

# The Development and Effectiveness Evaluation of Counter-Radicalization Policies in Spain

El desarrollo y la evaluación de la eficacia de las políticas contra la radicalización en España

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## Abstract

Spain has become a major target of Islamic jihadists due to its specific history and unique geographic location. Since the jihadist terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004, Spain and European countries decided to increase their focus on Islamic extremism. However, it was only after the domestic separatist terrorism was effectively curbed that the Spanish Government formally focused on addressing the Islamic extremism represented by Jihadism, at the national strategic level. The period from 2012 to 2019 had gone through three stages of development, and Spain's counter-radicalization policy had a comprehensive course of action, a full range of fields of action, and diversified subjects of action. Since 2012, the Spanish Government has implemented a number of initiatives within the framework of its counter-radicalization policy. The main actions include revising the legislative framework, broadening the channels for citizen participation, strengthening international cooperation, and implementing de-radicalization programs. Overall, Spain's counter-radicalization measures have

made considerable progress in the areas of legislative reform, citizen cooperation, and international cooperation, but they are still facing problems and challenges at the levels of prison de-radicalization, extremist counter-narratives, and central-local cooperation.

**Keywords:** Counter-radicalization policies; Islamic extremism; Jihadism; Spain.

## Resume

España se ha convertido en un objetivo importante de los yihadistas islámicos debido a su historia y ubicación geográfica. Desde los atentados terroristas yihadistas de Madrid en el año 2004, España y los países europeos decidieron aumentar su atención hacia el extremismo islámico. Sin embargo, fue sólo después de que el terrorismo separatista interno fue efectivamente frenado que el Gobierno español se centró formalmente en abordar el extremismo islámico representado por el yihadismo a nivel estratégico nacional. En el período comprendido entre 2012 y 2019 se había atravesado tres etapas de desarrollo, y la política contra la radicalización de España tenía un curso de acción integral, una gama completa de campos de acción y temas de acción diversificados. Desde 2012, el Gobierno de España ha puesto en marcha una serie de iniciativas en el marco de su política contra la radicalización. Las principales acciones incluyen revisar el marco legislativo, ampliar los canales de participación ciudadana, fortalecer la cooperación internacional e implementar programas de desradicalización. En general, las medidas españolas contra la radicalización han logrado avances considerables en las áreas de reforma legislativa, cooperación ciudadana y cooperación internacional, pero aún enfrentan problemas y desafíos en los niveles de desradicalización carcelaria, contranarrativas extremistas y centralismo. cooperación local.

**Palabras clave:** Políticas contra la radicalización; extremismo islámico; yihadismo; España.

For a long time, Islamic jihadists have taken Spain as an important strategic target. They began to infiltrate the country from the mid-1990s onward, subsequently growing underground. The 2004 jihadist train bombings in Spain that shocked Europe prompted Spain and European countries to reassess the terrorist threat and realize that the international terrorism, represented by Islamic extremism, had become a major threat to Europe, and the extremism had thus become the center of terrorism research and counterterrorism policy (Kundnani, 2012). However, while most European countries introduced counter-radicalization policies early, Spain did not formally launch its *Comprehensive Strategy Against International Terrorism and Radicalization* until 2012, a significantly later pace. In 2019, Spain entered a new phase of counter-radicalization with the launch of new National Counter-Terrorism Strategy based on new developments in counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization realities.

In contemporary academia, the discourse on Spain's "radicalization" trajectory and its "counter-radicalization" initiatives has garnered significant attention. A diversified range of studies, drawing from psychological, sociological, and socio-political frameworks, has interrogated the underpinnings of Spain's radicalization patterns (Jordán, 2009; Moyano Pacheco, 2011; Vicente, 2023). Furthermore, studies have considered both online and offline lenses in understanding the formation and influential factors behind Spain's radicalization (Alava, 2019; Torralba Rodríguez, 2019; Trujillo, 2019). Mirroring trends observed elsewhere in Europe, these analyses underscore the intricate web of determinants influencing radical behaviors, from systemic structures and environmental contexts to individual predispositions (Jordán, 2009).

Consequently, research on Spain's counter-radicalization initiatives depicts a multi-dimensional and multi-perspectival character. Several studies emphasize efforts and challenges faced by the Spanish Government and relevant institutions in de-radicalization, especially within educational systems, prisons, youth re-education, and reintegration facilities (García Membrives & Alonso, 2022; Rodríguez García, 2019; Sánchez Gil & Santiago Herrero, 2020; Trujillo & Moyano Pacheco, 2008). Nevertheless, a lacuna persists in the holistic evaluation of Spain's overarching counter-radicalization framework. While select investigations have critiqued Spain's strategies against violent extremism (Bourekba, 2021; Fernández de Mosteyrín & Limón López, 2017; Téllez Delgado, 2018), they primarily dissect the content or concepts of the policy. There is limited mention of the concrete results of Spain's counter-radicalization policy, with more emphasis on evaluating and characterizing the policy based on the content of related measures.

Distinct from prior research, this study adopts a dual approach. First, this article consulted summaries and original documents on the counter-radicalization policy issued by the Spanish Government online. It delves deeply into the specific content and guiding principles of Spain's counter-radicalization policy, aiming to trace its development and highlight its key features. Secondly, drawing upon existing academic research, official websites of Spanish Government institutions, and news reports from authoritative media sources such as *El País* and EFE Agency, this article evaluates the effectiveness of Spain's counter-radicalization strategies by comparing recent tangible outcomes across various domains and levels, and identifies potential shortcomings and challenges. This method offers a comprehensive and in-depth assessment of Spain's counter-radicalization framework. At the same time, this study also seeks to enrich the existing results of European counter-radicalization research. By analyzing the achievements and shortcomings of Spain's counter-radicalization policy, it aims to provide experience and lessons for other countries formulating their own counter-radicalization policies.

In the following sections, this article will firstly elucidate the core concepts involved in the text, such as Islamic extremism, jihadism, radicalization, counter-radicalization, and de-radicalization. Subsequently, considering Spain's history, geography, and demographics, the article will briefly discuss why Spain has become a target for jihadists and trace the development of jihadism in Spain.

