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The exportation of terrorism through Emni: a review of the attacks from Syria to Libya between 2014 and 2017 instrumented under the label of the Islamic State's external operations service

Abstract

This study seeks to explain the creation of the Islamic State's (IS) External Operations Service by linking the Franco-Belgian unit of Amn al Kharji (Emni) with the Libyan-Tunisian contingent of the Katibat al Battar al Libiyya (KBL) militia. This starting premise is supported by the theory that Emni and KBL have merged into a single entity, thus explaining why the first attacks carried out under the label of IS's External Operations Service were orchestrated from Syria, while the second wave of attacks instigated from Libya coincided with the loss of territory in Syria and the return of many KBL fighters to Libya. In order to better communicate the results of the research, we will briefly outline the origins behind the creation of an intelligence service within the Islamic State, and then analyse, from a relational perspective, the existing links formed between the members who conformed the external operations unit of IS and those who integrated the commandos of the attacks that struck Europe and Tunisia between 2014 and 2017.

Keywords

Terrorism, Islamic State (IS), IS's external operations service, Amn al Kharji (Emni), Katibat al Battar al Libiyya (KBL).

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1. Introduction

1.1. The embryo of the Islamic State's security architecture

All indications point to the creation of a secret service unit within the Islamic State (IS) or Daesh (the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant) derived from plans drawn up by former members of Saddam Hussein's army linked to the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), and later to IS (Tønnessen, 2015: 53). For example, the purpose of gradually subjugating Syria and turning it into a bastion from which to make better invade into nearby Iraq was outlined in some thirty handwritten pages found in the possession of Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi, the former colonel of information of the Iraqi air force's secret services, who died at the hands of the Syrian resistance in January 2014 (Roggio, 2014).

A former companion of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Camp Bucca (The Soufan Center, 2014), al-Khlifawi, better known by his alias Haji Bakr, moved in 2012 to the town of Tal Rifaat, which had become the IS fiefdom for the Aleppo region[1]. It was there that he put into action the plan outlined in the papers seized after his death, which already outlined a complex structure for the foundations on which the future proto-state system of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq would be built (Reuter, 2015).

Apart from detailed organisation charts, Haji Bakr's documents contained a detailed design of tactics —some pre-tested, some specially created for the occasion— to gain control of rebel-held areas of Syria. To this end and according to the drafts found, they sought to install the enemy from within by infiltrating their followers into the social structures through marriage with local women, among many other techniques. According to the confessions of Islamic State defectors collected by Speckhard and Yayla (2016: 92; 2017: 7), the infiltration strategy in Syria was developed village by village through the creation of *da'wa* offices (translated from Arabic as invitation or call, which in this particular case can be interpreted as offices for proselytising), designed to attract new followers through the spread of the Islamic faith. Informants were then identified from among the new followers and trained. These were people who were willing to spy on their families and communities, who were prepared to find compromising material with which to blackmail neighbours and others, especially if they contravened the precepts of *Sharia* (Islamic law)[2].

1 Many of Tal Rifaat's residents had emigrated in the 1980s to the Arabian Peninsula in search of work and fleeing persecution from the Assad regime. They returned years later, imbued with the radical ideas that had taken hold in the Gulf countries at the time, thus contributing to fertile soil in which IS ideas could later take root (Al Homsy, 2017).

2 The seizure, also in Aleppo, of more IS documents confirms that this *modus operandi* was not only used to investigate the civilian population, but also to infiltrate the opposition, both rebel groups and Assad's militias, in order to gather information that would allow them to know the political orientations of the leaders and in turn detect other infiltrators among the rival ranks (Speckhard and Yayla, 2016: 80).

Beyond that, Haji Bakr's sketches also elucidate the real power architecture within IS, which is crucial to understanding the rapid expansion of the organisation, which by the time the world became aware of its existence through al-Baghdadi's sermon from the pulpit of the Mosul mosque in July 2014, already had control over significant swathes of territory: Aleppo, Raqqa and Deir Ezzour in Syria and the provinces of Salahuddin, Anbar, Nineveh and Diyala in Iraq (Alami, 2014).

The intention to establish a caliphate in the form of a State was accompanied by the creation of secret services within IS in lockstep with Haji Bakr's plans. Under the leadership of Taha Sobhi Falaha, alias Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, IS spokesman and al-Baghdadi's right-hand man, that the Amn al-Kharji unit, also known simply as Emni, was created. The Arabic name Amn al-Kharji refers to external security, but in practice Emni combined internal policing functions with the implementation of what would later become IS's external operations service.

Emni began operating forty kilometres northeast of Aleppo from the town of Al Bab, where Abu Muhammad al-Adnani was based, and where he would later be killed by a US airstrike in August 2016 (John, 2016). He was followed in the post by Ali Moussa al-Shawakh, alias Abu Luqman, who belonged to al-Adnani's closest circle, and had held until then the position of governor in Raqqa (Sutherland, 2017). Based on research by Almohammad and Speckhard (2017), by the time of al-Adnani's death, it is estimated that Emni already had two parallel structures in Syria and Iraq. Coinciding with the fall of Al Bab in late February 2017 to Free Syrian Army rebel forces, Abu Luqman was spotted in the city of Sirte in Libya barely a month later, raising suspicions that Emni had expanded into North Africa, a theory that this article supports and which will be developed in the following sections.

