



Intelligence Bulletin

Reckoning with *Reconquista*:

A Spanish, Alt-right Network Glorifying Historical Crusader Memes to Amplify Incitement Against Muslims and Immigrants

Key Takeaways

- In recent years, Spain has seen the growth of both Anti-Muslim sentiments and incidents ***and*** violent Islamic extremist attacks, with home-grown radicals making up a significant number of the attackers.
- Following a violent Islamic extremist attack against two churches in Spain, on January 25th, 2023 NCRI detected a spike in anti-Muslim rhetoric on Twitter by Spanish users with a substantial proportion of the tweets violating Twitter's Hateful Conduct and Violent Speech Policy.
- The NCRI links the calls for violence to *La Reconquista*, a populist trope that glorifies calls for the historical "reconquest" of Spain from the Muslims with a growing network in Spain which amplifies cartoonish conquistador/crusader images and calls for genocide.
- *La Reconquista* troll accounts on Twitter now impersonate far-left individuals and Muslim immigrants to covertly amplify incendiary content from these groups to inflame ethnic and political tensions.
- As greater immigration and demographic pressures are forecasted to rapidly grow in Spain, NCRI assesses that inflammatory online networks are likely to play an increasingly significant role in the incitement of real world ethnic conflict.

Background

Anti-Muslim sentiments have been growing the past few years in Spain, exacerbated both by a rapid influx of immigrants and the rise of the far-right political party VOX.¹ This rapid rise² in Muslim immigrants has alarmed VOX and its followers, and they have responded in some cases with xenophobic and anti-Muslim sentiment. A core concept of VOX's platform is the idea of a second *Reconquista* in Spain.³ *Reconquista* is a historical reference to the events of the 8th century, where Spanish and Portuguese Christians "reclaimed" the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslim Umayyads through a series of military campaigns. VOX uses *Reconquista* as part of its anti-Muslim message; promoting the ideology that Muslims and Muslim immigrants within Spain have invaded the nation. Following a lethal Islamic extremist attack against two Catholic churches in Spain, on January 25th, 2023 NCRI detected a spike in anti-Muslim rhetoric in Twitter by Spanish users with a substantial proportion of the tweets violating Twitter's Hateful Conduct and Violent Speech Policy.

VOX: The Far-Right in Spain

The far-right VOX party was founded in 2013, but has enjoyed a surge in popularity more recently.⁴ The party claims to defend "traditional Spanish values" from internal (secessionists) and external threats (immigrants).⁵ Vox's manichean⁵ and ultra-nationalist stance appears to foster anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment, both of which have recently increased in Spain.

For example, in April 2019, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, VOX's vice secretary of international relations, said "Europe is what it is thanks to Spain—thanks to our contribution, ever since the Middle Ages, of stopping the spread and the expanse of Islam."⁶ The party also faced controversy when it posted an Islamophobic video that showed a future in which Muslims had imposed Sharia law in southern Spain.⁶ Both of these controversies demonstrate how anti-Muslim tropes characterize Vox, and contextualize its *Reconquista* platform.

Jihadist Terrorism in Spain

Terrorist groups Al-Qaeda and ISIS have shown a specific interest in Spain as a target for attacks. This is attributed to Spain's history of being under Islamic rule from the 8th century to the 11th century, where the territory was referred to as Al-Andalus; Islamic extremists in turn promote a "reconquer" narrative of Spain through these attacks.⁷ Additionally, Spain is a Western nation and one that has continuously contributed in efforts against extremist Islamic terrorist groups.⁷ These characteristics have made Spain the victim of various terrorist attacks, with Al-Qaeda and ISIS claiming responsibility.

¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/spain-islamophobia-hate-crime-racism-wave-sweeping-south>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/446225/number-of-immigrants-into-spain-by-nationality/>

³ <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-vox-party-partido-vox/>

⁴ <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019851680>

⁵ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/07/30/who-are-vox-and-who-are-their-voters/>

⁶ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/27/spains-vox-party-hates-muslims-except-the-ones-who-fund-it-mek-n-cri-maryam-rajavi-pmoi-vidal-quadradas-abascal/>

⁷ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26514861>

Nevertheless, lone actors and home-grown terrorists are Spain's largest terrorism threats.⁸ Evidence suggests that Salafi-jihadist ideology is growing⁹ and online radicalization appears to be playing a central role. A 2017 case study found that of the 178 Salafi-jihadists detained for criminal acts, almost half were foreign immigrants with nearly 75% being radicalized either partially or entirely online; many on mainstream platforms.⁹

2021 marked the seventh year that Spain remained on high alert for terrorist attacks.¹⁰ The Intelligence Center for Counterterrorism and Organized Crime (CITCO) and other Spanish government bodies continue to make efforts against terrorism. However, according to an article in the *The Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses (CTTA) Journal*, CITCO fails to consider "socioeconomic and cultural factors" in their counter-terrorism strategies.¹¹

Far-Right Hate Crimes and Terrorism

In 2021, the Spanish police investigated 1,802 hate crimes, according to a report from the Interior Ministry.¹² This represents a 5.6% increase from 2019, which was the last year hate crimes were studied, and a 42% increase from 2016.¹²

The growth of the VOX party has coincided with the normalization of xenophobia in Spain and the recent rise in hate crimes.¹³ In January 2021, Twitter blocked VOX's account for "inciting hate" against Muslims by starting the #stopislamization campaign.¹³ President of Al-Fanar Foundation for Arab Knowledge Pedro Rojo said that VOX's discourse has led "a handful of people to believe that it is legitimate to attack and even murder people."¹³

Spain has also seen far-right terrorist attempts. In 2020, the Spanish police arrested two men in Andalusia and Pamplona planning to start a "race war".¹⁴ The suspects were inspired by fellow white supremacist Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch mosque shooter.¹⁴

Algeciras Terrorist Attack

On January 25th, 2023 a man wielding a machete attacked several people at two Catholic churches in the port city of Algeciras.¹⁵ The suspect first entered the church of San Isidro, where he allegedly attacked Antonio Rodriguez, the parish priest. The suspect then went to the church of Nuestra Senora de La Palma where he allegedly killed a verger, Diego Valencia, with the machete.¹⁵ The parish priest at Nuestra Senora de La Palma told broadcasters that the suspect went straight for Valencia once the mass had finished, suggesting he might have believed

⁸ https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/02/26/inenglish/1551173888_956366.html

⁹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319493051_Differential_Association_Explaining_Jihadi_Radicalization_in_Spain_A_Quantitative_Study

¹⁰ <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/spain>

¹¹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26514861>

¹² <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/hate-crimes-continue-to-rise-in-spain-says-interior-minister/2701499>

¹³ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/spain-islamophobia-hate-crime-racism-wave-sweeping-south>

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/spain-crime-supremacists/spanish-police-arrest-two-for-selling-drugs-to-finance-race-war-idUSKBN28N0B8>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/least-1-dead-4-injured-by-man-wielding-samurai-sword-southern-spain-church-el-2023-01-25/>

Valencia was the priest.¹⁵ The National Court said the man was also suspected of having injured three other people in the attack.

The suspect was identified as Yassine Kanjaa, a 25-year-old Muslim Moroccan immigrant. The National Court ordered Kanjaa to be remanded in custody without bail on charges of murder and terrorism.¹⁶ During the attack, Kanjaa also attacked a Moroccan man he “considered to be an infidel” because he believed the man had renounced Islam.¹⁶ The National Court said the acts could be classified as a jihadist attack because Kanjaa’s actions appeared to be motivated by his faith and radical beliefs. The court said that Kanjaa fits the profile of a “self-indoctrinated terrorist who acts individually without direct ties with a terrorist organization but who carried out their actions in the name of the jihadist phenomena.”¹⁶

Spike in Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

The NCRI reports a spike in anti-Muslim rhetoric on the social media platform Twitter from January 25-26, 2023 following the terrorist attack. Four key words were used in the search, including the words *moros*, *islamismo*, *yihadista*, and *reconquista* (see table below).

