



# SPAIN

## Quick Facts

Population: 47,260,584 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 505,370 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Spanish 86.4%, Morocco 1.8%, Romania 1.3%, other 10.5% (2018 est.)

Government Type: Parliamentary constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$1.393 trillion (2019 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2021)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Spain's location as the gateway of the Mediterranean has long rendered it a prime destination for Muslim immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, but a small number of radical elements view the country with more nefarious objectives. To many would-be jihadists, al-Andalus – the territory of the Iberian Peninsula lost by Islam in the fifteenth century – is not simply an abstract cause, but rather a concrete objective.<sup>1</sup> After al-Qaeda-inspired militants first struck Spain in the Madrid train bombing of March 11, 2004, the country experienced a lull of more than ten years without a major terrorist attack. However, that fragile sense of security was shattered in August of 2017, when another group of militants staged a car attack in Barcelona and a subsequent attack days later in nearby Cambrils. In the wake of these attacks, the Spanish government has been forced to double down on its efforts to counter terrorism and radicalization, while Spanish society has been forced to manage impulses of isolationism and xenophobia.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In August 2017, one of Barcelona's most popular destinations was stunned by an outburst of *jihadist* violence. Moroccan-born Younes Aboyaqoub drove a stolen van directly into the crowds of La Rambla, a popular pedestrian street, killing 14 and injuring 130. Aboyaqoub fled the attack on foot, then killed another person after first stealing the victim's car. Four days later, police shot and killed him in Subirats, a village near Barcelona. Shortly afterwards, Aboyaqoub's associates staged another vehicle attack in the Catalan village of Cambrils.<sup>2</sup> The Islamic State (IS) later claimed responsibility for the outburst of violence,<sup>3</sup> which stunned Europe and shattered a fragile calm and relative safety that had settled over Spain in the decade since the last major terrorist attack on its soil.

This previous attack took place on March 11, 2004, when a group of assailants set off ten bombs on commuter trains bound for Madrid, killing 191 and injuring almost 1,800.<sup>4</sup> According to prosecutors,

the terrorists had no operational connection to formal *jihadist* groups, but instead were independently inspired by an al-Qaeda affiliated website that urged attacks on Spain.<sup>5</sup> After what would become known as the 11-M attacks, Spanish authorities doubled down on the mission of countering the threat of radical Islamist activity. Between 2004 and 2019, 822 people were arrested in 281 separate operations for crimes connected to *jihadist* terrorism.<sup>6</sup> The Elcano Royal Institute, a leading Spanish think tank, reports that 65 percent of these individuals were foreigners (and almost half of them from Morocco) while 35 percent were Spanish citizens. However, the proportion of Spanish citizens responsible for attacks has been growing, from 20.3 percent in the period 2004-2011 to 44.9 percent from 2011-2019.<sup>7</sup> According to data released by the Ministry of the Interior, 186 individuals were arrested on charges related to *jihadism* between 2012 and 2016 alone,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that intentions to commit violent acts remained high despite the lull in major attacks at this time. The geographic origin of the Spanish culprits speaks to the areas where radical Islamist activity has thrived: a full 73.1 percent of those arrested were from Ceuta and Melilla, with another 13.5 percent from the autonomous region of Catalonia, 5.8 percent from Andalucia, and 1.8 percent from Madrid.<sup>9</sup>

