

How radicalizing agents mobilize minors to jihadism: a qualitative study in Spain

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In the context of the global jihadist mobilization triggered by the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2012 and the subsequent emergence of Islamic State, children and adolescent recruitment have reached unprecedented levels in Spain. Between 2013 and 2019, 43 jihadists were arrested in this country due to their involvement in the indoctrination and recruitment of individuals below 18 years of age. How did they attempt to mobilize minors in support of global jihadism? Adopting a qualitative approach to address the question, this article relies on evidence collected from both primary sources (police reports, judicial documents, court hearings, as well as interviews) and secondary sources (press reports and published biographical accounts). The results indicate that their radicalization strategies varied as a function of the existence of previous personal ties between the recruiter and the minor; the age of the minor; and the environment in which the process unfolded. The interaction of these three factors generate the outline of three different formulas used in Spain for jihadist indoctrination of underage youth: one unfolds within the family milieu, another within social circles, and a third via cyberspace.

Keywords: jihadism; radicalization; recruitment; minors; Spain; Islamic State.

Introduction

Minors have been a strategic goal of global jihadism since the very emergence of Al Qaeda in 1988. Two of its founders, Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden, justified and even argued in favour of the participation of persons below 18 years old -age cutoff for the end of childhood for the United Nations (UN)- both in ‘defensive jihad’ against international troops deployed in Muslim majority countries and in offensive terrorist actions in other parts of the world (Azzam, 1984; bin Laden, n.d.; U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service Report, 2008). They did so based on two principal criteria: on the one hand, they were stimulated by practical concerns which advised terrorist organizations to cover their functional and operational gaps and shortcomings

with individuals that were easy to indoctrinate, instruct and discipline; on the other hand, they were guided by the jurisprudence of fundamentalist *sheiks* which hold that both adults and minors of a certain age are equally obliged to participate in the violent defence and promotion of Islam (Bloom & Horgan, 2019; J.P. Singer, 2015). Jihad was thus seen by Al Qaeda founders as an individual duty for young Muslims, particularly when children reach puberty, a time in life at which practicing the five pillars of Islam - starting by the acts of worship- becomes obligatory to them (Akbar Mahdi, 2003; U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service Report, 2008).

Ever since Al Qaeda began deliberately targeting children and adolescents, other terrorist organizations espousing variants of the Salafi-Jihadist ideology have also mobilized minors. In the context of this study, minors' mobilization to jihadism means the process whereby individuals below 18 years of age are driven from adopting a Salafi-jihadist belief to engaging in activities in support of that extremist ideology. According to the latest UN Secretary-General's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict, published in June 2019, at least 17 jihadist armed groups operating in 11 countries exploited individuals from eight to 17 years of age to serve combat roles, to transport military equipment, to carry out suicide attacks or for sexual exploitation, among other functions (United Nations, General Assembly, Security Council, 2019).

This global trend on juveniles' recruitment significantly increased following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2012 and the subsequent emergence of Islamic State (IS). Especially after the proclamation of its caliphate in June 2014, IS actively contributed to the doctrine on minors' involvement in jihad to ensure long-term survival, expand territorial control and compensate for militant losses (McCue et. al., 2017). Through its propaganda, the organization advocated for the enlistment of 'child soldiers' by invoking Qur'anic sources that relate the story of two fifteen-year-olds who

made a key contribution to the first military victory of the Prophet Muhammad (The lions of tomorrow, 2015). The media content produced by its official propaganda outlet also frequently featured children and adolescents either participating in violent activities or being exposed to violence, attempting to normalise the use of underage youth for terrorist purposes and openly espousing their indoctrination and training (Benotman & Malik, 2016; National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism and General Intelligence and Security Service, 2017). According to official figures, thousands of minors have been associated with IS in its former main strongholds in Syria and Iraq, as well as in other countries where it has local branches, such as in Afghanistan, Libya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Pakistan or Somalia (United Nations, General Assembly, Security Council, 2017, 2018, 2019). Furthermore, significant numbers of juveniles mobilized in countries where the jihadist organization does not maintain territorial control or a sustained presence. Only in Western Europe, more than a thousand minors were recruited since 2012, mostly to serve as foreign terrorist fighters in Syria or Iraq (Simcox, 2017; Cook & Vale, 2019).

It is in the context of the Syrian civil war and the emergence of IS that the radicalization and recruitment of children and adolescents also reached in Spain unprecedented figures. Between 2013 and 2019, at least 43 individuals were arrested for their engagement in the indoctrination of persons who had not yet come of age, among other jihadist actions. The number of minors associated with jihadi terrorism in Spain also reached an all-time high. During these seven years, ten adolescents over 14 years of age -the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Spain- were convicted for their participation in jihadist activities; one more was killed in a police raid against the perpetrators of the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks in August 2017, in which he participated; at least fourteen individuals under 18 years old who were residents of

Spain managed to integrate into the ranks of jihadist organizations established in Syria and Iraq, four of whom returned from the conflict area. Over the same years, another 17 jihadists began their radicalization processes before turning 18, even if they were arrested or died after¹.

Despite of this recent surge of children and teenager's recruitment to jihadism in Western democratic societies -as the Spain's case exemplifies-, there is very little published research on this topic. Most of the related literature in the field of terrorism studies has focused on juveniles mobilization techniques used by jihadist organizations in conflict contexts, which are determined by factors such as the institutional resources managed by these entities in areas under their control (schools, madrasas, mosques, orphanages); its predatory and coercive methods, sometimes extreme, of child recruitment; the existence of social environments that are supportive of jihadist groups (families, communities); the everyday presence of violence and its communal acceptance, to which underage youth are exposed both directly (experiencing deaths or witnessing bombings, public amputations or executions) and indirectly (through the constant exhibition of violent contents, as Islamic State supporters used to do in schools and public spaces in IS-held territories); as well as the structural conditions that put children and teenagers at risk of association with armed groups (for instance, uncontrolled population growth or poverty) (Almohammad, 2018; Asal et. al, 2008; Horgan et. al, 2016; McCue et. al., 2017; Morris & Dunning, 2018; O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018).

