



Attack in front of the ex-premises of "Charlie Hebdo" in Paris

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Based on limited information at this stage, this article analyses the chopper attack by a young Pakistani immigrant of the former premises of the Parisian satirical journal Charlie Hebdo on the backdrop of the trial of those involved in the January 2015 terrorist attacks against the offices of Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher supermarket.

Trial over January 2015 attacks opens in Paris.

On September 2, 2020, more than five years after the attacks, the trial of the massacres of January 7, 8 and 9, 2015 at Charlie Hebdo, Montrouge and at the Hyper Cacher in Paris began before the Special Court in Paris.

The special court (la cour d'assises spéciale) is competent to rule on crimes committed in connection with terrorism and organized drug trafficking, but unlike a traditional Court, it does not have citizen jurors sitting but only magistrates.

Let's recall the facts:

On January 7, 2015, the Chérif and Saïd Kouachi brothers entered at 10, rue Nicolas-Appert, where the offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine in Paris were located. They murdered eleven people before coming out, killing a policeman and then fleeing. The attack was a revenge/punishment for the publication by the magazine of cartoons of Prophet Muhammad in 2012.

On January 8, in Montrouge (Hauts-de-Seine), Amedy Coulibaly shot a municipal policewoman, who died of her injuries in hospital. On January 9, he took about 20 people hostages at the Hyper Cacher supermarket on the avenue de la Porte de Vincennes and executed four men.

As the three perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo, Montrouge and Hyper Cacher attacks have been shot, only their alleged accomplices will be tried in the special court. There are 14 of them, all believed to have played to varying degrees a role in the organization of these attacks.

Among them, three will be absent from the hearings: Hayat Boumeddiene, Mohamed Belhoucine and his brother Mehdi Belhoucine. The first, partner of Amedy Coulibaly, is suspected of having partly financed the January 2015 attacks through multiple scams. Targeted by an arrest warrant and wanted for more than five years, she fled to Syria, five days before the attacks of January 7, in the company of Mehdi Belhoucine - then probably Mohamed Belhoucine, who left the same day join the Islamic State organization. (*France24*, 1.9.2020)

Among those expected to be physically present on the trial, Ali Riza Polat's name stands out for his alleged active participation in the attacks. According to the investigation, he was the "right hand"

of Amedy Coulibaly but also “a link” between the latter and the Kouachi brothers, which earned him to be tried, like Mohamed Belhoucine, for “complicity” in terrorist assassinations.

The ten other people tried are suspected of having provided logistical assistance to the terrorists: Nezar Mickaël Pastor Alwatik, Amar Ramdani, Saïd Makhoul, Mohamed-Amine Fares, Michel Catino, Abdelaziz Abbad, Miguel Martinez and Metin Karasular are accused to varying degrees for allowing the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly to obtain weapons. Willy Prévost, meanwhile, admitted to having rendered “services” to Amedy Coulibaly, notably having played the role of intermediary for the purchase of the vehicle used by the terrorist to get to the Hyper Cacher. Finally, Christophe Raugel would have accompanied Willy Prévost during various trips to prepare the attacks without visibly knowing the nature of the “terrorist project.”

The 14 people on trial are on charges of terrorist association of a criminal nature and face up to 30 years in prison.

As with every trial of a deadly terrorist attack, the same troublesome question comes up: Were there any loopholes? Between 2013 and 2014, the intelligence services actively followed Chérif Kouachi before lifting this surveillance, a year before the attack of January 7, “for lack of evidence to justify it.” At the time, the Directorate-General for Internal Security (Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure - DGSI) actively followed a hundred individuals “with violent potential”. Today, this figure has increased tenfold and his team is now in charge of “following around 8,000 people”, not all presenting the same level of threat (*20 Minutes*, 25.9.2020).

The attack in front of the ex-locals of "Charlie Hebdo"

In its September 2 edition, *Charlie Hebdo* chose to republish the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad who had made the newspaper the target of jihadists.