1.2. The creation of IS's external operations apparatus: from Syria to the world

It was in the early years of Emni's existence, still under the leadership of Taha Sobhi Falaha, that the foundations were laid for the foreign operations service behind the deadly attacks that devastated Europe between 2014 and 2017. In the face of a highly hierarchical organisation such as the Islamic State, Emni soon became a budgeted and resourced unit with greater prominence in the IS security architecture than the *Hisbah* (morality police) or other units such as the military police and assault squads (Almohammad *et al.*, 2017).

At the internal security level, its powers were on a par with those of the secret services of the opaquest regimes. Emni applied sophisticated methods of interrogation and torture to members of the organisation who were suspected of passing on information or of playing on both sides. It was also responsible for thoroughly vetting foreign recruits who joined the group without references or without having gone through a prior validation process, in order to send them to the front if there were still doubts about the veracity of their statements (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2018). In an effort to

document and obtain as much information as possible about foreign fighters joining the group, Emni collected large files of personal data to create a complete profile of the newcomers (Callimachi, 2018; Speckhard and Yayla, 2017: 7).

Thanks to this privileged information, when IS considered the need to further develop the creation of a specific service for external operations, Emni already had an important database from which to recruit agents who would be selected to operate beyond the borders of the Caliphate. For this purpose, Emni selected the most skilled and committed fighters and committed and mostly grouped them by nationality or language (Callimachi, 2016), and trained them as elite units in remote areas of Syria.

In mid-2014, coinciding with the time when Western countries began to monitor the departure of their nationals more closely and surveillance intensified on those suspected of having returned from a theatre of conflict, many of the foreign fighters were instructed to buy a package holiday to Türkiye with a fixed return date. The aim was to bypass Turkish border controls and cross briefly into Syria for express explosives training before returning to their home countries on the scheduled flight so as not to arouse suspicion, where they would continue to be monitored by Emni members, ready for action (Callimachi, 2016).

1.3 Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen and Katibat al-Muhajireen: hotbeds for Emni and KBL recruitment

Many Belgians who came from the Sharia4Belgium organisation were among the first Europeans who made their way to the Middle East shortly after the Syrian civil war broke out. Among them was Houssein Elouassaki, who upon arrival in Syria joined Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM), a brigade led by the al-Absi brothers (originally Firas, and upon his death, his younger brother Amr, better known as Abu Atheer). Based in Kafr Hamra, a village administratively part of the Aleppo Governorate and in the northwest of the city, MSM had all its fighters staying in two large villas requisitioned from government-linked families (Taub, 2015). Elouassaki's intense activity on social media soon allowed him to attract a large number of comrades from his own organisation in Belgium, as well as other fighters with whom he had contact through Facebook. In recognition of his work, he was appointed *emir* (leader) of the Katibat al-Muhajireen (KAM), a brigade of foreigners, made up of fighters from Belgium, France and the Netherlands but still under the aegis of the MSM (Van Vlierden, 2016: 55).

In this sense, the Sharia4Belgium members were soon followed by members of the Zerkani Network, an organisation formed in Belgium around the figure of Khalid Zerkani, a veteran of the jihadi cause who in the past had trained in Afghanistan-Pakistan, where he met Seifallah ben Hassine, alias Abu Iyad, co-founder of the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG) and promoter of the Ansar al-Sharia organisation in Tunisia (Monnier, 2016). As will be seen in the following

sections, the figure of Abu Iyad is one of the key actors linking the Franco-Belgian contingent to the Libyan-Tunisian contingent, and who had also influenced Emni's relocation to Libya.

Some 77 Belgian fighters are known to have become part of the Katibat al-Muhajireen within the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (Van Ostaeyen and Van Vlierden, 2017: 6). Among the members of Zerkani's network who passed through KAM, probably the best known names are Abdelhamid Abaaoud, nicknamed Abu Omar al-Belgiki, who was the European commander of the cell that carried out the Paris attacks in November 2015, and Najim Laachraoui, also known as Abu Idriss, a member of the cell that carried out an attack in Brussels in March 2016.

Amr al-Absi was present at the founding of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in mid-April 2013 in Kafr Hamra, along with Abed al-Libi, *emir* of the Katibat al-Battar al-Libiyya (KBL), Haji Bakr, the architect of Emni, and representatives of other organisations operating in the territory. After several days of negotiation, the militias present there decided to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as long as the founding of the new ISIL was carried out in coordination with Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham (Doornbos and Moussa, 2016). As is well known, al-Zawahiri did not approve the merger with ISI, so Jabhat al-Nusra remained al-Qaeda's franchise in Syria, distancing itself from the al-Baghdadi-led organisation. Similarly, not all MSM members swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi, with approximately about a third of the Belgians in the foreigners' brigade led by Elouassaki jumping to Jabhat al-Nusra (Taub, 2015).

On the other hand, those who stayed in MSM made good friends with the KBL, an elite unit founded in 2012 in the Idlib governorate —sixty kilometres from Aleppo— mostly made up of Libyans, but also a good number of Tunisians involved in the Afghan jihad and in the fight against the US invasion of Iraq (Al-Tamimi, 2014). In this way, it is not surprising that the KBL's time in Syria ended up recruiting French-speaking MSM fighters, especially Belgians and French (Colquhoun, 2016). Abaaoud is believed to have made contact with the KBL in the summer of 2013, by which time the militia had around 750 Libyan fighters among its ranks (Weiss, 2015). Confirmation of this suspicion only came in the autumn of 2014 when the KBL published on social media a list of alleged KBL fighters killed in combat. Several Belgian names appear among them, including the nickname of Abdelhamid Abaaoud, Abu Omar al-Belgiki, in a clear manoeuvre to circumvent the Belgian authorities' tracking orders and thus facilitate Abaaoud's entry into Europe barely a year later (Van Vlierden, 2015: 31).