Next, the article will explore the formation and evolution of Spain's counter-radicalization strategy, in light of the shifts and progress in Spain's counter-terrorism focus. By examining the specific content of its policy documents, the article will analyze the main characteristics of Spain's counter-terrorism strategy at different stages and the connections between them.

Lastly, the article will present the primary actions undertaken by the Spanish Government within the framework of its counter-radicalization strategy from various levels—judicial, citizen participation, prison de-radicalization programs, and international cooperation. Based on the phased results of these actions, the article will evaluate the effectiveness of Spain's counter-radicalization strategy, analyzing the reasons for its shortcomings.

# I. Identification of Core Concepts

The extremism studied in this paper is mainly Islamic extremism, represented by jihadism. When Spain introduced the National Strategic Plan to Combat Violent Radicalization in 2015, then Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz said, “although the Plan is focused on all types of violent radicalization, there is at present no doubt that the main threat comes from Jihadist terrorism” (Ministerio del Interior, 2015).

## 1.1 *Islamic Extremism and Jihadism*

Extremism is a vague concept that can refer to political ideas that are diametrically opposed to the core values of a society. In the context of liberal democracy, it can be any form of racial ideology, religious ideology or ideology that denies basic human rights or democratic principles, or it can refer to the way in which actors seek to achieve any political goal that “show[s] disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others” (Scruton, 2007, p. 237).

Similar to the above definition, some Chinese scholars define Islamism as “a religious-political trend and movement” (Liu & Yu, 2016, p. 42), which “calls for the restoration and implementation of the rule of Shariah in all areas of social life by using Shariah as a criterion for measuring everything, in order to achieve a comprehensive Islamization” (Jin, 1995, p. 32). Islamism is divided between moderates, who advocate a peaceful approach of legitimate struggle to achieve these goals, and extremists, who advocate a combination of legitimate and violent struggle, even sliding into terrorism (Liu & Yu, 2016, p. 42). In summary, Islamic extremism is both a political ideology whose goal is to overthrow the existing non-Islamic political system and establish an Islamic theocracy dominated by Shariah law, and a way of action that emphasizes the use of all means, including terrorism and non-violent means, to achieve these goals (Wang, 2015).

Jihadism, also known as “Jihad Salafism,” is the violent Islamic extremism. It is essentially a return to the religious and social traditions of the early Islamic period, using violent means to eliminate all “un-Islamic” elements from society and to combat “infidels” and “apostates” in order to achieve the so-called “purification of Islam” and “revival of Islam” (Cui, 2018, p. 30). Jihadism constitutes the primary terrorist threat in Spain today, typified by terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

## 1.2 Radicalization, Counter-radicalization and De-radicalization

At its most fundamental level, radicalization is the process by which an individual becomes an extremist (Neumann, 2013). As defined by The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (2009), it is “the process of exposing individuals, typically young people, to a pronounced ideological message and belief system that promotes a shift from moderate mainstream views to more extreme ones.” This ideological shift often compels individuals to adopt a dichotomous worldview, leading them to recognize alternative political frameworks when they perceive the prevailing system as neither legitimate nor appropriate (Schmid, 2016). Thus, radicalization can be primarily viewed as a psychological phenomenon.

Diving deeper, radicalization can be segmented into three conceptual dimensions: emotional-psychological radicalization, equated to psychological alienation; doctrinal radicalization, associated with political-religious indoctrination; and violent radicalization, linked to unrestrained aggressive behaviors (Trujillo, 2019). This distinction elucidates the transition from the radicalization of ideas, connected to cognitive facets, to the radicalization of actions, related to behavioral elements. In this broader context, it is pertinent to mention that while Islamic extremism is understood as a political ideology or movement, distinctions are often made between Islamic radicalization at the ideological level and at the operational level.

Counter-radicalization refers to policies and programs that work to eliminate certain factors that can push individuals down the path to terrorism, and it primarily includes a broad range of social, political, legal, educational, and economic programs that prevent disaffected individuals (who are potentially radicalized) from crossing the red line to become terrorists (Wang, 2018). Based on differences in perceptions of radicalization, the focus of counter-radicalization policies varies from country to country. Because the United States does not consider radicalization (at the ideological level) to be necessarily illegal, U.S. counter-radicalization policies focus on opposing extreme violence that violates the law, i.e., radicalization at the operational level. Moreover, the U.S. does not even use the term “countering radicalization” because its government believes it has the connotation of “thought police” and instead uses the term “countering violent extremism” (Neumann, 2013). European countries’ counter-radicalization policies balance the ideological and behavioral dimensions of radicalization, even focusing on the ideological dimension, because they believe that extremist ideas not only can lead to extremist violence, but that such ideas are inherently problematic and potentially dangerous (Neumann, 2013).

De-radicalization originally referred to the rehabilitation of individuals who had embraced extremist ideology, usually for those serving prison sentences, and was later expanded by the UN Working Group on Terrorist Radicalization and Extremism to “Target radicalized individuals with the goal of reintegrating them into society or dissuading them from engaging in violent activities” (Wang, 2018). Thus, compared to counter-radicalization, the scope of de-radicalization is relatively limited and can be considered as part of the counter-radicalization component. Similarly, de-radicalization includes both behavioral and ideological dimensions. The former is mainly present in specific behavioral disengagement, also known as “disengagement,” such as leaving the organization or changing one’s role in the organization, and giving up violence as a means to achieve a given goal, but not in a transformation of values or beliefs. The latter refers to a cognitive transformation, i.e., changing one’s belief system, abandoning extremist ideology, rejecting violence, and accepting mainstream social values (Chowdhury Fink & Hearne, 2008).

## **II. The Historical Origins and Contemporary Development of Islamic Extremism in Spain**

Spain is considered by jihadists as a lost territory to be recovered due to its specific history, while its unique geographical location and large Muslim population have provided an important basis for the development and growth of extremist ideology.