The threats. In an English edition of its publication, *One Ummah*, which purported to mark the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, Al Qaeda warned that *Charlie Hebdo* would be wrong if it thought the 2015 attack was “punctual,” after the magazine had published the “despicable caricatures.” (*The Local.fr*, 12.9.2020). Marika Bret, the director of human resources at *Charlie Hebdo*, had to be exfiltrated from her home because of specific and circumstantial threats received on September 14 by the security officers who have been protecting her for almost 5 years.

On September 25, 2020, a chopper attack left two injured in the 11th arrondissement of Paris. The two injured were a man and a woman who worked for Premieres Lignes, an independent

documentary production company, whose premises are located on rue Nicolas-Appert, site of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015.

The main suspect, Hassan A., arrested after the attack, born in Islamabad, Pakistan, is 18 years old. He was arrested in June 2020 in possession of a bladed weapon, "a screwdriver". The young man arrived in France three years ago as a lone minor. Although he spoke French and English poorly, during the interrogation he quickly assumed a political dimension to his action. His act was deliberate and thoughtful, he explained in substance. He was not on police file S of suspected radical jihadists. (*Le Monde*, 25.9.2020)

He allegedly explained that he carried out the attack in reaction to the republication of the Muhammad cartoons by *Charlie Hebdo*. He bought a chopper a few days before, and he also took mineral spirits in his backpack with the intention of setting the building on fire. He explained that he had scouted the place a day before the events, thinking that the premises of *Charlie Hebdo* were still on rue Nicolas-Appert. But the newspaper is now installed in ultra-secure places kept secret since the attacks of January 2015 and its journalists have since 2015 been escorted by security officers.

The video surveillance shows the suspect to pass several times in front of the former premises of *Charlie Hebdo* in the morning before acting (*Le Parisien*, 26.9.2020). Investigators believe for the moment that he acted alone.

Arrived in France in August 2018, Hassan had been taken care of by the departmental council of Val-d'Oise. The latter had contested his minority, but a court decision had confirmed his support until August 10, 2020, the date of his majority since which he is no longer under the protection of social assistance for children. During these two years, "no sign of radicalization had been observed by the services".

While analyzing his cell phone the police got hold of a ID photo according to which Hassan A. is called Zaheer Hassan Mehmood and is 25 years old.

It was under this identity that the man introduced himself in a video, discovered on his cell phone and posted on social media. According to *Le Monde* daily, Zaheer Hassan Mahmood sent the video one or two days before the attack to two people, a man and a woman, who are both in police custody. According to a source familiar with the matter, "this is not strictly speaking a video of claim" or of allegiance. In the video, the young man appears elated, he cries, dances, and complains about his life in France, a country of "disbelievers." He explains in particular that he will go on the "path of the Prophet," and that he is "blessed". He also chants traditional Pakistani songs. Disturbing

detail, he also indicates that his “guide” is Mullah Ilyas Qadri, leader of Dawat-e-Islami, an apolitical and non-violent religious group of Sufi inspiration, based in Pakistan (*INFOJMODERNE*, 28.9.2020). The suspect "was completely unknown to all the intelligence services" under his two identities. If one relies on the document exhumed in his phone, Zaheer Hassan Mehmood would have left Pakistan at the age of 23, in March 2018 (he is listed "March 2017" in his administrative file), passing through Iran, Turkey then Italy, before joining France in August 2018 (*Liberation*, September 29, 2020).

The father of Ali Hassan (aka Zaheer Hassan Mehmood), whose name is not revealed, has said in an interview to the web-based channel Naya Pakistan, he is “proud” of his son who has “done a great job” and he is “very happy” about the attack. He “was a good son” who prayed regularly and attended Milad twice a year. He was a follower of Muhammad Ilyas Qadri, a Pakistani Sunni Muslim scholar and founder of the Dawat-e-Islami organisation, which has established a chain of madrasas across Pakistan and abroad. The attacker’s father appealed to the Imran Khan government and other Islamic countries to help bring his son home. “He has done service in the cause of Islam and we are a Muslim country,” he told the Pakistani channel. (*Hindustan Times*, 28.9.2020).