The first media outlet to publish an investigative article on Emni's *modus operandi* in relation to its terrorist threat to Europe was *The New York Times*. The article was written by Rukmini Callimachi (2016) who revealed that many of the attackers involved in attacks claimed by IS in Europe between 2014 and 2016 had previously trained in Syria, where they were specifically instructed in the execution of operations abroad. Thus, Mehdi Nemmouche, who attacked the Jewish Museum in Brussels in 2014, is known to have been in contact with Emni operatives, just as Sid Ahmed Ghlam,

whose planned attack in Villejuif in April 2015 was foiled, and Ayoub El-Khazzani, who attacked the Thalys train in August 2015, were linked to Abdelhamid Abaaoud and the cell behind the November 2015 attacks in France and the March 2016 attacks in Belgium.

The presumption that the KBL and Emni at some point merged forces and/or became a single entity stemmed from the fact that not only did both units claim to have trained Abaaoud and other members of the cells behind the Paris and Brussels attacks, but the two were also linked to the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels and the failed Thalys train bombing, all of which were orchestrated from Syria (Sutherland, 2017).

During the years of IS's meteoric rise, Syria was influenced by many Libyan and Tunisian fighters. According to the data available, some 3,000 Tunisians are said to have entered Syria from the beginning of the civil war until the spring of 2017 (Barrett, 2017: 25), while 3,600 Libyans entered through the Turkish border during 2013 and 2014 (Pack *et al.*, 2017: 15). With combat experience from the Syrian civil war, a good number of them returned to a Libya in the midst of chaos and misrule. This allowed them to lay the foundations of IS's first Libyan *wilaya* (province) in Derna, the hometown of many of the Libyans who had created the KBL in Syria. The returnees also included a significant number of Tunisians, who helped establish the Sabratha camp in the Tripoli area, conveniently located near the Tunisian border. It was precisely from Sabratha and under KBL command that the attacks on the Bardo Museum in March 2015 and the Riu Imperial Marhaba tourist resort north of Sousse in June 2015 were instigated.

Callimachi (2016) revealed that the Sousse beach attacker, Seifeddine Rezgui, had been in contact with Emni, an indication that supports the hypothesis that Emni and the KBL found common cause, and that as the Caliphate lost territory in Syria, Libya became the new centre of gravity from which to orchestrate attacks abroad. This relocation of the foreign operations apparatus to Libya under the command of the KBL would fit with the overt connection of the December 2016 Berlin attack and the May 2017 Manchester attack to KBL operatives (Sutherland, 2017).

Halfway between historical and sociological analysis, this study has been conceived from a relational perspective that unpacks organisations and their members as an aggregate of trajectories (Tilly, 2005: 19-22) which in turn weave a shared history. Thus, following Callimachi's lead, the following sections delve into the personal links between the members of the cells behind the attacks in Europe and the Maghreb between 2014 and 2017 in order to trace a common thread to IS's external operations apparatus. The result is the observation of groups that at first glance may appear to be more or less fragmented cells —the result of a natural trend within global jihadism that has evolved over the last three decades from centralised hierarchies to interconnected groups (Borum *et al.*, 2012: 393-395)— but which nevertheless, as this article shows, remain intrinsically linked to transnational jihadist networks.

2. Analysis

2.1. *The attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels*

Mehdi Nemmouche is the name of the French-Algerian who, on 24 May 2014, stormed the Jewish Museum in Brussels, killed four people and fled without being apprehended until six months later. As a result of his petty criminal history —a profile shared by other foreign fighters of his generation— he had spent some time in prison, a period during which he was radicalised (Basra and Neumann, 2016: 32) as one of his incarcerations coincided with that of several of the future members of the Cannes-Torcy cell, including its spiritual leader, Jérémie Louis-Sidney (Alonso, 2015). Inspired by Mohammed Merah, a fellow French-Algerian who in 2012 attacked several Jewish targets in the south of France, Nemmouche shared not only the Cannes-Torcy members' reverence for Merah but also their fierce anti-Semitism. While several members of the Cannes-Torcy cell spent time in Tunisian mosques after the fall of Ben Ali's regime (Thomson, 2014: 75), Nemmouche turned to Syria as soon as he was released from prison in 2012. There he joined the MSM, where Abaaoud had already become a role model of the foreigners' brigade (Hankiss, 2018: 58), and was commissioned to supervise hostages alongside Laachraoui (*BBC*, 2016b) and under the supervision of Salim Benghalem (Seelow, 2015b)[3]. In February 2014, Nemmouche made his way back to Europe, first passing through different Asian countries in order to evade the European authorities (Sayare, 2014). In preparation for the attack, he is known to have been in contact with Abaaoud (Stroobants, 2015) and Dniel Mahi (Cruickshank, 2017), another Belgian KBL jihadist from Zerkani's network and linked to later plots orchestrated by Emni (Van Vlierden, 2017).

2.2. *The attacks on Charlie Hebdo's offices and the Hyper Cacher supermarket*

The analysis of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack will not go into detail here, as it was claimed by AQAP and ISIS merely congratulated the brothers on their deed. However, it is the Kouachi brothers' close contacts that are of interest to this study as the environment in which they moved is closely linked to the networks used by IS and more specifically Emni to recruit for its external operations apparatus, confirming that both al-Qaeda and IS used the same pools of radicals.

