

Gunman kills four at Jewish school in Toulouse, France

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An unidentified gunman killed four people yesterday at the Ozar Hatorah Jewish school in Toulouse, in southwestern France. The victims included a young religious instructor, Jonathan Sandler, and his two small children, and a seven-year-old girl, Myriam Monsonego.

A 17-year-old youth was also in critical condition, shot in the heart and lungs, though reports indicated doctors were hopeful he would survive.

The event has provoked mass outrage, as well as fear in the entire ruling elite of a politically explosive reaction by broad layers of the population.

Nicole Yardeni, a regional CRIF (Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions) official, spoke to *Le Parisien* after getting access to footage from the school's video-surveillance cameras. She said that the gunman parked a scooter outside the school between 8:00 and 8:15 AM. Armed with an 11.43mm pistol and a mini-UZI submachine gun, he shot and killed Sandler and his children in front of the school, then entered the school courtyard and killed Monsonego.

The killer reportedly acted in a very calm manner, gunning his victims down with clinical detachment.

He then fled on a Yamaha T-Max motorcycle. Police sources said it was the same vehicle used in the recent murders of several soldiers in the region, citing video footage in Toulouse and the nearby city of Montauban. Those murders were likewise carried out with an 11.43mm firearm.

On March 11, Staff Sergeant Imad Ibn Ziaten of the 1st Parachute Regiment at the Franczal base in Toulouse was executed with a bullet to the head. The gunman fled on the Yamaha motorcycle, which had been stolen that day in Toulouse.

On March 15 in Montauban, three paratroopers from the 17th Parachute Regiment were shot at a cash

dispenser by a man who had arrived on a scooter, wearing a motorcycle helmet. He fired at least 13 rounds at them. Corporal Abel Chennouf and Private Mohamed Legouad died at the scene. The third victim, Loïc Liber, tried to flee into a shop but was seriously wounded when the gunman entered the store and shot him repeatedly, including in the spine.

Investigators cited the fact that the victims were all of North African origin—except for Liber, a black man from Guadeloupe—to suggest that the crime was probably racially motivated.

Interior Minister Claude Guéant reported that the gunman in these cases acted in a highly trained manner: the pistol magazine he left on the scene had been carefully scrubbed to leave no DNA evidence. Police investigators are reportedly working under the hypothesis that the gunman is militarily trained, and is either an ultra-right extremist or an Islamist.

One witness in Montauban said the visor on the gunman's helmet briefly flipped up, revealing an extensive tattoo and a scar on his left cheek. She described him as being solidly built and of medium height.

At 9PM yesterday evening, the news magazine *Le Point* reported that police were searching for three paratroopers dismissed from the 17th Parachute Regiment in 2008 after they posed for photographs wearing neo-Nazi uniforms and standing in front of a flag with a swastika. Jamel Benserhir, the former soldier who reported them to officers at the time, said they had “explicit tattoos.”

The Franczal base was involved in a tragic scandal in 1989, when four paratroopers were found guilty of torturing and murdering three young women and killing a forest ranger.

Monday's killings provoked protests and vigils in

several cities. Several thousand people marched from Republic to Bastille Square in Paris under banners of the Union of Jewish Students of France (UEJF), and a large crowd assembled in front of the Nazareth synagogue in downtown Paris. A crowd also gathered in front of the Ozar Hatorah school in Toulouse for an evening commemoration.

Officials of France's leading political parties all issued statements claiming they were temporarily suspending campaigning for next month's presidential elections and calling for national unity. Both President Nicolas Sarkozy and his leading challenger, François Hollande of the Socialist Party (PS), visited the Nazareth synagogue in Paris yesterday evening.

Marine Le Pen of the neo-fascist National Front (FN), who is expected to receive some 17 percent of the vote in the presidential elections, cancelled her television appearances and campaign events. She told *I-Télé*, "I will not comment on how this could touch politics. We are waiting, the whole country is waiting impatiently for this serial killer to be found so that all of us can breathe again."

Sarkozy held a press conference yesterday evening from the Elysée presidential palace. He said that "the entire Republic is mobilized to confront this tragedy," and announced the decision to issue a scarlet alert of the *Vigipirate* antiterrorist plan in the Midi-Pyrénées region. This level of alert, which had never previously been invoked, gives the state quasi-dictatorial powers to search citizens and suspend mass transit, air traffic, schools, and water supplies.

One of the central fears of France's political establishment is that a racist attack could throw into question not only Le Pen's neo-fascist campaign, but those of all the presidential candidates, who have made coded or explicit appeals to racist sentiment. Politicians' invocations of national unity largely aim to head off a discussion of the broader significance of racist attacks. They are an indictment of the policies of imperialist war and anti-immigrant racism that have become central planks of French bourgeois politics.

Thus, right-wing Social Cohesion Minister Roselyne Bachelot published a note on her Twitter account saying, "Don't make the horror in Toulouse the subject of polemics. Respect and Republican unity: the only acceptable attitude."

Others, however, felt obliged to acknowledge the

political link between the targeting of religious or ethnic minorities and the development of French bourgeois politics. *Le Nouvel Observateur* cited Abderrahmane Dahmane, a former Sarkozy adviser, as criticizing Sarkozy's right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and the FN. Dahmane said, "These acts are a strong signal sent to politicians and particularly to those who, in recent months, have played with fire... These attacks are the consequence of a campaign that has been particularly violent and hateful towards religious minorities."

Responsibility lies not only with Sarkozy and Le Pen, however, but with the entire political establishment. President Sarkozy has sought to overcome his deep unpopularity by appealing to the neo-fascist vote, declaring on March 6 that France has "too many foreigners." As for the PS's Hollande, he recently proposed a "solution" regarding the Roma population that involved interning them in camps.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon—the French Communist Party's presidential candidate, who has repeatedly participated in discussions and debates with Le Pen—was booed when he tried to attend last night's march in Paris.



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