

Suspect in Brussels shooting linked to Western-backed Syrian opposition

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A 29-year-old French citizen, Mehdi Nemmouche, was arrested by police at Saint-Charles station in the southern French city of Marseille on Friday, on a bus from Amsterdam via Brussels. He faces charges of carrying out the May 24 shooting at the Jewish museum in Brussels that killed four people: a French national, an Israeli couple, and a Belgian museum employee.

Nemmouche apparently traveled to train with Al Qaeda-linked Islamist opposition militias in Syria that France, the United States, and their European and Middle East allies have backed to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This underscores that the reactionary policies of the Socialist Party (PS) government of French President François Hollande may have played a significant role in the crime.

At a press conference yesterday, French and Belgian prosecutors gave a preliminary report on the suspect, who is being held by France's domestic intelligence agency, the DGSI (General Directory of Interior Security)

The Belgian prosecutor alleged that Nemmouche "took the bus on May 29 in Brussels. His bag contained an impressive quantity of high caliber munitions, and a Kalachnikov [rifle] with inscriptions claiming membership in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, a group active in Syria. He was also in possession of a video in which he claims responsibility for committing the attacks in Brussels ... He is presumed innocent until proven guilty. I cannot guarantee that it is his voice that one hears in the recording."

According to investigators, the same type of gun was used in the May 24 attack. Police also found among his belongings a baseball cap worn by the shooter, as seen on CCTV footage of the shooting released by Belgian police.

The French prosecutor, François Molins, said that the

suspect had spent more than a year training with Islamist opposition militias in Syria. "During his last stay in jail, he was noticed for extremist [Islamist] proselytism," Molins said. "On December 31, 2012, three weeks after he was freed, he traveled to Syria ... He spent over a year in Syria, where he seems to have joined the ranks of combatant groups, jihadist terrorist groups."

Nemmouche, originally from the city of Roubaix in northern France, had a difficult childhood. He was reportedly placed in foster care at the age of a few months, before going to live with his grandmother at age 17. He faced conditions of soaring unemployment and escalating social crisis common to youths in working class neighborhoods in French cities.

Nemmouche's former lawyer, Soulifa Badaoui, told BFM-TV that he was "intelligent, neither religious nor violent. Suffering from gaps in education, he lived in an environment marked by family problems."

Nemmouche reportedly was jailed several times between 2007 and 2012 for petty crimes, including driving without a license and robbery. He may have turned to radical Islam during a jail sentence for robbery served in 2012. Upon leaving jail in December 2012, he allegedly traveled to Belgium, Great Britain, Lebanon, Turkey, and from there to Syria.

While Nemmouche was abroad, he was followed by the French security services. According to *Le Monde*, "At that time, he was put on the database of wanted persons (FPR) and the Schengen database. Thus he was located in Germany in March 2014, as he returned from Southwest Asia, and was the subject of a surveillance file at the DGSI. Until Friday, he had never returned to France."

How Nemmouche was able to obtain large caliber weapons and plan a major attack, while being actively

followed by the DGSI and other European agencies, remains unclear. It raises serious questions, however, about what type of operations the European intelligence agencies themselves are carrying out with Syrian operatives inside Europe.

Yesterday, Hollande praised the French police for carrying out Nemmouche's arrest. He said, "We have the will ... to follow these jihadists and to prevent them, as they return from a struggle which is not theirs, which is not ours, from harming us." He added, "We will fight them, we will fight them, we will fight them."

Hollande's comments are a cynical attempt, using lies and evasions, to distance his government from the Syrian Islamist opposition forces now suspected of being tied to the Brussels attack. The proxy war in Syria—which Hollande ludicrously claims is "not theirs" and "nor ours"—has been stoked by the NATO powers, including Paris, and their regional allies, who have armed Al Qaeda-linked militias as the main striking force against Assad.

Far from trying to "fight" them, Paris continues to press Washington to support Syria's Islamist militias more aggressively. Just last month, amid renewed talk of a NATO war with Syria, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said he regretted that Washington and Paris had not attacked Syria last autumn. (See: "Amid diplomatic offensive against Syria, France presses for war")

Since the imperialist powers began stoking a civil war in Syria, hundreds of Europeans have joined the Western-backed jihadist forces in Syria. In February, French authorities said that more than 600 Frenchmen have gone to Syria, are planning to go, or have returned, and more than twenty have been killed. As of mid-January, a dozen French adolescents were in Syria or in transit, according to official estimates.



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