

French police in armed standoff with alleged Toulouse gunman

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Yesterday evening, an armed standoff continued in Toulouse between Mohamed Merah, the alleged gunman in a spate of shootings in southern France, and elite police units. Officials claim he is responsible for the deaths of seven people in three attacks since March 11—three paratroopers in two shootings in Toulouse and nearby Montauban, and four civilians in an attack Monday on the Jewish Ozar Hatorah school in Toulouse.

A RAID (Search, Assistance, Intervention and Deterrence) unit attacked Merah in his apartment shortly after 3AM yesterday. He fired back, reportedly wounding two officers. After a standoff during the day, police again assaulted the apartment around midnight, blasting away a door and blowing a hole in a wall.

Authorities assert that Merah, aged 23, has Al Qaeda sympathies. They insist that he carried out the killings alone. Based on the wildly contradictory reports circulating in the media, however, it is unclear whether any of these statements are true.

Merah bears little physical resemblance to eyewitness descriptions of the perpetrator in the Montauban shooting. Witnesses said the gunman was “corpulent.” They also said they saw a tattoo and scar on his left cheek when the visor of his motorcycle helmet flipped open. However, pictures of Merah released to the media show a slender man with no facial hair or markings.

Nor are reports of Merah’s links to Al Qaeda any more convincing. They rely on conflicting accounts and an alleged confession in a call placed from a public telephone booth to the night editor of France24 television, Ebba Kalondo. French officials claimed to be “98 percent” sure that the caller was Merah. Kalondo’s story was widely reported as fact by French media and TV outlets.

Interior Minister Claudé Guéant said that Merah had been followed for years by the DCRI (Central Directorate of Internal Intelligence) after he traveled to Afghanistan in 2007. Kandahar prison chief Ghulam Faruq said Merah was jailed by Afghan forces on December 19, 2007 for planting bombs in Kandahar. Pakistani officials told Reuters that Merah had never been arrested in Kandahar, however, and claimed to have “no information about him.” Afghan officials told the BBC that the man jailed in Kandahar was probably someone else with the same name.

French counter-terrorism official François Molins said Merah was arrested again in Afghanistan last year and returned to France by the US. Anonymous American officials contradicted this account, telling the BBC that French forces flew Merah back to France.

According to a friend of Merah interviewed by *Le Figaro*, however, he worked primarily as an auto body repairman in Toulouse. He spent a few months in jail three years ago for “petty theft,” after which he was followed by police. He unsuccessfully tried to join the French army. Merah’s lawyer, Christian Etelin, said Merah was never involved in “violent delinquency.”

Finally, reports of investigations of Merah’s belongings throw in question claims that he was acting alone. Authorities reported they are searching for a Renault Mégane car belonging to him and containing revolvers, UZI automatic weapons and shotguns. They also said he owned a Renault Clio car containing weapons, as well as “three safe houses” in the Toulouse area. It is unclear how Merah could possibly have afforded this, as investigators told *Le Figaro* that his income was “on the level of welfare payments.”

If these accounts are to be believed, however, a man closely watched by French intelligence and police was somehow left free to carry out a murderous rampage

over 10 days in Toulouse and nearby Montauban. He was even apparently in contact with police sources in the run-up to the attack on the Ozar Hatoreh school.

Police reportedly identified Merah Tuesday, after a Yamaha dealer who had worked on a T-Max scooter suddenly recalled that Merah had come to his shop asking him to repaint the scooter and disable its anti-theft tracking device. The dealer, Christian Dellacherie, told *Le Figaro* he had been working with police since the Montauban shootings, which took place on March 15.

Remarkably, though it was widely reported that the Toulouse gunman was using a Yamaha T-Max scooter, the dealer claimed he said nothing to police for “roughly one week.” The dealer claims that after the school shooting Monday, when media accounts noted that the scooter’s color had changed, he notified authorities.

The police’s focus on Merah to the exclusion of other suspects—reports previously suggested that neo-Nazi ex-paratroopers carried out the attacks—has put the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) of President Nicolas Sarkozy and the neo-fascist National Front (FN) on the offensive. Previously, they were concerned that this attack, if seen as a neo-fascist murder, might provoke a wave of popular revulsion against anti-immigrant racism they have made a centerpiece of their election campaigns. The anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agitation has also been taken up by the other parties in the campaign, including the Socialist Party. (See: Gunman kills four at Jewish school in Toulouse, France)

Commentators previously raised possible comparisons of the current attacks with the mass killings in Norway last year by neo-fascist Anders Behring Breivik.

Now, as the media pin the blame on Merah, the leading parties have returned to stoking up anti-Muslim racism and promoting attacks on democratic rights under the rubric of anti-terrorist safety measures. The tragedy is thus being exploited to defend the place of neo-fascist and anti-immigrant politics in France and in Europe. It is developing as a major factor in the ongoing presidential race, the first round of which takes place next month.

The FN published a statement criticizing attempts to “miserably exploit the Toulouse tragedy against the

National Front.” FN Presidential candidate Marine Le Pen declared, “The fundamentalist risk has been underestimated in our country. Politico-religious groups are developing due to a somewhat lax attitude. We must now wage war against politico-religious fundamentalist groups that kill our Christian children, our Muslim youth, and Jewish children two days ago.”

UMP official Valérie Rosso-Debord issued a statement denouncing Le Pen and Socialist Party (PS) presidential candidate François Hollande, currently Sarkozy’s leading competitors in the election. Rosso-Debord questioned Hollande’s security credentials and attacked Le Pen for “forgetting very quickly the repeated and permanent activity of the government in its struggle against terrorism.”

The PS, which has actively supported Sarkozy’s law-and-order and anti-immigrant campaigns in recent years, lamely responded by denying that they had made any criticisms of Sarkozy. François Rebsamen issued a statement stressing that Hollande had “behaved with dignity” during the events in Toulouse.

For his part, President Sarkozy grabbed headlines by intervening actively in events. He traveled to Toulouse to visit RAID forces at the site, then went to Montauban to deliver a funeral oration for the paratroopers killed in last week’s attacks.

Le Pen, Hollande and Green Party candidate Eva Joly traveled in the same plane to be present for Sarkozy’s address.



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