

## The Threat of Grassroots Jihadi Networks: A Case Study from Ceuta, Spain



02/15/2007 - By Javier Jordán & Robert Wesley (from **Terrorism Monitor**, February 15) - On December 12, 2006, Spanish police executed a spectacular counter-terrorism operation in the neighborhood of "Príncipe Alfonso" in Ceuta (a Spanish city located in North Africa, just south of Gibraltar). Those arrested belonged to a grassroots jihadi group planning attacks on local targets in the Spanish enclave. The following analysis emphasizes the principal characteristics of this former jihadi network and explores two issues of particular importance: 1) the relationship between the network's members and Spanish soldiers garrisoned in Ceuta, and 2) the inclusion and importance of the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla in jihadi rhetoric as Muslim territories that must be liberated from their infidel occupation. The jihadi group in Ceuta was composed of at least 11 individuals and constitutes another good example of the emergence of grassroots jihadi networks in European countries. "Grassroots jihadis" refers to groups that sympathize with and relate to the global jihadi movement, sharing common strategic objectives, but have little or no formal connections to al-Qaeda or any other associated organizations. They could, however, eventually secure relationships with some established operatives.

### The History and Characteristics of the Ceuta Jihadi Network

The group's origins stem from meetings in a small mosque called Darkawia that was dominated by a radical imam and located in the Príncipe Alfonso district—a disadvantaged area of Ceuta, where around 12,000 Muslims live. At the time of the raids, the area was practically considered a conflict zone by local police and residents, with high rates of unemployment and delinquency. In the months preceding the December 12 operation, the local police had resigned from patrolling the neighborhood due to various threats, especially from ambushes by local organized delinquent groups [1].

The majority of the group's members were born in Ceuta and lived in the Príncipe Alfonso district, with all but one having Spanish nationality. Many of the group's members also had criminal records. The principal leader of the jihadi network, Karin Abdelselam Mohamed, became radicalized while serving time in prison for minor crimes. Within the group, the members justified these illegal activities by claiming that they were done in support of jihad, a seemingly common occurrence among jihadis.

In terms of linkages with external jihadi groups, their primary connection was Karin's relationship with Tarik Hamed, who has been incarcerated in Spain since June 2005 for his involvement in a network established to recruit and facilitate travel for recruits heading to the jihad in Iraq. The group's radicalization, however, was largely independent of external mentoring, with its two leaders Karin and Mohamed Fuad Mohamed driving the process. The group's "gatherings," which were held in the mosque outside of normal praying hours and in the homes of its members, played a very important role in the development of the group's radicalization. Another apparent contributing element in this path was the incorporation of jihadi propaganda distributed via CDs containing videos, songs and text archives.

A common characteristic of grassroots networks is that they direct their aggression against targets of close proximity [2]. In the case of the Ceuta network, that hostility underwent several stages of escalation. In the first stage, the network started to spread rumors of possible attacks in the city and painted threatening graffiti around town. The next step consisted of destroying a morabito—a small building that lodges the tomb of people considered holy by Muslims in the Maghreb [3].

The third stage was aborted by the police. At the time of their arrests, the members of the group had already started to plan a high-casualty attack in Ceuta using explosives. They had discussed several targets: a shopping mall, a fairground during a time of festivities and a fuel depository. During their investigations, police found a will of a jihadi and evidence that some of them had expressed their willingness to die as martyrs (El Mundo, December 17, 2006; El País, December 16, 2006).

What has been described, so far, resembles other grassroots networks dismantled in Spain and Europe during the past few years and underlines the vitality of the third jihadi generation (if we follow the terminology used by the strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri) [4]. There are two aspects of the Ceuta case, however, that merit special attention.

First, the network tried to recruit Spanish soldiers of Muslim origin born in Ceuta. Approximately 30% of the troops in the Ceuta and Melilla garrisons have Muslim backgrounds. Each of the cities has on paper the equivalent of a light brigade. For many young Muslims born in Spanish territory, the military is an attractive employment opportunity, as many of them encounter difficulties securing jobs in the civil sector. The military provides an acceptable salary and offers the opportunity to learn a profession, while opening the door to other jobs such as occupations

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in the national and local police services. A significant portion of young soldiers also end up finding stable jobs in the public security domain.

