

**THE DISMANTLED NETWORK IN BELGIUM WAS PROBABLY
AIMING TO TARGET THE EUROPEAN PRESENCE
IN AFGHANISTAN**

By Claude MONIQUET, President of ESISC

The investigation that led to the arrest of about fifteen people from jihadist networks in Belgium early on Thursday, December 11, began about a year ago.

In 2007, a developing cell had been identified near **Malika El-Aroud**, a Belgian national from Morocco who was well-known among European security services. **Her first husband is indeed one of the murderers of Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud** who was killed in September 2001, less than three days before the 9-11 attacks in New York and Washington. While she was still leaving in Afghanistan (in the same camp as Osama bin Laden...) at the time of the international coalition's military intervention in October 2001, El-Aroud played it wisely – she pretended to be a victim and promised information – in order to receive support from the Belgian authorities to leave Afghanistan. As soon as she was safe in Europe, she quickly distanced herself from those who had helped her and got closer to armed Islamic networks. **She was then spotted in Switzerland where she went on trial for spreading jihad propaganda and incitement to hatred.** In 2005, she was close to the network that recruited Muriel Delgaucque, a Belgian national converted to Islam, who went to Iraq with her husband to blow herself up in a suicide attack.

In December 2007, she appeared one of the most prominent figures of a network that was planning to conduct attacks in Belgium. Under significant pressure, including from the United States, the Belgian authorities' only option was to strike... too early: several searches were conducted and a dozen individuals were arrested but were released the day after because of a lack of evidence. **To use intelligence terms, Belgium 'knew' – as did the U.S. and French allies – that 'something was up,' but no credible evidence could be used in the case.**

A year later, about the same network was targeted by the December 11 operation and, once again, Malika El-Aroud, who has been nicknamed in some internet jihadist websites the 21st Century Mujaahida, is involved. To make matters worse, her current husband is suspected to be 'one of the three or four

men who came back from Afghanistan recently' who were prominent members of the cell that was just dismantled. Mrs. El-Aroud is either unlucky with her husbands or – and that is more likely - she has a bad influence on them that matches the way she is seen: as an Islamic icon, a jihad inspirer whose role is important because she is a prominent figure of jihadist propaganda in Europe.

A few hours after the arrests occurred, it is obviously too early to say much more except **that intelligence and law enforcement services were sure that a suicide attacks was in the works.** A 'volunteer' who had come back from Afghanistan had allegedly videotaped its martyr testament and was believed to have asked, on December 7, its relatives to leave Europe.

It remains unclear where the attack was to be conducted but **it appears, and it has been confirmed by our own sources close to the investigation, that the target was located 'somewhere in Europe,'** maybe even in Belgium and not in Afghanistan. Some of the terrorists who were arrested were just back from that country after they had received training; they would not go there anymore. Moreover it is unlikely from a strategic standpoint that a new attack in Afghanistan would change much. In Europe, however, the impact would have been huge.

Moreover, as President-elect Barack Obama a few days ago confirmed the increase of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and as several European countries hinted they could do the same, it seems that one or several attack(s) targeting Europe – and more specifically a member state of the European Union, that already has troops there, would make sense for jihadists.

Indeed, it must be noted that both France and Belgium have been threatened of bloody attacks, in November, if they did not agree to withdraw from Afghanistan.

To put it simply, this means that, the risk will be - if not maximum- at least very high throughout Europe in the weeks to come.

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