

MADE IN FRANCE

By [Anshel Pfeffer](#) Haaretz 23 03 2012

Residents of Toulouse, much like France's leaders, seem to want to believe that home-grown terrorism is not an issue, and that it will disappear on its own.

TOULOUSE - Monique Drey, the owner of a small cafe a minute's walk from the apartment of where terror suspect Mohammed Merah holed up, has experienced her share of terrorist attacks. She spent 10 years living in Jerusalem's Gilo neighborhood. On Wednesday, she was busy serving the dozens of journalists waiting for developments on the siege outside Merah's home, which only came to an end the following day.

"This is small potatoes for me," she laughed, speaking Hebrew with a heavy French accent. She did not know Merah, she said, but added that the few Muslim families in the neighborhood are "very quiet" and "are not extremists at all."

Merah, who was killed when he jumped from his window during a shoot-out with police yesterday, was suspected of murdering three Jewish children, their teacher, and three French soldiers in three different shootings this week and last. Drey, like most residents of France's fourth largest city, seemed to be responding to the attacks with repression and denial. Apart from the more prominent police presence, there was no real sense of fear in the busy streets and the packed residents.

Even on Tuesday evening, before police identified a young man born and raised in Toulouse as the lead suspect in the attacks and tracked him down in his apartment, local residents were walking fearlessly outside.

"It's terrible, but he is a lone nut," said Dominique Marais, a shop owner, as he dined with friends at a noisy brasserie on one of the city's broad avenues. "Why should we let him ruin our lives?"

The waiter, a young Jewish man named Roger Cohen, nodded smilingly. "It is not pleasant that Jews were killed, but I don't think there is any special cause for concern," he said.

The murders did visibly upset members of a few small groups: a very particular part of the local Jewish community, some Muslims (who came to the school's street to place flowers and light candles), and the hundreds of journalists who came from around France and Europe to cover the worst anti-Semitic attack in Western Europe in three decades and the nerve-wracking siege that followed.

"I have covered wars in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and I still don't believe I am now reporting from the city where I was born," said a veteran reporter from a French news agency during a coffee break Wednesday morning. "It's like this is not happening - this is a quiet, boring city. People think that if they ignore it, it will just go away."

No friction

It's hard to say how many Jews, or Muslims, live in Toulouse, since France does not record citizens' religion. Jewish community activists say there are 15,000 to 20,000 Jews and twice as many Muslims in the city. There is relatively little friction between the two groups. Most of the Jews live in the middle-class districts close to the city center, while most Muslims reside in the poorer south.

"We hardly have any problems with Muslims," the president of the Jewish community, Aryeh Ben Simhon, says. "In fact, there are hardly any relations with them. The Muslims here do not have an organized leadership."

"There were no serious anti-Semitic incidents for years here, until this week," says Elhanan Drey, Monique's son, who also spent several years living in Israel. "However, there is anti-Semitism that people don't want to talk about. Jews are subject to curses in the street. There is a lot of that, but no violence."

Dan Zikri, 18, is about to start studying business administration and until recently taught at Ozar Hatorah, the school where the shooting took place on Monday. "Jews do not want to be seen on the street wearing a skullcap, because that leads to shoving and even blows. Anyone who tells you it doesn't happen is simply ignoring it."

Rabbi Levy Yitzhak Matusoff, a Chabad emissary in Toulouse for 35 years and the principal of Gan Rashi, the Jewish primary school attended by the three murdered children, disagrees. "There is no atmosphere of anti-Semitism here," he says. "There are a few Arabs who rampage sometimes and some veteran French people who recoil from Jews a bit, but that is definitely not the majority."

He believes the larger problem facing Jews in Toulouse as well as France is assimilation.

"Our numbers are constantly dwindling, due to mixed marriages," says Matusoff. Many Toulouse Jews have no ties to the community, and only 30 percent of the city's Jewish children attend one of the city's three Jewish schools, he estimates. Most of the children at the Jewish institutions do not come from particularly religious families, and the small education system has to fight for every one of them.

