**l….Terrorism in Morocco**

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Rabat, Morocco—In a major sting operation, the police in Rabat, in cooperation with Moroccan intelligence, arrested 35 suspected terrorists yesterday. Not only was the size of the operation a surprise, but the people arrested were not the run-of-the-mill terrorists. They were respected businessmen, government bureaucrats, a pharmacist, a police commander, and a TV journalist.

Authorities also seized a large arsenal of arms and ammunition. The profile of those arrested contrasts sharply with the profile of terrorists arrested six months ago. At that time police arrested several dozen young men from the slums of Casablanca. They had assembled homemade explosives and were preparing for a series of suicide bombings.

The latest arrests revealed a far more sophisticated terrorist operation. The leader of the group, Abdul al-Mani is a wealthy Moroccan immigrant in Belgium who is accused of financing his activity with multimillion dollar hold-ups and committing assassinations in that European country. He was arrested last week while he was on a visit from his home in Belgium where he lives with his wife and seven children.

Al-Mani is accused of committing half a dozen killings in Belgium since the late 1980s. The victims included a leader of the Belgium Jewish Community, the rector of a mosque, and a Syrian diplomat. The Belgian police were apparently not notified in advance of the charges and the arrest and were caught off-guard. Authorities in Brussels, however, have now opened their own investigation of al-Mani and the killings.

The Moroccan government has issued a statement saying that the 35-member group was plotting to assassinate cabinet ministers, military leaders, and prominent members of the Jewish Community.

The leaders of this group have trained in Afghanistan, met with Al Qaeda leaders and train regularly in rural Morocco. Some aspects of the case, however, puzzle terrorist specialists. For example, the three politicians arrested belong to small parties that mix Islamist and leftist ideologies. Their defenders describe them as moderates. But their longtime ties to Shiite Muslim movements, including Hezbollah, may have been a factor in their arrests. Sunni Muslims are in the majority in Morocco, but they worry about Shiite extremists.

“The group is a real mix of people and things, kind of bizarre, but if the charges against them are true, this is a big, big bust,” said Claude Dubonnet, director of The Chablis Institute, a Brussels think tank. Dubonnet works for the Moroccan government as an adviser.

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

On the east, Algeria has endured a campaign of suicide bombings by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a network blamed for recent gun attacks to the south in Mauritania on French tourists and the Israeli Embassy.

Moroccan militants have gone abroad for training and combat. Some fight in Iraq and some trek to clandestine training camps in the deserts of southern Algeria and northern Mali. Intelligence experts say that there are several active channels to funnel fighters abroad. These militants also benefit from a boom in Europe-bound cocaine along traditional smuggling routes.

Moroccan authorities believe that some of those who were arrested played a role in planning and executing the 2004 Madrid train bombings. Most recently, the group appears to have been stockpiling AK-47 assault rifles, Skorpio machine pistols, Uzi machine guns, and other weapons.

Moroccan officials believe they have crippled a major terrorist group. A group, officials speculate, that was planning widespread, large-scale attacks. A Moroccan intelligence officer, who declined to be identified by name, speculated, “We are dealing with the logic of a long-term, long-range terrorist group that had planned a strategy of infiltration in order to carry out their activities.”