism

The Spanish Criminal Code outlaws terrorism and any act of collaboration with a terrorist organization. The Spanish Criminal Code also prohibits incitement "to incur in discriminatory acts, hate or violence" under Article 510. "Hate speech" is punishable by imprisonment for one to three years and a fine of 6 to 12 months' salary. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [102], [U.N. Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights](#) [103])

The Center for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organized Crime (CITCO), the National Police, and the Civil Guard are responsible for enforcing the Spanish Criminal Code as it relates to terrorism. In 2015, the Spanish police arrested 100 suspected Islamic extremists. Between the 2004 Madrid train bombings and February 2016, Spain arrested approximately 600 alleged terrorists. (Sources: [La Moncloa](#) [104], [Human Rights Watch](#) [105], [Associated Press](#) [106], [BBC News](#) [107])

In 2014, Spanish authorities imprisoned more than 700 former ETA members for participating in terrorism. Spain has been scrutinized for exercising harsher punishments on ETA members. One case led to the intervention of the European Court of Human Rights, which forced the release of an ETA operative who was sentenced to 3,000 years in prison (despite Spanish law permitting a maximum sentence of 40-years). At the time ETA announced its dissolution in April 2018, the number of former ETA members imprisoned had reportedly dropped to under 300. (Sources: [Newsweek](#) [108], [The Economist](#) [109], [DW](#) [110])

In recent years, the Spanish government has largely focused on preventing terror attacks in the context of growing Islamic extremism. In September 2014, Secretary of State for Security Francisco Martinez ramped up security measures in conjunction with the government's escalation of the terror threat level. Law enforcement took extra precautions in monitoring transit hubs, hospitals, government buildings, and other key sites. The decision was primarily a response to ISIS's expansion in Iraq and Syria and direct threats against Western countries. On December 5, 2013, Spain launched the Cyber Defense Committee, charged with establishing a national cyber-security strategy to protect sensitive information networks across all departments. (Sources: [Wall Street Journal](#) [111], [U.S. Department of State](#) [102])

According to the U.S. Department of State, Spain is in the process of improving its legal framework to (a) directly address the flow of foreign fighters to conflict zones like Iraq and Syria; (b) enable the government to more aggressively prosecute suspected jihadists not already associated with criminal organizations; and (c) prevent online recruitment. Given its experience with ETA, Spain's jurisprudence and bureaucratic systems have the capacity to investigate and prosecute suspected terrorists. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [112], [Library of Congress](#) [113])

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

In its December 2017 National Security Strategy, the Spanish government identified jihadist terrorism as “one of the principal problems confronting the international community.” In February 2019, the Spanish government launched a new counterterrorism strategy focused on “Preventing, Protecting, Persecuting and Preparing a response.” Under these pillars, the government seeks to identify extremists and disrupt terrorist plots while protecting potential targets. The strategy also seeks to identify at-risk individuals and communities in order to prevent radicalization. The Preparing a response section refers to minimizing the impact of terrorist activities. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [114], [El Pais](#) [24], [Government of Spain](#) [30])

The new strategy specifically targets jihadists, particularly returning foreign fighters affiliated with ISIS and al-Qaeda. The strategy also targets Spanish prisons. Fewer than 15 of the 140 jihadist prisoners in Spanish prisons have signed up for deradicalization programs, according to the Interior Ministry. Under the new strategy, the government will seek to boost the number of prison guards and support for deradicalization programs. The strategy is effective through 2023, though it is subject to annual review. The new strategy replaces the previous 2012 strategy, which expired in 2017. 2019 marked the first time the government has publicized its strategy. (Sources: [El Pais](#) [24], [Government of Spain](#) [30])

In May 2016, the city of Malaga in southern Spain joined the “Strong Cities Network,” launched by the United Nations in September 2015 to build community resilience and cohesion in order to counter violent extremism. Malaga serves as a pilot for community-based counter violent extremism (CVE) programs. For example, Malaga has a youth radicalization intervention program as well as a number of programs designed to improve communication between government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [21])

Immigration Policy

As part of its comprehensive immigration policies, Spain participated in the U.S. Immigration Advisory Program. Through promoting collaboration between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials stationed at Madrid-Barajas International Airport, airline security personnel, and local police, this program is designed to monitor high-risk passengers traveling to the United States. The program has aided Spain in improving security and detecting false documents at its borders. Spain has recently introduced a number of new technologies to further secure its borders. For example, Spain has implemented a system to read EU passports with biometric data, improved explosive trace detection capabilities, and introduced an “External Surveillance System” for maritime policing. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [102])

