

WAS MERAH THE GUNMAN? Mohamed Merah's family denies he was Toulouse, France gunman

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The family of Mohamed Merah, whom French police accused of carrying out a wave of deadly shootings in Toulouse and Montauban between March 11 and 19, has emphatically denied that he was a terrorist or carried out the killings. Merah was killed by an elite police unit after a 32-hour siege of his flat last Thursday.

His half-brother Rachid Merah, who lives in Algeria, told *FranceInfo* television: "I have no idea of what the media and the politicians are talking about. They say that Mohammed has been in Afghanistan and Pakistan and that he was in contact with Al Qaeda. But I categorically deny it. And I doubt whether he has had any links with Al Qaeda or the Taliban or any terrorist organisation in the world. And proof of that is that France killed him before he could speak in court, when they could have caught him alive."

Rachid Merah's comments come after similar questions were raised by police experts, such as Claude Prouteau of the Intervention Group of the National Gendarmerie (GIGN), who noted that the special police unit that killed Merah could easily have captured him alive. Instead, the police stormed Merah's flat and killed him in a hail of nearly 300 bullets. During the siege, Interior Minister Claude Guéant nonetheless had asserted that everything would be done to capture Merah alive, so he could stand trial.

Commenting on the weapons and videos of the shooting that police reportedly found in Merah's flat, Rachid Merah referred to well-publicized reports that Merah was functioning as an informer for French intelligence: "But as for the weapons we can suppose that he was manipulated by the French secret services, because he was young and easily influenced. They could well have bought him. They used him then they killed him. All scenarios are possible. Who can prove that Mohamed Merah filmed the videos [of the shootings] himself? It could well be someone else."

Rachid Merah added: "You reap what you sow. They kill our children in Palestine, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, they should recognise their responsibility. The minister of the interior has said that Mohamed was a monster....but I reply that they have created this monster which killed children."

Rachid Merah's comments came after similar statements by Mohamed Merah's father, Mohamed Benalal Merah. He said: "They should have arrested him and investigated the case with him. Perhaps it wasn't he who killed them. By killing my son, the French security services have lost proof, and I have lost my son."

These statements come as the state's official version of events—that Merah was

undetectable because he was a “self-radicalizing lone wolf” who behaved normally until he assassinated seven people—is being exposed as a fabrication. Instead, he was operating in close contact with French intelligence agencies and in direct collaboration with one and possibly several as-yet unidentified accomplices.

The main evidence used to incriminate Merah were the weapons found in his apartment, and the police’s claims that he confessed to the crime in negotiations and phone calls with them. This evidence has not been released to the public, however, and there is still room for doubt as to whether Merah in fact was the killer. An eyewitness of the Montauban shooting reported that the killer was stout and had a scarred, tattooed cheek—unlike the slim, smooth-faced Mohamed Merah.

Another element of the case is the possible participation of a “third man,” who has remained unidentified until now. Merah’s brother Abdelkader, who was charged with helping him, told police that when he helped his brother steal the Yamaha T-Max scooter used in the killings, there was another person in the car, whose identity has not been revealed. There was also reportedly another person living in the flat where Mohamed Merah was killed.

The head of the French internal intelligence service (DCRI), Bernard Squarcini, was obliged to deny persistent reports in the French and Italian press that Merah was an informer for one of his own agents in Toulouse, and that this was why he could avoid detection and arrest until shortly before police killed him on March 22.

Squarcini’s denial is undermined by the fact that the day after Merah was shot, the police chief told *Le Monde* that the alleged killer had asked, during the siege, to speak to a Toulouse-based officer in his agency. This agent, understood to be a young woman of North African origin, had debriefed Merah on his return from a two-month visit to Pakistan in November 2011.

Former security chief Yves Bonnet told the Toulouse paper *La Dépêche du Midi* that it was “striking” that Merah seemed to have a DCRI handler: “Having a handler—that is not an innocent thing.”

Even if Merah had low-level “informant” status, this could explain why police and security services failed to detect him—i.e., because they deliberately ceased to look.

Le Canard Enchaîné newspaper reported on Thursday that Merah and his family had been bugged by the DCRI from March to November last year. The bugging ended abruptly, *Le Canard* said, around the time of his meeting with the DCRI agent in November. However, surveillance units later said that the bugging began in November and was dropped in February because it revealed nothing important. This was only a few weeks before the killer began his rampage.

Under these highly suspicious circumstances, only a few weeks before the French presidential elections, incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy seized upon the killings to whip up law-and-order hysteria and seize the media spotlight. He announced new laws penalising visits to Internet sites “spreading terrorist ideology,” and police carried out a crackdown on an alleged Islamist network in France yesterday, arresting 19 people.

The tacit support given to these police-state measures by PS presidential candidate François Hollande and Hollande’s pseudo-left allies has allowed Sarkozy to seize the initiative in the

election race, effectively mounting a political coup. Poll results now put him in front at 30 percent of voting intentions to Hollande's 28 percent in the first round of voting on April 22.

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