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IPRIS Viewpoints

JULY 2009

Combating Complacency: The International Islamist Threat and Portuguese Policy

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Over the last few years, several Islamist terrorist cells have been dismantled throughout Europe. London and Madrid were struck by brutal terrorist attacks, causing hundreds of fatalities and thousands of wounded. Nonetheless, and in spite of its geographical proximity and even its social similarity, Portugal is not considered a likely target and the public does not perceive Islamist terrorism as an imminent threat. There are a few broad structural and political reasons that support this viewpoint, but there are also warnings and national security vulnerabilities that shouldn't be ignored.

Other European experiences

During the 1990's, the war in the Balkans brought to light Islamist activity in the region, frequently connected with al-Qaeda or it's subsidiaries. Albeit with particular incidence in Bosnia, the mujahedin operating in the Balkans - usually former fighters from Afghanistan - were financed and logistically supported by groups established as charitable Islamic organizations. These Islamic Centers, created by or affiliated with the main global jihad leaders, were established in Bosnia, but also in other European countries like Austria and Italy. The role played by charitable organizations is crucial for jihadist movements, not only in Europe but throughout the world. The *zakat*, the act of giving alms, constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. Solidarity is a fundamental tenet of Islamic practice. Helping the needy, as with other principles of Islam, has been perverted by jihadism and transformed into a means to obtain financial resources, which are then used to support terrorist organizations and their activities. Islamism's presence in Central Europe manifested itself as terrorist attacks, money laundering and weapons trafficking, aggressive proselytism, and the expansion of terrorist cells into Western Europe.

France has been the target of several acts of Islamist terrorism, for example, the 1995 attacks by the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) on the Paris subway. In France, the growth of violent interpretations of Islam is closely related to the increase in immigration. This is not because immigrant communities are the core problem, but due to the poorly planned, mismanaged or simply absent social integration policies that have affected them. Although immigration from North Africa to France has been occurring for decades, it was in the beginning of the 1970's that the current social context started to take shape. During this period, a sudden change of policy toward the settlement of immigrants led to a rapid influx of immigrants to France, so quickly and in such large numbers that neither the French nor the immigrants themselves were properly prepared for the economic and social consequences. A situation of mutual distrust and resentment developed amongst the two sides of the society, spawning of prejudice and racial discrimination.

Beyond the normal difficulties associated with adjusting to a new society, racial bias made it extremely difficult for immigrants – and especially Arabs – to find employment and thus become more integrated both socially and economically in the host society. The traditional patriarchal structure of the typical North African family abruptly collapsed as the male head of the household was unemployed and/or the other members of the family tried to adapt to the modernity of their new country. Women often became the main sources of income, as they were able to find jobs in the service sector. In some cases, the man tried to reacquire his predominant role through religion, usually in a more radical form of it. Furthermore, the lack of integration among the first generation caused even more complex and dangerous dynamics in the subsequent ones. These younger generations do not identify themselves as natives of their parents' countries, but they also tend to feel that they are outcasts in France, an identity crisis that has further marginalized young people already separated from mainstream French society.

The 2005 riots in Paris showed how serious this conflict is. Cultural, economic and other factors have led to the isolation of first generation immigrants and their descendents in the *cités*, or *banlieue*, neighborhoods on the periphery of the large French cities. It is this type of discontentment and social marginalization that breeds terrorists, not poverty. Jihadism preys on these people who are poorly integrated into the society around them, offering a sense of belonging, of connectedness, which they are lacking. Islamism gives the socially marginalized a system that answers to their anxieties and grievances and, more importantly, provides them with the ideological and material tools to take action into their own hands. What is especially troubling is that individuals without a Muslim background are also drawn to the alternative worldview provided by Islamism. The *cités* have become *lawless zones*, places where the French state has difficulty asserting its authority, making them the ideal ground for the infiltration of terrorist cells and the creation of underground mosques where aggressive interpretations of Islam are spread. Moreover, these neighborhoods allow jihadism to exploit other standard sources of clandestine funding: drug trafficking and petty crime. Many terrorist cells in France have been dismantled and radical clerics deported, but while the French authorities have compiled an impressive record in counter-terrorism enforcement, their work is far from over.

> Portugal is neither an international nor a regional power. Therefore, attacking Portugal's infrastructure and population would not have the media effect nor the international political consequences that global jihad seeks. We must be cautious about accepting this argument.