Word	Definition ¹⁷	Context
<i>Moros</i>	<i>Moors (n.)</i> “The Moors were a Muslim people who established a civilization in North Africa and Spain between the 8th and the 15th centuries A.D.”	Generally refers to individuals of African or Arabic descent who practice Islam; typically Morroccans. A racial slur.
<i>Islamismo*</i>	<i>Islamism (n.)</i> “The religion or culture of Islam”	The act of imposing Islamic values on the Spanish government.
<i>Yihadista*</i>	<i>Jihadist (n.)</i> “An Islamic fundamentalist movement that favors the pursuit of jihads in defense of the Islamic faith”	Used by the far-right to create an image that all Muslims are extremists or pose a danger to Western civilization.
<i>Reconquista</i>	<i>Reconquest (n.)</i> “The act of conquering a country or territory again after having lost it”	Specifically the Christian Spanish Reconquest of Spain from the Umayyads in the 8th century.

¹⁶<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230130-spain-court-remands-church-attack-suspect-for-terrorism>

¹⁷ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english>

* This language is not an automatic sign of anti-Muslim sentiment but can be used as such in this context.

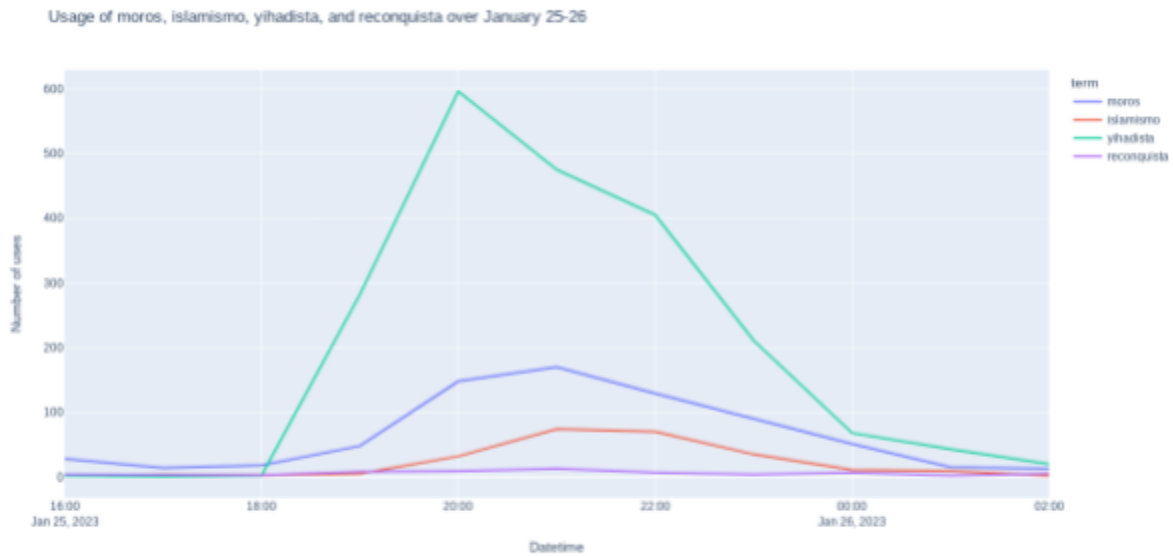


Fig 1. Representation of hourly tweets related to search words between January 25-26th.