Salafism has been a noteworthy ideological source domestically. It is fomented largely in Catalonia, where roughly one quarter of Spain's Muslims reside.<sup>10</sup> Numerous studies and investigations commissioned by city councils and the Mossos d'Esquadra (the autonomous regional civilian police of Catalonia) have chronicled the advance of the country's Salafist movement beginning in the late 1980s, with a "Salafist corridor" running along the coast between the cities of Reus and Girona.<sup>11</sup> While the movement is relatively fragmented, funding from foreign actors has enabled Spanish Salafist leaders to provide services and build trust in rural Catalan areas where "re-Islamization" and moral purity appeals to local Muslim communities that are poorly integrated at best.<sup>12</sup> While the majority of this activity is segregational yet non-violent, local newspapers have reported cases of Salafi *imams* who publicly propagate a radical, violent ideology and encourage its coercive imposition.<sup>13</sup> In one such instance, nine men in Reus sentenced a woman accused of adultery to death by stoning. The woman managed to escape, and the men were arrested by the local Mossos d'Esquadra.<sup>14</sup> The attackers in both the 11-M attacks and the 2017 attacks in Barcelona all had ties to the al-Furkan mosque in Catalonia, where a well-known *imam* regularly preached Salafist doctrine.<sup>15</sup>

The most radicalized groups on Spanish soil have benefited from ties with groups based in North Africa. These connections open pathways to larger terrorist networks, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>16</sup> For instance, the perpetrators of the 2004 Madrid train bombings were Salafists who received training abroad from the Moroccan Islamic Group (GICM). In other instances, Spain has served as an important hub for foreign Salafist organizations, including the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), whose members frequently interact with the GICM as well as with radical elements in Catalonia.<sup>17</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood has also maintained a presence in Spain ever since its original 1971 affiliation with the Spanish Muslim Association. Radical elements of the Brotherhood were especially relevant in Spain at the turn of this century; Abu Dahdah's network, an al-Qaeda hub based in Madrid, provided funding to the Brotherhood while coordinating logistics for recruits transiting Europe.<sup>18</sup> The Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies (IEEE) notes that this network went on to play a significant part not only in the 9/11 attacks, but also in the attacks in Morocco in 2003 and Madrid in 2004.<sup>19</sup> Although their activity has faded from the media spotlight, the Brotherhood remains active, largely in the regions of Andalusia, Valencia, and Madrid.<sup>20</sup>

Spain's appeal to *jihadists* lies in its geography. Because of its two exclaves (Ceuta and Melilla) on the North African coast, Spain is the only Western European nation that shares a land border with a majority-Muslim nation. However, equally compelling may be the country's inadvertent role in "*jihadi* lore." The Iberian Peninsula was part of the caliphate established by the Moors in 711; from that point until 1492, the territory known as "al-Andalus" remained under rule by Muslims. *Jihadists* consider this period a golden

moment in Muslim history, and seek to reassert control over the region.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Spain looms large in the collective *jihadi* imagination, and the country must contend with threats from violent international terrorist organizations in part as a result.

In January 2017, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri denounced the Spanish “occupation” of Ceuta and Melilla. He compared the exclaves to other Muslim-majority regions under non-Muslim control, such as the Palestinian Territories (occupied by Israel), Kashmir (occupied by India), the Caucasus (occupied by Russia), and Xinjiang (occupied by China).<sup>22</sup> This audio recording was al-Zawahiri’s first address since September 2015, and many analysts interpreted it as an attempt to contest the vehement discourse of the Islamic State, which had grown to be the more significant threat in the eyes of Spanish authorities.<sup>23</sup>

The Islamic State shares al-Qaeda’s interest in al-Andalus and has similarly exploited the propagandistic appeal of returning the region to Islamic rule (while also despising the role Spain has played in the counter-ISIS coalition in Iraq and Syria). In 2017, *Rumiya*, the ISIS magazine, ran a feature highlighting the prominence of Abdallah ibn Yassin, the founder of the Almoravid dynasty that ruled the region in the late 1000s and early 1100s. Another 2017 issue featured “The Ruling of the Belligerent Christians,” which urged present-day Muslims to remember the errors of rule in al-Andalus that allowed Christians to conquer the region.<sup>24</sup>

