



April 2004

## Holy War in Europe

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

*At an alarmingly increasing frequency, westernized Muslims and converted Christians in Western Europe are joining radical Islamic organizations to wage jihad against the United States and its allies. These young Muslim males funnel continental anti-Americanism and the alienation of centuries-old Islamic struggle against the Christian West into full-fledged rage that threatens to divide Western allies who together withstood the advance of the Islamic empires during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.*

On August 26, 1995, a militant Islamic group led by a twenty-four-year-old French Muslim named Khaled Kelkal attempted to blow one of France's high-speed trains off its rails. Luckily, the bomb's detonator, which used an ordinary twelve-volt battery, failed. Later that fall, other bombs would go off in France: two in double-decked metro rail cars in suburban Paris, one in a trash can along the very bourgeois Avenue de Friedland, another in a Parisian open-air market, and one more in a provincial Jewish school. In all there were nine attacks in three months, which killed ten people and wounded 114.

The bombings in 1995 provoked a widespread awareness for the first time in France that the country had a radical-Muslim problem, which was increasingly homegrown and not imported. Kelkal moved to France from Algeria when he was one month old; not known for being religious in his troubled youth, he became an Islamic militant in a French jail, as have hundreds of highly westernized French Muslims. Many more thoroughly secularized French Muslims, who did not have crime-filled youths, have become Islamic radicals, culturally at war with the society that made them. Zacarias Moussaoui, the "twentieth hijacker" of 9/11, is the most notorious example of a religious Frenchman

who became intoxicated with the holy-war ideology preached in many radical mosques throughout Western Europe.

### European-Grown Jihad

This phenomenon of highly westernized Muslims and converted Christians becoming radicalized believers has happened throughout Western Europe. Relatively few Turks have joined radical Islamic organizations allied with Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda, even though Turkish fundamentalists are numerous and often hardcore. At home and abroad, they are perhaps more numerous and better organized than are fundamentalists of any other nationality. But the Turks who have been arrested for association with al Qaeda usually share one bond: they were either born or raised in Germany and are culturally more German than they are Turkish Muslim. These young men are part of what the Iranian-French scholar Farhad Khosrokhavar has called the *néo-umma guerrière*—"the new holy-war community of believers" that recognizes neither national nor ethnic identity nor traditional Islamic values. Their Islam is "a new type of Nietzscheanism" where suicide and murder become sacred acts of an elite, self-made race of believers who want to bring on a purifying apocalypse.

Reuel Marc Gerecht (rgerecht@aei.org) is a resident fellow at AEI. A version of this article appeared in the March 29, 2004, issue of *The Weekly Standard*.

A small cadre of European scholars, mirrored by a small group of European internal-security and intelligence officials, have followed the growth of Islamic radicalism in Europe for nearly twenty years. They know, even if European politicians do not, that Europe's most fearsome Muslim true believers are not products of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, or the First Gulf War, or the American troop presence in Saudi Arabia after 1990, or the Algerian civil war, or the Bosnian war, or the strife in Chechnya, or the Hindu pillaging of mosques, or the war in Afghanistan, or the second American war against Saddam Hussein, or the globalization of American culture. These events are banners that men who are already converted to jihad wave as they march to give battle. The holy warriors in Europe do not want to see peace in Palestine any more than Osama bin Laden or Iran's clerical guide Ali Khamenei wants to see Israelis and Palestinians solve their problems in two separate, peacefully coexisting states or Hamas's spiritual chief Ahmad Yassin wanted to. They do not care about Israeli settlements.

Europe's jihadists are born from their imperfect assimilation into Western European societies, from the particular alienation that young Muslim males experience in Europe's post-Christian, devoutly secular societies. The phenomenon is vastly more common among Arabs than among African or Asian Muslims. The reasons why these young, predominantly Arab males are drawn to the most militant expressions of Islam are complex and always personal. But their journey—which they usually begin as highly westernized, modern-educated youths of little Islamic faith and end as practitioners of bin Ladenism—is a thoroughly European experience.

The jihadists of Europe have drunk deeply from the virulently anti-American left-wing currents of continental thought and mixed it with the Islamic emotions of 1,400 years of competition with the Christian West. It is a Molotov cocktail of the third-world socialist Frantz Fanon and the Muslim Brother Sayyid Qutb. Muslims elsewhere have gone through similar conversions—the United States, too, has had its Muslim jihadists and will, no doubt, produce more. And the globalization of this virulent strain of fundamentalist, usually Saudi-financed, Islam is real and probably getting worse. But

the modern European experience seems much more likely to produce violent young Muslims than the American one. Europe may be competitive with the worst breeding grounds in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.