Approximately 3,500 tweets were pulled from 16:00 January 25, 2023 to 2:00 January 26, 2023, as shown in Figure 1. The word *yihadista* had the highest peak with roughly 600 uses at 20:00 January 25, 2023. While this term is not always associated to radical anti-Muslim sentiment, the spike in its use demonstrates how the conversation on Twitter was influenced by the attack in Algeciras. The next largest spike was for the word *moros* with close to 200 uses at 21:00 January 25, 2023. This word is used more frequently as a slur, which makes its increased use during the spike more alarming. The other two words studied, *islamismo* and *reconquista*, saw much smaller jumps in use. (See Figures 12-22 for examples of violent speech and hateful conduct violations during the spike)

“Moros” Tweets

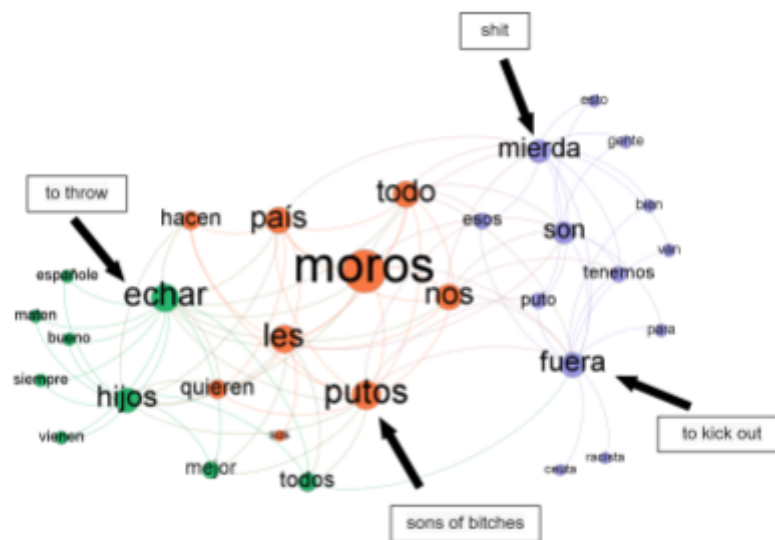


Fig 2. Frequency of words within the moros search, for all translations see appendix.

The NCRI created a topic network highlighting the most frequently used words associated with tweets that included the keyword *moros* (Figure 2). Larger nodes indicate more frequent use, and the proximity indicates the association of the words used. Some of the larger nodes in the topic network, such as “fuera,” demonstrate Spanish Twitter users’ desire to kick “*moros*” out of Spain. The frequent use of profanity, such as “putos” and “mierda,” also indicates animosity towards the “*moros*.”

Inflammatory themes among some of the tweets are calls for violence and retaliation. One of the more popular tweets in the *moros* search was the following, in which the user expresses the desire for others to attack and kill “*moros*” in Algeciras (Figure 3).



Translation. "I hope that all the Catholics and nationalists of Algeciras go to the neighborhoods where the moors live and leave them like the streets of Aleppo."

Fig 3. User violates Twitter policy and incites violence against moors

VOX Tweets and “Reconquista”

Vox leadership amplified inflammatory rhetoric after the attack with Party President Santiago Abascal Tweeting “Islam...turns into a danger for the civilization that takes it in” (Figure 4).¹⁸ In the tweet Abascal links to a video of his parliamentary address which referenced France’s expulsion of suspected jihadists. The top reply to Abascal’s retweet mirrors the anti-Muslim sentiment—an image using the phrase “Stop Islam” accompanied by a large red “x” over the crescent and star, a Muslim symbol (Figure 5).

¹⁸ https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1618647623543693316?cxt=HHwWiiDRnYHcy_YsAAAA



Fig 4. Abascal retweets VOX's main twitter account with a video of himself calling Islam a danger.



Translation. "STOP ISLAM... For a Spain free of Islam"

Fig 5. A tweet responding to Abascal's retweeted video

Another VOX account, @VOX_Cataluna, posted a statement made by VOX's Secretary General Ignacio Garriga.¹⁹ The contents of the tweet itself although tame, sparked a series of anti-Muslim tweets in the replies, with one user posting an image describing a conspiracy theory accompanied by an antisemitic and racist cartoon (Figure 6).



