

## **THE MARRAKECH ATTACK: IS TERRORISM RETURNING IN MOROCCO?**

*By Claude MONIQUET  
President of ESISC*

**The terrorist attack in Marrakech could be the sign that terrorism is returning to the Kingdom, after years of relative calm. But, in fact, the threat was always present and the worst was only avoided thanks of the excellent job of the security and intelligence services.**

**It is worth to underline that this is the first important terrorist attack in the Arab world (except some attacks on security forces in Algeria) since the beginning of the global Arab uprising, four months ago.**

### **1) The facts**

Today, just before noon, a violent blast destroyed the **Argana Café**, a two-storey well known place where scores of tourists are used to gather. The **Argana Café** is located on **Djemaa el-Fna square**, near the **Soukh el-Bahja**, a highly frequented spot in the center of the city. Djemaa el-Fna Square, a **UNESCO World Heritage site**, is the main place where the tourists congregate.

**At least 15 people (including, 11 “possible” foreigners: French, Dutch, Russians...) were killed** on the scene but ESISC sources in hospitals say **that as many as 80 others were injured and some are in critical conditions.**

This is the **worst terrorist attack in Morocco since May 16, 2003** and the multiple attacks in Casablanca that left 45 killed and more than 100 injured.

The first investigations show that:

- The blast was provoked by an **improvised explosive device (IED)** hidden in a suitcase and **maybe composed of gas canisters with a detonating device.** The bomb was designed to cause **as much casualties as possible and the suitcase was loaded with nails and other shrapnel.** As a result, first pictures available show highly mutilated and dismembered bodies.
- It is said that a **suspect was arrested shortly after the blast in central Marrakech, but there is no official confirmation.**

- **Some sources say witnesses affirm the attack is the work of a suicide bomber, but this is not yet officially confirmed.**

## **2) The global and political context of the attack**

Three important context elements must be underlined:

- Until now, **Morocco has been largely quiet in a region destabilized by popular revolts since the end of 2010.** Limited demonstrations were reported across the country but, **on March 9, the King Muhammad VI announced deep constitutional reforms to speed the democratic evolution he initiated since the very beginning of his reign.** Those reforms, aimed to transform Morocco in a full democracy, were welcomed by the Moroccan population as well by the traditional allies of the Kingdom, including France and the United States. The only one to clearly oppose them are some small leftist organizations and the Islamists of the illegal but tolerated movement “**al-Adl wal Ihsane**”.
- Despite huge social problems and a real concern about the level of corruption, **Morocco is generally seen as the most democratic North African and even Arab state.** This unique position and the recognition of the country’s “raft of reforms”, **allowed Morocco to be granted the “advanced status” from the European Union. Morocco is the first country in the southern Mediterranean region to benefit this status.**
- To implement its reforms and continue to increase the social level of the country, Morocco needs money. **As tourism is one of the main resources of the country and as Marrakech is THE city that attracts most of the tourists, the consequences of this attack could be really bad for the country** already penalized by the unrest in the region.

## **3) The security context**

The political situation of Morocco doesn’t mean that the Kingdom is an “isolated island” preserved of violence in a region where terrorism is spreading for years. **But the Moroccan security and intelligence services are doing well and, since years, they have dismantled dozens of terrorists cells and networks, both logistical and operational.**

It must be underlined that **this is not the first time Marrakech is targeted by Salafi terrorists.** On **august 24, 1994**, several men entered the Atlas-Asni hotel and opened fire with automatic arms: **2 were killed and several others wounded.** The attack was perpetrated by **French-Algerian citizen** – Stéphane Aït-Idir, Redouane Hammadi and Tarek Felah. **Other attacks were planned in Tangiers, Casablanca and Fes**, but the terrorists were arrested or fled before trying to attack. **It was proved that the French members of the gang have been trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.**

In addition to the 1994 attack, **two other waves of terrorism struck Morocco** since the beginning of the century:

- On **May 16, 2003**, five coordinated attacks were committed in **Casablanca**, the “economic capital” of Morocco. **Those attacks targeted foreign and Jewish interests. 45 were killed and around 100 injured.**

In **2007**, several attacks were committed in **Casablanca and Meknes**. **All of them failed and the only victims were the terrorists:**

- On **march 11**, two terrorists fearing to be arrested blew themselves up in an internet café of **Casablanca**
- On **April 10**, two terrorists were killed by security forces in **Casablanca**, while attempting to conduct an attack
- On **April 14**, two terrorists blew themselves up near the U.S. Consulate and the American Language Center, in **Casablanca**
- On **August 13**, an engineer blew himself up while attempting to board a tourist bus in **Meknes**

#### **4) The terrorist incidents since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2010**

**Many others attacks were avoided due to the work of the security and intelligence services.** Other incidents showed as well that, even unsuccessful, the threat was real and great. **Since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010, ESISC analysts have registered at least 20 significant incidents in which at least 115 presumed terrorists were arrested:**

- **April 15, 2011:** two men including a French tourist were stabbed in “**al-Hafa**” café, in **Tangiers**. The terrorist, **Abdellatif Zahraoui had been freed and pardoned along with other 190 prisoners** by royal decision on April 14...
- **On January 4, 2011**, the Interior ministry announced that **a terrorist cell was dismantled in Amghala (220 km from Laayoune, Western Sahara.)**. This cell was composed by 27 individuals, one of them being a known member of AQIM. It was said that **the cell was preparing suicide attacks against Moroccan security forces and planned bank robberies to finance its activities.** It intended also to recruit volunteers for training in AQIM camps in Mali and Algeria
- In **late December 2010** three terrorists were arrested in **Khouribga**, a city located 120 kilometres to the south of Casablanca. **They were plotting to attack on tourist compounds and Western diplomatic representations** in several cities.

