

Analysis: May 16, 2003 Suicide Bombings in Casablanca, Morocco
45 killed and more than 100 injured in the deadliest terrorist attack in Morocco's history

Summary:

- 14 members of the Salafia Jihadia terrorist group perpetrated a series of five, near-simultaneous suicide bombings just after 9:00 PM local time in Casablanca
- Plan was to attack Western and Jewish targets including: Café de Espana, Hotel Farah, a cemetery, a community center, a Jewish-owned Italian eatery, and the Belgian consulate
- Bombers were wearing grenades and explosives on their belts and in backpacks
- 12 of the 14 bombers died in the attacks, along with 33 civilians
- All of the bombers were from the shanty towns of Sidi Moumen, Carriere Thomas, and Thomasville, which are located on the outskirts of Casablanca
- Authorities prosecuted and convicted 87 people following the bombing
- Abu Musab Al Zaraqawi ordered and masterminded the attacks with the help of fellow al-Qaeda operative Karim Mejjati who provided explosives know-how

Tactics:

- Attack staged in Sidi Moumen, a shanty-town; bombers left there in taxis with homemade explosives in their backpacks, witnesses noted grenades and other explosives tied to their belts
- Upon arriving in target areas, attacks were carried out by teams and on foot
- Bombers killed the doorman of the Casa de Espana with a long knife or sword before detonating their bombs beneath a tent where customers were seated
- The attacks bore many al-Qaeda hallmarks: multiple, simultaneous attacks; suicide assailants; and lightly defended targets
- Al-Qaeda planned the Casablanca attack as the first of several suicide strikes in Moroccan cities; as many as 60 suicide bombers were recruited and trained for missions in such cities as Marrakesh, Sweir and Aghadir
- Incomplete planning and mistakes made by the bombers saved dozens of lives

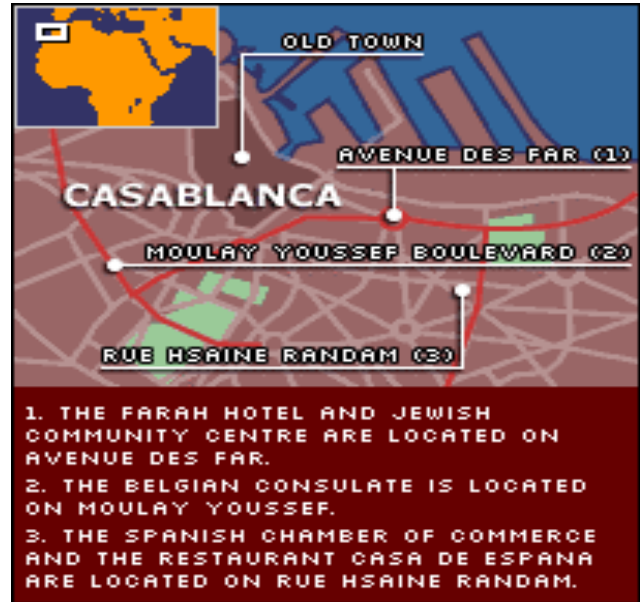
Targets:

- Casa de Espana, a Spanish-owned restaurant popular with business people and diplomats was the sight of the deadliest bombing, 20 people were killed while playing bingo and dining
- Hotel Farah, also known as Hotel Safir, was the scene of the death of a security guard and a porter, as well as the arrest of a stunned second bomber who was unable to detonate his explosives
- The Belgian consulate was thought to be collateral damage; real target of this bombing, which took the lives of two police officers, thought to be a nearby Italian restaurant, the Positano, owned by a French Jew of Moroccan origin

Casa de Espana



- A Jewish cemetery was also targeted, but was undamaged as the bomber mistook a different fountain, some 150 feet from the cemetery, for the one outside the cemetery and detonated his bomb prematurely, killing three Muslims
- A Jewish Community Center or Cercle de l'Alliance Israelite, was also bombed, but was closed for the Sabbath and empty at the time of the blast, only a day later the center would have been packed
- All five targets were within a mile of each other



Terrorist Profiles:

- Abu Musab Al Zarqawi the 37-year-old Jordanian radical and known al-Qaeda conspirator ordered the attacks; the United States has a \$25 million bounty on his head
- Karim Mejjati, the recently deceased (April 2005) 37-year-old al-Qaeda operative, who grew up in Casablanca, was responsible for training the suicide bombers in bomb-building and was sentenced in absentia to 20 years in Morocco for his role in the May 2003 attack



Zarqawi

- Mohamed El Omari, 23, a night watchman, and Rachid Jalil, 27, a welder, were the only survivors of suicide bombing team, both were sentenced to death
- The only other two terrorists sentenced to death were Yassine Lahnech, a 22-year-old traveling salesman and Hassan Taousi, 24, considered to be a leading member of Salafia Jihadia, both were to be replacement bombers
- Abdelhak Bentassir, who was accused of coordinating the attacks, died in custody on May 28, 2003 of alleged natural causes before his interrogation could be completed,



Karim Mejjati

leaving many to question his handling by authorities and his death's affect on the investigation at large



Hotel Farah



Jewish Community Center

Implications for law enforcement:

- Bombers successfully breached only 1 of 5 target areas; subsequent terrorist attacks show planning for a breaching element to eliminate guards and obstacles and an exploitation element to deliver explosive device into the desired target area
- Security at most of the locations became suspicious of the bombers' appearance, realized they were from the poor end of town, and stopped them prior to entry, no doubt saving many lives
- Moroccan government did not confront signs of increasing radicalism; Moustafa Sahel, the Moroccan interior minister said there was a "long maturation process that we witnessed without reacting"
- As Al Qaeda becomes more fragmented and dispersed, this operation is a model to watch for in the U.S.: hastily-conceived, multiple and simultaneous attacks against soft targets designed to produce maximum casualties (See CNN article on June 2005 arrest of two Pakistani men in Lodi, California <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/06/08/terror.probe/>)

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