



## The Mediterranean Region and International Terrorism: A New Framework for Cooperation?

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**Theme:** This ARI analyses the risks and threats that international terrorism poses to countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region today. After a review of bilateral and multilateral cooperation on internal security issues in this geopolitical region, this paper provides a preliminary assessment of the Euro-Mediterranean Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism.

**Summary:** Ten years after the start of what is known as the Barcelona Process, the Euro-Mediterranean region now faces the challenges of an international terrorist threat that has peaked precisely during that period. Despite the different perceptions of terrorism held by the authorities of European governments and authorities in the other countries involved in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, the best expression of their points of agreement on the interpretation of the risks and threats of international terrorism may be found in a document such as the Euro-Mediterranean Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism –a product of the Barcelona Summit–. Although the document refers to current multilateral initiatives and to the most institutionalised bilateral practices in certain aspects of practical cooperation, it stands as the first text to condemn all forms of terrorism, while providing non-EU Mediterranean countries with a policy framework for dealing with terrorism. Its contents and rhetoric are adapted to the European perspective, which differs from the American approach.

**Analysis:** In the summer of 1995, shortly before November when the Euro-Mediterranean Association was created, a wave of terrorist attacks was carried out in Paris by members of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Al-Qaeda was providing them with financial support and also helping organise their initial structure, choosing leaders among individuals who had acquired experience in the war in Afghanistan in the eighties and supporting the propaganda activities of radical Algerian fundamentalists. Then came spectacular attacks such as those in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in August 1998, and the mega-attacks in New York and Washington in September 2001. These were especially violent, attention-grabbing moments, but linked to a long series of terrorist acts which, though not precisely international, did have global aims and impact. What link or links can then be traced between global terrorism and the Euro-Mediterranean space? To what extent does global terrorism threaten this geopolitical region? How do the current challenges of international terrorism affect cooperation on security between countries on different shores that differ not only as societies, but also have different types of political regime and different levels of socio-economic development?

### *Shared Risks and Threats*

Al-Qaeda, its associates and the cells inspired by the leaders of this terrorist structure share the same final goal, which in itself affects the Euro-Mediterranean geopolitical sphere: to

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politically unifying the Muslim world, imposing an exclusive, rigorous vision of the Islamic creed based on neo-Salafist postulates. This means establishing a new caliphate –a kind of political-religious empire spreading from the extreme west of the Mediterranean Sea to the heart of south-east Asia, crossing the Middle East and the Gulf region, as well as central and south Asia–. In the minds of those who follow this doctrine, the new caliphate would include not only Mediterranean countries with majority Muslim populations, but also territories where there has been Muslim dominance in the past, for example Al Andalus. In addition to this shared ultimate goal, the different groups and organisations that form part of the international terrorist network that operates in the Euro-Mediterranean area have their own national or regional agendas. These are often redirected towards what is known as the global Jihad when these groups are not successful in overthrowing the existing order in their own countries in the Middle East and the southern and eastern Mediterranean.

International terrorism linked to the global neo-Salafist Jihad movement poses both internal and external risks and threats to European society as a whole, and more specifically to the countries on Europe's southern flank, what the leaders of this violence define as the 'distant enemy'. However, the risks and threats of terrorism come in large part from organisations linked to North African networks made up of a multinational and multiethnic mix of individuals radicalised in the Maghreb itself or in immigrant communities of Maghrebi origin established on European soil. Among those of particular concern to European governments and security services are the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), some of whose members were involved in the March 11 attacks, or the so-called Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), of Algerian origin. Both organisations have structures that often intertwine, spreading north and south on either side of the Mediterranean, regionalising their activities in both continents. Other groups that raise alarm in both continents include the Libyan Combat Islamic Group (GICL) and the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), with similar ideologies and genealogies. Of no less concern is the westward relocation of Jihadists whose terrorist activities had until recently been confined to Iraq. These include members of the al-Qaeda Organisation for Holy War in the Land of the Two Rivers and related groups that have already established contacts with others inside the European Union.