Other suspects. According to a judicial source, a "former roommate of the main suspect when he was staying in a social hotel" in Cergy (Val-d'Oise) was taken into police custody. This maintains the number of police custody at seven: the main suspect, and five men who were in one of the suspected homes of the suspect, in Pantin in Seine-Saint-Denis. The brother of the author of the attack was in turn arrested, in a children's social home in Labbeville in the Val d'Oise. He is 16 years old. However, on September 29, all other people in police custody, including his relatives, have been released.

Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin said he had asked the Paris police prefect why the threat near the former premises of Charlie Hebdo rue Appert was “undervalued”. He nevertheless specified that the editorial staff of Charlie Hebdo had left for "four years" and that the street in question had not been the subject of "any explicit threat". The leaders of the production company Premieres Lignes, two of whose employees were victims of the attack while they were smoking a cigarette in front of their building, denounced the absence of police to protect them during the trial of the murderous attack which targeted the satirical weekly in January 2015 (*La Libre Belgique*, 26.9.2020).

Testimonies from the trial

Hayat Boumeddiene, wife of Amedy Coulibaly, the perpetrator of the Montrouge and Hyper Cacher killings, is actively wanted and sent to court in her absence; she faces a 30-year prison sentence.

Exfiltrated from France to Syria on January 2, 2015 with the help of a close friend of Coulibal, to join the ranks of Daesh, the young woman could not ignore the terrorist plans of her husband. According to the investigating magistrates, she even actively contributed to it. From the end of 2014, she multiplied fraudulent consumer credits, scams and large cash withdrawals.

Shortly after arriving in Syria, Hayat Boumeddiene gave an interview to the French-speaking magazine of the Islamic State in which she explains that her husband had been delighted in June 2014 at the proclamation of the caliphate and “was burning with desire to join his brothers”. At no time does Hayat Boumeddiene “express her astonishment at having left for Syria before and without Amedy Coulibaly” and she confides “her satisfaction at the announcement of the facts”, based on several conversations between the accused and one of her friends intercepted during the proceedings.

Unlike many figures in the French jihad, Hayat Boumeddiene is still alive, according to the Terrorism Analysis Center (CAT) and judicial sources. She fully embraced the jihadist ideology of Daesh and became an icon, a symbol, even a muse for this terrorist organization. Since her stay in Syria, she has always enjoyed the protection of the Islamic State. According to the CAT, the young woman, detained at the Al-Hol camp controlled by Kurdish forces, fled with twelve other French jihadist women, or 10% of French women detained in Syria (*1001infos.net*, 1.9.2020).

Mohamed Belhoucine, 27, from Seine-Saint-Denis, was already serving a prison sentence as part of a criminal association case. He befriended Amedy Coulibaly while the two were incarcerated at the Villepinte prison.

Mohamed Belhoucine not only had a major ideological role in the attacks perpetrated by his friend but also a logistical role. The investigation showed that he was the author of the oath of allegiance to Daesh left by Coulibaly in his apartment in Gentilly (Val-de-Marne) and read during his video. He was one of the most active French-speaking cyber-jihadists since the emergence of the caliphate. He was behind the creation of several e-mail addresses, one of which was used by Coulibaly to communicate with the – yet unidentified - originator about his terrorist plans.

Having left for Syria with his wife and son a few hours after the departure of Hayat Boumeddiene, whom he accompanied by car to Madrid, Mohamed Belhoucine is also said to have joined the ranks of Daesh. According to sources familiar with the matter he died in action in 2016.

Mehdi Belhoucine, brother of Mohamed, who hold a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, was 23 years old when he flew from Madrid airport to Turkey alongside Amedy Coulibaly's wife, five days before the shooting that decimated the editorial staff of Charlie Hebdo, and joined the caliphate of Daesh.

Separated from his brother in Syria, investigators were informed in September 2015 that he was wounded in action and died of sepsis.