As in many other Western countries, ISIS has used social media to great effect in order to threaten Spain and to recruit or inspire vulnerable new converts among its populace. Two of ISIS’s major public relations arms, *Amaq* and *Al Haqq*, have launched various Spanish-language Twitter accounts, websites, and Telegram channels, and the group has actively sought Spanish translators to assist in spreading propaganda. These recruitment efforts appear to have paid off: according to the Ministry of Interior, more than 75 percent of the individuals arrested on *jihadist* charges between 2012 and 2016 had ties to ISIS.<sup>25</sup> Dozens of individuals have been imprisoned for social media activity deemed to support ISIS, spreading the group’s propaganda, or glorifying terrorism.<sup>26</sup>

The recruitment of children has been a major subset of this problem, as illustrated by the case of Hamed Abderrahman Ahmed. The only Spanish national to be detained in Guantanamo, Ahmed (known as the “Spanish Taliban”) was originally tried and acquitted in 2006 on charges of being a member of an al-Qaeda cell. He was rearrested in 2016 and charged with leading a new cell linked to ISIS that had been tasked to recruit or kidnap children and indoctrinating them before sending them to fight as “Cubs of the Caliphate” (*Ashbal al-Khilafa*).<sup>27</sup>

Although Ahmed was acquitted due to lack of evidence in June 2019,<sup>28</sup> his case was not the only recruitment effort to specifically target Spanish children. In October 2016, the Civil Guard in Ibiza arrested two Moroccan *imams* for radicalization and activities in support of ISIS. Their efforts targeted children at *Maslid el-Fatah*, a facility registered as a religious center in the town of Sant Antoni de Portmany.<sup>29</sup> In another high-profile Ceuta case in April 2017, the CNP arrested a 29-year-old ISIS member nicknamed “The Poison.” His wife and three others had been arrested earlier in November 2016, all on charges of radicalizing and indoctrinating minors.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, ISIS has spurred on others seeking to attack Spain at home. In June 2017, the CNP arrested Moroccan Rachid el-Omari over his plans to organize a massacre inspired by the Manchester attacks. At the time of his arrest, el-Omari had 27 ISIS manuals, one of them entitled “Combatant Inghimasi and Suicide Operations,” which prepares *jihadists* for martyrdom.<sup>31</sup> That same month, a four-member ISIS cell was dismantled in Mallorca, preventing it from carrying out a planned stabbing attack on pedestrians in a major public area.<sup>32</sup>

Fundraising has also been a significant line of effort for would-be *jihadists* based in Spain.<sup>33</sup> In a major June 2017 operation, the Civil Guard dismantled a complex business network dedicated to *jihadist* financing. Using 24 Danish shell companies with subsidiaries in Melilla, the network had amassed nearly eight million Euros and sent at least ten recruits from Spain, Denmark, and Germany to conflict areas.<sup>34</sup>

Despite ISIS's loss of territory and relative decline since 2015, the Spanish Department of National Security's (DSN) 2018 Annual Report confirmed that Spanish authorities consider the group's propaganda and fundraising efforts to remain cause for concern.<sup>35</sup>

However, the "foreign fighter phenomenon" now constitutes perhaps the most significant terrorist threat to the country. The DSN reports that, as of 2019, more than 230 Spanish citizens and residents left Spain to fight in Iraq or Syria; while 25 percent of these have been killed in combat, another 20 percent have already returned home,<sup>36</sup> posing an increased threat due to their training and combat experience. Recognizing this threat, the Spanish government reformed the *Criminal Code* in March 2015, to criminalize any attempt to travel abroad for terrorist purposes, including destabilizing institutions in other countries or for training.<sup>37</sup> This reform gave law enforcement agencies new flexibility in targeting foreign fighters, as well as the individuals who recruited and indoctrinated them.

### ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

According to the Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España (Union of Islamic Communities in Spain, or UCIDE), Spain's Muslims as of December 2018 numbered 1.99 million, representing 4.2 percent of the overall population.<sup>38</sup> Of this number, roughly 43 percent are ethnic Spaniards, 38 percent are ethnically Moroccan, and the remainder comes from immigrant communities throughout the Middle East and Africa.<sup>39</sup> The largest Muslim population resides in Catalonia (533,600), with other major clusters in Andalucía (324,680), Madrid (290,991), and Valencia (211,056);<sup>40</sup> while their overall populations are much smaller, Ceuta and Melilla also represent key Spanish Muslim communities.

For over a decade, tensions have flared in these areas over visual symbols of Islam. Starting in 2010, Barcelona and a number of Catalan towns opted to ban the *burqa* and the *niqab* in municipal buildings; a similar ban in Lleida was overturned by the Spanish Supreme Court in 2013 for infringing on religious liberties.<sup>41</sup>

Intense friction over access to mosques has also occurred in a number of other Spanish communities, particularly in rural areas. Between the mid-1990s and 2012, there were 60 registered disputes between Muslim communities and their Spanish neighbors over the construction of mosques,<sup>42</sup> and UCIDE's 2018 report claims that 12 percent of Muslim communities lack a mosque (and 95 percent lack an Islamic cemetery).<sup>43</sup> Riay Tatory, UCIDE's president, has protested what he deems a segregationist movement to "exile" mosques by relocating them to areas outside of city and residential neighborhoods.<sup>44</sup> The most high-profile incident of this nature occurred in 2012 in Torrejon. The Muslim citizens of the town – around 10% of its total population – purchased land to expand the city's mosque near the town's center. However, angry protests and petitions from the rest of the town's residents, as well as a demonstration by the anti-immigration party *Plataforma x Catalunya*, drove municipal authorities to revoke the building permit and change the site to one near an industrial park outside of town.<sup>45</sup> In other instances, residents have strewn pig's blood and pork meat over potential mosque sites in a deliberate attempt to permanently taint them in the eyes of Muslims.<sup>46</sup>

Social fractures run deeper in the exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, where physical segregation and social marginalization of Muslims are widespread. The Elcano Royal Institute points specifically to unemployment, low literacy, crime, and the presence of large slums as factors driving perceptions of discrimination that in turn foment "fundamentalist currents... of Salafism in general and *jihadist* Salafism in particular"<sup>47</sup> for the Muslim residents that live there.

Despite these tensions, Spanish society showed remarkable openness to the victims of the 2015 refugee crisis, regardless of their religious affiliation. Under the EU's redistribution plan, Spain accepted 15,000 resettled refugees to ease the load on Greece and Italy; the Rajoy administration had originally only agreed to 3,000, but changed course after encountering backlash Spanish grassroots organizations.<sup>48</sup>

It is vital to note that the majority of Spanish Muslims reject violence and consider themselves well integrated into the broader Spanish community.<sup>49</sup> However, for the small minority that does not share these feelings, the blend of isolation and xenophobia that they experience may render them more vulnerable to radicalization.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, xenophobia against Muslim immigrants appears to be building among the Spanish electorate; Vox, a previously unknown fringe party, rode its polarizing anti-immigration narrative to an unexpected victory in May 2019, and gained 24 seats in Parliament.<sup>51</sup> The government's 2019 counter-terrorism strategy recognizes that "the rise of identity-based extremism with exclusionary positions... is one of the most worrying issues today... leading to violent dynamics and support for terrorism among minority sectors of our society."<sup>52</sup> If current economic and political trends continue, perceptions of deprivation and insularism among each community are only likely to increase.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Despite the effects of economic crisis, potential Catalan secession, and paralyzing political deadlock (as of September 2019, failed negotiations among the leading political parties over forming a government have put Spain on track to hold its fourth general election in four years),<sup>53</sup> the Spanish government has nevertheless pursued an effective counter-terrorism strategy. In fact, it is considered to have played a leading European role in this sphere, helping found the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum in 2011 and presiding over an inter-ministerial Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) working group that has been described by the U.S. State Department as "tied closely to the fight against illegal immigration and the integration of existing immigrant communities."<sup>54</sup> It has also contributed more than 500 military personnel to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and is a member of the Coalition's working group to counter terrorist financing.<sup>55</sup>