In January 2015, then-Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz also called for a discussion over the European Union’s Schengen Treaty, which removed passport checks on EU internal borders. Díaz argued that “the existing mobility in the European Union is facilitating the movements (of jihadists) to any country and also to our country.” He planned to have Spain move “back to border controls” to limit the movement of Islamist fighters returning to Europe from the Middle East. Díaz also petitioned for the creation of a European passenger database. This would allow EU member states to share passenger information and thereby enhance border security. In February 2015, the Spanish government and opposition party agreed to implement new measures to address individuals in Spain who were planning to join Islamic extremist groups in war zones. The announcement came in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris and was reaffirmed by the Interior Minister after the November 2015 Paris attacks. (Sources: [NDTV](#) [115], [Business Insider](#) [116], [International Business Times](#) [37])

The government’s efforts to counter domestic extremism are closely associated with its clampdown on illegal immigration and efforts to integrate existing immigrant communities. Spain’s Foundation for Pluralism and Co-existence, a public office through the Ministry of Justice, supports integration of minority religious communities. The Foundation has provided grants to non-governmental organizations developing programs and activities aimed at social cohesion.

International Counter-Extremism

In the aftermath of 9/11, Spain took a leading role in international counterterrorism efforts. Spain has been a key participant of the Counter Terrorism Committee (CTC), established by the U.N. Security Council to monitor states’ compliance with counterterrorism standards. Spain has contributed significantly to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and, in 2016, deployed over 300 Spanish troops to a military-training mission in Iraq alongside the U.S. mission. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#) [105], [U.S. Department of State](#) [21])

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

Spain also helped found the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). The GCTF has a long-term goal of reducing vulnerability to terrorism by creating a comprehensive approach to countering radicalization and recruitment, preventing terrorist attacks, and prosecuting the perpetrators of terrorist acts. Spain has also been a long-time member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an inter-governmental body that works to promote policies that combat money laundering and terrorist financing, and the Egmont Group, a global association of financial intelligence units. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#) [21], [Egmont Group](#) [117])

Since 2004, Spain has been a member of an informal working group on jihadism known as the 5 + 5. This unofficial network consists of defense ministers from Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. The group exchanges information on threats posed by Islamic extremism and foreign fighters in the region. The Spanish Civil Guard also utilizes Europol information to combat terrorism and organized crime. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#) [112])

Spain has also been an active partner in U.S. and African efforts to track and disrupt transnational terrorism. U.S. officials from the Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agencies have advised Spanish airline security personnel and police in screening high-risk passengers, particularly those flying to the United States. In Africa, Spain has increased cooperation with Algeria, Mali, and Mauritania. Together, these countries have sought to combat and contain the threat of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Spain has also provided funding to Mali and Mauritania to support CVE programs. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State \(2013\)](#) [102], [U.S. Department of State \(2014\)](#) [112])

As of March 2019, Spanish agents in Syria were participating in Operation Gallant Phoenix, a U.S.-led operation to identify European foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. U.S. forces launched the mission in 2015 from a base in Jordan to gather evidence such as fingerprints and computer files in formerly ISIS-held territory in order to identify foreign fighters. The goal is to then bring charges against the individuals if and when they return to their home countries. Spain is one of 21 countries reportedly participating in the mission. (Sources: [El Pais](#) [31], [Brussels Times](#) [118], [Deutsche Welle](#) [119])

Spanish authorities played a critical role in identifying the armed perpetrator of the thwarted Amsterdam-Paris passenger train attack that occurred on August 21, 2015. Spanish security services noted that the suspect, Ayoub El Kahzani, lived in Algeciras, a port city in southern Spain, during 2014 and was already known as a potential terrorist threat. Spain had identified El Kahzani, a Moroccan national, to France and Belgium as a person who had joined an Islamist group. (Source: [New York Times](#) [120])

