

The campaign of attacks in Italy in 2006

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Toward the end of March 2006, the Italian police carried out an anti-terrorist operation in Milan that ended with the arrest of seven Moroccans and Tunisians (three others managed to flee). A few days later, on the 24th of March, Moroccan police arrested a group of nine individuals related to those arrested in Italy. According to Moroccan police, the head of the group broken up in Morocco was the Tunisian Mohamed Benhadi Msahel. Based on information provided by Italian and Moroccan authorities, backed up by confessions from several of those arrested, both groups were preparing a terrorist attack on the metro in Milan and against the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna. Directives to commit the attack came from leaders of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC in French)¹. In Milan the objective of the terrorists was to commit the attack just before the general elections on the 9th and 10th of April with the aim of avoiding the reelection of President Berlusconi. Based on the testimony of those arrested, the terrorist attack on the metro in Milan was inspired by the attacks in Madrid in March 2004.

The alleged coordinator of the terrorist plan at the tactical level was the Tunisian Msahel. After being detained by the Moroccan police Msahel confessed the details of the plot². Because of this it is known that Msahel was the central link in a wider chain. Both the idea to attack in Italy, as well as the strategic coordination for the terrorist operation originated at higher levels: from the GSPC and from the connection of this group with the principal leaders of Al Qaeda in Central Asia.

When the police operations were carried out the planning for the attacks was still at an early phase. Nevertheless, this case study is of special interest because it reveals the direct implication of the organizations, the GSPC and Al Qaeda in the preparation of attacks in Europe and also reveals a relatively detailed picture of the system of coordination used by these organizations when carrying out terrorist actions.

The structure of this chapter is the following: First it will look at the principal protagonists in this plot. Following, it will explain the details of the terrorist plan. A general analysis of the plan will also be made, examining the motivations hidden behind this project and the role played by the GSPC and Al Qaeda. Finally, the chapter will close with some conclusions and the formulation of recommendations for antiterrorist policies based on the lessons learned from this case study.

This chapter has been written with the help of open sources, primarily the Moroccan and Italian press, complemented by the French press and to a minor extent that of other countries. The case was followed particularly through two Arab language newspapers: the Moroccan Al Alam and the Saudi Asharq al Awsat. The case attracted media attention in April 2006 when the statements of those arrested were made public by Moroccan judicial authorities, and in March 2007 when Msahel and the other members of the group were sentenced.

Analysis of the protagonists in the terrorist plot

On March 24 2006 nine individuals were arrested by Moroccan police and accused of terrorism. Their names are Mohamed Benhadi Msahel, Lahcen Mhater, Faris Said, Ghrar Said, Abdelghani Aouiouch, Abdelhaq Touri, Adil Kaoutari, Mohamed Hermouch and Abdelfettah Hidaoui. According to information available about those arrested no weapons or explosives were seized by the police. The names of those arrested by Italian police during the same month and connected to the cell broken up in Morocco did not come out in the media. Having little proof to convict the group (they had no weapons nor had they begun to manufacture explosives), Italian authorities decided to expel almost all of them and not initiate criminal proceedings against them³.

In this terrorist plot five individuals stand out: the Tunisian Msahel, the Moroccans Anouar Majrar and Abdelghani Aouiouch, and the Algerians Amer Laaradj and the mysterious Abu Hamza. These last two were not arrested. Among open sources there is a more information available about the first individual given that, according to the police and the Moroccan press, Msahel was going to be the principal coordinator of the attacks in Italy and his confession was disseminated with a greater degree of detail. However, coordination of the terrorist action did not fall only on him, and in reality Msahel was only one piece within a much more complex mechanism. In the following pages the characteristics of each one of the subjects and the nature of the relationships they maintained among themselves are analyzed.

Mohamed Benhadi Msahel. The recruiter and the tactical coordinator in Italy

At the time of his arrest Mohamed Msahel was 37 years old. Msahel is an unmarried man of Tunisian origin who, after immigrating to Italy and leading a life little in keeping with Islam, returned to religious practice in 1999. Msahel had been implicated previously in criminal activities, concretely in drug trafficking. In 2001 he began to attend the mosque on Via Padova in Milan. There he met an individual named Ali Addahaoui who spoke with him about the necessity for jihad.

Msahel was little by little introduced into the radical circles of Milan. In the mosque in Segrate he attended classes on jihadist subject matters. There he had access to videos of a radical content and discourse, for example, from Abu Qatada. In 2002 at the mosque on Via Padova he met an individual who a few years later would be key in the participation of Msahel in the terrorist plot: the Moroccan Abdelghani Aouiouch. The radicalization process of Msahel was similar to other cases occurred in Italy.

There are no especially relevant details on the activity of Msahel after he went through this process of radicalization. From his statement made to the Moroccan police it can be deduced that he acted between Italy and France, recruiting new individuals for the jihadist cause in the circles connected to the mosques that he attended.

