

International Terrorism and Islamic Politics in the Mediterranean Region

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The year 2005 was, in some ways, a misleading one as far as the incidence of terrorism in the Mediterranean region was concerned. For, on the basis of the most immediately relevant statistically evidence, of the kind used by the US Government or the RAND Corporation, 2005 saw a certain decline in violent actions by Islamist or other terrorist groups, be it on the European north-west side of the Mediterranean, or on the Balkan and Turkish north-east sides, as in Palestine, Egypt and North Africa. Indeed 2005 saw a number of positive or potentially positive developments in regard to political stability, notably the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, a sustained reduction in suicide and other attacks by Palestinians on Israeli civilians and other targets, progress towards more long-term peace in the former Yugoslavia, and continued progress towards post-conflict consolidation and political liberalisation in Algeria. In what has come in recent years to be perhaps the most sensitive point of north-south interaction in the Mediterranean, the Spanish-Moroccan arena, 2005 saw a lull, in marked contrast to 2003, when Islamists killed dozens in the bombings of Casablanca, and 2004, when Moroccans resident in Spain killed nearly two hundred people in the Madrid atrocities of March 11th. This pattern of reduced terrorist activity in the Mediterranean is compatible with an apparent world-wide trend, according to which, and with the major exception of Iraq, terrorist actions on a

global scale saw significant decline in that year.

Terrorism is not, however, something which, like oil prices or infant mortality, can be measured let alone evaluated on the basis of statistics alone. Terrorism is not a movement, or an environmental trend, but a tactic, used for political ends, and it is in that broad political context, as well as in a broad geographical context, that its development has to be assessed. Here 2005 yields a somewhat less reassuring picture. In the first place, and talking of terrorist acts in the strictest definitional terms, there were developments in 2005 that gave serious cause for concern. While there were no more attacks in Spain or the USA, London was attacked on two occasions in July. Casualties were much lower than in the two earlier metropolitan cases, but the pattern of sporadic, but lethal, unannounced Islamist bombings in major western cities, beginning in 2001, was thereby sustained. The evidence available suggests that the London bombers, while in some cases possibly inspired by events in Asia, and even trained in Pakistani camps, were individuals acting on their own behalf, without connections to Al Qaeda. The evidence produced after two years of investigation by Judge Juan del Olmo on the Madrid bombers suggested the same thing, despite earlier suggestions of ties to both Al Qaeda and ETA.

However, while this allowed observers to discount the existence of a major *organised* terrorist network, linking Afghanistan and the Middle East to European cities and migrant communities, this very informality of the groups active in Madrid and London also showed how flexible, and easy to repeat, such operations are. Evidence from arrests in Britain in 2004

concerning training in Pakistani of British Muslims aiming to attack trains and public buildings in Britain, and material produced in del Olmo's court in Madrid, centring on a plot involving over thirty people to blow up the High Court, with the potential to cause hundreds of casualties, showed that relatively autonomous groups, similar to those which attacked Bali in 2002, were continuing to form and could cause major damage. The very fact that no formal command structure, no significant funding, no central training unit were needed indicated that such attacks could, and probably, would continue, albeit in sporadic form, for years to come. All of this is not, moreover, to discount the possibility that, parallel to the informal groups of Madrid and London, other more formal links to Al Qaeda do exist or may even be growing. Bin Laden's warnings that more attacks from his organisation are to come should not, in this respect, be taken lightly.

Secondly, while the northern shores of the Mediterranean were free from major attacks in 2005, apart from some token explosions by ETA, there were major incidences of terror in countries on the south-east Arab side that gave cause for concern: the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri in January 2005, following that of other Lebanese opponents of Syrian rule; the blowing up on 5th November 2005 of three hotels in Amman, Jordan, by units linked to the Al Zarqawi forces in Iraq; and the destruction of hotels in Sharm al Sheikh, Egypt, by forces hostile to the Egyptian Government's policy on Israel. If the Palestinian arena was, in strict terms of terrorist incidents relatively quieter, apart from a series of suicide attacks on Israeli targets by

members of Islamic Jihad, the underlying trend there was of continued tension and potential explosion, something made more real after the Hamas legislative election victory in February 2006. These events, and the growing tension in Palestine itself associated with the Israeli construction of their 'Security Wall', suggested that the potential for Palestinian-Israeli violence in the future remained strong.