Nevertheless, it is clear that drivers of minor's participation into terrorist violence differ between youth living in contexts of political violence and armed conflict and those who reside in areas far from a war theater. Although studies have pointed out some factors that play a key role in minors' mobilization into jihadism in Western

countries, such as family membership in extremist groups, or Internet and social media, which have made accessible information from the battlefield and connections with IS members, as well as enabled access to propaganda materials and salafist-jihadist preachers (Horgan et. al, 2016; Malik, 2019; O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018), research has yet to systematically investigate children and teenager's recruitment techniques used by movement entrepreneurs outside conflict areas.

The present study aims to broaden the empirical literature on minors' jihadist mobilization by focusing on the strategies put into effect in Spain between 2013 and 2019. To that end, the tactics and procedures employed by 43 jihadists in the indoctrination and recruitment of children and adolescents have been analysed, as well as the contexts and environments where these processes took place. Based on this empirical and analytical foundation, the present study proposes a preliminary typology of the formulas used to mobilize and recruit minors.

Formulas shaping jihadist mobilization of minors in Spain

43 individuals were arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2019 for mobilizing children and adolescents. This group was comprised of 30 men and 13 women. Their ages ranged between 17 years and 52 years at the time of their detention ($M= 29.0$; $SD=9.9$). Four of them were minors themselves. Nearly half had children. Ten resided in the province of Barcelona; ten in the autonomous city of Melilla, an enclave under Spain's sovereignty located on the north coast of Morocco; six in Ceuta, a Spanish city also situated in the north of Africa; and another four in the Catalan province of Girona. Other 11 lived in eight more provinces, while the remaining two resided in France. All of them, except two, held IS as their reference organization, although seven also considered as a reference organization Al Qaeda and its territorial branches in Syria

(initially called the al-Nusra Front) and in the north of Africa (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), as well as an associated entity, at the time still existing as such, the Movement for Unicity and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJWA).

A qualitative method has been taken in this investigation in order to establish the main temporal, spatial and procedural dimensions of the dynamics that drive the mobilization and indoctrination of minors in Spain. The findings presented in this research are built on data collected mostly from primary sources (police reports, judicial documents, court hearings, as well as interviews with police experts and first-line practitioners with first-hand knowledge about some of the individuals that make up the universe of study) and, to a lesser extent, from secondary sources (press reports and published biographical accounts).

Based on an analysis of the empirical evidence gathered, this article proposes a typology of formulas employed by these 43 radicalizing agents in the jihadist recruitment of individuals who have not reached adulthood. This typology is based upon the identification of three factors which in Spain have noticeably shaped efforts to recruit children and adolescents.

The first of these determining factors in the jihadist mobilization of minors is the existence of previous social bonds between the recruiter and the minor. The incidence of this variable is extraordinarily high: 36 out of the 43 individuals studied in this article (83.7%) attempted to recruit children and adolescents from their immediate daily environment, with whom they had often overlapping ties of kinship, friendship or neighbourhood. Fact is that pre-existing personal bonds with other jihadists are common among those implicated in jihadist activities in Spain (Reinares et. al, 2017). However, these social ties take on even greater importance in the case of individuals under 18 years of age, given that they are particularly vulnerable to influences emanating from

their closest circles (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Richards, 2011; Van der Heide & Geenen, 2017)

A second factor that plays a role in determining the techniques used in minors' mobilization is the scenario in which the processes of jihadist radicalization and recruitment unfolded. This factor is closely linked to that of the recruiter's previous knowledge of the person who is the target. It has been observed that when the radicalization agent and the minor both knew each other before, the interaction between the two tends to take place primarily in an offline environment. By contrast, when no previous knowledge or contact existed between the two, the interaction tends to begin online, and it also continues to develop, largely, in the cyberspace.

Finally, the recruitment formula is influenced by a third factor: the age of the minor to be mobilized. It is logical that the extraordinary dependence on the family during the first years of life makes it difficult for anyone without family ties to establish contact with a child and indoctrinate them for an extended period of time. On the contrary, to the degree that the child grows and advances from infancy to adolescence, the individual acquires a sense of autonomy from the family, begins to move within new social environments, and to intensify the use of new technologies. In consequence, the radicalization and recruitment formulas to which they could potentially be exposed to expand.

The interaction of these factors (the prior existence of social ties and their type; the scenario where the process is to take place, and the age of the minor) generates the outline of three formulas used in the jihadist mobilization of juveniles (Figure 1). The first, the 'intra-family formula', was used by 22 of the 43 radicalizing agents studied, who tried to exert influence over members of their own nuclear family. The ages of the minors ranged from early infancy to 17 years of age. Up to 18 subjects recruited friends,

partners, neighbours or acquaintances through the 'extra-family formula within the immediate environment'. Finally, 12 individuals followed the 'extra-family formula in the non-immediate environment,' to mobilize minors with whom no previous social bond existed, and with the initial tie made primarily online. These minors were between 13 and 17 years old, an age range when access to and consumption of Internet contents tends to rise with respect to earlier ages, along with other risk factors which facilitate virtual interaction with radicalization agents. On occasion, the same radicalizing agent used more than a single formula for mobilizing juveniles.

