



## **Al Qaeda's New Look. Lessons learned from Germany's foiled terror plot**

(Published in *The Daily Standard*, September 7, 2007)

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**Colaboraciones n° 1938**

**September 19, 2007**

The foiling of an Islamist terrorist plot this week in Germany is noteworthy for several reasons that may not have been obvious from the headlines.

The first is the involvement of an ethnic Turk. On Tuesday, police in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia seized three men identified as a Turk and two German converts to Islam (under German court rules, their full names were not released). While the activity of converts in terrorism is not new, the Turkish community in Germany has so far been free of the plague of religious extremism. Turkish and Kurdish immigrants to Germany and their offspring have been attracted to nationalist radicalism, but seldom to Islamic fundamentalism. They

generally seek and succeed in finding a place in German society.

On Thursday, September 6, the German authorities were still hunting some ten suspects, described as a mixture of Germans, Turks, and others. This Turkish connection is troublesome in light of the recent election of the Sunni-centric, religious AK party in Turkey. German Turkish and Kurdish Muslims have described infiltration of their communities by "soft" fundamentalists ever since the religious parties emerged as a serious political force in Turkey more than 20 years ago. Similarly, moderate Muslims in Turkey's neighboring and related cultural zones, the Balkans and Central Asia, now warn that Turkish, rather than Arab, Islamists are be-

ginning to throw money around and establish networks in their regions.

A second striking detail is the similarity of the German plot with the London-Glasgow conspiracy at the end of June. Gasoline or hydrogen-peroxide car bombs were to be aimed at major airports. This may indicate a strategic decision by al Qaeda to use low-tech methods to cripple Western air transportation. When the history of the war on terror is finally written, it might appear that al Qaeda's main target was consistent. They repeatedly aim at airlines and airports as one of the economically richest targets--with ripple effects for global business, as we have all learned. Public transit systems, as in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, are even more vulnerable, but the social dislocation caused by attacks on them is of short duration.

Al Qaeda is losing the war in Iraq. Its fanatical dedication to Wahhabi-style *takfir*--or expulsion from the religion and slaying of Muslims with whom it disagrees--has alienated many Sunnis who formerly fought against the U.S.-led Coalition and the Iraqi government (see Frederick W. Kagan's "[Al Qaeda in Iraq](#)"). As Iraqi Sunnis change sides in our favor, al Qaeda is bent on transferring the jihadist battlefield to Europe, which is the nearest and most vulnerable theater of opportunity.

The European Union has not formulated an effective common anti-terror strategy. European federal authority is fragmented and subject

to local political vagaries--as seen by the hurried withdrawal of the Spanish from Iraq after the Madrid metro horror. Differences like that between, in the past, typically secular Turkish and Kurdish Muslims in Germany, diverse groups of Arab and African Muslims in France, and radical Muslims from Pakistan and India in the United Kingdom have also obstructed a common EU response.

If there is a particular trap to be avoided in drawing lessons from the German plot it is that of applying increasingly common clichés about "homegrown terrorism." The German conspiracy has already been traced to an Uzbek group, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), operating training centers in Pakistan. There are not enough Uzbeks or even Pakistanis in Germany to support a "homegrown" radical Islamist network among them, and for the Germans of Turkish origin, as indicated, the phenomenon is new and imported. In Germany, at least, terrorism is clearly not "homegrown"--it is an exotic import, supported with foreign money.

The group that allegedly spawned the Islamic Jihad Union was the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which never established a foothold in that ex-Soviet republic but recruited Uzbeks to fight in jihad in Tajikistan and, after 9/11, Afghanistan. IMU was wiped out in Afghanistan, but some of its members fled to Pakistan. In seeking to export the Iraq front to Europe, al Qaeda is gathering whatever forces it has, wherever they may be found,

and sending them West. Its original Saudi core was badly damaged in the aftermath of 9/11, and their successors are still busy in Iraq.

Aside from the vigilance of the German authorities, it is good news that al Qaeda has to scrape the bottom of its barrel for terrorist cadres, because it shows that its worldwide ranks are not being replenished, even though fronts may increase in geographical distribution. The de-

pendence on low-tech weaponry based on common chemicals is evidence that al Qaeda may also be depleting its financial and technological capital.

The worst thing to be noted in the German case is the location of Uzbek-organized terror training camps in Pakistan. When will the government of Pervez Musharraf put an end to accommodation with the radicals?