3 Salim Benghalem was linked to the Buttes-Chaumont network, also known as the 19th arrondissement network, whose members included the Kouachi brothers, perpetrators of *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in January 2015. Previously, Benghalem had been with the younger of the Kouachi brothers, Chérif, in Yemen (Al-Mujahed, 2015), where they forged contacts with AQAP (the organisation that would later claim responsibility for the *Charlie Hebdo* attack) He then travelled to Tunisia with Mohamed El Ayouni and Boubaker al-Hakim, two fellow veterans of the Buttes-Chaumont network, before arriving in Syria thanks to the help of a contact of Abu Iyad (Suc, 2016b).

In this regard, Amedy Coulibaly, a friend of the two brothers, carried out the attack on the Jewish supermarket Hyper Cacher two days after *Charlie Hebdo* and left a recorded statement in which he pledged allegiance to IS and explained that he had coordinated with the Kouachi brothers to carry out an attack on the same dates (Malik *et al.*, 2015).

Chérif Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly came from the Buttes-Chaumont network, so called because its members used to meet for jogging in the Buttes-Chaumont park in the 19th arrondissement of Paris under the guidance of the ideologue Farid Benyettou. With the network dismantled in 2005, its members tried and imprisoned in 2008 and others relocated abroad (Bennhold, 2008), the French authorities did not count on the possibility of the group reorganising itself during its time in prison and forging contacts there with French-Algerian jihad veterans. This is how Chérif Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly met Djamel Beghal and Farid Melouk during their imprisonment in Fleury-Mérogis prison (Bonelli, 2015: 6)[4]. They were inspired by the veterans' extensive track records and took them as mentors.

Although none of the three attackers at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices and the Hyper Cacher supermarket had ever set foot in Syria or Iraq, their links to the IS's external operations apparatus were funnelled through their closest friends and links. It is known that in 2012 Melouk moved to Syria with his family, where he was in charge of a training camp and in contact with Abdelhamid Abaaoud (Suc, 2016a).

Of particular interest for this study is the figure of Boubaker al-Hakim, a French-Tunisian born in Paris, with experience in Syria and Iraq in the 2000s. He was a member of the Buttes-Chaumont network and a companion of the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly. On one of his forays to Fallujah in March 2004, he was accompanied by his brother and his friends Mohammed El Ayouni and Peter Cherif from the Buttes-Chaumont network (Filiu, 2016: 99). There they joined Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Organisation of Monotheism and Jihad, a group that would later swear allegiance to Osama bin Laden and rename itself al-Qaeda in Iraq (Özdemir and Gürler, 2018: 124). Later, while trying to cross Syria to meet his family, al-Hakim was intercepted by al-Assad's forces and imprisoned in Far' Falastin prison. He was imprisoned for nine months before returning to France, where he was tried along with the other members of the Buttes-Chaumont network.

Released in 2011, and with his Iraqi experience as his calling card, al-Hakim had no problem moving into the jihadist environment, which is why, he headed for Tunisia, the country of his family´s origin after the fall of Ben Ali´s regime. There he joined Ansar al-Sharia (AST), the organisation that Abu Iyad had started together with hundreds of jihadists amnestied with the fall of the regime (Zelin, 2020: 209) and

4 Beghal, an Algerian, went to France in his twenties and was radicalised in the early years of the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA). Just after the 1995 Paris bombings, he went to the UK, where he quickly entered the orbit of influence of Abu Qatada and the Finsbury Park mosque milieu (Halliday *et al.*, 2015). He later fought with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, where he lived with and formed such a close relationship with Abu Iyad that the Tunisian entrusted him with his wife and children to get them out of the country (Sayare, 2016). On the other hand, Melouk, born in France in the 1960s, had fought in the Balkan war (Caillet and Puchot, 2017: 94). On his return to France, he joined the Algerian GIA and became part of the Chasse-sur-Rhône cell, and after the 1995 attacks on French soil he took refuge in Afghanistan (Suc, 2016a).

assumed responsibility for developing AST's military branch, for which it created a training camp in Libya and a free corridor between the two countries for arms smuggling (Filiu, 2016: 100).

He was accompanied to Tunisia by fellow Tunisians Mohamed El Ayouni and Salim Benghalem, but in April 2014 al-Hakim followed Benghalem and went to Syria, where, as reported by Suc (2020a), he quickly rose through the ranks of the KBL, which we equate with Emni for the purposes of this study. In Raqqa, al-Hakim was a neighbour of the French-Algerian Abdelnasser Benyoucef, a veteran of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (MICG), with whom he shared not only a neighbourhood but also leadership within IS's external operations apparatus. According to his ex-wife's statements, Benyoucef was one of the masterminds behind Amedy Coulibaly's attack at the Hyper Cacher, as well as being behind the Verviers plot and the foiled Villejuif attack (*Le Parisien*, 2010), as will be discussed in the next section.

This generational link between jihadi veterans and new IS recruits begins to emerge when analysing the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher attacks, but it is a constant that is repeated in other attacks as well. The coordination from Syria by veterans in some ways also brings us back to the importance that Neumann *et al.* (2011, 837-838) placed at the time on the middle layers connecting al-Qaeda's top leadership with the grassroots groups. This structure was replicated in the organisation of IS and Emni, where middle management acted as recruiters in Europe and masterminds of attacks from Syria, thus becoming the backbone of the organisation by allowing the grassroots to be integrated into the structure and directing the terrorist campaign.

