



# **MEHDI NEMMOUCHE & THE BRUSSELS**

## **JEWISH MUSEUM ATTACK:**

A case study in jihadist antisemitic terrorism

Front cover: CCTV footage of Mehdi Nemmouche carrying out his attack at the Jewish Museum in Brussels  
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The victims of the terror attack on the Brussels Jewish Museum. May their memories be a blessing. From left to right, Dominique Sabrier Z"l, Alexandre Strens Z"l, Miriam Riva Z"l and Emmanuel Riva Z"l



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## INTRODUCTION

Following a dramatic two-month trial, Mehdi Nemmouche was convicted on 7 March 2019 in a Brussels court of carrying out the ISIS-linked firearms terrorist attack at the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014. Three victims died at the scene, while the fourth died days later in hospital. The jury also convicted Nacer Bendrer of supplying Nemmouche with the weapons used in the attack. On 12 March 2019, Nemmouche was sentenced to life in prison, and Bendrer was sentenced to fifteen years.<sup>1</sup>

Mehdi Nemmouche's attack was the first case of a European jihadist fighter returning from Syria and attacking in Europe. This marked the opening of a series of terrorist attacks and disrupted plots in Europe, the UK and the West that were directed, inspired or connected to ISIS. As one report commented, "Nemmouche was just a preliminary warning" and "a leading indicator of a wave of ISIS-connected violence that would target European and other Western cities."<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, the fact that Nemmouche's only target – and therefore also the first target of an ISIS-linked terrorist attack in Europe – was a Jewish facility is instructive. Tragically,

the museum attack was neither the first nor last antisemitic jihadist terrorist attack in Europe. From 2012 to 2015, jihadists attacked European Jewish communities in three other deadly firearms attacks in Toulouse, Paris and Copenhagen. Authorities in Spain, Denmark and South Africa have disrupted attack plans in which ISIS-inspired individuals or cells plotted to target Jews and Jewish communities. In 2017 alone, British Police foiled two ISIS-inspired plots that considered targeting British Jewish communities in Birmingham and north London.

This research briefing reviews the significant aspects of the Brussels Jewish Museum attack trial, looking at Nemmouche's target selection and attack modus operandi. His profile, path to radicalisation, links to crime and terrorism are also examined. The Jewish Museum attack serves as a tragic but essential case study in analysing the threat that jihadist terrorists pose to Jewish communities in Europe and around the world. It is also a stark reminder of the importance of having in place security procedures at Jewish community locations.

Mehdi Nemmouche. Copyright: Brussels Federal Police/France 2



1. Matthieu Demeestere, "Frenchman convicted of Belgium Jewish museum murders," AFP, 7 March 2019 <https://news.yahoo.com/verdict-due-jewish-museum-terror-trial-014047403.html>

2. Guy Van Vlieden, Jon Lewis and Don Rassler, "Beyond the Caliphate: Islamic State Activity Outside the Group's Defined Wilayat," West Point Combatting Terrorism Center <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/02/CTC-Beyond-the-Caliphate-Belgium.pdf>

## ANATOMY OF AN ATTACK

### Modus operandi

Mehdi Nemmouche, a French and Algerian dual national, attacked the Jewish Museum in Brussels on the afternoon of 24 May 2014. He was aged 29 at the time of the attack. Using a Kalashnikov-type rifle (Zastava M70) and handgun (.38 calibre Llama Scorpio revolver), Nemmouche murdered four individuals in the building: Miriam and Emmanuel Riva, an Israeli husband and wife visiting Belgium on holiday; Dominique Sabrier, a French volunteer at the museum; and Alexandre Strens, a Brussels native who was a museum employee. The attack itself lasted 82 seconds. CCTV filmed the incident, but the museum had no security personnel outside the building.

During the trial, the prosecution outlined how the attack unfolded. CCTV footage showed Nemmouche wearing a baseball cap, shooting the Israeli couple at point blank range at the entrance of the museum. He then walked down a corridor and fired into offices. When his handgun jammed, he pulled out the assault rifle and fired into the offices, which is where the two museum workers were killed. In addition to the two weapons, Nemmouche also carried a GoPro camera in an attempt to record the attack, but it failed to operate properly.

Reporting on the attack, the Jewish Chronicle (London) quoted in detail the prosecution's description of the attack:

*"The killer entered the museum quietly through the main door, standing just behind Miriam and Emmanuel Riva, who were looking at tourism brochures. They did not notice him standing right there and he shot the husband first and then his wife in the neck.*

*The killer then advanced into the main entrance office. An employee, 26-year-old Alexandre Strens, was walking towards the entrance, intrigued by the noise. He then saw the killer and tried to close a door between them. The killer then shot him in the forehead, wounding him critically...*

*[Dominique Sabrier] saw the killer and tried to hide under a desk but he walked towards her and shot her multiple times with a hand gun first and then with his automatic rifle.*

*The killer then gets calmly back out of the museum, walking by Emmanuel and Miriam Riva's bodies without looking at them."<sup>3</sup>*

Mehdi Nemmouche at the Brussels Jewish Museum. Copyright: Brussels Federal Police



CCTV footage of Nemmouche entering the Jewish Museum in Brussels with his weapon. Copyright: Brussels Federal Police



