

## **Escape of Nine Prisoners from the Kenitra Prison in Morocco**

### **The Incident**

On 7 April 2008, nine men convicted of terrorist offences escaped from a prison in Kenitra, Morocco located 25 km north of the capital city of Rabat. The escape occurred around 5.30 a.m after dawn prayer. The prisoners escaped by digging a tunnel which surfaced in the backyard of the prison director's house.<sup>1</sup> They are believed to have had assistance both inside the prison and outside the tunnel.

The Moroccan authorities said all nine prisoners had been convicted of offences related to the 2003 Casablanca bombings, which killed 45 people and represent the largest terrorist attack in Moroccan history.<sup>2</sup> In a note left behind in the prison, the prisoners apologized for causing a "disturbance" but claimed that escaping was the last resort left to them after repeated efforts to demonstrate their innocence. They also complained of poor treatment within the prison, which they cited as a motivation in the escape. Two of the prisoners had been sentenced to death; four were serving life sentences, and the remaining three had been sentenced to twenty years in prison.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Escaped Prisoners**

The nine escaped prisoners are believed to have met only in prison, where they planned their escape. They apparently belonged to different terrorist cells and networks. In the aftermath of the 2003 bombings, more than 1400 Moroccans associated with Salafism were arrested and charged with terrorism related activities. These nine appear to have been detained in that sweep and subsequently convicted of various offences.<sup>4</sup>

The escaped prisoners are as follows:

- Abdullah Bo Ghumair, alias Abu Hafis: Sentenced for life in August 2003 for the murder of a French citizen. Abu Hafis was also implicated in creating bombs and establishing armed groups in order to execute terrorist operations in public places. He is believed to be the Amir of a militant group.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Ayman Bin Alahami: Salafists and a Drug Baron Turned Kenitra into a Thrilling Capital" Elaph, 10 April 2008

<http://65.17.227.80/ElaphWeb/Reports/2008/4/320174.htm>

<sup>2</sup> "Morocco: 9 Imprisoned for Casablanca Blasts Escape," The New York Times, 7 April 2008.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/08/world/africa/08briefs-9IMPRISONEDF\\_BRF.html?\\_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/08/world/africa/08briefs-9IMPRISONEDF_BRF.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> "Mike Nizza: Behind a Jail Break in Morocco" The New York Times, 7 April 2008

<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/07/behind-a-jail-break-in-morocco/index.html?ex=1365307200&en=150422b0d2272412&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

<sup>5</sup> "AFP: Moroccan Prisons Enhance Security Measurements After the Escape of Nine Prisoners" Al-Akhbar, 7 April 2008

[http://www.akhbar.ma/i39771\\_2.html](http://www.akhbar.ma/i39771_2.html)

-Saad Hossaini: Suspected of threatening internal security and forming a criminal group to carry out terrorist attacks.<sup>6</sup>

-Kamal Al-Shatbi: Sentenced to 20 years. Between 2000 and 2001, he met Osama Bin Laden in camps belonging to Moroccan Salafists in Afghanistan. He was arrested upon arrival in Morocco.

-Tariq Al-Yahyawi: Arrested with 46 suspects belonging to Al-Hanweeshi group, which was implicated in the murder of several Moroccan officers.

-Mohammed Al-Shatbi: Sentenced to 20 years in prison and implicated in secret illegal migration networks.

-Abdul Hadi Al-Thahabi: Sentenced to death for the murder of two Moroccan citizens.

-Hisham Al-Alami & Mohammed Moheem: Sentenced to life in prison: No information available on whether he was convicted of terrorism-related charges.

Mohammed Al-Shazli: Sentenced to 20 years. No information available on whether he was convicted of terrorism related charges.<sup>7</sup>

## **The Search**

The Moroccan authorities have increased security forces on the borders as they believe the prisoners are planning to escape the country. This includes the country's eastern borders, where al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb has established camps. They have also enhanced security in the northern territory closest to Spain.<sup>8</sup>

## **Not the First Prison Break**

This is not the first time a prisoner has escaped from this particular prison. In December 2007, a prominent drug dealer, Mohammed Al-Wazzani (alias Nini), who had been sentenced to eight years, was able to escape to Spain.<sup>9</sup> Al-Wazzani escaped by simply walking out of prison and getting into a vehicle.<sup>10</sup> The Justice Ministry was informed a week after his escape. Eight people working inside Kenitra prison were implicated in Al-Wazzani's escape.<sup>11</sup> The circumstances around the al-Wazzani escape and this recent

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<sup>6</sup> "AFP: Casablanca Bombing Convicts Tunnel Out of Prison: Officials" AFP, 8 April 2008

<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gMINOUSy4PsOuLYOecBPRLwbKqig>

