

The French "Iraqi Networks" of the 2000s: Matrix of the 2015 Terrorist Attacks?

by Jean-Pierre Filiu

Abstract

The networks that were active in sending "volunteers" for the anti-US jihad in Iraq from 2003 to 2007 might have played a key role in organizing the major terrorist attacks that struck France in January and November 2015. This jihadi genealogy underlines a complex generational transmission between pre-Islamic State (IS) and IS-inspired activists and cells.

Keywords: Jihadism; France; IS; Iraq

Introduction

France had faced repeated waves of Middle East-bound terrorism since the 1980s. But the devastating shock of the successive 2015 attacks is unprecedented. One of the factors to explain such blows could lie in the development, one decade earlier, of networks focused on the anti-US jihad in Iraq, where these blended with what would eventually become the Islamic State. To sustain this hypothesis, one will first follow the four waves of anti-French terrorism, then the constitution of the French "Iraqi" networks, before focusing on one of their central figure, the French-Tunisian Boubaker al-Hakim.

From Middle East State-inspired to Algeria-linked Terrorism in France

France has been the target of four successive terrorist waves over the past three decades:

The first wave, from 1982 to 1986, was a clear case of State-inspired terrorism, with the direct implication of the Islamic Republic of Iran and/or the Assad regime in Syria (the French judicial authorities has accused the Syrian intelligence as recently as March 2015 [1] of ordering through the Abu Nidal group, aka Fatah-Revolutionary Council, the August 1982 terrorist attack that killed six people in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Paris). France was targeted mainly for its military support to the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq (that had attacked Iranian territory in September 1980), but also for resisting the Syrian campaign against the sovereignty of Lebanon and the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) independence of decision from Damascus.

The second wave, in 1995-96, was intimately linked to the escalating Algerian civil war between the GIA [2] jihadi group not only with the security forces, but also with the rival Islamist FIS.[3] It was in fact triggered by the GIA killing of the imam Abdelbaki Sahraoui, one of the FIS founding members, in Northern Paris, in July 1995, soon followed by a terrorist attack in the Paris subway that killed eight people at the Saint-Michel metro/RER station.[4] The GIA campaign eventually ended after eighteen months as a result of French security actions (which led to the capture or the killing of most jihadi activists), but also because of the GIA internal crisis and decline.

The third wave, closely connected in 2000-2001 with Al-Qaida's global campaign (including the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington), was eventually thwarted by preventive action from the French security, that benefitted from the defiant attitude of the GIA towards Al-Qaida, and the induced vulnerability of the rival "Abu Doha" networks (Abu Doha was the war moniker of Rashid Boukhalfa, an Algerian jihadi that run Al-Qaida inspired training facilities in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan). One would have to wait until 2006 for a

GIA splinter group, the GSPC,[5] to eventually pledge allegiance to Al-Qaida and become its branch for the “Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM).[6]

The fourth wave was far more devastating than the two first ones (since the third one was thwarted) and killed 17 people (and three terrorists) in three separate attacks over three days in January 2015 (Charlie Hebdo, Hypercacher and the shooting of a police woman), then 130 people (and 7 terrorists) on the night of 13 November 2015, in six coordinated attacks in Paris and its Saint-Denis suburb (massacres at Bataclan and restaurants and suicide bombings near Stade de France). The Islamic State (IS) officially claimed responsibility for the November massacre the following day in an audio message disseminated through IS-linked Telegram accounts.[7] Prior to the Paris/Saint-Denis November attacks, Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser had proposed a typology of IS-linked attacks that put in the type 2 category (training and mid-level directives) the Verviers plot (thwarted in Belgium, shortly after the Paris January attacks).[8] One major figure in this Verviers plot was the Belgian-Moroccan Abdelhamid Abbaoud, who was killed in Saint-Denis with two accomplices on 18 November 2015. He was accused by the French authorities of masterminding the 13 November attacks and of having planned a deadly sequel in the Defense, the financial district in Western Paris.

