

American Foreign Policy Council

SPAIN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 40,548,753

Area: 505,370 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Composite of Mediterranean and Nordic types

Religions: Roman Catholic 94%, other 6%

Government Type: Parliamentary monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$1.466 trillion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



Not only is Islam in Spain steadily growing, it is also on a clear path to radicalization. Social integration of the country's rapidly expanding Muslim community is proving more and more difficult, while insular religious radicalism and the spread of intolerant ideas among Spanish Muslims is on the rise. This has coincided with the targeting of Spain by foreign jihadist elements. Today al-Andalus—the territory lost by Islam in the fifteenth century, which includes the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) and part of southern France—is no longer simply an abstract cause, but has become a concrete jihadist objective.¹

The Spanish government's response to this rising Islamism has been lackluster. Although the Zapatero administration has maintained law enforcement pressure on terrorist cells plotting to carry out terrorist attacks inside the country or financing and giving

support to jihadist groups abroad, its tendency toward multiculturalism has at times undermined its efforts to influence the discourse about, and among, Muslims in Spain. Indeed, the Spanish government appears to have abdicated the “battle of ideas” between moderate and extreme interpretations of Islam altogether. For the country’s main political parties, meanwhile, the issue of Islamic radicalism remains largely taboo. Nonetheless, grassroots sentiment regarding the need to place limits around what Muslim immigrants can and should do regarding customs, norms, and respect for national laws is increasingly palpable—if still without coherent voice or direction.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Today’s Islamist activism in Spain can be defined along two lines: its overt political and legal dimension, and its more clandestine presence in the country. While radicalization may be minimal within the well-rooted Spanish Muslim community, which numbers more than one million individuals, it nonetheless represents a threat to its integrity—and thus to Spanish society as a whole. Spain’s Interior, Justice and Labor Ministries recently published a definitive report on the topic, which concluded that despite the comparatively small percentage of radicals among Spain’s Muslims, there are reasons for serious concern regarding both the intensity of their radicalism and their adeptness in nourishing and promoting it.²

Aside from Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish cities along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, across the Strait of Gibraltar, it is Catalonia that has the highest concentration of Muslims on Spanish soil, followed closely by Andalusia. In the main, Muslims in Spain tend to belong to the following associations: the *Federación Española de Entidades Religiosas Islámicas* (FEERI), the *Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España* (UCIDE), and, more marginally, the *Junta Islámica de España*. FEERI has a significant Moroccan composition, and the Islamist group *Al Adl wal Ihsan* (Justice and Charity)—illegal but tolerated in Morocco—has attempted to infiltrate it in the past. UCIDE, by contrast, involves Muslim laity and clergy of Syrian and Saudi origin. FEERI and UCIDE are, together, the key members of the Islamic Commission of Spain, the official Islamic partner of the Spanish government. By contrast, the smaller

Junta Islámica is more overtly political, involving converts to Islam and so-called “progressives” and promoting a distinctive version of Islam that is occasionally at variance with the state.³ None of the three provide figures concerning their membership or organizational structures, however.

Out of the more than 1,000 mosques throughout Spain, experts deem around ten percent to be radical.⁴ Out of that tally, 50 mosques are classified as Salafist and around 30 preach the *Tabligh* doctrine.⁵ Tablighi Jama’at’s leader in Spain is Laarbi al-Lal Maateis and, in Ceuta, he competes with *imams* proposed or appointed by neighboring Morocco’s Directorate of Religious Affairs.

The main efforts of Islamic radicals to impose their vision are currently concentrated in Catalonia and Murcia and their surrounding areas. The debate about the prohibition of the *burka* and the *niqab* in public buildings began in Catalonia, where the wearing of these garments in localities of high Muslim concentration has begun to unsettle locals. Eleven mosques and prayer rooms, run by Salafist preachers and located in smaller municipalities of Lleida, Barcelona, and Tarragona, decided to challenge the proposed ban in court in July 2010.⁶ Cases of coercion against Muslims by Salafist leaders are more and more frequent; however, they are usually difficult to prove in court due to the control that these leaders exert over the faithful.⁷ In short, the advance of Salafism has been chronicled in numerous studies and investigations, including those commissioned by several city councils or conducted by the *Mossos d’Esquadra*, the autonomous regional civilian police of Catalonia.⁸