Of course, the countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean with majority Muslim populations are also affected by exactly the same international terrorism that concerns Europeans on the northern shore. We must not forget the serious incidents in Djerba and Casablanca, followed more recently by attacks in Sharm el Sheij, Amman and Istanbul. Jordan and Turkey are two countries bordering on Iraq that appear to have become the base for terrorist operations both in those countries and further afield. These incidents and situations in any case demonstrate how al-Qaeda and its related organs and cells are bent on undermining the legitimacy of the Muslim regimes in the region and destabilising them, while attempting to use the anger felt in the entire Arab world over the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis to fuel their mobilisation strategy, that is, as one more excuse to carry on with the global Jihad. The strategists of international terrorism define these political regimes as the 'near enemy', since –from the bellicose perspective of neo-Salafist fundamentalism– they accuse the leaders of these countries of being heretics and tyrants, essentially for not strictly adhering to the *sharia* or Koranic law. In practice, however, these holy warriors do not hesitate to carry out extraordinarily lethal attacks on victims who are most often local Muslims.

Although the international terrorist groups and organisations that operate in the southern Mediterranean area at present have very limited capacity to overthrow the region's established political regimes, it seems likely that there will be recurring attacks –either planned or spontaneous, depending on the perpetrators–. Despite the clear differences between countries such as Tunisia and Libya, the repression of Islamist radicalism by the authorities seems to have contained the terrorist threat from this ideological sector, at least for now, though it is very difficult to assess the potential these groups have to mobilise if other political opportunities arise. Nonetheless, acts of international terrorism continue to be relatively frequent in Algeria and Egypt, despite the combination of a military response and a national reconciliation policy now being implemented in Algeria (leading to a significant but not yet final split in the GSPC), and the recent reform initiatives undertaken by the Egyptian government. The effectiveness of these reforms remains to be seen, but they have not been considered significant so far, since terrorist activity in Egypt is aimed mainly at the tourism economy and is an increasingly diffuse form of violence as factions proliferate. There is considerable concern in Morocco about the danger posed by the spread of neo-Salafist Islamism in recent years. It is feared that there could be new attacks like those in Casablanca in 2003 by individuals involved in the Assirat al Moustakim movement.

#### *Cooperation on Security Issues?*

After 9/11 and many other attacks committed later in Mediterranean countries by groups linked to the global neo-Salafist Jihad movement, the challenges presented by global terrorism became a top priority for governments in the region. There was a generalised increase in national security and international security and defence cooperation, in some cases with the involvement of authorities in the Maghreb and outside the region (an example of this being Operation Active Endeavour). There was also an increase in the increasingly scattered area of internal security. Such cooperation in areas traditionally considered to be internal security concerns is carried out mainly through bilateral relations, especially cooperation between governments of EU countries and other countries in the Euro-Mediterranean geopolitical space. This is a somewhat anomalous circumstance, given the parameters of confidence required for the exchange of sensitive information that may be useful for containing or eradicating international terrorism, since the scope and intensity of such cooperation can vary according to the political situation in either of the countries involved. This is particularly true of partners in the south and east, especially when cooperation instruments or national security agencies are not fully adapted and the framework of reference is poorly developed or unpredictable.

At times, of course, internal security issues go beyond the bilateral framework, for example, when police agencies in the Mediterranean area make use of mechanisms provided by Interpol. This is also true of the technical assistance provided by the European Union to third countries that are high priorities in the fight against terrorism, some of them in the Maghreb. The 25 EU countries also take collective action in their relations with international organisations that include neighbouring countries in the eastern and southern Mediterranean (for example, the Arab League and the African Union) and in foreign aid programmes in those same countries. Such programmes often already contain specific stipulations on anti-terrorist cooperation or foment cultural dialogue and good government to inhibit violent radicalisation and recruitment by international terrorist networks. Finally, inasmuch as all this has to do with democratising the neighbouring countries to the south and promoting the values of tolerance and respect for human rights, this reflects a European interpretation of the underlying conditions that favour international terrorism

under their political systems. Neither the political elites nor the majority of the citizens of these countries necessarily share this interpretation. The elites often complain that their European partners put too much emphasis on security issues, while the general population generally associates international terrorism with disparities in standards of living and unresolved regional conflicts.