This article will not discuss Hegghammer and Nesser’s typology, but focus instead on the networks that developed in France between the third and fourth waves, and how their complex integration in the IS global outfit led to the devastating attacks of 2015. One would just be reminded that Hegghammer and Nesser include in their “type 2” both the Abu Doha networks (because of their loose connection with Al-Qaida that was described above as a major “vulnerability”) and Mohammed Merah’s three separate attacks in Toulouse and Montauban in March 2012 (which killed first three French military, then a teacher and three children at a Jewish school). The French judicial authorities accused Moez Garsalloui, a Belgian-Tunisian activist, of organizing the transfer of jihadi volunteers from Europe to the Pakistani tribal areas and of having supervised the terrorist training in those areas of at least six French nationals, including Merah.[9] Garsallaoui had been condemned in 2010 by the Belgian ministry of justice to an eight-year sentence in absentia for his jihadi activism. The US military claimed to have killed him in October 2012 in the North-Waziristan tribal area.

The Nineteenth District Network

Yet the main jihad-oriented networks that developed in France between the third and the fourth waves were not connected to the Af-Pak nexus, but to Iraq, where they channeled foreign fighters to the insurgency after the 2003 US-led invasion.[10] In retrospect, the matrix of the “fourth wave” dynamics appear to have laid in the “Nineteenth district network”, thus labeled since most of its members originated from the Buttes-Chaumont neighborhood in the Nineteenth district of Paris. The key figure in this network is the French-Tunisian Boubaker al-Hakim, who repeatedly threatened France on behalf of the Islamic State (including in an interview in the Dabiq online magazine dedicated to Africa in April 2015), under the war moniker of Abu Muqatel.

Boubaker al-Hakim was born in August 1983 in a five-children family in Paris. He grew up in the Nineteenth district where he developed a close relationship with Farid Benyettou, a self-proclaimed Salafi preacher of his own age, along with other “buddies” like Peter Cherif, Mohammed al-Ayouni and the Kouachi brothers, Cherif and Said. Boubaker al-Hakim first travelled to Syria in July 2002, officially to study Arabic. The rising threat of a US campaign against Saddam Hussein’s regime had already compelled the Syrian intelligence, known under the generic terms of *mukhabarat*, to work closely with its Iraqi counterparts, after years of divorce, and even “shadow war” between the evil twins of Baath party. The Assad regime indeed feared that an American invasion of Iraq under the motto of “democratization” would soon lead to an aggressive campaign against the Syrian dictatorship itself.

From Arab Legion to Al-Qaida

Boubaker al-Hakim was certainly monitored in Damascus by the Syrian security, like all foreigners, especially students of Arab descent. It is not sure whether he was actually recruited by the Syrian intelligence, but their support was crucial in the semi-clandestine trip he made into Iraq before returning to France from Damascus in January 2003. Two months later, he was back in Damascus where he volunteered at the Iraqi embassy to join the so-called “Arab legion” that Saddam’s regime was hoping to mobilize against the impending US-led onslaught. Boubaker al-Hakim was soon interviewed by French media in Baghdad where he called upon his “buddies from the Nineteenth district” to join the anti-US resistance.[11] The collapse of the Iraqi regime in April 2003 forced Boubaker al-Hakim to go underground. This strengthened most certainly his collaboration with the now banned Iraqi security and the Syrian *mukhabarat*. [12] Without such collaboration, he would never have been able to sneak back into Syria and travel from there to France.

This is when Boubaker al-Hakim started to recruit as a jihadi role model for what would be described in the subsequent prosecution as the “Nineteenth district network”. The “spiritual” guidance of the group remained in the hands of Benyettou, who never left France. But Boubaker al-Hakim returned back to Damascus and from there onward to Falluja in Western Iraq along with his brother Redouane and his “buddies” Peter Cherif and Mohammed al-Ayouni. Falluja had become the stronghold of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s group Tawhid wal Jihad, which many “former regime loyalists” (FRL), according to the US denomination, had joined less out of jihadi commitment than because it was the most dedicated group fighting the Western/”Crusader” occupation. I have often described what would evolve later into the “Islamic State in Iraq” as the blending of two totalitarian projects [13]: the Al-Qaida vision (with Tawhid wal Jihad becoming officially in the fall of 2004 the Iraqi branch of Al-Qaida) and the Baathist “FRL” project, both keen at the “management of savagery”, as the jihadi ideologue Abu Bakr al-Naji would entitle his seminal book.[14]