Nemmouche was arrested six days after the attack, apprehended on a bus travelling from Brussels to Marseille while in possession of the murder weapons. Police found the Llama Scorpio revolver in his jacket pocket, while his luggage also contained the following:<sup>4</sup>

- Zastava M70 Kalashnikov-style rifle
- Over 270 cartridges for the rifle
- 57 rounds of ammunition for the revolver
- Portable GoPro camera
- Digital Nikon camera (including a video file showing the weapons)
- Nike cap
- Black hood and gloves
- Gas mask
- Blue nylon jacket
- White sheet with the name of the ISIS of Iraq and Syria

Nemmouche's accomplice Nacer Bendrer, a French national, aged 30 at the time of sentencing, was arrested in Marseille in December 2014, six months after the attack. Although he had already been convicted

in a French court in September 2018 and jailed for five years, Bendrer was transferred to Belgium for the Museum trial. Upon its conclusion, Bendrer told the court that, "I am ashamed to have crossed paths with this guy [Nemmouche]. He is not a man, he is a monster."<sup>5</sup>

#### Pre-attack hostile reconnaissance

Pre-attack hostile reconnaissance is a common feature of the terrorist attack planning process.<sup>6</sup> Terrorists regularly undertake some level of online or onsite information collection prior to perpetrating the attack itself.<sup>7</sup> The trial of Nemmouche indicates that he behaved similarly. CCTV evidence showed that Nemmouche visited the museum the day before the attack, entering the venue and speaking with museum employee Alexandre Strens who would be shot the next day. *The Brussels Times* and others reported this as follows:

*"Evidence that Nemmouche visited the museum emerges from camera footage from the previous day, which shows him entering*

3. Shirli Sitbon, "Mossad was behind 2014 Jewish Museum shooting, suspected gunman's lawyers will argue," *Jewish Chronicle*, 11 January 2019 <https://www.thejc.com/news/world/suspected-brussels-jewish-museum-gunman-mehdi-nemmouche-lawyers-argue-the-atrocity-arranged-mossad-1.478415>

4. Steve Almasy and Shelby Lin Erdman, "Captured Jewish Museum shooting suspect carried weapons, gas mask," *CNN*, 2 June 2014 <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/01/world/europe/france-belgium-jewish-shooting/index.html>

5. "Brussels Jewish Museum murders: Mehdi Nemmuouche jailed for life," *BBC News*, 12 March 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-47533533>

6. "Hostile Reconnaissance: Understanding and countering the threat," Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI), June 2016 <https://www.cpni.gov.uk/system/files/documents/23/de/understanding-hostile-reconnaissance-understanding-and-countering-the-threat.pdf>

7. Kevin A O'Brien, "Assessing Hostile Reconnaissance and Terrorist Intelligence Activities: The Case for a Counter Strategy," *RUSI Journal*, 24 October 2008 <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-journal/assessing-hostile-reconnaissance-and-terrorist-intelligence-activities-case>

*the museum and approaching volunteer worker Alexandre Strens. They have a brief conversation, and then the man identified as Nemmouche leaves. Strens was next day one of the four victims – two museum staff and two Israeli visitors.”<sup>8</sup>*

The prosecution introduced additional evidence that Nemmouche may have accessed the museum’s website in the months prior to the attack, although this was reportedly not determined conclusively. Investigators examined over 5,000 IP addresses that visited the Jewish Museum website before

the attack.<sup>9</sup> From January to March 2014, there were overlaps between Nemmouche’s visits to Turkey, Hong Kong and France and when the museum website was visited by IPs in those countries: Turkey (mid-January to mid-February), China (13 March) and France (between 19 and 26 March). Investigators reconstructed his travels from his passport. In the months before the May 2014 attack, Nemmouche visited Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Hong Kong. Belgian authorities requested information from authorities in these countries but reportedly received little information.

The Brussels Jewish Museum. Copyright: Michael Wal



8. Alan Hope, “Jewish Museum trial: Nemmouche visited the scene the day before attack, court hears,” *Brussels Times*, 12 January 2019 <http://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/justice/13726/jewish-museum-trial-nemmouche-visited-the-scene-the-day-before-attack-court-hears>

“Attentat au Musée juif: Nemmouche aurait procédé à un repérage la veille,” *RTBF*, 7 December 2018 [https://www.rtf.be/info/societe/detail\\_attentat-au-musee-juif-selon-la-dh-nemmouche-a-procede-a-un-reperage-la-veille?id=10091708](https://www.rtf.be/info/societe/detail_attentat-au-musee-juif-selon-la-dh-nemmouche-a-procede-a-un-reperage-la-veille?id=10091708)

9. “Website van Joods Museum werd bezocht vanuit landen waar hoofdverdachte Mehdi Nemmouche was,” *Nieuws*, 28 January 2019 [https://www.rtf.be/info/societe/detail\\_attentat-au-musee-juif-selon-la-dh-nemmouche-a-procede-a-un-reperage-la-veille?id=10091708](https://www.rtf.be/info/societe/detail_attentat-au-musee-juif-selon-la-dh-nemmouche-a-procede-a-un-reperage-la-veille?id=10091708)

## THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES THAT FAILED

The trial was marked by Nemmouche's lawyers basing his defence upon a series of preposterous and offensive conspiracy theories. Before the trial started, two of Nemmouche's lawyers, Sébastien Courtoy and Henri Laquay, were already known to be ideologically motivated, having been photographed in 2014 with notorious French performer Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala performing his trademark antisemitic "quenelle" (so-called 'inverted sieg heil' gesture).<sup>10</sup>

