

Morocco Charges Cooperation Between Terrorists and Organized Crime

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Moroccan intelligence is claiming its greatest success against terrorism since the 2003 suicide attacks in Casablanca that killed 45 people. Two weeks ago, the government announced the arrest of 35 alleged members of a cell led by Abdelkader Belliraj, who holds both Belgian and Moroccan citizenship. The revelation came as a surprise to Belgian intelligence, which monitored Belliraj and other suspects for years without finding evidence of their involvement in terrorist activities. If Moroccan accusations are confirmed, the case could rock the counter-terrorism community for two reasons. First, the Belliraj network could become one of the most glaring illustrations of a growing nexus between terrorism and organized crime. Second, it would confirm the existence of a long-debated connection between Shiite and Sunni radical groups. The question is whether the Moroccan allegations have any real substance.

Since February 18, Moroccan police forces have arrested 35 persons. Surprisingly, the suspects include politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats, a police commander and the correspondent of Hezbollah's al-Manar TV (Radio television belge de la communauté française, February 21). A stockpile of arms was found during the police raids, including AK-47 assault rifles, Skorpion machine pistols, Uzi machine guns and detonators (Actualités du Maroc, February 20). According to the authorities, it was the most formidable arsenal ever seized in a terrorism case in Morocco.

On February 20, the small Islamist party al-Badil al-Hadari (Civilized Alternative) was dissolved by the Moroccan

government in the aftermath of the arrests, with the government claiming strong connections between the party and the Belliraj network (Le Soir, February 21). Among the 35 detainees, several were affiliated with the party, including its secretary general. The members of the Belliraj network were charged with a long list of crimes led by “setting up a criminal gang to prepare and commit terrorist acts as part of a collective plan aimed at undermining public order through fear and violence” (Maghreb Arabe Presse, February 29).

According to Moroccan Minister of the Interior Chakib Benmoussa, the targets of the cell included government ministers, high officers of the Forces Armées Royales (Moroccan armed forces) and Jewish Moroccans (Le Matin, February 22). Chakib Benmoussa claimed that the Belliraj network had prior contacts with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain (GICM) and the Algerian Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat (GSPC) (Maghreb Arabe Presse, February 20). The Belliraj network is also reported to have sought permission to train in camps of the Lebanese Hezbollah in 2000 (Aujourd’hui le Maroc, February 28).

The allegations of the Interior Minister offer the picture of a terrorist cell that scorns religious and ideological cleavages. The alleged leader, Abdelkader Belliraj, is a 51-year old Moroccan-Belgian Shiite. He moved to Brussels in the 1980s, where he was known for militancy on Palestinian issues. He was also allegedly close to the Syrian Muslim Brothers (Le Vif, February 27). Other members of the network previously had contacts with several radical movements, including Chabiba Islamiya (Islamic Youth), created in the 1970s (Le Soir, February 21). To make things even muddier, some of the suspects, including Mustapha Moatassim, secretary general of the dissolved Islamic party al-Badil al-Hadari, were close to leftist movements. Despite occasional Sunni-Shiite collaboration in the past, the Belliraj network appears to be an exceptional case of a militant Shiite group with ideological ties to far-left politics, created with the help of Sunni organizations.

Other allegations of the Moroccan government are related to events that occurred in Belgium and Luxemburg. According to Interior Minister Benmoussa, Belliraj was responsible for six unresolved cases of assassination in Belgium between 1986 and 1989. Belliraj was questioned by Belgian investigators concerning the murder of the rector of the Brussels Grande Mosque, Abdullah al-Ahdal, in March 1989, but was released due to a lack of evidence (*Le Soir*, February 25). Some of these attacks were claimed by the now-defunct Abu Nidal group, raising the possibility that Belliraj was a hitman for Abu Nidal.

In addition, Rabat pointed to the Belliraj network as the culprits in a series of hold-ups between 1992 and 2001. In 2003, Abdellatif Bekhti, another Belgian-Moroccan, was sentenced to prison for the hold-up of a Brink's depot in Luxembourg in 2000. He escaped two months later and disappeared until his arrest in the Belliraj case two weeks ago. It is estimated that Bekhti received about \$5 million of the \$24 million taken in the robbery. That money was later laundered through Moroccan hotels and real estate and was used to finance the group, according to police (*Le Quotidien*, February 21).

Not every terrorist group receives \$5 million in its bank account overnight. Questions arise over why the group undertook such a dangerous plan and what the ultimate destination was for the funds collected through this and other robberies. There is a growing concern among specialists regarding a potential nexus between terrorism and organized crime—the Colombian FARC and the Taliban are often mentioned as illustrations. But the nexus, in their case, primarily involves drug trafficking. Cases of grand banditry are much rarer. Conducting a major hold-up in Western Europe requires skill, sophistication and careful planning.

Belgian authorities remain relatively dubious concerning the Moroccan allegations. Indeed, Belliraj was well-known in Belgium. He was monitored and even interrogated but always released. According to Belgian intelligence, Belliraj did not have the profile of a terrorist (Le Soir, February 20). Given that there was no bilateral cooperation on this case, Belgian investigators wonder what information Moroccans have that Belgium does not. Belgian police officials have been sent to Rabat to pursue the matter.

Belgian newspaper La Libre Belgique wonders whether Moroccan intelligence officials are not merely attempting to please the Moroccan king (February 22). Some specialists interpreted the firing of General Hamidou Laanigri, head of the Direction Generale de la Surete Nationale (DGSN—Moroccan domestic intelligence) by King Mohammed VI in 2006 as a consequence of the DGSN's poor performance in eradicating terrorism. Another Belgian paper added to the confusion by claiming Belliraj had for several years been an informer for the Belgian domestic intelligence agency, Surete de l'Etat (De Standaard, February 29).

The light has yet to dawn on this case. More information should become available in the coming days or weeks as Morocco and Belgium exchange information. So far, three conclusions can be drawn with some certainty. First, terrorism remains one of the main concerns of Moroccan authorities. Second, Morocco has a willingness to demonstrate its efficiency in counter-terrorism to both its own people and to the international community. Rabat is trying to become one of the world centers of counter-terrorism, as demonstrated by the summit on nuclear terrorism held in February in Rabat. Third, the threat of terrorism is likely to rise in Morocco as jihad is spreading in North Africa and Moroccan fighters are returning from Iraq with lessons to teach to would-be terrorists. It will be interesting to see if the nexus between terrorism and organized crime is confirmed, as well as the alleged cooperation between radical groups with apparent religious and ideological incompatibilities.