

The Current State of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group

By Carlos Echeverría Jesús

ON MAY 16, 2003, suicide bombers killed 45 people in Casablanca, the biggest terrorist attack suffered by Morocco to date. Authorities blamed the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) for the attacks.¹ Members of the Salafi-jihadi-oriented GICM were also connected to the al-Qa`ida-inspired group of North Africans who executed the March 11, 2004 terrorist bombings in Madrid that killed 191 people. In addition to these incidents, the GICM has been active in Western Europe, primarily with document forgery, gunrunning and drug trafficking. These European-based cells have alarmed EU counterterrorism authorities, who have launched a number of operations against the GICM partially out of concern that these cells could collaborate with hostile groups such as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Today, however, the GICM is a shell of its former self. Successive Moroccan and European counterterrorist operations targeting the group have left it fractured. Its remaining members are active in similar terrorist organizations, but no longer conducting attacks under the GICM's name. This article identifies the GICM's known history and past operations, its organizational structure, and its current role in the larger Salafi-jihadi movement.

The History of the GICM

Details on the history of the GICM remain obscure. The GICM emerged shortly after 1998 and comprises Moroccan recruits who trained in camps in Afghanistan. A number of leaders, such as Abdelkarim el-Mejjati and Nourredine Nafia, were involved in creating the group. El-Mejjati became a leader in al-Qa`ida in Saudi Arabia, where he was killed by police in 2004. Nafia, a Moroccan convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison for his role in the 2003 Casablanca attacks, was an important contributor in the early

years of the group.² When creating the GICM, Nafia supposedly drafted a 33-page GICM doctrinal charter.³

When the GICM was founded, it absorbed a number of supporting cells such as the group responsible for assassinating two Spanish tourists at the Atlas Asni Hotel in Marrakech in August 1994.⁴ At the end of the 1990s, the GICM and the "Salafiyah-Jihadiya"⁵ were the two known major terrorist groups active in Morocco. In 2002, when the Saudi members of a sleeper cell were arrested in Morocco for plotting attacks against naval units in the Strait of Gibraltar, a wave of arrests of Salafi-jihadi militants began.⁶ One year later, the GICM was one of the actors believed involved in planning the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings. The Casablanca attacks killed 45 people, including 12 suicide bombers. Although the GICM, among other groups, was blamed for the attacks, recent trials have failed to prove this link with certainty.⁷ The 2004 bombings in Madrid that killed 191 people were carried out by an al-Qa`ida-inspired group of North Africans, mostly Moroccan residents in Spain. A number of them were connected to the GICM.⁸

2 Sebastian Rotella, "Libyans Advance in Al Qaeda Network," *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2008.

3 Nafia spoke about this charter after he was arrested. See "Moroccan Group 'Derivative Structure' of Al-Qa'eda," Middle East Online, April 20, 2004.

4 Carlos Jesús Echeverría, "Radical Islam in the Maghreb," *Orbis* 48:2 (2004): p. 358.

5 The Moroccan government often attributes terrorist incidents or plots to a group it identifies as "Salafiyah-Jihadiya." As explained by researcher Alison Pargeter, however, "this appears to be a label put upon these militants reflecting the fact that they do not belong to any particular formalized group. As such, 'Salafiyah-Jihadiya' would seem to be a label invented by the Moroccan authorities to describe an ideological current." For more on this, see Alison Pargeter, "Uncovering Extremist Violence in Morocco," *CTC Sentinel* 1:8 (2008).

6 The Saudis were able to integrate into society because they married Moroccan women through GICM support.

7 Hassan el-Haski, who was condemned in 2007 in Spain for participating in the 2004 Madrid bombings, was extradited to Morocco for six months to face trial for his alleged involvement in the 2003 Casablanca attacks. Although he was acquitted by the terrorist court of Salé on February 5, 2009 of involvement in those attacks, he received a 10 year sentence in the aftermath of the Royal Attorney's reaction. He will return to Spain to serve a 14 year sentence before returning to Morocco to serve his sentence there. See "Marruecos condena a 10 años a Haski tras el recurso del fiscal," *El Mundo*, March 3, 2009.

