

JIHAD FROM EUROPE

Lorenzo Vidino

On March 16, 2003, just days before American forces commenced combat operations in Iraq, Italian intelligence intercepted the following telephone conversation between Mohammed Tahir Hammid, a suspected Kurdish terrorist recruiter based in the northern Italian city of Parma, and a fellow militant located in northern Iraq:

Man: *How is the situation of the Muslims over there [in Europe]? What do they think of the situation [the upcoming war in Iraq]?*

Hammid: *After the Americans decided to go to war against Iraq there are many communities of Moroccans and Tunisians that are getting ready to go and fight against the Americans... their blood is hot... this thing that they want to do will be a good thing for the future of the Muslims!*¹

Some two and a half years later, Hammid's assessment of the impact of the war in Iraq on European Muslims still rings true. The Iraqi conflict has played an important role in radicalizing large segments of Europe's 15 million-strong Muslim population. And, while most have limited themselves to vocal opposition to the war, a small cadre of young European Muslims have joined the fight against U.S. and Coalition forces, either with the assistance of international terrorist organizations or via independent local cells inspired by the radical, anti-Western ideology of Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda.



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Europe's challenge

As three high-profile terrorist incidents—the March 11, 2004 train bombings in Madrid, the subsequent November assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, and the bombings in London in July of this year—have highlighted, Europe today confronts a two-fold terrorist threat. The first danger comes from sophisticated international organizations, such as al-Qaeda, which have operated on European territory for almost two decades, and which can still count on an extensive continental network that could allow them to carry out large-scale operations on European soil, even after September 11th. The second stems from independent, autonomous cells of young, freshly radicalized domestic militants, whose members have emerged as major players in terror acts abroad, and—increasingly—in the internal destabilization of the European continent as well. Indeed, while al-Qaeda and its affiliates remain a serious threat, European intelligence officials have concluded that an attack carried out by such local groups acting autonomously and selecting their own targets and *modus operandi*, constitutes the more immediate danger.² (The recent bus and rail bombings in London are sad proof of this fact.)

The movement of European militants to Iraq as a result of Operation Iraqi Freedom underscores this dual menace. Over the past three years, European authorities have succeeded in dismantling a series of highly organized trans-state networks engaged in the recruitment of volunteers for terrorist operations in Iraq. In other cases, however, investigations have found volunteers for the Iraqi *jihād* to be young European Muslims with no affiliation to any organized network or terror group, but who nevertheless felt a sudden urge to fight the “infidels.”

The Iraqi *jihād*, however, is just the latest of a series of recruitment campaigns that fundamentalists have carried out on the “Old Continent.” European militants have previously fought in conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, the Philippines, and Kashmir. The success of those prior recruitment drives exposes a wider and more troubling phenomenon: the extensive radicalization of large segments of the European Muslim population.

That process began some twenty years ago, when hundreds of Islamic fundamentalists began to establish a presence in Europe, capitalizing on generous asylum policies that allowed them to escape persecution in their native countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Contrary to the naive hopes of European governments, however, these radicals did not abandon their extremist rhetoric or subversive activities in their new homes. Rather, they exploited newfound liberties to further an increasingly ambitious agenda, directed first at overthrowing secular governments in the Islamic world and, gradually, at “infidel” European societies and governments as well.

Iraq is emerging as a new Afghanistan—a place where a fresh cadre of fanatics is learning deadly skills that its members will be willing and able to employ once they return from the battlefield.

In the years that followed, these radical cadres played a key role in ideologically influencing large segments of Europe's burgeoning Muslim population. The mosques and networks established by them went on to radicalize thousands of immigrant or European-born Muslims.

The reasons for these successes are numerous. Many turn to radical Islam as a form of protest against social and economic difficulties, such as segregation and unemployment. Others feel a disconnect with their adoptive societies, where they live amid drugs and crime, and think they can find true identity or some form of redemption in what they perceive as “pure” Islam. Yet at least some who have embraced militant Islam have come from wealthy, fully assimilated families in Europe, disproving the paradigm that equates militancy with segregation—and making the profiling of European radicals a nearly impossible task.

While the reasons for their conversion might vary from case to case, what is constant among the thousands of European Muslims who identify themselves with radical Islam is a deep hatred for the very societies in which they live. Radical preachers in numerous European mosques tell their devoted audiences that Islam is under attack, not only in Iraq or the Middle East, but worldwide, and that it is their duty to defend it.

As such, the mobilization of European terrorists for Iraqi *jihad* poses a direct danger to the security of Europe—and, by extension, to that of the United States as well. While the impact of European radicals on the course of the Iraqi insurgency has so far been limited, European authorities increasingly fear that Iraq is emerging as a new Afghanistan—a place where a fresh cadre of fanatics is learning deadly skills that its members will be willing and able to employ once they return from the battlefield.

