

## **BELGIUM SHOWS COMMITMENT TO COMBAT TERRORISM DURING SHARIA4BELGIUM TRIAL**

As the trial of the banned Islamist group “Sharia4Belgium” began on Monday September 29, Belgian media focused their interest on Muslim radicalism and on the increasing risk of terrorist attacks across the country.

Only 8 out of 46 accused were present in front of Antwerp’s Criminal court, as most of them are currently fighting in the ranks of the “Islamic State“ (IS) terrorist group in Syria. However, the trial attracted significant media attention due to the identity of the main defendant, Fouad Belkacem. On Tuesday, the public prosecutor Ann Fransen clearly presented him as a terrorist organization leader, and requested a fifteen-year jail sentence.

To recall, Fouad Belkacem was not only the group’s founder and ideologist, but he was also responsible for recruiting and indoctrinating new members. He is also suspected of having maintained regular contacts with foreign Islamist organizations.

In her submissions, Ann Fransen was keen to provide a detailed description of the group’s organizational structure, ideology and activity. In particular, she demonstrated how Sharia4Belgium’s commitment in the armed struggle throughout the Middle East was a tactic to fulfill its ultimate objectives, namely overthrowing the Belgian State and replacing it with an Islamic one.

Although Fouad Belkacem himself denied such accusations – presenting his calls to jihad as “pure theology” of “provocations” – it should be mentioned that the group’s members are also being prosecuted for violent actions in Belgium, including a riot in front of a police station in Brussels’ Molenbeek district on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2012.

After the shock provoked by Brussels’ Jewish Museum shootings on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 2014, this trial therefore contributed to increasing public awareness, at a time when more and more information reveals the scale and scope of the phenomenon, especially in the context of Syrian and Iraqi conflicts.

Indeed, since the beginning of September, security services and media reported an increased number of incidents involving Belgian radicalized Muslim youngsters who aspire or who are already fighting in Syria. Among others, it is worth mentioning the following events:

- On Saturday September 20, media reports quoting judiciary sources claimed that Belgian security services had foiled several terrorist plots in recent months. According to the daily newspaper “L’Echo”, some of these planned attacks might have been similar to the shootings carried out by Mehdi Nemmouche in Brussels’ Jewish Museum.
- On Monday September 22, a young Belgian citizen from the Walloon town of Verviers proudly claimed on his Facebook page that he had killed a Kurdish fighter in the province of Aleppo, in north-western Syria. According to the Flemish daily newspaper, the “Islamic State” (IS) terrorist, known as “Abu Hamza” or “Abu Abbas”, was already known by the police for a shooting incident which took place in Liege in October 2013.

Currently, there are at least 3 inhabitants from Verviers, an old industrial center located near Liège, who are believed to have joined IS ranks over the past month, which therefore raises concerns over the radicalization process taking place among the local Muslim community.

- On Tuesday September 23, a 24-year-old Syrian national whose identity was not revealed was arrested in Brussels South Charleroi Airport (BSCA), in possession of several fake passports and electronic documents related to the Syrian situation, including videos of murders committed by IS members.

The suspect, who was reportedly transiting through Belgium from Greece on his way to Scandinavia, was immediately indicted for membership to a terrorist group. It was the second time in less than a month that Belgian authorities arrested a Syrian national suspected of belonging to “IS” at the airport.

- Still on Tuesday September 23, a short message posted on Twitter announced that one of the 46 indicted “Sharia4Belgium” members – identified as 19-year-old Abdallah Nouamane, aka “Abu Jihad”, from Antwerp – was killed following clashes between IS terrorists and Syrian governmental forces. He was the 9<sup>th</sup> member of the organization believed to have been killed in Syria.
- On Friday October 3, Flemish daily newspapers “Het Nieuwsblad” and “Gazet van Antwerpen” reported a message posted the day before on Facebook by Brussel’s Salafi preacher Abd Al Wadoud Abu Daoud. It is worth mentioning

that the latter is known by the police for his close links to the Elouassaki family. Several brothers belonging to this family, native of the Flemish city of Vilvoorde, are members of Sharia4Belgium and 2 of them are reportedly fighting in Syria.

Abd Al Wadoud Abu Daoud's Facebook status shows pictures of radicalized Muslims training to fight in a wooded area allegedly located near the town of Florenville, in the southern region of Ardennes. In October 2013, Sharia4Belgium's member "Abu Moussa", one of the closest followers of Fouad Belkacem, had already used his Facebook account to invite young Muslims to join a training camp in the same region.

The verdict in the trial of Sharia4Belgium is expected on October 8. In any case, the severity of the sanction required by the public prosecutor already indicates the Belgian authorities' will to reaffirm their determination in the fight against the expansion of jihadism throughout the country. According to figures frequently quoted by public officials, around 300 Belgian citizens left to fight in Syria since 2012, as the authorities have proven unable to contain this movement. Although it is very unlikely that the probable conviction of Fouad Belkacem on charges of terrorism will be sufficient to reverse the trend, it might nevertheless act as a strong message sent to radical Islamist movements in Belgium.

This could be an essential element for the future struggle against radicalism, especially as the country faces increased terrorist threats for having joined the international coalition against the "Islamic State" in Syria and Iraq.

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