The school has high walls, and surveillance cameras caught the shooter, who was dressed in black and wearing a helmet - but no one was watching the security footage in real time. After the attack on Monday, community leaders accused the municipality and the Interior Ministry of cutting back security at the school a few months ago. But community sources also admitted that the schools themselves had privately organized and paid for the security, and that they themselves had decided to cut costs. This was the only way to reduce tuition and attract parents, they said.

In the wake of the terrorist attack, Interior Minister Claude Gueant promised that the police would take responsibility for guarding the Jewish schools. Jewish community leaders publicly welcomed the declaration, but some said they wondered quietly if this was just an election promise.

Gueant, who is responsible for France's police and internal security, moved his headquarters to Toulouse this week and supervised the manhunt and the siege closely. In a meeting with Jewish community representatives on Tuesday afternoon, he said the investigation was still focusing on the far right and that he believed the terrorist was a neo-Nazi.

Yet early the following morning, after the special antiterrorist unit had surrounded Merah's home, he said the young Islamist of Algerian descent had been a security target for a few days at that point.

Police sources quickly leaked that Merah had been found after a computer belonging to one of his family members was used to search for information on a motorcycle owned by one of the soldiers Merah murdered. That motorcycle, which was used in the shootings, had been listed for sale by the soldier. The local motorcycle agency then reported that a young man had asked about disabling the GPS on a motorcycle of that model.

Ultimately, though, it was Merah who effectively turned himself in. Early Wednesday morning, he called a senior journalist at the news channel France 24 to brag about his deeds, without giving his name. The station immediately informed the police, and Merah was tracked down soon afterward.

'Monsieur Securite'

All this happened a month before the first round of France's presidential election. The government is unlikely to establish a state commission of inquiry to find out how a young man who recently visited Pakistan and Afghanistan, who reportedly tried to recruit others to radical Islam, and who was being tracked by state security services, managed to carry out two nearly identical terror attacks over the course of four days and then went on to sleep soundly in his bed while France was carrying out the biggest manhunt in its recent history. During the many hours of negotiations with police, Merah claimed he had been planning another terror attack on the morning that police surrounded his apartment.

Meanwhile, the opportunity to present himself as "Monsieur Securite" has brought color back to President Nicolas Sarkozy's cheeks and is starting to boost him in the polls. The many cynics were quick to say that Sarkozy's order to take Merah alive was intended to make the standoff go on as long as possible. Every extra hour with Merah barricaded inside his apartment ensured that Sarkozy's rivals would not be able to resume their campaigning and remind the voters why they no longer want Sarkozy as president.

The slow response by French security forces would surprise Israeli observers. Even when they finally fired stun grenades into the apartment, it turned out to be another stage in the psychological warfare aimed at wearing down the gunman so that he would surrender and come out on his own.

If this had been Israel pursuing a suspect in the territories, the suspect would have received a short warning via loudspeakers, after which helicopters would have fired missiles at the building and bulldozers would have started to demolish it. French police officers explained that the attempt to end the standoff without having to use force was a cultural matter. In any event, there were no hostages inside, so time was not an issue.

Taken alive, Merah could have offered valuable information about the radicalization of young Muslims and how they get to Al-Qaida bastions in Pakistan. It's not certain whether the public will hear the more embarrassing details about Merah's last years in Toulouse, as he built up an impressive arsenal and planned his killing spree in great detail. Beyond the damage this would do to the security establishment, the interior minister and the president, this is a black box that no one in France - with the possible exception of neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen - wants to open.

As with the July 2005 terrorist attacks in Britain, when four British-born Muslim men murdered 52 people by bombing London's public transportation system, the latest attacks showed that France, too, is now facing a new kind of terror. These are not outsiders, but young Frenchmen who turned radical in French cities, took advanced courses in terrorism in Pakistan and returned home. Like the residents of Toulouse, the French establishment will probably try to ignore the implications, hoping the new home-grown terrorism will disappear on its own.