Ansar al-Islam’s European base

The war in Iraq has provided fresh fodder for the already-busy recruitment networks established by Islamist

terrorist groups in Europe during the 1990s. Over the last three years, European authorities have partially uncovered a sophisticated web of cells run by al-Qaeda’s radical Kurdish affiliate, Ansar al-Islam, responsible for sending hundreds of volunteers to Iraq.

Since its creation in 2001 through a merger of several Kurdish Islamist groups in northern Iraq, Ansar has evolved into a major terrorist entity. Its links with al-Qaeda began early on, when, in the summer of 2001, representatives of the group traveled to Afghanistan to meet with al-Qaeda leaders in Kandahar. There, the newly-formed Kurdish group obtained moral and financial support from the Bin Laden network. In exchange, it proposed a symbiosis of sorts, offering al-Qaeda’s leadership the use of Iraqi Kurdistan as an alternate base.

Ansar’s offer was accepted after 9/11, following the destruction of al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan by U.S. forces, and the man appointed to oversee al-Qaeda’s relocation was a familiar face: Jordanian-born master terrorist Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Zarqawi moved some of his most trusted lieutenants to northern Iraq, where he developed close operational ties with Ansar forces. He also facilitated the passage of hundreds of Arab fighters fleeing the Afghan scene into Iran, from where the majority eventually traveled to Ansar camps near the Iraqi city of Suleimaniya.³

The partnership between Ansar and al-Qaeda solved another problem as well. Following the loss of their Afghan sanctuary, al-Qaeda’s recruiters in Europe found themselves without a destination for the swelling numbers of volunteers for the *jihad*. The alliance between Zarqawi and Ansar changed all that, making Iraqi Kurdistan a favorite destination for European militants.

That shift was facilitated by a series of new, post-9/11 alliances formed in

Europe between terrorist groups in response to continental counterterrorism efforts. The most notable of these was created in Italy and Germany between remnants of al-Qaeda and Ansar militants who had been sent to Europe for recruitment and fundraising. The new network, coordinated by Zarqawi in Iraq, became active in several European countries, harnessing the cells established by al-Qaeda prior to 9/11.

Milan, with its infamous Islamic Cultural Institute—a facility with a long history of extremist activities—became one of the most important operational hubs of the new network. There, operatives established links with al-Qaeda recruiters, and with their assistance built a formidable conduit for *jihad*, sending volunteers from Europe to camps in northern Iraq by way of Turkey or Syria.⁴ The first group of European volunteers, consisting of eight Tunisians and three Iraqis, was allegedly sent to Iraq in the fall of 2002 via Syria. Many other volunteers, from European countries such as Germany, France, Holland, Sweden and Finland, followed suit.

The flow of militants from Europe to Iraq surged with the prospect of a war in Iraq. A growing number of *jihadis* flocked to Kurdistan, enticed by the idea of fighting U.S. forces and avenging al-Qaeda's bitter defeat in Afghanistan. Ansar, in turn, became a major focus of the Coalition campaign. In the opening days of the war, American forces pounded suspected Ansar facilities in northern Iraq and destroyed its training camps.

Ansar would not re-emerge as a player in Iraq until after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, when the group's members returned from Iran, where they had sought refuge during Coalition operations. While some remained on the group's original turf in Kurdistan, many fighters made their

way to Baghdad and the Sunni Triangle. There, their ranks were bolstered by scores of additional foreign volunteers.

Evidence gathered by European intelligence services and by Coalition forces in Iraq since the end of major combat operations in Iraq has shed light on the scope and effectiveness of Ansar's Milan-based network. All told, the Milan network is believed to have succeeded in recruiting no fewer than 200 militants for the Iraqi *jihad*, 70 of them from Italy.⁵

Italy was not the only European outpost for the network, however. Ongoing investigations into the group's recruitment activities have uncovered important links to Germany, and to a cell of senior leaders based in Munich. Under the leadership of a 30-year-old Kurd named Mohammed Loqman, this cell was responsible for organizing safe houses, recruiting volunteers and raising money for the "brothers" in Kurdistan, using the smuggling of illegal Kurdish immigrants into Europe to bankroll its activities.⁶ German authorities believe that the group managed to raise more than a million Euros (nearly 1.3 million dollars) before most of its members were arrested in late 2003.⁷

