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Investigators Probe Imam's Role in Radicalizing Young Men in Barcelona Terror Attack

Police focused on Moroccan national Abdelbaki Es Satty, who led a mosque in Ripoll, Spain



Ali Yassine, the president of Ripoll's Annour Islamic community, and spokesman Hamid Barbach are seen at a mosque where imam Abdelbaki Es Satty preached in Ripoll, north of Barcelona. PHOTO: ALBERT GEA/REUTERS

By Jon Sindreu, Kavita Mokha and Pietro Lombardi

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RIPOLL, Spain—An imam in northeastern Spain emerged as a prime suspect in the investigation of the terror attack in Barcelona as Spanish authorities look into whether he radicalized a group of young men and plotted with them to launch an even deadlier assault.

Spanish authorities said Sunday they are looking into Abdelbaki Es Satty in connection with the attack Thursday, when a terrorist drove a van into a crowd in central Barcelona and killed 13 people. Mr. Es Satty, a Moroccan national, was the former imam at a mosque in Ripoll, the hometown of most of the 11 others police suspect of involvement.

Josep Lluís Trapero, police chief in Catalonia, said investigators believe that the cell may have been conspiring for more than six months to carry out one or more bombings in Barcelona, but was aborted when gas canisters being used to build bombs exploded.

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A spokeswoman for the Catalan police said Mr. Es Satty may have died in that blast, which took place in a tiny town 190 miles from Barcelona and reduced a house to rubble. Police are trying to identify charred human remains there.

At the site, "we found materials for explosives that are similar to the ones usually used by Daesh," or Islamic State, Mr. Trapero said. The terrorist group has claimed responsibility for the attacks.

If the investigation confirms the plot was as extensive as officials believe, it would represent a departure from the terrorist attacks in Europe seen more recently, which have largely involved lone wolves rather than a network.

Spanish authorities expressed confidence Sunday they are close to apprehending the last remaining suspect, Younes Abouyaaqoub. They

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said all the others they suspect of involvement are dead or arrested.

The development comes three days after the attack in Barcelona's Las Ramblas neighborhood, which injured scores in addition to the dead. Hours after that van attack, a car drove into pedestrians in a town 75 miles to the southwest, Cambrils, killing one. A police shootout with those in the car killed all five.

Authorities said Sunday they are investigating whether Mr. Es Satty may have radicalized a group of young Muslim men of Moroccan origin in Ripoll, whose population of 11,000 includes about 1,100 Muslims.

Some locals said the young men were becoming more fervent in their faith, attending the mosque more assiduously earlier this year and sometimes wearing djellabas, traditional robes of North Africa.






Townpeople in Ripoll were mostly mystified by the turn taken by a group who appeared well integrated in their local community and had no record of terrorist activity.

"We aren't able to say what the origin of the radicalization was," said Mr. Trapero, the police chief. "The imam is one of our lines of investigation." Police searched his apartment on Friday.

When local Muslim leaders in 2015 hired Mr. Es Satty as imam at one of the town's two mosques, they were unaware he had once been in prison, according to mosque officials. Spanish authorities confirmed his imprisonment Sunday but didn't say what it was for. Authorities said he had contacts with someone with alleged links to terrorism.

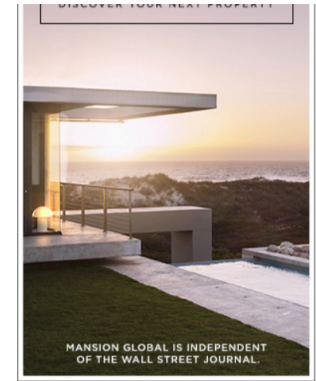
Mr. Es Satty did little to meld with Ripoll's tight-knit Muslim community, according to locals. They recalled him as sober and distant, sitting alone when he ate in cafes.

In his sermons, "he never speaks of jihad or killing," said Mohammed Ichabad, a regular at the mosque. Nourine el Haji, a 45-year-old who shared an apartment with the imam for four months in Ripoll's center, was among those who said they saw no signs of extremism. "He was a normal person," Mr. el Haji said.