### **2.1 Al-Ándalus - A Lost Territory to be Recovered**

Spain has become an important target for jihadists because the Iberian Peninsula was long under Arab rule. Between the 8th and 15th centuries, the Arabs established a regime in the Iberian Peninsula, known as Al-Ándalus. At its height, the territory of Al-Ándalus included much of what is now Spain and Portugal. At the end of the 15th century, the Arab rulers withdrew completely from the Iberian Peninsula. For these historical reasons, the jihadists saw the Iberian Peninsula as an “Islamic region” (Dar Al-Islam) that had been seized and occupied by the infidels (Torres Soriano, 2009), a lost territory to be recovered. Andalus is thus repeatedly mentioned in jihadist propaganda.

In 1987, after the former Soviet Union announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan, Abdullah Azzam, known as the “Father of Global jihad,” called out, “This duty [i.e. jihad] shall not lapse with victory in Afghanistan, and the jihad will remain an individual obligation until all other lands which formerly were Muslim come back to us and Islam reigns within them once again. Before us lie Palestine, Bukhara, Lebanon, Chad, Eritrea, Somalia, the Philippines, Burma, South Yemen, Tashkent and Andalusia” (Reinares, 2016, p. 14). In an open letter to religious leaders of Saudi Arabia in the year of 1994, al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden also called for a holy war to retake “the land between Palestine and Al-Andalus and other lost Islamic territories due to the betrayal of rulers and the weakness of Muslims” (Bin Laden, 2005, p. 14). Furthermore, on July 14, 2015, the Islamic State mentioned in a video titled “Message to the Algerian People” that “the war has been lit in Algeria and will not be extinguished until Andalus is conquered” (Muñoz & Pagola, 2015).

According to statistics, from 1994 to 2019, there are 317 references to Spain in jihadist propaganda, including 112 references to Al-Andalus<sup>1</sup>, that is, more than a third of the total. This shows that the “Reconquest of Al-Andalus” has become an important mobilizing slogan for the jihadists and that Spain has become an important target for them.

## 2.2 The Clandestine Development of Islamic Jihadism in Spain

With North Africa across the sea and two enclaves in the Maghreb –Ceuta and Melilla– bordering Morocco, Spain became the gateway to Europe for large numbers of Africans. Spain also has a large Muslim population: in 2019 there were almost 2.1 million Muslims in Spain, of whom 1.2 million were immigrants (Europa Press, 2019). Moroccans constitute the largest group of Muslims living in Spain. In 2020, there will be 864,546 Moroccans in Spain.<sup>2</sup> Spain and its close geographical ties to the Maghreb, as well as the country’s large Muslim population, are therefore an important basis for the spread of jihadist ideas within its borders.

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1 Grupo de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional, “Referencias a España en la propaganda yihadista”. <http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/?q=es/content/referencias-espa%C3%B1-en-la-propaganda-yihadista#seccion15>

2 Instituto Nacional de Estadística, “Población extranjera por sexo, país de nacionalidad y edad (hasta 100 y más)”. <https://www.ine.es/jaxi/Datos.htm?path=/t20/e245/p04/provi/10/&file=00000008.px#ltab=tabla>



Jihadist activity in Spain can be traced back to the mid-1990s, when the first Spanish branch of Al-Qaeda was formed near Madrid in 1994 under the name of “Mujahideen of Allah.” After its founder left Spain, the organization was taken over by Abu Dahdah. In 1996, the “Algerian Islamic Armed Group” also established a branch in Valencia (Reinares & García-Calvo, 2018). The early activities of the jihadists in Spain were limited to logistical activities. For example, the Al-Qaeda branch recruited mainly in and around Madrid and financed the activities of jihadist groups outside Spain, as well as terrorist training abroad for the members recruited in Spain (Reinares, 2016). The branch of the “Algerian Islamic Armed Group” is responsible for raising funds, falsifying documents and transporting weapons and personnel to Algeria (Jordan, 2014).

This branch was dismantled by the police in 1997. The Al-Qaeda branch was found to be closely linked to the Al-Qaeda branch in Hamburg, Germany, which masterminded the September 11 attacks. It was only banned by the government in November 2001. Most of its members, including Abu Dahdah, were arrested, with the exception of Amer Azizi who was in Iran at the time.

## 2.3 Terrorist Operations by Islamic Jihadist in Spain

After the banning of the Al-Qaeda branch, Amer Azizi began to plan attacks in Spain from abroad. From September 2002 to November 2003, four groups gradually formed the criminal network for the Madrid bombings, including two groups that grew out of remnants of the Dahdah group, a group associated with the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, and a group of common criminals who have embraced extremist Islamic ideology in prison (Reinares, 2010). The jihadist train bombings in Madrid on March 11, 2004, were the worst terrorist attacks by jihadists in Spain and Europe. A total of 10 bombs exploded almost simultaneously on four trains on the Madrid suburban railway, killing 191 people and injuring more than 1,800 people (Martín Plaza, 2014).

The jihadists struck again in Barcelona in 2017, killing at least 13 people and injuring more than 100 others when a white van rammed into pedestrians on Barcelona’s La Rambla street in the afternoon of August 17. In addition, another car ramming attack occurred in the early hours of August 18 in the southern city of Cambrils, Barcelona. The two attacks ended up killing a total of 16 people (Agencias, 2017). This was the worst terrorist attack in Spain since 2004.

### III. The Formulation and Development of Counter-radicalization Policies in Spain

Eight years after the Madrid attacks, the Spanish Government formally introduced a counter-radicalization policy in 2012. After three stages of development, Spain's counter-radicalization policy has gradually developed into a comprehensive and three-dimensional framework for action.