Public Opinion

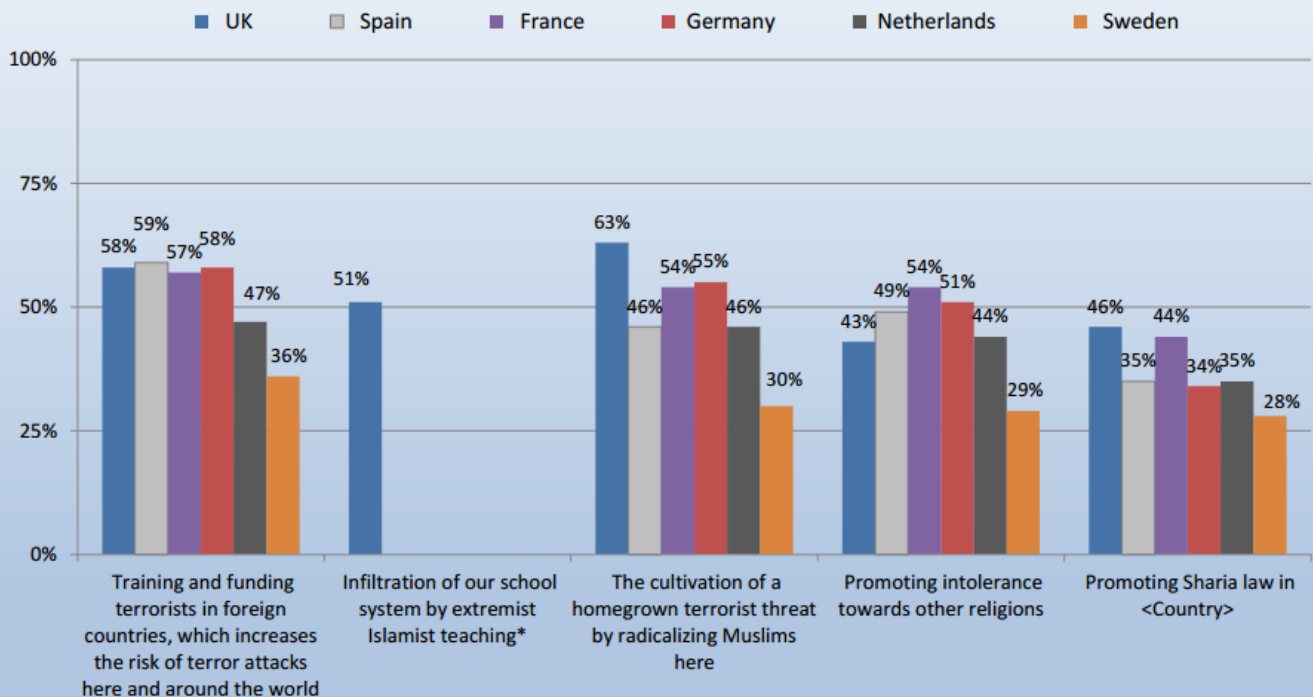
A February 2019 Pew Research Center poll on leading security threats found that 75 percent of Spanish respondents believed ISIS represented a major threat to their country. The data represent a decrease from an August 2017 Pew survey that found that 88 percent of Spanish respondents believed that ISIS is a major threat to their country. In both polls, climate change topped the list of perceived threats with 81 percent in 2019 and 89 in 2017. (Sources: [Pew Research Center](#) [121], [Pew Research Center](#) [122])

In September 2014, a Counter Extremism Project (CEP) study found that a majority of respondents from Spain consider Islamic extremist movements to be the greatest threat to their national security. The study also found that the growth of Islamic extremism in Spain was believed to be “very dangerous” by 51 percent of the Spaniards in the sample, and “quite dangerous” by 41 percent. In response to a question regarding the impact of growing Islamic extremism in the Middle East and North Africa, 55 percent of the Spanish respondents agreed it would destabilize the region. Finally, Spanish respondents most strongly felt that terrorist training and funding in foreign countries were the biggest threats to security and way of life in Spain. These threats were directly or indirectly related to Islamic extremism.

Spain: Extremism & Counter-Extremism

Future Risks to National Security

Training and funding terrorists in foreign countries, the cultivation of homegrown terrorist threats by the radicalization of Muslims and promoting intolerance towards other religions are seen as the biggest risks to national security. For the UK, the infiltration of the school system by extremists Islamic teaching is also a risk.



Q21. To what extent do you think of each of the following as being risks to our security, prosperity and/or way of life here in <Country>, resulting directly or indirectly from Islamist extremism?

*NB: asked only to UK voters

According to a December 2015 survey completed by Simple Lógica, a Madrid-based polling firm that specializes in social research and market analysis, the Spanish public disapproved of military involvement in conflict areas. With regards to Spanish participation in the Western-led war against ISIS, 61 percent of those polled were against and only 28.8 percent were in favor. When asked what effect they believed the war would have on the eradication of jihadi terrorism, 58.8 percent thought it would have “little” or “no” effect. Only 21.6 percent of respondents considered war to be “somewhat,” “enough” or “very impactful” against jihadists. (Sources: [Counter Extremism Project](#) [123], [Simple Lógica](#) [124])