

HAKIM BENLADGHEM: SOLITARY JIHADIST OR MEMBER OF A MULTINATIONAL NETWORK?

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On Tuesday, March 26, at 14:30, a violent incident occurred on the A8 motorway (Brussels-Tournai-Lille) between an individual driving a Nissan 4x4 vehicle and special forces of the Belgian police who were tailing him.

Ordered to stop by the police officers who wanted to arrest him, the driver of the 4x4 refused to comply and then tried to hit one of the unmarked police cars before opening fire. The police retaliated and the suspect, a 39-year-old Franco-Algerian by the name of Hakim Benladghem, was killed by the return gunfire.

In the hours that followed, the Belgian media announced that the man could be linked to terrorist activities.

In the evening, sources close to the Belgian Federal Prosecution (responsible for cases related to terrorism and organized crime) informed ESISC that Benladghem was indeed suspected of being a terrorist and his profile was "similar to the French terrorist Mohamed Merah", who sowed death in Toulouse and Montauban in March 2012: a solitary terrorist with a criminal past who embarked on an "individual jihad".

On Wednesday, March 27, further information was released to the media: Benladghem had been monitored since the end of 2012, following a report by the DCRI¹ who suspected him of being linked to a terrorist network in France. In addition, on March 21, he was the instigator of a hold-up at a restaurant on the outskirts of Brussels, accompanied by two accomplices – the "M. brothers". The purpose of the operation: to acquire weapons held by the owner.

In addition, the search conducted on the evening of March 26 at the Brussels home of Benladghem led to the discovery of a most impressive arsenal: several machine guns, top-of-the-range shotgun, tactical helmets of which at least one was equipped with night vision, bulletproof vests, a steel armored shield of about forty pounds used by special forces to protect themselves during assault operation, etc..

It should be noted that the weapons and equipment seized were all new and highly sophisticated: materials exclusively for special units of the police and army, impossible to get in the trade and very hard to find on the black market.

It is because of the existence of this sophisticated equipment that the police, well informed, decided to stop the suspect away from his home: repeating a more than thirty hours siege and endangering the safety of police personnel was out of question. The bloody epilogue of the Mohamed Merah's case was not to be repeated.

¹ The Central Directorate of Interior Intelligence, the intelligence and security service for French.

1) **Benladghem was monitored since 2008, not since 2012...**

Sources close to French intelligence, the Belgian judicial authorities and several intelligence services in the Middle East allow us to be much more specific about the "profile" of Hakim Benladghem.

Two essential elements emerge: first, the man may not be as "isolated" as they say, on the other hand, he has attracted the attention of security services in several countries since at least 2008.

1.1. **2008: Benladghem tries to enter Gaza**

- In spring 2008, Hakim Benladghem tried, with at least three intents, to enter the Gaza Strip through the Egyptian border. Each time, he was driven back by the police and, at the time of his last attempt, on April 6th, 2008, he was challenged and placed in custody. In his possession was found two bulletproof vests, several hoods, a gas mask, a laptop and various other objects.
- The trip to Egypt was preceded by intense preparation. His brother, Farid, was travelling in the Middle East and seems to have settled in the Gaza Strip. However in the space of seven days, Hakim Benladghem received 149 phone calls from two mobile phone numbers whose codes correspond to Gaza².
- Returned to the hexagon, Benladghem was immediately placed under surveillance and wiretapped by the French intelligence services.

1.2. **Relations with suspected jihadists**

- The tapping and interception of electronic correspondence - the suspect used several phones and at least a dozen different email addresses - it appeared that he was in touch with people already "spotted" within the framework of other investigations on jihadist movements or, at least, he knew them. Among others Farouk Ben Abbes, Youssef el-Mourabit, Jean-Michel Clain, Fabien Clain and Kamel Bouchentouf.

These five people are not without interest:

- Farouk Ben Abbes, a Belgian national, had also lived in the Gaza Strip from 2008-2009. But in May 2009, he was arrested in Cairo along with six other people (including a woman of Albanian origin) as part of an investigation after the attack of February 22, 2009 in Bazaar Khan el-Khalili³. During his interrogation, Ben Abbes, considered a member of Jaish al-Islam⁴, admitted plotting an attack against the Parisian theatre Le Bataclan, which took place in January 2007, against a concert in support of Israeli border guards. Returned to France, Ben Abbes is in 2010 a suspect in the investigation on the jihadi forum Ansar al-Haqq ("Supporters of the truth") and will spend more than a year in custody.

² 45 times, from 2 to 4 February from 972 599 197 502 and 104 times, between 4 and 9 February from 972598257773. "972" is the prefix for Israel and "59" of the cellular network in Gaza.

³ The attack targeted a group of students from Levallois-Perret, on a school trip to Cairo. The French Cécile Vannier, aged 17, was killed and 24 others injured.

⁴ Jaish al-Islam, also known as Tawhid and Jihad Brigade is a small Gazan terrorist organization close to the ideology of al-Qaeda.

- Youssef el-Mourabit was involved in 2011 in the trial of the Franco-Belgian "Afghan networks" headed, among others, by the Belgian activist Malika el-Aroud.
- Fabien Clain, a French convert, was indicted and convicted on July 9, 2009 by the 14th Penal Chamber of the Grande Instance Tribunal of Paris to have been one of the organizers of a terrorist network in Toulouse which tried to send volunteers to fight in Iraq (note that the Merah brothers, although they were not involved at the time, revolved around the network...)
- Jean-Michel Clain, brother of the former, was considered a member of this movement⁵.
- Kamel Bouchentouf (originally from Longwy, he settled in Nancy in 1999, a city where was born and resided Benladghem ...), was arrested in 2007. Suspected of planning attacks in France, especially against a U.S. consulate, the base of the 13th Parachute Dragoon Regiment (13th RDP) of Dieuze, the prefecture of Meurthe and Moselle and a restaurant of the chain McDonald's. He claimed to have been an informant for the DST, which was vehemently denied by the service.

