The 3/11 attacks in Madrid, which killed 191 and injured over 1800 people, had other domestic consequences beyond their already-mentioned impact on the Spanish general elections that took place three days later, on March 14. Again, there is little doubt that the mobilization of a significant segment of the electorate, spurred by the terrorist massacre and its aftermath, secured the victory of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español at the polls. The incumbent Partido Popular government’s insistence that the Basque terrorist group ETA was behind the attacks, when emerging evidence clearly pointed toward jihadist terrorism, also proved counterproductive to the ruling party. After the Madrid train bombings and the elections, Spanish society became deeply divided over who to blame for the train blasts. Yet counterterrorism in Spain underwent an important reform, so as to adapt the state’s internal security structures to better face the threat posed to its citizens and interests by the persisting and evolving phenomenon of jihadism.

Why Did 3/11 Divide Spaniards, Instead of Uniting Them?

Contrary to what happened in the United States after September 11 or in the United Kingdom after the London attacks on July 7, 2005, the March 11, 2004, Madrid train bombings profoundly divided Spanish society. The
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...aftereffects of that disunity persisted for well over a decade, although they have become less manifest with time. The disunity stemmed from differing attributions of blame for the commuter train massacre. Yet it proved to be a spurious division resulting from a politicization of the attacks. This situation, in turn, was made possible by specific features of the Spanish political system—such as, for instance, its greater penchant for polarization, or the recurring absence of cross-party consensus on matters of defense, foreign affairs, or counterterrorism—but above all because citizens were unaware of a terrorist threat that had been present in Spanish society for a full decade before the bombings.

Some Spaniards, particularly those whose political beliefs lie on the right of the spectrum, believed, and partly still do, that ETA was somehow implicated in the Madrid attacks. The most common version of this argument goes that the so-called moritos de Lavapiés (“little Moors from Lavapiés”)—a derogatory and oddly dismissive way to talk about a group of people who set up such a complex and sophisticated terrorist network—lacked the knowledge and ability to carry out the attacks. According to this argument, even though these moritos de Lavapiés took part in the events, they must have been induced to act and supported from within Spain by other, more experienced terrorists.¹ This argument is typically supplemented with speculation about the way in which José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero—the new PSOE prime minister who came to power in the general elections held three days after the attacks—later offered ETA a transformative way out of its decades-long terrorist trajectory by means of a negotiation process, instead of trying to defeat the terrorist organization.

Other Spaniards, mostly on the left of the political spectrum, believed, and more than a few surely still do, that the March 11 attacks were a direct consequence of the “Azores photograph”—a reference to a photograph taken on March 16, 2003, on one of the Portuguese islands, that illustrated the affinity between the then Prime Minister José Maria Aznar of the PP and US president George W. Bush, and Spain’s support for Bush’s war on terror. In addition to Bush and Aznar, the picture includes the then British prime minister Tony Blair, a strong supporter of the US action in Iraq. This affinity led to the subsequent deployment of Spanish troops in Iraq shortly after the United States invaded the country and toppled its dictator, Saddam Hussein.² It has not been unusual for this sector of Spanish society to criticize the PP for its insistence on associating ETA with 3/11, even after the evidence pointed elsewhere, in order to protect its voting expectations at an election that was to be held just three days after the bombings.

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As explained and documented in this book, both interpretations of the Madrid train bombings were erroneous, and the lacerating rift that divided Spaniards, including the surviving victims themselves, continues to be deceiving. There is no direct or indirect evidence that ETA was somehow involved in the bomb attacks. Nor is it true that the idea of perpetrating a massacre in Madrid originated in response to the presence of Spanish soldiers on Iraqi soil. The decision to carry out that act of terrorism was made in December 2001 in Karachi, Pakistan, and ratified at a meeting that delegates from three jihadist organizations from the Maghreb region held in Istanbul in February 2002. The initial recruitment efforts for the nascent 3/11 network began the following month, March 2002, well over a year before the Iraq invasion would take place.

