

Reports indicate Toulouse gunman was French intelligence asset

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Press reports and comments by top intelligence officials suggest that Mohamed Merah, the alleged gunman who killed seven people including three Jewish schoolchildren in a nine-day shooting spree in Toulouse, was a French intelligence asset.

These revelations raise questions about French intelligence's failure to stop Merah, and whether this failure was dictated by political considerations. The investigation of Merah was led by the Central Directorate of Internal Intelligence (DCRI), run by Bernard Squarcini—a close associate of incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy, previously running far behind Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande in next month's presidential elections, has benefited from massive media coverage after the attacks and now is catching up to Hollande in polls.

In a March 23 *Le Monde* interview, Squarcini had confirmed that Merah had traveled extensively in the Middle East, even though his legal earnings were roughly at the minimum wage: "He spent time with his brother in Cairo after having traveled in the Near East: Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and even Israel. ... Then he went to Afghanistan via Tajikistan. He took unusual routes and did not appear on our radars, nor those of French, American, or local foreign intelligence services."

Squarcini apparently aimed to bolster the official explanation for Merah's ability to escape police: he was an undetectable "self-radicalized lone wolf." This story is being shattered by revelations that French intelligence agencies were apparently in close contact with Merah, trying to develop him as an informant inside Islamist networks.

Yesterday *Les Inrockuptibles* noted Italian reports that Merah worked for France's main foreign intelligence agency, the General Directorate of External

Security (DGSE). It cited the paper *Il Foglio*: "According to intelligence sources that spoke to *Il Foglio*, the General Directorate of External Security obtained entry into Israel for him in 2010, presenting him as an informant, passing through a border post with Jordan. ... His entry into Israel, covered by the French, sought to prove to the jihadist network that he could cross borders with a European passport."

Contacted by *Les Inrockuptibles*, the DGSE refused to confirm or deny *Il Foglio*'s story: "The DGSE does not discuss its sources or its operations, real or imagined."

In comments yesterday to *La Dépêche du Midi*, Yves Bonnet—the former chief of the Territorial Surveillance Directorate (DST), now absorbed into the DCRI—also asked whether Merah was a DCRI asset.

Bonnet said, "What is nonetheless surprising is that he was known to the DCRI, not only because he was an Islamist, but because he had a correspondent at the domestic intelligence agency. Having a correspondent, it is unusual. It's not unexceptional. Call it a correspondent, call it a handler ... I don't know how far his relations or his collaboration with the service went, but one can ask questions."

Squarcini denied yesterday that Merah was "an informant of the DCRI or of any French or foreign service." However, his interview in *Le Monde* suggests that Merah was precisely that.

By Squarcini's own admission, Merah repeatedly visited DCRI offices after his trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan—in October and November 2011—to discuss what he had seen. Squarcini called this "an administrative interview without coercion, as we were not in a judicial setting." Thus Merah was freely giving the DCRI information it wanted to know; that is, he acted as an informant, officially or otherwise.

These revelations make officials' failure to identify and stop Merah all the more inexplicable. They also raise the issue of whether French intelligence officials were behind the highly irregular delays in the investigation of the shootings.

Though the shootings took place on March 11, March 15, and March 19, Merah only fell under suspicion on March 20—after police compared a short list of Toulouse-area Islamists with a list of IP addresses of computers having browsed an Internet ad posted by the March 11 murder victim.

Journalist Didier Hassoux told *Les Inrockuptibles* that police obtained the list of 576 IP addresses “when the first killing, of a soldier, was reported”—that is, on March 11. However, according to surveillance technology specialist Jean-Marc Manach, the IP addresses were not sent on to Internet service providers (ISPs) for identification until five days later, on March 16. The ISPs responded the next day.

This five-day delay is very unusual, Manach notes: “Police sources told me that such operations [to obtain individual identities from ISPs] take only a few minutes. Another source, among those who usually respond to such judicial requests, said that they take ‘48 hours maximum.’”

In a further blow to the official account of Merah as a “lone wolf,” a video of the killings made by the gunman arrived to *Al Jazeera* late on Monday, in an envelope postmarked Wednesday, March 21. However, on that day Mohamed Merah was holed up inside his apartment under siege by police, who had also detained his brother, Abdelkader. It is unclear who mailed the video, which had been heavily edited to disguise voices—raising the possibility that Merah had accomplices in the killings.

French officials reacted ferociously to news of the video. Sarkozy called for any television channel obtaining such images not to broadcast them, while Hollande warned that *Al Jazeera* could lose its right to broadcast in France if it publicized the video.

Hollande's stance on the Toulouse video reflects the capitulation of the bourgeois “left” parties in France to law-and-order hysteria after these tragic shootings. No one has demanded an investigation of the intelligence agencies' role in the killings, though they now reek of a state operation. Nor have the French Communist Party, the New Anti-capitalist Party, or the PS pointed

out that the Sarkozy administration, which has benefited electorally from the crime, faces legitimate suspicion that it might be involved.

This reflects the degeneration of the entire political establishment. Having backed imperialist wars in Muslim countries and waves of social cuts in France—as social-democratic officials in Greece pushed through even more devastating cuts demanded by the European Union—the “left” parties themselves now rely on chauvinist invocations of anti-Muslim patriotism. This leaves them prostrate before the security services and the Sarkozy administration's attempt to turn the Toulouse shootings into the basis for what appears to be a political coup.



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