In 1984, Spanish police arrested an Iranian operative from the Martyrs of the Islamic Revolution who wanted to attack a Saudi airplane at Madrid's Barajas Airport. That same year, a terrorist cell attacked a Kuwaiti citizen and killed a Saudi engineer in Marbella. A restaurant nearby the U.S. airbase of Torrejón, in Madrid, was bombed in 1984, killing 18 American servicemen and wounding 83 people, and while the details of this event were never

clearly disclosed, police suspected jihadist groups. In 1989, Spanish police arrested a group of individuals in possession of several kilos of explosives and detonators in Valencia, all with strong ties to Hezbollah. For many, the 11th of March 2004 was a surprise, but as the above examples have shown, Islamist terrorism has been present in Spain for many years. However, the purposes and activities of these jihadist groups have changed with the passage of time.

The first Islamist terrorist cells established in Spain, mainly of Algerian and Syrian origin, dedicated themselves to building up their organization through money laundering, financing through donations and petty crime, recruitment, document forging, providing sanctuary for wanted terrorists from abroad, and networking with cells from other European countries. In other words, Spain was a logistic and strategic platform. But it evolved. The 9/11 attacks in the United States showed Islamists all over the world that global jihad was easier to implement than they had previously thought. The Spanish cells, well established and connected with other groups in Western Asia and Europe, committed themselves to directly attacking the heart of Western civilization. From an ideological point of view, this commitment had been made long before, but the aggression took the less visible form of corrupting society through actions such as drug trafficking. Prior to 9/11, large-scale direct attacks on Spain would have jeopardized the organizational infrastructure the cells were building to assist their peers in carrying out attacks abroad. However, with these networks well-established, a major attack on Spain carried less risk.

On the fateful day of 11 March 2004, ten backpacks loaded with explosives were detonated inside trains arriving or parked in the Atocha railway station in Madrid, killing 191 people and injuring close to 2000. Some suspects were arrested, others fled the country, and a group of seven committed suicide when surrounded by the Spanish police in a Leganés flat. The terrorists in custody were tried and convicted, but many questions remain unanswered. Police investigations confirmed the plot's international ties and also unveiled the importance of the criminal enterprises associated with Islamism in the planning and financing of the bomb attacks. Besides the usual means of financing, *locutorios* – internet and phone cafes – also played a relevant role in both funding the bombing and serving as a center for communications with jihadists from other countries.

The latest relevant event tied to Islamism in Spain occurred in Bilbao on 20 March 2009, with the arrest of 17 individuals, Algerian and Moroccan nationals, implicated in thefts, drug trafficking and credit card forgery. They are accused of developing a crime network with the purpose of financing al-Qaeda's Organization in the Islamic Maghreb, a group deeply implicated in the 11 March attacks. After the Madrid bombings, more then 30 counter-terrorism operations were carried out by Spanish police. Islamist activity in Spain continues to be mainly the province of Algerians and Moroccans, although the involvement of Pakistani nationals has been growing. Conquering the historic al-Andaluz Caliphate, that comprised a large part of the Spanish and Portuguese territory, is one of the most frequent calls to arms in the captured propaganda of jihadists, helping to explain the terrorists' motivation and the high levels of Islamist activity in Spain.

> In spite of all the religious rhetoric, Islamism is driven by political criteria, so it is more than reasonable to assume that top jihadist leaders would not dedicate themselves, personally, to attacking a country like Portugal.

Further cases could be presented. Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and others all have well-documented Islamist activity. For the sake of conciseness, an exhaustive description of Islamist activity in Europe has not been given, but the cases discussed above have provided clear examples of jihadist motivations and methods. Furthermore, France and Spain are particularly relevant due to their geographic proximity and cultural connections to Portugal.

Islamism and Portugal

Contrary to other European countries, information in public sources related to Islamism in Portugal is prac-

tically nonexistent. There are a considerable number of academic articles dedicated to jihadist movements in general and to the importance of Islam in the Portuguese culture, yet in the news media, there is hardly any relevant information. In 2004, during the European Cup, there were stories about a man's arrest near Oporto due to suspicions of Islamist activities, but there was no significant follow up. In 2006, Portuguese police arrested a man listed as most wanted by the Dutch authorities due to Islamist terrorist activities; this man, allegedly the leader of a terrorist cell in the Netherlands, was trained in Yemeni jihadist camps. The Dutch police requested the Portuguese authorities' assistance because they suspected that members of this cell fled to Portugal after a shootout in which three people were killed and three others injured. Once again, there was no significant follow up by the Portuguese media. This might explain, to certain extent, why terrorism isn't perceived as a threat.

