

Moroccan Crackdown on Salafiya Jihadiya Recruitment of Fighters for Iraq

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For the third time this year, Morocco has announced the dismantling of a terrorist group. The latest operation occurred only a few months after the complex Belliraj affair in February and the arrest of a cell in May suspected of plotting attacks in Morocco and Belgium (see Terrorism Focus, March 4; June 10). These multiple arrests underscore the importance of the jihadi threat in Morocco but, like the two previous operations, the latest crackdown raises many questions about the nature of the threat.

Police announced the arrest of 35 alleged recruiters for al-Qaeda operations in Morocco, Iraq and Algeria on July 2. According to the police, the recruiters formed an organized network active across the entire country. The arrests took place in Tangiers, Larache, Oujda, Tetouan, Rabat, Khouribga and Fes (AFP, July 2).

The network, which had been under surveillance for several months, was finally dismantled earlier this month, as there were signs of an imminent attack. The local cells were apparently at the stage of pinpointing targets and the group leaders were waiting for the green light from al-Qaeda's core leadership in order to launch bombing operations, according to security sources (Assabah, July 4). If this claim is confirmed, it would indicate that the planned operation was intended to be very significant.

In a recent interview, Abdelhak Bassou, head of Morocco's

Renseignements Généraux, the domestic intelligence agency, said that 11 terrorists arrested in May were preparing attacks planned for this summer against tourist hotels in Morocco. Bassou did not specify whether the cells dismantled in May and July were related. However, he suggested that they were carrying out similar activities—recruiting for international jihad and plotting domestic attacks (AP, July 11).

Local cells dismantled this month across Morocco were only recently activated. New cells have also been created, including those in towns that had been untouched by extremism so far, such as El Hajeb and Taourirt. While several members of the network—including the alleged leader, known by his nom de guerre, Abu Makhoulf—traveled across the country to recruit volunteers, returnees from Iraq were charged with training the recruits according to security sources (Assabah, July 4). Although more information is still needed in this case, the central role played by Iraqi veterans in the creation and training of Moroccan cells should serve as a reminder of the danger constituted by former Iraqi fighters returning to their home countries or leaving for other destinations, following a similar pattern to the Afghan veterans.

Although a wave of returnees is observed, the export of Moroccan jihadis continues. Indeed, most individuals recruited by the Abu Makhoulf network—around 30 jihadi candidates—were sent to Iraq. This represents only a fraction of the Moroccan fighters in Iraq. The data from Moroccan security services indicate that 16 other cells—previously dismantled—had managed to send more than 130 volunteers within the space of three years (Elaph, June 18). Considering that at least 15 more cells have been dismantled, some cells are still under surveillance, some cells are unknown to the police and some individuals travel by themselves, the number of Moroccan fighters in Iraq is probably much higher than official estimates.

A security source revealed to Elaph the detailed itinerary of

Moroccan jihadis joining the Iraqi insurgency. First, they board an aircraft to Istanbul, Turkey. From the airport, they take a cab to a travelers' station where they buy a bus ticket to Damascus, Syria. Once arrived, volunteers wait at a hotel for a smuggler, who is paid around \$15,000 cash per trip (Elaph, June 18).

The Abu Makhoulf network was also responsible for recruiting volunteers to join al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Three individuals were allegedly sent to Algeria. There are also indications that Abu Makhoulf personally traveled to southern Algeria, Mali and Mauritania in order to establish contacts with AQIM leadership (Assabah, July 4).

According to the police, the recently dismantled cells were part of the Salafiya Jihadiya, a Morocco-based Salafist movement. Moroccan authorities blamed this group for the 2003 Casablanca bombings. The Salafiya Jihadiya was also allegedly involved in the 2004 Madrid bombings and was accused of plotting an attack against U.S. Navy ships in the straits of Gibraltar in 2002.

The Salafiya Jihadiya is a particularly understudied and obscure jihadi organization. Its mere existence is challenged by some individuals who accuse the government of using one convenient label for all terrorist activities in Morocco in order to blame international Salafism for domestic terrorism and avoid looking at internal problems, such as low education, poverty and ill-planned urbanization. Most of the suicide bombers of the 2003 attacks came from Morocco's slums (see Terrorism Monitor, May 19, 2005).

There is nevertheless a jihadi current specific to Morocco which can be defined as the Salafiya Jihadiya ideology. It finds its roots in the 1980s, when Moroccan King Hassan II allowed Saudi Arabia to spread Wahhabism in order to counter political

Islam in Morocco. As a result, a new generation of radical preachers was schooled in Saudi Arabia, including Omar al-Haddouci, Hassan Kettani, Ahmed al-Raffiki, Abdelkarim Chadli and Muhammad Fizazi, all considered key ideologues of the Salafiya Jihadiya. After the 1991 Gulf War, however, these radical preachers distanced themselves from the Saudi regime which had helped the U.S. invasion and started criticizing the Moroccan monarchy.

Ideologically, the Salafiya Jihadiya is inspired by the writings and speeches of Sayyid Qutb, Omar Abd al-Rahman, Abu Qatada and Osama Bin Laden. The resulting doctrine is a radical version of Salafism that advocates the overthrow of the monarchy through the use of violence. The Salafiya Jihadiya rejects democracy and accuses the Moroccan regime of apostasy. The Salafiya Jihadiya claims that local action against Muslim apostates is more important than the war against the "infidels."

In the 1990s, Afghan veterans—including Zakariya Miloudi, who was implicated in the 2003 Casablanca bombings—helped establish a jihadi network in Morocco, mainly in poor neighborhoods. These cells today constitute the base of jihadi activism in Morocco. However, it is unclear whether these various cells and networks are connected within a common organization—the Salafiya Jihadiya.

Evidence of the existence of the Salafiya Jihadiya as an operational group is scarce. The Salafiya Jihadiya is most correctly described as a radical ideology, rooted in Morocco and spread by a network of local preachers. The discourses of the Salafiya Jihadiya are used by local militants to recruit jihadis and to legitimate the use of political violence.

Although links between the ideological and operational levels are very likely, it is uncertain whether Salafiya Jihadiya

actually constitutes a cohesive organization. In fact, this seems doubtful after witnessing various Moroccan terrorists and ideologues remorselessly denouncing each other during the trial that followed the 2003 Casablanca attacks. The loose nature of the Salafiya Jihadiya, nevertheless, does not make the jihadi threat in Morocco less real, especially in the light of jihadi groups such as the al-Qaeda-related Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain (GICM). The GICM, assorted local cells and even isolated self-radicalized individuals constitute a direct threat to Morocco and to regional stability as they foster the Algerian and Iraqi insurgencies. The Salafiya Jihadiya continues to promote this instability within Morocco.