



“Jihadi threats”

The Islamist response to the Pope’s speech

Dr. Maria Alvanou

Ph.D University of Trento

Terrorism Expert

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On May 13 1981 Mehmet Ali Agca, a Muslim of Turkish origin, attempted to assassinate the late Pope John Paul II in St. Peter’s Square. A lot has been written regarding the reasons behind this attempted assassination that was never fully investigated. Today, 25 years after, threats for assassinating the new Pope Benedict XVI have been transmitted through Internet. On a website used by rebel movements in Iraq, a message posted by the Mujahideen's Army announced that members of the organization would "smash the crosses in the house of the dog from Rome." The Internet statement by the Mujahideen Shura Council, continued with the words: "We tell the worshipper of the cross that you and the West will be defeated, as is the case in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya...We shall break the cross and spill the wine...God will help Muslims to conquer Rome...God enable us to slit their throats, and make their money and descendants the bounty of the mujahideen". The Iraqi militant group, an umbrella organization led by Iraq's branch of al Qaeda, vowed a war against the "worshippers of the cross" in response to a recent speech by Pope Benedict on Islam that sparked anger across the Muslim world.

The Pope quoted last week in a lecture about faith and violence a 14th century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologos who had characterized Islamic teachings as "evil and inhuman" and referred to spreading Islam "by the sword." This academic lecture at the Regensburg University initiated a massive Islamic rebellion. In Indian-controlled Kashmir, shops, businesses and schools shut down in response to a strike call by the head of a hard-line Muslim separatist. Protests also broke out in Iraq, where demonstrators burned an effigy of the Pope in Basra and Indonesians rallied in front of the Vatican Embassy in Jakarta. In addition, Muslims threw firebombs at seven churches in the West Bank and Gaza Strip over the weekend.

The web threats against the life of the Pope come to supplement a general call of Islamists against the “Western Crusaders”, part of the “Jihad war” that has started for years now. Saudi cleric Salman Al-Odah spoke on TV stating: “The things [the Pope] said were thought out and not a slip of the tongue. This was not said in jest or spontaneously – this was thought out. It's as if the Pope did not have the courage to attack Islam and its Prophet directly. So he borrowed from an attack by a 14th-century Byzantine emperor in a dialogue with a Persian scholar[...]He expressed what is in his heart, but he did not have the courage to say it directly, so he quoted... He could not insult Islam directly, so he borrowed the insults of the Byzantine emperor. He said this several times, and in public, while there is nothing in the context to explain why he chose such a long quotation from that dialogue, and recounted it in order to mock the Prophet of Islam, saying that the Prophet brought only things that are bad, cruel, evil, wicked, and satanic. [...] Nobody says you should face your enemy in the battle with roses or aromatic plants, or that you should give him your head on a platter. Even Christianity, which says that if you are struck on the right cheek, you should turn your left cheek, and if you are asked to give your coat, you should give your shirt as well, also includes the words of Jesus: "I came not to bring peace, but a sword." As we see, the Christians today are the ones who attack the world of Islam. It is not the world of Islam that is aggressive. Who colonized whom? Who invaded Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and every piece of the world of Islam? The Islamic world is subject to the aggression, the strikes, and the colonialism of the Western powers. Today, we see that the extremist, terrorist American and British administrations are

attacking the Islamic world, supporting all the forces of violence and extremism, and abandoning the scales of justice.”*

While the Pope apologised saying his remarks came from a text that didn't reflect his own opinion, the whole issue seems to take dimensions such as the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad or the death sentence for an Afghan convert to Christianity did. European religious and political leaders have indeed backed Benedict speaking of misinterpretation of his words, but on the contrary in Turkey, where the Vatican Leader is supposed to pay a visit soon, Islamic reactions have affected even the secular character of the State. Minister Mehmet Aydin- overseeing the religious affairs in Turkey- has said he expects Turkish authorities to cancel the visit if the Pope does not offer a full apology and the secretary-general of the Turkish HUKU-DER law association submitted a request to the Justice Ministry asking that the religious symbol of Christianity be arrested upon entering Turkey. An appeal by Fikret Karabekmez, a former legislator for the banned pro-Islamic Welfare Party, called for Benedict to be tried under several Turkish laws, among them for obstruction of freedom of belief, encouraging discrimination based on religion and inciting religious hatred.