In May of 2005, Msahel was in Paris at the same time as Aouiouch at a family party of the Moroccan Anouar Majrar. It seems that this meeting was crucial for the involvement of Msahel in the terrorist plot in Italy. Msahel had been invited to the party by a friend from Tunisia who introduced him there to another individual important in the history of this terrorist plot: the Algerian Amer Laaradj. This individual was a midlevel leader within the structure of the GSPC in France. After this family party Msahel began to have a closer relationship with the GSPC and also decided to join the ranks of Al Qaeda in Iraq with the aim of fighting the jihad against the United States.

In June 2005 Msahel went to Syria and installed himself in Damascus with the idea of entering into Iraq, but he didn't manage to cross the border. During his stay in Syria he met different individuals who belonged to the structure of support for Al Qaeda in Iraq which coordinated the entry of volunteers into the country.

Msahel left Syria and began to recruit volunteers in Italy and Morocco who would go to Iraq via Syria⁴. Msahel showed himself to be a good recruiter and committed to the jihadist cause. He gained the confidence of some members of the GSPC and they invited him to participate in the terrorist plan in Italy. Initially it was Anouar Majrar who proposed his joining the plot; but Majrar was arrested in Greece at the end of 2005, sent to France and from there extradited to Morocco. As a consequence other members of the GSPC contacted Msahel again about his participation in the project. In January 2006 Msahel entered Algeria from Morocco to receive more precise instructions about the terrorist plan. His network of contacts with radicals in Italy prepared to participate in suicide attacks in Iraq made him a valuable element in finding individuals ready to participate in the same type of actions in Italian territory.

Anouar Majrar: the primary tactical coordinator in Italy (failed)

Anouar Majrar is a Moroccan who operated in Italy and France. No information exists regarding the process of his radicalization nor is the year or years known when he joined jihadist networks. In March 2005, when he met Msahel, Majrar was already well connected to and enjoyed the trust of some members of the GSPC in France.

In June of 2005 Majrar joined Msahel in Damascus with the intention of entering Iraq. During his stay in Syria he received instructions by telephone to travel to Algeria. There Majrar met with various leaders of the GSPC, among them Amer Laaradj. They proposed he participate in a terrorist plan in Italy, a project which he would have to coordinate with a cell in Spain. Majrar accepted and when he returned to Syria he invited Msahel to join in the terrorist project. As was already mentioned, Msahel accepted⁵.

Majrar tried to return to Italy from Syria through Greece. He was detained there, sent to France and from there extradited to Morocco⁶. According to what is known, Majrar confessed to Moroccan authorities about the terrorist plan and alerted them to the intentions of the GSPC and the role that the Tunisian Msahel could be playing in the plot⁷. From this moment the security around the terrorist conspiracy was compromised.

Abdelghani Aouiouch: tactical coordinator of the attacks in France

As it has been mentioned the Moroccan Abdelghani Aouiouch was who introduced Msahel into the coordination structure of the GSPC in Europe. Aouiouch was a member of a logistical cell of the GSPC in France that financed the organization through criminal activities, principally robberies of businesses and shops. His relationship to jihadism predates 9/11.

The information available about Aouiouch allows us to deduce that he was a person who specialized in acting as an intermediary between the social networks of radical individuals. In this case study Aouiouch is seen getting Msahel together with Majrar and Amer Laardj, and later also acting as intermediary between Amer Laardj, Msahel and the Moroccan Abdelfettah Hidaoui. This last individual was a leader of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group that was preparing an attack against the US embassy in Rabat⁸. According to the testimony of those arrested, this plan consisted in exploding a charge beneath the foundation of the building for the purpose of creating a tunnel⁹. Abdelfettah Hidaoui solicited economic aid from Aouiouch to support the families of jihadists that were imprisoned in Morocco. Hidaoui also asked Amer Laardj for the support of the GSPC so that persons whom he trusted could receive training in camps in Algeria and afterwards return to Morocco.

Additional proof of the role of Aouiouch as an intermediary is that Amer Laardj entrusted him with the coordination of Moroccan and Algerian jihadists in France with the aim of carrying out attacks there. The terrorists' objectives selected in France were a restaurant where civil servants from French intelligence services had lunch, the Paris metro, Orly

Airport and a shopping Mall in La Defense¹⁰. Aouiouch thought of 14 July 2006 as a possible date for the attacks, a French national holiday. However, Laardj told him that the choice of the date corresponded to Al Qaeda and that, therefore, he should wait for instructions. At Laardj's request Aouiouch was also going to support Msahel's group in carrying out the attacks in Italy.

Amer Laardj: the intermediary with the GSPC and coordinator at the operational level

Amer Laardj (a.k.a. Salim el Ouahrani) is one of the most interesting characters in this plot. He is an Algerian who led a logistical cell of the GSPC in France during some years and who later returned to Algeria to receive training in a camp of that organization.

