

EUROPE

How a Shadowy Imam Evaded Scrutiny and Forged the Barcelona Cell

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By ALISSA J. RUBIN, PATRICK KINGSLEY and PALKO KARASZ AUG. 23, 2017

RIPOLL, Spain — He sometimes wore jeans and dressed like a “hipster,” and had only a short beard. He was unfailingly courteous and studiously discreet. And it seems that he trained the young men he lured into his terrorist cell to behave in much the same way, carrying on double lives that betrayed little of their real intentions.

Abdelbaki Essati, the shadowy imam who the authorities believe was at the center of last week’s terrorist attacks in and near Barcelona, Spain, appears to have been a master of deception. His associations with jihadists reached back more than a decade, but he managed to evade the scrutiny of authorities and the suspicion of many in Ripoll, the small town in northern Catalonia where he showed up last year to offer his services.

Mr. Essati’s technique, according to terrorism experts, was taken right from the playbook of the Al Qaeda jihadi recruiters with whom he had first come into contact at least 11 years ago. It now appears that he used those methods to carefully select

“He was really nice, charming, really polite, but he was too polite, too correct,” said Wafa Marsi, 30, who grew up with the older members of the cell the imam forged in the town.

“Usually you can get a sense of a person by their look, their smile, but you couldn’t with him,” said Ms. Marsi, who also described his appearance. “And that is why I did not trust him.”

Mr. Essati died on Aug. 16, when the explosives he was manufacturing with the help of some of his young recruits blew up in their safe house in Alcanar, south of Barcelona. Court records show that the police later retrieved a book belonging to the imam from the rubble with the inscription, “Soldier of the Islamic State in the Land of Andalusia.”

But even after his death, Mr. Essati’s spell over the young men remained so powerful that the plot he put in motion went forward the next day without a bomb, ultimately killing 15 people.

How Mr. Essati slipped through the checks meant to protect the public from would-be terrorists speaks to the lack of communication between Spanish national and Catalan regional law enforcement and the judiciary.

But it also shows the skill of an experienced terrorist recruiter, one who appears to have been trained in keeping a low profile so that no one would think to look into his background.

If they had, they would have found only that he had been convicted once of drug trafficking. That is an important reason Mr. Essati was able to fly under the radar of Spain’s counterterrorism authorities; he had no charges or convictions for terrorism-related offenses.

Yet Mr. Essati had been known to the Spanish judicial and counterterrorism authorities for at least 10 years, according to Fernando Reinares, the director of the Program on Global Terrorism at the Elcano Royal Institute in Madrid, which keeps an extensive database of Spanish jihadists based on court records and other official sources.

“Abdelbaki Essati had some kind of contacts, dating back a decade ago, with facilitators of the Madrid train bombing network based in Catalonia and, subsequently, while in prison, with a member of that same terrorist network,” Mr. Reinares said.

The Madrid train bombings killed more than 190 people and wounded hundreds more.

In the aftermath of last week’s attacks, regional and national law enforcement authorities and politicians are sniping at each other for failing to cooperate more closely. Their relationship was already strained because of Catalonia’s effort to win independence from Spain.

Catalan law enforcement authorities have long complained that they are not allowed to work on their own with foreign intelligence organizations such as the C.I.A.

Another problem appears to be that information gleaned by counterterrorism intelligence operatives that does not result in charges or convictions is not systematically made available to local law enforcement.

Records of behavior in prison — increasingly understood as an important factor in radicalization — also appear not to be widely shared.

While there is an Islamic Council of Catalonia that vets imams, it was not asked about this imam, its coordinator, Jamal Elattouaki, said.

The mayor of Ripoll, Jordi Munell, said that the local police should have gotten more warning about the dangers presented by Mr. Essati.

“The information that someone had did not arrive where it should have,” he said, adding that the Spanish government had not passed it on to the Catalan authorities.

Meanwhile, Spanish police officers denounced Catalan officials for “marginalizing in a painful way” the contribution of Spain’s national and military authorities during the investigation and manhunt.

Mr. Essati was born in Morocco in around 1970 in a small village in the Chaouen region near the northern city of Tangiers. Little is known about his early life. He told the mosque in Ripoll where he worked until the end of June that he was married and had nine sons.

He did not mention that he had acquaintances who had been convicted of terrorism-related offenses or that he had served time in prison on drug charges.

In 2006 his name surfaced in a case against a group of men accused of recruiting mujahedeen to fight in Iraq. At least one of those men had also helped conspirators involved in the 2004 Madrid train bombings to escape.

Mr. Essati's documents or copies of them were found at the home of one of the accused recruiters, Mohamed Mrabet Fahsi, who claimed he had the papers because of his work at a local mosque. The court ultimately dismissed the case for lack of evidence.