Above all, however, there was the course of events in Iraq itself. The whole justification given by the USA for the March 2003 attack on Iraq has been shown to be false and almost certainly wilfully falsified, in Washington and London, in the months prior to that attack. On the one hand, Iraq did not have significant stores of Weapons of Mass Destruction, to use itself or to hand on to third parties, other states or terrorist groups; on the other hand, the Ba'thist regime in Baghdad, while it maintained its own armed supporters abroad, was not in any significant way tied to Al Qaeda or other forms of 'transnational' terrorism. Indeed the reverse has proven to be the case: the US invasion of Iraq has, if anything, spurred the arms race, including in nuclear and other weapons, in the Middle East, as other states, such as Iran look to deter such an attack, while the continued and provocative Anglo-US occupation of Iraq has itself served, in a way only matched by Afghanistan in the 1980s, the broader mobilisation of support for terrorist and other armed groups across the Muslim world and, to some degree, in the Muslim Diaspora communities of western Europe as well. In other words, the Iraqi invasion has produced exactly the effects, nuclear proliferation and mobilisation of terrorists that it was, mendaciously, supposed to eliminate.

No-one can calculate the number of young men who have gone to fight in Iraq and who may later go on to fight in other conflicts, as Bin Laden's supporters did from Afghanistan, and we are even less able to calculate the dimensions of the animosity to the USA and the west in general which this war, visible on TV screens across the world, has aroused

among Muslims in different countries. We can, however, be reasonably confident that, unlike, say, the war in the 1990s in Algeria, or the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990, the war in Northern Ireland or the conflict in Western Sahara, this war in Iraq will prove to be not only a civil war, and a war involving calculated interventions by neighbouring states, but will also prove to be, like the Arab-Israeli conflict, one whose influence and shocks spread across the region in an uncontrollable manner.

These events, and trends, need, however, to be placed in a somewhat broader analytic framework, in order to understand better where political violence in the Mediterranean has come from and where, and how, in the future, it may recur. Here there is a need to identify a number of different trends which, overlapping and reinforcing each other constitute the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern political situation of the mid 2000s. On the Middle Eastern and Muslim side, it is important to distinguish three separate trends: the incidence of 'international terrorism', or transnational *jihadi* actions, like Manhattan, Madrid and London, and, in the third world, Amman and Bali; secondly, in the narrow sense of the term, militant actions by Islamist or other forces *within* their specific countries, be this Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt or Algeria; and a transnational political process, the broader, authoritarian and socially repressive, but non-violent, spread of Islamism through political activity, participation in elections etc, seen in a range of countries from Lebanon and Palestine to Jordan and Egypt. The first is very much a minority activity even for jihadis, let alone Islamists, while in the second case a number of formerly violent groups have in recent years sought some accommodation with politics and the state – Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The prospect of a major victory in the Moroccan legislative elections of 2007 by the Party for Justice and Development indicates that this trend is spreading westwards as well, and with significant implications for the Moroccan community in France

and Spain. In broad strategic and political terms, and in terms of the consequences for relations between Europe and the Middle East, the confident and apparently inexorable spread of political Islamism, from Iraq to Morocco, is of greater importance than the sporadic incidence of *jihadi* bombings.

Yet while the spread of Islamism has its own dynamic, and political and social causes, it is also shaped and stimulated by the actions of the west, and in particular the USA. This is most obviously the case for the war in Iraq and the manner in which, since March 2003, the US presence in Iraq has not only brought that country to the brink of civil war, but also created a cauldron whose inter-state and regional repercussions will be considerable. Western policy also serves to antagonise Muslim opinion by an almost totally uncritical support for Israel, in its policies of denying a contiguous and independent Palestinian state, and by the way in which statements by some of its politicians, military leaders and some religious officials fuel a sense of inter-religious confrontation. In all of this Europe has a secondary role, yet remains very much in the forefront of regional politics and of the Middle East-West interaction. Sorely divided over Iraq, and playing a secondary, welfare, role in regard to Palestine, Europe can do little to influence the course of events in the Middle East, except in its ability to promote change in Turkey because of the latter's wish to join the European Union. The outcome of months of patient European diplomacy with regard to Iran, the aim of which was to dissuade Iran from pursuing its nuclear enrichment policy, was that Europe failed in its endeavour, earning the scorn of both sides of the controversy, America and Iran itself. The conclusion can only be that, while in 2005, Europe suffered significantly less casualties from terrorism than in 2004, and than many observers had feared, the long-term prognostication for the strategic context in which Europe, and the Mediterranean as a whole, are located remains one in which many dangers and uncertainties persist.