Nemmouche's lawyers claimed that the Jewish Museum attack was a Mossad operation that framed their client. One of his lawyers, Virginie Taelman, stated that, "the killing was not an attack by ISIS, but a targeted execution by agents from Mossad."<sup>11</sup> The two Israeli victims, Emmanuel and Miriam Riva, had lived in Berlin between 2008 and 2012, when Emmanuel Riva worked for the Israeli embassy.<sup>12</sup> Miriam had also worked for the Mossad as an accountant before she retired. Another one of Nemmouche's lawyers, Sébastien Courtoy, also tried to argue an additional conspiracy that Hizbollah may have murdered the Rivas

in a revenge attack because Emmanuel had worked at the Israeli consulate in Berlin.<sup>13</sup>

The defence also attempted to convince the jury to disqualify all the DNA evidence incriminating Nemmouche. They claimed, for example, that his fingerprints on the weapons were only from his handling the weapons in a bag he was carrying to Marseille. They also claimed that some of the security images of the attack had been manipulated or faked. According to the defence, the image of Nemmouche that investigators circulated did not show Nemmouche wearing sunglasses, whereas the CCTV video images themselves showed that the shooter at no point took off his sunglasses. The jury, however, rejected all of the defence's claims and convicted the defendants.

The evidence of Nemmouche's guilt was overwhelming. For example, investigators found a partial print of the sole of a shoe, from when he kicked open the door of the museum. The print matched a pair of Calvin Klein trainers owned by Nemmouche, only eight pairs of which were ever sold in Belgium.<sup>14</sup>

Mehdi Nemmouche's lawyer Sébastien Courtoy talks to the press. Copyright: Zuma/REX/Shutterstock



10. "Lawyers of Suspected Jewish Museum Shooter Seen Performing Nazi-like Salute," Haaretz, 2 August 2014 <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish-lawyers-of-brussels-suspect-do-quenelle-1.5257779>

Dave Rich, "The Unwelcome Arrival of the Quenelle," Dissent magazine, 30 January 2014 <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/the-unwelcome-arrival-of-the-quenelle>

11. Lorne Cook, "Suspect in Brussels Jewish museum attack refuses to testify," Associated Press, 15 January 2019

12. "Investigators reject claim Mossad behind Brussels Jewish museum attack," AFP, 22 January 2019 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/investigators-reject-claim-mossad-behind-brussels-jewish-museum-attack/>

13. Mark Eeckhaut, "Nemmouche zwijgt 'om iemand te beschermen,'" De Standaard, 6 February 2019 [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20190206\\_04157437](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20190206_04157437)

14. Alan Hope, "Jewish museum trial: Nemmouche betrayed by his Calvin Klein shoes," Brussels Times, 26 January 2019 <http://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/justice/13874/jewish-museum-trial-nemmouche-betrayed-by-his-calvin-klein-shoes>

## TERRORIST FIREARMS AND THE CRIME-TERROR NEXUS

Studies have demonstrated the strong links between terrorism and crime, particularly in many European countries. According to the Crime Terror Nexus project, about “half of Europe’s jihadists are former criminals”, and they “use their criminal skills and connections to procure illegal weapons, obtain forged documents, and finance terrorist attacks.”<sup>15</sup> In a study on firearms procurement and terrorism in Europe, the Flemish Peace Institute explained that religiously-inspired terrorist networks in Europe “tend to rely on members with criminal past who use their connections in the criminal underworld” to obtain firearms.<sup>16</sup>

Nemmouche’s Zastava M70 assault rifle was possibly acquired in Marseille criminal markets and may have originated as a deactivated firearm from criminal networks in Spain.<sup>17</sup> During the trial, ballistics evidence showed that the .38 calibre Llama Scorpio revolver Nemmouche used in the attack did originate in the criminal market.<sup>18</sup> The serial number

of the weapon had been filed away but was reconstructed. According to an investigator, the pistol was manufactured in Colombia and, in October 2006, sold in a deactivated state in La Jonquera in Girona, Spain. The buyer, using a false German identity, also purchased other deactivated weapons: two CETME automatic rifles, Walther P-99, Beretta 9MM and Glock 17. During the investigation, Nemmouche’s co-defendant Nacer Bendrer and a former fellow inmate Mounir Attallah admitted they regularly visited La Jonquera to solicit prostitutes but denied procuring the weapons. Moreover, the investigation into the weapons Nemmouche used in the museum led to a subsequent investigation by Spanish Police and Europol (Operation Portu) that eventually dismantled a Spanish network selling deactivated firearms that did not comply with deactivation standards in European countries.<sup>19</sup>

Weapons presented as evidence at the trial of Mehdi Nemmouche. Copyright: Francois Lenoir/Pool/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock



15. Crime Terror Nexus <https://crimeterrornexus.com/>

16. Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, “Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe,” Project Safe, Flemish Peace Institute, April 2018: pg. 137 [https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wysiwyg/vrede\\_syntheserapport\\_saftelr.pdf](https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wysiwyg/vrede_syntheserapport_saftelr.pdf)

17. Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, “Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe,” Project Safe, Flemish Peace Institute, April 2018: pg. 137 [https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wysiwyg/vrede\\_syntheserapport\\_saftelr.pdf](https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wysiwyg/vrede_syntheserapport_saftelr.pdf)