**THE ATTACK AT THE OTZAR HATORAH SCHOOL IN TOULOUSE THIS WEEK
WILL CERTAINLY INFLUENCE THE POLITICAL ARENA, BUT IT'S HARD TO SAY
JUST HOW YET.**

By Sefy Hendler Haaretz 23.03.12

The first was Marine Le Pen. Shortly after the police began their shoot-out with the suspected terrorist in a placid Toulouse neighborhood early Wednesday morning, the far-right candidate breathlessly announced that "the danger posed by fundamentalism has not been seriously addressed." Le Pen, who was on the defensive after early, erroneous reports alleged that French neo-Nazis were behind the murders of three Jewish children, their teacher and three French soldiers, was trying to gain any possible political capital from the tragedy.

Just a few days ago, Le Pen seemed to be losing ground in public opinion polls in relation to the two main presidential hopefuls, Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande. She is hoping to recover and finish at least third, with at least 16 percent of the vote. If she does so, she will come close to matching her father's success 10 years ago, when the elder Le Pen shocked France by making it into the second round of balloting by taking 18 percent of the vote (before ultimately losing to Jacques Chirac).

For Marine Le Pen, the terror attack this week could be a campaign cornerstone. But this applies to other candidates, too.

This is a period of national grief and fear in France, but it is also election season. The massacre at the Otzar Hatorah Jewish school came a month before the first round of presidential balloting, which is scheduled for April 22. The campaign had been dramatic even before the terror attack, and the incident has heightened interest in the election. Politicians didn't keep mum even while policemen were still exchanging fire with the suspect. They managed to keep their mouths shut for only 48 hours.

Jean-Luc Melenchon, the rising star on the far left (with 11 percent in the polls), called his decision to continue campaigning a "kind of resistance" to the brutal murders. Even the cool, collected centrist candidate Francois Bayrou (13 percent) held an election rally on Monday evening, hours after the murders. He bluntly attacked Sarkozy, although not by name, demanding a "unifying, not divisive" government policy. Thus he hinted that the president has been veering rightward over the past few weeks and thus bears responsibility for the extremist turn in French discourse.

The one person who remained stoic in the face of these declarations, at least at the time of writing, was Sarkozy himself, who is trailing in the opinion polls. Sarkozy is busy dealing with affairs of state rather than personal interests, as French citizens prefer their citizen No. 1 do. The attacks and their fallout let him project an image of dignified responsibility. At Wednesday's memorial service for the three soldiers, he stood in front of the flag-draped coffins looking grim. He projected the right image and said the right things. "We must stay united," he declared. The other candidates at the ceremony watched Sarkozy's performance from the first row.

As he has proven, Sarkozy is a wizard at crisis management. In 1993, when he was a young, promising mayor in the wealthy Paris suburb Neuilly-sur-Seine, he personally intervened in a nursery school hostage affair. He showed courage in front of the cameras, and even received a badge of honor from the police. Commentators would later state that this was a decisive event

in the formation of his public image. Now, Sarkozy is again coming across as a deft crisis manager, as "France's national policeman." After all, as interior minister, he declared war on criminals and improved the sense of security in the country's largest cities.

Though his standing in the polls has improved since he restarted his campaign, he continues to lag well behind leftist candidate Hollande. A poll conducted before the attacks forecast that each one would win about 28 percent of the vote in the first round of balloting, but that Hollande would beat Sarkozy by 8 percent to 10 percent in the second round.

Until now, Hollande's tactic was to do little while projecting a presidential demeanor. Sarkozy had conducted an aggressive campaign, relentlessly attacking him. But since the school shooting on Monday, Sarkozy has taken on a reserved presidential manner. Hollande, who also responded in a reserved, dignified way to the attacks, will now apparently have to launch a more aggressive campaign and focus the discussion on matters other than security, a field where he lacks personal experience.

"The war on terror must continue without interruption, and without any display of weakness," Hollande quickly declared after the shooter's identity was publicized. He seemed to be trying to say, "I also know how to defend the state."