Islamism uses Muslim communities as a vehicle to penetrate Western societies, using them afterwards as a host. Consequently, part of the low risk of Islamist attacks in Portugal can be found in the origin and structure of the Portuguese Muslim community. The new Islamic presence in Portugal dates from the decolonization process in the 1970's. The most significant groups came from Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, joining a small group of Muslims already in the country since the 1950's for academic reasons. Among Portuguese Muslims, the predominant community was – and still is – the Ismailia, who mainly arrived from Mozambique but are originally from the former Portuguese India. Hence, despite the religious differences, there were no cultural clashes: these Muslims had been part of the Portuguese 'cultural society' for decades. For this community, Islam is an apolitical and peaceful religion. Furthermore, the majority of the members of this Shiite branch belong to an educated middle class, and so they did not face many problems in reestablishing their professional activities, building successful careers in the business sector and establishing close ties with the Portuguese economic and political elites. Ismailias are a good example of the differences between Islam and Islamism. This well established and integrated community largely undercuts the rhetoric of Islamist recruiters, who prey upon economic marginalization and social discontent.

In countries such as Spain, France, and the United Kingdom, where Islamism probably poses the most serious threat in Europe, clandestine mosques and Islamic Centers are usually clusters of radical and violent proselytism and, therefore, the monitoring of them is an essential part of counter-terrorism strategies. However, there is no evidence of the existence of illegal Islamic temples in Portugal and, due to the fact that Ismailias dominate the leadership structure of the Portuguese Muslim community, mosques and Islamic centers in Portugal tend to follow the religious guidelines given by this moderate community. However, there are some signs that trouble may be brewing underneath this appearance of calm. Some mosques on the outskirts of Lisbon and Oporto are not as transparent as the central temples, and there are suspicions that some of them could be led or influenced by more radical Wahhabi clerics.

> Portugal must have a comprehensive approach to security. A closer cooperation between the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior is needed. Today, no foreign policy is effective without the inclusion of the security sector and vice-versa.

Another reason commonly presented for the absence of a risk of terrorist attacks lies in the fact that Portugal is neither an international nor a regional power. Therefore, attacking Portugal's infrastructure and population would not have the media effect nor the international political consequences that global jihad seeks. We must be cautious about accepting this argument, though. First, it lacks any concrete proof to support it, for example in the form of Islamist literature specifically alluding to Portugal's unimportance as a target. Second, it ignores the dominant trend of Islamism in Europe: spontaneous terrorist cells, made of marginalized individuals instigated by propaganda, often without any direct or indirect connections with the leading structures of al-Qaeda or any other international Islamist organization. For them, Portugal's political weight in the world is completely irrelevant. Third, this argument does not consider

that the true nature of Islamism lays in demonizing and destroying what is generally called the "Western way of life": democracy, free trade, religious freedom, and gender equality, amongst other features. Islamism seeks to replace this order with an authoritarian, global theocratic regime. In other words, it is not the countries themselves that matter, but what they represent, making Portugal as compelling a target as Spain, Italy, or France. In spite of all the religious rhetoric, Islamism is driven by political criteria, so it is more than reasonable to assume that top jihadist leaders would not dedicate themselves, personally, to attacking a country like Portugal. But we must remember that the highly indoctrinated operatives working under a decentralized structure who would likely carry out an attack are less concerned with political implications, and Portugal stands with other Western countries as an embodiment of all the aspects of society Islamism is committed to abolishing.

Islamism is not a monolithic reality. It works according to a very flexible and pragmatic logic. What the Western mainstream perceives as al-Qaeda is in fact a diffuse movement, a myriad of groups and organizations united by ideological affinities and political opportunism. The international Islamist movement represents the association of local political objectives with a broader ideological program, thus creating the appearance of a more unified network. Nowadays, more than an organization, al-Qaeda is an inspiring idea for many. By examining how Portugal may be similar to or different from its neighbors in both international political context and the situation of the domestic Muslim population, we are able to conduct a preliminary assessment for Portugal of the risk Islamist terrorist attacks.

> Portugal has been fortunate enough to not suffer the consequences of jihadism. It would be prudent to learn from our neighbors' experience and develop policies that continue to protect us from this threat.

