How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Abstract:

This paper seeks to find how the online sphere influences Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain. Its structure is based on the definitions of key concepts, an online radicalisation theoretical framework and the discussion of this topic in the Spanish context. It is argued that online radicalisation processes are primarily explained by the consumption of propaganda and the contact with other extremists in forums or messaging applications. In Spain, the online sphere might especially influence a particularly vulnerable group, the second or third generation of Moroccan immigrants. They may lack an identity and may feel the online community as a virtual ummah, which provides them with a purpose: jihad. As a prevention tool against online radicalisation, it is found that a solid comprehensive counternarrative strategy involving every relevant actor would be the most successful approach to tackle this phenomenon.

Keywords:

Jihadism, radicalisation, terrorism, Internet, social media, Daesh.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

Introduction

Whereas the terrorist threat level in Spain remains "high"[1], the number of detainees and operations regarding jihadist terrorism increased progressively for the last years[2]. Furthermore, the development of online platforms has contributed to the jihadist radicalisation of individuals by the dissemination of propaganda in social media and through the contact with other extremists via online messaging platforms, among other actions[3]. These factors motivated this study, which seeks to better understand the complex environment of online Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain.

It is argued that the Internet has a critical role in the radicalisation process. The online platforms globalised Salafi-jihadist ideology[4] and recently, Daesh relied heavily on this environment in order to indoctrinate individuals[5]. In Spain, most jihadists for indoctrination use the online sphere and nowadays the most used platforms for this purpose are private forums or encrypted messaging applications such as Telegram[6].

Among the ways that the Internet influences radicalisation, this paper highlights that it contributes to uphold extremist beliefs through the consumption of jihadist propaganda and by putting like-minded individuals in contact[7]. This progression occurs in an echo chamber where the individual disengages from the normalised values[8]. Moreover, the online sphere acts as a virtual ummah —spiritual community of Muslims— where

[1] Ministry of Interior, Government of Spain, "Terrorist threat level in Spain", available on http://www.interior.gob.es/en/prensa/nivel-alerta-antiterrorista. Accessed 03.07.2018.

[2] "Detenidos 77 yihadistas en España en 2017", Diario Información, December 2017, https://www.diarioinformacion.com/nacional/2017/12/27/detenidos-77-yihadistas-espana-2017/1972233.html Accessed 03.07.2018.

[3] REINARES, Fernando; GARCÍA-CALVO, Carola and VICENTE, Álvaro, "Dos factores que explican la radicalización yihadista en España", Real Instituto Elcano, August 2017, available on http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari62-2017-reinares-garciacalvo-vicente-dos-factores-explican-radicalizacion-yihadista-espana Accessed 18.02.2018.

[4] SHAHAR, Y. "The internet as a tool for intelligence and counter-terrorism", in B. GANOR, K. VON KNOP, and C. DUARTE, "Hypermedia Seduction for Terrorist Recruiting", IOS Press, Washington, DC, 2007, p. 140.

[5] KHADER, Majeed; NEO, Loo Seng; ONG, Gabriel; TAN MINGYI, Eunice and CHIN, Jeffery, "Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era", IGI Global, Pennsylvania, 2016, p. xxi.

[6] MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.

[7] NEO, Loo Seng. "An Internet-mediated pathway for online radicalisation: RECRO", in "Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era", ed. KHADER, Majeed; NEO, Loo Seng; ONG, Gabriel; TAN MINGYI, Eunice and CHIN, Jeffery. IGI Global, Pennsylvania, 2016, p. 204.

[8] NEUMANN, Peter and STEVENS, Tim, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, "Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action", 2009, p. 11, available on http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1236768491ICSROnlineRadicalisationReport.pdf Accessed 12.05.2018.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

vulnerable people might feel like adopting an identity and interiorising the purpose of jihad[9]. It is argued that in the Spanish context this purpose is derived from the jihadist argument of defending from those states who are involved in military campaigns in Muslim-majority countries in addition to an argument that solely affects Spain. That is, the retrieval of Al-Andalus, a former land that covered most of the Iberian Peninsula and was governed by Arab dynasties from the 8th to the 15th century[10].

In particular, data from 2013 to 2018 regarding detained individuals due to jihadist terrorism related offenses will be examined to provide an accurate current picture of online jihadist radicalisation in this country. Additionally, this study will analyse the national strategy for countering violent radicalisation and its implementation's effectiveness, which arose controversy[11]. Nonetheless, it is argued that it is too soon to evaluate this since it is a long-term strategy and it was implemented just three years ago.

Before discussing how the online sphere influences jihadist radicalisation in Spain, it seems logical to understand some of the concepts included in this question and how they relate to each other. First, this paper assumes that radicalisation is a process, which entails a starting point from where an individual gets extremist ideas. In the Spanish context, these 'extremist' or 'radical' ideas are distant from what "is defined or accepted as normative, traditional, or valued as the status quo"[12]. According to the last National Security Strategy review in 2017, this starting point or status quo is considered in Spain as "constitutional values" such as "liberty, equality, justice or political pluralism"[13].

As the question of this research is related to 'jihadist radicalisation', it is assumed that extremist views are those fundamental religious beliefs that might lead to perpetrate acts of terrorism. In this regard, Salafi-jihadism is the final point of this radicalisation process.

---

[9] NEO, Loo Seng, "An Internet-mediated pathway for online radicalisation: RECRO", in "Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era", ed. KHADER, Majeed; NEO, Loo Seng; ONG, Gabriel; TAN MINGYI, Eunice and CHIN, Jeffery, IGI Global, Pennsylvania, 2016, pp. 211-212.