18. “Website van Joods Museum werd bezocht vanuit landen waar hoofdverdachte Mehdi Nemmouche was,” Nieuws, 28 January 2019

19. Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, “The Illicit Gun Market in Belgium: A Lethal Cocktail of Criminal Supply and Terrorist Demand,” in Triggering Terror: Illicit Gun Markets and Firearms Acquisition of Terrorist Networks in Europe, edited by Nils Duquet, Project SAFE, Flemish Peace Institute, April 2018: pgs. 58-59 [https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/files/reports/triggering\\_terror\\_saftelr.pdf](https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/files/reports/triggering_terror_saftelr.pdf)

“Huge Firearms Depot Seized During Operation Portu Now Revealed,” Europol Press Release, 14 March 2017 <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/huge-firearms-depot-seized-during-operation-portu-now-revealed>

## FOUR ANTI-JEWISH FIREARMS ATTACKS IN EUROPE

Aside from the Brussels Jewish Museum attack, European Jewish communities experienced three other firearms attacks perpetrated by European jihadists who were linked to jihadist networks and inspired by groups.

### March 2012

Mohamed Merah carried out a series of moped-enabled shootings across Toulouse and Montauban, France. He shot dead a French Muslim paratrooper and four days later he killed two French Muslim soldiers. Four days after that he drove up in his moped to Ozar HaTorah School in the morning, during school drop-off, and shot dead three children and a rabbi.

### January 2015

On 7 January, the Kouachi brothers attacked the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris. The following day, Amedy Coulibaly murdered a female police officer who was attending a traffic accident in a neighbourhood with a synagogue and Jewish school, which may have been his intended target. On Friday 9 January, Coulibaly murdered four people at the Hypercacher kosher supermarket late in the afternoon before the Sabbath. Coulibaly's attacks were coordinated with the Kouachi brothers.

### February 2015

On the afternoon of Saturday 14 February, Omar El-Hussein opened fire at a freedom of speech event in Copenhagen, killing a documentary filmmaker and injuring three police officers. In the early morning hours of the following day, he killed a Jewish volunteer security guard outside the Great Synagogue.

While Western societies as a whole are at risk from terrorism, Jewish communities and Jewish locations are often secondary or tertiary targets, but also primary targets as the Nemmouche case shows. These four attacks have fostered an operational mind-set in which attacks against broader targets in the West

may also be a prelude to attacks against the Jewish community as a secondary target.

### Crime, terrorism and firearms procurement

All four cases also share similarities in other areas such as the crime-terror overlap and firearms acquisition. Two studies, by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London and the Flemish Peace Institute, have written about these and other cases in great detail.<sup>20</sup>

- Mohamed Merah, from France, had "a life that had been characterised by routine violence."<sup>21</sup> Prior to his attacks, he had two stays in prison, along with 18 convictions for assaults, robberies and theft. Even before traveling to Pakistan in 2011 for terrorist training, Merah had engaged in a history of violence, including assaulting a teenage girl that left her blind.
- Amedy Coulibaly, from France, was engaged in crime and imprisoned for criminal acts such as armed robberies, aggravated theft and using fake vehicle number plates. He spent time in a prison near Paris where he met Cherif Kouachi, one of the terrorists who attacked the Charlie Hebdo office on 7 January 2015. While in prison, Coulibaly and Kouachi met and were mentored by Djamel Beghal, a convicted al-Qaeda recruiter, meaning that "prison allowed the initial network to be established."<sup>22</sup>
- Omar el-Hussein, from Denmark, had joined a Copenhagen gang in his teenage years and took part in petty crime, drugs and burglaries. In January 2014, he was arrested and later imprisoned for an unprovoked stabbing attack on the Copenhagen public transport S-train in November 2013.<sup>23</sup>

While many of the recent terrorist attacks in

20. Rajan Basra, Peter Neumann and Claudia Brunner, "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus," 2016 <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ICSR-Report-Criminal-Pasts-Terrorist-Futures-European-Jihadists-and-the-New-Crime-Terror-Nexus.pdf>

Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe, Project Safe, Flemish Peace Institute, April 2018 [https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wysiwyg/vrede\\_synthese\\_rapport\\_safte\\_lr.pdf](https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wysiwyg/vrede_synthese_rapport_safte_lr.pdf)  
Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe, Project Safe, Flemish Peace Institute, April 2018 [https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wysiwyg/vrede\\_syntheserapport\\_safte\\_lr.pdf](https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wysiwyg/vrede_syntheserapport_safte_lr.pdf)

21. "Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures", ICSR, pg. 38 <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/ICSR-Report-Criminal-Pasts-Terrorist-Futures-European-Jihadists-and-the-New-Crime-Terror-Nexus.pdf>

22. Ibid, pg. 32

23. Ibid and also see Cecilie Lund Kristiansen, "Overblik: Det ved vi om gerningsmandens 22-årige liv," Politiken, 23 February 2015 [https://politiken.dk/indland/fokus\\_danmark/fokus\\_terror/art5566491/Overblik-Det-ved-vi-om-gerningsmandens-22-%C3%A5rige-liv](https://politiken.dk/indland/fokus_danmark/fokus_terror/art5566491/Overblik-Det-ved-vi-om-gerningsmandens-22-%C3%A5rige-liv)

the West have employed attack methods using vehicle ramming, stabbing and the detonation of explosives, terrorists have also used firearms in attacks, especially in Europe and the USA. The four major attacks against European Jews all involved firearms. The manner in which they acquired their firearms is an important area of study. In addition to Nemmouche, Mohamed Merah and Amedy Coulibaly acquired some or all of their weapons through complex illicit gun markets in Europe and used their pre-existing criminal connections.<sup>24</sup> It has been reported that Coulibaly's weapons originated from an arms dealer who was linked to several far-right groups in France. Omar el-Hussein, meanwhile, stole the M95 rifle in an act of targeted theft, while the origin of the two pistols he used is unconfirmed.