What does the September 25 attack teach about the substance of the trial proceedings?

Several questions of principle arise at this stage.

- The threat posed by radicalized or jihadist women and children
- The fate of prisoners in Kurdish-controlled camps in Syria
- The difficulties of controlling a large population of potential terrorists in Europe
- Are there any real lone wolves?
- To what extent does the Al-Qaeda - ISIS (Daesh) competition increase the terrorist threat in Europe?

All these topics have been addressed by various projects within the framework of Horizon2020, including the TRIVALENT¹ project, and were summarized in this author's article, "Jihadist radicalization processes in Europe (2001-2019)"²

There is an increased awareness that women play a much more active role than hitherto assumed and their threat should not be underestimated. In 2016, the French police arrested three radicalized women aged 19, 23 and 39, who had pledged allegiance to ISIS and were planning a terrorist attack on the Gare du Lyon train station.

In this context, the case of Hayat Boumeddiene is emblematic. Not only was she the go-between the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly, making more than 500 calls in 2014 with Izzana Hamyd, the companion of Chérif Kouachi, but is suspected of having partly financed the January 2015 attacks through multiple scams. Then she became an Islamic State propagandist, allegedly fled with twelve other French jihadist women from the Al-Hol camp controlled by Kurdish forces and would be in the jihadist enclave of Idlib in Syria, or Turkey, and still represents a terrorist danger.

Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg, researchers at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), citing the case of Hayat, analyze the fate of other European women with the same status: Swedish, Dutch or Finnish.

¹ <https://trivalent-project.eu/>

² Ely Karmon, "The Jihadist Radicalization Processes in Europe (2001-2019)," *ICT website*, July 28, 2019, URL.: https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2427/The_Jihadist_Radicalization_Processes_in-Europe?fbclid=IwAR3DK6gL0U-tiRg43wdqZYogaieB39ScO3-seSts94vQ4z1I5765OqCr4Xo#gsc.tab=0

It doesn't appear to be disillusioned women who are escaping from Camp al Hol these days. From the look at their social media accounts, these women appear to be of the other sort – women who remained loyal to ISIS, who wait for the ISIS men to come break them out or who are now taking matter into their own hands. That we don't know how many have escaped or where they have gone, and we cannot predict how many will escape in the coming weeks and months is truly alarming.³ It is also alarming, note Speckhard and Ellenberg, that women are assisted by the Turkish military in Jarabulus and Manbij to make their way into Turkey. Where they go from there is unclear, though their remaining in Turkey as sleeper cells is also a possibility

The latest European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2020, notes that the subject of returning women and minors is another source of concern to EU Member States. Many of the women who travelled to the conflict zones did not limit themselves to the role of wives and mothers. Due to differing national legislations, women are prosecuted (for offences such as providing support to IS) in some EU Member States, but not in others. The security concerns relate to their high degree of radicalisation and, if not prosecuted or managed effectively, their ability to move freely within the Schengen area upon their return. This is also true of children who may be severely traumatized by exposure to radical beliefs and brutal acts of violence, bearing in mind that some of them have received military training, during which they have been taught how to kill and use a variety of weapons.⁴

According to the EUROPOL report, there is also a possible risk from radical Islamist groups in the EU trying to take advantage of asylum seekers. Belgium reported that in 2019 it identified asylum seekers linked to radicalism or terrorism, although in negligible numbers. Several trials involved women and minors who had joined ISIS in Iraq or Syria.