[10] Grupo de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional, "Referencias a España en la propaganda yihadista", available on http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/?q=es/content/referencias-espa%C3%B1n-en-la-propaganda-yihadista Accessed 18.05.2018.

[11] Gobierno de España, "Plan Estratégico Nacional de Lucha contra la Radicalización Violenta", Centro de Inteligencia contra el Terrorismo y el Crimen Organizado, Madrid, 2015; MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.

[12] MANDEL, David R, "Radicalization: what does it mean?" in "Home-Grown Terrorism: Understanding and Addressing the Root Causes of Radicalisation among Groups with an Immigrant Heritage in Europe", ed. PICK, Speckhard and JACUCH, IOS Press, Amsterdam, 2010, p. 5.

[13] Gobierno de España. "Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional 2017", NIPO 785170411, Presidencia del Gobierno, Madrid, 2017, p. 20.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

Peter Neumann highlighted two useful concepts that help to understand the radicalisation process: "cognitive radicalisation" and "violent radicalisation". Whereas the former means to hold extremist views, the latter implies the intention of committing violent acts too[14]. This analysis will be based on this division to better comprehend the stage in which an individual who is getting radicalised is placed.

The role of the Internet in Salafi-jihadist radicalisation

Jihadism expert Manuel Marlasca argued that nowadays terrorists maintain a more low-profile rank due to the extended monitoring activity that security services develop on the Internet. However, some platforms such as the private messaging application Telegram have a difficult encoding system to hack and are increasingly used by extremists in order to avoid monitorisation[15]. In this sense, Echeverría added that intelligence services warn that data encoding phenomenon minimises the capacity they have to prevent and detect terrorist attacks. He said that, for instance, Paris attacks in November 2015 had not been detected due to the online encoded channels terrorists used to communicate between each other[16].

In the future, Internet will still be a useful tool for terrorists. Burke argued: "violent extremists will also exploit new media technology whenever it becomes available"; Torres stated that the online sphere is a domain where terrorists must be if they seek to fulfil their objectives and Marlasca emphasised the "vital importance" of the Internet for extremists now and in the future[17]. In addition, a counterjihadism expert of the Spanish counterterrorism intelligence centre warned about the use of virtual reality technology by terrorists, which could impact future radicalisation processes[18].

---

[14] NEUMANN, Peter, "The trouble of radicalisation", International Affairs, London, Volume 89, 2013, p. 13.
[15] MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.
[16] ECHEVERRÍA, Carlos, "El aprovechamiento de las tecnologías por los grupos terroristas de perfil islamista: evolución y lecciones aprendidas", IEEE, Madrid, Volume 61, 2018, p. 10.
[17] BURKE, Jason, "How the changing media is changing terrorism", The Guardian, February 2016, available on https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/25/how-changing-media-changing-terrorism Accessed 13.05.2018; TORRES, Manuel R., "Al Andalus 2.0. La ciber-yihad contra España", Biblioteca Gesi, Granada, 2014, p. 261; MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.
[18] Counterjihadism expert of the Intelligence Centre for Counterterrorism and Organised Crime in Spain, interview with author, Madrid, 12.07.2018.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

In relation to the characteristics that the online sphere offers to terrorists, Weimann suggested a list of nine features: "easy access", "little or no regulation, "potentially huge audiences spread throughout the world ", "anonymity of communication", "fast flow of information", "interactivity", "inexpensive development", "multimedia environment" and the "ability to shape coverage in the traditional mass media, which use the internet as a source for stories"[19]. Furthermore, a member of the intelligence service of the Spanish Guardia Civil added the eternity factor. He argued that every content uploaded on the Internet never disappears. "Information on the Internet can be replicated in an unlimited way", he stated[20].

Thus, the Internet allows an individual to get radicalised by consuming online extremist content. As Marlasca said, it is not necessary to go to a training camp anymore; Internet plays the role of a "virtual training camp"[21]. For instance, individuals can both watch and read extremist content and access manuals such as bomb making instructions on the Internet[22]. Therefore, the online sphere serves as a pathway to both cognitive and behavioural radicalisation.

In the early 2000s, the ideologue Abu Musab Al-Suri already encouraged individuals to read online content and act as individuals, rather than necessarily belonging to a specific group. He said: "activists needed principles, not organisations"[23]. This phenomenon was defined by Marc Sageman as the so-called "leaderless jihad"[24].

---

[19] WEIMANN, Gabriel, "Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges", United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington DC, 2006, p. 29.
[20] Member of the intelligence service of the Spanish Guardia Civil, "Jornada de terrorismo" conference organised by IEEE, in Zaragoza, 16.11.2016, available in http://www.fundacionmgimenezabad.es/index.php?option=com_weblinks_video&view=category&id=226&idv=493&av=2016&limitstart=&Itemid=100823 Accessed 16.05.2018.
[21] MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.
[22] JORDÁN, Javier and TORRES, Manuel R., "Internet y actividades terroristas: el caso del 11-M", El profesional de la información, Volume 16, 2007, p. 124.
[23] BURKE, Jason, "How the changing media is changing terrorism", The Guardian, February 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/25/how-changing-media-changing-terrorism Accessed 13.05.2018.
[24] SAGEMAN, Marc, "Leaderless Jihad", Pennsylvania University Press, Pennsylvania, 2008, p. 143.

ieee.es

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

Every radicalisation process starts with a "cognitive opening", an openness to "new ideas and possibilities"[25]. This is also the starting point of the "cognitive radicalisation" process described by Neumann[26]. The online sphere provides the platform where to exploit the grievances and frustration that an individual may have. However, the cognitive opening is nevertheless primarily based on the individual itself. It is a "phase where the personality and person-specific factors and social milieu interact to create the motivation for individuals to 'open-up' and initiate the search for alternative rhetoric or channels to fulfil their needs"[27].