2.3. The Verviers cell and the foiled attacks in Villejuif and on the Thalys train

Sid Ahmed Ghlam is an example of an operative who was specifically recruited to carry out attacks in Europe. After an express radicalisation in Strasbourg prison (Chevillard, 2020), this Algerian computer science student in Rheims travelled to Türkiye for a month's stay in November 2014, and again for a couple of weeks in February 2015. In interrogations with French authorities, Ghlam denied having crossed the border into Syria, but admitted meeting in Türkiye with three Islamic State operatives, one of whom was Abdelnasser Benyoucef, the other a Samir Nouad and the third a man Ghlam identified only by the alias Abu Omar. In the absence of further clarification on the real identity of the third operative, it appears that it could be either Abdelhamid Abaaoud, known as Abu Omar al-Belgiki, or Fabien Clain from Toulouse, a member of the Artigat network whose alias was Abu Anas al-Faransi but who sometimes also simply called himself Omar (Seelow, 2015a).

Benyoucef appears to have played a leading role in the preparation of the plot as he chose the initial target for the attack, the Villepinte train station, which was later changed at Ghlam's request to a church in Villejuif, and which was ultimately failed when Ghlam accidentally shot himself in the leg and was arrested by the security forces (Suc, 2020b). For the execution of the attack, planned for April 2015, Ghlam was in

contact by message with Samir Nouad (Suc, 2017), and a certain Macreme Abrougui, an IS operative linked to Adrien Guihal, a jihadist from the Artigat network and a close friend of Fabien Clain (Boutry *et al.*, 2018), all members of Emni.

The preparation of this attack by a single individual, briefly trained abroad and supervised during the entire phase leading up to the execution of the attack, would be a precursor to the *modus operandi* that Emni would perfect with each new attack.

Among the failed attacks orchestrated by Emni, we also find Ayoub El Khazzani's assault on the Amsterdam-Paris Thalys train on 21 August 2015, which was unsuccessful as passengers managed to subdue the attacker. El Khazzani, of Moroccan origin, first resided in Spain and then lived in several European countries before settling in Molenbeek, Belgium, where he frequented the Loqman mosque (Warlop, 2015), which in turn had been a meeting place for several members of the Zerkani network (Ponsaers, 2017: 181).

Like Ghlam, El Khazzani spent only a short time in Syria. He boarded a flight to Istanbul on 10 May 2015 (Laffargue, 2015), and returned to Europe after the Balkan route opened just one month later. He made the return trip with Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who accompanied him as far as Hungary, where they parted ways until they met again in Brussels at a safe house specifically set up to accommodate those returning to Europe as sleeper agents ready to be activated. Abaaoud and El Khazzani's journey was made possible thanks to the work of the Algerian Bilal Chatra, who scouted the route in advance, informing Abaaoud at all times of the existing checks and difficulties (Brisard and Jackson, 2016: 12).

Chatra, who was expected by the Emni leadership to carry out the attack together with El Khazzani, fled the shared flat before the planned day of the attack (Seelow, 2017) and was only apprehended in Germany in 2016. However, his knowledge of the border crossings had been useful not only for El Khazzani but also for the members of the Verviers cell, which had been dismantled in January 2015 (Pokalova, 2020: 94). It is known that Chatra had facilitated the entry into Greece of Khalid ben Larbi and Soufiane Amghar, two members of Zerkani's entourage who trained in Syria with the KBL and who were also sent back to Europe at the behest of Abaaoud (La, J., 2017). After the two were killed in a police operation, others involved in the Verviers cell were brought to trial. The cell's coordination was attributed to Abaaoud from Greece (Callimachi et. al, 2015) under the guidance of Dniel Mahi (Van Vlierden, 2017) and direction of Abdelnasser Benyoucef and Samir Nouad (Vincent, 2020).

2.4. The attacks on the Bataclan, the Stade de France and various Parisian establishments

As a result of the early dismantling of the Verviers cell and the failed attacks on the Thalys and Villejuif, Benyoucef allegedly left the ranks of Emni to go to eastern Syria to direct military operations (Suc, 2020b), while Abaaoud took on the task of

coordinating —this time from within Europe— the new forces arriving from Syria (Callimachi *et al.*, 2016).

The November 2015 attacks in Paris were carried out by three groups of troops under the coordination of Abaaoud and with the help of close friends from Molenbeek, such as the Abdeslam brothers. Salah Abdeslam, Brahim's younger brother, played the logistical role of picking up the operatives in Hungary or in the countries they were arriving in as they entered Europe in a staggered manner, mimicking the flow of refugees (Brisard and Jackson, 2016: 13).

The group that attacked the Bataclan was composed of three operatives skilled in combat. Samy Amimour and Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, both of Algerian descent and living in France, had presumably met online through the Ansar al-Haqq forum run by Adrien Guihal, which led them to make the journey together from France to Syria, where they joined the KAM (Breton, 2021). On the night of 13 November 2015, they attacked the Bataclan with Foued Mohamed-Aggad, an operative of Moroccan origin radicalised by Mourad Farès in Strasbourg and who joined the KBL when he arrived in Syria (Seelow, 2014).

The commando that attacked the Stade de France comprised three other members (the identity of one of them remains unknown although he is presumed to be of Iraqi origin, as was the partner with whom he entered Europe). Both were travelling with false papers, but it has been established that one of them was one Ammar Ramadan Mansour Mohamad al-Sabaawi from northern Iraq and recruited in Mosul at the time the city fell under IS control (Jacob, 2017). The third member of the cell that attacked the national football stadium was the young Bilal Hadfi, a French national living in Belgium, where he underwent an express radicalisation process after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, leaving a few weeks later for Syria (Chan and Schreuer, 2015). Contact with Abaaoud had no taken place until the two men met in Syria where they were fighting among the ranks of the KBL (Higgins and Freytas-Tamura, 2015). Abaaoud was in telephone contact with Hadfi until shortly before the first of the three commando members blew himself up (Brisard, 2015: 6), thus setting in motion the third group, in which Abaaoud himself participated.