Given the number of Muslim immigrants and converts in Europe and especially Italy, plus the deadly Islamist attacks in New York, London and Madrid, one cannot afford to take lightly the web threats. After all, a nun was already shot dead in Somalia by Islamic gunmen and churches came under attack in Palestine. Thus a high alert in security measures is of an utmost importance today in Italy. It has been nearly a year after the July 7, 2005 bombings in London, since Italian interior minister Giuseppe Pisanu gave already the warning that “terrorism is knocking at Italy’s door and the director of the Italian intelligence agency SISMI (Servizi per le Informazioni e la Sicurezza Militare) stated that “in Italy there are cells ready to strike.” A lot of groups operate in Italy that can be called part of the al-Qaeda’s network of affiliates and might attempt to carry out an attack, even in collaboration one with another. One of the most dangerous groups is the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), the loosely-connected but extremely dangerous network, believed to be behind the attacks in Casablanca and Madrid. Another hazardous organization is the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which, over the last few years, has established an extensive network in Italy, based of in Naples and Milan, where they have established a sophisticated recruiting network.

Rome has been repeatedly spotlighted by al-Qaeda as the next possible target and now there is an additional reason for fear. Explicit threats against Italy were published on the Internet since July 18 2005 by the Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades (the same group that claimed responsibility for the London bombings), if the Italian Prime Minister would not withdraw the country’s troops from Iraq. In the fall of 2005, Italian news media reported that the late Jordanian insurgent leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had sent “an agent” to Italy to prepare attacks, while hundreds of undocumented immigrants continued to arrive on the shores of Southern Italy. After the London attacks, a court in the northern Italian city of Brescia convicted two North African militants who belonged to a cell that in 2002 had allegedly planned to bomb the cathedral of Cremona and the Milan metro system. Moreover, suicide bombers recruited in Italy have carried out deadly attacks out of the country, causing fear that they might soon strike at home.

The targets for a possible attack in Italy- apart from personally the Pope- are plenty, due to the country’s history as the heart of European civilization and Christianity: museums, churches and historical monuments are in special danger. For example the church of San Petronio in Bologna is considered to be a likely target because one of its most famous frescos, said to show Prophet Mohammed in Hell. In addition, the public transportation system, airports (Milan’s Malpensa and Linate, Rome’s Fiumicino and airports in big cities

* NOTE: The transcript of Saudi cleric Salman Al-Odah’s speech can be found in MEMRI TV, www.memritv.org

such as Naples, Turin and Florence), train stations, underground trains and major ports like Civitavecchia near Rome represent potential targets too. Aqueducts have also been mentioned by analysts as possible targets, particularly in relation to the use of chemical or biological agents. Italy also offers to terrorists high-value hit list places that can hurt additionally the U.S., like its military bases throughout the country: in Aviano, Vicenza (both in the northeast), Camp Darby (Pisa), Sigonella (Sicily), and the naval facilities of Gaeta (Naples) and La Maddalena (Sardinia).

The menace of an Islamist attack in the West due to the Pope's speech expresses once more the reflections of the relationship between religion and violence in today's Jihadi stream. In the western world where the right for free speech and expression are established and considered granted, there is a new reality to face: one can no longer freely state even opinions about the Islamic religion. It is a taboo issue, one that can ignite reactions out of proportion and unfortunately violence. A scholarly lecture, a criticism (even a strong one without doubt) of another religion like the one made by the Religious Leader of the Christians, should become the reason for discussion- even controversy, but not threats and deadly attacks. The present outrage of a big majority of Muslim extremists, proves nothing else than indeed "Jihad" and the "Holy war" legacy is alive and dangerous.