<sup>7</sup> "Ayman Bin Alahami: The Accountability of the Moroccan Security is threatened". Elaph, 14 April 2008

<http://65.17.227.80/ElaphWeb/Politics/2008/4/321299.htm>

<sup>8</sup> "Ayman Bin Alahami: The Accountability of the Moroccan Security is threatened". Elaph, 14 April 2008

<http://65.17.227.80/ElaphWeb/Politics/2008/4/321299.htm>

<sup>9</sup> "Moktadir Mehdi: Escape of a Drug Baron out of Kenitra Prison" Maroctek, December 2007

<http://www.maroctek.com/forum90/thread30431.html>

<sup>10</sup> "Ayman Bin Alahami: Salafists and a Drug Baron Turned Kenitra into a Thrilling Capital" Elaph, 10 April 2008

<http://65.17.227.80/ElaphWeb/Reports/2008/4/320174.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

incident have brought the Kenitra prison staff under severe scrutiny. The details that emerged of the lifestyle al-Wazzani was able to enjoy in prison and his method of escape suggest that prison staff can be bribed to help prisoners break out.

These escapes threaten the accountability of Moroccan authorities and could undermine the international community's confidence in Morocco's counterterrorism efforts. The letter the prisoners left behind indicated that they had worked alone. But many in Morocco believe that the requirements of the escape suggest they had help.

There has been speculation that some workers in prison have been radicalized and helped the prisoners to escape. Dr. Mohammed Dareef, a Moroccan expert on Islamic groups, told the Al-Akhbar Moroccan Newspaper that there are indications throughout the last year that people working in prison are being influenced by the prisoners and their Salafist Jihadist ideology. Dr. Dareef believes these prisoners received protection and shelter right after their escape in addition to assistance digging the tunnel.<sup>12</sup>

The prison escape led Moroccan security forces to enhance the security measures of political and Islamist detainees. The situation of Morocco's Islamist detainees is currently unstable, as almost 900 prisoners nationwide are on a hunger strike to protest mistreatment and poor conditions in prison.<sup>13</sup> Islamist groups opposing the Moroccan government want "political prisoner's status" which they believe will entitle them to better treatment. Several human rights groups claimed that prisoners lack appropriate food and healthcare.<sup>14</sup> The escaped prisoners stated in the letter they left behind that the poor conditions of prison were the main reason for their escape.

### **Terrorism in Morocco**

There are several terrorist groups active in Morocco, the largest of which is al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb. The group began in Algeria, but has plans to spread throughout North Africa and has successfully recruited Moroccan members. Other militant groups include the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), whose members were involved in the Madrid train bombings in March 2004, Assirat al-Mustaqim ("The Right Path") and Attakfir wal Hijrah ("Excommunicated and Migration"). There are also several home grown militant organizations that are self

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<sup>12</sup> "Hamid Zaatshi: Moroccan Expert to Al-Khabar: Workers in Moroccan Prisons Affected by Jihadi Salafism" Al- Akhbar, 9 April 2008

<http://www.elkhabar.com/quotidien/?ida=104704&idc=31>

<sup>13</sup> "AFP: Casablanca Bombing Convicts Tunnel Out of Prison: Officials" AFP, 8 April 2008

<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gMINOUSy4PsOuLYOecBPRLwbKqig>

"Montasir Hamada: Embarrassing Questions After the Hollywood Escape of Extremists" Arab Online, 11 April 2008

<http://www.alarabonline.org/index.asp?fname=%5C2008%5C04%5C04-11%5C854.htm&dismode=x&ts=11/04/2008%2005:26:57%20%D8%B5>

<sup>14</sup> "Al-Jazeera: Morocco Bombers in Jail Break" Al-Jazeera, 7 April 2008

<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/74D92393-ECEA-4BA1-A215-15CE18E0B1EA.htm>

radicalized. A few of the escaped prisoners belong to home grown organizations, such as Tariq Al-Yahyawi who is a member of the Al-Hanweeshi group.

Since the Casablanca terrorist attacks in 2003, Moroccan security forces have broken up more than 50 Islamist cells and arrested thousands of people. No significant attacks have occurred since then.

### **Consequences of the Prison Break**

Even though the nine escaped prisoners might not have been directly involved in the 2003 attack, the consequences are severe. It is possible that they might try to contact former associates and reconstitute their groups to carry out more terrorist plots. The fact that they believe they were mistreated in prison can make them more vengeful than before. They may not only pose a threat to Morocco: other possible destinations include Algeria, where they can join al Qaeda in the Land of Maghreb; or Spain.

Their successful escape from prison can motivate other prisoners to escape, or embolden militants. It is vital for the Moroccan government to enhance security inside jail and to investigate thoroughly the possibility of radicalization of prison staff and the help they might have given the escaped prisoners.

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