- **Also at the end of December 2010**, the Interior Ministry reported that a terrorist network consisting of six members was “recently dismantled”. The six were said to be “experts in manufacturing explosives and were ready to use them for attacks in unspecified countries”. **They also planned attacks using car bombs against foreign interests in Morocco and against Moroccan institutions and security facilities.**
- On **December 28, 2010** Moroccan media reported that **5 Takfiri Islamists were arrested in Ferkhana and Selouan**, in the northern province of Nador. They were arrested while diffusing leaflets **calling for jihad against the “impious Moroccan regime”**.
- **At the beginning of December 2010**, a previously unknown terrorist group, *Ansar Al-Jihad Al-Alami*, published a statement on several Jihadist website, in which **it threatened to carry out attacks against Western interests in Morocco** during the Christmas holidays.
- **At the beginning of October 2010, 3 alleged Moroccan terrorists** were arrested near the north-eastern border town of **Oujda**. The suspects had already attempted to infiltrate into Algeria, to join forces with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).
- In **September 2010**, two alleged Islamist gunmen opened fire on the owner of a jewellery store in Berrechid, near **Casablanca**.
- During **the summer 2010**, Several businesses including banks, private schools and fund transfer agencies were robbed by armed men. **Numerous Islamists have been arrested in connection to these robberies which are believed to help finance terrorist operations** against targets within the Moroccan territory.
- In **August 2010**, the authorities announced they had dismantled **a terrorist cell which was planning attacks against foreign interests in the kingdom**. The exact nature of the targets has not been disclosed so far, but a statement issued by the ministry of Interior specified that 18 suspects had been arrested during the operation. Among them were 3 people who had already been sentenced for terrorism in the past.
- In **July 2010**, authorities announced that **8 members of an explosive-trafficking network had been arrested in the Bouknadel municipality, in the outskirts of Salé**. A bomb-expert belonging to the same group was detained several days later in **Essaouira**. The ministry of Interior specified that **about 550 kg of explosives had been seized during the operation**. According to the statement, the type of explosives, made from chemical fertilizers, has already been used in the past to make explosive belts.
- On **July 28, 2010**, the Moroccan daily Assabah reported that **several dozen of Moroccan terrorists have joined the AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb)** in the Sahel desert. It was said that several other dozen

Moroccans have been recruited by AQIM in Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. They have been charged with recruiting jihadists in their home countries.

- On **July 22, 2010**, Moroccan media reported that **3 suspected Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb terrorists had been recently arrested in Morocco**. According to intelligence sources quoted by the daily Assabah reported they had been trained to explosive and weapons use in Al-Shabaab camps in Somalia and in AQIM camps in the Sahel region. The daily added that the **3 had planned to infiltrate into Morocco from Mauritania to carry out suicide attacks against security forces**.
- In **June 2010**, Moroccan Media reported that **4 members of the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine had been arrested in Azila and Marrakech**. It was reported that **the cell had planned to target prominent members of the Jewish community and “symbols of the State’s authority.” They had also planned to carry out bomb attacks against tourist targets** across the country.
- In **April 2010**, **17 people belonging to a terrorist network were arrested in several cities of the country**. The network had been planning to stage terrorist attacks against targets in Morocco.
- At **mid-April 2010**, **two police officers protecting the royal Palace in Tétouan** were stabbed by an attacker who was said to have been expelled from Spain following the 2004 Madrid train bombings.
- At **the beginning of March 2010**, a **French national and his wife were arrested for terrorism**. Working for the National Center for Scientific Research (Centre national de la Recherche Scientifique CNRS) in Paris, Khalid Etefia has been charged, with his wife, Doha Aboutabit, with having recruited candidates for suicide attacks in Iraq,
- **In the same days**, Moroccan police announced **they had dismantled a 6-member Takfiri terrorist cell which was “active in several cities of the Kingdom” and “planned to stage terrorist attacks inside the country”**.

## **5) Our assessment**

The attack has not yet been claimed, but we assess it must be the work of a well organized terrorist organization. Likely a terrorist cell linked to **AQIM (*al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*)** or the local **Moroccan Islamist Combat Group (*Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain, GICM*)**.

Given the skill of the Moroccan security services, **we think that this attack must have been prepared on a long time and maybe from abroad**. It shows also that, **despite the hundreds of people arrested those last years for terrorist activities, the Moroccan Jihadists have the clear capacity to recruit and rebuild their networks**.

**On the other hand, analyzing the explosive used in the device will be important to understand if the bomb was a sophisticated one or not. It could also give important clues to understand if the attack is a local one, maybe conducted by a small cell, or is coming from a larger organisation in Morocco or abroad.**

The fact to attack a place crowded with foreigners at lunch time in a tourist attractive place demonstrates **a clear will to target “infidels” and destabilize the Kingdom by hitting its economy.**

In the coming days, scores of suspects will very likely be arrested but, **as it was seen in the past that Islamist terrorists – especially in North Africa – trend to conduct several terrorist attacks in a very short sequence, other attacks could be feared, in Marrakech or elsewhere in the Kingdom in the coming days.**

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