Saifudeen argued that a disengagement from the mainstream ideas would lead to extremist ideas. It is defined as a "cognitive rethink", which is based on questioning accepted norms and beliefs[28]. This author added that another key factor is the "social anchors" of an individual. The particular social groups surrounding an individual are the nexus to his or her current beliefs. If these anchors become weaker, it seems easier to disengage from a certain worldview and rethink it[29]. Hence, extremist online content does not simply radicalise an individual. There must be a "degree of causality between what is found online and its influence on the individual reading it[30].

This cognitive opening that might lead to a radicalisation process is defined by Loo Seng Neo's RECRO online radicalisation model as the "reflection phase". According to this author, this stage "details the triggers, needs, and vulnerabilities that an individual may have which increase one's receptiveness towards alternative belief systems"[31]. Neo's model is divided in the reflection, exploration, connection, resolution and operational phase. The first three points refer to cognitive radicalisation and the last two to

---

[25] WIKTOROWICZ, Quintan, "Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West", Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2005, p. 85.

[26] NEUMANN, Peter, "The trouble of radicalisation", International Affairs, London, Volume 89, 2013, p. 13.

[27] NEO, Loo Seng, "An Internet-mediated pathway for online radicalisation: RECRO", in "Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era", ed. KHADER, Majeed; NEO, Loo Seng; ONG, Gabriel; TAN MINGYI, Eunice and CHIN, Jeffery, IGI Global, Pennsylvania, 2016, p. 206.

[28] SAIFUDEEN, Omer, "The cyber extremism orbital pathways model", S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Volume 283, 2014, p. 17.

[29] Ibid.

[30] CONWAY, Maura, "Introduction: terrorism and contemporary mediascapes – Reanimating research on media and terrorism", Critical Studies on Terrorism, Volume 5, 2012, pp. 445-453; YASIN, Nur Azlin, "Online Indonesian Islamist extremism: A Gold Mine of Information", RSIS Commentaries, Volume 144, 2011, pp. 1-2.

[31] NEO, Loo Seng, "An Internet-mediated pathway for online radicalisation: RECRO", in "Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era", ed. KHADER, Majeed; NEO, Loo Seng; ONG, Gabriel; TAN MINGYI, Eunice and CHIN, Jeffery, IGI Global, Pennsylvania, 2016, p. 197.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

behavioural radicalisation since the resolution and operational phase are defined by a willingness of the individual to commit violent acts[32].

Within the exploration and connection phase, the concept of "echo chamber" is one of the crucial aspects that entail the development of radicalisation on the Internet. As explained by Neumann and Stevens, the online network provides a unique scenario where "unacceptable views" in a common social environment are otherwise, normalised on this ground. It provides the opportunity to an individual of just consuming the materials that echoes his or her ideology and contacting Internet users who share similar beliefs. Therefore, it is established an echo chamber, where "the most extreme ideas and suggestions receive the most encouragement and support", and individuals are increasingly impermeable to opposite messages[33]. In this regard, individuals "feel less restrained, express themselves more open" and develop a disinhibition effect[34]. Hence, they do not behave similarly in the online and offline world. In order to calculate to what extent an individual gets affected by the echo chamber phenomenon, it seems crucial to identify the "degree of disciplined regularity" with which he or she visits this kind of content or contacts extremists[35].

Regardless on the way individuals contact like-minded subjects, Charlie Winter highlighted that socialising is a fundamental part of the radicalisation process. He said that no one engages in terrorism by just consuming online propaganda. Instead, the most important aspect of the process is the discussion that takes place on the online platforms[36].

Eventually, the individual might turn progressively into a behavioural radicalisation where the opinion on the moral value of killing changes. This turning point occurs after the "moral disengagement", a concept defined by Albert Bandura. He stated that individuals involved

---

[32] NEUMANN, Peter, "The trouble of radicalisation", International Affairs, London, Volume 89, 2013, p. 13.
[33] NEUMANN, Peter and STEVENS, Tim, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, "Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action", 2009, p. 11., available on http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1236768491ICSROnlineRadicalisationReport.pdf Accessed 12.05.2018.; HUSSAIN, Ghafar and SALTMAN Erin, "Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and How to Counter it", Quilliam Foundation, London, 2014.
[34] SULER, John, "The online disinhibition effect", Cyber Psychology & Behavior, Volume 7, 2004, p. 321.
[35] NEO, Loo Seng, "An Internet-mediated pathway for online radicalisation: RECRO", in "Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era", ed. KHADER, Majeed; NEO, Loo Seng; ONG, Gabriel; TAN MINGYI, Eunice and CHIN, Jeffery, IGI Global, Pennsylvania, 2016, p. 210.
[36] GILSINAN, Kathy, "How should the world respond to terrorism?", The Atlantic, Abril 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/world-response-terrorism/476337/ Accessed 22.04.2018.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

in terrorist attacks need to justify their actions and see them as morally legitimate[37]. For instance, victims would be blamed for their destiny. In Salafi-jihadist ideology, Western victims are considered guilty of paying taxes to governments who participate in military interventions in Muslim-majority countries[38]. Hence, "once dehumanised, the potential victims are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes and concerns but as subhuman objects"[39].

Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain

As it has been explained, the Internet has influenced Salafi-jihadist radicalisation processes in several ways. In Spain, the online domain became open to the public in the 90s. A few years later, on the 11 March 2004, the first jihadist attack in Spanish soil after the arrival of the Internet was perpetrated. The judicial investigation found out that during their radicalisation process, the terrorists visited extremist forums and consumed jihadist propaganda on the Internet. In particular, they used it for indoctrination, training and secure communications.

This fact shows that the online sphere had a role in jihadist radicalisation in Spain since the beginning of the Twenty-First century. Nonetheless, as this research analyses the current influence of the Internet in this process, only the period between 2013 and 2018 will be studied in order to get a precise actual picture. These years will be considered due to the current threat posed by Daesh. This terrorist organisation denominated itself as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2013, when it began its rise. This group started an aggressive online media campaign, which allowed it to recruit foreign fighters to their territory and inspire terrorist attacks worldwide based on the messages they spread through propagandistic means. According to the last Spanish National Security Strategy review in 2017, Daesh is the main threat to Spain in terms of jihadist terrorism due to their online media capacity building, among other reasons[40]. Additionally, different experts

---

[37] BANDURA, Albert, "Mechanisms in moral disengagement", in Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind, ed. REICH, Walter, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 161-191.

[38] MAHER, Shiraz, "Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea", Hurst & Company, London, 2016, p. 57.

[39] BANDURA, Albert, "Mechanisms in moral disengagement", in Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind, ed. REICH, Walter, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 180-181.

[40] Gobierno de España, "Estrategia de Seguridad Nacional 2017", NIPO 785170411, Presidencia del Gobierno, Madrid, 2017, p. 58.

ieee.es

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

argued that a new era regarding jihadist indoctrination emerged due to the diversified propaganda strategy developed by Daesh in the online sphere[41].

2013-2018

The last years in the fight against jihadist terrorism in Spain showed an increasing trend in the number of detentions and operations. Whereas from 2010 to 2013, the figure of detainees was never above 20; this number soared dramatically in the following years although it plummeted in 2018: 36 in 2014, 75 in 2015, 69 in 2016, 76 in 2017 and 29 in 2018. Similarly, the number of operations also increased. Between 2010 and 2014 there were never more than 15, but in the next five years this figure has always been above 20[42].
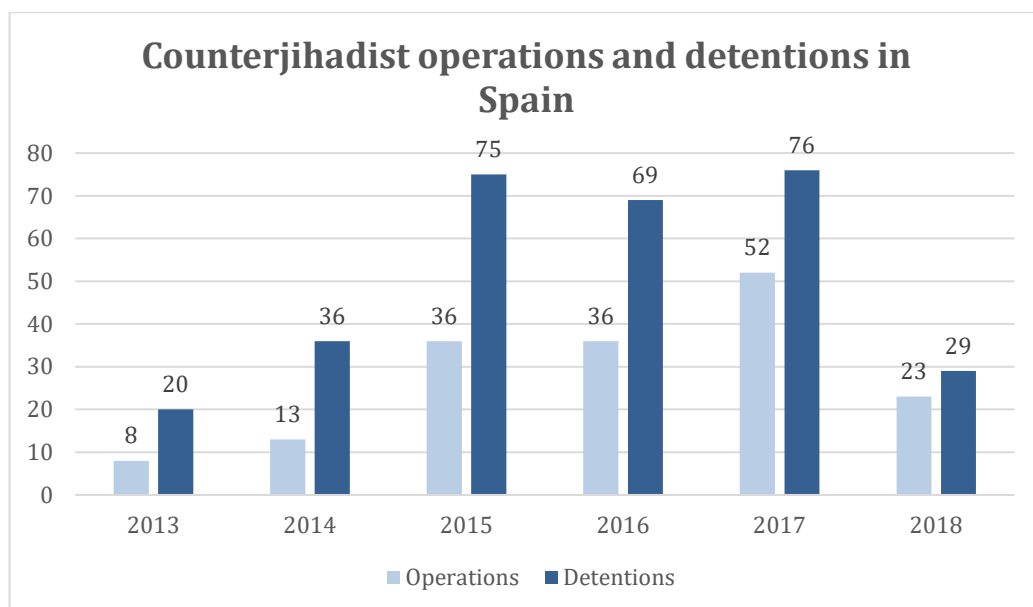

Figure 1: Counterjihadist operations and detentions in Spain from 2013 to 2018. Source: Ministry of Interior

---

[41] Member of the intelligence service of the Spanish Guardia Civil, "Jornada de terrorismo" conference organised by IEEE, in Zaragoza, 16.11.2016, available in http://www.fundacionmgimenezabad.es/index.php?option=com_weblinks_video&view=category&id=226&idv=493&av=2016&limitstart=&Itemid=100823 Accessed 16.05.2018; LESACA, Javier, quoted in GAVIÑA, Susana, "Producciones Daesh: La máquina propagandística del terror", ABC, September 2017, https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-producciones-daesh-maquina-propagandistica-terror-201601241221_noticia.html Accessed 23.05.2018.