[Table 1 here]

Children and adolescent's socialization are a complex, dynamic process comprised of multiple actors and interactions. This entails that radicalization agents' attempts to indoctrinate underage youth were counterbalanced by other social forces that hindered, altered or even halted the recruitment dynamic. Minors' not completing the mobilization process -despite indoctrinator's diligence- may have also resulted from other circumstances, such as their moral rejection of violence or the perceived costs of militancy (Cragin, 2014). Be that as it may, it is safe to assume that not all of the radicalization agents analysed in this study succeeded in associating children and teenagers with global jihadism. According to the information available, 16 out of the 43 recruiters (37.2%) failed in their attempts to attract new followers. On the contrary, the remaining 27 (62.8%) managed to involve underage youth in a wide variety of actions, ranging from disseminating propaganda online to radicalizing other individuals, as well as joining the ranks of jihadist organizations in conflict theatres or planning and carrying out terrorist attacks in Spain. In a number of cases, it is apparent that

mobilizers took advantage of minors' young age to involve them in actions they did not have control over, such as, for instance, travelling to IS territory.

Irrespective of the results of radicalization agents' efforts, this article sets out to systematically explore the techniques put into practice by all the individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2019 for their alleged role in the jihadist mobilization of children and adolescents. The following sections examine and illustrate in more detail the three formulas for radicalization and recruitment of minors that they used.

The intra-family formula for mobilizing minors

As the family represents the first group to which a minor belongs, most of the primary political socialization, as well as the fundamental norms and social values acquisition, takes place within it. This makes the family the most propitious environment for the adoption of ideologies and the development of behaviours from a very early age. In this sense, an analysis of the empirical evidence gathered in the case of Spain reveals that parents' or older brother's alignment with Salafi-jihadism and their involvement in jihadi activities tends to generate enabling conditions for minors' radicalization. In some cases, this even leads to a parallel effort of immediate relatives to explicitly inculcate them with values and behaviours consistent with this fundamentalist and violent way of understanding Islam.

Among the 22 radicalization agents who followed the 'intra-family' formula, 13 were parents (59.1%) who attempted to mobilize their children in support of global jihadism. This mode of exercising parental responsibilities demonstrates that jihadists do not perceive a contradiction in combining their parental role with their political conviction and militant commitment. Such an alignment of identities results from bellicose Salafism promotion of parenthood as a form of activism, that is to say, as an opportunity for its followers to both reaffirm their cognitive and behavioural

engagement with global jihadism and to meet the collective expectations of this ideological movement. As a matter of fact, ‘activist parenting’ is explicitly encouraged by jihadist organizations. Through their propaganda they incite progenitors, particularly mothers, to raise ideologically aligned children and advocate initiating indoctrination from early childhood to prevent later ideological dissonances between parents and children (Sister Al, 2001; Sumayyah al-Muhajirah, 2015; The woman is a shepherd in her husband’s home and responsible for her flock, 2017).

The present research shows that older brothers have also contributed to building intergenerational solidarity with this movement by encouraging their smaller brothers to identify with and support jihadist organizations. This was the case for 9 of the 22 radicalization agents (40.9%) who resorted to the ‘intra-family’ formula. Their strong influence over their younger siblings may have stemmed from the closer relationship and frequent contact that existed between them, in contradistinction with the parent-child gap that occurred due to the formers being absent during the social and emotional development of their offspring. Older brothers may have also acted as role models because of having coped in the past with the same conflicts and tensions that their small siblings would face, usually related with identity uncertainties or perceived discriminations. This is particularly true for the younger members of a jihadist cell formed in the town of Ripoll, in Girona province, who adopted Salafi-jihadi ideas under the direct influence of their older siblings, who in turn had been indoctrinated by a local imam. In mid-August 2017, the cell carried out two terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, killing 16 people (Reinares & García-Calvo, 2018).

Family efforts geared towards radicalizing minors in Spain were initiated, in a number of cases, when the potential recruits were at the first stages of child development. Two principal mechanisms were elicited with that purpose. The first

technique focused on teaching children to imitate the type of behaviour which makes up the action repertoire of jihadist organizations, and to integrate into their vocabulary the usual terms of the aggressive rhetoric they employ. Evidence of this child instruction practice can be clearly seen in a phone conversation between a thirty-year-old Moroccan woman resident in the Barcelona metropolitan area and the top commander of an IS military unit in Syria. During the call, the mother encourages her three-year-old son to follow her directions in order to impress the IS combatant:

-Mother: Tell him 'I will behead the police officer and I will go [to Syria]'.

-Son: I behead the police officer...

-Mother: How are you going to do? This way: 'gjjjj'. He is going to behead the police officer and he will go to see you.

(...)

-Mother: Tell him 'I miss you'.

-Son: I miss you...I want to go with the mujāhidīn.

(...)

-Mother: Who is our emir? Our emir [is] Abu Baker al-Baghdadi.

-Son: Abu Baker Al-Baghdadi... With the mujāhidīn... with [those] who kill.

(Auto de prisión provisional, 2015, p. 3).

The second technique for ideologically and physically training children from an early age consists in exposing them to media material produced by jihadist organizations for the purpose of encouraging them to identify with such entities and trigger positive emotions about its members and activities. Presumably, this practice is also aimed at desensitizing minors to violence. This is evident in the case of a 23-year old Moroccan girl who entertained his 7-year old brother with the same violent videos she was watching while deepening in her own radicalization process:

One day, I was (...) I was watching [a video] while my little brother was sleeping.

