

## How Online Jihad Recruitment Drew Two French Girls to Syria

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By Lori Hinnant, Associated Press  
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LEZIGNAN-CORBIERES, France — On the day she left for [Syria](#), Sahra strode along the train platform with two bulky schoolbags slung over her shoulder. In a grainy image caught on security camera, the French teen tucks her hair into a headscarf.

Just two months earlier and a two-hour drive away, Nora, also a teen girl, had embarked on a similar journey in similar clothes. Her brother later learned she'd been leaving the house every day in jeans and a pullover, then changing into a full-body veil.

Neither had ever set foot on an airplane. Yet both journeys were planned with the precision of a seasoned traveler and expert in deception, from Sahra's ticket for the March 11 Marseille-[Istanbul](#) flight to Nora's secret Facebook account and overnight crash pad in Paris.

Sahra and Nora are among some 100 girls and young women from [France](#) who have left to join jihad in Syria, up from just a handful 18 months ago, when the trip was not even on [Europe's](#) security radar, officials say. They come from all walks of life — first- and second-generation immigrants from Muslim countries, white French backgrounds, even a Jewish girl, according to

a security official who spoke anonymously because rules forbid him to discuss open investigations.

These departures are less the whims of adolescents and more the highly organized conclusions of months of legwork by networks that specifically target young people in search of an identity, according to families, lawyers and security officials. These mostly online networks recruit girls to serve as wives, babysitters and housekeepers for jihadis, with the aim of planting multi-generational roots for an Islamic caliphate.

Girls are also coming from elsewhere in Europe, including between 20 and 50 from Britain. However, the recruitment networks are particularly developed in France, which has long had a troubled relationship with its Muslim community, the largest in Europe. Distraught families plead that their girls are kidnap victims, but a proposed French law would treat them as terrorists liable to arrest upon return.

Sahra's family has talked to her three times since she left, but her mother, Severine, thinks her communication is scripted by jihadis, possibly from the Islamic State group.

"They are being held against their will," says Severine, a French woman of European descent. "They are over there. They're forced to say things."

The Ali Mehenni family lives in a red-tiled, middle-class home in Lezignan-Corbieres, a small town in the south of France. Sahra, who turns 18 on Saturday, swooned over her baby brother and shared a room with her younger sister. But family relations turned testy when she demanded to wear the full Islamic veil, dropped out of school for six months and closed herself in her room with a computer.

Now she was in a new school. And she seemed to be maturing — she asked her mother to help her get a passport, because she wanted her paperwork as an adult in order.

On the morning of March 11, Sahra casually told her father she was taking extra clothing to school to teach her friends to wear the veil. Kamel stifled his anxiety and drove her to the train station. He planned to meet her there just before dinner, as he did every night.

At lunchtime, she called her mother. I'm eating with friends, she said.

Surveillance video showed at that moment, Sahra was at the airport in Marseille, preparing to board an Istanbul-bound flight. She made one more phone call that day, from the plane, to a Turkish number, her mother said.

By nightfall, she had not returned. Her worried parents went to police.

They noticed the missing passport the next day.

"Everything was calculated. They did everything so that she could plan to the smallest detail," Severine says. "I never heard her talk about Syria, jihad. It was as though the sky fell on us."

Sahra told her brother in a brief call from Syria that she had married to a 25-year-old [Tunisian](#) she had just met, and her Algerian-born father had no say because he wasn't a real Muslim.

Her family has spoken to her twice since then, always guardedly, and communicated a bit on Facebook. But her parents no longer know if she's the one posting the messages.

Sahra told her brother she's doing the same things in Syria that she did at home — housework, taking care of children. She says she doesn't plan to return to France, and wants her mother to accept her religion, her choice, her new husband.

Nora's family knows less about her quiet path out of France, but considerably more about the network that arranged her one-way trip to Syria.

Nora grew up the third of six children in the El-Bahty family, the daughter of [Moroccan](#) immigrants in the tourist city of Avignon. Her parents are practicing Muslims, but the family does not consider itself strictly religious.

She was recruited on Facebook. Her family does not know exactly how, but propaganda videos making the rounds play to the ideals and fantasies of teenage girls, showing veiled women firing machine guns and Syrian children killed in warfare. The French-language videos also refer repeatedly to France's decision to restrict use of veils and headscarves, a sore point among many Muslims.

Nora was 15 when she departed for school on Jan. 23 and never came back.

The next day, Foad, her older brother, learned that she had been veiling herself on her way to school, that she had a second phone number, that she had a second Facebook account targeted by recruiters.

"As soon as I saw this second Facebook account I said, 'She's gone to Syria,'" Foad says.

The family found out through the judicial investigation about the blur of travel that took her there. First she rode on a high-speed train to [Paris](#). Then she flew to Istanbul and a Turkish border town on a ticket booked by a French travel agency, no questions asked.

A young mother paid for everything, gave her a place to stay overnight in Paris and promised to travel with her the next day, according to police documents. She never did.

Nora's destination was ultimately a "foreigners' brigade" for the Nusra Front, an al-Qaida branch in Syria, Foad says. The idea apparently was to marry her off. But she objected and one of the emirs intervened on her behalf. For now at least, she remains single, babysitting children of jihadis. She has said she wants to come home — and Foad traveled to Syria but was not allowed to leave with her.

"As soon as they manage to snare a girl, they do everything they can to keep her," Foad says. "Girls aren't there for combat, just for marriage and children. A reproduction machine."

Two people have been charged in Nora's case, including the young mother. Other jihadi networks targeting girls have since been broken up, including one where investigators found a 13-year-old girl being prepared to go to Syria, according to a French security official.

"It is not at random that these girls are leaving. They are being guided. She was being commanded by remote control," says family lawyer Guy Guenoun "And now she has made a trip to the pit of hell."