The Munich cell may have been the nerve center of Ansar's network in Germany, but its dismantlement did not end the group's activities there. Other active Ansar cells have since been found throughout the country, including in Stuttgart, Berlin, Hamburg, Duisburg, Cologne, Ulm and Frankfurt.⁸ Authorities in Berlin estimate that at least 100 Ansar members are currently active domestically, while an undetermined number of German Muslims has been recruited by the group to fight in Iraq.⁹ In Bavaria alone, between 10 and 50 militants are believed to have joined Ansar activities in Iraq. German officials are also convinced that at least two of the militants recruited by the

network left Germany determined to die as suicide bombers.¹⁰

As authorities quietly closed in on the Munich Ansar cell in late 2004, a plot by the group made headlines worldwide. On December 6th, German authorities arrested three men accused of planning to kill Iraq's interim Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, during his visit to Germany. While authorities believe that the plot was an unsophisticated one, hatched on the spur of the moment, these arrests showcased Ansar's willingness to transplant the brutality of the Iraqi conflict to European soil. As Michael Ziegler, the spokesman for Bavaria's security forces, told reporters following the seizure, "the foiled attack on Allawi shows that this group must be considered dangerous also for Europe."¹¹

The continent's political proclivities and lack of effective counterterrorism laws will have serious ramifications in the years to come, as militants now active in Iraq return home and turn their attention to domestic troublemaking.

The abortive attack on Prime Minister Allawi rocked Germany. Ansar, which previously had been using Germany purely as a logistical base of operations, was now planning attacks inside the country. And while the target was an Iraqi, there was no guarantee that the group would not have struck German targets in the future. The logic was convincing: "If someone is involved in an attack in Iraq, I am virtually 100 percent convinced that he'll also carry out an attack over here if ordered to do so," Guenter Beckstein, the top state security official in Bavaria, announced.¹²

Spurred by this logic, German authorities launched an unprecedented

crackdown on the Ansar al-Islam network in their country. On January 12th, more than 700 police officers raided dozens of apartments, businesses and mosques in Munich, Frankfurt, Ulm, Bonn, Duesseldorf and Freiburg. Twenty-two Ansar members were arrested and charged with crimes such as raising money for a terrorist organization and forging documents.¹³

From the Banlieux to Fallujah

The Ansar network uncovered in Italy and Germany has shed light upon the sophistication of foreign terrorist recruiting operations in Europe. But the Iraqi conflict has also attracted another constituency—young Muslims with no apparent ties to organized terrorist groups. While these radicals are fewer in number than al-Qaeda and Ansar's professional recruits, their activities are no less troubling. The understanding that Iraq can become the new Afghanistan, a place where militants gain military and terrorist experience before they travel back to their home countries, is gaining ground among European counter-terrorism officials, who are now apprehensively awaiting the return of Iraq's "alumni."

France has played a particularly pro-active role in investigating the movement of such homegrown militants. "We consider these people dangerous because those who go will come back once their mission is accomplished," a top French counterterrorism official explained to the *New York Times* in October 2004. "Then they can use the knowledge gained there in France, Europe or the United States. It's the same as those who went to Afghanistan or Chechnya. Now the new land of *jihad* is Iraq. There, they are trained, they fight and acquire a technique and the indoctrination sufficient to act on when they return."¹⁴

French authorities have matched rhetoric with action. In the fall of 2004, in the wake of reports from American and Iraqi authorities that at least three French Muslims had died fighting in Iraq, and that another three French citizens had been detained by U.S. forces, the government of Prime Minister Jacques Chirac began seriously investigating the migration of domestic radicals to the Middle East.

These culprits, French authorities quickly found, had much in common. All six had come from the same Paris suburb, the XIX *arrondissement*—an area in the northeast of the French capital heavily populated by immigrants from North Africa.¹⁵ Moreover, all six had left France in March 2004 for Syria, where they had enrolled in the al-Fateh al-Islami Institute, a radical religious school in Damascus, as a prelude to entering Iraq.¹⁶

French authorities uncovered other similarities as well. All six men had been quiet, normal, secular youths. But something had changed in the months following the beginning of the Iraq war; the men had all fallen under the influence of a group of radicals of North African descent, who had indoctrinated them into the world of Islamic fanaticism. In January 2005, on the basis of these findings, French authorities moved against the group, arresting 11 individuals, including its ringleader and his closest collaborators.

According to French authorities, these arrests decisively dismantled the network operating in the XIX *arrondissement*. However, a lingering question remains: how many other such networks exist in France?

On this score, recent intelligence reports are not encouraging. As of December 2004, the DGSE, France's foreign intelligence service, had identified a group of twenty fighters operating in Fallujah under the command

of a Frenchman.¹⁷ Moreover, Andre Broussard, France's top anti-terrorism judge, who is currently conducting a sprawling investigation into the cadres known domestically as the *filière irakienne*, is convinced that dozens of young Frenchmen have reached Iraq since the summer of 2004.¹⁸

Self-imposed limits

Unfortunately, the substantial operational successes made by European intelligence agencies in closing down, dismantling and uprooting recruitment networks and terrorist cells have not been mirrored on the legal front. In many European countries, joining a terrorist organization that operates on foreign soil is still not a crime, and therefore those who travel to Iraq are not breaking the law. In certain cases, authorities have used "Al Capone-style" loopholes, detaining militants for lesser crimes such as document forgery or illegal immigration. Yet by and large, most European prosecutors are hamstrung by legal guidelines that lack the appropriate teeth to properly tackle terrorist activities.