Iraqi-Focused Networks

From March to August 2004, Boubaker al-Hakim remained in the embattled city of Falluja. His brother Redouane was killed in a US air raid and Mohammed al-Ayouni lost an eye and an arm in an explosion. Boubaker al-Hakim managed to escape before the fall of the jihadi stronghold in November 2014 and took refuge back in Syria, but Peter Cherif was captured and transferred to a US-run detention facility in Iraq. In January 2015, French security services dismantled the “Nineteenth district network” and the French ministry of justice eventually obtained Boubaker al-Hakim’s extradition from Damascus. He received a seven-year sentence, compared to a six-year sentence against Benyettou and a three-year against Cherif Kouachi (his brother Said was considered innocent). Mohammed al-Ayouni also received a three-year sentence and, while jailed, his jihadi aura (and the physical proof of it) led a petty criminal, Salim Benghalem, to fall under his militant spell.

While those jihadi activists were jailed, French security services dismantled another network associated with the hamlet of Artigat (60 kilometres South of Toulouse) which was also dedicated to sending volunteers to Iraq. The “spiritual” guidance of this group remained in the hand of a Syrian Islamist, Abdelilah Dandachi, who had chosen the name of Olivier Corel when receiving the French nationality. Two figures of this “Artigat Network” personify the intertwining of those “between-waves” dynamics: Sabri Essid, while in detention, was visited by the very same Mohammed Merah whose mother had married Essid’s father; Essid would join in March 2014 the then “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) and be identified in a jihadi execution video celebrating one of the Paris January 2015 attacks [15]; and Fabien Clain would also join the “Islamic State” in Syria and eventually praise the Paris November 2015 attacks online.

Meanwhile, Boubaker al-Hakim was released in January 2011 and soon went to Tunisia where a popular revolution had toppled dictator Ben Ali who had been more than 23 years in power. The general amnesty benefitted Seifallah Benhassine, aka Abu Iyad, the former leader of the Al-Qaida-linked GICT.[16] “Abu Iyad”

started to organize the militant salafi group Ansar al-Sharia (AS/Supporters of the Sharia) and commissioned Boubaker al-Hakim to develop its clandestine military branch. AS was in the vanguard of the deadly assault on the US embassy in Tunis in September 2012, that led to the outlawing of the Salafi group. But Boubaker al-Hakim, indirectly in February 2013, directly in July of the same year, participated in the targeted killings of two prominent leftist figures. Those twin killings nearly derailed the Tunisian democratic transition that was eventually saved by a “Quartet” from the civil society (who became the award-winners of the Peace Nobel Prize in 2015 for this accomplishment).

The IS-French-Tunisian Triangle

After that his subversion plan had been thwarted in Tunisia, Boubaker al-Hakim rallied the Islamic State in Syria, where his position in the operational chain of command remains unknown (one should point out that very little is known for certain about the operational structure of the Islamic State and the way it commissions terrorist attacks worldwide. The fact that IS-directed attacks in Turkey are never claimed officially is only an indication of the extent to which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s self-proclaimed “caliphate” has managed to protect its inner circle while projecting its terrorist campaign globally). What is certain is that two of his former “Nineteenth district buddies”, the Kouachi brothers, were the ones who killed twelve people at the Charlie Hebdo magazine siege in January 2015, opening the cycle of violence of the fourth terror wave on French soil.

It would appear that terrorist attacks in France are often connected to attacks of the same inspiration in Tunisia:

- two months after the Paris January attacks, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the killing spree at the Tunis Bardo museum, where 21 foreign tourists and one Tunisian security died (next to the two terrorists);
- on the very same day, 26 June 2015, when a French jihadi killed his employer at a chemical facility in the Alpes region (but failed to detonate a major explosion), a Tunisian jihadi, trained in an AS facility in neighboring Libya, killed 38 tourists, most of them British, in a beach resort near Sousse;
- and twelve days after the Paris November 2015 attacks, the presidential guard was struck in Tunis by a suicide attack that killed twelve security operatives.

It would be obviously far-fetched to portray Boubaker al-Hakim as the sole mastermind of such coordination of terrorist attacks in both France and Tunisia. But the bloody trail of his “Nineteenth district buddies” can be followed until the fourth wave of anti-French terrorism, not only through the Kouachi brothers, but also through Mohammed al-Ayouni and his radicalized “disciple” Salim Benghalem (who has been accused of organizing the arrival and training of French jihadis in Syria on behalf of the Islamic State [17] and condemned in absentia to a 15-year sentence). Former militants of the Artigat Network like Sabri Essid or Fabien Clain have already been mentioned above for their participation in IS terrorist activities. The combining of this “Artigat network” with the Nineteenth district Network one, delivers a critical mass in terms of members, propaganda and underground facilities which, along with IS guidance, inspiration and control, paved the way for the 2015 massacres in France.