Laardj was not arrested in the antiterrorist operations in Italy and Morocco in which Msahel was detained. From the testimony of those arrested it was deduced that Laardj acted from Algeria but traveled with ease to other countries. He attended the family party in Paris where he met Msahel and, later he went to Rabat-Salé to have a meeting in person with Msahel and Aouiouch. In that meeting he passed on instructions to them from high level commanders of the GSPC. He was also in contact with them through emails sent from cybercafés.

In addition to acting as an intermediary between the tactical coordinators and strategic commanders (for this reason in this chapter he is considered as the operational level coordinator), Amer Laardj appears in the terrorist plot as the person who was going to manufacture the homemade explosives that were going to be used in Italy and in the other countries where the GSPC thought to attack (France and Denmark). Laardj had been trained as an explosives technician during his time in the training camp in Algeria and was ready to travel to Europe to support the groups that were going to take action in different countries. This demonstrates the versatility of this individual (as coordinator and specialized technician) that could perhaps have parallel in other operations of the organization.

Abu Hamza

Abu Hamza (his real name is unknown) is an enigmatic person and of enormous interest within this plot. The testimony of those arrested defines him as the coordinator between the GSPC and Al Qaeda. From the information available it can be deduced that he is Algerian and acted from Algeria. However, as a security measure none of those arrested in Morocco met him in person or saw his photograph. Majrar and Msahel received instructions from Abu Hamza by telephone, through the mail or through intermediaries, but they never met with him.

The figure of Abu Hamza is closely linked to the planning of the attacks. Abu Hamza called Msahel on the telephone in September of 2005 after Msahel, having returned from Syria, revealed interest in participating in the terrorist plan. The object of the call was to be sure of Msahel's commitment to the jihadist cause and his willingness to participate in the plan. Subsequently Msahel received a new message from Abu Hamza. It was in a letter that came from Algeria and that had to be destroyed after reading it. In this letter Abu Hamza set out the plan to commit various terrorist actions in Europe and particularly in Italy. Abu Hamza told Msahel that the terrorist plan corresponded to directives set by Osama Bin Laden, "lion of Islam."

At no point is it clear whether Abu Hamza maintained direct communication with Bin Laden or if the directives were deduced from the public communications of the leader of Al Qaeda; but for the degree of detail involved in the attacks it seems that there did exist some type of communication between Al Qaeda and the GSPC (hence, those implicated in the plan described Abu Hamza as the coordinator between the two organizations). This is also reflected in one of the orders Msahel received in Algeria. The members of the GSPC with

whom he met asked Msahel to recruit someone of European nationality in Italy to travel to Pakistan and there to receive from Ayman Al-Zawahiri more concrete details of the terrorist operations in Europe and the dates to carry them out. It was understood that this planning did not affect the terrorist plan in Milan. The choice of objectives had already been fixed and also the approximate date.

During his brief stay in Algeria, Amer Laardj opened an email account for Msahel in a cybercafé and gave him the instructions that they were going to use for communicating. Abu Hamza was also there. From this it can be assumed that Abu Hamza was going to supervise the preparations for the attacks and that he was probably going to provide support for them by acting as coordinator with other cells (remember that when the plan was explained to Majrar he was told that he could count on the support of a cell in Spain).

Participation of jihadist organizations in the terrorist plan in Italy

The information available on the protagonists of the plot in Italy permits us to deduce the following with respect to the participation of Al Qaeda and the GSPC in the terrorist plan.

Degree of involvement of the GSPC

According to the testimony of those under arrest, the GSPC was the principal driving force and author of the terrorist plan. It was the leaders of the GSPC who initially proposed to Majrar that he participate in the campaign of attacks, and they made him travel to Algeria before raising this possibility with him. Subsequently, when Majrar was detained, the leaders of the GSPC contacted Msahel to confirm his commitment and his readiness to participate in the terrorist project. When his willingness was confirmed he was summoned to a meeting in Algeria to learn in more detail the instructions for the plan and to discuss with the leaders of the organization the different options for undertaking the plan.

Once Msahel accepted participation in the plan, the GSPC gave him liberty to recruit radicalized individuals as he thought necessary for implementing the project. Msahel and the GSPC were already able to count on the support of others on the ground in Italy for the attack on the metro in Milan, but those others were arrested by the Italian police shortly before Msahel's group in Morocco would also fall. The arrests carried out by the Italian police in the second half of March were the result of an investigation of at least six months that had been initiated by the judges Armando Spataro and Nicola Piacente. The Italian press on 21 March 2006 reported on the arrests (a few days before the arrest of Msahel in Morocco) and the plans to attack the metro in Milan and the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna¹¹. According to what later came to be known, some of the names of the seven arrested in Italy coincided with the information that the Moroccan authorities would subsequently pass on to the Italian police¹².