Historically, the situation in the UK has been different to Europe. Illegal firearms in the UK circulate among organised criminal gangs and street gangs. In general, however, UK-based terrorists have had comparatively less access to semi-automatic or automatic firearms that have been used in terrorist attacks on the continent. Two cases stand out of British jihadists having access to firearms: (1) the murder of Lee Rigby

in May 2013 in which one of the perpetrators brandished an unloaded 90-year-old Dutch-made KNIL 9.4mm revolver; and (2) the ISIS-inspired drive-by moped attack plot disrupted in September-October 2014 in which one of the group members procured a Baikal handgun, silencer and ammunition from a criminal.<sup>25</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that the UK Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee quoted the concerns of the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) about the interaction between ideologically extremist prisoners and non-extremist prisoners with access to firearms on the criminal market:

*"In October 2016, \*\*\* prisons house both [terrorism-related] prisoners and criminals with firearms markers: the scale of the latter group has made routine separation difficult and these links are not routinely considered in decisions on \*\*\*\*."*<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, the ISC wrote that:

*"We note that there could also be advantages in separating extremist prisoners from those who may have access to firearms."*<sup>27</sup>

24. Nils Duquet and Kevin Goris, April 2018, pgs. 145-147 [https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wy-siwyg/vrede\\_syntheserapport\\_safte\\_lr.pdf](https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wy-siwyg/vrede_syntheserapport_safte_lr.pdf)

25. Paul Holtom, Paul James and Connor Patmore, "From the IRA to ISIS: Exploring terrorist access to the UK's illicit firearms market" in *Triggering Terror*, edited by Nils Duquet, Flemish Peace Institute, April 2018; pgs. 369-434 [https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wy-siwyg/boek\\_safte\\_bw\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.flemishpeaceinstitute.eu/sites/vlaamsvredesinstituut.eu/files/wy-siwyg/boek_safte_bw_lowres.pdf)

26. "The 2017 Attacks: What needs to change?" Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, November 2018; paragraph 85, pg. 36. The \* indicates redacted material [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-DemBSSMo\\_tb2JDcFhORnZ1d0NrbUhzT1Q5QzU5dS1McGU0/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-DemBSSMo_tb2JDcFhORnZ1d0NrbUhzT1Q5QzU5dS1McGU0/view)

27. Ibid [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-DemBSSMo\\_tb2JDcFhORnZ1d0NrbUhzT1Q5QzU5dS1McGU0/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-DemBSSMo_tb2JDcFhORnZ1d0NrbUhzT1Q5QzU5dS1McGU0/view)

28. The information is based on data in the two 2018 Project SAFE/Flemish Peace Institute publications: *Firearms acquisition by terrorists in Europe* (pg. 138) and *Triggering Terror* (pgs. 210-212). Note that Merah and Coulibaly possessed numerous additional weapons. The table in this briefing only shows the firearms used in the attacks.

### Firearms used in European anti-Jewish terrorist attacks<sup>28</sup>

ATTACKER	TARGET	LOCATION	DATES	FIREARMS USED
Mohamed Merah	French-Muslim soldiers and Ozar HaTorah school	Montauban and Toulouse, France	11 - 19 March 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Colt .45 semi-automatic pistol</li> <li>Uzi machine pistol</li> </ul>
Mehdi Nemmouche	Jewish Museum	Brussels, Belgium	24 May 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Zastava M70 rifle</li> <li>.38 Llama Scorpio revolver</li> </ul>
Amedy Coulibaly	French Police officer and Hypercacher kosher supermarket	Paris, France	8 - 9 January 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two vz.58 assault rifles</li> <li>Two Tokarev TT33 pistols</li> </ul>
Omar el-Hussein	Krudttønden cultural centre and Great Synagogue	Copenhagen, Denmark	14 - 15 February 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>M95 rifle</li> <li>Walther 7.65mm pistol</li> <li>Polish-made 9mm pistol</li> </ul>

## PROFILE OF A CRIMINAL AND A TERRORIST

### Criminal past and path to radicalisation

Mehdi Nemmouche's links to crime predated his involvement in terrorism. Numerous reports have provided important insights into his profile and path to crime, radicalisation and terrorism. AFP journalist Matthieu Demeestere has succinctly summarised Nemmouche's troubled upbringing, leading to a life of crime from his early teens.<sup>29</sup> Born in April 1985, Nemmouche's family were of Algerian origin and lived in the northern French town of Roubaix. At the age of three months, he moved to a foster family in Lille until he was sixteen. According to Demeestere, Nemmouche's foster parents described him as an "angry youth" who was "capable of the worst as well as the most kindly" acts. Aged 13, Nemmouche committed his first known crime; at 16, he was convicted in a juvenile court and spent three weeks in a juvenile prison for a robbery using an air pistol. He later amassed other offences, such as traffic offences and muggings.

