

Terrorism in Europe: The Moroccan Connection

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Brief Analysis

The prominence of Moroccan expatriates among the perpetrators of high-profile attacks contrasts with the kingdom's relative success in containing its own domestic jihadism threat.

The recent terrorist attacks in Spain and Finland have been linked almost exclusively to young men of Moroccan origin, sparking concern that the kingdom has become a breeding ground for jihadists. Of the twelve suspected accomplices in the Barcelona and Cambrils attacks that killed fifteen people on August 17, all but one were Moroccan-born or Spanish citizens of Moroccan descent, and the outlier was born in Melilla, one of Spain's two tiny enclaves on Morocco's northern coast. Similarly, of the five individuals arrested for suspected involvement in the stabbing attack that killed two Finnish citizens on August 18, all were of Moroccan origin, and a sixth Moroccan national is being sought in connection with that incident. Moroccan networks were also implicated in at least three high-profile terrorist strikes across Europe in the past two years, including the November 2015 attack in Paris, the March 2016 attack in Brussels, and the failed attack at the Brussels Central Station in May of this year.

In some of these instances, the radicalized individuals came from economically and socially marginalized backgrounds, leading certain analysts to focus on the possible links between terrorism and immigrants' poor integration into European society. This appears to have been the case in the Turku incident in Finland, in which the group comprised largely underemployed, transient, unsuccessful asylum seekers or petty criminals. But in the

Barcelona attack, most of the perpetrators were relatively well integrated into their Spanish communities and did not suffer from any demonstrable economic hardships.

Rather, ideology seems to have been the dominant fuel for that attack, given that the terrorists were reportedly inspired by a local Moroccan-born imam who had developed ties to the Islamic State (IS) while maintaining regular contact with Morocco and with Moroccans abroad. IS propaganda, including Spanish-language websites and social media, had recently intensified its focus on "al-Andalus," as Islamic extremists call Spain in reference to its long history under various Muslim rulers (711-1492). After the attacks, IS claimed its perpetrators as "soldiers" and "mujahedin."

Some Barcelona attackers, however, had a record of drug offenses -- apparently including the imam, Abdelbaki Essati. He, like many others, appears to have been radicalized while in prison for such an offense by a fellow terrorist inmate, also of Moroccan origin and linked to the deadly 2004 Madrid train bombings. Some likewise maintained close contact with family still in their ancestral country, reportedly including a recent trip there by the cell's imam.

Reactions inside Morocco to these incidents have been mixed. King Mohammed VI immediately called Spain's King Felipe to offer condolences, an interaction featured in the mainstream Moroccan press, which has since largely dropped the whole story. Opposition media, by contrast, such as the well-known website Lakome, continue to dwell on all angles of this episode, from personal profiles of the attackers and their Moroccan extended families to speculation about what the tragedy implies about "the failure of Morocco's Islamic reform."

ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN MOROCCO

If Moroccans in Europe have garnered growing attention for their involvement in attacks such as the one in Barcelona, Morocco itself has largely managed to contain its domestic terrorism problem in the last decade and a half. In 2003, in multiple, coordinated attacks targeting Jewish and European sites, twelve suicide bombers killed thirty-three individuals in Casablanca. Since then, the monarchy has devoted considerable resources to countering extremism at home, implementing a mix of robust -- at times controversial -- security measures and educational initiatives aimed at pushing back against violent Islamism.

At the popular level, Pew Research Center polls show a dramatic decline in sympathy for al-Qaeda, down to single digits, after the 2003 Casablanca bombings. The most recent surveys indicate about the same level of lingering affinity for IS, measured at 8 percent in 2015 -- a bit higher than in other Arab countries polled, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt.

On the security front, a 2003 antiterrorism law passed in the wake of the Casablanca bombings significantly expanded the state's security and domestic intelligence-gathering apparatuses, all of which operate under the palace's direct supervision. (Affairs falling outside the foreign policy, security, and religious realms are generally left to a popularly elected legislature, whose largest element is the Justice and Development Party, a moderately Islamist party that pledges loyalty to the monarchy.) The 2003 law drew criticism from human rights groups for broadening the definition of terrorism to include all actions deemed a threat to public order, imposing the death penalty for convicted terrorists, and increasing to ten the number of days for which security officials can detain a terrorism suspect before providing access to a lawyer. Such concerns notwithstanding, Morocco's domestic-monitoring and intelligence-gathering tools have evidently permitted the crown to routinely uncover terrorist cells in the kingdom and, more recently, to track citizens joining jihadist groups abroad.

Indeed, according to unofficial Western expert estimates, between 2012 and 2014 some 1,122 Moroccans left the kingdom to join IS in Syria and Iraq, with an additional 300 believed to have joined the jihadist group's self-proclaimed province in Libya. Seeking to stem the outward tide of these fighters, the government in 2014 amended the antiterrorism law to impose fines of up to 500,000 Moroccan dirhams (\$60,000) and prison terms of five to

fifteen years for citizens seeking to join armed organizations inside the kingdom or in foreign theaters of conflict. Still, recent estimates of Moroccans fighting for IS hover around 1,500 and jump to 2,500 when accounting for Europeans of Moroccan origin. Concerns over the prospect of these battle-hardened individuals returning home via Libya and Algeria prompted the monarchy to reinforce Morocco's military presence along the Algerian border, deploying heavy weapons, antiaircraft guns, and rocket launchers in an effort to deter possible attacks.