In the Mediterranean region of Murcia, where there are an estimated 120 mosques and prayer rooms, Islamist activism within the Muslim community has largely been a staple of the followers of *Al Adwal Ihsan*. Founded in 1983 by Moroccan preacher Sheikh Abd-salam Yassine, the organization is today well established in poor districts as well as Moroccan university circles. The group does not recognize the religious legitimacy of the Moroccan Crown. Mounir Benjelloun, vice president of Murcia’s Islamic Federation (FIRM), had his Spanish naturalization application rejected in 2010 due to

his ties to *Al Adl wal Ihsan*, on the grounds that Spanish authorities consider the latter to be a radical group that hampers the integration of Muslims into the state.

The pro-government UCIDE competes here for influence with FIRM, as it does with other local federations throughout Spain. FIRM is reported to be in control of 45 out of the 120 existing mosques and prayer rooms in the region and, through them, *Al Adl wal Ihsan* can disseminate its fundamentalist message throughout Alicante and Almería, Murcia's bordering provinces, each with a significant Muslim presence.⁹

The issue of radical Islamism on Spanish soil is difficult to define despite the significant number of well-known Salafist *jihadi* commanders in prison (among them the cell of Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, alias Abu Dahdah, which has been directly linked to al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks, and groups, cells and individuals connected with the 2004 Madrid bombings, some of which are elements of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, or GICM). Traditionally, the most radicalized groups on Spanish soil have ties with different groups working in Northern Africa, which are progressively converging into the framework of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).¹⁰ The footprint of Salafist *jihadi* in Spain itself is complex. The country has served as an important nucleus for the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), whose members enjoy extensive interaction with the GICM as well as with radicals in Catalonia, which boasts the second largest community of Pakistanis on European soil after the United Kingdom.¹¹

The recent trial and sentencing of elements of the Algerian *Comando Dixan* cell—broken up by France and Spain in 2002—and the legal processes against militants captured during *Operación Tigris*, which broke up a *jihadi* network in the Catalan city of Santa Coloma de Gramenet, proved definitively the existence of organized, transnational terrorist groups on Spanish soil and the importance of Spain in global *jihadi* strategy.¹² Other trials, however, have highlighted the legal difficulties associated with state efforts to prosecute *jihadi*

networks. These include:

- The May 18, 2010 acquittal by Spain's National Court (*Audiencia Nacional*) of two *jihadists* accused of trying to make dirty bombs with, among other components, red mercury.¹³
- The arrest by Guardia Civil officers of ten Algerians with alleged ties to the GSPC and al-Qaeda in Alicante, Granada, and Murcia on November 23, 2005. They had turned to credit card forgery to raise funds and finance the GSPC. Five of these men ended up being tried in the National Court in May 2010, only to be acquitted of terrorism charges; however, three of them have been sentenced to prison for forgery.¹⁴
- The sentencing of eleven Pakistanis arrested in Barcelona in January 2008 and accused of plotting terrorist suicide attacks against the Barcelona metro system under the instructions of Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud. On December 14, 2009, the eleven detainees were sentenced to prison on different grounds, but found not to be complicit in the commission of a terrorist crime, since the plot had not reached the level necessary to be a terrorist conspiracy.¹⁵

In brief, the radical Islamist cells operating in Spain have traditionally involved immigrants from the Maghreb (mainly Algerians and Moroccans) and Pakistanis due to the Spanish involvement with northern Africa and the historical presence of a huge Pakistani immigrant community in Catalonia, in northeast Spain. Moroccans usually belong to those terrorist groups and cells that operate in their home country (the GICM and the *Jihadia Salafiya*), as do Algerians (the Islamic Armed Group in the 1990s and the Islamic Group for Preaching and Combat and AQIM more recently). Cells and networks have traditionally been small and autonomous, rather than interconnected. However, investigations by security forces and legal prosecutions have detected increasing links connecting these radicals with those outside of the nation's borders. Pakistanis, by contrast, are influenced by the TTP (the Pakistani Taliban Movement) agenda, which is very much connected with the Afghan battlefield—where Spain is fully involved in political, cooperation and on the military battlefield.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As of the end of 2009, Spain's Muslim population constituted approximately 1.5 million people, or 3.26 percent of the country's total 46 million inhabitants.¹⁶ The percentage is lower than Europe's overall five percent average of Muslim inhabitants, and significantly lower than that of some of Spain's neighboring countries, including France (where Muslims make up between five and ten percent of the population).¹⁷