#### 3.1 Introduction of Spain's Counter-radicalization Policy

Although the Spanish Government launched a series of actions to combat jihadism after the Madrid attacks in 2004, it did not formally introduce a counter-radicalization policy until 2012. This delay can be attributed to Spain's dual focus on domestic separatist forces, primarily ETA, and the emerging jihadist threat. The long-standing battle against ETA arguably diverted significant attention from external extremist Islamic terrorism. Echoing this sentiment, former Prime Minister José María Aznar remarked in 2004, "the very successes achieved in the struggle against ETA in recent years may have led us to lower our guard against the fundamentalist threat" (Reinares & García-Calvo, 2018). The turning point came with the approval of the Integrated Strategy against International Terrorism and Radicalization in 2012, following ETA's declaration in 2011 to permanently end its armed activities. This marked the official integration of Islamist "radicalization" prevention into Spain's counter-terrorism framework.

The overall objective of the Integrated Strategy is "to eliminate the threat posed by international terrorism and reduce the vulnerability of society to terrorist attacks by addressing the processes of radicalization that may lead to or support international terrorism."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as a member of the European Union, the Integrated Strategy is Spain's response to the EU strategy to combat radicalization at the domestic level. The lines of action of the Integrated Strategy follow the principles of the 2005 EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism,<sup>4</sup> dividing

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3 Estrategia Integral Contra el Terrorismo Internacional y la Radicalización. Síntesis, p. 5, <https://www.uma.es/foroparalapazenelmediterraneo/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/SINTE-SIS-EICTIR-AUTORIZADA-EN-CASTELLANO.pdf>

4 The EU Counter-Radicalisation and Terrorism Recruitment Strategy updated in 2008.

its action plan into a total of four areas: prevention, protection, tracking and preparedness.

Each of the four lines of action has specific objectives. Specifically, prevention focuses on addressing the roots of radicalization; protection seeks to reduce the vulnerability of states to terrorism; tracking works to counter terrorist actions; and preparedness aims to restore normality after a terrorist attack, while providing support to victims of terrorism. In total, these four fronts of action cover 29 areas, including domestic, international, cyber, border, citizen, institutional, victim, analysis, operation, and so on. In addition, the Integrated Strategy emphasizes the involvement of the central, autonomous and local administrations, as well as society as a whole, in counter-radicalization actions.

## 3.2 Refinement and Improvement of Spain's Counter-radicalization Policy

In 2015, three years after the Comprehensive Strategy came into force, the Spanish Government launched the National Strategic Plan to Combat Violent Radicalization (hereinafter referred to as the **Strategic Plan**). The content of the Strategic Plan is to a large extent a continuation and expansion of the Integrated Strategy.

The overall objective of the Strategic Plan is “to create an effective tool for early detection and elimination of the germ and source of violent extremism by acting on communities, collectives and individuals at risk or vulnerable.”<sup>5</sup> Compared to the Integrated Strategy, the Strategic Plan slightly reorganizes the lines of action into three main fronts: prevention, surveillance and action, corresponding to “before,” “during” and “after” radicalization.

As mentioned above, the Integrated Strategy is confusing in its division of operational areas, either by geographical location, by subject of implementation, or by function, without a single standard. The Strategic Plan, on the other hand, unifies the criteria for classifying fields of action, i.e., by spatial criteria, dividing them mainly into domestic, foreign and cyberspace. Each area of action establishes corresponding objectives and content of work on each of the three

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5 Plan Estratégico Nacional de Lucha Contra la Radicalización Violenta, p. 5, <https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/pdf/servicios-al-ciudadano/plan-estrategico-nacional-de-lucha-contra-la-radicalizacion-violenta/documentacion-del-plan/estrategia-interior/PLAN-ESTRATEGICO-NACIONAL.pdf>

fronts of prevention, surveillance and operations. In general, the Strategic Plan has a more clearly preventive character than the Integrated Strategy, with a focus on countering radicalization at the ideological level and a focus on prevention, complemented by action to tackle violence.

The Strategic Plan, which is a practical implementation of Spain's counter-radicalization policy, also calls for the strengthening of central and local cooperation and the establishment of a central and local administrative framework based on the principle of "unity and coordination." The Strategic Plan establishes an inter-ministerial working group at the central level, overseen by the Ministry of the Interior, the "National Group to Combat Violent Radicalization" (hereinafter referred to as the "National Group"), which is responsible for the command and coordination of the strategic plan nationwide. At the local level, there are the "Autonomous Community Group to Combat Violent Radicalization,"<sup>6</sup> the "Provincial Group to Combat Violent Radicalization" and the "Local Group to Combat Violent Radicalization,"<sup>7</sup> depending on the administrative levels concerned. This administrative framework allows both the central government and the local authorities to work together. In other words, through this administrative framework, a close cooperation between the central and local levels is established.

The main body of the "National Group" is an inter-ministerial working group, which includes twelve Spanish ministries and other governmental bodies and private institutions. The local working groups include representatives of the local police, municipalities and courts, as well as representatives of educational centers, social groups and other groups at risk of radicalization.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the Strategic Plan establishes a partnership between the public and private sectors in the area of security in order to promote the active participation of society as a whole in counter-radicalization actions.

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6 The Autonomous Working Groups are established only in the regions with autonomous police, and only a few autonomous regions in Spain have autonomous police, namely the Canary Islands, Catalonia, Navarre and the Basque Country.

7 This group is primarily responsible for the municipal area.

8 Presentación - Plan Estratégico Nacional de Lucha Contra la Radicalización Violenta (PEN-LCRV), [http://www.interior.gob.es/documents/10180/3066463/CM\\_mir\\_PEN-LCRV.pdf/b57166c1-aaaf-4c0d-84c7-b69bda6246f5](http://www.interior.gob.es/documents/10180/3066463/CM_mir_PEN-LCRV.pdf/b57166c1-aaaf-4c0d-84c7-b69bda6246f5)

### 3.3 New Developments in Spain's Counter-radicalization Policy

In February 2019, the Spanish Government introduced the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (hereinafter referred to as the *Counter-Terrorism Strategy*), and in doing so, it replaced the 2012 Integrated Strategy. The Strategy was introduced for a number of reasons. Firstly, the 2012 Integrated Strategy had expired; secondly, in response to changes in the global security environment, Spain launched a new National Security Strategy in 2017, which required the government to develop a new counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization strategy within the framework of the new National Security Strategy; and finally, there were new developments in terrorism in Spain, such as the threat of ISIS and the Barcelona terrorist attacks in 2017. As a result, the Spanish Government launched a new Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2019 in order to adapt to the new changes in terrorism and to address the process of radicalization that may lead to terrorism.