Translation. "Why invade a country when you can buy their institutions, turn their women against their men, convert their kids into transvestites, sell the riches generated by your work to foreign investors and import a hostile army of 'refugees' to top it off?"

Fig 6. User shares an outlandish conspiracy against Muslims.

¹⁹ https://twitter.com/VOX_Cataluna/status/1618636071612604417?cxt=HHwWgoDT0cy7xvYsAAAA

VOX's use of "*Reconquista*" is prominent amongst social media platforms like Twitter. During the 2019 Spanish elections, there was a network of 2,897 retweets with the word *Reconquista* mentioning the @vox_es Twitter account.²⁰ However, *Reconquista* is not always referenced by name. Twitter users make various allusions to *Reconquista* and other anti-Muslim historical events (Figure 7).



Fig 7. Several quotes from Spanish Twitter users inspired by Reconquista ideology.

²⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058754>

Troll Accounts in Reconquista

Recently, there has been evidence of troll accounts posing as Muslim immigrants as well as far-left individuals on Twitter.²¹ The accounts aim to slander Muslim immigrants and various ideologies of the left. The NCRI notes that many of these accounts were made in the 2020s and typically follow one another. Another commonality among the accounts is the use of the inverse red triangle “▼” in the account name or description. The red triangle is an anti-fascist emoji, associated with Spanish far-left leaders like Pablo Iglesias and Alberto Garçon.²²