The network's leader, Karin, succeeded in attracting several young soldiers garrisoned in Ceuta to his private meetings. Karin's jihadi group wanted the soldiers to facilitate access to a military deposit of arms and explosives with which to perpetrate further terrorist attacks. The soldiers, however, were not persuaded. Despite the group's overall failure, news of the group's military contacts and the fact that one of the apprehended had been an infantry soldier in Ceuta (and as a consequence had been taught the use of light weapons) produced alarm about the possible infiltration of jihadis in the Muslim ranks of the garrisons.

In addition, this news coincided with the non-renewal of the contracts of more than 15 soldiers of Muslim backgrounds in the Ceuta garrison due to the findings of internal intelligence reports. In fact, the worry over possible infiltration of radical Salafism in the military began much earlier than this recent operation. It was already explicitly mentioned in a military intelligence report leaked to the press in September 2005, which led to the non-renewal of at least three soldiers in the previous months (El País, September 12, 2005; El País, November 5, 2006). The most recent news of non-renewal, however, has helped precipitate an antagonistic climate among the associations and the opinion leaders of the Muslim community, a problem that has been politicized rapidly. La Unión Democrática Ceutí—the political party in Ceuta that receives most of the Muslim vote—has started a protest campaign that has included the distribution of thousands of leaflets at the entryways of mosques denouncing the "persecution of the Spanish soldiers of the Muslim faith" (El País, January 21).

The tension has increased even more with a police union requesting to control Muslim candidates' access to vacancies in the national police coming from Ceuta and Melilla in order to avoid potential infiltration by radicals (there were 434 Ceuta/Melilla Muslim applicants for the most recent entrance examination). This request has also been harshly criticized by Muslim collectives in Ceuta and throughout Spain (EFE, January 25).

It is quite possible that this frictional dynamic will continue or worsen in the future if the two factors evident in this case study continue to be present: a) that grassroots jihadi networks remain resolute in their campaign to attract members of the security services; and b) that thousands of qualified second generation Muslims continue to apply for vacancies in the army and police forces.

In facing this situation, the Spanish government will have to find the appropriate balance between protecting the constitutional right to non-discrimination regardless of ethnicity or religion and necessary counter-intelligence activities. It is an equation which will require discretion and an acute sense of the social climate from policymakers in the military and police intelligence units to avoid additional polarization and the permissive conditions that could further recruitment and radicalization in local communities.

Another salient aspect of this case is its implications for future networks to operate in the region based on the grievances emerging from local interests (i.e. perceived discrimination in the military), and those emanating from exogenous jihadi propaganda. The Ceuta counter-terrorist operation overlapped with an increase in global jihadi rhetoric concerning the rightful ownership of the cities of Ceuta and Melilla. Although there is apparently no relationship between this most recent network's activities and these claims, such rhetoric cannot be overlooked when considering the future of jihadi activity in the region.

In May 2006, a direct threat to Spanish interests appeared in the radical al-Ansar forum, in which the fight for the liberation of Ceuta and Melilla was compared with those of Iraq, Chechnya and Kashmir. The communiqué was posted by a group calling itself Nadim al-Magrebi, which is the name occasionally used by an Algeria-based jihadist network (El País, November 5, 2006).

The communiqué quite naturally caused alarm throughout Spanish counter-terrorism agencies. Even more worrying, however, was the reference to Ceuta and Melilla as occupied cities in the December 20, 2006 diatribe of Ayman al-Zawahiri. These types of proclamations have the potential to pressure or motivate groups acting in the Maghreb or in Spanish territory to plot new attacks on Spanish interests.

This threat could be compounded further by the recent partnering initiatives of groups operating in the Maghreb (i.e. the GSPC's tactic of changing its name to "Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb"). These more established groups are in part attempting to harness the potential of such local grievances and grassroots groups to further their agenda of reinvigorating their beleaguered movements.

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#### Notes

1. Javier Jordan & Humberto Trujillo, Favourable situations for the jihadist recruitment: The neighbourhood of Principe Alfonso (Ceuta, Spain), Jihad Monitor Occasional Paper No. 3, November 27, 2006.
2. This hostility can also be observed in other European networks such as the Hofstad Group that assassinated Theo Van Gogh, the network that authored the Madrid attacks, as well as other Spanish-based groups arising after the March 11, 2004 attacks.
3. Their construction and veneration constitutes a habitual practice in the north of Morocco; nevertheless, it is considered abominable by Salafis.
4. Brynjar Lia, "Al-Suri's Doctrines for Decentralized Jihadi Training," Part 1 and 2, Terrorism Monitor, **January 18** and **February 1**.

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