A path for future vigilance

- *A traditional look into organized crime can leave out important angles.* Recent figures show strong evidence of international criminal organizations operating in Portugal, mainly concentrating in financial crimes, such as money laundering and smuggling. Although the nature of the organizations is not specified, organized crime provides an opportunity for Islamists to secure better logistical and financial conditions. Part of the funding for the 11 March bomb attacks in Madrid came from the sale of small amounts of drugs, and Hezbollah, a group with strong European ties, has increasingly been linked to Latin American drug cartels in the Tri-Border region.

- *We cannot comfortably rely on our current favorable situation.* Security reports also indicate the appearance of increasingly sophisticated organized criminal methods, unknown to Portugal until now, such as home invasions and the robbery of armored cars. A high degree of operative sophistication and an increase in the levels of violence are defining characteristics of these new organized criminal activities, which are common in regions like Eastern Europe. This does not necessarily mean these new methods are being used exclusively by foreigners; it could also mean that Portuguese nationals have attained foreign know-how, showing that the freedom of circulation within the European Union allows other countries' problems to spread and become our own. Taking into consideration the levels of Islamist activity in Spain, it is not beyond reason to assume that Islamist cells may migrate. In fact, an increase of counter-terrorist operations in other European countries could easily trigger a movement of cells to countries such as Portugal.

- *Maintain a separation of ideas.* Islam and Islamism are not the same, and identifying them as such is a dangerous mistake. Such inaccuracy may easily lead to intolerance and create the setting that will push an impressionable youth from an integrated and well established religious community into the arms of radical interpretations of Islam. In part, this is what happened in France. In order to achieve the purpose of attacking the West, Islamism needs to radicalize moderate Islam. Terrorism seeks, among other things, polarization and mobilization. Confusing Islam and Islamism is playing the terrorists' game. This error usually assumes two contrasting forms: 1) perceiving all Muslims as radicals

and 2) finding political/moral justifications for Islamist violence. To maintain and further develop an environment of trust with the Portuguese Islamic community is of outmost importance. Only a setting of trust and genuine integration will allow Portuguese Muslims to denounce and oppose the infiltration of Islamism within their community.

- *Make intelligence smarter.* Important steps were taken in order to modernize and articulate the country's national security framework. In that sense, the Portuguese external intelligence service (SIED) is recognized by its efforts in improving, in the latest years, the pathway for a more comprehensive and modern approach for the post-9/11 intelligence needs. The recently approved National Defense Law is another good example. The law foresees the use of the military on Portuguese soil in the case of transnational threats, a solution similar to the one found in the French Vigipirate plan. Intelligence agencies also saw their organic structure reformed in 2004. However, there is still a legal dichotomy between criminal investigation and intelligence. As a result, the Portuguese intelligence services are completely forbidden to intercept communications. Due to its prospective nature, intelligence stands on the front line of National Defense and holds a particularly relevant role when the threat is as complex, diverse, and decentralized as global terrorism. Both the Ministers of Justice and the Interior have publicly stated their willingness to accept a review of this legal limitation. However, the ability to alter the law lies in Parliament, where the political situation is not quite as favorable. A significant part of the changes Portugal has experienced in the last few decades have been caused by the European integration process. In terms of intelligence interceptions, we are clearly behind our regional partners, and so it would not be surprising if this problem was to be resolved through a European agreement. But, in order for that to happen, we would have to be close to a very significant threat, probably to a point where it is too late to tackle it.

- *Portugal must have a comprehensive approach to security.* A closer cooperation between the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior is needed. Today, no foreign policy is effective without the inclusion of the security sector and vice-versa. In the contemporary world, security is not the exclusive domain of police and military forces. Matters such as energy, water supply, and public transportation are not integrated into our national security plan. Furthermore, and in spite of some public discussion about the subject, there are no defined pillars of strategic national interest. Some NATO countries have periodic reviews of their foreign, homeland security and defense policy strategies. They elaborate a widely accepted agenda in these fields and then evaluate new policies against it over the course of time. In Portugal, it is frequent to witness substantial policy changes in such crucial areas with the variation of governments, leading to a lack of continuity and preventing the consolidation of security gains made by previous governments.

Portugal has been fortunate enough to not suffer the consequences of jihadism. It would be prudent to learn from our neighbors' experience and develop policies that continue to protect us from this threat.

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