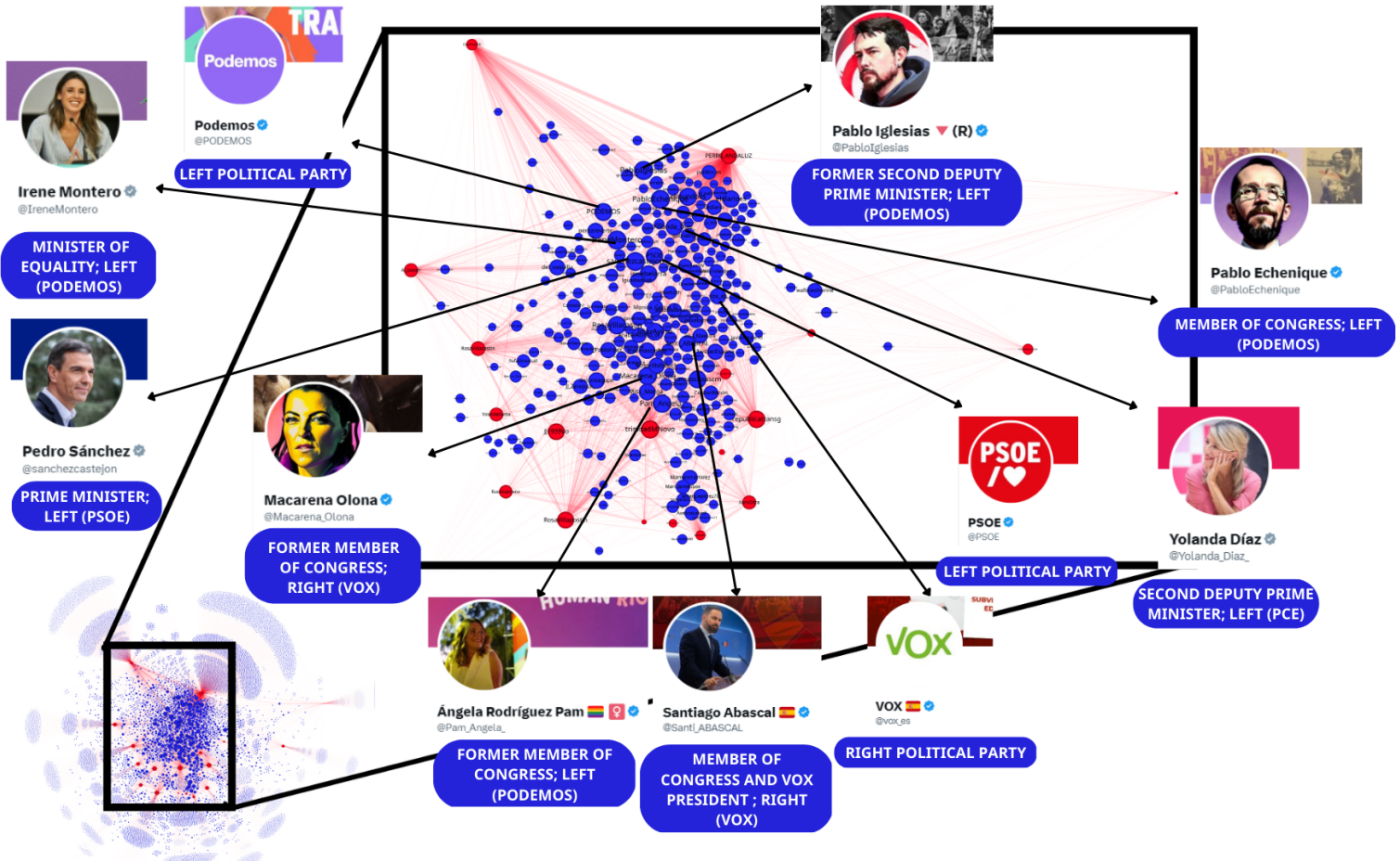


Fig 8. Visualization of troll accounts (red) , their targets (blue) and interactions, in January.

NCRI collected troll accounts through qualitative identification via open source intelligence methods. From that collection, analysts then developed a social graph network on the troll accounts connectivity and targets (Figure 8). Analysis shows that many of the troll accounts

²¹https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/feminista-favor-islam-cuentas-trol-twitter-pasar-migrantes-expandir-odio_1_9899708.html

²²https://www.huffingtonpost.es/entry/que-significa-el-dichoso-triangulo-rojo-invertido_es_5e20a5bdc5b674e44b9472df.html

targeted public figures including the Spanish Prime Minister, members of parliament, left-wing politicians, and journalists (table in appendix). While these accounts are aware that what they spread is parody, they assist in spreading false narratives about leftist and Muslim Twitter users (see Figures 23-25 in appendix).

One user impersonating a Muslim immigrant posted putative images of his accommodations (using a stock image²³) nominally provided by “nuns” to portray ingratitude and hostility (Figure 9).



Translation. "Today nuns offered me free rooming to sleep in while I figure out my documentation. This is the cubbyhole they wanted to keep me in. A hole. Christians are infidels and insolidares. I denounced them and took money to go to a five star hotel. Stop with the racism!!!"

Fig 9. Fake account makes Muslim immigrants appear ungrateful in a tweet directed against Christians.

Because far right trolling is often linked to chatter in 4chan, 8kun, or extremist communities in Telegram, NCRI performed open source analysis on *reconquista* activity in these communities to characterize activity there. Analysis suggests robust activity on both 4chan and Telegram, with numerous communities on Telegram (appendix figure) dedicated to *reconquista* with several thousand followers, complete with inflammatory videos and provocative memes (Figure 10). NCRI assesses that *reconquista* possesses a growing and robust chan culture, replete with diverse ultranationalist and white supremacist propaganda, and enjoys support from sizable extremist communities in the cyber-social domain.

²³https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/feminista-favor-islam-cuentas-trol-twitter-pasar-migrantes-expandir-dio_1_9899708.html



Fig 10. Examples of Genocide glorification and immigrant invasion memes found on 4chan.