For Americans, after 9/11, this is obviously not just of academic interest. For the future of al Qaeda—if al Qaeda is to have a future where killing Americans en masse remains its transcendent *raison d'être*—is in Western Europe. September 11 could not have happened without a European base of operations.

Though the State Department was not particularly discriminating in issuing visas to Saudis before 9/11, it does a much better job now. The security review of visas granted to Middle Eastern men will only become more stringent with time, doing enormous injustice to the innocent and greatly complicating the operational lives of the guilty. Western European travel documents—which still allow easy access to the United States—are essential for al Qaeda and its allied organizations. But obtaining travel-worthy false European passports for non-state-supported terrorist organizations is becoming harder and harder (this is particularly true since the European Union forced the Belgians to implement better control of their passports, which had been routinely “disappearing” in large numbers). Thus, Islamic holy-warrior terrorist organizations need European Muslims who can lawfully obtain Western European passports.

Al Qaeda knew this a long time ago, which is why the recruitment of Muslims who could travel and operate in the West was a high priority. If al Qaeda or allied holy-warrior organizations cannot operationally enlist and train American Muslims to strike within the United States—and the evidence before and after 9/11 suggests that al Qaeda has done a poor job of finding American Muslims who need to kill non-Muslim Americans to express their love of God—then they must enlist European Muslims or risk compromising the most important element in their recruitment call to holy war. French-born holy warriors could perhaps spiritually survive bombing France, but it is not the same as attacking the United States. America is the cutting edge of Western civilization—not France—and modern Muslim holy warriors want ideally to terrify and humble their enemy's

---

Europe's jihadists are  
born from their  
imperfect assimilation  
into Western European  
societies, from the  
particular alienation that  
young Muslim males  
experience in Europe's  
post-Christian, devoutly  
secular societies.

---

advance guard, not the more lightly armed, less threatening troops behind.

## Effects of the Bombings in Spain

Which brings us to Spain. It is possible that if the Spanish withdraw from Iraq as incoming Prime Minister José Luis Zapatero promises to do, they might save themselves from further jihadist attack. It has been a long time since Spain was the preeminent Christian foe of the Muslim world. Unlike France, which is still a cultural force in North Africa (even if, increasingly, it is only a French translation service for American civilization), Spain is irrelevant to the dreams, aspirations, and hatreds of Arabs. France has a Muslim population now deeply and permanently anchored in its national psyche and daily life. Spain does not. And as much as some Muslim denizens of Spain may hate their non-Muslim neighbors, it is a little hard to envision even the most historically sensitive Spanish Muslim holy warrior bombing Madrid repeatedly because of the medieval loss of “Andalusia” to the Catholic princes of Castille and counts of Barcelona. Spain could probably walk away from the United States, pillory America as loudly as possible (anti-Americanism in Spain runs deep and is historically much more heartfelt than in France), emphasize the glories of Muslim Spain and sincerely regret its fall, and not get bombed anymore.

The bombings in Spain could easily produce a Europe-wide temptation to duck: while quietly assisting America in its counterterrorist efforts (the French have been superb allies in this regard since 9/11), they publicly would take as much distance as possible from the United States and ratchet up the “pro-Muslim,” “pro-Arab” propaganda. This approach would naturally blend into Western Europe’s current official analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation

as the crux of all the bad blood between the Muslim world and the West. It could dovetail nicely with the developing Democratic Party campaign argument depicting Iraq as a mistake, as a digression from the war on terror that has made counterterrorism more difficult. Muslim holy warriors might still try to bomb American embassies or businesses in Europe, which of course could victimize numerous Europeans, but that would be better than having European passenger trains blown off their rails or Alpine highway tunnels firebombed.

President Bush has said that we, the West, are all in this together. But this simply is not true. The *néo-umma guerrière* does not really want to strike Spain, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Germany, Poland, or even France as much as it wants to bomb the United States. It would be a delicious irony if small bands of Muslim holy warriors in the twenty-first century accomplished the opposite of what the Ottomans, the most powerful of Islam’s empires, achieved in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The latter helped bring the West together; the former may help tear it apart.

If a Western split does not occur, then we will probably have the French to thank. They know that Zacarias Moussaoui was once upon a time a good Frenchman. They know that more Khaled Kelkals are being born in the *banlieues*. They know that even the most dedicated Muslim holy warriors might sometimes have to settle for attacking the second best. But then again, Paris hated losing on Iraq. Many in the French elite—most prominently, the foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin—want the democratic experiment in Iraq to fail. With the American loss of Spain and the waffling in Poland, the French sense victory in Europe. It will be interesting to see whether France’s envy of American hegemony trumps its own experience and fear of Muslim holy warriors trying to blow their way into heaven.