From December 2007 to December 2012, Nemmouche served five years in prison, which is when investigators believe he radicalised

to a jihadist outlook. Part of his sentence was served in Salon-de-Provence in France, but he was reportedly transferred at the end of 2010 after the prison disrupted a group of radicalised inmates. Former prison staff testified during the 2019 trial that he was radicalised while in prison,<sup>30</sup> and the former prison director described Nemmouche as an intelligent, charismatic individual who influenced Nacer Bendrer.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Nemmouche was known as an "extremist proselytiser" who spoke about jihad and the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia. This connected him to the 'Roubaix gang' of French jihadist fighters, some of whom he reportedly knew.<sup>32</sup> These former fighters returned from the Bosnian war in the 1990s and carried out robberies to help fund al-Qaeda.

### Joining the jihad in Syria and returning to Europe

After his release from prison in December 2012, Nemmouche travelled that month to Syria. He eventually joined a unit of foreign fighters called Katibat al-Muhajirin (KAM), which at the time was still connected with ISIS. KAM attracted French-speaking volunteers and was composed primarily of Belgian and French

Mehdi Nemmouche during the trial in Brussels. Copyright: Pool Yves Herman/Belga via ZUMA Press/REX/Shutterstock



29. Matthieu Demeestere, "Radicalised in jail, teen thug becomes hardened jihadist," AFP, 7 January 2019 [https://news.yahoo.com/radicalised-jail-teen-thug-becomes-hardened-jihadist-020520998.html;\\_ylt=AwrC1ChYDxcXcADGXQtDMD;\\_ylu=X3oDMTBybGY3bmpvBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwMyBHZ0aWQDBHNlYwNzcg--](https://news.yahoo.com/radicalised-jail-teen-thug-becomes-hardened-jihadist-020520998.html;_ylt=AwrC1ChYDxcXcADGXQtDMD;_ylu=X3oDMTBybGY3bmpvBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwMyBHZ0aWQDBHNlYwNzcg--)

30. "Nemmouche was duidelijk geradicaliseerd in gevangenis," De Standaard, 11 February 2019 [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20190211\\_04168604](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20190211_04168604)

31. "Procès Nemmouche - La compagne de Nacer Bendrer le décrit comme peu pratiquant et certainement pas radicalisé," RTL Info, 11 February 2019 <https://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/faits-divers/procès-nemmouche-le-direct-il-avait-tres-mal-pris-son-transfert-de-la-prison-de-salon-de-provence-en-2010-1099201.aspx>

32. "Brussels Jewish museum shooter 'an angry French teen' who was radicalised in jail," France 24, 8 March 2019 <https://www.france24.com/en/20190308-brussels-jewish-museum-attack-mehdi-nemmouche-french-teen-radicalised-jail>

33. Jean-Charles Brisard and Kevin Jackson, "The Islamic State's External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus," CTC Sentinel, November/December 2016: pgs. 8-15 [https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel\\_Vol9Iss1118.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel_Vol9Iss1118.pdf)

jihadists. Nemmouche reportedly belonged to a sub-group led by Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the infamous Belgian ISIS operative who later went on to lead the ISIS-directed multi-wave attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015.<sup>33</sup>

Nemmouche served various roles within ISIS, including as a violent prison guard. During the Jewish Museum trial, the court heard from former hostages that ISIS held in captivity. In June 2013, they had kidnapped four French journalists, eventually releasing them in April 2014. Two of the journalists testified in court and identified Nemmouche as the man who imprisoned and tortured them. One of them, Nicolas Henin, described Nemmouche as sadistic, narcissistic and explicitly antisemitic.<sup>34</sup> Henin testified that Nemmouche expressed “admiration” for Mohammed Merah. According to Henin, Nemmouche liked to tell the hostages, “Hey, I feel good this morning. I’d like to get my Kalashnikov and smoke a little Jewish girl.” Henin claimed that Nemmouche also admired Youssouf Fofana, the leader of the “Gang of Barbarians” who was convicted in 2009 of the torture and antisemitic murder of Ilan Halimi in 2006. Furthermore, Henin stated that, in addition to Nemmouche, he recognised among his jailers someone known as “Abu Idriss,” the alias of Belgian-Moroccan ISIS operative Najim Laachraoui who later became one of the suicide bombers in the March 2016 attack at Brussels Airport.

Nemmouche, of course, is only one among many thousands of radicalised French and Belgian nationals who travelled to Syria during this time period in order to join jihadist groups, such as ISIS or al-Qaeda affiliates. In a series of papers in West Point’s CTC Sentinel, terrorism experts and journalists analysed, in great detail, the nexus of jihadist networks in France and Belgium and foreign jihadist fighters in Syria and Iraq.<sup>35</sup> They frequently reference Nemmouche. He was also apparently linked to other French jihadists, such as Ibrahim Boudina and Abdelkader