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to conclude—based solely on these numbers—that Islam is a fringe phenomenon in Spain. To the contrary, the rapidity with which Islam has grown and expanded in Spain makes it both notable and potentially problematic. According to the United Nations, in the year 2000, Spain had around 400,000 Muslims—accounting for about one percent of the population.¹⁸ Ten years later, that number practically quadrupled. Indeed, if not for the constant flow of Latin American immigration to Spain in recent years, the current percentage of the population made up by Muslims would undoubtedly be much higher.

Unlike other immigrant communities in Spain, the Muslim community is not evenly distributed throughout the country. Rather, Spanish Muslims are concentrated mainly in three regions: Catalonia (368,000), Andalusia (240,000), and Madrid (234,000).¹⁹ Catalonia counts for the majority of Muslim immigrants, in part because the region's official antagonism to the Spanish language has led regional authorities to give priority to non-Spanish speaking people, convinced that it would be easier to immerse the newcomers into a Catalanist environment. Andalusia, due to its geographic proximity to North Africa and need for extensive manpower for agriculture, has likewise attracted comparatively high levels of Muslim immigrants. So has Madrid, which serves as Spain's biggest magnet of economic growth and thereby provides greater opportunities for employment for immigrants.²⁰

Spain's Muslim population, unlike that of its European partners, is

heavily shaped by the predominance of Moroccans among Muslim immigrants—who, according to sources within the Islamic community itself, may represent as much as 50 percent of the total Muslim population.²¹ This population is also relatively young, and exhibits extensive adherence to religious practices and a determination to preserve its Muslim identity. Finally, Muslims dominate migration patterns in Spain; as of early 2010, Muslims accounted for 21 percent of the total number of immigrants to the country.²²

The comparatively recent, explosive growth of the Muslim population in Spain has been mirrored by a growth of Islamic institutions. While the number of legal, officially-approved mosques in the country remains low (no more than two dozen), a large number of cultural associations have sprung up in recent years, filling the need for new venues for worship and prayer. The 2007 census conducted by the Ministry of Justice's Office of Religious Affairs identified around such 450 associations.²³ However, UCIDE has admitted to the existence of more than 700 such facilities, and law enforcement authorities estimate that there are actually over 1,000 illegal mosques in existence in Spain today.²⁴

As the statistics above suggest, Spain's Muslim community is religious—and increasingly so. In its April 2010 survey of national religious attitudes, the Spanish government found a marked increase in piousness among the country's Muslims (with religious adherence rising from 41 percent in 2006 to 52 percent in 2009). Simultaneously, the number of non-practicing Muslims declined from 18 percent in 2006 to 12 percent in 2009.²⁵ These statistics stand in stark contrast to the prevailing trend of widespread secularism among the country's native population that has evolved in recent decades. For example, less than 20 percent of Spaniards today define themselves as practicing Catholics, compared to 50 percent in 1976. As such, it is not an exaggeration to say that in Spain there are more people praying at mosques on Fridays than at churches on Sundays.

According to the same study, around four percent of Muslims in Spain do not condemn the use of violence in pursuit of political objectives. In other words, around 50,000 to 60,000 Muslims in

Spain can be considered potentially radical and at least somewhat susceptible to the call of *jihad*. The larger Muslim community, meanwhile, is riven by divisions—and by a comparatively large percentage of the country’s Muslims that fall outside official religious institutions. FEERI and UCIDE, the two main Muslim organizations in Spain, together account for just 70 percent of all Muslim groups in Spain.²⁶ Additionally, disagreements concerning religious authority and interpretation abound between groups led by Spanish converts and those whose leaders are immigrants. Finally, there is a struggle underway between the competing interpretations of Islam and Islamic law practiced by Morocco and Saudi Arabia. Both versions of Islam are conservative (although the Saudi is considerably more so), while the Moroccan is additionally nationalistic, claiming sovereignty over Spanish territories in North Africa—namely, the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, two smaller territories (Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera and Peñón de Alhucemas), and the Chafarinas archipelago.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The current government of President Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has announced its intention to pass a new, more progressive and secular Religious Freedom Law to replace the existing version (which was created in 1980). The draft of the law already being circulated suggests the Zapatero administration hopes to redefine Spain as secular and neutral to all forms of religious expression.²⁷ The impact is likely to be profound, involving the banning of Christian symbols in public places and schools as well as religious services and state funerals, among other things, while certain religious expressions on the part of the Muslim minority (such as the wearing of the veil in schools) will be accepted and not questioned.