Do you remember that plane? De you remember the one who was burnt? The one from the plane? [the pilot] My brother said: 'Wow, that's cool! Put it again, put it

again!’ I rewinded the video, and he said: ‘Wow, how cool! Put it again!’ And now, a time has passed, and he still says: ‘please, I want to watch it, it’s really cool’ (Fiscalía de la Audiencia Nacional, 2017, p. 25).

Once minors grow and achieve enough cognitive development to comprehend basic political concepts, the processes of jihadist radicalization and recruitment become more complex and intensive. Some of the dynamics mentioned above are maintained, such as the exposure of adolescents to audio-visual propaganda, but it is typical for the indoctrinator to introduce general ideological considerations into the discourse, along with orientations concerning partisan and sectarian loyalties. Furthermore, with the progressive incorporation of the minor into other socialization settings –like the school or peer groups–, the immediate relative who act as radicalizing agent increase the control over the minor’s broader environment in the effort to filter unwanted external influences that could operate as players in ideological transmission. Consequently, parenting style becomes authoritarian and obedience is demanded. The following testimony, provided by the Spanish wife of a member of a jihadist cell called the *Al-Andalus Brigade*, dismantled in Madrid in June 2014, describes these tactics in her husband’s radicalization of their two children, a nine-year-old girl and a 11-year-old boy:

He began very lightly, but insistently, to teach them *shuras* and require them to recite them. (...) One day the girl came to me saying that she had come from the cemetery with her father, who had told her: ‘Here are all of the unfaithful and all of them will go to hell.’ (...) He showed the older boy jihadist videos with girls faces destroyed by bombs . . . The boy told me this, crying with terror; he was convinced that he would not be able to sleep. The boy asked that he not been shown this, but his father insisted: ‘You are a man, you have to see it.’ And he would do it during the time when I went down for bread. (...) He wanted to take my son and his friends to a farm that my father has in Avila [were the cell members used to meet]; he wanted to take him to Morocco, also with the same friends, who -- I later

learned -- also were to receive the same orders from their superiors' (Escrivá, 2017, para. 11, 16 and 28).

The complete sequence of actions undertaken by the father – from the rigid teaching of Islamic practices to the attempts to neutralize those voices, like the mother's, that contradicted his discourse – reveals how the efforts involved in the 'intra-family' formula are directed toward the final integration of the child in a radical milieu beyond the domestic circle. Such a preparation for the minor also includes control over their academic education. Thus, it is not uncommon for adults who try to radicalize the minors of the family to interfere in their schooling by impeding them from following their classes as their other classmates. This may take different forms, such as prohibiting them from studying music, substituting their juvenile literature books with Salafī readings, or interrupting their basic compulsory studies to have them trained in religious schools in Muslim-majority countries (Alonso, 2018; Dirección General de la Policía [DGP], Comisaría General de Información [CGI], 2014a; Sentencia 24/2017, 2017).

The dynamic is completed by the elimination from everyday life of any element that contradicts the Salafī codes of conduct. To this end, the home becomes an ideological refuge in which photographs are prohibited, along with the viewing of movies and cartoons, and listening to music, all of them aspects of secular, modern society that are regarded as undesirable and corrupting. But beyond the home, the child is also kept isolated from influences considered to be threats to their Islamic identity. The wife of another member of the above-mentioned *Al-Andalus Brigade* wrote in a personal diary of the kind of family activities that her husband had prohibited her and their adolescent children from undertaking to prevent them from adopting secular norms and practices or interacting with non-Muslims: these included celebrating birthdays or the Christmas holidays; or going to the movies, swimming or the beach (DGP, CGI,

2014a). Conversely, a Muslim convert mother resident in Alicante, in the southeastern coast of Spain, encouraged one of her adolescent sons to join a radical football fan club in Tetouan, some of whose members joined IS' ranks in Syria and Iraq (Sentencia 8/2019, 2019).

By building a highly ideological environment within the family, immediate relatives not only aimed to transmit beliefs and values, but also to promote attitudes and practices. Parents and older brothers who acted as radicalization agents used their role and authority to cognitively manipulate minors, thus shaping the latter's opinion about the use of violence and their willingness to engage in jihadist activities. To this end, the use of emotional-based arguments that espouse sentiments of heroism and courage, empowerment and commitment, as well devotion and duty, became a key technique. When persuasion techniques failed, it was likely that recruiters adopted some type of coercive strategies. This is revealed in the two quotes reproduced below. The first is the instructive speech of a mother of 16-year old twins, all three residents in a medium-sized city in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, who encouraged them to follow the example of their older brother, dead in Syria while fighting for IS. A police operation in April 2015 disrupted sibling's plans to travel to that country. The second excerpt is the rebuke of a father, arrested in Madrid in June 2014, who attempted to impose disciplinary rules with respect to engagement in jihad to his 15-year-old son:

You have to take care of your religion, your education, you have to behave well, you have to adopt your dead brother's good manners (...) you have to follow the path that satisfies God and move away from that which doesn't (Dirección General de la Guardia Civil, Sección de Información, VII Zona de la Guardia Civil, 2015, p. 13).

I feel bad to know that my children have lied to me and hidden things from me since they were very small. I cannot trust you; it seems like you are a two-year-old,

yet those of your same age are already in jihad, fighting the infidels. Be a man and be strong; we want you to be men. You can't keep on like this: 'I have a headache; today I will stay home.' You have to be a man! Do you hear me? It has all been for nothing then. Do you understand me? What makes me sick are your actions. Please pay attention to me, you understand what I am saying... Well, do what you think best.' (Sentencia 25/2016, 2016, p. 124).

