



Photo by: REUTERS

15-year-old French jihadists fighting in Syria

By BENJAMIN WEINTHAL
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Paris has been trying to 'hide the phenomenon' of jihadism since Merah affair in Toulouse, says Jerusalem political scientist.

BERLIN – Two French 15-year-olds have left France to join Islamist militants in the fight against Syrian President Bashar Assad, the Toulouse prosecutor and a father of one of the boys said on Friday.

"I've informed the Paris anti-terrorist prosecutor because the two boys made their intention clear that they would travel to Syria via Turkey," prosecutor Michel Valet told Reuters.

Emmanuel Navon, director of the communications and political science department at Jerusalem Orthodox College, told The Jerusalem Post on Sunday that "the French government has been trying to hide the phenomenon [of jihadism] in France and are aware [of it] since the Toulouse massacre."

In 2012, a French-Algerian radical Islamist Mohammed Merah killed four French Jews and three French Muslim soldiers in Toulouse and Montauban before being killed by police.

The father of Hakim, one of the two 15-year-old boys from the southwestern French city of Toulouse, told BFM TV his son had left a note on January 6 explaining he was going to join the jihad, or holy war, against Assad. He said Hakim left cash behind to cover the cost of a plane ticket to Turkey which he bought with his father's credit card.

According to the father, who did not give his name, the boy called the family three days ago to say he was in danger in Syria and that he would not call again for a month. He added that if he did not call by then, the family should assume he was dead and they would next meet in paradise, his father said.

"He has been brainwashed on the Internet," the father said.

Navon, the French-born Israeli political scientist, told the Post that Toulouse is "not a center of jihadism."

"There is no geographic concentration of jihadists in France," Navon said, adding that Marseilles has a very high percentage of French citizens of North African origin and it could "potentially be a center of jihadists."

Navon added that European jihadists who use their Western passports to travel to the Middle East are a danger for Israel.

"They could carry out attacks against Israel and other countries in the region using European passports," he said.

French President Francois Hollande said on Wednesday about 700 French nationals and residents had traveled to fight in Syria. He has made clamping down on violent cells and self-radicalized "lone-wolf" operators planning domestic attacks a priority since Merah's attacks in 2012. Merah linked his Jew-hatred to

Israel, saying, "I kill Jews in France as these are the same Jews who kill innocents in Palestine."

Merah's brother Abdelkader said, "My mother always said, 'We, the Arabs, we were born to hate Jews.' This speech, I heard it all throughout my childhood."

France has been on heightened security alert since January 2013, when it intervened in Mali to repel al-Qaida-linked rebels who had seized control of the north of the former French colony.

Three people were arrested in June as part of a group suspected of sending Islamist fighters to Syria. Two brothers from Toulouse were killed recently in Syria, one in a suicide bombing, after appearing on a video urging Hollande to convert and Muslims to join the war.

"Since the Merah case, we've had several of cases of young people traveling to Syria although it is not exclusive to Toulouse," prosecutor Valet said.

Speaking to reporters on Friday, Interior Minister Manuel Valls said 20 French jihadis had died in Syria.

"It shows the magnitude of the phenomenon in France and Europe," he said.

Reuters contributed to this report.



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