

In Cold Blood: The Madrid Bombings

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Much of the current debate about the global jihad movement revolves around competing organizational models. The first of these is a top down model in which individual cells respond to direction from al-Qaeda's core leadership. In effect, this can be understood in its strictest form as a command and control model and in a softer form as an affiliation model. The second – and alternative model conceptualizes the jihad as a social movement in which individual cells-small networks or clusters-draw inspiration, but no more from al-Qaeda. They emerge bottom up, act with autonomy, and carry out local attacks. In the strictest form of the model these bottom-up groups are self-contained, not beholden to al-Qaeda, and not linked to its members let alone al-Qaeda central. The strict forms of the two models have been articulated in ways that leave little common ground between them; but in their softer forms they can be combined in ways which provide complementary insights and a deeper level of understanding.

A careful examination of the Madrid train bombings of March 11, 2004, suggests that although the top down component was far less powerful than the bottom up dynamic, the perpetrators were not isolated from al-Qaeda movement. Indeed, the Madrid bombers acted within a broader network of affiliation which included connections with people who were clearly part of al-Qaeda's organizational structure. Yet, there is little evidence to suggest that they were acting on orders from al-Qaeda. The implication is that neither the strict top down command and control model nor the strict bottom up or emergent model provides an adequate frame of reference for the Madrid bombings. This should not really be surprising: academic models, whether formalized or not, rarely conform to reality, and are seldom as exclusive or neat as their proponents claim. The basic thesis here, in fact, is that in a complex world, the integration of multiple models is likely to offer a much closer approximation to reality than models which claim exclusivity and universality. In other words, the debate has become overly stark and polarized and fails to capture the complexity of the Madrid bombings which contain elements of the softer variants of both models.

The Madrid case, of course, is itself complicated because on April 3, 2004 seven of the major perpetrators blew themselves up in an apartment in Leganes when surrounded by police. Therefore, the trial that took place in 2007 was missing a key component. Further uncertainties stemmed from the dramatic impact the bombing had on the Spanish election. The change of government and the withdrawal of the Spanish contingent from Iraq encouraged some observers to infer intentions from consequences. At the same time, there were some grounds for concluding that the attack had a clear strategic objective as it appeared that the bombers might have been encouraged by an analysis on a jihad web-site which identified Spain as one of the weak links in the coalition in Iraq. [1] It bears emphasis though that the new government's decision to withdraw from Iraq was not enough to prevent the Madrid bombers from an additional attempt to blow up a high speed train on April 2. The group had also identified a set of future targets, and had a substantial war chest sufficient to fund a series of additional attacks. The implication is that the attacks of March 11 were the opening salvos in what was intended to be a protracted campaign of terror rather than a one-time event. Important as a Spanish military withdrawal from Iraq was to the attackers the objectives went well beyond the war in Iraq.

Serhane ben Abdelmajid Fakhel, "the Tunisian", was a key figure in planning the attack. An arrest warrant issued on April 1, 2004 described Fakhel as the "leader and coordinator" of the attacks. [2] A 35 year old who had come to Spain in 1994 to study economics at the Autonomous University of Madrid; he had been a successful real estate salesman before undergoing some kind of personal crisis and subsequent radicalization. As part of this process – and probably both contributing to it and resulting from it - Fakhel developed close relationships with other extremists. These included:

- Barakat Yarkas (aka Abu Dahda) leader of the Madrid al-Qaeda cell, which prior to September 11 had provided support for Mohammed Atta's Hamburg cell. After September 11, Yarkas was imprisoned.
- Amer Azizi, who fled Spain to avoid arrest but had been part of the Spanish cell and remained an important second-tier al-Qaeda figure.
- Fakhel's Moroccan brother-in-law, Mustapha el-Mimouni, who had been recruited by Azizi in 2001 and was arrested in the aftermath of the Casablanca bombings in May 2003.
- Mouhannad Almallah Dabas who, along with his brother, played a very

important role in the indoctrination of the Madrid group. [3]

- Rabei Osman, known as Mohammed the Egyptian whom Fakhret met in March 2003. Although Osman encouraged Fakhret's extremism and subsequently boasted that Madrid was his project, in fact he was little more than a drifter and cheerleader who attached himself to different groups. This was reflected in his acquittal in the Madrid bombings trial in October 2007.