8 El-Haski is a veteran of Afghan training camps and a

The GICM's Volatile Structure

GICM members interact with other North African Salafi-jihadis, particularly in Europe, where they have been engaged in transporting falsified documents, gunrunning, and drug trafficking. One example of this interaction is the case of Jamal Ahmidan, one of the authors of the 2004 Madrid bombings who blew himself up on April 3, 2004 in Leganés, Spain; Ahmidan had links to GICM members such as Hassan el-Haski. Criminal activity abroad seems to finance the GICM, and according to a variety of sources the group has sleeper cells in a number of European countries.⁹ The GICM's experience has shown a capacity for recruitment, and it has assisted with the assimilation of al-Qa`ida operatives into Moroccan and European society. One example of this is a 2002 plot in Morocco involving three Saudis who married Moroccan women through GICM support. Another example involved three terrorists involved in the 2004 Madrid train bombings, who traveled to Iraq through Belgium with the support of a cell founded by Abdeladim Okoudad, a GICM coordinator in Europe.¹⁰

After each terrorist incident or uncovered plot, the Moroccan government has made scores of arrests.¹¹ The government's campaign against the GICM and related groups has affected the GICM's operational ability and has almost destroyed it. It is likely that the remaining members no longer operate on behalf of the GICM. During the current decade, much of the GICM's leadership in Morocco and Europe has been imprisoned or is awaiting trial. It is not clear if the group currently has a leader. In 2004, the Moroccan expert Mohamed Darif claimed "all the

top leader of the GICM in Europe according to Spanish investigations later confirmed by the judicial process on the Madrid bombings.

9 *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report TE-SAT 2008* (The Hague: European Police Office, 2008), pp. 24-25. Chapter five of this report lists a number of EU states where Moroccan terrorists have been arrested.

10 Jorge A. Rodríguez, "Doce detenidos por ayudar a escapar a autores del 11-M y enviar suicidas a Irak," *El País*, October 17, 2008.

11 These incidents include the foiled Strait of Gibraltar terrorist plot in 2002, the 2003 Casablanca attacks, the 2004 Madrid bombings, successive domestic counterterrorist operations since 2005, and the suicide attacks in Casablanca and Meknes in 2007.

1 Recent trials, however, have failed to prove undoubtedly that the GICM was behind the Casablanca attacks.

signs are that Mohamed el-Guerbouzi, nicknamed Abou Aissa, became the leader of the organisation” after 2002.¹² El-Guerbouzi, however, has repeatedly denied any association with terrorism. He became a British citizen two decades ago and remains living in London. Nevertheless, in 2003 the Interpol office in Rabat issued a warrant for his arrest.¹³ On December 19, 2003, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison in absentia by a court in Rabat “for his alleged involvement in the Casablanca bombings.”¹⁴

The GICM has become marginalized on the physical battlefield. It has suffered a loss of operational control to the extent that it is not even mentioned in analyses on Salafi-jihadi terrorism in Morocco. Demonstrating the GICM’s lack of current capability, factions within the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group have merged with al-Qa`ida, but no such al-Qa`ida merger has been announced with the GICM.

The GICM’s Role in the Salafi-Jihad

Historically, GICM members have been active in Morocco and Europe. A number of arrests in Belgium, France, and Spain in recent years have disrupted the group’s ability to operate in Europe. On November 13, 2005, for example, members of a suspected Belgian GICM cell led by Abdelkader Hakimi and Lahoussine el-Haski—the latter the brother of GICM member Hassan el-Haski—went on trial in Brussels for allegedly providing material support to the GICM. Hakimi was considered one of the GICM’s leaders in Europe and had been arrested in Brussels on March 19, 2004.

