

Terrorism in Europe

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In Europe there are distinct groups involved in terrorist activities: those related to European issues like ETA Basque terrorism and those which have non-territorial leftist centred ideologies (for example, the recent threat letters in Italy connected to leftist cells), and radical Islamic groups. Terrorist activities of the latter are often ascribed to al-Qaeda, but, in a way, al-Qaeda is a misnomer: a loosely connected, "franchised" ensemble of terrorist cells, largely autonomous towards each other and having a real capacity for self-financing without reference to the "mother" institution. Their relations are more in terms of knowing each other through the Afghan camps in the 1980s and 1990s (during the fight against the Soviet Union and the period of the Taliban regime) and in consequence of the same antagonistic attitudes towards the West.

Within these groups, one can see two types of actors: those who have roots in the Muslim countries (mainly North Africa and Pakistan), and those who are converts and have joined the organisations after their conversion. Up to now, we know of no member of these radical Islamist cells who had not converted or professed Islam as his religion. On the other hand, there is no known organic link between the al-Qaeda type terrorism and other activist or terrorist organizations. Such links might be established in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya or in some other troubled spots in the world, but this is not the case, yet, in Europe. Among these terrorist cells, the Moroccan ones seem to have a wide influence. The Madrid train explosions in March 2004, according to the latest findings, were sponsored and carried out by these Moroccan cells, although one of their prominent members was from Tunisia.

The cases of England and France

Another feature of European Islamist terrorism is its wide use of recruits whose parents or grandparents came from the former European colonies. Among them two countries have been the major centres for the development of this type of activity: France and the United Kingdom. Though Italy, Spain, and even countries like Holland, Belgium, Germany, and Greece have harboured these terrorist groups as well, but the role of France and England is distinct in so far as many members of these terrorist cells seem to have been English or French by birth or acquisition, their parents originating from the ex-colonies. In England, the Pakistanis or some "Arabs" (coming from North Africa mainly through France and having established themselves in the United Kingdom), and in France, people from Algeria, Morocco or Tunisia have played a significant role in the jihadist activities. This fact seems to be noteworthy. In Germany, where the majority of the Muslim population is of Turkish (or Kurdish with Turkish citizenship) background, the Arab perpetrators of the 11 September 2001, who had spent many months in Germany, did not have any organic link with the Muslim populations of Germany. The ex-colonial citizens of France and England, or those from North Africa (in France), and Pakistan or North Africa in England (but not Bangladesh or India) play a major role in terrorist activities in these two countries in particular, and in Europe in

The terrorist attack on passenger trains in Madrid on 11 March caused shock and anger. Alerted by the assault, political authorities all over Europe have intensified their efforts to suppress jihadist activities. The causes of militant Islamist activism in Europe are often considered to be external, emanating from conflicts in Palestine, Iraq, etc. But any policy based upon this externalization, i.e. denying the existence of internal roots, in particular the existence of alienated European Muslim youth, is doomed to failure.

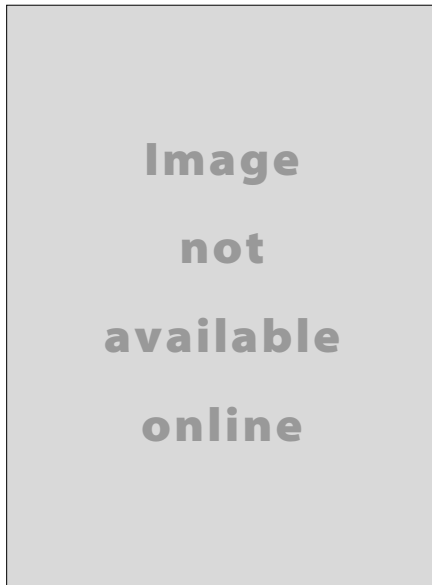


PHOTO BY ANDREA COMAS, REUTERS, 2004

general. The fact that Bangladesh does not play a major role is probably due to its non-involvement in the Kashmir problem which pushes Pakistan to radical islamism. Moreover, Pakistan played (and still plays) a major role in Taliban style activities.

Post-colonial heritage

The reasons for the distinct roles of France and England in the jihadist activities in Europe are manifold. First, the colonial memory has its own say in this matter: many of these young males feel despised or rejected in their new country in France or England. They feel deeply estranged, on the other hand, from the secular and "godless" Western societies in which they develop a counter-secular identity before getting involved in Islam as the major bearer of their hatred or rejection of societies which do not recognize them as such. Among these male youth (in which there is no female constituency up to now), many belong to the lower middle class while some are economically excluded. Some have the European citizenship (French, English, or even Spanish) but some have the North African or Pakistani one: they have been either denied the citizenship, or have simply not asked for it, or did not stay long enough to be entitled to it. In Spain, some have only settled there a few years ago or even more recently.

On the whole, these groups, which constitute a very small proportion of the immigrant population from North

Africa or Pakistan, have developed a counter-Western or counter-European identity. This is mainly due to their ambiguous situation in Europe, as well as Western policies towards the Muslim world, in particular, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Chechnya (in Paris, one dismantled cell had endeavoured to blow up the Russian Embassy), and more recently, Iraq.

The problem of jihadist cells in Europe is, therefore, both internal (estranged people from the former colonies) and external (the spread of terrorist networks with anti-Western jihadist ideologies, favoured by hot issues like the Palestinian and Chechen problems). Any policy "externalizing" the causes, i.e. denying their internal roots, is doomed to failure. Accordingly, any policy aiming at exclusive repression of these youth groups can only be short term and will create new problems as well. A mixture of repressive and persuasive policies is necessary in order to promote an efficient counter-terrorist activity in the long term.

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Anti-terrorism demonstration near Madrid, 5 April 2004

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