When his brother-in-law was arrested in May 2003, Fakhret took over the leadership role of the emergent cell. Soon afterwards, he began to care for the family of Yarkas. He regularly took Yarkas's son to visit him in prison; the last occasion was five days prior to the March 11 attacks. Although Fakhret was angry at Yarkas's imprisonment, the invasion of Iraq and Spanish support for the United States "made him furious." [4] During the trial, Almallah Dabas claimed that "Fakhret was deeply affected by the war in Iraq and started trying to persuade people to go there to wage jihad." [5] Reportedly, he also met with Azizi and asked for Moroccan militants to assist with an attack in Spain. Azizi refused, but encouraged Fakhret to recruit locally. It seems likely, however, that there was at least an al-Qaeda endorsement or blessing for the enterprise. [6]

One of the other key figures was Jamal Zougam, who also had extensive contacts with the global jihad and was perhaps the most important connector among the Madrid bombers. Zougam had been a peripheral figure in the Yarkas cell. Some of his connections – especially Yarkas and Azizi - overlapped with those of Fakhret. Zougam, however, had more extensive international connections with figures involved in some way or another with the jihad. These included:

- David Courtallier in France.
- Abdelaziz Benyaich and Imam Mohamed Fizazi in Morocco, both of whom were involved in the Casablanca bombings.
- Mullah Krekar in Norway.
- Mohammed al-Garbuzi, a Moroccan cleric in London who was himself closely linked with Abu Qatada, the Jordanian cleric who played a central role in recruiting jihadis. Significantly, on April 3 in the apartment in Leganes, when the group was under siege efforts were made to contact

Abu Qatada who was incarcerated in Britain.[7]

In other words, the Madrid bombers were not an isolated self-contained group. Several key members had connections with people tied directly or indirectly to al-Qaeda. If they were well connected to the global jihad; however, there is no evidence that the group was under the direct control of al-Qaeda. On the contrary, the key driver from July 2003 until the bombings on March 11, 2004 was the relationship between Fakhret and a Moroccan drug trafficker named Jamal Ahmidan. This relationship was decisive in turning Fakhret's anger into action and in allowing what had hitherto been a group of people long on rhetoric, but short on concrete action, to develop the capacity to carry out a well orchestrated and highly lethal terrorist attack.

Although Ahmidan has often been described as the military planner for the Madrid bombings, this does not do justice to his role. He was the single most important individual in the execution of the Madrid attacks and without him the bombings would not have taken place. Yet, he was not an obvious candidate for such a role. Ahmidan was the successful leader of a small, but effective drug trafficking group, which smuggled hashish from Morocco and ecstasy from Holland to Spain. He had a reputation for violence and a flashy life style. Although he, along with other members of his drug trafficking group, had grown up in Tetuan (a Moroccan town known for its extremists) as a young man, Ahmidan was not particularly religious. Even after migrating illegally to Spain, he was far more interested in his criminal business than political and religious extremism.

This changed, in part, as a result of his experience in prison. Some observers trace this back to prisons in Spain while others focus on the period between mid-2000 and July 2003 when Ahmidan was imprisoned in Morocco. According to Ahmidan's wife, it was during this latter period that she first detected changes in her husband. Although "he lived like a king" because of money paid by his family for his protection, he told his wife in a phone conversation that when released he intended to go to Iraq. [8] The importance of Ahmidan's Tetuan prison experience was also emphasized by Rafa Zouhier, an intermediary in the acquisition of explosives and an informant for Spanish law enforcement. Zouhier described Ahmidan as "very radical: and observed that it "was in the jail in Morocco, where he made contacts, where he was transformed. Now, he came to Spain to roll." [9] Yet when Ahmidan arrived back at his home in July 2003, according to his wife he was initially his old self. By September or October; however, he had clearly fallen under the influence of Fakhret and wanted to move his son from Catholic School to the Madrasah at Madrid's M-30 mosque. [10] According to his wife, Ahmidan also began to spend more and

more time on the Internet looking at jihad sites. [11]

