

Fearing Converts to Terrorism, France Intercepts Citizens Bound for Syria



By ALISSA J. RUBIN JUNE 2, 2014

PARIS — The three young Frenchmen were arrested as they tried to make their way to Syria to wage jihad. They had not harmed anyone in France or made plans to do so, according to the evidence at their trial in January, but in France these days, seeking to fight in Syria is enough to bring a charge of plotting terrorism — and in this case sentences of three to five years in prison.

France, and much of Europe, have grown steadily more concerned over the past year about the possibility that the main terrorist threat could come from their own citizens, European passport holders who can move relatively easily between their homelands and the battlefields of Syria, where Islamist rebel groups are fighting the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

In that climate, France is becoming especially aggressive by arresting would-be jihadis even before they leave the country or set foot on a battlefield.

France's fears came to the fore on Sunday when officials announced the apprehension of a suspect in the killings of three people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels last month, a 29-year-old Frenchman said to have spent time in Syria last year.

On Monday, the French authorities said they had arrested four men they described as jihadi recruiters operating in the Paris region and in the south of France and one French citizen living near Brussels, the latest in a string of cases intended to disrupt the flow of French citizens, usually young men of North African and Arab descent, to Syria.

Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said Monday that he and Justice Minister Christiane Taubira would seek to pass legislation to expand the legal grounds for arrest and prosecution in cases involving plans for terrorist acts, but no violence.

Manuel Valls, the French prime minister, said in January while serving as interior minister that the threat of jihadis returning home to Europe “represents for me, without a doubt, the greatest danger that we must face in the coming years.”

“It’s a phenomenon of unprecedented size,” Mr. Valls said.

Adding to the growing concern, United States officials said last week that for the first time an American working with a group in Syria linked to Al Qaeda had carried out a suicide bombing, having traveled from Florida to wage jihad.

France’s use of a pre-emptive strategy is being watched closely by other governments, many of them brushing aside concerns about civil liberties to employ their own techniques to reduce what they consider a substantial risk to their national security. All of them are mindful of similar terrorist threats — not least because the number of foreign fighters flocking to Syria is on course to exceed even that of those who waged the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, and this time even more Europeans are involved.

Of the 11,000 foreign fighters estimated to be in Syria, as many as 2,000 are from Europe, including 400 to 500 from France, said Peter Neumann, who runs the International Center for the Study of Radicalization at King’s College London, citing figures from several months ago that could be higher now. On Sunday, President François Hollande said about 700 residents of France were fighting or had fought in Syria.

France and Britain have begun to try to use family members as an early warning system to alert authorities when they see signs of a loved one becoming radicalized. Britain has begun a program to detain those who have gone to Syria on their return, charging many of them with terrorism offenses before the suspects have taken any overt action. This year Bosnia put in place a 10-year prison sentence for anyone convicted of trying to fight in a foreign war, a measure clearly aimed at Syria.

On Friday, the authorities arrested six men in the Spanish enclave of Melilla in North Africa, charging them with recruiting jihadis to travel to Syria.

France moved earlier and more aggressively than many other nations, in part because of the 2012 case of the terrorist Mohammed Merah.

Mr. Merah, a French Muslim who had trained in Afghanistan, returned to his home city, Toulouse, and killed three French soldiers, three Jewish children and a rabbi who was the father of two of the children.

“We always had this worry,” said Ludovic Lestel, a government prosecutor in Paris, referring to the phenomenon of Islamic extremists trained abroad who return and strike their home countries.

“But the Mohammed Merah case proved that a single person could go with a jihadi group to train himself and come back to perpetrate an attack in France,” Mr. Lestel said.

Before the most recent spate of arrests, including that of Mehdi Nemmouche, the Frenchman arrested in connection with the killings in Brussels, there were more than 50 terrorism-related cases at various stages in the Paris courts, which handle all terrorism cases regardless of where the people are apprehended, Mr. Lestel said.

A number of French defense lawyers say they are concerned that the trend toward intervening early to head off any jihadi threat raises civil liberties issues.

“We’ve created laws that are very powerful,” said Pierre de Combles de Nayves, a Paris lawyer who has represented 10 to 15 clients charged under the terrorism laws.

In France, “one now punishes before the attacks,” he said, noting that those who leave for Syria have not actually harmed anyone in France.

“What have they done in France? In France all they have done is to purchase a ticket; it is impossible to foresee who will leave for the purpose of carrying out terrorism,” Mr. de Combles de Nayves said.

Mr. Lestel and Thomas Fiquet, another prosecutor in Paris who specializes in terrorism cases, say the authorities based their pre-emptive arrests on intelligence about suspects’ intentions. In the case of the three men tried in January, they were arrested as they prepared to board a flight in St.-Étienne, in central France, headed for Gaziantep, a city in eastern Turkey.

“They were going to buy military and paramilitary equipment; they were trying to obtain a weapon and to train themselves at

the use of explosive devices; they were looking for a destination linked with jihad," Mr. Lestel said.

During the trial, prosecutors described how in conversations that were wiretapped by the security services, the three men referred to the trip to Syria as their "vacation plans." At one point, one suspect, Youssef Ettaoujar, who appeared to be the leader, said to one of the others that there was no need to bring weapons because "they provide them," apparently referring to the groups of fighters in Syria.

In addition to the strengthened terrorism laws, the French are working to diminish departures by creating a website to help parents and relatives learn about the signs of radicalization. The government has also set up a phone number that relatives and friends can use to reach social workers or psychologists to discuss worrying behavior. They can also use the number to reach the police and border authorities to alert them to a relative's radicalization.

None of these measures, however, appear to have significantly stanching the flow of would-be fighters to Syria.

Many European jihadis come from communities where youth unemployment is high. A 15-year-old and a 16-year-old from Toulouse, largely radicalized on the Internet, stole their parents' credit cards and bought airplane tickets to Turkey, and one managed to cross into Syria before deciding to come home.

A 15-year-old girl named Zoé, who is from a secularized Muslim family, was unhappy and alienated in school, but she became enamored of the jihad narratives on Islamic social networks and went to Syria to marry a fighter, said Yassine Yakhouti, a defense lawyer who is familiar with her case.

As for the three men who went to trial in January, one seemed to be committed to the more extreme Islamic ideas associated with Al Qaeda. The other two worked in low-paying jobs, one as a host in a store on the Champs-Élysées and the other delivering pizza, and they appeared to be seeking direction in their lives.

One of them, Fares Farsi, now 22, said in court that he was unsure about the whole project.

"My parents were getting divorced" at the time, Mr. Farsi said.

"For my father, I was a troublesome element of the family," he said. "I was going through a period of self-radicalization; I was very easily influenced. I had doubts about carrying those weapons."

There was no doubt, however, about the sentence he received: three years.
