

Moroccan crackdown on terrorists shows converging threats

By Sebastian Rotella

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RABAT, Morocco - They are politicians and businessmen, bureaucrats and pharmacists, a police commander and a TV journalist.

Police arrested them and seized an arsenal in nationwide raids last month, the biggest crackdown in Morocco since suicide bombings killed 45 people in Casablanca five years ago.

During the past week, Moroccans have clustered on rainy mornings around kiosks along the capital's colonnaded downtown avenues, marveling at the latest newspaper reports on the case. The profile of the 35 suspects contrasts sharply with the Casablanca bombers, a dozen young men from a slum who assembled homemade explosives and died wearing identical wristwatches that were a last gift from their handler.

The alleged leader of this group was a Moroccan immigrant in Belgium who allegedly financed his activity with multimillion-dollar hold-ups and committed assassinations in Belgium dating back 20 years. Interior Minister Chakib Benmoussa said in an interview that the group plotted to assassinate Cabinet ministers, military chiefs and Jewish leaders in order to destabilize this moderate Muslim nation.

Benmoussa and other investigators say the plot helps illustrate threats converging here and radiating across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

"The leaders of this network had the opportunity to train in Afghanistan, to meet leaders of al-Qaida, and to go to Algeria to train in [rural outposts] in 2005," Benmoussa said. Some aspects of the case against the suspects perplex analysts. The three politicians arrested belong to small parties that mix Islamist and leftist ideologies. Their defenders say that they are moderates.

Their longtime ties to Shiite movements, including Hezbollah, might have been a factor. Sunnis are the majority here, but authorities worry about the danger of extremism among the small Shiite minority and sympathetic Sunni radicals.

Sunni and Western governments fear the recent assassination of a Hezbollah military chief in Syria could foment Shiite-inspired violence, according to Abdellah Rami, an expert on Islam at the Moroccan Center for Social Studies. But Rami sees contradictions in the official version alleging that the group was influenced by both al-Qaida and Hezbollah.

"I find it hard to believe that all these movements were mixed together in the same cell," said Rami, who knows the jailed politicians.

Authorities say they have documented connections, such as attempts to arrange training with Hezbollah in 2002. The jailed journalist, Abdelhafid Sriti, was the correspondent for Hezbollah's Al Manar network. Al Manar has been banned from broadcasting in France, Spain and the U.S., which accuse it of airing extremist and anti-Semitic programming.

Western security experts agree that there are unanswered questions.

"It's a real mix of things, kind of bizarre, but if everything is confirmed I think it is a big, big affair," said Claude Moniquet, director of a Brussels think tank who works with the Moroccan government.

Morocco is relatively open and democratic, modernizing fast and trying to reduce stark inequality. The monarchy promotes a tolerant Islam in which the king is the leader of the faithful, an effort to maintain a bulwark against extremism. But its geography makes it a gateway to Europe and a crossroads for migration, crime and extremism.

"The Moroccans have worked hard since Casablanca so they haven't had more attacks," said a Belgian anti-terror official who knows North Africa well. "But they have a lot of radicals to watch, guys going to Iraq who could come back. And there are all the problems [in countries] around them, like a sandwich effect."

Meanwhile, a flow of Moroccan militants go abroad for training and combat. Some fight in Iraq; some trek to clandestine training outposts in the deserts of southern Algeria and northern Mali, the vast and lawless Sahel region.

"Some of these pipelines function with the goal of creating a reserve of fighters down there," Benmoussa said. "And others with the idea of training them to come back to Morocco. ... What is going on in the Sahel worries us a great deal."

Extremists benefit from a boom in Europe-bound cocaine along traditional smuggling routes, said Benmoussa, 49, who is a Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate.

"It is a zone where there is a lot of money circulating, with cocaine traffic that is growing fast," Benmoussa said. Certain terror networks "exploit this situation because these groups guarantee, secure the routes."

Authorities recently arrested Abdelkader Belliraj, 51, the alleged leader of the plot, while he was on a visit from Belgium, where he lived comfortably with his wife and three children.

Moroccan investigators accuse Belliraj of committing half a dozen killings in Belgium in the 1980s and 1990s.

More recently, the Belliraj group got training from al-Qaida in the Islamic Magreb as that group expanded from Algeria, authorities say.

"This is a long-term network. If it were just for an attack today, assembling makeshift explosives costs a lot less," Benmoussa said. "But we are dealing with the logic of a long-term project with a strategy of infiltration and subversion."

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