[42] Ministry of Interior, Government of Spain, "The fight against jihadist terrorism", available on http://www.interior.gob.es/documents/10180/6186126/OPERACIONES+Y+DETENIDOS+YIHADISMO+DESDE+11M+%2803-12-2018%29.pdf/6630151a-d5f7-4b73-9dfe-7b1520189b3c Accessed 03.07.2018.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

These figures are primarily explained by the rise of Daesh in 2013[43] —more than an 80% of the detainees from 2013 to 2016 were linked to this terrorist group[44]— and by a change in the Spanish Criminal Code in 2015 by which self-indoctrination was considered a criminal offence. Since March 2015, the article 575 stated for the first time that an individual would be punished between two and five years in prison in the case that he or she would frequently consume or possess extremist content in the online sphere with the aim of eventually committing a terrorist attack or collaborating with terrorist purposes[45].

Marlasca and Gil argued that this reform was proved to be effective. The former emphasised that the law protects those who consume extremist content without a terrorist purpose. "A behaviour pattern needs to be established" in order to prosecute an individual, said Marlasca[46]. Furthermore, Gil added that since it is a successful law, other states are willing to establish a similar one[47].

Moreover, a Spanish counterterrorism expert of the Spanish police explained that the key aspect of the legal reform is the fact of consuming extremist material with a terrorist purpose. "I have seen individuals who spend hours consuming this type of content without any purpose, just for fun". In conclusion, the officer argued, the judge needs to value a case in which an individual expresses this purpose in a certain way such as contacting a terrorist organisation or trying to get explosives or weapons[48]

Another member of the Spanish police who has been involved in this type of investigations explained that "the greater danger" regarding jihadist indoctrination and recruiting in Spain is placed in the online sphere. He argued that the focal points are the forums and social media[49]. In this sense, an Elcano Institute report illustrated this police's

---

[43] CAMERON, Glenn, "Timeline: The rise, spread and fall of the Islamic State", Wilson Centre, July 2016, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state Accessed 12.06. 2018.

[44] REINARES, Fernando and GARCÍA-CALVO, Carola, "Estado Islámico en España", Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid, 2016, p. 17, available on http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/publicaciones/libros/Informe-Estado-Islamico-Espana.pdf Accessed 03.05.2018.

[45] Government of Spain, "Organic Law 2/2015, 30 March 2015", in relation to terrorism offences, Boletín Oficial del Estado, 31 March 2015, Volume 77, p. 27181.

[46] MARLASCA, Manuel, journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.

[47] GIL, Chema; journalist specialised in jihadism and codirector of the International Security Observatory, interview with author, Madrid, 06.06.2018.

[48] Counterjihadism expert of the Spanish police, interview with author, London, 14.06.2018.

[49] Member of the Spanish police involved in counterjihadism operations, cited in OTTO, Carlos, "Así combate España en internet el yihadismo: "Si no hay casi atentados es por algo", El Confidencial, August

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

statement by studying whether the detained jihadists in Spain between 2013 and 2016 radicalised in an offline or online environment. It showed that a 40% of the individuals went through this process in a mixed environment, a 35% in the online sphere and a 25% in offline interactions[50]. Thus, the influence of the online domain in radicalisation processes is significantly superior to the offline one in the Spanish context.
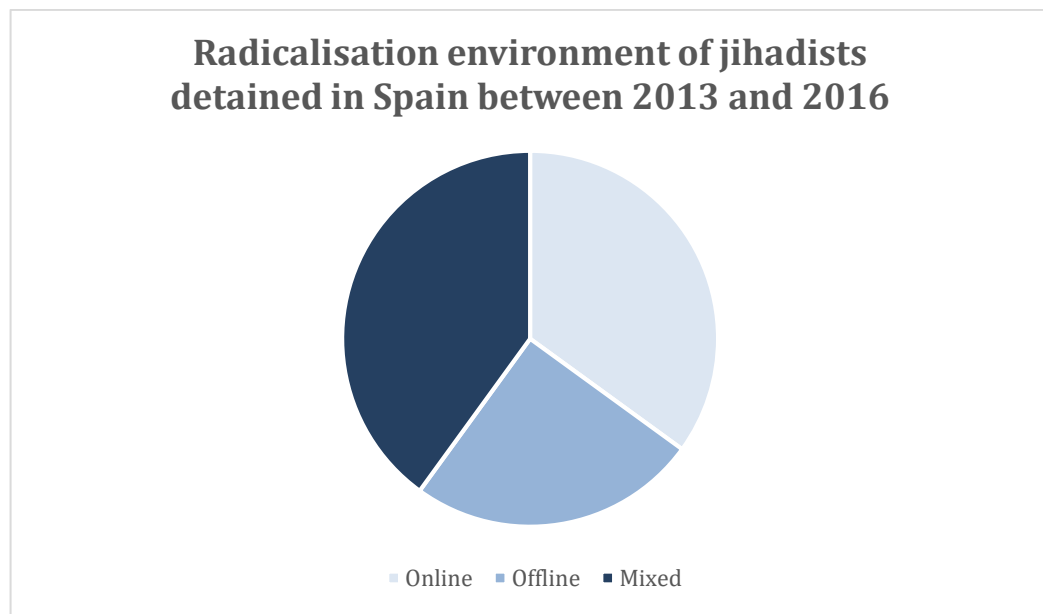

Figure 2: Radicalisation environment of jihadists detained in Spain between 2013 and 2016.
Source: Real Instituto Elcano.