The extra-family formula in the immediate environment

With the onset of adolescence, individuals widen their social circles and become exposed to the influence of new socialization agents. In this stage of personal development, the family, without losing its importance, gives way to the group of peers as the principal environment for acquiring beliefs and experimenting with new practices. But in this phase of exploration of one's immediate environment and otherness, the search for social references can also put adolescents within the sights of others in their close circles that can act as transmitters of ideas and practices of Salafi-jihadism.

Of the 18 radicalization agents that followed the 'extra-family formula within the immediate environment' for the indoctrination and recruitment of minors, three of them aimed their efforts at peers with whom they had a close, even special relationship: their girlfriends. Two of these recruiters were minors themselves. Their tactics reveal how they exploited the sentimental bond with the aim of getting their partners to take on the ideological principles of global jihad and to be guided by them. For instance, they constantly ask their girlfriends to read writings about jihad and showed them videos of combats and executions disseminated by jihadist organizations. Their strategies entailed a set of actions targeted not only at their partners but also extended to other members of their girlfriend's closest social network, such as relatives or friends, in order to avoid that they could buffer the recruiter's radical rhetoric. (Dirección General de la Guardia

Civil [DGGC], Dirección Adjunta Operativa [DAO], Comandancia de Melilla, 2014a; DGGC, DAO, Comandancia de Melilla, 2014b; DGGC, DAO, Comandancia de Melilla, 2014c; Mossos d'Esquadra, Comissaria Superior de Coordinación Central [CSCC], Comissaria General d'Informació [CGI], 2015).

These three radicalization agents planned to travel to the IS-held territories and shared their plans with their girlfriends in an attempt to emotionally involve them. This is clearly apparent in the following excerpts from two conversations. The first one is the audio recording which one of these recruiters sent via Whatsapp to her 16-year old partner, before being arrested in April 2015; the second one is a phone conversation between a young Melilla resident and his 17-year old girlfriend, both of whom were detained in December 2014:

About you leaving, I don't know. I have been told that it is haram (sin) to leave behind your family and children and leave. I don't know, I am far from convinced. I don't know, you can go to Yannah (paradise) perfectly by doing what Allah asks of you (...) I don't know why you obsess about going to those countries. If you go there, then take me with out, and that's that, but I won't let you go alone. If you want to go in the end, and I am married to you – insha Allah – then take me with you, but I won't let you leave by yourself. You just don't convince me, seriously. This would be the only issue on which we did not see eye to eye. The only one. (Mossos d'Esquadra, CGI, Área Central de Información Exterior, 2015a, pp. 1005-1006).

Boyfriend (B): Do you love me or not?

Minor (M): A lot.

B: But what if you lose me?

M: I don't want to imagine that.

B: But if you lose me, you already know why (...) I want you to be happy. I want you to say: «He left me to obey Allah, insha Allah». I want you to think that way, and not to think «he deceived me» or other nonsense. Because you know that my intention is to get married with you and stay with you. (DGGC, DAO, Comandancia de Melilla, 2014a, p. 71).

Much like partners, peers can play a key role in minor's mobilization to jihadism. There is evidence showing that adolescents could join jihadist groups following acquaintances who enlisted before them. In so doing, peers act as facilitators who drive their friends into an environment that is favourable for their recruitment, fostering bottom-up radicalization processes. This is illustrated by the case of a Brazilian adolescent who converted to Islam and was then recruited by the so-called 'Islamic Brotherhood, a group for the preaching of Jihad', a jihadist cell that planned to carry out terrorist attacks against different targets in Barcelona city. After interacting with some of the members of the group at a local mosque, the Brazilian joined the cell and brought with him other new members. In particular, he invited a classmate, who also converted to Islam, to accompany him to the mosque and, later on, to the meetings of the 'Islamic Brotherhood.' (Mossos d'Esquadra, CGI, Área Central de Información Exterior, 2015a; Mossos d'Esquadra, CGI, Área Central de Información Exterior, 2015b).

The previous case shows that the 'extra-family formula within the immediate environment' has also been followed by individuals from the minor's everyday life different from partners or friends. It is clear from the evidence analysed that this role was played by individuals who had easy access to young teens and teenagers, which reveals that, when selecting a target, recruiters focused on minors who were already familiar to them. They tried to attract adolescents that lived in their neighbourhood or who regularly visited the same public spaces as them. For instance, one member of the 'Islamic Brotherhood' gave a pen drive with *ayahs* inciting jihad to a student who attended the same school as his children (Sentencia 14/2015, 2015; Sentencia 2018, 2018). The members of this cell, and of another dismantled in Melilla in May 2014, radicalized minors who attended small neighbourhood mosques that they also often

frequented (DGP, CGI, 2014b; Sentencia 14/2015, 2015). In the same vein, a radicalization agent arrested in Ceuta in December 2015 tried to recruit girls who attended extracurricular classes at an Islamic cultural centre directed by his brother (Auto de prisión provisional, 2016). Examples of minors' indoctrinators also include the case of an individual, arrested in 2017 in Melilla, who did a job that provide him with routine access to young people in a juvenile facility (Ortega Dolz, 2017).

It seems certain that most of these adults who acted as radicalization agents of such adolescents were only slightly acquainted with them before the radicalization process started. Compensation for this initial lack of familiarity and intimacy was pivotal in the preparatory stage of minor's jihadist mobilization. Research indicates that some indoctrinators pretended to be friendly and trustworthy in order to build an initial bond of trust, or even attempted to initiate a seductive interaction with identical purpose. This covert behaviour also made possible that radicalization agents gained knowledge of certain vulnerabilities of the teenager (economic, family or emotional issues), which offered them the opportunity to provide social support and portray themselves as someone to whom one can go for advice and counsel. By generating a perception that an exclusive, genuine and affectionate relationship exists between both of them, recruiters were able to increase adolescent's attachment to them.