Even where such legal mechanisms have been available, liberal interpretations of law and policy by European judges have torpedoed some terrorism cases. In January 2005, for example, Italy was scandalized by the final ruling of the judge presiding over the Milan trial of members of Ansar's Italian network. According to the judge, Clementina Forleo, the men—while indeed part of a network that was recruiting fighters for the conflict in Iraq—were engaged in "guerrilla" actions, not terrorism.¹⁹ The result? The Ansar operatives, though found guilty of such minor crimes as document forgery, were acquitted of all terrorism-related charges.

These political proclivities and legal hurdles will have serious ramifications for European security in the years

to come, as militants now active in Iraq return home and turn their attention to domestic troublemaking. Indeed, signs of such activity are already emerging; the January 2005 arrests of the militants of the XIX *arrondissement* in Paris revealed that the men, originally detained because they were recruiting volunteers to go to Iraq, also had been “drawing up plans for attacks in France against French and foreign interests.”²⁰

American authorities, for their part, would do well to watch these developments closely. Most of the terrorists who have planned or executed attacks on American soil over the last decade have come from or through Europe. Moreover, many of the individuals now fighting in Iraq hold European passports and can therefore enter the United States with relative ease. “The Iraqi conflict, while not a cause for extremism, has become an extremist cause,” CIA director Porter Goss told the U.S. Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence in January 2005. “Those jihadists who survive will leave Iraq experienced in and focused on acts of urban terrorism.”²¹

Goss’ concerns are certainly justified. Recent history is rife with examples of terrorist attacks by the veterans of radical religious conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya. It might only be a matter of time before combatants in the Iraqi *jihad* similarly bring the fight to the West. Indeed, by all indications, they have already begun.



1. Tribunale Ordinario di Milano, Giudice per le Indagini Preliminari (Tribunal of Milan, Judge for Preliminary Investigations), *Indictment of Muhammad Majid and Others*, November 25, 2003.
2. This is the conclusion, for example, of the 2004 annual report of the *Algemene Inlichtingen-en Veiligheidsdienst* (AIVD), Holland’s domestic intelligence service, which clearly indicates that the biggest threat to the security of the Neth-

erlands comes from “home-grown” Islamist groups.

3. *Indictment of Muhammad Majid and Others*.
4. Tribunale Ordinario di Milano, Giudice per le Indagini Preliminari (Tribunal of Milan, Judge for Preliminary Investigations), *Indictment of Merai and Others*, March 31, 2003.
5. Victor L. Simpson, “European Militant Network Shut Down,” Associated Press, December 19, 2003.
6. *Indictment of Muhammad Majid and Others*.
7. Florian Meesman and Ahmed Senyurt, “Ansar al Islam—Terror in Deutschland?” *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk* (Leipzig), December 13, 2004.
8. Annette Rameisberger, “Islamistische Terrorzelle in Muenchen Zerschlagen,” *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), December 3, 2003.
9. Tony Czuczka, “Militants Said to Send Fighters to Europe,” Associated Press, January 8, 2005.
10. Elaine Sciolino, “French Detain Group Said to Recruit Iraq Rebels,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2005.
11. Tony Czuczka, “Militants Said to Send Fighters to Europe,” Associated Press, January 8, 2005.
12. Tony Czuczka, “German Authorities Say Islamic Militants Behind Allawi Assassination Plot are Sending Fighters from Iraq to Europe,” Associated Press, January 8, 2005.
13. “Islamic Terrorist Suspects Held After Police Raids,” Deutsche Presse-Agentur, January 12, 2005.
14. Craig S. Smith and Don van Natta, Jr., “European Muslims Joining War Against U.S. in Iraq,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2004.
15. “Sept Suspects Arretes a Paris,” *Le Parisien* (Paris), January 26, 2005.
16. Jean Chichizola, “Four Recruiters for Jihad in Iraq Arrested,” *Le Figaro* (Paris), January 26, 2005.
17. Gerard Davet, “Les Filieres de Recrutement de la ‘Guerre Sainte’ Sont en Place,” *Le Monde* (Paris), December 16, 2004.
18. Don van Natta, Jr. and Desmond Butler, “Calls to Jihad are Said to Lure Hundreds of Militants into Iraq,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2003.
19. Tribunale Ordinario di Milano (Tribunal of Milan), Judge Clementina Forleo, *Sentence against Maher Bouyahia and Others*, January 24, 2005.
20. “Islamists Arrested in Paris Planned France Attacks,” Reuters, January 28, 2005.
21. Central Intelligence Agency Director Porter Goss, Statement before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 16, 2005.