Even allowing for a natural tendency for Ahmidan's wife to downplay her husband's role and to place primary responsibility for the bombings on some else, Fakhet clearly had a profound impact on Ahmidan, crystallizing the process of radicalization already underway. Indeed, the relationship between Fakhet and Ahmidan is critical to the Madrid bombings. In some ways it parallels the two parolees who are featured in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, neither of whom would have murdered the Clutter family without the presence of the other. Similarly, the interactions between Fakhet and Ahmidan created an outcome that neither one would have achieved without the other. Fakhet brought to the relationship an infectious zealotry and a commitment to violence that would have probably come to nothing without Ahmidan's capacity to organize and implement. Without Ahmidan, Fakhet would probably have remained a "wannabe" terrorist, full of anger and resentment, but lacking the ability to turn his aspirations into reality. And without Fakhet, Ahmidan would probably have continued to channel his drive, energy, and organizational skills into his drug business rather than the "trains of death" project.

As it was, Ahmidan had assets which were indispensable in moving from concept to reality. The first was his charisma and leadership which brought along the other members of his drug trafficking organization. A second was his contacts, some obtained from prison, which enabled him to obtain access to the dynamite that was used in the train bombings. The third was an ability to operate under the radar of law enforcement which led, for example, to the use of the safe house. Ahmidan also brought logistical expertise and provided "money, weapons, phones, cars, safe houses and other infrastructure". [12] Finally, and perhaps most important, Ahmidan acted as the financier of the attacks, using money, a stolen car, and hashish to pay for the explosives, and covering the rentals for both the safe house and the apartment in Leganes as well as the cell phones used to detonate the bombs. [13] In effect, the Madrid network was self-sufficient only because of Ahmidan and the use of proceeds from drug trafficking.

The combination of Fakhet and Ahmidan was very formidable – something that has been ignored by commentators looking elsewhere for the "mastermind" of the attack. Together the two men were motivated and capable of both planning and implementing the Madrid attacks. The train bombings of March 11 required neither external guidance, nor external resources. The finances for the Madrid bombings were self-generated. The attacks were "bottom-up" rather than top down and can best be understood in terms of what in complexity theory is called emergent behavior (in which the interaction of the components

parts has a major impact on the whole). This does not mean that the cell operated in a vacuum or without reference to al-Qaeda. Even though the Madrid bombings were local in origin and had a local target, the bombers almost certainly saw themselves as part of the broader global jihad movement. Although there were no formal command and control links to al-Qaeda, the network that carried out the bombings was plugged into the global jihad and took at least some of its impetus, inspiration, and legitimacy from that connection. In the final analysis, therefore, by using the softer connectivity and affiliation model with the softer variant of the emergent or bottom up model, it is possible to develop a level of understanding that stricter more exclusive models fail to provide.

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NOTES:

[1] See Brynjar Lia & Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged al-Qaeda Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No.5, September-October 2004, pp. 355-375.

[2] "Spanish police name suspected coordinator of 11 March attacks," *Madrid EFE* in Spanish 1030 GMT April 1, 2004

[3] Javier Jordán and Robert Wesley, "The Madrid Attacks: Results of Investigations Two Years Later," *Terrorism Monitor* Vol. 4 Issue 5, March 9, 2006 pp.1-4

[4] See L Bokhari et al, "Paths to Global Jihad" Proceedings from a FFI Seminar, Oslo, 15 March 2006, p17, available at <http://rapporteur.ffi.no/rapporteur/2006/00935.pdf>

[5] Daniel Woolls, "Alleged Madrid bombing cell recruiter says he rejected offer to wage jihad," *Associated Press Worldstream*, February 20, 2007

[6] Elaine Sciolino, "Complex Web of Madrid Plot Still entangled" *New York Times* April 12, 2004 [7] Lawrence Wright, "The Terror Web" *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2004

[8] "Wife details husband's transformation into Spanish train bomber" *Madrid El Pais (Internet Version-WWW)* in Spanish 0000 GMT 8 Mar 2007 hereafter cited as "Wife details"

[9] See Luisa Barrenechea, "Lost in Translation" 8 June 2007. Available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/trackback/33961>

[10] "Wife details"

[11] "Wife details"

[12] Sebastian Rotella, "Spain: Jihad's unlikely alliance" *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2004

[13] "Spanish police identify financial mastermind of Madrid bombings" *Madrid El Pais (Internet Version-WWW)* in Spanish, May 17, 200