The significance of this tactic for building trust and, eventually, cooperation can be seen in the case of a jihadist arrested in Ceuta in December 2015: he usually targeted students between 13 and 14 years of age with clear affective needs and then offered to help them. He asked one girl: 'What would you do if you had cancer?' before promising her 1,000 euros and economic assistance for her family if she accepted the idea of going to Syria. He ensured another female minor that he would marry her once they both reached Syria (Sentencia 23/2017, 2017).

In preparation for teenager's indoctrination, recruiters gradually increased the exposure of the minor to jihadist contents and violence supportive attitudes. This escalation in the intensity of ideological transmission allowed indoctrinators to confirm the minor's cognitive opening, as well as to achieve a certain degree of interdependence, before inviting them to private meetings where the radicalization process eventually unfolded. (DGP, CGI, 2014b; DGGC, DAO, Comandancia de Melilla, 2014b; Sentencia 14/2015, 2015; Sentencia 2018, 2018;). An intercepted conversation between members of the 'Islamic Brotherhood' outline this progression in the mobilization of minors attending the mosque:

'Sound out the boys first, and spend time talking to them, a lot, you know? Five months. You get to know them well, you talk with them, and then you know. (...) A lot of the boys here we can help, to begin to talk with them first of *wuḍū'* (ablutions), *salat* (ritual prayer), *'ilm* (wisdom), *'aqīda* (creed), and *tawhid* (oneness of God) and . . . then you bag him! You know? Once they have the path well into their heads, you know? Then you focus them and then they see it (. . .) These times we are in jihad, indeed! The children also have to grow up with lines of the jihad, as well' (Mossos d'Esquadra, CGI, Área Central de Información Exterior, 2015c, p. 901.).

To focus the minor on jihad, as this individual proposes, involves tracking and controlling their daily activities, and even distancing them from their parents and other members of his closest social circle to avoid influences that neutralize the cell's message. The method followed in these cases is clear in a guidance document under the eloquent title of 'Didactic material, teaching and rigid indoctrination in Islam directed at minors' that a foreign terrorist fighter returnee from Mali elaborated and then implemented together with the members of his cell in the Melilla's ghetto where all of them resided. The manuscript advises attracting adolescents with playful or entertaining activities and then, once their loyalties have been won, imposing a program of

indoctrination on them that substitutes television and videogames with instruction in the Koran and Islamic practices, the viewing of jihadist propaganda and participation in Salafist meetings. The handwritten document reveals that strengthening intra-group loyalty was a central step in minors' path towards adopting Salafi-jihadist ideas. 'It all requires patience and many prayers until the result can be seen,' he concluded (DGP, CGI, 2014b).

The method developed by this returnee also contemplated the involvement of the potential recruits in criminal acts, like violent robberies, as an initiation rite (DGP, CGI, 2014b). It is likely that with this ritual he sought not only to test the minors' loyalty, but also to make them subservient to his will, and thereby deter potential desertions. In a similar way, a recruiter who operated in Ceuta until his arrest in 2016 even took occasional recourse to physical violence to strictly enforce the tough behaviour rules that he imposed on an adolescent, to whom he demanded to wear the niqab and instructed in the use of fire arms (Sentencia 23/2017, 2017).

The deployment of manipulation techniques and physical violence seems to stem not only from the interest of radicalization agents to achieve the subordination of the minor, but also from their efforts to reduce uncertainty regarding the problem of mistaken target selection. Kinship bonds, even partnership and friendship ties, increase information about the teenager who is to be indoctrinated, thus minimizing suspicion and distrust. Nevertheless, the recruitment of individuals beyond the in-group entails higher risk, especially in the case of minors, due to their inconsistency and impressionability. To unite the fate of the adolescent with that of his recruiter and to exercise a strong authority over them are two mechanisms used to begin the radicalization and recruitment process limiting the possibilities of desertion cases along the way.

The extra-family formula in the non-immediate environment

The interaction of the adolescent with new socialization actors also occurs online. If Internet penetration now reaches practically all age groups, various risk factors increase the possibilities that virtual contact with jihadist recruiters will be made beginning in mid-adolescence (from 13 years of age). Studies of media habits among Spanish minors indicates that, unlike children and younger teens, those who have reached mid-adolescence a) have higher access to Internet and more presence in the social media; b) have less parental control over their online activities; c) have a greater predisposition to reveal personal information, and d) have a greater tendency to contact with unknown people through virtual platforms (Garmendia et. al, 2016).

The evidence collected shows that these digital behaviour patterns greatly increased the chances available to online radicalization agents' intents upon establishing contact with adolescents. Recruiter's efforts to mobilize minors were also helped by the large number of online platforms and communities (social networks and instant messaging apps) where it was relatively easy to find potential targets and initiate simultaneous conversations with some of them, while at the same time having the advantage of using fake chat identities. This procedure was followed by a 26-year-old Moroccan man -- the leader of a network dismantled in March 2015 in various localities of the provinces of Barcelona, Avila and Ciudad Real-- who acted through an extensive system of false profiles on different social networks: four in Tuenti (a Spanish virtual community for the adolescent public until 2016); seven on Facebook; two on YouTube; and one on Twitter. Through these numerous accounts he could direct himself indiscriminately to a multitude of adolescents, multiplying his possibilities of gaining access to potential recruits. Using different profiles also allowed him to reach the same

person who he perceived might be open to his message, if still reluctant to get involved in any activity (DGP, CGI, 2015).