While the federal government is trending toward official religious neutrality, local and state governments are moving in the opposite direction. Over the past couple of years, local city councils and organizations in Spain’s various regions have floated initiatives to outlaw the wearing of the *burka* and *niqab* in public buildings. The issue has since risen to national prominence, with the Spanish Senate’s June 2010 passage of a motion urging the government to introduce

the necessary legal reforms to ban both garments in public places and in the street.²⁸ Yet the Zapatero administration rejected the proposal, and blocked the passing of that same motion in Congress days later.²⁹

Simultaneously, the Zapatero government has continued its pursuit of *jihadist* cells on Spanish soil, perpetuating the aggressive counter-terrorism policy established following the 2004 Madrid bombings. Fears of a new terrorist attack in Spain have led the government to adopt quick intervention policies in cases of suspected terrorism—in many instances, doing so without having the necessary evidence to guarantee a conviction. Whereas in 2001 a total of four Islamists were known to be imprisoned (and 18 detained) in Spain, by 2005 the numbers had jumped to 117 and 108 respectively.³⁰ However, while there are currently a greater number of radicals detained by the Spanish state, this has not translated into a higher rate of formal trials and convictions; on numerous occasions, judges have released the defendants for lack of evidence. Therefore, in 2010, only 65 Islamists were arrested; 43 have been found guilty and were imprisoned while 22 are still awaiting trial.³¹

ENDNOTES

[1] For more, see Rafael L. Bardaji and Ignacio Cosidó, “Spain: from 9/11 to 3/11 and Beyond,” in Gary J. Schmitt, ed., *Safety, Liberty, and Islamist Terrorism: American and European Approaches to Domestic Counterterrorism* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2010).

[2] In the study, radical views were found in five percent of the 2,000 adult respondents. See Ministerios de Interior, Justicia y Trabajo, *La Comunidad Emigrante En España De Origen Musulmán* (Madrid: Demoscopia, April 2010); Comments on this report can be found in Olga R. Sanmartin, “Rubalcaba Dice Que El Gobierno ‘Observa’ Las Mezquitas Radicales [Rubalcaba Says the Government ‘Observes’ Radical Mosques],” *El Mundo* (Madrid), April 8, 2010, 14.

[3] The websites of FEERI, UCIDE and the Junta are, respectively, www.feeri.eu, es.ucide.org, and www.juntaislamica.org. They provide some details as to the organization’s ideologies and their program of activities.

[4] See, for example, Soeren Kern, “Spain Goes On Mosque—Building Spree: Churches Forced to Close,” Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos *GEES Analysis*, January 10, 2010, http://www.gees.org/articulos/spain_goes_on_mosque_building_spree_churches_forced_to_close_8379.

[5] C. Echeverría Jesús, “Aproximación al Terrorismo Yihadista Salafista En y Desde Marruecos [Approach to the Jihadi-Salafist Terrorism In and From Morocco],” Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos *GEES Analysis*, February 20, 2009, www.gees.org.

[6] Jesús Garcia and Ferrán Balsells, “Rebelión Salafista Por El ‘Burka’ [Salafist Rebellion by Burqa],” *El País* (Madrid), July 9, 2010, 36.

[7] Ferrán Balsells, “La Policía No Haya Pruebas Del Supuesto Juicio Islámico De Tarragona [Spanish Police does not Find Evidence of the Supposed Islamic Trial],” *El País* (Madrid), June 20, 2010, 27.

[8] Ferrán Balsells, “El Salafismo Se Hace Con El Control De Cinco Mezquitas En Tarragona [Salafism Takes Control Of Five Mosques In Tarragona],” *El País* (Madrid), June 21, 2010, 31.

