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WAS MERAH THE KILLER? Doubts Regarding the Conduct of French Intelligence and Police

Questions emerge over police handling of Toulouse, France killings

by Alex Lantier
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Details emerging about Mohamed Merah, the alleged gunman in a series of murders in the Toulouse area from March 11 to March 19, raise serious questions about the conduct of French intelligence and police agencies.

Merah allegedly killed one paratrooper in Toulouse on March 11, two paratroopers in nearby Montauban on March 15, and a father and several children at a Jewish school in Toulouse on

March 19. He was killed in an armed standoff with police at his Toulouse apartment Thursday, shot in the head by a sniper as he fell from his balcony.

Officials are scrambling to explain how Merah—though known to both French intelligence (DCRI, Central Directorate of Internal Intelligence) and to police—operated undetected for over a week, and why he was killed in the operation.

Speaking to Europe1 radio Thursday, Foreign Minister Alain Juppé admitted: “I understand why one would ask if there was an error or not. As I do not know whether there was an error, I cannot tell you what type of error, but we must shed light on this.”

Christian Prouteau, the founder of the GIGN (Intervention Group of the National Gendarmerie), a counterterrorism squad that rivals the elite police unit that killed Merah, criticized the assault yesterday. He said he was surprised that the standoff ended in Merah’s death: “How is it that the best police unit cannot arrest a lone man? They could have hit him with tear gas. Instead they threw armfuls of grenades at him. The result was that the criminal was put in a psychological state to continue his ‘war.’”

He added: “It may appear presumptuous, but in 64 GIGN operations under my command, there was not a single fatality.” Echoing comments by local Toulouse police, Prouteau asked why police did not simply wait in ambush outside Merah’s apartment and detain him as he left; this technique is apparently used often against Basque nationalists and mafia operatives.

These questions arose as incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy seeks to exploit the tragedy to push for wide-ranging police state powers, and to burnish his law-and-order credentials for next month’s presidential elections.

A recent CSA poll taken after the shootings showed Sarkozy increasing his vote, winning 30 percent of the vote in the first round of the elections versus 28 percent for Socialist Party (PS) candidate François Hollande. Hollande is still expected to win the second round of the elections, however, due to Sarkozy’s unpopularity outside the UMP’s voter base.

In a televised speech Thursday, Sarkozy called for “criminal punishment” of anyone reading internet sites that promote “terrorism” or “hatred,” traveling abroad for “indoctrination,” defending “extremist ideologies,” or promoting them inside prisons. Such proposals, couched in such broad terms as to allow the state to criminalize virtually any oppositional politics, trample basic constitutional rights of free speech and travel.

Magistrates Union official Marie-Blanche Régnier said Sarkozy’s call was a “political maneuver.” She rhetorically asked whether he would include Marine Le Pen, the neo-fascist candidate whose voters Sarkozy has aggressively wooed with anti-immigrant rhetoric, on the list of “extremists.”

Under conditions in which the PS, the Communist Party (PCF), and the New Anti-capitalist Party are not challenging Sarkozy’s calls for “national unity,” most objections to the investigations have come from police and security specialists. However, the details that have surfaced already make clear that, if Merah was indeed the killer, he was able to carry out the murders only due to a

remarkable breakdown of French police and intelligence operations.

Given the immense political stakes in Sarkozy's exploitation of the shootings, it is only logical to ask whether there is any connection between this breakdown of intelligence and Sarkozy's attempt to save his chances in the upcoming elections.

Shortly after the March 15 Montauban killings, officials were already saying they were exploring "all possible suspects" in the murders. According to the daily *Libération*, when on March 19 Toulouse police provided investigators with a list of Islamist "radicals" in the Toulouse area, it had only six names on it, and Merah's was at the top of the list. Merah was therefore well known to police.

After the Montauban killings, however, Merah was apparently not identified—even though his mother's IP address was on a police list of computers that had been in contact with the March 11 victim. This list was examined carefully by investigators, and it eventually played a role in Merah's capture. However, investigators apparently did not cross-check this list with the list of Islamists until Monday the 19, after the killings at the Ozar Hatoreh school.

Defense expert François Heisbourg told *Libération*, "There are only a few dozen Frenchmen who have traveled to Afghanistan, and only a few units in the Midi-Pyrénées region [around Toulouse]. One wonders why no one paid more attention to him! One can perhaps understand this before the Toulouse and Montauban killings—it's surprising, but not shocking. But afterwards? This means that either the agencies involved are completely out of cash, or they are not doing their job."

He added, "I am puzzled when I hear the Paris and Toulouse prosecutors explain that they did not have the suspect's address. It seems the Central Directorate of Internal Intelligence (DCRI) interrogated him in the autumn and concluded he was not dangerous. How did they contact him if they did not have his address?"

Heisbourg also raised questions about Merah's training as a gunman, apparently acquired during a couple of trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan, though he spent most of his time working as a mechanic: "This 'lone wolf' acted in ways the most experienced mafiosi do not dare attempt. He ran his operation himself, and carried out the killings with an unprecedented degree of cold calculation and absence of hysteria. Even the September 11 terrorists were more unnerved. He has therefore received absolutely first-rate training. Who trained him and how?"

Indeed, some questions remain as to whether Merah in fact was the killer. He did not resemble the description given by witnesses at the Montauban shooting, who spoke of a corpulent figure with tattoos and a scar on the left cheek. By contrast, Merah was thin and had no facial markings.