All those forecasting that the terror attacks will give the right an easy victory should take a look at what happened in Spain several years ago. On March 11, 2004, three days before the Spanish general elections, a series of bombs killed 191 people in several Madrid train stations. Aides to the incumbent prime minister, the conservative Jose Maria Aznar, hinted that the Basque underground was behind the attacks, even though they bore a distinct Islamist fingerprint.

At a mass rally for the terror victims the following day, Aznar was greeted with jeers. I was there. For an Israeli, it was strange to see a crowd jeering a right-wing prime minister at a memorial service following a terror attack by Islamic extremists. There were no calls for revenge or "death to the murderers"; instead, mourners demanded that the event not be exploited for political capital. It was clear that Aznar's right-wing faction would lose, and that the socialist candidate Jose Luis Zapatero would profit.

In that instance, an Islamic terror attack tilted the election to the left, which is the opposite of what usually happens in Israel. France is not Spain, but it's not Israel, either. The attack at the Toulouse school this week will certainly influence the political arena, but it's hard to say just how yet. Will France's public move to the right, and if so, will Le Pen or Sarkozy benefit? Until now, Sarkozy had sought to guarantee that Le Pen's extremist right-wing supporters would back him during the second round of balloting. Without them, he has no chance of winning a second term. The only thing that is clear right now is that seven dramatic weeks are in store for France, and that elections are not going to be calm and elegant.

THE SPIRIT OF BIN LADEN LIVES

By [Avi Issacharoff](#) Haaretz 23 03 2012

Al-Qaida may have had no knowledge of Mohammed Merah, but the French terrorist showed that the group's extremist Islamic ideology is alive and kicking.

There is no way of knowing for certain whether Mohammed Merah, the suspect in this week's terror attack in Toulouse, was in fact an Al-Qaida member. He claimed to be, but both he and the organization had a common interest in saying so. Indeed, it is not clear how active Al-Qaida is at the moment, if at all, or whether Merah was a lone activist following the organization's ideology though not its instructions.

The U.S. assassination of Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden last May seriously damaged the morale of his supporters, but not their motivation. Immediately after his death, his loyalists had a glut of plans to attack Western targets. But they face more complicated issues than the killing of their leader - primarily, the fact that the United States and other nations have broken the organization's infrastructure in East Asia, South Africa and the Arab states. Thousands of Al-Qaida militants have been assassinated in the past few years, in countless operations.

Nevertheless, jihadis are undoubtedly still scattered around the world, including in Europe and the United States. In many European cities, Muslim neighborhoods and slums have become fertile ground for extremist ideology, with some imams ranting against the West and Jews.

Merah apparently worked alongside his brother and perhaps with the knowledge of a friend, but Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri probably knew nothing about his intentions. But ultimately, even if Merah "only" shared Al-Qaida's views and was not an integral part of the

organization, it is clear that extremist Islam is trying to lash out in order to prove it is still relevant in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Merah, who died following a shoot-out with French police yesterday, was a "classic candidate" for Al-Qaida membership. He was 23, of Algerian descent, and visited Pakistan and Afghanistan. In France, he joined the Knights of Pride, a radical Salafi group that France outlawed last January after it called for a non-recognition of the country's secular, democratic regime. The French security forces had group members, including Merah, under surveillance, but he managed to give them the slip.

In many senses, the terrorist from Toulouse was a relatively small headache for Western intelligence. He was a known target, they had information about him, and he was under surveillance. The more meaningful threat in Europe and the United States is from dormant, unknown activists, who are believed to be present in every major European city. Some were born there, others immigrated from Muslim countries.

Alongside the events in Toulouse, Egypt reportedly arrested two suspects Wednesday in a plot to strike a Western ship entering the Suez Canal. The two, apparently Islamic extremists, wanted to hit both Western targets and the Egyptian economy. The extremists are displeased by Egypt's transformation and the growing strength of political Islam there, namely among the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi Al-Nour party. In Iraq, Sunni organizations continue to launch terror attacks, and in Syria, a Sunni group claimed responsibility for the car bombings in Damascus last weekend that left dozens dead.

Osama bin Laden may be dead, but his doctrine and ideas are alive and kicking.