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Islamist Extremism in Europe

Marc Ginsberg and Martin Walker

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On December 14, 2005, CSIS' Transnational Threats Project hosted a roundtable entitled *Islamist Extremism in Europe*. Two leading experts, Martin Walker, Editor-in-Chief of UPI, and Marc Ginsberg, former U.S. Ambassador to Morocco, conducted the roundtable.

Drawing upon their expertise and knowledge of the Middle East and Europe as well as terrorist groups, Dr. Ginsberg and Mr. Walker provided some alarming facts on the spread of radical Islam in Europe. A growing number of Islamist sleeper cells and the ongoing recruitment of alienated European Muslims by terror groups, such as Ansar-al Islam, the Takfiri movement, and al Qaeda in many European countries may be turning Europe into an Islamist stronghold and a conduit for extremist activities against non-Muslims across the continent, as well as against the U.S. According to Dr. Ginsberg, there is a rise of more virulent form of Islamic radicalism in mosques throughout the region from France across Spain, Italy, Bosnia and Chechnya. Much of it is homegrown and funded by a variety of sources, not least of which were Saudi charities. Militants are operating in a variety of ever-changing constellation of cell structures moving freely from one country to the next.

Dr. Ginsberg noted that counter-terrorism policy of European countries has been weak due to a lack of coordination, a lack of communication, and a lack of broad vision among some of the European leadership. In his view, most European countries do not consider radical extremism and the terror it brings to be their problem, except for perhaps the U.K, Spain, and Italy. He also noted that Moroccans, who are inspired by a radical Takfiri movement, were behind many averted terrorist plots against Europe.

Takfiris believe in an all-out armed jihad against all believers, even apostate Muslims. Dr. Ginsberg stated that the Takfiris are especially dangerous to Europe because they adopt the Western lifestyle (i.e. Western dress, no beards) to assimilate into European society, thereby making it difficult for law enforcement to track them. Takfiris recruit women and use petty crime and drug trafficking to fund their operations. Although Takfiris espouse a hard line approach, their ideology is gaining popularity because it encourages followers in Europe, who are trying to assimilate in their own minds to reconfirm the faith to break their own rules. Dr. Ginsberg stressed that closer attention should be paid to immigration from northern Africa into southern Europe, as well as to the linkages between the Takfiri movement and various terrorist cells in Europe.

Seconding Dr. Ginsberg's views, Mr. Walker started his presentation by noting that the European Union, with about 20 to 21 million Muslims out, adopted a theory that there is no middle way between Euro-Islam (that is, a form of Islam that embraces Western political values, including

pluralism, tolerance, separation of church and state, and individual human rights) and a ghettoization of Muslim minorities. This makes it hard to find a more amicable way to assimilate Muslim minorities. According to Mr. Walker, the difficulty is that a lot of the Islamic minorities, although they are claiming to follow the Euro-Islam idea, sometimes offend the rest of the domestic audience. Some Muslims are not willing to engage in a political discourse that is commonplace in the West, which further widens the rift between Muslims and their host countries in Europe. Furthermore, the so-called “honor killings” of Muslim girls who have gone to schools in England, where they have become friends with British boys and decide to follow the usual rules of teenage courtship, contributes to the poisoning of the relationship between Muslims and Westerners, according to Mr. Walker. These developments, compounded by the March 11th terrorist attacks in Madrid and the murder of the Dutch liberal film-maker Theo van Gogh, increased anti-Muslim attacks in Europe and added to the strengthening of positions of right-wing forces in Europe.

Mr. Walker pointed out that another important factor that enhances Islamist extremism in Europe is the high number of European converts to Islam over the past five years. Converts have many reasons ranging from personal and social crises, curiosity, drugs or crime. They are mostly found in prisons but sometimes in drug rehabilitation centers and mosques set up for this purpose.

Both speakers agreed that Europe has to do more to address the problem of both amicable integration of its Muslim population as well as to fight militant Islam on its soil. A particular concern was lodged on the return of seasoned Jihadis from Iraq to their slums in Europe. Another problem that remains unattended is the flow of money from extremist organizations to Europe. Moreover, the number of new terror cells in Europe is increasing. According to Dr. Ginsberg’s estimates, there are 50 new cells that more or less established themselves in Europe and the Middle East since the invasion of Iraq.

The forum also addressed questions on the demographic changes in Europe due to falling birthrates and rising immigration, the importance of disaggregating the Takfiri movement from other groups, the need to monitor radical imams and mosques, the need for better public diplomacy, the improvement of information sharing between European law enforcement agencies, of human intelligence in tracking Islamists in the region, and the importance of empowering moderate Muslims.