But it was not really necessary to investigate the March 11 attacks, or to unveil new information about them, to avoid this division between Spaniards—even though doing so has helped narrow the gap. It would have been enough if, like the British, the Spanish had been sufficiently aware of the threat of jihadist terrorism since well before the invasion and occupation of Iraq. It should be remembered that, as mentioned earlier, since at least 1997, reports sent in by the UCIE of the National Police to magistrates at the National Court—in charge of authorizing wiretaps of jihadists active in Spain—were warning about the need for investigations “to prevent the highly probable perpetration of attacks in our country.” Even among citizens with an interest in the issue who were adults when the Madrid bombings took place, there was a huge lack of awareness about the expansion of jihadism in Spain since the mid-1990s. Hardly anybody had in mind that back in 1994, al-Qaeda had founded in Spain one of its most important cells in all Western Europe, or that this cell was broken up in November 2001 after it was shown to have ties with the people who committed the September 11 attacks. Likewise, almost no one was aware that throughout 2003, the year before the Madrid train bombings, more than forty individuals had been arrested in Spain for their involvement in jihadist terrorism activities. That figure had not been so high since the first jihadist arrest in Barcelona in 1995 and the first breakup of a jihadist cell in Valencia in 1997.

This lack of awareness about these and many other incidents relating to the evolution of jihadist terrorism in Spain in the decade prior to the Madrid attacks, and the fact that Spanish public opinion did not perceive the existing threat until much later—and then only after the Iraq crisis of 2003—can be explained in part by the fact that ETA’s frequent terrorist attacks had received
the most public attention and media coverage. But as far as jihadist terrorism was concerned, the political class did not provide the public with adequate information and education regarding the problem, and even trivialized it on occasion. As a result, when the attacks occurred in March 2004, Spaniards sought to explain the terrorist bombings using familiar concepts, since they could not do so using unfamiliar ones. What was familiar? On the one hand, ETA, and on the other, Iraq. If 3/11 divided Spaniards, it was because Spanish society lacked the necessary resilience against large-scale terrorist attacks beyond the immediate crisis and emergency responses.

Spain’s Counterterrorism Reformed

At the time of the 2004 Madrid train bombings, Spain was equipped with well-developed internal security structures that were highly efficient in the fight against ETA terrorism but not as well adapted to dealing with a type of terrorism related directly or indirectly to al-Qaeda. The reason for this deficiency was not so much because this phenomenon was unknown to the few expert officials dealing with this issue in the CNP’s central intelligence unit, but rather was because only a very few individuals had been dedicated to this task, and they had limited resources to carry out their work.4

Things likely would have been different if the problem of jihadist terrorism had been given the importance and resources it deserved since at least the mid-1990s, especially after the September 11 attacks in the United States and the May 2003 attacks in Casablanca. But the Spanish government, then formed by the conservative PP, did not do so. Its leader, José María Aznar, acknowledged shortly after leaving office in March 2004 that “the very successes achieved in the struggle against ETA in recent years may have led us to lower our guard against the fundamentalist threat.”5 Indeed, the Madrid train bombings made it clear that the fight against jihadist terrorism had not received due priority from the government, and that as a result, the police information and intelligence services were not able to cope with the existing needs. In spite of the previous knowledge that both the CNP and the Guardia Civil had of a substantial portion of those who belonged to the 3/11 network, even to the point where the authorities were keeping tabs on some of these individuals, the terrorists showed a remarkable ability—surely derived from the skills that some of them had acquired in al-Qaeda’s Afghanistan training camps prior to 9/11—to conceal their true intentions.
It also became clear that there were serious problems of coordination, not only among police forces but also within each of them. In fact, adequate coordination efforts between the corresponding sections of the CNP and of the Guardia Civil that were dedicated to combating terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, and the illegal trade in explosive substances likely would have enabled them to share data, to sound the alarm, and possibly even to thwart the preparations to perpetrate the 3/11 attacks in Madrid.