Mr. Essati shows up next in the public record, this time in court himself, responding to charges of drug trafficking committed in 2010, according to the Spanish judicial authorities.

He was sentenced to four years in prison. There, he became friendly with Rachid Aglif, known as "El Conejo" (the Rabbit), who was serving 18 years for his involvement in the Madrid bombings.

An order for Mr. Essati's expulsion from Spain upon release from prison was overturned by a judge in 2015, who said that he had shown "employment and an effort to integrate." He was freed and he dropped from view.

He re-emerged in early 2016 in **Belgium**, home to the Islamic State cell that carried out attacks in Paris and Brussels around that time.

There is no information suggesting that Mr. Essati had contact with the group, but Belgian authorities say they are currently looking deeper in to Mr. Essati's background and movements.

Hans Bonte, the mayor of Vilvoorde, a Belgian town on the outskirts of Brussels from which many young Muslims have gone to fight in Syria, said Mr. Essati “definitely was in Vilvoorde from January to March last year.”

The local Muslim community, under pressure because of suspicions that it harbored terrorist fugitives, flagged his presence to Belgian authorities, who asked the security services to gather intelligence on Mr. Essati in cooperation with the Spanish authorities, Mr. Bonte said.

The inquiry showed no known ties to terrorism, he said. However, at least one mosque where Mr. Essati applied for work as an imam rejected him after he failed to produce a routine certificate of good conduct.

The mayor of Vilvoorde told the Belgian news media on Wednesday that the imam probably made at least two more visits to **Belgium** as well.

Mr. Essati had a history of traveling to European places known for jihadist communities. Those included Winterthur in Switzerland, near Zurich, according to a European counterterrorism expert.

Locals in Ripoll said that Younes Abouyaacoub, the young terrorist recruit who was killed by police on Monday, had also traveled to Zurich in recent months. It is not clear why.

The Paris prosecutor, François Molins, told reporters on Wednesday that two or three members of the Barcelona cell had also visited the Paris region on Aug. 11 and 12, stopping at a branch of Fnac, a retail chain that sells electronics.

“No one can think, as we speak, that this lightning visit to France was just to buy a camera at Fnac,” he said.

American intelligence analysts believe Mr. Essati was well connected with members of the Islamic State’s external operations wing, but said they needed more time to determine if it had played any role in the Barcelona attacks.

Last year, soon after his foray to Vilvoorde, Mr. Essati returned to Spain, showing up in the small mountain town of Ripoll, where the local mosques were

searching for an imam.

His courtship of the young men began quickly.

Most of those he targeted, by all accounts, were “normal” young adults. They had jobs, were well assimilated, and spoke Catalan and Spanish. Some were born in Spain.

But Mr. Essati, it seems, had the training and the instinct to find the ones who might be most open to joining his conspiracy.

The grooming loosely followed the recruitment strategy first outlined by Al Qaeda operatives, according to Daniel Koehler, a fellow at George Washington University’s program on extremism.

The handbook advises focusing on young men between 18 and 21 because they are “pure” and less likely to betray the group.

Mr. Essati also recruited brothers — there were four sets among the 12 — allowing him to use family ties and peer pressure to reinforce their loyalty, Mr. Koehler noted.

“These one-on-one recruiters are unbelievably strong on appealing to positive values: on honor, on justice, freedom, pride, positive emotionally based values,” he said.

“If the kids have any feelings about injustice, the recruiter will talk day in and day out about the injustice being done to women and children in Iraq and Syria.”

“The recruiter bestows on them this identity as a spiritual warrior,” Mr. Koehler added.

The young men who gathered around Mr. Essati were so committed that they managed to imitate his dual life and low profile right up to the end.

Their families may have seen changes in their children, but they never thought — or perhaps never wanted to think — that there was anything nefarious behind it.

“Their mothers were proud,” said Ms. Marsi, who knows many of the young attackers’ mothers.

“The boys weren’t smoking, they weren’t drinking. One was studying to be an engineer. They were taking their life seriously.”

Seven of the 12 who joined the cell are now dead, and the rest turned themselves in to the police or were captured.

Follow Alissa J. Rubin @Alissanyt, Patrick Kingsley @patrickkingsley and Palko Karasz @karaszpalko on Twitter.

Alissa J. Rubin reported from Ripoll, and Patrick Kingsley and Palko Karasz from Barcelona, Spain. Reporting was contributed by Raphael Minder and Germán Aranda from Barcelona; Milan Schreuer from Paris; Eric Schmitt from Washington; and Rukmini Callimachi from Erbil, Iraq.

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