

BELGIUM/SYRIA: NEW REPORTS CONFIRM INCREASING INVOLVEMENT OF BELGIAN JIHADISTS IN SYRIA

By ESISC TEAM

On June 27, the judge for the Spanish National Court, issued an arrest warrant against Ismail Abdelatif Al Lal, 38, in connection to the investigation of Jihadist recruiting network operating in Ceuta and Morocco dismantled last June 21.

Spanish media reported quoting investigation sources that Ismail Abdelatif Al Lal, Belgian resident, is considered to be an alleged Al-Qaeda facilitator in Europe. He is known to have traveled to Syria along with the first group of suicide bombers of Ceutan origin. He is also known to have traveled at least on three occasions to Turkey from where he coordinated the terrorist attacks in Syria that have been later claimed by Al-Nusra Front.

Al Lal is suspected to be a member of a Jihadist recruiting network operating in Ceuta and Fnideq, north Morocco dismantled in June 21. The network is considered responsible for recruiting and training of at least 50 Jihadists, 12 of them, including a minor, have been already sent to jihadist camps in Arabic countries, mainly to Syria. According to investigation sources, the network has also links in the Netherlands and Belgium.

However, Belgian authorities have not yet confirmed if Al Lal was a Belgian resident. If confirmed, the fact will once again highlight the increasing implication of Belgian jihadists in recruiting for jihad in Syria.

Earlier on June 24 Belgian daily Het Gazet van Antwerpen reported that at least 5 other young Belgian had left to fight in Syria over the last weeks. The young men, aged between 20 and 21, from the cities of Antwerp and Vilvoorde, have been allegedly recruited by Sharia4Belgium. According to the daily, 7 of the 9 Belgian nationals who already came back from Syria are already detained, and most of them confessed that Fouad Belkacem, the former spokesman of Sharia4Belgium, has been implicated in their recruitment.

Nearly 200 Belgian citizens, mostly of north-African origin, are believed to have joined Islamist rebel groups fighting in Syria so far. According to federal judicial authorities, members of Shara4Belgium are directly responsible for sending of at least 33 people for jihad there.

It should be mentioned that several Belgian prominent radical islamists have already joined Syrian jihadist camps and some of them have already been killed in the fighting with governmental troops.

On June 19 daily Le Soir reported that Abdelrahman Ayachi, the son of islamist cleric sheikh Bassam Ayachi, was killed in Syria while fighting alongside with rebels against the Syrian army. Born in Saudi Arabia, Abdelrahman Ayachi was raised in France and studied in Belgium, where he was condemned in 2012 to an 8 years imprisonment for terrorism-related activities. He fled to Syria before being jailed, and he was leading there the Suquar al-Sham ("Sham Falcons") Islamist brigade part of the rebel forces.

To recall, his father sheikh Bassam Ayachi for many years was a leader of the Belgian Islamic Center in Belgium. Together with French islamist Raphael Gendron, Ayachi was arrested in Bari, Italy, in 2009 and faced charges of terrorism-related activities and membership in Al Qaeda. Both were liberated in July 2012. In April 2013 Raphaël Gendron was killed during heavy fighting against government troops in the northern Syria.

Sheikh Bassam is suspected of recruiting candidates in Belgium and France for jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile in his latest interview to media in April 2013 Ayachi denied his implication in recruiting of islamists in Belgium for Syria.

So far authorities gathered conflicting reports concerning the number of Belgian jihadists who have already joined Syrian islamist rebel groups.

Here are a series of major facts, reporting about the presence of Belgian jihadists in Syria:

- On June 17 four young Belgian citizens wanting to join the rebels fighting the Assad's regime were arrested by Turkish police on the border with Syria and were sent back to Belgium. The same day another young Belgian man, 16-year-old, had come back from Syria accompanied by his mother.
- On June 8 Elias Taketlouné, 23, member of Sharia4Belgium, has been arrested in the airport of Zaventem, Brussels, upon his arrival from Syria, where he went to fight in the main rebel group for 5 months. He claims to have been working for a humanitarian organization on the Turkish-Syrian border. Elias Taketlouné is the fourth Belgian that comes back from fighting in Syria after Hakim Eloussaki (21), Walid Lakdim (21) and Mohamed El Youssoufi (19). All of them are members of Sharia4Belgium.
- On April 10 in an interview to Belgian weekly Knack, Belgian imam Brahim Laytousse claimed that according to "direct sources", at least 12 young Belgian jihadists have been killed in Syria while fighting against al Assad regime. This information has never been confirmed by official sources.
- On April 1 Syrian state news agency Sana reported that a Belgian jihadist, Ahmad Stevenberg was killed by Syrian army in the village of al-Ghnaimiye, in Lattakia governorate on the Syrian coast, during an army operation in the area.

- On March 15 the first Belgian national, Sean Pidgeon from Brussels, was killed in Syria. He left Belgium to join rebel forces in November 2012.

Besides, various videos have been posted since the beginning of the year on Youtube, and on jihadist websites, depicting islamist fighters in Syria speaking Flemish or with Flemish accent. On June 7 a two-minute video broadcasted by private Flemish television VTM showed young men talking in Dutch with Flemish accent helping to behead a naked man, somewhere allegedly in Syria. On March 16 a series of short video records has been posted on YouTube showing islamist fighters praying and fighting against governmental troops in Syria. In the video, posted by a 19-year-old Belgian islamist, one can clearly hear fighters speaking in Dutch, with accents from Antwerp and the Netherlands.

It should be mentioned that Belgian authorities remain highly alarmed by the increasing presence of Belgian jihadists in Syria. So far they implemented a set of security measures to tackle the issue. On April 16, a total of 48 searches were conducted in Brussels, Antwerp and Vilvoorde and 6 suspects were arrested in framework of a broad investigation over radical islamists allegedly involved in the recruitment of young Belgian fighters who joined the jihad in Syria. On April 11, Flemish local politicians from Antwerp, Kortrijk and Vilvoorde convened to discuss about the radicalization of young Belgian nationals by extremist groups. Previously, on March 25 Belgian Minister of Interior, Joëlle Milquet announced the creation of a Task Force to bring the Belgian jihadists back home.

It should be mentioned that increasing number of Belgian nationals leaving the country for jihad in Syria presents a series of challenges for the national security:

- The main threat is linked to the fact that after having received a military training and having participated in military actions against governmental troops, the jihadists coming back to Belgium (as most of them have Belgian nationality) could later be implicated in terrorism-related activities on Belgian soil.
- Besides, the videos, posted online by jihadists, showing Islamist fighters in Syria speaking Flemish and French, serve as a powerful propaganda tool, that is actively used by jihadist recruiting networks.
- At the same time the latest incidents highlight that islamist networks, recruiting jihadists for Syria, spread their activities far beyond national borders, strengthening ties between terrorist cells operating in European countries.

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