Furthermore, another Elcano Institute research project that studied jihadist profiles in Spain in the same period pointed out that among the individuals who were radicalised in an online environment, most of them used social media —61 %— and sites such as blogs or forums —52 %—. On the other hand, a 19% recurred to messaging apps such as Whatsapp or Telegram. In addition, among those who used social media, a large majority visited Facebook —91 %— whereas a 34% consumed Youtube videos, a 28% visited Twitter and a 16% accessed other social media platforms[51].

2017, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2017-08-21/atentado-barcelona-cambrils-espana-lucha-yihadismo-terrorismo-atentado-barcelona_1430867/ Accessed 18.02.2018.

[50] REINARES, Fernando; GARCÍA-CALVO, Carola and VICENTE, Álvaro, "Dos factores que explican la radicalización yihadista en España", Real Instituto Elcano, August 2017, available on http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari62-2017-reinares-garciacalvo-vicente-dos-factores-explican-radicalizacion-yihadista-espana Accessed 18.02.2018.

[51] REINARES, Fernando and GARCÍA-CALVO, Carola, "Estado Islámico en España", Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid, 2016, p. 42, available on http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/publicaciones/libros/Informe-Estado-Islamico-Espana.pdf Accessed 03.05.2018.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

This member of the Spanish police focused on the role that the online sphere has in terms of a recruiting ground for terrorists. "Terrorist attacks are not organised in forums or social media…but these platforms are crucial for recruiting individuals". He also argued that many young individuals' posts in Facebook, Twitter or Instagram are analysed by recruiters, who decide if their profiles may be appropriate. Consequently, they would introduce them into more specific and private forums or chats[52]. Nonetheless, Marlasca argued that currently, social media platforms are not so relevant anymore and the main recruiting grounds are private chat rooms such as Telegram where communication is more secure[53].

According to jihadism experts[54], the most common profile regarding radicalised individuals is the 'identity seeker' described by Venhaus[55]. Most radicalised individuals in Spain are between 16 and 30 years old and do not have a clear identity. A 57 % of the jihadist detained or dead in Spain between 2013 and 2017 were second or third generation immigrants[56], a segment of the population which is especially vulnerable to identity crisis. They might experience it since they do not feel close enough to their parents' culture and they do not feel engaged in the society where they were born either[57].

---

[52] Member of the Spanish police involved in counterjihadism operations, cited in OTTO, Carlos, "Así combate España en internet el yihadismo: "Si no hay casi atentados es por algo", El Confidencial, August 2017, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2017-08-21/atentado-barcelona-cambrils-espana-lucha-yihadismo-terrorismo-atentado-barcelona_1430867/ Accessed 18.02.2018.

[53] MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.

[54] Counterjihadism expert of the Spanish police, interview with author, London, 14.06.2018; GARCÍA-CALVO, Carlota, cited in FERNÁNDEZ, Elisabet, "Carola García-Calvo: "Es un momento clave para prevenir la radicalización yihadista en España", La Región, June 2017, http://www.laregion.es/articulo/ourense/carola-garcia-calvo-momento-clave-prevenir-radicalizacion-yihadista-espana/20170618080354717389.html Accessed 13.05.2018; REINARES, Fernando and GARCÍA-CALVO, Carlota, "Marroquíes y segundas generaciones entre los yihadistas en España", Real Instituto Elcano, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari61-2018-reinares-garciacalvo-marroquies-segundas-generaciones Accessed 13.05.2018.

[55] VENHAUS, John M., "Why youth join Al-Qaeda", United States Institute of Peace Special Report, Volume 236, 2010, p. 8.

[56] REINARES, Fernando and GARCÍA-CALVO, Carlota, "Marroquíes y segundas generaciones entre los yihadistas en España", Real Instituto Elcano, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_es/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/ari61-2018-reinares-garciacalvo-marroquies-segundas-generaciones Accessed 13.05.2018.

[57] GARCÍA-CALVO, Carlota, cited in FERNÁNDEZ, Elisabet, "Carola García-Calvo: "Es un momento clave para prevenir la radicalización yihadista en España", La Región, June 2017, http://www.laregion.es/articulo/ourense/carola-garcia-calvo-momento-clave-prevenir-radicalizacion-yihadista-espana/20170618080354717389.html Accessed 13.05.2018.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

Therefore, some of this second or third generation immigrants believe that their only identity derives from Islam[58]. In this context, the Internet has an essential role since it contributes to the sense of belonging to a virtual ummah. Both via consuming propaganda and chatting to like-minded individuals, the radicalisation process advances in the echo chamber.

In addition, Daesh released its first video in Spanish after the Barcelona attacks[59]. In the footage, a Spanish member of Daesh threatened Spain by recurring to a historical demand of radical Islamists: the retrieval of Al-Andalus, which is frequently mentioned in jihadist propaganda[60].

Therefore, jihadist radicalisation in Spain has a unique element in the propaganda narrative that influences both cognitive and behavioural processes. Unlike other countries, which suffer terrorist attacks due to their involvement in military campaigns in Muslim-majority countries, Spain is also perceived by extremist individuals as a Muslim territory that should be recovered by a future caliphate. Torres argued that the inclusion of images as the Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona or La Alhambra in Granada in jihadist propaganda "contributes to radicalisation" because it "legitimises violent actions against the Spanish state"[61].