The massive waves of illegal immigrants from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and North Africa since 2015 have raised fears that ISIS has used this new phenomenon in order to infiltrate Europe with many terrorist trained cells. The attacks in Paris and Brussels seemed to confirm this worry. However, recent attacks in Europe have, for the main part, been committed by lone individuals who have not been to a conflict zone – but who may have been inspired by terrorist propaganda and/or the extremist narrative, as well as by other successful attacks worldwide. This was evidenced by

³ Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg, "The Security Risk Posed by ISIS Women Smuggling Their Way Out of Camp Hol," *The Government Technology & Services Coalition's Homeland Security Today Magazine*, June 22, 2020, URL.: <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/the-security-risk-posed-by-isis-women-smuggling-their-way-out-of-camp-hol/>

⁴ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020>

several successful attacks in the UK during 2017 (Westminster Bridge, London, Manchester Arena), or the attacks in Barcelona in Spain in August 2017.⁵

Terrorist use of the migrant flow has been observed, but it is not deemed systematic. It has been assessed to be more difficult now for terrorists to exploit the migrant flow, owing to increased security measures, such as intensified control of EU borders. Nonetheless, travel to Europe may still be possible, for instance via third countries using stolen or forged travel documents.

Is Ali Hassan/Zaheer Hassan Mehmood a lone wolf or part of a network of jihadists who helped radicalize him and pushed him to carry out the attack? As in the case of Coulibaly, we must wait for the investigation to progress.

Lone wolves indeed exist, but they represent only a handful of cases. Among 130 individuals arrested in Spain between June 2013 and August 2016 for terrorist activities related to ISIS, only 4.6% became involved alone, i.e. isolated from other jihadists; they were literally lone actors, not just single actors. The evaluation of many experts is that real “lone wolves” are a small minority.⁶

The interesting fact is that the threats against Charlie Hebdo journalists were made by Al-Qaeda. We remember that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which trained Cherif Kouachi in Yemen, took responsibility for the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*.

On the other hand, even if Amedy Coulibaly had released a video declaring himself a Daesh soldier, probably aided by Mohamed Belhoucine, who left to fight and die in the ranks of the Islamic State in Syria, the IS did not take responsibility for his attacks. In a way, Coulibaly's demeanor appears to embody the competition between the two groups, perhaps reflecting the desire of an ordinary sympathizer to claim an affiliation with the more famous entity.

While AQAP quickly took credit for the Charlie Hebdo attack, IS referred to Coulibaly's terrorist operation only a month later, in its English magazine *Dabiq*, issue # 7. Under the title “The good example of Abu Basir al-Ifriqi”, Coulibaly is presented as a “brave mujāhid” who had given his bay'ah (allegiance) to the Khilāfah [Caliphate] “beforehand – immediately upon its announcement – and sat in waiting for instructions from its leadership, while never traveling to Iraq nor Shām.” He provided “the two mujāhid” Kouachi brothers with money and weapons “so as to call to jihād under the banner of the Khilāfah.” The *Dabiq* article includes a long list of his good deeds in prison, his prayers, and the “order” to his wife to wear the hijāb.⁷

⁵ Ely Karmon, *The Jihadist Radicalization Processes in Europe (2001-2019)*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ely Karmon, “Islamic State and al-Qaeda Competing for Hearts & Minds, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2015), URL., <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/420/html>

The same *Dabiq* edition also features an interview with Coulibaly's wife, another "good example" for the wives of mujahids, happy to live "in a land where the law of Allah is implemented." Hayat notes that prior to his death, Coulibaly asked her not to show him Islamic State videos because "it would make him want to perform hijrah [migration] immediately and that would have conflicted with his intent to carry out the operations in France."

Coulibaly, and his wife, are thus seen as self-radicalized Muslims influenced by IS deeds and propaganda. That is exactly what IS attempts to achieve through its sophisticated media campaign; to propagate the success of lone-wolf and homegrown terrorism narratives without investing much resources or effort. In this it imitates and, in some measure, improves the AQAP propaganda strategy, which was hitherto most prominently represented by AQAP's older *Inspire* magazine.

The reaction of the jihadist media in the coming days will help to understand whether Al-Qaeda or Daesh will profit from this latest terrorist attack in France in terms of propaganda. It should be noted that the jihadist networks of Al-Qaeda, which were at the origin of the massive wave of European fighters towards Syria from 2012, before the declaration of ISIS in July 2014, could have the upper hand in the near future among young Muslims in Europe susceptible to radicalization.

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