Thus, the GSPC was using individuals that did not formally belong to it (they had not gone through any procedure of admission nor did they have any awareness of being members of the organization) to carry out terrorist actions planned and coordinated by the Group. These are operations that were planned and to be executed at the tactical level by homegrown networks that in reality had been conceived and supported on the operational and strategic levels by a formal organization such as the GSPC. In this way, these tactical cells could also be considered as a part of the organization in functional and *ad hoc* (for this concrete action) terms, given that to commit the terrorist actions planned they were going to act subordinated to the GSPC and they would also benefit from coordination with other cells subordinated to that organization.

This way of proceeding has the advantage of providing flexibility and the capacity for the regeneration of networks of the GSPC in Europe. The organization could create *ad hoc* teams

to carry out specific functions through individuals who had previously demonstrated a certain degree of commitment; those individuals being the element of communication and subordination between the higher organization and the rest of the cell. Once the planned action took place, or in the case of a cell being partially or totally dismantled by the police, the organization could use another trustworthy contact in Europe to start a new cell.

At the same time, this practice also offers operative advantages to the networks of individuals that are trying to contribute to the global jihad. In this case study, groups that were going to attack in Italy and in other countries in Europe were counting on the support of Amer Laardj as explosives expert. The formulas for manufacturing explosives available on the Internet are of little use – and even dangerous – if one does not count on an authentic specialist in the area. For this reason the support of the GSPC in the person of Laardj was crucial for carrying out a terrorist action using explosives. The same can be said for other types of support, such as financial, links between cells, refuge in case of having to flee, etc. In this way, the subordination of homegrown radicals to a higher organization multiplies their capacities and reduces one of the principal vulnerabilities that grassroots jihadist networks have: their lack of professionalism.

The degree of involvement of Al Qaeda

Information available on this case study offers few details about the degree of involvement of Al Qaeda in the terrorist plan. The only, but substantial, information in this regard is the mention, according to Msahel, that Abu Hamza made in a letter. In this letter he stated that terrorist operations in Europe and particularly in Italy had been recommended by the “lion of Islam” and leader of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden. The fact that the mysterious Abu Hamza was named in the testimony of those under arrest as the coordinator between the GSPC and Al Qaeda leads us to assume that the instructions of Bin Laden were sent directly to the Algerian organization through secret communication; in other words, that this was not a simple interpretation by the leaders of the GSPC deduced from public statements of Al Qaeda. However, no more details regarding this were offered with the exception of the intention of the GSPC to send a courier from Europe to Pakistan with the aim of Ayman Al-Zawahiri supervising the details of the campaign of attacks in Europe, as well as the directive of not establishing dates for the attacks in France until counting on the approval of the leaders of Al Qaeda.

Additional data that should be taken into account is that on 5 March 2006, the television network Al Jazeera broadcast a communiqué from Ayman Al-Zawahiri threatening European countries for the caricatures of Mohammed and in which he also congratulated Hamas for its electoral victory. What was most interesting about this communiqué was that in it he also explicitly threatened President Berlusconi for the presence of Italian troops in Iraq and demanded that they be retired from that country. By refusing to do so, threatened Zawahiri, “Italy would dig its own grave in Iraq.” Highly likely anticipating the attack on the Milan metro, Zawahiri mentioned the attacks in Madrid and London as the model that should inspire the next attacks¹³.

To understand the degree of involvement of Al Qaeda in the terrorist plans in Italy the information available on another cell linked to the GSPC and dismantled shortly before in Morocco in November of 2005 is helpful. This group was led by Khaled Azig and Mohammed Reha, two young men of Moroccan origin who operated in Syria and Morocco under the coordination of the GSPC. The testimony of those arrested also appeared in the Arab press and offered more concrete details than the Msahel case about the way in which local cells coordinated with regional organizations¹⁴.

In the history of the network of Khaled Azig and Mohamed Reha an enigmatic character also appears called Abu Bashir, who according to the confession of both individuals was the

coordinator of Al Qaeda in Europe and North Africa, and was also the go-between for the organization with the GSPC. According to the story that Azig and Reha told the Moroccan police, they saw how Abu Bashir coordinated different cells in Syria, Morocco and Europe. As in the case of Abu Hamza, communication that Abu Bashir maintained with the cells was always through the telephone or by Internet. None of those arrested saw him in person or in a photograph. This information appears to be confirmed by at least two Spanish antiterrorist operations against recruitment networks to send volunteers to Iraq in which the name of Abu Bashir as high level coordinator also appeared¹⁵.

