

The Paris Attacks: Three Generations of Jihadists

Jan 15, 2015



Articles & Testimony

Extremists have been importing conflicts from the Arab world into France since the 1990s, resulting in the latest tragedy.

The terrorist network responsible for killing seventeen people in Paris last week is a troubling combination of three generations of jihadists, all fueled by conflicts in the Middle East: the Algerian-focused generation of the 1990s, the Iraqi-motivated networks of the 2000s, and the global jihad of this decade, on the background of a fierce competition between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

At the core of this ominous combination lays the "19th District," or the Buttes-Chaumont network, which was active in sending volunteers to fight U.S. forces in Iraq from 2004 until its dismantlement in 2005. The key figure in this network was the French-Tunisian Boubaker al-Hakim, who enrolled in Saddam Hussein's "Arab legion" of pro-regime supporters prior to the U.S. invasion.

After Saddam's fall, Boubaker and his partners were trained by former Iraqi intelligence officers. They followed them to become active jihadists in the city of Fallujah, the stronghold of the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda. Redouane al-Hakim, Boubaker's brother, was killed there in a U.S. bombing in July 2004. Boubaker also developed, because of his frequent transits through Syria, an enduring collaboration with Bashar al-Assad's secret police.

Thanks to his combat credentials, Boubaker became the role model for his "buddies" in the Buttes Chaumont, including Cherif Kouachi and his older brother Said. Boubaker and Cherif were arrested in 2005 and sentenced to jail in 2008, along with five other accomplices. Some of them de-radicalized in jail, including Farid Benyettou, the network's "spiritual leader," who had never left France. But Hakim and Kouachi kept admiring some of their fellow detainees, including Algerian jihadist Smain Ait Belkacem, who was jailed for his participation in the October 1995 bombing of the Parisian underground.

This is how Hakim and Kouachi bridged the gap between their "Iraqi" generation and their "Algerian" predecessors. After their release, it took them a few years to drift into the full-fledged global jihad. Hakim organized jihadist commandos in post-Ben Ali Tunisia who assassinated two prominent leftist leaders in February and July 2013, jeopardizing the country's democratic transition. Hakim waited until the last days of 2014 to claim this double murder from northern Syria, on behalf of ISIS.

Meanwhile, Kouachi plotted Ait Belkacem's escape with Amedy Coulibaly, a "reformed" criminal. The plot was foiled in May 2010 and Coulibaly was jailed until March 2014. Kouachi was only briefly detained. After his release, he joined his brother Said in Yemen, where they were trained by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) under the guidance of the Yemeni-American imam Anwar al-Awlaki (killed in a CIA drone strike in September 2011).

The dots that connect Hakim and ISIS on one side and the Kouachi brothers, responsible for the *Charlie Hebdo*

massacre, on the other will likely be revealed soon. Cherif and Said Kouachi paid tribute to Awlaki and AQAP after the killing. But Coulibaly, who murdered four Jewish citizens and one policewoman in two separate attacks, explicitly pledged allegiance to ISIS and its "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in his posthumous video, while his female companion has traveled to ISIS-controlled territory in Syria.

This transgenerational phenomenon highlights how foreign conflicts from the Arab world have been imported into France. No doubt that is partly due to Assad and former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who nurtured jihadists to convince the West that they had to be kept in power. This sinister calculation has just been paid for with French blood. Enduring dictators only make stronger jihadists. This is another lesson of the Paris tragedy.

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