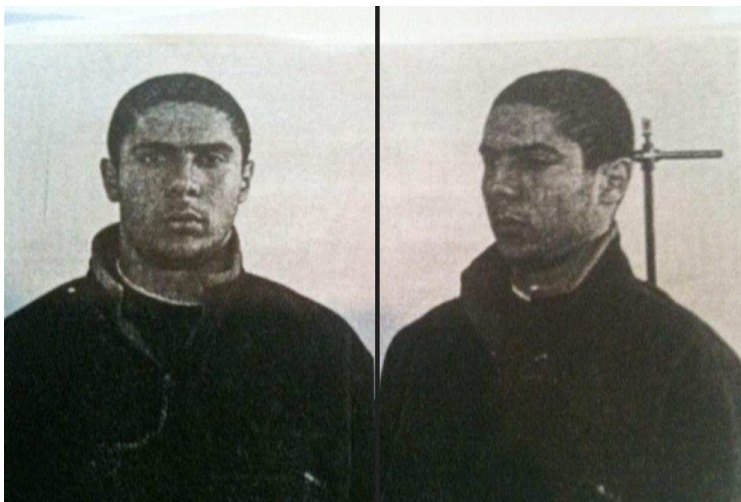


Brussels Museum Attack Reveals a Lack of Sophistication

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Summary

When a 29-year-old returnee from the conflict in Syria walked into the Jewish Museum of Brussels on May 24 and opened fire with an AK-47, the act revealed lethal intent, but also a lack of training and expertise. One of the most surprising things about the attack is that more people were not killed. Even amateurs can achieve devastating results with effective timing, targeting and concentration of force. However, if the shooter is representative of the threat from foreign jihadists returning from Syria, the threat remains very limited indeed.



Mehdi Nemmouche, the alleged Jewish Museum of Brussels gunman. (REUTERS)

Analysis

On May 30, French police arrested Mehdi Nemmouche after he was found in possession of an AK-47 rifle and a revolver during a random search at a bus station in the Mediterranean port city of Marseille. Nemmouche was quickly identified as the prime suspect in the May 24 shooting attack at the Jewish Museum of Brussels in Belgium. Nemmouche's AK-47 was reportedly wrapped in a flag bearing the symbol of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

Authorities reportedly also recovered a video that Nemmouche recorded before the attack, in which he showed his weapons and took credit for the subsequent bloodshed. It is believed that he attempted to record the attack itself, but apparently the camera either malfunctioned or Nemmouche failed to properly operate it in the heat of the moment.

Nemmouche, who was born in France, reportedly has a long criminal history, having spent several stints in French prisons. Sometime during his prison career he was radicalized, and prior to his release from prison in late 2012 he showed overt signs of radicalization. According to French press reports, Nemmouche left France in December 2012 to fight alongside jihadists in Syria. After spending over a year in Syria, Nemmouche returned to Europe in March, following time spent in Malaysia, Singapore

and Thailand. European officials apparently lost track of Nemmouche after he landed in Germany, and authorities are now trying to reconstruct his activities between his arrival in Germany and the May 24 attack. Authorities in Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand are also undoubtedly working to determine the reason for his travel there, along with anyone he met during the trip.

Authorities are performing forensic examinations of Nemmouche's weapons to confirm they were used in the Brussels shooting, but all evidence points to him as the perpetrator. This identification will help put to rest the speculation that the Brussels shooting was a Hezbollah operation intended as part of a campaign to avenge the [February 2008 assassination of Imad Mugnyiah](#). At the same time, Nemmouche's history has sparked renewed concern about the threat posed by jihadists returning from Syria. However, an examination of what we know of the Nemmouche case so far will reinforce the fact that the [threat of returning jihadists, while quite real, is limited in scope](#).

This limitation is evident in the way the attack was planned and executed. As Stratfor has noted for many years, there is a large difference between the types of skills taught in basic militant training camps and [those taught on advanced militant training courses](#). The overwhelming number of men who received jihadist training over the past three decades have been schooled in basic military skills only, as opposed to more advanced terrorist tradecraft. They learn how to operate an AK-47, fire rocket-propelled grenades and some basic hand-to-hand combat skills. They do not learn the tradecraft skills required to conduct sophisticated terrorist attacks, such as bombmaking, surveillance, clandestine communications or operational security.



[Video: Reconstructing the Preparations of the Jewish Museum Shooter](#)

To borrow an old axiom, men tend to fight the way they were trained, and that is exactly what we saw in the Brussels attack. It was a simple attack, conducted by a man with basic infantry skills. The target chosen for the attack was symbolic, but otherwise soft in terms of security and not very significant. One of the most surprising things is that a man armed with an AK-47 could attack such a soft target and only kill three people. We have seen

untrained amateurs armed only with handguns kill far more people in armed assaults against soft targets, such as the [2007 Virginia Tech shooting](#).

Furthermore, the fact that Nemmouche was found still in possession of his weapons in Marseille is also quite significant. First, it indicates that he likely purchased the guns himself on the black market rather than being given the weapons by a professional terrorist organization or state sponsor. Unless the attack was intended to be a suicide operation, a professional terrorist operative would have ditched the weapons after the attack to ensure he got away cleanly -- there are always more guns available through militant channels. Nemmouche would not have been arrested in Marseille if the guns had

not been found in his possession. It will be interesting to see what the investigators discover about how and where he obtained his weapons. Nemmouche certainly did not bring the AK-47 with him from Syria, since he flew into Germany via several countries in Asia.

Additionally, a professional terrorist operative would be unlikely to make the operational security error of hauling an Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant flag around Europe. It will also be interesting to find out how Nemmouche slipped off the radar in Germany. While there is a chance that he was purposefully avoiding German surveillance, it is also plausible that the Germans simply were not tracking him because they assessed that he did not merit the resources required to cover him.

This case highlights the fact that most of the foreign fighters returning from Syria will not be able to conduct sophisticated terrorist attacks. Basic infantry skills are different from the expertise required to plan, execute and extract from a sophisticated attack. Still, it remains easy to kill people, and even relative amateurs can prove deadly. This means that these returnees will continue to pose a limited, but still deadly threat.



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