From the perspective of this chapter, the most interesting aspect of the story of Azig, Reha and Abu Bashir is that details appear on communications between the GSPC and Al Qaeda in Iraq and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan/Pakistan. On the relationship of the GSPC with Bin Laden's organization they spoke, for example, about the future creation of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb and about the oath of loyalty that Abdelmalik Dourkdel, leader of the GSPC, intended to make to Bin Laden. Essentially these plans were carried out in September of 2006, leading to the transformation of the GSPC into the Al Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb. The testimony of Azig and Reha confirmed that communication between the leadership of said organizations was done through human couriers who would carry letters by hand to Iraq and Afghanistan. This information corresponds with the testimony of Msahel about the interest of the GSPC in sending couriers from Europe to Pakistan with the details of the terrorist operation they were planning.

Both the Msahel and Abu Hamza case and the Azig, Reha and Abu Bashir case, demonstrate that in effect there existed – and probably continues to exist – direct communication between the GSPC and Al Qaeda. However, with the information available from both cases it can be stated that, for security motives, said communication was excessively slow and that as a consequence only dealt with strategic questions. The channels of communication would have made close collaboration between the leaders of both organizations in the coordination of operations at the tactical level difficult.

In conclusion, regarding the case of the terrorist plan in Italy in 2006, Al Qaeda possibly intervened designating the objectives and the dates for committing the attacks. However, they delegated the concrete details of the planning of the terrorist attacks and, particularly all related to the preparation on the ground, to the GSPC. The GSPC has many more contacts and more support among the networks of radical Islamists of Maghreb origin, which makes them an allied organization of great value given Al Qaeda's intentions to attack European countries with a high number of immigrants from Northern Africa, as is the case in Italy or France, and particularly in cities such as Milan or Paris.

The terrorist plan in Italy

The action in Italy in which Msahel was going to participate was framed within a wider campaign of attacks instigated by Al Qaeda in Europe. Said campaign included attacks in Denmark and in Paris, concretely against a restaurant where civil servants from French intelligence services tended to have lunch, and against the metro and a shopping center in the La Defense district.

From the testimony of those arrested it can be assumed that the terrorist plan in Italy had two primary objectives:

a) Attack against the metro in Milan. A group of five suicide attackers who would explode themselves in the interior of the trains were to be responsible for this action. The intention of the terrorists was to carry out the attacks a few days before the legislative elections in Italy with the aim of influencing the results and avoiding the reelection of President Silvio Berlusconi. According to the testimony of those arrested the choice of Milan as the target was due to it being the city where President Berlusconi was born; in this way the attacks would be

a more explicit message of revenge against him for sending Italian troops to Iraq and Afghanistan.

It can be also assumed that the existence of a large community of immigrants of Muslim origin in Milan, making it easier for the terrorists to pass unnoticed, also contributed to the decision. However, Milan has also been the location for antiterrorist operations against jihadist cells, some of them tied to the Islamic Cultural Center at Viale Jenner. During the years 2002 through 2005 Italian security forces carried out at least four operations against cells composed primarily of Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians, who in one case were trying to acquire arms and explosives¹⁶. The presence of radical Islamists in Milan goes back to the middle of the decade of the 1990s. In those years Milan became a base of operations for jihadism in Europe for the following reasons: the preaching and activism of the Egyptian sheik Anwar Shaban at the Islamic Cultural Center in Milan; the existence of recruitment networks for sending volunteers to Chechnya, Afghanistan and, later, Iraq; and the geographic situation of the city which permits rapid access to other European countries¹⁷.

The choice of the metro as a target is in keeping with the preference of jihadist terrorism: a system of transportation that is very difficult to protect given that ease of access is prioritized along with the possibility that tens of thousands can use the system simultaneously each day. The metro had already been a jihadist objective in Europe with the attacks on July 7 2005 in London that took the lives of 56 people and injured hundreds (plus the failed attacks on July 21 2005), and during the campaign of attacks by the GIA in Paris in July of 1995 in which 8 persons died and 86 were injured¹⁸.

In addition, the choice of the metro in Milan reveals the continuation of attempts to attack the same objective. In 2002, Domenico Quaranta, an Italian convert to Islam caused a small fire in the Milan metro with a canister of gas that failed to explode¹⁹. According to Italian authorities, in 2004, a cell made up of Moroccans and Tunisians that operated in the city of Cremona, had also tried to attack the metro in Milan in a station below the cathedral and a church in the Italian city of Cremona²⁰. With the exception of the church in Cremona (in place of that in Bologna) the 2004 plan had many similarities with the 2006 plan. In 2004, the Italian press also revealed that the Milan metro had already been chosen as a target for a multiple suicide attack prior to 9/11. That information came from an informer with the Italian security services who had infiltrated a jihadist cell²¹. In May of 2005 the Italian police carried out a new operation in Milan and Turin in which nine suspects were arrested. The individuals arrested in Milan were Mouldi Ben Rachid Ben Yahia, Hichem Ben Mohamed Hekiri, Samir Sassi, Kamel Kneni, Hamadi Ben Abdelaziz Bouyahia and Lotfi Ben Sadok Maaoui. The majority were Tunisians who were sending volunteers and money to Iraq. According to the Italian police these individuals were also preparing an attack against the metro in Milan and the cathedral of Cremona²². In October of 2006, a court in Milan sentenced three of them to various years of prison for conspiring to commit terrorist acts²³.