From this perspective, the outfits that contributed to the sending of French volunteers to the anti-US jihad in the 2000s could very well prove to be the missing link that led to the devastating “fourth wave” of terrorism against France in 2015. The symbolic importance of those jihadi “veterans” for IS recruitment and propaganda is clear. It is to be hoped their operational role and responsibility in the actual commission of terrorist attacks will be clarified and addressed accordingly before more bloodshed occurs. In fact, the

Pentagon announced it had "targeted and killed" Boubaker al-Hakim on 26 November, 2016, during an air strike on the Syrian city of Raqqa.[18]

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Notes

- [1] *Paris-Match*, « Attentat de la rue des Rosiers, exclusif : le visage des tueurs », 4 March 2015 ; URL : <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Societe/Attentat-de-la-rue-des-Rosiers-Exclusif-Le-visage-des-tueurs-719874>
- [2] GIA is the French acronym for Groupe Islamique Armé/Islamic Armed Group.
- [3] FIS is the French acronym for Front Islamique du Salut/ Islamic Salvation Front.
- [4] RER is the French acronym for Réseau Express Régional/ Express Regional Network and the explosion of the deadly gas canister took place precisely at the Saint-Michel/Notre-Dame RER station.
- [5] GSPC is the French acronym for Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat/Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat.
- [6] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib", *The Middle East Journal*, 63, No. 2, (Spring 2009),pp. 217-220.
- [7] *Site Intelligence Group*, « IS claims Paris attacks, warns operation is "first of the storm" », 14 November 2015 ; URL : <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/is-claims-paris-attacks-warns-operation-is-first-of-the-storm.html> .
- [8] Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9, No. 4, (August 2015), pp. 14-30; URL: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440/871> .
- [9] Jacques Follorou, « Moez Garsalloui, le contact des djihadistes français au Pakistan », *Le Monde*, 20 October 2012 ; URL : http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/10/19/moez-garsalloui-le-contact-des-djihadistes-francais-au-pakistan_1777996_3224.html .
- [10] Jean-Pierre Filiu, « Ansar al-Fath and 'Iraqi' networks in France » ; in : Bruce Hoffman et Fernando Reinares (Eds.), *The evolution of global jihadi threat from 9/11 to Osama Bin Laden's death*. New York : Columbia University Press, 2014.
- [11] English translation of the popular expression "potes du 19ème", used in an interview broadcast by the French *Radio-Télé-Luxembourg* (RTL), March 13, 2003.
- [12] Martin Chulov, « ISIS, the inside story », *The Guardian*, 11 December 2014 ; URL : <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/sp-isis-the-inside-story>
- [13] Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State*. London, Hurst, 2015, pp. 200-201. See also Lara Marlowe, « Arab civilians suffer long-term struggle for self-determination », *Irish Times*, 19 May 2016 ; URL : <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/arab-civilians-suffer-long-struggle-for-self-determination-1.2652478>
- [14] « The Management of savagery » is a jihadi treatise that went on-line in 2004 and whose author, nicknamed Abu Bakr al-Naji, might be an Egyptian activist. This treatise became a standard reference within Al-Qaida in Iraq, and then the Islamic State.
- [15] Jean-Manuel Escarnot, Le « demi-frère » de Merah, étendard français de l'EI », *Libération*, 11 March 2015 ; URL : http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/03/11/le-demi-frere-de-merah-etendard-francais-de-l-ei_1218844 .
- [16] GICT is the French acronym for Groupe islamique combattant tunisien/Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group.
- [17] Adrien Pécout, « Le djihadiste Salim Benghalem, absent omniprésent », *Le Monde*, 1 December 2015 ; URL : http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/12/01/le-djihadiste-salim-benghalem-absent-omnipresent_4821504_3224.html .
- [18] Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Coalition Strike against Boubaker al-Hakim. U.S. Department of Defense, December 10, 2016. URL: <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1026657/statement-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-on-coalition-strike-against-bo>