Ironically, in the months before the Barcelona and Turku incidents, the Moroccan police presence in the northern coastal region was visibly reinforced -- not so much to stop terrorists but to monitor political protest activity centered in the port city of al-Hoceima. Such steps are generally effective in Morocco, though naturally not foolproof. The terrorist imam Essati apparently traveled back and forth between Spain and Morocco unimpeded, and if Moroccan authorities warned their Spanish counterparts about him, it had no effect.

Alongside the crown's security measures, Morocco has pursued a series of **reforms in the religious realm aimed at reducing the influence of extremist ideologies (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-islam-in-the-battle-against-extremism>)**. These reforms have brought greater state control over religious institutions, including several hundred Quranic schools dotting Morocco's landscape and its roughly 50,000 mosques. School curricula have been altered to promote Islamic teachings compatible with notions of human rights and religious tolerance. Additionally, the monarchy has imposed new training regulations for imams and others wishing to teach Islam. Beginning in 2005, for example, the state began training a corps of imam supervisors, including women, to regularly meet with prayer leaders and ensure that the religious discourse being disseminated in mosques reflected "moderate Islam," as termed by the leadership. Since 2014, a royal decree has prohibited imams from engaging in political or union-related activity while in the mosques, and in 2015 the monarchy injected \$20 million into a new training facility to accommodate not only Moroccan imams and imam supervisors but also a growing number of aspiring imams from West Africa and even Europe.

A principal goal of such programs is to counter the more rigid ideological strains of Islamism affiliated with ultraconservative, or Salafi, Islam. Salafism itself is tolerated in the kingdom so long as it does not promote violence or reject the monarchical framework, and in recent years prominent Salafi clerics imprisoned following the 2003 Casablanca attack have been granted amnesty in exchange for softening their public discourse and disavowing jihadist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The most prominent Moroccan group opposed to the monarchy remains **al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Benevolence), an Islamic movement whose founder and chief ideologue, Abdessalam Yassine, died in 2012 (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-adl-wal-ihsan-inside-moroccos-islamist-challenge>)**. Though the movement is formally banned, the government tolerates al-Adl wal-Ihsan as long as it remains nonviolent, preserving more aggressive tactics for groups espousing violence.

The long-term effects of such measures remain to be seen, but the substantial involvement of jihadists with Moroccan links in European terrorist attacks suggests the policies fostering relative stability at home have not sufficiently undermined the ideological sources of extremism for Moroccan nationals living abroad. Still, the kingdom appears intent to continue positioning itself as a regional model of religious reform.

MOROCCANS IN EUROPE

The Moroccan diaspora in Europe is extensive, numbering several million, compared with a home-country population of around 36 million; but precise numbers, or even definitions of Moroccans by immigration status, vary considerably. Most live in Francophone countries such as France or Belgium, with scattered communities elsewhere across the continent. The overwhelming majority are settled, law-abiding, employed, and official immigrants.

Spain is a special case because of its geographic proximity to Morocco, and its status as Morocco's other former colonial power -- besides France -- controlling the northern third of the country under a protectorate for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Tangier is just a half-hour by ferry from the Spanish ports of Tarifa, Cadiz, or Algeciras, and a one-way ticket costs less than \$50. Many Moroccans in that northern coastal region also speak at least basic Spanish, in addition to French and Arabic -- and sometimes also Tamazight, the northern Berber dialect. Out of a total Spanish population of approximately 32 million, nearly 800,000 are registered first- or second-generation Moroccan immigrants. About one-quarter of them reside in Catalonia, mostly in or near Barcelona. The number of additional, illegal Moroccan migrants in Spain is unknown.

An unusual aspect of the Moroccan diaspora is its comparatively close institutional connectivity. For example, a European Council of Moroccan Ulema (Islamic clerics) works to coordinate communication, charity, and other aspects of community life. And the kingdom itself maintains a relatively strong interest in Moroccans abroad. In late July, to cite but one instance, the prestigious Asilah cultural festival hosted a three-day conference on "Muslims in the West," featuring presentations by several young European imams of Moroccan origin, as well as experts from as far afield as the United States and Argentina.

Given this background, the recent prominence of Moroccan expatriates in jihadist terrorism appears to reflect not the prevalence of fundamentalist extremism in their country of origin but the opposite: Morocco remains relatively inhospitable to such violence for a combination of cultural and security reasons. As a result, the small proportion of Moroccans inclined in that direction have evidently sought sanctuary abroad; others may have become radicalized in their adopted European homes, rather than importing the ideology from Morocco.

LESSONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Two broad suggestions emerge from the preceding analysis with respect to Moroccans' involvement in terrorism abroad. First, the United States should encourage even closer intelligence and security cooperation between Morocco and all Washington's European allies. Filling the empty ambassadorial post in Rabat, the Moroccan capital, would help facilitate such an approach. Second, U.S., European, and Moroccan experts should seek to draw lessons from Morocco's overarching success at preventing jihadist terrorism at home. For example, to the extent Morocco's efforts to enlist former Salafi-jihadists in countering extremist ideologies has reduced the appeal of violent Islamism at home, the kingdom's experience may offer potential antidotes to extremism exportable beyond Morocco's borders.

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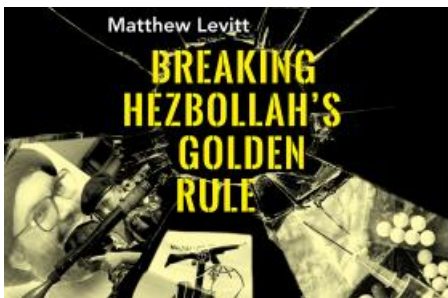
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