Thus, the third commando that attacked in Paris that night was composed of the elder of the Abdeslam brothers, Brahim, with whom Abaaoud had shared time in prison, and Chakib Akrouh, a Belgian-Moroccan neighbour of Abaaoud and a regular at the mosque frequented by Zerkani's followers (Ponsaers, 2017): 181). In a Seat, Akrouh and Abaaoud drove through the streets of the tenth and eleventh arrondissements of Paris, firing assault rifles at diners in Le Carrillon, Le Petit Cambodge, La Bonne Bière and La Belle Equipe, while Brahim Abdeslam blew himself up at the Comptoir Voltaire brasserie (Vaudano, 2015).

A final person who played a leading role in the attacks is Salah Abdeslam, who not only met the fighters as they arrived in Europe, booked the flats and cars that were to be usted to carry out the attacks, and also chauffeured the Stade de France commando

and then fled the scene, leaving an explosive vest in the car that he chose not to detonate (France 24, 2016b).

Helped by friends on the night of the events, he managed to return to Belgium, where he stayed in hiding for several months until the police tracked him down thanks to a tip-off from a friend of Abdeslam (*L'Obs*, 2016). Abdeslam's arrest along with another operative probably accelerated the Brussels attacks amid fears that more cells would be dismantled (France 24, 2016a), as it seems that the initial idea was to attack again in Paris during the European Football Championship in the summer of 2016 (Norman, 2016).

2.5. Brussels airport and metro attacks

The commando behind the Brussels airport attack consisted of Ibrahim El Bakraoui, Najim Laachraoui and Mohamed Abrini. The first two were killed on the spot when the explosive belts they were wearing detonated, while Abrini fled the scene with no active involvement (*BBC*, 2016a). A Belgian of Moroccan origin, Ibrahim El Bakraoui grew up in a working-class neighbourhood north of Brussels, became radicalised during his time in prison, and upon his release from prison made his way to Syria (*The New York Times*, 2016). On the other hand, Laachraoui, one of the few operatives without a criminal record who came from the Zerkani orbit, had not only studied electromechanics (Blaise and Breeden, 2016) but had also previously worked at Zaventem airport (Mulholland, 2016), which undoubtedly facilitated the selection of the airport as a target and the explosives as a means of action. Finally, Abrini, a third wheel**,** who was only apprehended on 8 April 2016, was, along with Salah Abdeslam, one of the few operatives directly involved in the attacks who could be called to stand trial (Norman, 2016). Abrini was a neighbour and childhood friend of Abaaoud and the Abdeslam brothers. He underwent an expplicit radicalisation after learning of his brother's death on the battlefield, which led him to travel to Syria to honour his death and to meet Abaaoud, who skilfully recruited him for an attack in Europe (Schuurwegen, 2020).

On the other hand, there is the commando that attacked the Brussels metro, made up of Khalid El Bakraoui, Ibrahim's older brother, and Osama Krayem, a Swedish national of Syrian origin. While Khalid shared his brother's dabbling in the criminal activities as a prelude to radicalisation (*The New York Times*, 2016), Krayem joined extremist circles in the Rosengard district, known as the Swedish Molenbeek as it also produced a number of foreign fighters. The intensive consumption of Anwar al-Awlaki's sermons was the final trigger for Krayem to embark on the road to the Caliphate (Watkinson, 2016).

IS claimed responsibility for both the November attacks in Paris and the March attacks in Brussels. Just a day after the attacks on French soil, IS published a *nasheed* (a cappella chant) in which Fabien Clain claimed responsibility for the attacks with a musical background composed by his brother Jean-Michel (Boutilly, 2019).

With regard to the attacks in Belgium, it was Amaq, IS's news agency, that claimed responsibility for the attacks on the day they took place (*Reuters*, 2016).

The trial of those involved in the November attacks in Paris found that the masterminds behind the plot in France —who also masterminded the attacks in Belgium— were Oussama Ahmad Atar and Obeida Aref Dibo, both allegedly killed in Syria and tried in absentia. Oussama Ahmad Atar was a Belgian-Moroccan veteran of the jihad in Iraq during the time of AQI. He was a cousin of the El Bakraoui brothers, whom he recruited for the Brussels commandos. Imprisoned by the Iraqi regime, Atar was held in Abu Ghraib, Camp Bucca and Camp Cropper prisons (Joscelyn, 2017), from where he was released thanks to international pressure from Amnesty International, allowing him to return to Belgium and from there return to the Middle East, where he soon rose through the ranks of Emni (Vargo, 2021: 82). On the other hand, Obeida Aref Dibo, of Syrian origin, is thought to have held a position as Atar's deputy with more operational responsibilities, as he was in charge of recruiting and training some of the agents who were to be sent back to Europe (Campion, 2021).

The French justice system found Fabien Clain guilty of having claimed responsibility for the November attacks, but his responsibility for organising them could not be proven (*L'Obs*, 2022). On the other hand, Matthieu Suc (2019) also listed Boubaker al-Hakim as a possible co-author of the November 2015 attacks in Paris. This theory fits in with the correlation that this article seeks to draw between the Franco-Belgian and the Libyan-Tunisian contingents in the context of IS's external operations apparatus. In this line of triangulation, it is not trivial that the attacks that took place in France in 2015 coincide not only in time, but also in form and content, with the attacks IS orchestrated in Tunisia.