The overall objective of the Strategy is to “eliminate the threat posed by terrorism to Spanish citizens and Spanish interests abroad, reduce the vulnerability of society and address the process of radicalization that leads to violent extremism.”<sup>9</sup> Compared to the 2012 Integrated Strategy, there are two key changes in the presentation of its content. On the one hand, it focuses more on human security, with an emphasis on the security and interests of Spanish citizens. On the other hand, the Spanish Government has shifted its focus to the threat posed by terrorism to its interests abroad, and it is no longer limited to eliminating this threat within its borders.

Like the Integrated Strategy, the Strategy also divides its lines of action into four main pillars: prevention, protection, tracking and preparedness for response, and its specific objectives are defined in essentially the same way as in the Integrated Strategy. However, the Strategy has fine-tuned its areas of action. In line with the changing and evolving realities of counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization, the Strategy expands cyberspace into a global public space, based on the framework of domestic, foreign and cyberspace fields of action—the main features of which are “no physical borders,” “the attribution of jurisdiction and its

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9 Estrategia Nacional contra el Terrorismo 2019, p. 33, [https://www.dsn.gob.es/sites/dsn/files/Estrategia%20contra%20Terrorismo\\_SP.pdf](https://www.dsn.gob.es/sites/dsn/files/Estrategia%20contra%20Terrorismo_SP.pdf)

regulation,” and “the absence of a physical border.”<sup>10</sup> It also adds two new areas to the global commons: “maritime space” and “air and outer space.”

Similar to the 2012 Integrated Strategy, the Strategy also focuses on civil society engagement. However, unlike the Integrated Strategy, which is an internal document, the Strategy, like the Strategic Plan, emphasizes the principle of “transparency,” which states that counter-radicalization security policies must be easily understood and communicated to citizens, so that they can perceive and recognize the risks and threats posed by violent extremism, and be motivated and urged to participate in counter-radicalization.

### 3.4 General Characteristics of Spain’s Counter-radicalization Policy

Considering the three stages of development described above, Spain’s counter-radicalization policy has three main characteristics.

Firstly, this policy embodies a comprehensive approach. Both the Integrated Strategy and the Counter-Terrorism Strategy align with the principles of the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism. This divides action against radicalization into four primary lines: prevention, protection, tracking, and preparedness. Meanwhile, the Strategic Plan narrows its focus primarily on prevention, segmenting its approach into “prevention,” “surveillance,” and “action.” Collectively, these lines of action form a holistic cycle to combat radicalization. They address not only the early and intermediate phases of radicalization, which are ideological in nature, but also the advanced stages, which are operational. This mirrors a key characteristic of European counter-radicalization policies: balancing efforts against both ideological and operational dimensions of radicalization. Additionally, these strategies target not just terrorists and violent extremists, but they also aim to support and protect groups at risk of radicalization and victims of terrorism. This strengthens efforts in both prevention and rehabilitation.

Secondly, the breadth and depth of Spain’s counter-radicalization policy are evident in its diverse areas of action. From the 2012 Integrated Strategy through to the Counter-Terrorism Strategy, the demarcation of these areas has been both

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10 Estrategia Nacional contra el Terrorismo 2019, p. 16, [https://www.dsn.gob.es/sites/dsn/files/Estrategia%20contra%20Terrorismo\\_SP.pdf](https://www.dsn.gob.es/sites/dsn/files/Estrategia%20contra%20Terrorismo_SP.pdf)

systematic and cohesive. The strategies consider domestic and international terrains, encompass both online and offline domains, and span across land, sea, air, and space. This results in a multi-dimensional and comprehensive framework, offering a holistic response from all angles.

Finally, Spain's counter-radicalization policy involves a diverse array of actors. On the one hand, the executive branch takes the lead in policy implementation, underlining collaboration between central and local administrations. On the other hand, the policy actively promotes the participation of other governmental bodies and civil society. For instance, there is a marked emphasis on cooperation between the executive and the judiciary, aiming to refine the legislative framework to more effectively counter extremism. The policy also champions inter-departmental collaboration, engagement with civil society, and outreach to groups at risk of radicalization. Further, it fosters public-private partnerships in security, promoting broad societal participation in counter-radicalization initiatives.

## **IV. Concrete Practice of Spain's Counter-radicalization Policy**

Since the promulgation of the Integrated Strategy in 2012, the Spanish Government has implemented a number of projects within the general framework of its counter-radicalization policy to promote its effective implementation in a number of areas.

### **4.1 Legislative Reforms against Jihadist Terrorism**

There is no specific counter-terrorism legislation in Spain, with the Criminal Code defining terrorist offences (Human Rights Watch, 2005). The Article 571 of the Criminal Code defines a terrorist as "those who pertain to, act in the service of, or collaborate with terrorist organizations or groups and have the purpose or object of subverting the constitutional order or seriously altering the public peace" (Human Rights Watch, 2005). It deals primarily with organized, hierarchical Spanish separatist forces and is not suited to the threat of jihadist terrorism. Jihadi terrorism is international terrorism with diverse manifestations, whose main characteristics are "international expansion through charismatic leaders who spread their message through the internet, the media and social networks in order to achieve a double objective: on the one hand, trying to cause

terror among the population by publishing cruel messages, and on the other, calling on their supporters to carry out attacks” (Muñoz-Silva, 2017, p. 19).

It was only in 2010 that Spain introduced legislative changes in response to the threat of jihadism and began to combat small, semi-autonomous terrorist groups (Muñoz-Silva, 2017). In 2015, Spain adopted Organic Law 2/2015, which again amended the provisions of the Criminal Code on terrorism to address the threat of Islamic terrorism in the current environment. Organic Law 2/2015 is also the Spanish Government’s response to UN Resolution 2178 of 2014. This resolution stipulates that member states should prevent the process of radicalization that leads to terrorism and discourage terrorist recruitment activities, the travel of and financial support for foreign terrorist fighters.