In any case, the Euro-Mediterranean Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism is an extremely important tool to increase and improve cooperation on internal security issues within a partnership that brings together European countries and their next-door neighbours on the North African coast and in the Middle East. The Code was a product of the Barcelona Summit held in late November 2005. It is, first of all, a unique text in which all these countries take a united stand against terrorism, which they condemn in all its forms, and state their determination to cooperate in accordance with UN resolutions, agreements and developments, the standards established by the International Financial Action Group and standard bilateral cooperation procedures. Second, it is a document that expressly states that terrorism is never justifiable and that it is necessary to tackle all its causes to eradicate it in the long term, without associating it with any specific nation, culture or religion. Finally, the document indicates a will to continue reducing vulnerability and protecting people, and makes specific reference to civil aviation and maritime security, while providing for the exchange of useful experience on how to minimise the consequences of attacks and provide aid to victims. It could be argued that the Euro-Mediterranean Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism suffers from a lack of a common definition of terrorism or the imposition of any specific obligations for effective international cooperation. It is true that the lack of a definition of terrorism is a mistake, since not all the countries conceive of it the same way. In fact, Arab leaders often sympathise with or even sponsor certain groups and organisations that are listed as terrorists in the European Union, though not linked to the al-Qaeda networks.

However, the document chooses to strip the notion of terrorism of adjectives and qualifiers. No official representative at the Barcelona Summit protested its final wording, though previous drafts were the subject of great controversy. Underlying the text, in my opinion, is a shared concern that in the end makes it possible for all countries without exception, both in the EU and on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, to consider, purely and simply, that the activities of al-Qaeda and its affiliated agents and cells in the region constitute a terrorist threat. The bilateral cooperation now in place can be strengthened on the basis of this solid consensus on the common perception of international terrorism. Existing multilateral mechanisms can also be optimised on the same basis and other newer ones can be added, including those that could arise from the conference that is regularly held by the Ministers of the Interior of the Western Mediterranean (CIMO). In any case, the nature of the Euro-Mediterranean Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism must not be misinterpreted. It is a political framework of reference that is unique in this region of the world. Its contents commit the members of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership to strengthening international cooperation on anti-terrorist issues in accordance with a set of regulatory guidelines and practices. It thus helps structure dialogue on the increasingly important issue of anti-terrorist cooperation within the Euro-Mediterranean Association. It also includes the twelve non-EU countries in a largely European approach to preventing, containing and eradicating terrorism, with a focus on police and legal action. This does not always mesh with the US approach, which

is quicker to use military force, and to which some of the leaders in the region who cooperate regularly with the US authorities are more accustomed. It is, therefore, a significant step forward in the creation of a common political framework of conceptual and regulatory reference. Its effectiveness, in terms of the cooperation set forth in the document, will have to be assessed after more time has passed.

**Conclusion:** The Barcelona Declaration of 1995 devoted only a few short sentences to the problem of terrorism and how to combat it, among other reasons because international terrorism as we know it today had barely hatched. Ten years later, the most significant event in this area is the Euro-Mediterranean Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism – produced at the 2005 Barcelona Summit– for the first time providing a political framework of conceptual and regulatory reference, while helping structure the necessary dialogue on the increasingly important issue of anti-terrorist cooperation. This document will stimulate and complement further steps that can be expected as a result of the existing cooperation on internal security issues. Cooperation must nonetheless be increased among members in a partnership that includes EU countries and non-EU countries from the same geopolitical region. Existing cooperation is mainly bilateral –between EU members and countries located on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean– and may be developed in accordance with the goals expressed in the document and the responsibilities acquired by the leaders who signed it. However, the complexity and scale of global terrorism affects them all, making it necessary not only to strengthen this aspect of cooperation, but also to develop others in multilateral forums and through collective mechanisms that allow for the multilateral exchange of information. This is what will make it possible to prevent attacks, dismantle terrorist structures and break the financial networks of the groups and organisations operating in the Mediterranean area –groups and organisations that also tend to spread towards bordering regions and develop connections with other nodes of the global terrorist network–.