In recent years, a number of recruitment networks for suicide bombers destined for Iraq have been dismantled in Morocco and in Europe.¹⁵ The 27-member Tetouan

cell apprehended in January 2007 had logistical and financial links with AQIM and with the GICM, according to the sentence released on June 10, 2008. Abu Qaswarah, a Moroccan native who was the second-in-command of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, was killed by U.S. forces on October 5, 2008 in Mosul.¹⁶ He was at one point a member of the GICM and was even put in charge of the GICM’s magazine, *Sada al-Maghrabi*.¹⁷ More recently, on February 26, 2009, the terrorism court of Salé in Morocco sentenced Saad Houssaini (also known as “The Chemist”) to 15 years in jail for his alleged involvement in the 2003 Casablanca bombings. He was arrested in March 2007 for alleged participation in the GICM.¹⁸

There are a number of other cases in Morocco that have not been linked to the GICM. It is possible that links will develop as the cases proceed. On February 21, 2008, authorities broke up a 36-member cell called the “Belliraj Cell.” In May 2008, an 11-member cell connected with networks involved in sending combatants to Iraq and to training camps in Algeria was dismantled in Nador and Fes in Morocco; a large number of light weapons and ammunition were confiscated. The cell was also allegedly planning terrorist attacks in Morocco and Belgium. On July 2, 2008, a 35-member cell, charged with sending combatants to Iraq and to Algeria, was dismantled in a number of Moroccan cities. On August 29, 2008, a 15-member cell called Fatah al-Andalus that plotted terrorist attacks in Morocco was dismantled in a number of cities in the country and important electronic and chemical materials were seized. On December 12, 2008, the Moroccan minister of the interior, Chakib Benmoussa, announced the arrests of a number of suspected terrorists in Fes, Rabat, and Berkane who had links to AQIM.

were dismantled by the Spanish security forces in 2005 and 2006. Both focused their activities on sending combatants to Iraq.

16 “Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:12 (2008).

17 Pascale Combelles Siegel, “Coalition Attack Brings an End to the Career of al-Qaeda in Iraq’s Second-in-Command,” *Terrorism Monitor* 6:21 (2008).

18 “Rabat condena a un terrorista al que Del Olmo interrogó por el 11-M,” *El Mundo*, February 27, 2009; “French Court Convicts 8 of Helping 2003 Casablanca Suicide Bombers,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 11, 2007.

There is concern that AQIM could tap into dormant or former GICM cells in Europe for the purpose of striking targets in the West. It is believed that GICM elements based in Europe have mutated into a more autonomous phenomenon consisting of groups of alienated, “homegrown” radicals who are using the language of the Salafi-jihad but largely act on their own.¹⁹ A number of Moroccans were connected to the al-Quds Mosque in Hamburg,²⁰ the Islamic Cultural Centre in Milan, and the Finsbury Park Mosque in London, which all became associated with the propagation of radical Islamism.

Conclusion

Years of investigation, several trials and numerous court convictions do not provide a complete picture of the GICM. In Morocco and in Europe, the GICM is today defined by the fragmentation of different cells. It appears that former members of the group have been absorbed by other jihadist organizations, or are operating on an independent basis. Government prosecutors have tried with difficulty to persuade juries that alleged terrorists connected to the GICM have conspired against the Moroccan government and society. The sheer number of plots with ties to the GICM raises concern that the group could recover if authorities give it breathing space.

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19 In fact, this trend is applicable to most of the jihadist cells acting in Europe. For more, see Peter R. Neumann: *Joining Al-Qaeda. Jihadist Recruitment in Europe* (London: Routledge-IISS, 2008), p. 17.

20 Mohamed Fizazi, who was sentenced to 30 years in prison in Morocco for his involvement in the 2003 Casablanca attacks, preached at the same al-Quds Mosque as the leader of the 9/11 terrorists, Muhammad `Atta.

12 Mohamed Darif, “The Moroccan Combatant Group,” Real Instituto Elcano, March 30, 2004.

13 Anneli Botha, “North African Involvement in Transnational Terror Networks” in “Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalization of Domestic Terrorism,” African Institute for Security Studies Monograph #144, June 2008.

14 Ibid.; “Four More Suspects Charged in Madrid Blasts,” Associated Press, March 22, 2004.

15 Two GICM-connected networks operating from Catalonia, Spain—the Rabet Group and the Nakcha Group—