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Sabri Essid



France's First Family of Jihad

Meet the Merah-Essids

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"Oh, you Jews! Allah has permitted us to kill your brothers on French soil and here on the soil of the Islamic State." So says the speaker in an Islamic State video released in March, which allegedly shows a Palestinian Mossad agent being shot dead by a child executioner. Standing next to the boy and behind the kneeling detainee, the man, whose face is uncovered, speaks French with the cadence of the banlieues, France's troubled urban slums that have proved fertile recruiting grounds for the Islamic State and other jihadist groups. He has been identified as none other than Sabri Essid, the "half-brother" of the infamous Jewish school killer, Mohammed Merah.

In 2012, the 23-year-old Merah, a wannabe jihadist who had made exploratory visits to Afghanistan and Pakistan, went on a killing spree in and around his hometown of Toulouse. He killed three French paratroopers in two separate incidents on March 11 and 15, gravely wounding a fourth. Merah made clear he considered the killings retaliation for the participation of French troops in NATO operations in Afghanistan. Then, on March 19, he pulled up in front of the Ozar Hatorah school on his signature TMAX motor scooter and proceeded to shoot dead three children, aged 3 to 8, and a teacher. Merah himself would be killed in a shootout with French police three days later.

It was at the burial of Merah one week after his death that Sabri Essid identified himself to a French journalist as Merah's "half-brother." In fact, they were stepbrothers. According to French press reports, in the summer of 2011, Essid's father, Mohamed, married Merah's mother, Zoulikha, in a religious ceremony. As far as Islamic law is concerned, Merah thus became Mohamed Essid's stepson.

In the Islamic State execution video, Sabri Essid can be seen placing a paternal hand on the child executioner's shoulder while praising the "young lions of the caliphate" (all translations from French by the author). The intimacy of the gesture is not feigned: That boy is Essid's own stepson, Rayan. The 12-year-old was recognized by former classmates from the elementary school he attended in Toulouse.

When he left France for Syria in March 2014, Essid reportedly took his entire family with him: his wife Leila, Rayan, her son from a previous marriage, and three children of their own. The youngest was just 6 months old. Sabri's younger brother Walid also went along for good measure.

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2006, Essid had been detained by Syrian authorities in what has been described as an al Qaeda safe house along the Syrian-Iraqi border. He was captured in the company of a French Muslim convert by the name of Thomas "Abdelhakim" Barnouin. Repatriated to France in February 2007, the two men were arrested immediately upon their arrival at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris.

Judicial investigations identified Essid and Barnouin as members of what has come to be known as the "Toulouse group," a network specializing in the recruitment and dispatch of jihadists to fight American and allied forces in Iraq. Both men would be found guilty of forming part of a terrorist enterprise and sentenced to prison terms. In the meantime, Barnouin is also reported to have left France for Syria.

The spiritual guide of the Merah-Essid clan is said to be a reclusive Syrian immigrant who goes by the name of Olivier Corel. Born Abdullah Qorel some 68 years ago, Corel lives in the rustic village of Artigat, 55 miles south of Toulouse, where Mohammed Merah and other members of the family are known to have visited him. Corel was arrested in connection with the Toulouse group investigations, but charges against him were eventually dropped. Last November, he was

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again arrested, this time in connection with investigations into possible accomplices of Merah.


Sabri Essid is not the only prominent member of the clan to have left France to join the Syrian jihad. Just two months after Essid's departure, it was Souad Merah's turn to go. In May 2014, French interior minister Bernard Cazeneuve revealed that Souad, Mohammed's older sister, had flown to Gaziantep, Turkey, and was presumed to have traveled from there to jihadist-controlled territory in northern Syria. At just some 30 miles from the Syrian border, Gaziantep is a frequent stop for European jihadists on their way to Syria.

Like Essid, Souad left France with her four children in tow, the youngest being 9 months old. In Syria, she is believed to have reunited with Abdelwahed El Baghdadi, her husband under Islamic law and the father of her two youngest children.

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