

Scandal erupts over *Público* exposure of state complicity in Barcelona attack

Part I: Podemos and the Catalan nationalists cover for Spanish intelligence

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In the month since the online daily *Público* revealed that Spanish and European intelligence intensively monitored the perpetrators of the August 2017 Barcelona terror attack up until the very day it took place, a bitter battle has unfolded within the Spanish media and political establishment. The *Público* report provided detailed evidence, based on internal documents, of official foreknowledge of the attack, which was led by a Spanish intelligence asset. Yet the ruling establishment is uniting to denounce the report and pour scorn on the idea that an official conspiracy took place.

In July, *Público* published a four-part report after a year-long investigation into relations between Imam Abdelbaki Es-Satty, the leader of the terror cell, and the National Intelligence Centre (CNI). *Público* based its report on CNI sources and confidential reports on Es-Satty and his cell, excerpts of which it published on its site. Refuting the official account that these attackers flew under the radar, surprising Europe's intelligence agencies as they prepared the deadliest terrorist attack in Spain since Al Qaeda's 2004 Madrid bombings, *Público's* documentation shows that:

- The CNI recruited Es-Satty as an informer at least as far back as 2014, using a Gmail account for communications between Es-Satty and his CNI handler.

- The intelligence services falsified his legal files to prevent his expulsion after he was found guilty of drug-trafficking. He even received aid from the CNI to install him as an Imam in the small Catalan town of Ripoll, although he was known to have been radicalised for a long time, as far back as 2004, when he was linked to the attacks in Casablanca on 16 May 2003.

- The CNI wiped Es-Satty's record so that Ripoll's

Muslim community would not be aware of his history; this also hindered Catalan regional police as they began to investigate the attacks.

- The CNI knew the movements of some of the cell's members in France, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland, and monitored phone conversations between them. Es-Satty had contacts with Islamist forces across Europe involved in the NATO-led proxy war against Syria, including jihadist circles in Belgium. The CNI's intense monitoring of his cell required the collaboration of European intelligence agencies, including French intelligence, which has acknowledged that it spied on members of Es-Satty's cell who travelled to Paris shortly before the Barcelona attack.

- The CNI devoted an extraordinary level of surveillance to members of the cell, including those who had no criminal record until the day of the attacks. The CNI, *Público* writes, was "listening to and transcribing all conversations between those young Muslims, who were not supposedly yet related to any jihadist plot—executing the most exhaustive possible intelligence controls, which require considerable material and human resources."

- After the attack, CNI officers involved in dealing with Es-Satty were posted to a remote African country, and another was "moved to the capital of a Latin American country with his family."

The *Público* report is politically devastating. To date, there has been no attempt by any of its detractors to examine or discredit the documents upon which it is based. It provides powerful evidence that the Spanish government, which was publicly seeking a pretext to impose martial law before the October 2017 declaration of Catalan independence, knew a terror cell existed in Barcelona but decided not to act to dismantle it, at the

cost of hundreds of casualties. This has far-reaching political implications.

The turn to police-state forms of rule and the official legitimization of fascism now underway in Spain and across Europe are based on state criminality and political lies. After the cell carried out its attack, the CNI attempted to hide the evidence of their complicity. And as Spanish police brutally attacked peaceful voters in the Catalan referendum, the Spanish ruling class shifted drastically to the right, promoting the pro-fascist and anti-Catalan nationalist Vox party. Most strikingly, the Spanish Supreme Court stated that Francisco Franco, the leader of the 1936 coup against the Spanish republic and founder of a four-decade fascist dictatorship, was the country's legitimate head of state starting immediately after his coup, which provoked the Spanish Civil War.

As news of the *Público* report spread on social media, it provoked outrage among broad layers of the working class. Las Ramblas, the avenue in central Barcelona where the attacks happened, was filled with stickers saying "17-A. Stop complicit silence." But the ruling elite has worked relentlessly to downplay, distort and discredit the report. The acting Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government baldly asserted that the former CNI director had already given the necessary explanations in Parliament. Late last month, the PSOE, Popular Party, Citizens and Vox blocked—for the second time—calls from the Catalan nationalist parties for a parliamentary investigation into the 2017 attacks.

Of particular significance was the response of political and media forces affiliated with Podemos. Having sought for months to form a coalition government with the PSOE, which is covering up the background of the Barcelona attack, its factions united to insist this report is of no significance.

A typical example was the online daily *eldiario.org*, a leading "left" liberal web site. After days of not reporting the news, its director Ignacio Escolar had to reply to infuriated subscribers who accused it of complicity in a conspiracy of silence. Without trying to explain the longstanding state monitoring of the Barcelona cell revealed by *Público*, he complacently wrote that it is "not unusual for some perpetrators of an attack to have been investigated by security forces or secret services. This is how many other terrorist attacks are prevented, even if this is not always achieved."

Journalists Antonio Maestre and Elisa Beni, both prominent figures regularly appearing on television to represent the views of Podemos, also attacked the report.

In an exchange on Twitter with Carlos Enrique Bayo, the author of the *Público* report, Maestre accused him of posting hack work based on notes obtained from "fanatical" Catalan secessionists. Beni defended Maestre, calling the *Público* report "nonsense" and a "political use of terrorism."

Jaume Asens, spokesman for En Comú Podem, Podemos's Catalan affiliate, insisted readers should avoid making "conspiracy readings" of the *Público* report.

Gaspar Llamazares, a former leader of the Stalinist United Left, denounced anyone raising questions about the role of Spanish intelligence: "In the majority of the greatest [terrorist] attacks in the world, an informer has appeared or they [the terrorists] were monitored by the intelligence services. Nowhere, except in Spain, have they been accused of being accomplices."

Similarly, the Catalan nationalists are aiding in a state cover-up. One month after sending a pro-forma letter appealing to Madrid to set up a face-saving commission to investigate the attacks, and thus "end the social alarm generated," the Catalan government has remained completely silent.

The Catalan petty bourgeoisie has also attacked *Público*. Natàlia Sànchez, of the Catalan-nationalist Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP), attacked Bayo in the Catalan Parliament's commission on the 2017 attacks. She accused Bayo, who had travelled from Madrid to testify to the commission, of "helping to generate a sense of conspiracy-paranoia which is not helpful for the victims or for the work of this commission."

Far more is at stake than Bayo's reporting. The Catalan nationalists and the sections of the affluent middle class in which Podemos and its affiliates are rooted—oriented to the PSOE, the Spanish capitalist state, and the European Union—fear the implications of the discrediting of imperialist wars in the Middle East and of the Spanish state apparatus. They are adapting to the rapid shift of the bourgeoisie towards authoritarian and fascist forms of rule.

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