2.6. The attacks on the Bardo Museum in Tunis, Sousse beach and the seizure of Ben Gardane

The first mass attack to hit Tunisia in 2015 took place on 18 March at the Bardo Museum, just two months after *Charlie Hebdo*. It was perpetrated by Yassine Laabidi, also known as Abu Anas al-Tunisi, and Jaber Khachnaoui, alias Abu Zakaria al-Tunisi. As indicated by their *kunya* (nicknames), both were Tunisian nationals and are known to have been trained in Libya, with the suspicion that Abu Zakaria had also previously spent time in Syria and Iraq (Reidy, 2015). The attack was claimed by Ifriqiyah Media, a Tunisian pro-Islamic State media outlet, and by Jund al-Khilafa, a group formed in January 2014 by defectors from Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN) and fighters returning to Tunisia from jihadist havens, such as Syria and Libya, who had pledged allegiance to IS (Zelin, 2019: 66).

The next attack that made headlines around the world and ultimately buried Tunisia's tourism business for years to come was the attack perpetrated by Tunisian Seifeddine Rezgui on 26 June 2015 at a resort in Sousse. More deadly than the Bardo attack, the Sousse attack took place on the same day that France was horrified by the

beheading of the director of a transport company in Saint-Quentin-Fallavier by his employee Yassin Salhi, who had been radicalised since the 2000s and whose contacts could also be traced back to IS in Syria. In terms of timeline, Tunisia experienced an attack on a bus of the Presidential Guard twelve days after the 13 November 2015 attacks in Paris, while in March 2016 there was the failed attempt to establish an IS province in the town of Ben Gardane in southern Tunisia, just two weeks before the Brussels attacks (Filiu, 2016: 100).

Both the Bardo museum and Sousse beach attackers and the operatives involved in the foiled seizure of Ben Gardane were linked to the Islamic State in Libya, which was able to orchestrate the events from the close proximity of a camp in Sabratha (Echeverría, 2016: 12-13). Of the Tunisians linked to Sabratha, one of the names believed to be behind the Bardo and Sousse plots is that of Chamseddine al-Sandi, who was responsible for recruiting the operatives in Tunisia and paying for their travel to Libya, as confirmed by some of the defendants at the trial of the attacks *(Agence France-Press*, 2019). Also found guilty of planning the Bardo and Sousse attacks were Moez al-Fezzani, better known by his alias Abu Nassim, and Noureddine Chouchane, both IS leaders in Sabratha. Exiled to Italy during the Ben Ali regime when persecution of the Islamist movement was at its fiercest, al-Fezzani took his first steps with al-Qaeda in Bosnia and Afghanistan, while Chouchane tried unsuccessfully to join the organisation led by al-Zarqawi in Iraq. With the change in the Tunisian regime, both returned to Tunisia to join the newly created Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, where al-Fezzani's experience helped him quickly rise through the ranks of AST and from there he travelled to Syria where he would first fight with Jabhat al-Nusra and then with the KBL in IS. In 2014, he was one of the first fighters to return to North Africa to help establish the first IS *wilayas* in Libya (Marone and Vidino, 2019: 21-22). In Chouchane's case, he went directly from Tunisia to Libya, where he soon established himself as one of the *emirs* of the KBL in Sabratha (Zelin, 2020: 234; Saal, 2017: 20).

From Boubaker al-Hakim's own comments (Dabiq, 2015: 62), it can be inferred that he was somewhat connected to the Bardo Museum bombing, either as an instigator of it or with prior knowledge about the plot. In any case, the link between Boubaker al-Hakim and Chamseddine al-Sandi, Moez al-Fezzani and Noureddine Chouchane can be easily traced to the figure of Seifallah ben Hassine, the founder of AST.

2.7. The attack on Breitscheidplatz in Berlin

The progressive loss of territory in Syria and the difficulty of maintaining several dormant cells in Europe not only led to a shift of the base of operations from Syria to Libya, but also changed the *modus operandi* of the attacks, which were now conceived without the need for foreign fighters who had previously trained in conflict zones. This is how Sabratha became not only a safe haven from which to orchestrate the Tunis attacks, but also as the platform from which IS's external operations apparatus

instigated a second wave of attacks in Europe. These attacks took place in Berlin on December 2016 and in Manchester on May 2017.

The attack in the German capital was carried out by the Tunisian Anis Amri who rammed a lorry into a Christmas market on Breitscheidplatz on 19 December 2016, killing eleven people. Anis Amri had fled Tunisia in the midst of the general chaos that followed the Jasmine Revolution. Placed in a juvenile detention centre in Italy for illegal entry into the country, he assaulted one of the centre's workers and ended up spending time in prison where he came into contact with radical ideas. After his release, he moved to other European countries, eventually ending up in Germany. There he came into contact with the community established around the Iraqi cleric Ahmad Abdelaziz Abdullah, nicknamed Abu Walaa, and the top representative of IS in Germany. During Amri's interactions with various members of the Abu Walaa´s network, the possibility of a truck attack was already being discussed, and fellow network members such as Boban Simeonic and Hassan Celenk supported Amri's plan to stage an attack in Germany (Heil, 2017).

Besides his contacts with Abu Walaa's entourage, intimately linked to IS in Syria and to the foreign operations apparatus through the relationship with the convert Martin Lemke who came to lead the German battalion within Emni (Cruickshank, 2016), Anis Amri communicated via Telegram with Tunisian compatriots who had enlisted with IS in Libya. It was thanks to them that he ended up carrying out the Breitscheidplatz attack, guided by a document on conducting martyr operations that he had received from one of the operatives in Libya, who was also the one who spoke to him via instant messenger in the final hours leading up to the attack (Flade, 2017). Just days after the attack, the Islamic State news agency Amaq released a video recorded by Amri paying homage to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Smith-Spark, 2016), confirming that the attack was carried out by an IS-led operative.

