

It takes a jihadi village

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Mohamed Merah is captured in this frame grab from a video broadcast by a French television station.

In the immediate aftermath of the recent bloodbath executed by Mohamed Merah in Toulouse, leaving three French paratroopers, a Jewish teacher, his two sons and another Jewish child dead, a number of observers were quick to label Merah a "psychopath" and a "lone wolf."

Even though he claimed to be working for al-Qaeda, his words were brushed away as the delusions of an irrational obsessive. Friends of Merah said his Algerian background in France had alienated him and that he eventually "snapped." His lawyer said he was completely cut off from reality.

Over the weekend, the French police charged Merah's brother Abdelkader with involvement in the crimes. If the charges hold water when tested, that would handily deflate the theory of crazed spontaneity on the killer's part and, hopefully, embarrass the pundits who leaped to deny any direct link between the killer's actions and a well-known strain of Islamic revanchism.

In my experience, the words "lone wolf" are code for a warning: If you interpret such horrific events as the work of a sane man under the influence of radical Islamism, you will be considered an Islamophobe.

Major Nidal Hasan, who perpetrated the 2010 Fort Hood massacre, was also hastily labelled a lone wolf, a man responding to idiopathic urges, in order to pre-empt accusations that his rage was directly linked to Islamism. As it turned out, even though his actions themselves were not dictated by specific orders from al-Qaeda or any other terrorist organization, Hasan's rage against those he identified as enemies of Islam did not spring from psychological derangement, but from a long marination in jihadist propaganda.

And so, it would seem, is the case with Mohamed Merah - he may not have been acting as part of an organized group or within a larger plot, but he was very much a product of the modern European jihad machine.

Ignorant of Merah's personal background, I was at first inclined to take the lone-wolf theorists at their word. Then my knowledge gap was filled in by an op ed in the March 25 Wall Street Journal by Jytte Klausen, a professor of politics at Brandeis University and author of the 2009 book, *The Cartoons that shook the world*. Klausen is also the founder of the Western Jihadism Project, which tracks and analyzes the development of jihadi networks in the West.

According to Klausen's article, Merah's rampage was not the product of an unhinged mind. Far from being alienated, Klausen writes, "Merah was practically a prince in French jihadist circles." His mother is married to the father of Sabri Essid, a senior member of a radical Toulouse cell. Essid helped run an al-Qaeda safe house in Syria for jihadists in transit to Iraq. He and several others were eventually convicted in France for conspiracy to terrorize.

Klausen says that according to *Le Monde*, Merah was trained in killing by the Uzbek Islamic Movement. For this and other grounds for suspicion, Merah was under periodic surveillance by the French police.

The murders were engineered for maximal publicity. Nothing was random or unplanned. It was performance theatre at its most gruesome. Self-videoed, the graphic spree was intended for global viewing on multiple websites. At one point Merah can be seen holding his young victim by her hair as he reloads his gun, after which he calmly shoots her. His martyr's death - flinging himself out the window while being mowed down in a hail of bullets - followed "the jihadist textbook."

Like other modern terrorists, Merah was addicted to the Internet (and media in general: Klausen notes that two hours before the police came to his apartment, Merah called a French TV station). One of his last tweets said (in French), "I have changed my life - on video." His Twitter account ID has a black knight on a horse bearing the flag of jihad aloft. (His Facebook and YouTube accounts have been removed).

Merah's last tweet was signed "Mohamed Merah-Forsane Alizza." Forsane Alizza refers to "Knights of Glory," a France-based jihadist media organization, banned in January because their members were found to be in training for armed combat. The ban has been ineffective in quashing their marketing; content has been put on new sites and a website bearing the Forsane Alizza brand is still active through a web-hosting company based in Washington state.

All this information effectively rebuts any assumption that Merah's meticulously planned, coolly executed crime was a freak aberration from normalcy, a case of social alienation run amok or an outcome of mental illness. Mohamed Merah may have hunted alone, but he killed in the shadow of the wolf pack who suckled and trained him.

bkay@videotron.ca