Tliba, who all left France for Syria around the same time and eventually joined ISIS.<sup>36</sup> Prior to arriving in Syria, Boudina and Tliba were part of the Cannes-Torcy cell, a French jihadist network that plotted various attacks and also perpetrated a grenade attack on a Jewish kosher shop in Sarcelles in September 2012. While eighteen members of the cell were arrested and eventually sentenced to prison in June 2017, Boudina and Tliba were not caught and travelled to Syria. In fact, by January 2014, they had already returned to France and, prior to his arrest, Boudina had even constructed viable improvised explosive devices, procured a firearm and devised plots to attack a range of locations, including a Jewish target.<sup>37</sup>

Nemmouche left Syria in January 2014 and, as noted above, travelled to Turkey and then Southeast Asia, before returning to Europe in March 2014. Even after leaving ISIS territory, Nemmouche tried to maintain contact with his ISIS associates:

*“Once in Turkey, on January 16, 2014, he was called from Belgium by Abaaoud, who was himself a KAM member and would later play a key role in the Paris attacks. Earlier that day, Nemmouche had tried to contact Dniel Mahi, another KAM alumnus also then in Belgium and a close friend of Abaaoud. After a circuitous journey throughout Southeast Asia, Nemmouche spent several weeks in Molenbeek before his attack against the Jewish Museum of Brussels in May 2014, the first successful one carried out in Europe on behalf of the Islamic State.*

*Although the above-mentioned Syrian returnees were all Islamic State members, the level of organizational command and control remains difficult to assess. In addition to the absence of any official claim of responsibility, it is also worth noting that Nemmouche complained about the lack of support he faced upon returning from Syria.”<sup>38</sup>*

By March 2014, Nemmouche had moved to

34. Matthieu Demeestere, “Alleged Brussels museum killer was ‘sadistic’ Syria jailer,” AFP, 7 February 2019 [https://news.yahoo.com/alleged-brussels-museum-killer-sadistic-syria-jailer-134159374.html?\\_ylt=Awrc1zGgSVxcdTwAChzQtDMD;\\_ylu=X3oDMTEyaTFoNzJwBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwMxBH20aWQDQjY5NDVfMQRzZWMDc3I-](https://news.yahoo.com/alleged-brussels-museum-killer-sadistic-syria-jailer-134159374.html?_ylt=Awrc1zGgSVxcdTwAChzQtDMD;_ylu=X3oDMTEyaTFoNzJwBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwMxBH20aWQDQjY5NDVfMQRzZWMDc3I-)

35. Jean-Charles Brisard and Kevin Jackson, “The Islamic State’s External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus,” CTC Sentinel, November/December 2016: pgs. 8-15 [https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel\\_Vol9Iss1118.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel_Vol9Iss1118.pdf)

Pieter Van Ostaeyen, “Belgian Radical Networks and the Road to the Brussels Attacks,” CTC Sentinel, June 2016: pgs. 7-12 [https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/06/CTC-SENTINEL\\_Vol9Iss613.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/06/CTC-SENTINEL_Vol9Iss613.pdf)

Evan F Kohlmann and Laith Alkhouri, “Profiles of Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” CTC Sentinel, September 2014: pgs. 1-5 <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2014/09/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss91.pdf>

36. Jean-Charles Brisard and Kevin Jackson, “The Islamic State’s External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus,” CTC Sentinel, November/December 2016: pgs. 8-15 [https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel\\_Vol9Iss1118.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel_Vol9Iss1118.pdf)

37. Ibid

Belgium, where he rented a room in a block of flats on Rue Saint-Joseph in the Molenbeek neighbourhood of Brussels (an area that is known for its networks of Islamist extremists).<sup>39</sup> After the 24 May 2014 attack, police searched the property and found inside the bin in Nemmouche's bedroom the packaging for SIM cards discovered on him at the time of his arrest in Marseille. They also found a shoebox matching the shoes used in the attack (see above). Police investigations of his mobile phone also revealed that in April 2014 he had been in contact with Nacer Bendrer and another fellow former inmate Mounir Attallah.

In summary, Nemmouche was involved in low-level criminal activity from a young age, leading him on a criminal trajectory into his adult years. His radicalisation in prison helped shape his jihadist worldview, which he was then able to act upon by moving to Syria and joining ISIS in 2012-13. He had developed an antisemitic mind-set that revered individuals who had tortured and murdered Jews in France. His training and activities in Syria produced a battle-hardened individual who had the intent and capability to undertake an attack in Europe after returning from Syria.

## CONCLUSION

Mehdi Nemmouche's attack on the Brussels Jewish Museum and the activities that led to it serve as an important case study in the lethal potential of jihadist terrorists operating in the West. The attack is also another tragic reminder that Jewish communities worldwide remain a target for terrorists; at the same time, of course, the anti-Jewish terrorism threat is certainly not a recent development. CST has documented the data and trends showing that groups and individuals across a range of ideological worldviews have targeted Jews and Jewish communities worldwide for some seven decades.<sup>40</sup> Since 2001, international jihadist groups and individuals have attacked Jewish communities and Israelis living abroad in multiple locations around the world.

In the early 2000s, jihadist attacks were mostly perpetrated by al-Qaeda, its affiliates and supporters, whereas many of the later attacks have been perpetrated by lone actors or small groups linked to or inspired by ISIS, al-Qaeda or others. Targeting Jews worldwide has also remained a priority in al-Qaeda's stated agenda. In May 2017, Sheikh Hamza Osama

bin Laden provided a priority target list and ranked "Jewish interests everywhere" near the top, stating that "inflicting punishment on Jews and Crusaders where you are present is more vexing and severe for the enemy." CST's security work is driven by the need to protect British Jews from terrorist attacks. Ultimately, these trends should serve as a sober reminder of the importance of communal security, maintaining security procedures in community structures, reporting any suspicious behaviour or information collection and sustaining an ethos of community vigilance.