This individual's method alternated two different techniques for interacting with teenagers: on the one hand, after examining the personal information and the available contents on the profiles to which he gained access, he would individually contact those who he deemed potentially receptive to the Salafist message. For instance, he typically picked those users who showed moral outrage over the suffering of Muslims in Palestine, Syria or Myanmar or who criticized the situation of Muslim communities in the West. On the other hand, he also published messages praising jihadist militants and their actions across a range of social media platforms and disseminated propaganda material, such as photographic compositions with Qur'anic verses or fake news about the situation of jihadist groups in different conflict theatres. Upon tracking the reaction to such contents among his followers, he followed up by communicating with those who commented or shared them (Head of group in DGP, CGI. Court hearing. December 14, 2016).

At the same time, evidence collected shows that sometimes it was the minors themselves who established contact with online recruiters of their own initiative (DGP, CGI, 2015). This demonstrates how Internet also allows adolescents already familiarized with the tenants of Salafism to deepen their own radicalism and even to discover a channel for involvement in jihadism. In this way, the ideological affinity between recruiter and minor favoured fluid communication between them.

Analysed information reveals that radicalization agents who employed the 'extra-family formula in the non-immediate environment' initiated persuasion in their early contacts with their targets. In a number of cases, indoctrinators pretended to share the teenager's innocent interest in religion and tailored their narrative to suit the

potential recruits. Taking a step further, radicalization agents offered their targets to join chat groups where exchanges and discussions eventually turned to jihadism. This was the case of an online activist who tried to mobilize a 15-year old girl in support of Islamic State. The virtual recruiter's method is illustrated in the following quote, which reproduces the initial contact between both actors:

-Recruiter (R): I have a Facebook group, well in WhatsApp, in the group I only have girls, we only talk about religion. When I get home, I will add you to the group. I have a lot of information, and you can ask the questions you want, we send a lot of videos and photos about Islam. When we don't have anything to do, we read and learn things together.

-Minor (M): Ok, add me, so I can meet the girls and talk to them.

-R: They are good girls, there are even Spanish girls converted to Islam. There are too many, more than 100 girls in the group.

-M: From your town?

-R: No, from different places, Valencia, Barcelona, Madrid, Ceuta, America. There are even [girls] from the U.S.

-M: But they are young girls, aren't they?

-R: Yes, there are girls with 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. And there are women aged 30 and 40 years. We usually learn things together, we ask questions each other and we comment. We play quiz games about religion, like the game we played in the bus. (Sentencia 33/2018, 2018, pp. 8-9).

Other cases show how radicalization agents guided their conversation with minors towards jihadism after analysing their interlocutor's vulnerabilities and enacting techniques adapted to them. These involved, for instance, finding individual needs that were not covered, such as affection, attention or care, and, consistently, providing the adolescents with appreciation and a sense of belonging. Occasionally, this occurred after the teenagers themselves openly shared messages related to the issues and concerns in their life, their moods and states of mind. This behavioural progression in the radicalization agents' use of the Internet is apparent in the recruiting of a 17-year old

Moroccan woman who was arrested in Gandía in September 2015, once she began preparing for travelling to Syria and Iraq. The beginning of the process could be placed at the moment when, after publishing different postings in a social media regarding her depression, the teenager was contacted by another girl who acted as a radicalization agent:

‘When I returned from Morocco, I became depressed for reasons connected to family and love. Then I met her. She was nice, and she told me that she wanted to be my friend. (...) She taught me things about religion, about how a woman should dress... She began to speak with me about the Islamic State and to tell me what was happening in Syria. She sent me very good images of the place. (...) I was very innocent, impressionable. She was very kind with me. My friends did not help me much after my break-up [with her boyfriend], but she did. Later I realized that she had tried to split me from my other girlfriends. She told me: ‘I see you on a bad path with them.’ (Defendant in the court record 4/2016. Court hearing. March 5, 2017).

Having introduced topics related with global jihadism in the conversation, recruiters then attempted to progressively intensify the interactions. It was not unusual for those who reached a minor on a social network to try to rapidly consolidate this link via other means of communication which allowed more secrecy. In several cases, indoctrinators had mobile phone conversations with the teenagers they tried to radicalize. Less frequently, they attempted to arrange offline meetings with the adolescent, an option often impeded by geographic distance (Sentencia 11/2017, 2017). For example, the individuals arrested in the police Operation Kibera, which during 2014 and 2015 dismantled the widest jihadist network for recruitment of women in Spain, typically shifted to private and encrypted platforms like WhatsApp for conversations with girls first contacted on Facebook. One of these recruiters, a 28-year-old man from Melilla who was arrested in December 2014, tried to get the address of an adolescent girl who had raised a doubt about Islam in a WhatsApp group. After speaking by phone with her and recurring to tactics of seduction to breaking down the adolescent’s

resistance, the radicalization agent tried to get information about her home to make possible an offline encounter (DGP, CGI, 2014c).

Once the link had been established and the relationship tightened, recruiters attempted to ensure and accelerate the process of involving minors in jihadist activities. With this objective, some radicalization agents sought to involve them in small tasks by which they could hone their commitment and dedication. For example, the leader of a virtual network for propaganda dissemination appointed a teenager as administrator of a Facebook group and provided her with media material for her to publish it. This technique allowed the recruiter to test the adolescent's engagement with the cause while, at the same time, deter her from possibly leaving the mobilization process by prematurely involving her in criminal acts (DGP, CGI, 2015).