The changes to the terrorism provisions of Organic Law 2/2015 include the following main points:

- First, Organic Law 2/2015 expands the formulation of the “purpose” of terrorism. In the previous criminal code, the purpose of terrorism was defined as “subversion of the constitutional order” and “serious disturbance of the public peace” due to the focus on combating domestic separatist forces. Based on the main characteristics of jihadism, Organic Law 2/2015 adds the relevant expressions to “purpose,” namely: “obstructing and disrupting the functioning of the political institutions or economic or social structures of the State, forcing the public authorities to act or refrain from acting, disrupting the functioning of international organizations or causing fear among the population” (Meza-Lopehandía & Williams Obrequé, 2018, p. 15).
- Second, Organic Law 2/2015 expands the scope of the crime of terrorism. It covers three main aspects (Ponte, 2015): firstly, the inclusion of computer crime with a terrorist purpose as a terrorist offence, based on the characteristics of jihadism using new technologies to spread; secondly, in response to the phenomenon of terrorist fighters abroad, the inclusion of “travelling or residing in a foreign territory controlled by a terrorist group or organization in order to receive training or cooperate with it” as a terrorist offence; thirdly, in response to the phenomenon of home-grown terrorists, the recruitment, indoctrination and training for terrorism is considered as a terrorist offence, with penalties for both the perpetrators and the recipients of the acts, including, in particular, penalties for acts such as self-training and self-indoctrination for terrorism.
- Finally, Organic Law 2/2015 strengthens the penalties for the relevant offences. For example, the time limit for imprisonment for the storage, possession



and manufacture of weapons and ammunition has been increased from the previous 6 to 10 years to 8 to 15 years (Muñoz-Silva, 2017).

## 4.2 “Stop Radicalismo” Program to Strengthen Citizen Collaboration

The “Stop Radicalismo” Program was officially launched in December 2015 with the aim to encourage the public to help the government detect, prevent and stop violent extremism in Spain by providing citizens with safe and confidential channels. There are four channels through which citizens can provide information: a toll-free number, the official website of “Stop Radicalismo,” an email address, and Alertcops, a mobile phone app that allows direct contact with the Spanish police.

The information collected through these channels is passed on to the security forces and security agencies if there is a possibility of a criminal incident or if immediate intervention is necessary. If this is not the case, the information is forwarded to the Strategy and Foresight Department of the Intelligence Centre for Combating Terrorism and Organized Crime, which evaluates the information and then passes on important data to the security forces and agencies.

This program reflects three new features of Western security policy: the shared responsibility of individuals for security, the spread of a culture of security, and the involvement of civil society in counter-terrorism operations. In addition, when the “Stop Radicalismo” program was launched, the Spanish Government stated that the second phase of the program would involve counter-narrative<sup>11</sup> actions to counter extremist propaganda by jihadists. In line with such idea, two 30-second-long videos on the Ministry of the Interior’s Twitter account were posted, the first telling the story of a woman fleeing from a terrorist group after being abused by her soldier husband, and the other that of a family of three whose husband and son had died after joining the Islamic State (Morillas Gallego, 2018).

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11 “Counter-narrative” against terrorism refers to a direct response to terrorist behavior, consciousness, and ideology in terms of ideas, logic, and facts. Depending on the type of propaganda target, targeted activities are carried out to explicitly deconstruct the delegitimization of terrorist propaganda and demystify it, thus gradually dismantling and eroding the intellectual framework of violent extremist ideologies.

### 4.3 De-radicalization Program in Prisons

Prisons are one of the most vulnerable places for radicalization. Of the jihadists arrested or killed in Spain between 2004 and 2011, 28.1% received their extremist ideas in prison (Reinares et al., 2018). As a result, strengthening de-radicalization measures in prisons has been one of the main elements of Spain's counter-radicalization strategy since 2012.

In fact, since some of the perpetrators of the Madrid attacks were ordinary prisoners who had received extremist ideas in prison, the Spanish Prison Service (Instituciones Penitenciarias) issued an order in 2004 to strengthen the observation, control and access to information of prisoners linked to Islamic terrorism. However, it was not until 2014 that the Spanish Prison Service launched a de-radicalization program aimed at jihadists, and in 2014-2018 it established three main programs: "Monitoring and Prevention," "Intervention and Treatment" and "Evaluation and Tracking."

In July 2014, a new program to prevent extremism in prisons was established as a mechanism to monitor and prevent the radicalization of Muslim prisoners. The mechanism collects, analyzes and systematizes data on variables such as prisoners' physical appearance, cell status, social and daily behavior, and attitudes towards their families, in order to determine their level of risk and devise measures to control their communication with the outside world, their reading material and their personal belongings (Carrasco, 2020). The mechanism also classifies prisoners into three main categories: Category A-prisoners who have been prosecuted or convicted for Islamic terrorism; Category B-prisoners who have indoctrinated and spread extremist ideas to other prisoners; Category C-prisoners who have been radicalized or are in the process of being radicalized (Moreno Lara, 2018).

In October 2016, the Framework Program for Intervention in the Violent Radicalization of Islamic Prisoners was launched to establish a mechanism for intervention and treatment of the above three categories of prisoners. The program is mainly an individual intervention for Category A-prisoners, which involves communicating with them to understand their life trajectory and faith experiences, trying to influence their self-perceptions and values, and educating and guiding them to stop committing crimes and integrate into their new lives. For Category B and C prisoners, it is mainly a collective intervention. The main measures include strengthening prisoners' self-awareness and self-esteem, teaching and training them skills to cope with difficult situations, and increasing

their understanding of cultural and religious diversity and respect for other faiths (Carrasco, 2020).