2.8. The Manchester Arena bombing

Just as Amri was able to outwit German intelligence services, Emni also encouraged the execution of the Manchester bombing in May 2017 by Salman Abedi in a bid to push for actions that did not require the coordination of multiple operatives. Thus, on 22 May 2017, the young British man of Libyan origins blew himself up in an action of which only his brother Hashem was aware, and in which the same type of explosives used in the Paris and Brussels attacks were used (Saal, 2017: 19).

The Abedi brothers came from a Libyan family who had emigrated to the UK in the 1990s to escape the Gaddafi regime. The Abedis were old acquaintances of the family of Abu Anas al-Libi, one of al-Qaeda's hardcore operatives in the Afghanistan days who had been stationed with Osama bin Laden in Sudan before moving to the UK (Abdulwahhab *et al.*, 2013), where he temporarily met with the Abedis, whom he already knew from his time in Libya. Given the social environment in which the Abedi brothers had grown up, it is not surprising that at the dawn of the revolution

they both visited the country with their father Ramadan Abedi, who took an active part in the insurgency against the Gaddafi regime by joining a unit of the February 17th Martyrs Brigade (De Simone, 2020), which was close to ASL (Glenn, 2017).

Ramadan and his wife settled in Libya upon the fall of the regime. Salman and Hashem, who remained living in the UK, visited them regularly. It is on one of these trips that Salman allegedly first took up arms to fight in Ajdabiya (Doward *et al.*, 2017) and visited the coastal town of Sabratha, where he came into contact with KBL members who would eventually supervise and guide him —from a distance— in the preparation and execution of the attack (Callimachi and Schmitt, 2017).

3. Conclusions

The guiding thread of this article is based on the assumption that Emni and the KBL found common cause in Syria. Indeed, this assumption is confirmed by the fact that the KBL —mainly made up of Libyans and Tunisians— recruited European fighters from among the foreigners who were part of the KAM within the MSM; the same fighters whom Emni also claimed to have trained.

The Europeans who chose to join IS were mostly the children and grandchildren of Muslim families who migrated to Europe in the second half of the last century, with a small but not insignificant percentage of new converts. They tended to come from deprived neighbourhoods or places where violent militant networks had proliferated in the past. Disaffection with the host societies often meant that they had run-ins with the law, so that the time spent in prison reinforced, in many cases, a process of incipient radicalisation.

Beyond the fact that both units used the same pool of recruits to swell their ranks, the KBL's bid to recruit French and Belgians is not only explained by the fact that they shared French as a *lingua franca* with the Tunisians, but also by the convergence of their Arabic dialects: the *Darija* of the French and Belgians —mostly of Moroccan origin— was closer to the Maghrebi speech of the Libyans and Tunisians than to the Levantine dialect of the Middle East.

The hypothesis that Emni and the KBL were organised under one umbrella is supported by the fact that both entities sometimes claimed responsibility for the same attacks. Thus, both Emni and the KBL claimed responsibility for the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels and the Thalys train attack. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the European coordinator of the Verviers cell and of the mass attacks in Paris and Brussels (ultimately directed by Emni in Syria), was also claimed by both entities as their own.

The management structure that is supposed to be behind the foreign operations apparatus in its first venture in the Levantine caliphate includes names such as Abdelnasser Benyoucef, Boubaker al-Hakim, Fabien Clain and Oussama Ahmad Atar, all of them linked to networks in France and Belgium previously associated with al-Qaeda, which they used not only for recruitment but also for carrying out attacks

on European soil. It follows, therefore, that one of the crucial reasons why certain European countries were victims of attacks on the scale of those analysed in this article is due, above all, to the strength of the pre-existing networks that had been established on European soil since the 1990s. Composed largely of foreign fighters returning from the Afghan and Iraqi jihad, their structures have managed to survive the onslaught of law enforcement while keeping alive the bonds forged on the battlefield.

Thus, the figure of the French-Tunisian al-Hakim is closely linked to that of another Tunisian, Seifallah ben Hassine. The latter, from his time in Afghanistan, was an old acquaintance of Khalid Zerkani, the leader of the Belgian network that provided the most recruits to IS's foreign operations service, and of the Algerian Djamel Beghal, responsible for the radicalisation of the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly.

On the other hand, the Ansar al-Sharia organisation that formed around Ben Hassine at the dawn of the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia had a knock-on effect for many European fighters —mostly French— who passed through Tunisia before arriving in Syria. Thus, the Tunisian attacks in 2015 are similar to those that Europe experienced around the same time, perfectly illustrating the confluence between the Franco-Belgian corridor and the Libyan-Tunisian contingent in a triple flow of movements from Tunisia to Syria, from Tunisia to Libya and from Syria to Libya.

The linguistic and cultural affinity that favoured this triangulation of European and Maghrebi foreign fighters was facilitated by the loss of territory in Syria and the gradual move to Libya as a new base of operations for IS. This would explain why IS's first foreign operations in Europe were led by French and Belgians, while in the second wave of attacks in Tunisia, Germany and the UK it was Libyans and Tunisians who took the lead. The KBL's return to Libya and the increasing complexity of having operatives deployed in an increasingly scrutinised Europe also meant that the format of the attacks evolved towards more autonomous actions that did not require the coordination of many people or extensive logistics on the ground for the provision of weapons and explosives.

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