The GSPC planned to count on the help of operatives already in Italy to carry out the attack. Mohamed Msahel was going to be responsible for recruitment thanks to his previous contacts in the city. In the meeting that he had with leaders of the organization in Algeria he suggested the possibility of a group of young residents of Bologna who he knew were ready to go to Iraq to commit suicide attacks joining the project. The leaders of the GSPC gave him the go ahead for this possibility and Msahel proposed establishing contact with them immediately upon his return to Italy.

However, in analyzing the case it is not at all clear if all the volunteers were going to come from Msahel's recruitment efforts or if the GSPC had other operatives on the ground involved in the plan. In favor of this hypothesis is the fact that the Italian authorities arrested five individuals of Moroccan origin in April 2006 that were allegedly planning to attack the

metro in Milan just before the elections. Three of them were to be tried before the Italian justice system and two were expelled from the country²⁴.

In addition to getting volunteers to carry out the suicide attacks, another important issue in the plan was the manufacture of the explosives. According to the testimony of Msahel, the Algerian Amer Laardj was responsible. This individual had received training in this area during his stay in a GSPC camp in Algeria. The idea of the terrorists was that Laardj would travel to Italy to manufacture the homemade explosives that would be used against the Milan metro and against the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna. As part of the plan, Msahel had to find a safe house where Laardj could work discreetly.

b) The attack on the Basilica de San Petronio in Bologna. The second objective of the terrorists was a catholic church in the Italian city of Bologna. In it there is a fresco from 1415, painted by Giovanni da Modena in which Mohammed appears naked and in hell as Dante described in the Divine Comedy.

The information available on this case study offers little detail about how they thought to carry out this terrorist attack. They intended to do it after the attacks in Milan and the concrete date – just as with the attacks in France and Denmark – would depend on the calendar established by Ayman Al-Zawahiri. It is unknown if they thought to use suicide bombers, nor how many persons were going to participate in the attack. The principle objective was to destroy the Basilica and the fresco in which Mohammed appears, but it is not possible to know if they intended to cause a large number of deaths by attacking at a moment in which a religious ceremony would be taking place.

Regarding the choice of objective, it is interesting to point out how the leaders of Al Qaeda and the GSPC knew of the existence of the fresco. It is most likely that they learned of it because of the controversy that was triggered by it in 2001 and 2002 and that attracted the attention of the media of other countries. In June 2001 the Union of Muslims of Italy sent a letter to Pope John Paul II asking for the “disappearance” of the fresco. After this a campaign of actions began which included a demonstration in front of one of the principal mosques of Rome.

Shortly afterward, Abdel Aziz El Mataani, professor at the Egyptian University of Al Azhar joined the controversy by declaring to the Italian news agency ANSA that “Whoever tries to destroy this image will be blessed by Allah, because he will do it to change an attitude that is harmful and rejected by Islam.”²⁵ As a consequence, the Italian police kept a presence at the Basilica for a month to avoid acts of vandalism against the fresco. One year later, in the middle of 2002, the theme again attracted media attention when the news was disseminated (unconfirmed by Italian security agencies) that the church had been designated an objective of Al Qaeda. True or not, what is clear is that four years later, the GSPC, inspired by Al Qaeda, really planned to attack the Basilica.

Motivation for the attacks

In general terms it can be inferred that the aim of both attacks consisted in humiliating the West, in this case concretely Italy and in avenging the evils that, according to them, the infidels cause Muslims. But in addition, the choice of targets and the testimony of those arrested is evidence of other more concrete motivations.

In the plan to attack the metro in Milan the motivation was clearly political. According to Msahel’s confession the aim of the attack was to influence the Italian elections and provoke the defeat of President Berlusconi. In 2003 the Berlusconi government supported the United States’ invasion of Iraq and sent troops that were still there in April 2006. Msahel added in his statement that the attack on the metro in Milan was inspired by the attack on the trains in

Madrid in March 2004, which in the opinion of the terrorists, as a consequence led to the defeat of the party of Jose María Aznar in the elections held in Spain three days later.

In this sense, the Milan plan demonstrated once again the desire of the jihadists to affect, through terrorism, the foreign policy of western governments toward the Muslim world. This idea is recurring in the messages claiming responsibility for attacks on the part of Al Qaeda and in the statements of Osama Bin Laden or Ayman Al Zawahiri aimed at western societies. What stands out in the Madrid case and in the failed plot in Milan is that the terrorists intended to affect said policy through direct intervention on the eve of elections, in this way magnifying their importance as actors in the internal politics of western democracies.