In April 2004, the new authorities that took charge of the Ministry of Interior—Spain's central institution for counterterrorism policy—within the new PSOE government understood from the very beginning that jihadist terrorism posed a lasting threat to Spain. The ministry's first decisions were aimed at correcting observed counterterrorism weaknesses. But to do so, they were not able to refer back to the electoral program on which the PSOE had campaigned in the general elections, because it contained no specific proposals in this regard to countering terrorism. Initially, decisions involving the changes that subsequently would be made to Spain's internal security structures were shaped by the security forces themselves, as stated by the newly appointed minister of the interior before the corresponding parliamentary committee:

. . . when we got to the Interior Ministry, we told the professionals at the Police and Guardia Civil information services: We have a serious problem in terms of Islamic terrorism, al-Qaeda terrorism, or new international terrorism. Do we have sufficient resources? Do we have a strong enough structure? . . . Basically, the Police and Guardia Civil information services told us two things: one, that we clearly have to increase the resources and personnel available to the external information units, that is, the Police and Guardia Civil units that focus on international terrorism; and two, they also told us that we should create a professional structure that can receive information, analyze it, assess the risks of the new terrorism, and consequently make operational recommendations to the Police and Guardia Civil.

By May 2004, the Interior Ministry authorities had approved a wide-ranging counterterrorism plan with a special focus on al-Qaeda and related jihadist terrorism. Over the entire four-year term of the legislature that began a few weeks after 3/11, about a thousand police and Guardia Civil agents were added to central units and local brigades dealing with jihadist terrorism. Based on the initial number of police agents who were dealing with international
terrorism at the time of the Madrid bombings, the increase in personnel may be in the order of six- to tenfold, depending on the criteria used to calculate. Likewise, two months after the train bombings and more than a quarter of a century since the Spanish democracy was faced with the terrorism of ETA, both agencies with nationwide counterterrorism competences finally were able to secure joint and shared access to each other’s databases. At the same time, a National Center for Counterterrorism Coordination (Centro Nacional de Coordinación Antiterrorista) was established. Both innovations intended to strengthen coordination among national security forces, in light of the weaknesses in this area that became clear on examination of the events leading up to the Madrid train bombings.

Prior to the attacks, existing Spanish antiterrorism legislation, crafted in response to several decades of ETA terrorism, was inadequate in the face of the challenges of jihadist terrorism. Different individuals linked to jihadist cells and groups in Spain had been able to evade detention or conviction, which ultimately enabled them to involve themselves in the preparation and execution of the Madrid attacks. Yet no significant modifications were introduced in the legislation, except for an increase in the penalties for trafficking and illegal use of explosive substances, until December 2010. It was only then, more than nine years after 9/11 and almost seven years since 3/11, that provisions on terrorism offenses included in the Spanish Criminal Code were revised. Even so, the reform was done to comply in a timely manner with the amended EU Council Framework Decision on combating terrorism, approved on November 2008, which provided for the criminalization of certain activities that lay the groundwork for violent radicalization, recruitment, and terrorist training.

In spite of the advances made since the 9/11 attacks and the fact that international terrorism was a field to which Spain’s police (especially within the CGI) were paying careful attention, intergovernmental cooperation could not help prevent the Madrid train bombings. A number of red flags should have been raised earlier: those directly or indirectly involved in the plot were resident or nonresident foreigners, mainly Moroccans; a good number of them were known to the security services in their countries of origin; and several well-known members of the 3/11 network had even been arrested in France, Morocco, or Turkey. Increasing and diversifying international cooperation against global terrorism became a top goal of Spanish internal security after 3/11. The first cooperation partners were Spain’s immediate European neighbors, working within the EU context. The international cooperation against terrorism developed by the
Spanish authorities also led to an increased cooperation with the United States. Further priorities for counterterrorism cooperation were the predominantly Muslim countries where al-Qaeda, its territorial extensions, or associated groups or organizations were established, and which could penetrate Spanish territory, mainly though not only in the Maghreb. As an obvious result of the 3/11 attacks, Morocco would receive Spain’s top attention.¹⁰