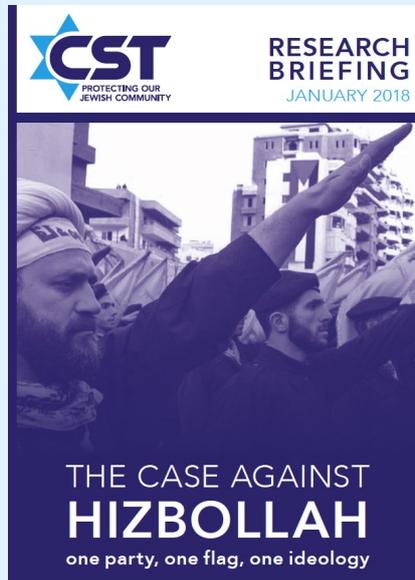
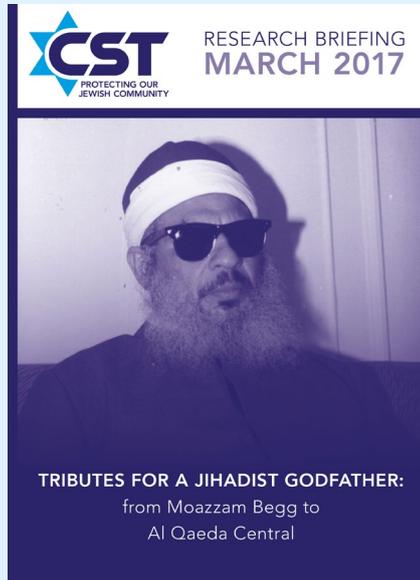
38. Ibid, pg. 9

39. Lars Andersen, "Mehdi Nemmouche stayed in Brussels for nearly two months before the Jewish Museum attack," Brussels Times, 11 January 2019 <http://www.brusselstimes.com/brussels/13715/mehdi-nemmouche-stayed-in-brussels-for-nearly-two-months-before-the-jewish-museum-attack>

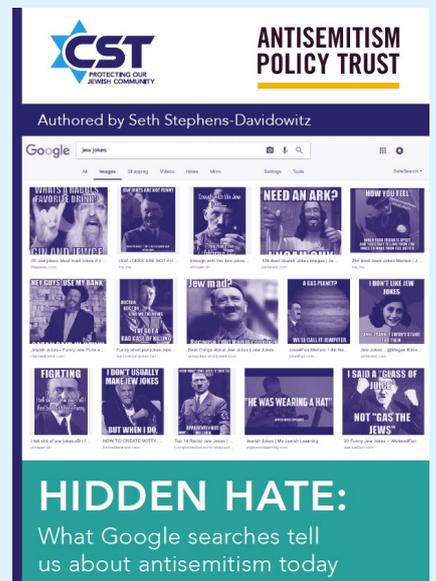
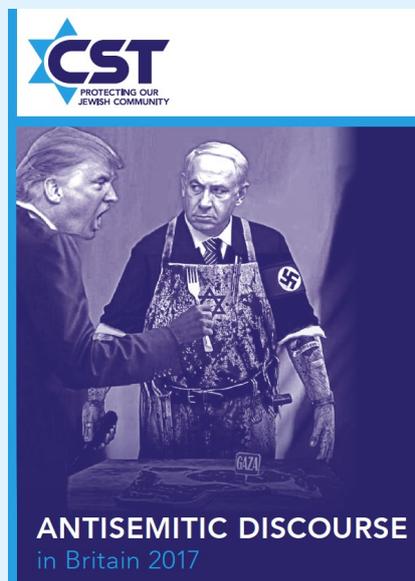
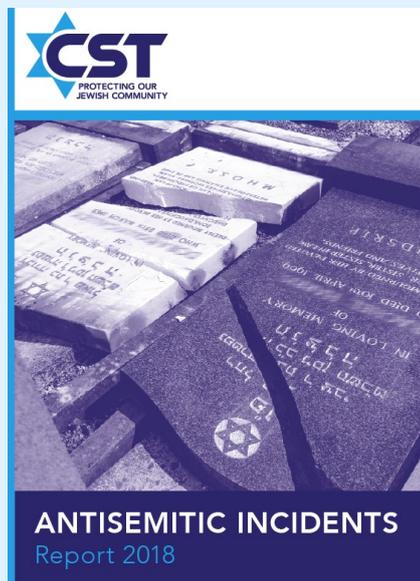
40. CST publication, "Terrorist Incidents against Jewish Communities and Israeli Citizens Abroad 1968-2010"

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- To represent British Jews on issues of racism, antisemitism, extremism, policing and security.
- To promote good relations between British Jews and the rest of British society by working towards the elimination of racism, and antisemitism in particular.
- To facilitate Jewish life by protecting Jews from the dangers of antisemitism, and antisemitic terrorism in particular.
- To help those who are victims of antisemitic hatred, harassment or bias.
- To promote research into racism, antisemitism and extremism; and to use this research for the benefit of both the Jewish community and society in general.
- To speak responsibly at all times, without exaggeration or political favour, on antisemitism and associated issues.

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