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A terrorist mowed down pedestrians with a van in the heart of Barcelona, Spain, on Thursday, killing at least 13 people and injuring scores in an attack claimed by Islamic State. Witnesses recalled their panic and shock. Photo: AP.

Some local Muslims complained the mosque was lax, with attendees often eating during Ramadan, and Mr. Es Satty irked families by charging to tutor their children on Islam. Some said they traveled to another town to pray.

Authorities are investigating Mr. Es Satty's contacts with the group of young men in Ripoll, who also had shown no signs of extremism, according to friends and family, but have been implicated by police.

They went to Institut Abat Oliva, the local public high school. Two of them were Driss Oukabir, 28, and his 17-year-old brother Moussa, who banded together with brothers Mohamed Hychami and Omar Hychami. Moussa Oukabir and the Hychami brothers were all killed in the police shootout in Cambrils hours after the Barcelona attack.

Driss Oukabir was arrested Thursday after authorities found that the van used in Barcelona had been rented in his name. He denied involvement, saying his brother stole his

identification to rent it, according to Ripoll's mayor.

Núria Rifà, who went to primary school with the Oukabir brothers, remembers Driss as "a very sweet guy" happy to chat in the street when they met. His brother Moussa became "much more of a rebel" in recent times, she said, "but not unlike other kids. I never heard of him getting involved in any brawl or anything."

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Moussa was "a good player, he got along perfectly with his teammates and the team with him as well," said Jordi Leiva, once his soccer coach at the Ripoll Club de Futbol. Mr. Leiva said he also worked at a foundry with Mohamed Hychami, whom he recalled as a jokester.

"I was shocked because I knew the two pretty well," he said.

Police said Mr. Abouyaaqoub, the fugitive and now focus of a manhunt, may have been the driver of the van in Barcelona.

He lived with his parents, two sisters and a brother in an apartment building in a poorer area of Ripoll with many Moroccan immigrants. "There's a lot of racism around," said Jordi Fàbregas, who lives in the building. "But generally people get along."

The young men suspected in the attacks played soccer together and spent time at a riverbank that is a hangout for young people. They spoke to each other in Catalan, which is the majority language in the area but not common among first-generation immigrants, who use often use Spanish.

Neighbors and friends said the boys mingled with locals, liked to party, regularly drank alcohol and rarely attended the mosque. Then, around the end of last year or start of this year, some locals noticed the young men becoming more observant.

The house that exploded was on an unpaved road on the outskirts of Alcanar, a coastal town about 190 miles south of Ripoll. It is a place where seasonal workers come to pick olives each year, with fewer than 100 residents in winter. It is dotted with abandoned 1980s-era homes sometimes used by squatters.

Speaking of the house that exploded, some residents said they saw men going in and out for as long as a year, mostly after dark. One neighbor told of hearing noises coming from it late into the night.

This summer, the activity intensified, said Carmen Circiumaru, 48, who lives next door. She saw four young men going in and out throughout the day.

Fernando Gruas-Esteve, a 70-year-old retiree living nearby, said he saw men driving up to the building in a small [Volkswagen](#) and on a green motorcycle, always keeping their helmets on.

One neighbor described smelling a gas odor from the house one night last week.

Just before midnight Wednesday, residents heard two explosions in rapid succession and saw two fireballs, said Sarah-Lena Schenk, a German tourist on holiday nearby.

The next morning, the house was rubble. Authorities said Sunday more than 100 butane gas tanks had been found in it.

Mr. Es Satty, the former Ripoll imam now suspected of involvement in the week's terrorism, stepped down from the mosque in June, saying he had to return to Morocco to deal with an inheritance.

The group of young men then stopped going to the mosque as abruptly as they had begun, some friends said.

On Tuesday, the day before the Barcelona attack, Mr. Es Satty said he would finally be leaving Spain. Locals were surprised to spot him later in Vic, a neighboring city, where police later found one of the vans implicated in the attacks.

At the Cafeteria Esperanza, a Ripoll café frequented by Muslims, a few locals gathered over the weekend watching the news.

"Everybody knows them here," one patron said of the young men. "Who ate their brains? It's not religion."

—*Jeannette Neumann in Barcelona and Marina Force in London contributed to this article.*

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