Efforts to enhance intelligence capabilities, foster counterterrorism coordination, and advance international cooperation combined, after the Madrid train bombings, with a number of other initiatives, adopted since 2005. Such initiatives included the elaboration and implementation of a Terrorism Prevention and Protection Plan; a National Plan for the Protection of Critical Infrastructures; and a Prevention and Reaction Plan to deal with possible terrorist incidents involving nuclear, radioactive, bacteriological, or chemical components. Other developments in Spain have included new interdepartmental measures in the area of terrorism financing, and the application of a special disciplinary and monitoring regime in prisons to inmates charged with or convicted of jihadist terrorism offenses.¹¹

The success of the Spanish government measures taken against international terrorism perpetrated by those who claim to be followers of Islam depends to a large extent on how the Muslim communities in Spain perceive both these terrorists and the state’s counterterrorist activities. It should not be ignored that a good part of the individuals involved in the 3/11 network were known within Madrid’s Muslim communities precisely because of the extremism of their attitudes and beliefs. Enough people inside these communities, who regularly frequented places of worship with or had other contact with these well-known figures, may have been aware that people they knew or were friends with were among those preparing to commit terrorist attacks in or outside Spain. Yet two years after the Madrid train bombings, 16 percent of Muslims living in Spain still expressed positive attitudes toward terrorist attacks against civilians in alleged defense of Islam or toward al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden specifically.¹²

The Spanish Interior Ministry, particularly the Office of the Secretary of State for Security, has made efforts to develop a free exchange of views with the leaders of the Islamic Commission of Spain. The commission has been in dialogue with the Spanish state since the two entities signed a cooperation agreement in 1992, and these talks have been renewed by efforts on the part of the General Directorate of Religious Affairs to regulate Islam in Spain since 2004. However, this dialogue is limited by problems of representation
that affect the leaders of the main Muslim associations, who strive—not without interference from beyond Spain's borders—to articulate the interests of Muslims living in Spain. It is also limited by the divisions found both within each association and between associations.

All in all, the action that the Spanish government has taken against jihadist terrorism since 3/11 is both multifaceted and multidepartmental, and goes beyond the measures adopted in the internal security sector. However, even though other European and Western countries have been formalizing integrated, national strategies to deal with this issue, in Spain's case the need to deal with two simultaneous terrorist threats—the ETA on one hand and al-Qaeda-related terrorism on the other—was an obstacle to developing a national strategy and an integrated plan to prevent radicalization. It was not until 2010 that the Spanish government, still under the control of the PSOE, approved an Integrated Strategy against International Terrorism and Radicalization (Estrategia Integral contra el Terrorismo Internacional y la Radicalización), which then was ratified in 2012 under a new PP executive leadership. The adoption of a more specific National Strategic Plan to Fight Violent Radicalization (Plan Estratégico Nacional de Lucha contra la Radicalización Violenta) had to wait until January 2015, more than ten years after 3/11.

A survey carried out by the Elcano Royal Institute in June 2006 showed that, on the whole, Spanish public opinion strongly supported the adoption of these measures.13 (By this point, most of the above-mentioned initiatives already had been adopted and were at an advanced stage of implementation.) The survey also showed that there were solid grounds for an explicit and stable political consensus on this important issue, at least between Spain's then two main political parties. Such a political consensus concerning the fight against jihadist terrorism, however, did not exist until a decade following the Madrid train bombings. Known as the Pact against Jihadism (Pacto contra el Yihadismo), officially called the Agreement to Strengthen the Defense of Freedoms and Fight against Terrorism (Acuerdo para Asfizar la Defensa de las Libertades y en la Lucha contra el Terrorismo), the agreement was signed on February 2015—again, a decade after 3/11.

Jihadism in Spain after 3/11

Between the first arrest in 1995 and 2003—that is to say, in the nine years preceding the Madrid train bombings—slightly over one hundred individuals
were detained in Spain for offenses related to jihadist terrorism, an average of twelve arrests per year. By contrast, over a similar nine-year period after the attacks (2004 to 2012), the number of arrests resulting from police operations against jihadist terrorism in the country exceeded 470. The annual average of detentions thus climbed to fifty-two, more than four times higher than during the previous period.

