

## Militancy/Terrorism



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**Spain Alert: Authorities arrest suspected members of Islamist terrorist cell in Catalonia, Extremadura on January 16; likely posed highly credible threat**

### Current Situation

- On January 16, authorities arrested four suspected members of an Islamist cell carrying out operations in the regions of Catalonia and Extremadura.
- The counterterrorism operation, led by Guardia Civil, the national law enforcement agency, and Mossos d'Esquadra, the Catalan regional police, focused on the towns of Martorell, Rubí, and Sant Pere de Ribes in the province of Barcelona and the Extremaduran city of Mérida. The operation is ongoing, with authorities in pursuit of a fifth suspect.
- Authorities stated that the cell members were finalizing an arms deal, including weapons and explosives, to carry out a terrorist attack. However, they added that the members did not possess any weapons and lacked a specific plan, including a target, of how to carry out the plot.
- Moreover, officials stated that the cell was led by German Bagaev, a Russian national of Chechen origin, currently jailed in a Barcelona prison. Bagaev was arrested in 2019 for arms trafficking and other organized criminal activities. Reportedly, Bagaev coordinated the arms purchase deal from within the prison, providing the cell members with contacts of the weapons dealers.
- According to the authorities, Bagaev formed the cell by promoting the radicalization of prison inmates and subsequently recruiting them to the cell.

## Assessments & Forecast

1. The organized nature of the cell's operations, coupled with the fact that they were finalizing an arms deal, reflects the highly credible threat posed by the group. That said, the lack of a specific plot indicates they were unlikely to have been in the final stages of planning the attack.
2. Additionally, that the arrestees were part of a group involving multiple actors and operating from two regions in Spain is highly notable and reflects the growing threat posed by groups regionwide. This is especially so amid a general uptick in foiled terrorist plots involving multiple actors, as opposed to lone actors, in 2023. This is supported by [Germany confirming the arrests of Hamas-affiliated terrorists on December 14](#) and the [December 16 dismantling of a transnational IS network](#) in Europe.
3. This, in turn, raises concerns over multi-pronged attack plots in Europe, which could result in mass casualties. Indeed, that the suspects were finalizing the purchase of explosives and weapons indicates they likely intended to carry out such an attack. The purchase of explosives is also notable, given an uptick in terrorist plots involving bombings – including suicide bombings – in 2023. That said, considering that these plots require coordination between multiple actors, they are more likely to be detected by authorities.
4. **FORECAST:** While Islamist attempts to carry out [coordinated, sophisticated attack plots](#) involving firearms and explosives will increase in the coming months, the primary threat will continue to stem from self-radicalized lone actors. With such actors predominantly using rudimentary tactics, successful attacks are more likely to materialize in the form of a stabbing or possibly vehicular ramming.
5. Separately, that Bagaev carried out radicalization and recruitment efforts while in prison is consistent with regionwide trends, with the risk particularly elevated in France and the UK. This is predominantly due to the potential for already radicalized individuals, including imprisoned terrorists, to indoctrinate others, allowing them to recruit for Islamist networks.
6. Additionally, Bagaev's Chechen background is notable, given that perpetrators of successful attacks, including the [October 13 stabbing attack at a school in Arras in Pas-de-Calais, France](#), and foiled plots have been of Chechen origin. **FORECAST:** As such, the development is likely to raise concerns about the latent threat posed by immigrant communities hailing from former Islamic State (IS) strongholds, with Chechnya having previously been a hotbed for IS activity.
7. Further, Bagaev's role in the plot is reflective of the criminal-terrorist nexus, given that his organized crime background allowed him to facilitate the arms deal. This is especially relevant to Spain, where authorities continue to crack down on both trafficking networks, as well as jihadist actors. In addition to gaining access to weapons, transnational terrorist groups are also known to play active roles in organized crime to finance their operations. **FORECAST:** Given this, the potential for Islamist and far-right actors to gain access to sophisticated, lethal weapons remains elevated in countries with significant organized crime networks. This includes Spain, as well as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden.
8. Further, the counterterrorism operation highlights the authorities' sustained efforts at deterring militant activities within Spain, in addition to aiding transnational counterterrorism operations. This is especially so amid the elevated terrorist threat level regionwide – especially due to the Israel-Hamas conflict – with Spain maintaining the level four terror alert, the second-highest on a five-point scale, since 2015. **FORECAST:** With that, authorities are liable to maintain bolstered security measures, including the strengthening of surveillance measures, and continue carrying out coordinated operations and intelligence sharing in counter-terrorism operations within Spain, as well as across Europe. Such measures are also likely to involve authorities lowering the threshold for arrests to include preventive detentions. With that, the likelihood of similar arrests and foiled plots to be uncovered remains elevated in the near term.

## Recommendations

1. Travel to Spain may continue while maintaining vigilance for the increased threat of potential

attack plots by Islamist terrorist groups.

2. Alert authorities immediately upon witnessing suspicious items or behavior.
3. If a potential stabbing, shooting, or similar incident manifest, leave the area immediately if possible, or take shelter at a secure location.
4. Public, private, and third-sector organizations are advised to increase awareness of threats on social media using threat monitoring services.
5. Increased awareness of an organization's political footprint and perceptions from online fringe groups can help uncover potential violent actors and plots before they occur.
6. For further questions and risk assessments, please contact [intel@max-security.com](mailto:intel@max-security.com).