1.3. Numerous travel and facilities in Belgium

- Benladghem seems to have worked fairly little, but he seems to have been well travelled since 2007, including England, Norway, Italy, Switzerland, Syria (where he was issued with a visa for India in September 2007, by the Embassy of New Delhi).
- It is probably his Egyptian adventure and the surveillance he was under in France (as evidenced by several telephone conversations with his brother) which pushed him to cross the border and settle in Belgium, where he took up residence in January 2009, at the "9 rue de la Courtoisie", in Anderlecht, a commune in the Belgian capital.

2) In 2009, he was placed under surveillance by the Belgian authorities...

- French services continue to be very interested in him and then informed their Belgian counterparts. In the months that followed, the judge Isabelle Panou opened an investigation file at the request of Federal Prosecution⁶.

2.1. New Encounters

In Belgium, he was again the subject of wiretappings. These are revealing.

- On 28 May 2009, two telephone conversations with his brother (at 14.25 and 18.25), he evokes the bombing of Khan el-Khalili and the arrest of seven suspects by the Egyptian police.
- In many exchanges intercepted in April and May 2010, it emerged that Benladghem sought to get paramilitary equipment.

⁵ Paris-Match, 19 July 2012

⁶ File 17/2010 following the instructions FD.35.97.00006/2009 of the federal prosecution.

- Also in May 2010, he planned to travel to Algeria, but cautious, he called (on May 26 at 16.24) one of his uncles, who worked in the Algerian police and asked him to check if he was indexed by the DGNS or the DRS⁷.
- In other conversations with his brother, he complains that he thinks (with reason...) that he is under surveillance. The tone is violent: "Sons of bitches, they think with their methods, they may counteract the determination of those who are able to shed their blood for Allah [...] They will taste the fire of hell" ...

2.2. 2010: search and interrogation

In Belgium, the calm will not last long. On July 17, 2010 Benladghem's home was searched and he was arrested and taken to police headquarters where he was held for ten hours.

This was a disappointing hearing, say our sources. Master of himself and speaking very little, Benladghem acknowledged nothing: he never attempted to enter Gaza, he knows none of the people quoted to him, anyway, he said, "I am a solitary person who does not spend time with people"- and he has never used any of the email addresses presented to him. Moreover, he says he "does not remember what he did between November 2007 and May 2009": "It's too far, I only have memories from the year 2009" (!) He does not remember the duration of his stay in Syria, in 2007 ...

Asked about the number of phone calls he received from Gaza in February 2008, he says he has "never been contacted by a telephone in Israel." He added that the French mobile number that received these calls is not his. But, this is most curious, as he just acknowledged a few minutes earlier, that the same number⁸ was activated in Norway in January 2008 when he "was looking for a job."

To the Belgian counter-terrorist agents, he presented himself as "an international truck driver" and said to earn "approximately 2,000 Euros per month." Since he pays rent of just over 500 euros and has a refunding of credit of 1,000 Euros, it is therefore difficult to understand how the balance of his bank account amounted to a little over 21 000 Euros⁹ and how he possessed 50,000 Euro in cash deposited in a safe¹⁰. He does everything, in fact, to hide the last element: when asked about the key to the safe found at his home, he explained that the key was from "an old chest he got rid of...". Later, he affirmed that these amounts are the result of his "savings".

In addition to the safe key found during the search, two access cards to Frankfurt Airport (which he says he used in his activities as a truck driver), several mobile phones and Belgian, French, British, Moroccan and Algerian SIM cards were also found.

3) Many unanswered questions

Despite the specific questions asked, Benladghem did not answer. Moreover, no weapons or explosives were found at his home. He is eventually released and even recovers some of the money seized.

In 2010, as revealed in these newspapers "*Vers l'Avenir*" et "*Het Laatste Nieuws*", he assiduously attends the gym, and in one year, one session per day, this man measuring 1m75

⁷ DGNS: Directorate General for National Security; DRS: Department of Intelligence and Security.

⁸ 0619489508.

⁹ ING account 363-4451097-01.

¹⁰ Safe number 982, open in the branch of BNP Paribas in Chaussée de Gand, Anderlecht.

and weighing 110 kilos, shaped himself an athlete's body. He also took diving courses. Everything seems to indicate that he was preparing for action.

However the police kept an eye on him. When his accomplices in the robbery of a restaurant, on March 21, were arrested and "gave him up" the decision is made to arrest him. The investigators have informations that make them think he is ready to take action.

Hakim Benladghem's death leaves many open questions that we must now answer:

- Was the man really "isolated" or was he a member, as his career seems to indicate, of a network or an organization?
- Does he have accomplices ready to take action in Belgium or France?
- How can a man who apparently didn't work for years get 70 000 Euros?
- What were the motives for his travels in Europe and in Syria? We know that in 2007, the latter was one of the points of passages of the mujahidin wishing to join the jihad in Iraq...
- Where did he get weapons reserved for Special Forces?
- What were his plans? Were the weapons for his own use or for a group? And which one?
- What was he going to target? His journey to Gaza and its possible links with Jaish al-Islam suggest he was maybe targeting Israeli interests or the Jewish community.

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