

Striking in al-Ándalus: why Islamic State attacked Spain

Written by Ben Rich, Lecturer in International Relations and Security Studies, Curtin University



Spain plays a relatively inconsequential role in the fight against Islamic State. Reuters/Sergio Perez

Despite its (relatively) low body count and primitive execution, [Thursday's terrorist attack](#) in Barcelona shocked many local and international onlookers. The Islamic State (IS) group was quick to claim responsibility for the attack, in which a van was deliberately driven into pedestrians on Barcelona's famed Las Ramblas strip. At least 13 people [are dead](#), and around 100 have been left injured.

The location and targeting of the attack deviates from IS's previous efforts. These have typically focused on punishing countries directly involved in military operations against it in Syria and Iraq.

But how reliable are its claims of responsibility? And why was Spain chosen, given its relatively inconsequential role in the fight against IS?

Further reading: [Barcelona attack: a long war against Islamic terrorism is our reality](#)

The validity of IS's claims

Verifying the culpability of terror attacks can traditionally be a tricky affair. Given that organisations that engage in terrorism are doing so from a position of weakness, there is always an incentive to lie in order to bolster mystique and inflate the image of threat.

But in this regard, IS seems to differ from previous groups. It has typically been reliably truthful

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in what it claims to have been its actions.

One Australian example of this can be found in the 2014 [Lindt Cafe siege](#). The perpetrator, Man Haron Monis, proclaimed he was [acting under IS auspices](#). But despite this declaration, and the potential propaganda victory it could bring, IS resisted such advances and distanced itself from the incident.

While IS would go on to [posthumously praise Monis's actions](#), it never made any explicit claims to having organised or directed them. No pre-existing relationship was found in the [subsequent inquest](#).

This incident, along with many others, seems to indicate that while IS claims a butcher's bill of heinous activities, it doesn't tend to overtly lie about them.

Such a policy, while initially appearing counter-intuitive, maintains IS's perception as a trustworthy source of information. This is particularly important in recruitment efforts, and makes it difficult for governments to challenge the IS's claims in counter-propaganda.

For IS, maintaining a twisted sense of chivalrous virtue remains paramount.

Spain and the clash of civilisations

The Barcelona attack also reflects IS's view of the world as a civilisational clash.

Described as a "[reluctant partner](#)" in the anti-IS coalition, Spain has resisted entreaties to join military efforts. Instead, it has opted for what it sees as a less risky role – providing logistical aid and [training](#) to local Iraqi forces, as well as [preventing homegrown attempts](#) to support IS abroad.

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Spain's limited role in the fight, particularly in contrast to other terror victims such as France and the US, might lead one to expect it to be relatively low on IS's hit list.

But in terms of IS's conflict narrative, Spain represents just another manifestation of a hostile Western civilisation in a state of war against the Islamic community. This leaves it more than open for reprisals.

At a spiritual level, Spain also holds a special place in IS's mythology. Once a part of the Islamic empire, *al-Ándalus*, as it is known in Arabic, is seen by many IS ideologues as a natural territorial part of the end-state caliphate and currently under direct occupation by infidels.

Shock and bore

Terrorist reprisals like this attack are likely to intensify temporarily against Western targets throughout Europe and further abroad over the coming months and years, as the IS is systematically deconstructed on its home turf in Iraq and Syria.

IS remains heavily dependant on an image of defiant dynamism and a commitment to challenge the international status quo, which it claims subjugates the chosen community. As its ability to function as a "state" continues to decline, it will increasingly seek to maintain such a mystique through acts of spite against those that have prevented it from achieving its goal of a "caliphate".

Despite a likely future increase in terrorist attacks, IS also risks a growing public disinterest and apathy toward its activities.

As one commentator [has written](#), the banality and nontheatrical nature of IS's approach to terrorism – particularly in contrast to al-Qaeda's keen eye for spectacular symbology – has left many onlookers less than impressed and far from terrified.

Ben Rich does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations

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