In February 2018, the Spanish Prison Service set up a third mechanism, the “Violent Radicalization Risk Assessment” mechanism. This mechanism requires prison staff to collect information on Category-A, B and C criminals on a daily basis and to carry out a quantitative risk analysis every six months to assess the risk of reoffending and the reaction of prisoners after isolating them from extreme Islamism (López-Fonseca, 2018). The objectives of this mechanism are to monitor and assess which variables have a real risk of causing violent extremist behavior, and to visually present the variables that help to prevent and deal with radicalization in prisons.

## 4.4 International Cooperation to Counter-radicalization

Jihadist terrorism operates within a global context. This means that the evolution of the phenomenon is not limited to elements at the national level but must also be viewed from an international perspective (Sánchez-Gil, 2020). Spain has strengthened international cooperation in countering radicalization, mainly through its extensive participation in international conferences and forums on countering terrorism and its participation in military operations abroad, as well.

During its term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2015-2016, Spain actively promoted measures and resolutions to combat jihadist terrorism, and in 2015 the Council adopted the Madrid Guiding Principles to help countries stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters into conflict zones. Spain is also a member of the International Forum against Terrorism (Foro Global contra el Terrorismo). This is an informal body made up of 29 countries together with the European Union. In July 2012, Spain held the High-Level Conference on Victims of Terrorism in Madrid, which adopted the Madrid Declaration and the Plan for Victims of Terrorism, aimed at raising awareness of victims of terrorism at the global level. In September 2013, at the initiative of Spain, the International Forum against Terrorism adopted the Madrid Memorandum, which aims to guarantee immediate and effective assistance to victims of terrorism from the first moment of the attack and throughout the criminal process, helping them to cope in the best possible way with their injuries.

According to information on the Spanish Ministry of Defense website, Spain currently has 3,000 soldiers involved in 17 overseas operations in the framework of international organizations such as NATO, the UN and the EU.<sup>12</sup> The main overseas operations related to the fight against “jihadist terrorism” are in countries such as Mali, Iraq and Türkiye.

Spain joined the EUTM Mali operation in 2013 to support and train troops in the region to fight the Islamic State. Initially, Spain had a maximum of 50 troops on the operation, which increased to 110 in June 2015, and on January 24, 2018, the Spanish Ministry of Defense added more than 150 troops to the original 140, bringing the total to 292.<sup>13</sup> From January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, Spain assumed command of the Corps, and in May of the same year Spain’s command was extended until 2020 (Araluce, 2018). In 2019, around 500 Spanish troops will be in Iraq for Operation Inherent Resolve. Similar to the operation in Mali, this operation aims to train local security forces to fight the Islamic State.<sup>14</sup> Since 2015, an artillery squadron of 149 Spanish soldiers has been stationed at Türkiye’s Incirlik airbase to defend against the missile threat posed by the conflict in Syria. This is the first time that Spain has placed an anti-ballistic missile system abroad, a task that will be extended until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021.<sup>15</sup>

## V. Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Spain’s Counter-radicalization Policy

The Spanish Government’s counter-radicalization policy has achieved certain results in some areas and has effectively countered the growth of Islamic extremism in Spain. However, there are also some problems and shortcomings in certain areas that make the government face considerable challenges.

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12 Ministerio de Defensa, “Misiones en el exterior”. [https://www.defensa.gob.es/misiones/en\\_exterior/](https://www.defensa.gob.es/misiones/en_exterior/)

13 Ministerio de la Defensa, “EUTM-Mali”. [https://www.defensa.gob.es/misiones/en\\_exterior/actuales/listado/eutm-mali.html](https://www.defensa.gob.es/misiones/en_exterior/actuales/listado/eutm-mali.html)

14 Estado Mayor de la Defensa, “La Armada lidera por primera las Operaciones Especiales en la lucha contra el DAESH en Irak”. [https://emad.defensa.gob.es/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/10-Operacion\\_Inherent\\_Resolve/noticias/listado/191125-sogt-toa.html](https://emad.defensa.gob.es/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/10-Operacion_Inherent_Resolve/noticias/listado/191125-sogt-toa.html)

15 Estado Mayor de la Defensa, “Operación ‘Apoyo a Turquía’”: [https://emad.defensa.gob.es/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/30-Operacion\\_Apoyo\\_a\\_Turquia/](https://emad.defensa.gob.es/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/30-Operacion_Apoyo_a_Turquia/)

## 5.1 The main achievements of Spain's Counter-radicalization Policy

Firstly, at the legislative level, the Spanish Penal Code has undergone enhancements as a response to the development of jihadism, which have led to improvements in the formulation of terrorist aims. As a result, the specific content of terrorist offences has been enriched and supplemented. In particular, at the level of cyber security, self-radicalization and terrorist fighters abroad, the government has added provisions to strengthen the prevention and fight against the phenomenon of radicalization. This legislative reform responds to the emphasis placed by counter-radicalization policy on greater cooperation between the executive and legislative branches and reflects the Spanish Government's active implementation of international counter-terrorism rules, thereby establishing a sound legal framework for combating extremism.

Secondly, the "Stop Extremism" program has, to a certain extent, increased the participation of the population in counter-radicalization actions and promoted cooperation between government departments and civil society (El País, 2015). By the beginning of 2019, the project had received nearly 7,000 reports, 34% of which were considered significant and led to over 150 police investigations, of which a total of 14 led to the discovery of foreign terrorist fighters. The "Stop Extremism" program has increased the sense of shared responsibility of Spanish citizens for national security and has contributed to the spread of a culture of security among the population.

In addition, the Spanish Government has been able to achieve international cooperation in the fight against extremism through various channels, with an emphasis on active participation abroad. On the one hand, the Spanish Government promotes resolutions to combat jihadist terrorism through international conferences and forums, and it actively promotes issues related to victims of terrorism, promoting the attention of countries to victims of terrorism and the exchange of relevant experiences. On the other hand, the Spanish Government is also strengthening the capacity of vulnerable regions to deal with the threat of jihadist terrorism by participating in military operations abroad, thereby effectively curbing the expansion of jihadist terrorism in and around conflict zones.