Malicious Narratives in the Aftermath of the Algeciras Attack



Fig 11. Tweet sharing a video and falsely claiming that it shows a Muslim migrant in Spain attacking his wife's doctor

Malicious narratives concerning Muslims in Spain continued to be spread on Twitter weeks after the Algeciras attack in late January. On March 5, 2023, a video was posted on Twitter by @MeghUpdates claiming to show a Spanish doctor being attacked by a “radical migrant

husband” after asking his wife to remove her hijab for a medical examination (Figure 11).²⁴ The highly engaging (over 7,000,000 views) video was disinformation- taken not in Spain, but Russia, and not in 2023, rather 2021. It is a video of a September 21, 2021 incident that occurred in Nizhnevartovsk, Siberia. A man assaulted a physician who conducted a physical evaluation of his wife, as a patient.²⁵ Bakhridden Azimov, the Tajikistan-born husband of the patient, assaulted the doctor because he called his wife’s skin “beautiful,” not because he asked her to remove her hijab.²⁵ As migration pressures and ethnic tensions rise regionally in Spain, the impact of deceptive and malicious narratives are likely to become more prominent.

Conclusion

In this report, we have demonstrated the reach of an online network dedicated to the promotion of reactive and inflammatory anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant content. The network is replete with a covert network of imposter accounts, trolls, and populist politicians. Reconquista channels on 4chan and Telegram exhibit a “chan” culture, circulating memes mocking violence against Muslims and glorifying Europe. These types of memes are typical of violent far-right groups across the globe, such as the neo-Nazi protesters at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina in 2017. The growing “chan” culture associated with the *reconquista* movement suggests far-right circles in Spain are beginning to integrate the symbols and customs of their foreign counterparts.

As immigration pressures and culture clashes in Spain persist, NCRI assesses the potential for a simultaneous rise in Jihadist and right-wing populist radicalization, which could lead to violent anti-Muslim attacks and Jihadist terrorist activity. Alt-right groups promoting violent and hateful speech against the Muslim community could result in the radicalization of more online homegrown jihadists in Spain. With the rise in Islamic extremist attacks, and troll activity and VOX politicians reaffirming anti-Muslim beliefs, alt-right anti-Muslim radicalization could occur as well.

The tensions between online alt-right communities and Islamic extremists are longstanding, with episodes of unrest and acute violence from both sides. Spain thus faces a serious threat with online reciprocal radicalization, one that could lead to further acts of violence in the future. As demographic pressures and regional instability persist, Spain is being pushed towards an uncertain future. The methods outlined here could be crucial for more rapid detection of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant content, and for data-informed decision making in future escalation.

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1632567682913685504>

²⁵ <https://www.rt.com/russia/535970-man-in-russia-charged-with/>

Appendix

Examples of Violent Speech and Hateful Conduct Violations



Fig. 12

Translation. "The problem isn't islamism, it is Islam. All of Islam. A sexist moral and ethical code, homophobia, intolerant and incompatible with the ideals of the West of equality, respect, liberty, and tolerance. Islam does not fit in Europe. Islam is the opposite of the West."



Fig. 13

Translation. "In another time, in Algeciras right now they would be hunting moors and hanging them in the plaza. Now you only hear prudence, mentally ill or that we shouldn't generalize all the moors."



Fig. 14
Translation. "Hate doesn't kill, the moors kill"



Fig. 15
Translation. "Everything that has to do with Islamism the Muslim and jihadist should disappear of the face of the earth"



Fig. 16
Translation. "THE MOORS OUT OF SPAIN OR DEAD"



Fig. 17
 Translation. "I would have put a declaration of war against Christians [referring to calling terrorist attack a jihadist attack], and then promoted the annihilation of all the moors"



Fig. 18
 Translation. "One dead and various injured by MOORS in Algeciras with cries of: 'DEATH TO CHRISTIANS' and throwing sacred objects. THE DANCE STARTS."



Fig. 19

Translation. "At this hour there should already be moors decapitated there [Algeciras]. We are at war imbeciles."