[9] A. Negre, “Justicia Vincula A La Federación Islámica De La Región Con Una Organización Radical [Justice Ties The Islamic Federation Of The Region To A Radical Organization],” *La Verdad* (Murcia), May 6, 2010, 1-3; “UCIDE Dice Que La Federación Islámica Controla Siete Mezquitas Radicales [UCIDE Says That The Islamic Federation Controls Seven Radical Mosques],” *La Verdad* (Murcia), May 7, 2010, 13

[10] See “Marruecos Desarticula Un Grupo Terrorista Vinculado Al 11-M [Morocco Arrests a Terrorist Cell Connected with the March 11, 2004 Attacks],” *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona), March 3, 2010, 17.

[11] C. Echeverría Jesús, “La Conexión Paquistaní se Consolida Tam-

bién en España [The Pakistani Connection Is Also Acting in Spain],” Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos *GEES Analysis*, January 23, 2008, www.gees.org.

[12] For a fact-based, detailed account, see Judge Javier Gomez Bermudez, *No Destruirán Nuestra Libertad* [They Will Not Destroy Our Freedom] (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2010).

[13] Manuel Marraco, “Una ‘Leyenda Urbana’ al Banquillo Islamista [An ‘Urban Legend’ to the Islamist Bench],” *El Mundo* (Madrid), May 19, 2010, 11.

[14] Al Goodman, “5 Terror Suspects On Trial In Madrid,” CNN, May 23, 2010, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/03/23/spain.terror.trial/index.html>.

[15] See “Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point *CTC Sentinel* 3, iss. 1, January 2010, 27.

[16] Kern, “Spain Goes On Mosque—Building Spree: Churches Forced to Close.”

[17] “France,” Central Intelligence Agency *World Factbook*, March 22, 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/fr.html>.

[18] See, for example, Hossein Kettani, “Muslim Population in Europe: 1950-2020,” *International Journal of Environmental Science and Development* 1, no. 2. June 2010, <http://www.ijesd.org/papers/29-D438.pdf>.

[19] See “Poblacion Musulmana En España [Muslim Population Of Spain],” *El País* (Madrid), June 10, 2010.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Unión De Comunidades Islámicas De España: Estudio Demográfico De La Población Musulmana* [Union Of Islamic Communities Of Spain: Demographic study Of The Muslim Population] (Madrid: UCIDE, December 2009).

[22] Pew Forum, “The Future of the Global Muslim Population,” January 27, 2011, <http://pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe.aspx#4>.

[23] See Escobar Stemman and Juan José, “Activismo Islámico En España [Islamic Activism In Spain],” *Política Exterior* 124, July/August 2008.

[24] Kern, “Spain Goes On Mosque—Building Spree: Churches Forced to Close.”

[25] Authors’ collection.

[26] Patricia Bezunarte, Jose Manuel Lopez, and Laura Tedesco, “Muslims in Spain and Islamic Religious Radicalism.” *Microcon*, May 2009, http://www.microconflict.eu/publications/PWP8_PB_JML_LT.pdf.

[27] “Ni Crucifijos Ni Funerales Católicos [Neither Catholic Crucifixes Nor Funerals],” *El País* (Madrid), June 13, 2006.

[28] “Spanish Senate Calls for Nationwide Burqa Ban,” Deutsche Press-

Agentur, June 23, 2010, http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/europe/news/article_1565614.php/Spanish-Senate-calls-for-nation-wide-burqa-ban.

[29] Alan Clendenning and Harold Heckle, "Spain Rejects Burqa Ban – For Now," Associated Press, July 20, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/20/spain-rejects-burqa-ban_n_653254.html.

[30] See, for example, Kathryn Haahr, "Catalonia: Europe's New Center of Global Jihad." Jamestown Foundation *Terrorism Monitor* 5, iss. 11, July 6, 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=4210&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=182&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4210&tx_ttnews[backPid]=182&no_cache=1).

[31] "Al Qaeda En El Magreb Podría Pedir La Liberación De Alguno De Los 65 Islamistas Presos En España [Al-Qaeda In The Maghreb Could Request The Release Of Some Of The 65 Imprisoned Islamists In Spain]," *El Confidencial* (Madrid), December 10, 2009.