As a result of this policy and the measures described above, between 2013 and 2019 (specifically the month of November), the Spanish Government carried out 198 operations against jihadist terrorism in Spain, resulting in 361 arrests, and 40

operations outside the country, resulting in 111 arrests.<sup>16</sup> This shows that the Spanish Government has achieved some success at the level of combating jihadist terrorism.

## 5.2 The Main Problems with Spain's Counter-radicalization Policy

The Main Problems with Spain's Counter-radicalization Policy can be described as follows:

Firstly, the de-radicalization project in prisons has been ineffective. As of October 2019, the project was following a total of 265 prisoners in 53 prisons. As the Framework Program for Intervening in the Violent Radicalization of Islamic Prisoners takes a voluntary approach to prisoner participation, as of October 2019, only a total of 46 prisoners had participated in the project, less than a fifth of the total (EFE, 2019). Evidence also suggests that prisoners who have completed the project have renounced the use of violence, but not the ideology that supports it. In other words, the project has not de-radicalized the prisoners at an ideological level (Carrasco, 2020). This limited efficacy can be attributed to several factors: inadequate training of prison staff, low inmate participation, concerns about religious and ideological freedom, and a potentially arbitrary system of risk assessment classification, among others (Carrasco, 2020). Overall, therefore, the effectiveness of de-radicalization measures in prisons has been relatively limited.

Secondly, there is a lack of application of counter-narrative measures in Spain's counter-radicalization policy. Although the Spanish Government has stated that it will implement counter-narrative measures in the second phase of the "Stop Extremism" program, and has accordingly released two videos on the subject, it has hardly adopted any counter-narrative strategies against violent extremism since then. The reasons for the lack of counter-narrative measures include the following (Carrasco, 2020): firstly, there is a lack of trained native imams in Spain, and imams who have received their theological education in Arab countries often do not speak Spanish and do not understand the social, cultural and political environment in Spain, making it difficult to adapt to the needs of the Spanish Muslim community. Secondly, two primary Muslim organizations

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16 Ministerio de Interior, "Lucha contra el terrorismo yihadista": <https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/pdf/prensa/balances-e-informes/Lucha-contra-el-terrorismo/Lucha-antiterrorista-contra-ETA-y-el-terrorismo-internacional-XIII-Legislatura-Mayo-2019-Diciembre-2019/OPE-RACIONES-Y-DETENIDOS-YIHADISMO-DESDE-11M-27-11-2019.pdf>

in Spain, the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE; Spanish: Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España) and the Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Entities (FEERI; Spanish: Federación Española de Entidades Religiosas Islámicas), have historically had persistent differences. Such disagreements have made it challenging to foster leaders with high authenticity, authority, and leadership skills, who are crucial for disseminating counter-messages and rehabilitating violent extremists.<sup>17</sup> Thirdly, as de-radicalization measures in prisons have been ineffective, prisoners have been unable to develop a credible counter-narrative to extremism. Fourthly, Spain's emphasis on increasing global awareness of victims contrasts with a lack of attention to the preventive role that victims can play in countering radicalization. These reasons have led to a lack of subjects within Spain who can develop an extremist counter-narrative, making it difficult for the Spanish Government to effectively carry out counter-narrative actions to counter jihadist propaganda.

Finally, although counter-radicalization policy emphasizes “unity and collaboration” between central and local authorities, there is no effective cooperation between them. For example, only a very small number of local authorities have implemented the Strategic Plan introduced in 2015. According to statistics, until 2017, only 13 of Spain's more than 8,000 municipalities had actually implemented the plan (Ortega Dolz, 2017). The lack of effective coordination between central and local governments at the level of combating terrorism in Spain also contributed to the terrorist attacks in Barcelona in 2017 (Reinares & Garcia-Calvo, 2018).

## Conclusion

The Spanish Government has become a key target for Islamic jihadists due to its particular history and unique geographical location. Following the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the government shifted its focus on the threat of Islamic jihadist terrorism within the country. However, it was not until after the formal decline of domestic terrorist forces that the government redirected its attention on combating Islamic extremism as represented by jihadism.

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17 Adding to the complexities, Ayman Adlbi, the former president of UCIDE, who is now the president of the Islamic Commission of Spain—an organization encompassing both UCIDE and FEERI—was arrested in 2021 due to alleged ties with a jihadist terrorism financing network, though he was later released.

The current Spanish counter-radicalization policy has been shaped by three main phases: the 2012 Integrated Strategy against International Terrorism and Radicalization, the 2015 National Strategic Plan to Combat Violent Radicalization, and the 2019 National Counter-Terrorism Strategy. After three stages of development and refinement, Spain's counter-radicalization policy has developed a framework of action led by the executive branch, with diversified lines of action, multidimensional areas of action and a plurality of subjects of action. Within this framework, the Spanish Government has made considerable progress in terms of legislative reform, citizen cooperation and international cooperation in the fight against radicalization. However, challenges remain in the areas of prison de-radicalization, counter-narratives of extremism and central-local coordination, which limit the effectiveness of Spain's efforts to combat ideological radicalization.

To address these challenges, several strategies warrant consideration. First and foremost, Spain might greatly benefit from engaging in a robust international exchange of knowledge specifically on prison de-radicalization, thereby assimilating the best practices from countries with successful records in this area. Recent studies indicate that initiatives in the UK and France, which implement methods such as religious counseling and interviews, have yielded effective and promising results (Hecker, 2021; Surmon-Böhr et al, 2020). Secondly, the government should strengthen the training of native Spanish imams in order to meet the needs of the Muslim community within Spain and the needs of Spain's counter-radicalization policy. In addition, while supporting and protecting victims of terrorism, the government should focus on their counter-narrative role in the prevention of radicalization. Finally, it is necessary for the government to strengthen effective communication and collaboration between the central and local levels in the implementation of counter-radicalization policies, and further improve the cooperation mechanisms between different levels of government, so as to facilitate the implementation of counter-radicalization policies at the local level.

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