

Debate rages over motives of 'mentally ill' attacker

The killer

Lara Marlowe

Authorities suggest terrorist inspired by Isis rather than being part of group

A debate with profound implications for the way France attempts to prevent further terrorist attacks has erupted regarding the motives of Mohamed Laouaiej-Bouhleh, the 31-year-old Tunisian who killed 84 people in Nice by mowing them down with a refrigerated lorry on July 14th.

The testimony of family and neighbours indicates he was mentally ill, alcoholic and not at all religious.

But Islamic State claimed Laouaiej-Bouhleh as one of its "soldiers" at the weekend, and one of six people detained for questioning in Nice told police that he recently "radicalised quickly", grew a beard and stopped drinking.

The revelation yesterday that Laouaiej-Bouhleh sent a text message to one of the six detainees saying "Bring more weapons", 18 minutes before starting his crime shifted suppositions back towards a jihadist plot.

"You can be crazy and a terrorist," the criminologist Alain Bauer, a close friend of prime minister Manuel Valls, told *Le Figaro*.

President Francois Hollande had been criticised for jumping to conclusions when he evoked the undeniable "terrorist character" of the attack and added that "all France is under the threat of Islamist terrorism", five hours after the massacre.

Contradictions

Valls and interior minister Bernard Cazeneuve appeared to contradict each other in simultaneous television interviews on Friday night. "He is a terrorist, doubtless linked to radical Islam," Valls said.

Asked if he could confirm that Laouaiej-Bouhleh was linked to radical Islam, Cazeneuve said "No."

Prof Farhad Khosrokhavar, a sociologist who specialises in radicalism and jihadism, told French television and newspapers that "until or unless it is

proved otherwise, there is nothing to link Mohamed Laouaiej-Bouhleh to Islamic State . . . He was engaged in an act of vengence against society" and should have been interred in a psychiatric hospital.

Jihadist attacks of the past year and a half "created a particular context" which may have inspired Laouaiej-Bouhleh, Khosrokhavar said. But "there was nothing ideological about it. Before, depressed people committed suicide. Now, the environment created by Islamic State leads them to act this way . . . We should be careful not to automatically attribute such acts of violence to Islamic State".

Defence minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said virtually the same thing: "Even if Daesh [the Arab acronym for Islamic State] doesn't do the organising, Daesh inspires this terrorist spirit, against which we are fighting."

The Amaq news agency, mouthpiece for Islamic State, also known as Isis, said Laouaiej-Bouhleh "executed the operation in response to calls to target citizens of coalition nations which fight the Islamic State". Amaq did *not* say that Laouaiej-Bouhleh was trained or dispatched by it.



Mohamed Laouaiej-Bouhleh

“ He may have been what French experts call a ‘hybrid terrorist’ whose mental illness was aggravated by Islamist rhetoric

Last month, Omar Mateen murdered 49 people in a gay nightclub in Orlando. Larossi Abballa fatally stabbed a police officer, then slashed the throat of the policeman's wife at their home outside Paris.

Mateen and Abballa both

made last minute videos proclaiming allegiance to Islamic State. Laouaiej-Bouhleh made no video. Thirteen months ago, Yassin Salhi, a delivery driver like Laouaiej-Bouhleh, beheaded his boss near Lyon and took a "selfie" of himself next to the

severed head, using an Islamic State flag as a backdrop. Laouaiej-Bouhleh made no such gestures.

As recently as the Euro 2016 football championships, a female neighbour told *Nice-Matin* newspaper, she and Laouaiej-Bouhleh drank a bottle of wine while watching a match.

It is possible Laouaiej-Bouhleh was influenced by an appeal issued by Islamic State's spokesman, Abu Mohamed al-Adnani in 2014. The methods prescribed by al-Adnani have been termed "low-cost terrorism" or "lumpen terrorism".

'Kill the infidel'

"Kill the infidel, whether he's a civilian or a soldier," al-Adnani's statement said. "Hit his head with a stone, slash his throat with a knife, run him over with your car, throw him from a high place, strangle him or poison him."

Laouaiej-Bouhleh may have been what French experts call a "hybrid terrorist" whose mental illness was aggravated by Islamist rhetoric. In this, he would resemble Salhi, or the mad Tunisian who attacked a Paris police station with a hatchet, wearing a fake explosives belt, on the first anniversary of the Charlie Hebdo killings.

In December 2014, a half-Algerian, half-Moroccan man ran over 13 pedestrians in Dijon, shouting "*Allahu Akbar*" at the wheel of his car. The authorities said he was insane.

Now Laouaiej-Bouhleh has killed 84 people using the same

method. Through the sheer number of casualties, his crime resembled the November 13th attacks in Paris, which required far more men and organisation.

Laouaiej-Bouhleh had been forced by court order to leave the home he shared with his wife and three children 18 months ago, because he beat his wife. In his home town of Msaken, near Sousse, Tunisia, his father, told the Agence France Presse that his son suffered a nervous breakdown from 2002 until 2004.

"He didn't pray. He didn't fast. He drank alcohol, and even used drugs," his father said. "He would become angry, and he shouted. He would break anything he saw in front of him."

An inhabitant of the building where Laouaiej-Bouhleh had lived with his family also spoke of mental illness, saying, "When he split up with his wife, he defecated everywhere and shredded his daughter's teddy bear with a knife."

Last January 27th, a motorist asked Laouaiej-Bouhleh to

move his vehicle because he was blocking traffic. The Tunisian threw a wooden pallet at the man, cracking his skull. He was convicted on March 24th and given a six-month suspended sentence.

Personal troubles

Jean-Baptiste Ximenes, the wounded motorist, posted this message on Facebook: "The terrorist who did the attack in Nice is the one who attacked me . . . The world is small, so stop letting these guys loose."

Neighbours said Laouaiej-Bouhleh talked obsessively about his estranged wife. A fellow Tunisian, a painter who is also called Mohamed, told *Nice-Matin* that the killer was "originally a normal guy, who became more and more aggressive because of his personal troubles". The bank had refused him a loan, and he couldn't meet alimony payments. "I really think he was overwhelmed by his problems and blew a fuse," Mohamed said.



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