Through the attacks or attempts to attack near the time of elections the terrorists have become an additional actor in the electoral campaign. With their actions and threats they can undermine the popularity of specific parties involved and directly support others. The climate of alarm that is generated also benefits them from a propagandistic perspective as it generates headlines in the media and public statements from politicians. For example, in the Italian case of 2006, even President Bush warned Italian authorities about the possibility of an attack similar to that of Madrid, and this even before the arrest of Msahel and his group²⁶. The vice president of the European Commission, the Italian Franco Frattini, also warned about the need for maximum security measures²⁷. The mood in March 2006 had also heated up because of the diffusion of a new video from Ayman Al-Zawahiri condemning the caricatures against Mohammed and proposing attacks in Europe²⁸. The most interesting aspect of this video is that in it Al Zawahiri explicitly threatened President Berlusconi for maintaining troops in Iraq.

At the same time, the nature of the attack and its coinciding with the elections also reflects the fact that the jihadists see western citizens as guilty for the policies of their governments. In the videos filmed of two of the suicide bombers in the London attacks on July 7 2005, Shezad Tanweer and Mohamed Sidique Khan justified the massacre of civilians that they were going to commit, accusing them of being responsible for the injustices that Muslims suffer at the hands of western governments²⁹. The same idea appears in the public statements of Bin Laden and Zawahiri.

In the plan to attack the Basilica of San Petronio the motivation had a very evident religious content. With this attack the jihadists wanted to present themselves as the authentic defenders of Islam, taking advantage of the controversy raised in Italy around the 15th century fresco shortly before. In this sense, the motivation for this terrorist plan resembles more that raised by the murder of the Dutch film director Theo Van Gogh in November 2004.

At the same time, the targeting of a Christian church is not new for jihadism. As was already mentioned, in 2004 the Italian police arrested a group of Moroccans that were allegedly intending to attack near the cathedral of Milan and more specifically against a church in Cremona. In Iraq attacks by Al Qaeda against Christian churches have taken place, and the same has happened in Algeria, Pakistan, Indonesia and the Philippines by other jihadist groups. On Christmas in 2000 Jemaah Islamiyah in the Indonesia carried out simultaneous attacks against several churches during midnight mass which caused dozens of deaths. Al Qaeda has also planned and carried out attacks against places of Jewish worship, such as the terrorist suicide attack against the synagogue in Djerba in April 2002.

The attacks against Christian and Jewish religious buildings respond to the jihadist vision of carrying out a war between religions. According to radical Islamists, Christianity and Judaism have conspired against Muslims since the birth of Islam. According to this vision, Christians and Jews are guilty of not having recognized the message of the Prophet Mohammed, which was the culmination of the revelations of the God of Abraham.

For these reasons the plan to attack the Basilica in Bologna combined the motivation of the defense of Islam and the Prophet with the world view of fighting a war between religions.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The analysis offered here lead to the following conclusions. The plans to attack the Milan metro and the Basilica of San Petronio in 2006 were not devised by a local group of radicals. The Al Qaeda organization recommended to the Algerian GSPC the planning and execution of these terrorist actions. It is very likely that Al Qaeda delegated these attacks to the GSPC due to fact that Italy and France were their objectives, countries where the number of North African immigrants is high and where the GSPC counts on a network of sympathizers. To carry out an eventual operation in the United Kingdom, possibly Al Qaeda would prefer to plan and coordinate the operation in a more direct manner through radicals of Pakistani origin, as very likely happened in the attacks of July 7 2005 and in the airplane plot of summer 2006.

In turn, the GSPC, in carrying out the preparations for executing the attacks, relied on individuals that were not formally connected to the organization (such as Msahel and Majrar) but that maintained a relationship with members (Amer Laardj and Abu Hamza). For his part, Msahel had planned to bring into the project of the attack in Milan a group of radicals who had planned to go to Iraq to commit suicide attacks and who had no connection to the GSPC. These individuals were going to count on the crucial support of an explosives expert from the GSPC, Amer Laardj, who in supposedly just a few days would manufacture the backpacks with explosives needed to carry out the attacks. The operation itself was not too complex, nor did it require much more preparation than the manufacture of the bombs and the availability of individuals willing to carry out the suicide attacks. The metro is an objective which is almost impossible to protect from a group of suicidal attackers laden with explosives and once initiated it would be difficult for the plan to fail.

If the terrorists had successfully carried out their plans the political consequences would have been incalculable. Italy has been an important ally of the United States in the war in Iraq and deployed troops to that country, and has also maintained a military contingent in Afghanistan. As with other European countries, wide sectors of Italian society actively opposed the war in Iraq and currently judge the presence of troops in Afghanistan negatively. A jihadist attack a few days before the elections – presumably followed by a communiqué claiming responsibility that would link the attacks with the policies of the Berlusconi government regarding Iraq – would have had grave political consequences. Certainly an important segment of public opinion, of the media and of the political opposition would have considered Berlusconi's policies as an indirect cause of the attacks. In the case of Spain, shortly after the attacks in Madrid in March 2004, 64 percent of those surveyed (and 80 percent among the left wing electorate) thought that the attacks would not have happened if Spain had not supported the United States in the war in Iraq³⁰.