In other cases, to obtain the participation of the minor, recruiters relied on persistence and an incremental increase in the intensity of the communications, even using intimidatory practices. This technique was used by the leaders of the Kibera network, who lived in Morocco, with some Spanish women whom they tried to persuade to go to Syria and Iraq. For many months they sent a 14-year-old girl daily messages via a social media in which they encouraged her to migrate to the Caliphate. Later when she began to express doubts, the recruiters threatened to go to her house and force her onto a plane if she tried to pull back (Fiscalía de menores de Melilla, 2014). The adolescent was eventually arrested in August 2014 when she was about to cross the border between Melilla and Morocco after accepting travelling to the IS-held territories.

Conclusions

In the aftermath of the Syrian civil war outbreak and the subsequent emergence of Islamic State, 43 individuals arrested in Spain between 2013 and 2019 attempted to associate children and adolescents with global jihadism. Exploring the techniques used

by these radicalization agents, it emerges that their recruitment dynamics varied as a function of the existence of previous personal ties between the recruiter and the minor, the age of the minor, and the environment in which this process unfolded. These findings allow us to propose a three-formula model of minors' mobilization to jihadism built through an inductive analytical process supported by empirical research. First is the 'intra-family formula,' employed by individuals who try to indoctrinate members of their own nuclear family ranging from early infancy to 17 years of age. Second, there is the 'extra-family formula within the immediate environment,' used by persons who maintain personal links of varied nature with their targets: sentimental relationships, friendships, or neighborhood ties. Finally, there is the third formula: the 'extra-family formula in the non-immediate environment' allows recruiters to use Internet and the social media to make contact with adolescents who they have not previously met and could not know by any other means. While in the first two formulas the procedures take place principally, if not exclusively, in an offline environment, the third formula unfolds fundamentally in virtual cyberspace.

A review of the dynamics and mechanisms put into practice by the 43 individuals who developed these three formulas also reveals the basic elements of the minor's mobilization dynamic, which is aimed at driving children and adolescents from adopting Salafi-jihadist beliefs to engaging in activities in support of that extremist ideology. The study suggests a progression between stages in the recruiter's strategy, which began with the target selection. Indoctrinators generally followed a rational and well-planned procedure to choose the underage youth they would try to radicalize. Among other factors, their calculations were based on the ease of access to their target. Empirical evidence shows that 83.7% of the mobilization contacts took place within the framework of kinship, partnership, friendship and neighborhood ties. Other criteria that

informed the recruiter's selection of followers was an estimate of the minor's cognitive opening to the process, as well as the identification of objective or subjective elements of vulnerability.

The second stage in the mobilization process involved gaining access to the target. It is all the more evident that favorable conditions for interacting with minors exist quite naturally within the family and immediate environment, but the widespread use of Internet also enables contacts between people who do not know each other, thus facilitating interactions between recruiters and potential recruits. Exposure to this kind of contacts appeared to be more likely among young people who had entered mid-adolescence. In the case of those agents of radicalization who approached juvenile targets beyond the in-group, gaining their trust and tightening the relationship with them constituted the next step. The recruiters accomplished this by befriending such adolescents, by pretending to share the teenagers' topics interests or by offering advice and social support, among other practices. During this stage, radicalization agents tailored their approaches to the targets' needs and perceived vulnerabilities and tried to fulfil them.

Later on, indoctrinators began introducing themes related with global jihadism in their conversations with potential recruits. The ideological transmission accelerated progressively. By and large, this occurred when minors became ostensibly receptive to the radical rhetoric and the violence supportive attitudes of their indoctrinators. This escalation took different forms, such as exposing children and teenagers to discourses of jihadist preachers in regular meetings or inviting them to Salafist events. In the same way, underage youth were exposed to media content produced by jihadist organizations, in a desensitization effort for them getting increasingly comfortable with the prospect of engaging in political violence. Other key technique to intensify the adoption of radical

beliefs comprised subjecting minors to an intensive socialization process with others who had embraced jihadism while, at the same time, isolating them from social forces that opposed violent extremism.

If brought to completion as planned, the course of action for jihadist mobilization of individuals below 18 years of age eventually drives them to participating in jihadist activities. In order to accomplish it, recruiters attempted to shape minors' viewpoints regarding the use of violence by framing jihad as a religious duty, by depicting terrorist attacks as a legitimate reaction against all the grievances experienced by Muslims or by portraying militancy as an expression of bravery and empowerment, as well as an opportunity for emotion seekers to engage in combat or find love. Furthermore, before becoming full-fledged militants, potential joiners were tested in their commitment to the cause. Initiation rites also served the purpose of deterring disengagement.

As the analysis of the techniques deployed by the recruiters who used the three formula shows, minors' mobilization to jihadism is permeated by manipulating and coercive techniques throughout the whole process. The radicalization agents studied in this article resorted, at some point and to varying degrees, to a broad repertoire of persuasive instruments, including deception, seduction, emotional involvement, pressure and even physical aggression. These strategies played a number of purposes, namely, gaining access to potential new followers, building trust and obtaining cooperation. The present research demonstrates that minors' mobilization, even when it occurs out of conflict scenarios, cannot be considered as a genuinely voluntary process.

Notes

1. This data have been retrieved from the Database on Jihadists in Spain of the Elcano Royal Institute's Programme on Violent Radicalisation and Global Terrorism.

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Table 1. Formulas for jihadist radicalization and recruitment of minors in Spain, 2013-2019

Formula	Previous social bond and type	Scenario	Age of the minor
<i>Intra-family</i>	Yes, kinship ties	Offline	All stages of infancy, childhood and adolescence
<i>Extra-family within the immediate environment</i>	Yes, partnership, friendship and/or neighbour ties	Offline, primarily	Adolescence
<i>Extra-family in the non-immediate environment</i>	No	Online, primarily	Beginning in middle adolescence

Source: own elaboration.