Nowadays, the most common jihadist propaganda materials consumed and shared by extremists in Spain are those originally created by Daesh, such as videos, magazines, infographics and images[62]. Marlasca added that there is barely original content production in this country and emphasised that Spain is an important part of the European network of jihadist recruiters[63]

However, as showed in the statistics, not every radicalisation process in Spain primarily

---

[58] Counterjihadism expert of the Spanish Police Service, interview with author, London, 14 June 2018.
[59] MÉNDEZ, Rafael, "El Yihadista Yassin, hijo de la Tomasa", El Confidencial, August 2017, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2017-08-25/yihadista-yassin-hijo-tomasa-amenaza-espana-isis_1433595/ Accessed 18.07.2018.
[60] "Referencias a España en la propaganda yihadista". Grupo de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional, http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/?q=es/content/referencias-espa%C3%B1n-en-la-propaganda-yihadista Accessed 18.05.2018.
[61] TORRES, Manuel R., in CARO, Carla, "Las Referencias a España en la propaganda yihadista baten todos los récords en 2016", ABC, November 2016, https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-referencias-espana-propaganda-yihadista-baten-todos-records-2016-201611210149_noticia.html Accessed 12.05.2018.
[62] Counterjihadism expert of the Intelligence Centre for Counterterrorism and Organised Crime in Spain, interview with author, Madrid, 12.07.2018.
[63] MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

involves the use of the Internet. As a paradigmatic example, the cell that organised the Catalonia attacks in 2017 radicalised in an offline environment since they knew each other from the small town of Ripoll, which has a population of 10.000 inhabitants. The first jihadist attack in Spain after March 2004 bombings occurred after the members of the cell spent one year interacting in face-to-face conversations. The key element of the group was the imam of Ripoll's mosque, Abdelbaki Es Satty, who met the other members in the town's mosque and indoctrinated them later in private places, so they could not be easily monitored[64]. Just days before the attack, they used the Internet in their operational phase to search information about potential targets such as Sagrada Familia church or Camp Nou stadium[65]. Bueno, researcher in Granada University, argued that since they did not leave significant traces on the Internet, it was more difficult for the security services to detect their radicalisation[66].

Preventing online radicalisation in Spain

The challenge of countering terrorism implies considering the online sphere as a key part of a preventing radicalisation strategy. As pointed out by experts in counterjihadism, countering extremist narratives in the online sphere is a crucial element in preventing radicalisation[67]. According to Halverson, a "narrative is a system of interrelated stories"[68]. Salafi-jihadists use several stories to strengthen their anti-Western struggle such as the fact that Western countries are occupying Muslim-majority countries and therefore, they should be expelled.

---

[64] SAÍZ-PARDO, Melchor, "El imán de Ripoll radicalizó a la célula yihadista con un proceso exprés de menos de un año", El Correo, August 2017, https://www.elcorreo.com/politica/iman-ripoll-radicalizo-20170820150515-ntrc.html Accessed 18.07.2018.

[65] "¿Qué sitios buscaron en Internet los terroristas del 17-A?", El Nacional, August 2018. https://www.elnacional.cat/es/sociedad/busquedas-barcelona-terroristas-17a_294843_102.html Accessed 09.08.2018.

[66] CONCEJO, Edurne, "Ha sido una captación tipo secta", La Vanguardia, August 2017 https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20170823/43742247437/proceso-radicalizacion-secta-atentado-barcelona.html Accessed 20.07.2018.

[67] MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018; Member of the intelligence service of the Spanish Guardia Civil. "Jornada de terrorismo" conference organised by IEEE, in Zaragoza, 16.11.2016, available in http://www.fundacionmgimenezabad.es/index.php?option=com_weblinks_video&view=category&id=226&idv=493&av=2016&limitstart=&Itemid=100823 Accessed 16.05.2018.

[68] HALVERSON, Jeffrey; GOODALL, H. L. and CORMAN, Steve, "Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism", Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, pp. 13-26.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

An effective counternarrative strategy is based on four pillars: the message, the messenger, the platform from which the message is sent and the target[69]. De Estrada, member of the intelligence service in the Spanish army, highlighted as a successful counternarrative message the dissemination of the unpleasant style of life in Daesh's territory in order to deconstruct its propaganda[70]. This and other counternarratives' messages should be delivered by credible actors and platforms. Bearing in mind the target audience —individuals vulnerable to Salafi-jihadist radicalisation or individuals who have already started the radicalisation process[71]—, the Spanish government would never be an influential actor[72]. Instead, it should play a "silent facilitation role by providing required resources and tools" for this cause[73].

In this sense, credible messengers would be former extremists who are repented or Muslim celebrities who could make an impact in vulnerable young individuals[74]. Nevertheless, it is not always easy to obtain these testimonies due to the "fear" of being threatened by terrorists[75]. Marlasca pointed out: "The message is much more effective if it comes from the Muslim community"[76].

In fact, the Spanish National Strategy against Violent Radicalisation —coordinated by the Intelligence Centre for Counterterrorism and Organised Crime— involve all the actors in its fight against violent radicalisation. It was implemented in 2015 and one of its

---

[69] SALTMAN, Erin and SMITH, Melanie, "Till Martyrdom do us part: Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon", Institute for Strategic Dialogue, London, 2015; GIL, Chema; journalist specialised in jihadism and codirector of the International Security Observatory, interview with author, Madrid, 06.06.2018.

[70] DE ESTRADA, Félix, "Jornada de terrorismo" conference organised by IEEE, in Zaragoza, 16.11.2016, available in http://www.fundacionmgimenezabad.es/index.php?option=com_weblinks_video&view=category&id=226&idv=493&av=2016&limitstart=&Itemid=100823 Accessed 16.05.2018.

[71] Counterjihadism expert of the Intelligence Centre for Counterterrorism and Organised Crime in Spain, interview with author, Madrid, 12.07.2018.