In the nine years before 3/11 and throughout the nine years following the attacks, Spain essentially had the same antiterrorist legislation, since new criminal provisions were not introduced in the Criminal Code until the end of 2010 and only took effect from the beginning of 2011. Thus, even when counterterrorism efforts intensified following 3/11, data on detentions should be considered a reliable, relevant indicator of the extent to which the phenomenon of jihadist terrorism and its inherent threat persisted in Spain following the Madrid train bombings.

All fifty jihadists who were arrested and ultimately convicted for terrorism offenses from 2004 thorough 2012 were men.14 No less than half of them were twenty-five to thirty-four years old at the time of their detention. Eight out of every ten were under forty, and more often than not were married and had children. Up until 2012, jihadist terrorism in Spain was not a home-grown phenomenon; 90 percent of the individuals involved were foreigners, and just 10 percent were Spanish nationals (although only 6 percent actually had been born in Spain). Six out of every ten were natives of geographically close Maghreb countries—43 percent were Moroccan and 19 percent were Algerian—but 28 percent were from Pakistan. Notwithstanding their diverse educational and occupational backgrounds, those with primary or no formal education, as well as those employed as services personnel, unskilled laborers, or in unknown occupations, were particularly represented among these individuals arrested and convicted for activities related to jihadist terrorism in Spain between 2004 and 2012. In addition, about one-third of those in this group had criminal records as ordinary delinquents before they were detained and charged with terrorist offenses.

Around seven out of every ten of the convicted who were sent to prison in the nine years following 3/11 resided in or around the metropolitan areas of Madrid and Barcelona. They typically had been radicalized at least in part in these areas, though others had been radicalized outside the country as well.15 Radicalization took place in top-down or to a lesser extent in horizontal processes, starting usually between their mid-teens and late twenties. The circumstances of their radicalization were mainly, though not exclusively, inside
private homes or in places of business or worship; prisons also played a role, as did the immediate influence of charismatic or religious figures and previously existing kinship, friendship, or neighborhood ties.

An overwhelming majority of these individuals were involved alongside others as parts of cells either integrated in or linked to jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda and its then Iraqi branch, or associated North African and South Asian entities such as the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, the Algerian-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or Therik e Taliban Pakistan. Indeed, Therik e Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility for a plot, thwarted in January 2008, to carry out a highly lethal explosive-based attack against Barcelona’s public transit system. Eleven individuals—ten from Pakistan (one of whom was a naturalized Spaniard) and one from India, of whom slightly more than half resided in Barcelona—were convicted in connection with a terrorist plot that was meant to be Spain’s second 3/11.

From 2013, in the context of the worldwide mobilization prompted by jihadist insurgencies in Syria and Iraq, jihadist terrorism experienced a major transformation in Spain. Spain is not affected as strongly as other Western European nations by such mobilization, but jihadist activity is no longer a phenomenon overwhelmingly associated with foreigners living in the country. Data on some 140 suspected jihadists arrested between 2013 and May 2016 show that nearly half the detained were Spanish nationals and had been born in Spain. Though most of the rest were Moroccan, these findings clearly indicate the rise of homegrown jihadism in Spain. This homegrown component has its main focus among second-generation descendants of Moroccan immigrants who reside in the North African Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, though Barcelona’s metropolitan area remains the leading national geographical focus overall. In contrast with past findings, though jihadism in Spain (as elsewhere) is still a phenomenon dominated by young men, the percentage of women involved in jihadist activity has grown significantly, along with the proportion of converts. Only 5 percent of all individuals arrested for jihadist terrorism activities in Spain between 2013 and May 2016 were acting alone. The vast majority (95.5 percent) were embedded in new or reconstituted cells and networks connected mainly with major jihadist organizations such as Al Nusra Front but, above all, with the former Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda, which throughout 2013 and 2014 morphed into the so-called Islamic State, rivaling al-Qaeda for hegemony within global jihadism.
Meanwhile, the propaganda disseminated by the main jihadist organizations persistently continues to make specific references to Spain. Among the most frequently mentioned points in the decade since 2004 are those alluding to Al-Andalus and to the Madrid train bombings.