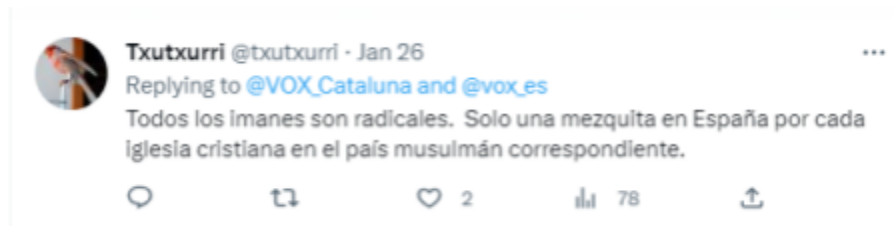


Fig. 20

Translation. "All imams are radical. Only one mosque in Spain for every Christian Church in the corresponding Muslim country."



Fig. 21

Translation. "Reconquista style, but [we] won't only remove the moors but also those who opened their doors to them, they have let them [moors] stay here and they defend them [moors] on the daily."



Fig. 22
 Translation. "What elegance! Dignified heir [Queen Letizia of Spain] to Isabel [Queen Isabella I of Castile], who brought those dirty moors to their knees."

Examples of Troll Tweets



Fig. 23
 Translation. "The tragedy in Algeciras was preventable. Instead of distancing ourselves from our Muslim brothers, like the far-right proposes, we have to adapt more to them, so they feel more integrated and they don't do things like that out of desperation."



Fig. 24
 Translation. "THE SPANISH STATE SHOULD RETURN CEUTA AND MELILLA [Spanish cities] AS PEACE OFFERINGS AFTER THE SUCCESSES IN ALGECIRAS"



Fig. 25

Translation. "Oh my God, the assassination in Algeciras is terrible. I am bothered by this type of news because it gives VOX reason to promote racism. I hope that they bury the assassinated priest quickly and forget about everything quickly for the good of democracy. RIP"

Example of Replies to @MeghUpdates Post:



Fig. 26



Translations for Words in Topic Network for 'moros':

Green Nodes	Orange Nodes	Purple Nodes
españole - Spanish maten - they kill bueno - good siempre - always vienen - they come hijos - sons echar - to throw/put mejor - better todos - all/they all	hacen - they make país - country moros - moors todo - all les - them nos - us quieren - they want putos - sons of bitches sus - their	mierda - shit esto - this is esos - those son - they are gente - people bien - good puto - son of a bitch tenemos - we have to van - they are going to fuera - out/to kick out para - for ceuta - Spanish city (close to Morocco) racista - racist

Troll Twarc Network Annotations:

Account Targeted by Trolls	Position/Importance
Macarena_Olona	Former Member of Congress (right; VOX)
Pam_Angela_	Former Member of Congress (left; PODEMOS)
sanchezcastejon	Prime Minister of Spain (left; PSOE)
PabloIglesias	Former Second Deputy Prime Minister (Left; PODEMOS)
PODEMOS	Left Political Party
PSOE	Left Political Party
J_Zaragoza_	Member of Congress (left; PSOE)
ionebelarra	Member of Congress (left; PODEMOS)
MazelLilith	Secretary of Organization of Podemos (left; PODEMOS)
PabloEchenique	Member of Congress, Secretary of Programs of Podemos (left; PODEMOS)
vox_es	Right Political Party
IreneMontero	Minister of Equality (left; PODEMOS)
Yolanda_Diaz_	Second Deputy Prime Minister (left; PCE, Sumar)
Rita_Maestre	Member of the Madrid City Council (left; PODEMOS)
Ruiz_Noticias	Journalist
julia_otero	Journalist
rosamariaartal	Journalist
RdukeRuben	Activist (left)

Reconquista Telegram Channels:

Telegram Channel	Subscribers
La Reconquista   (@LARECONQUISTA_ESP)	8110
Reconquista Network (@reconquistanetwork)	769
La Reconquista cultural de Espana (@lareconquistaculturaldeespana)	40