[72] Member of the intelligence service of the Spanish Guardia Civil, "Jornada de terrorismo" conference organised by IEEE, in Zaragoza, 16.11.2016, available in http://www.fundacionmgimenezabad.es/index.php?option=com_weblinks_video&view=category&id=226&idv=493&av=2016&limitstart=&Itemid=100823 Accessed 16.05.2018.

[73] SAIFUDEEN, Omer, "Getting out of the armchair", in "Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era", ed. KHADER, Majeed; NEO, Loo Seng; ONG, Gabriel; TAN MINGYI, Eunice and CHIN, Jeffery. IGI Global, Pennsylvania, 2016, p. 143.

[74] Counterjihadism expert of the Intelligence Centre for Counterterrorism and Organised Crime in Spain, interview with author, Madrid, 12.07.2018.

[75] MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 7 June 2018.

[76] Ibid.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

cornerstones is to counter radicalisation in the online sphere[77]. The strategy has received criticisms for not being effective due to, among other reasons, the lack of coordination between the different administrations[78]. However, the member of the Intelligence Centre for Counterterrorism and Organised Crime interviewed for this research explained that the results of this strategy will only be perceived in the long term. In addition, he added that the "evaluation methodology of this type of plans are complex due to the object of study and the objective they aim for"[79]. It is therefore argued that, although there may be flaws in the development of the strategy, it is yet too early to conclude if it is effective or not.

Furthermore, according to this member of the intelligence agency, the scope of the strategy is not based on deradicalisation. Instead, it is grounded on disengagement from violent actions. "Deradicalisation would suppose that the subject renounces to the ideology. In Spain deradicalisation is very complicated since there are no individuals with enough prestige in the Spanish Islam that can counter the radical message. We know cases of disengagement, not deradicalisation"[80].

Conclusions

It has been argued that the Internet has a crucial role in Salafi-jihadist radicalisation. Individuals can both find jihadist content and make contact with extremist subjects in the online sphere, where therefore, the cognitive and behavioural radicalisation processes may occur.

---

[77] Gobierno de España, "Plan Estratégico Nacional de Lucha contra la Radicalización Violenta", Centro de Inteligencia contra el Terrorismo y el Crimen Organizado, Madrid, 2015, pp. 23-25.

[78] ORTEGA, Patricia, "Solo 13 de los 8.000 municipios aplican el Plan Nacional contra la Radicalización", El País, August 2017, https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/08/28/actualidad/1503946491_613708.html Accessed 12.04.2018; MARLASCA, Manuel; journalist specialised in jihadism, interview with author, Madrid, 07.06.2018.

[79] Counterjihadism expert of the Intelligence Centre for Counterterrorism and Organised Crime in Spain, interview with author, Madrid, 12 July 2018.

[80] Counterjihadism expert of the Intelligence Centre for Counterterrorism and Organised Crime in Spain, interview with author, Madrid, 12 July 2018.

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

Firstly, the cognitive radicalisation contributes to the establishment of an echo chamber that gradually disengages the individual from accepted views and normalise the extremist ones. This cognitive rethink progressively provokes a moral disengagement that ends up perceiving victims of jihad as subhuman objects. Moreover, as a platform for the behavioural radicalisation, the Internet is perceived by extremists as a virtual training camp where they can learn how to prepare terrorist attacks.

The main part of this research was solely dedicated to the study of the influence of the Internet in Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain. The period between 2013 and 2018 was considered in the investigation since Daesh´s importance —the main threat in this country regarding jihadist terrorism— rose dramatically in 2013. In addition, in 2015 there was a change in the Spanish Criminal Code that was crucial in order to fight against jihadist radicalisation. From that year on, online self-indoctrination was prosecuted and consequently, the number of detentions and operations regarding jihadist terrorism in Spain soared.

Additionally, most of the detained jihadists between 2013 and 2016 used social media or forums. However, the most influential platforms are currently private forums and messaging applications since communications are more secure and therefore, harder for the security services to detect.

The most common profiles among detained jihadists are second or third generation immigrants from Morocco who lack an identity and are vulnerable to a radicalisation process. The Internet might play an influential role in these identity seekers due to its contribution to give a sense of belonging to the virtual ummah.

As another unique factor in the radicalisation processes that occur in Spain, it was concluded that the jihadist narrative has an element, which is not common in other countries: the retrieval of Al-Andalus as part of a future caliphate. Experts showed that the presence of this discourse is extended in jihadist propaganda in Spain. Thus, this country is not a target just for its involvement in military campaigns in Muslim-majority countries unlike other Western states.

ieee.es

How does the online sphere influence Salafi-jihadist radicalisation in Spain?

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez

Lastly, the prevention of online radicalisation in Spain was analysed. In conclusion, it was found that a counternarrative strategy against the jihadist discourse on the Internet is the most successful approach for preventing this issue in the long term. The Spanish National Strategy against Violent Radicalisation —established in 2015— includes this element as part of the plan. However, it has received criticisms for not being effective. In this regard, it was argued that it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness since it is a long-term strategy and it has only been in place for a few years. This policy considers the treatment of radicalised individuals as well. Nonetheless, it was argued that a deradicalisation objective is not feasible. Thus, the procedure implemented by the strategy focuses on a disengagement from violence even though extremist beliefs may still be present in the individuals' minds.

<div style="text-align: right">

Víctor Torralba Rodríguez
Graduated in the Master of National Security Studies
King's College London

</div>