This case study shows how Al Qaeda delegated to the GSPC, and how the GSPC delegated to a homegrown network with minimal means but which saw its capacities multiplied by counting on the technical support and the strategic leadership of higher organizations. It is a symbiotic relationship among groups. If the terrorist plan would have been successful the large organizations like Al Qaeda or the GSPC would have managed to project their strength from Central Asia and the Maghreb into the center of Europe, in a manner analogous to western countries when they intervene militarily at a distance of thousands of kilometers.

This fact grants to Al Qaeda and to other terrorist organizations a potential capacity for deterrence that could affect the foreign policy of other states. In addition, homegrown networks composed of radicals who aspire to emulate the "heroic deeds" of Al Qaeda benefit in terms of material, technical and cognitive resources through their subordination to a higher organization. Their profile rises suddenly, converting them into a useful piece in the jihadist mechanism in the fight against the infidels.

In facing this system of delegation and cooperation between global organizations (Al Qaeda), regional organizations (GSPC), and homegrown networks of radicalized individuals, the principal policy recommendation to be made is recognition of the urgent nature of international cooperation on antiterrorist matters. This case study confirms the need for fluid channels of communication at the police, judicial and intelligence levels among the greatest number of states and from which could flow useful information in a constant manner. At the same time it is also necessary that state agencies that receive information from outside the state share that information effectively with the agencies specialized in investigating internal terrorism.

In this case study the terrorists traveled and cooperated (or planned to cooperate) with networks established in Italy, France, Spain, Syria, Morocco, Algeria and Pakistan, the planners being situated in those last two countries. The arrest of Majrar, which permitted the discovery of the plan and its prevention, happened in Greece. If the analysis was limited to the purely local, a small group of radicals could, at first sight, appear to be scarcely dangerous. Perhaps they would appear as a group of friends with radical ideas but little real will to achieve their intentions or with little or no material resources or technical knowledge to carry out a terrorist attack. However, if a group of these characteristics enters into contact with a higher organization, and this organization decides to count on them and provide them with the means to carry out a terrorist attack of little complexity, the result could be lethal in the short term and the strategic consequences could be very serious in the medium and long term. In the majority of cases the way to discover this possible connection between jihadist networks is through international cooperation.

¹ *Corriere della Sera*, March 21, 2006; *Maroc Hebdo International*, No 693, April 2006

² *Al Alam*, March 30, 2006.

³ *La Stampa*, April 6, 2006.

⁴ *Le Jour d'Algerie*, December 7, 2006

⁵ *Asharq Al Awsat*, October 21, 2007

⁶ *Agence France-Presse*, April 4, 2006

⁷ *La Gazzete du Maroc*, No 467, April 11, 2006

⁸ *Maroc Hebdo International* No 693, April 2006

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Agence France-Presse*, April 4, 2006; *The New York Times*, March 3, 2007

¹¹ *Corriere della Sera*, March 21, 2006.

¹² *La Stampa*, April 6, 2006

¹³ *La Stampa*, March 6, 2006

¹⁴ *Dar Al-Hayat*, November 11, 2005.

¹⁵ Juzgado Central de Instrucción No 5, Auto de Procesamiento del Sumario (Procedimiento Ordinario) 21/2006 L, October 23, 2007, p. 11; Juzgado Central de Instrucción No 5, Auto de Procesamiento June 13, 2008, p. 2

¹⁶ Kathryn Haahr, "GSPC in Italy: The Forward Base of Jihad in Europe", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 4, Issue 3 (February 9, 2006)

¹⁷ Guido Olimpio, "Italy and Islamic Militancy: From Logistics Base to Potential Target", *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 3, Issue 18 (September 21, 2005)

¹⁸ Petter Nesser, "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994-2007: Planned, Prepared, and Executed Terrorist Attacks", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 31, (2008), pp. 924-946.

¹⁹ *RAI News*, July 17, 2002

²⁰ *BBC News*, "Terror suspects arrested in Italy", 25 February, 2004

²¹ *The Guardian*, March 26 2004

²² *Associated Press*, May 18, 2005

²³ Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb. The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, Institute for Security Studies, Monograph No 144, June 2008, p. 153.

²⁴ *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2006

²⁵ *El Mundo*, July 30, 2002

²⁶ *La Repubblica*, March 23, 2006

²⁷ *Ibid*, March 6, 2006

²⁸ *CNN.com* "Bin Laden's No. 2 condemns Mohammed cartoons", March 5, 2006

²⁹ BBC News, September 1, 2005

³⁰ *Javier Noya*, “Del 11-M al 14-M: estrategia yihadista, elecciones generales y opinión pública”, *Análisis del Real Instituto Elcano*, No 132, 2004