The year 2019 saw the Spanish government release an updated counter-terrorism strategy. In line with the counter-terrorism strategies of the EU and the UN, Spain's new guiding document has four pillars: "prevent, protect, pursue, and prepare a response." The strategy recognizes the role of technological advances in strengthening the ability of terrorists to recruit and spread propaganda, and makes countering the foreign fighter threat a primary objective.<sup>56</sup> To strengthen the government's ability to convict, the strategy calls for the adoption of a policy allowing other countries to provide evidence that would be permitted into court proceedings and enable convictions for acts committed while fighting for a terrorist organization abroad.<sup>57</sup> Simultaneously, Spain has adopted a *National Counter Radicalization Strategy*, which is promulgated by the national Center for Counter-Terrorism and Organized Crime Intelligence (CITCO). This strategy recognizes that radicalization occurs at the local level and attempts to directly address the causes for grievance posed by, for example, the closure of *almacabras* (Muslim cemeteries) or lack of access to mosques.<sup>58</sup>

While the country has dealt with decades of domestic terrorism from separatist groups, Spain has made international cooperation a vital part of its efforts to counter *jihadist* terrorism, both domestically and abroad. Spain has engaged in high-level joint efforts with other Western countries through mechanisms such as the U.S. Immigrant Advisory Program and increased access to Europol information databases on terrorism and organized crime.<sup>59</sup> It also maintains a close working relationship with Morocco. For years, this joint law enforcement work has allowed the authorities of both countries to increase their overall effectiveness, and the partnership continues to reap dividends: in April 2018, a coordinated Spanish-Moroccan counter-terrorism operation led to the arrest of a suspected *jihadist* in Morocco who was planning an attack on the Spanish city of Seville during Easter's *Semana Santafestivities*.<sup>60</sup>

However, the effectiveness of Spain's counter-terrorism tactics has come at a price: the government has faced international criticism from some corners over its use of extreme or preemptive tactics to disrupt suspected terrorist plots. Since 2004, the Ministry of the Interior has maintained a policy allowing quick

expulsion of suspected *jihadis* from Spanish territory, even in cases when suspects' trials had not yet concluded, or when people had been acquitted of the charges against them. Under this policy, the Spanish government has expelled more than one hundred alleged *jihadists* who had not actually been convicted of a crime.<sup>61</sup> One prominent example is Nouh Mediouni, an Algerian allegedly involved in an AQIM cell. After ten months in prison, Mediouni was released in July 2015, due to a lack of incriminating evidence. The Secretary of State then expelled Mediouni from the country, citing national security concerns. Mediouni's lawyer appealed, but the Supreme Court ruled that sufficient evidence existed to ban Mediouni even if he could not be convicted criminally.<sup>62</sup>

Likely in response to these critiques<sup>63</sup> Spain updated its criminal code in 2015 to “improve its legal framework to more effectively counter the movement of foreign terrorist fighters to conflict zones, better pursue suspected terrorists without clear affiliation to a known criminal organization, and curtail terrorist preparatory activities online.”<sup>64</sup> Amnesty International denounced this legal step as so vague that it would be not only ineffective but also infringe on basic human rights.<sup>65</sup>

Significant societal tensions currently revolve around the country's ongoing immigration crisis. In 2019, for example, a record amount of 748,759 immigrants entered Spain.<sup>66</sup> This surge has coincided with the rise of fake news and media reports demonizing immigrants, predominantly Arabs and Muslims,<sup>67</sup> resulting in a rise in harassment, discrimination and even physical attacks against immigrants (including Muslim immigrants). The dynamic poses a challenge for the Spanish government, which lacks legal frameworks to protect minorities from discrimination.

## ENDNOTES

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