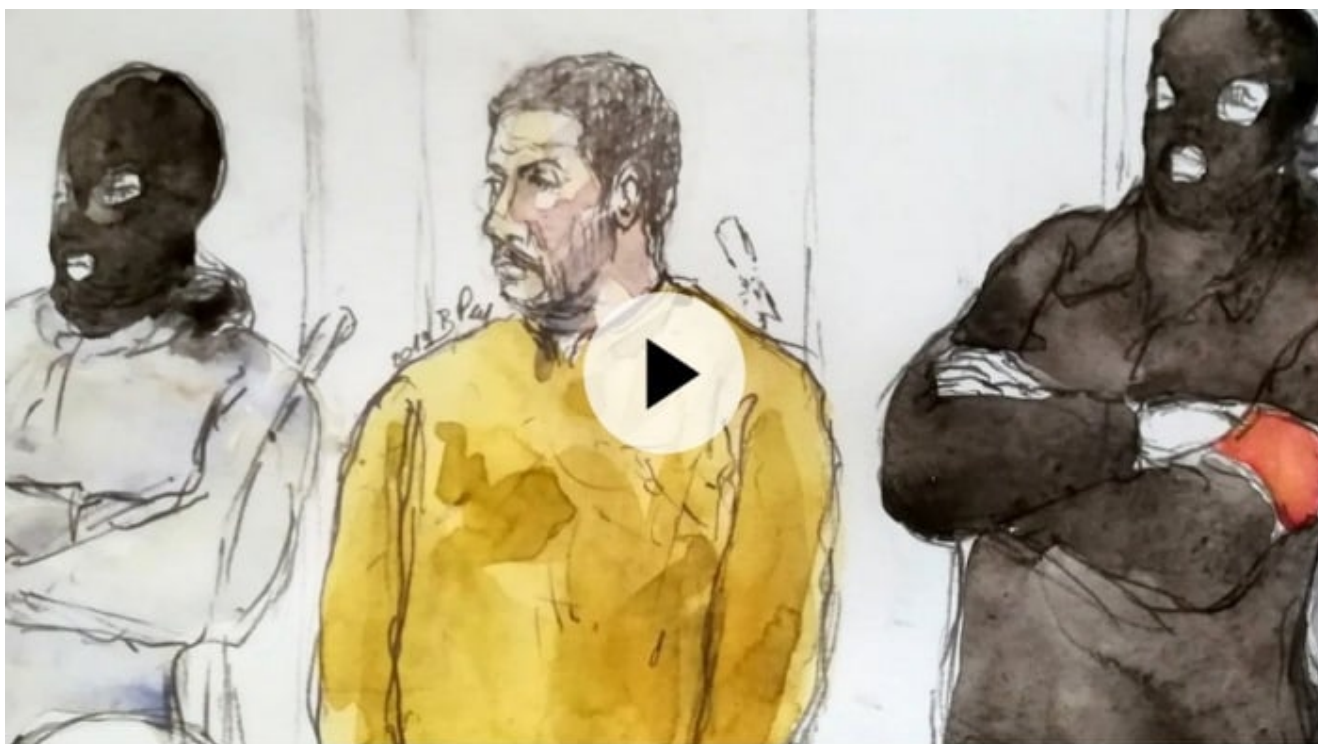


# French journalists tell trial alleged Brussels museum killer held them hostage in Syria

From AFP via [Channel News Asia](#)

Two French journalists on Thursday told a terror trial in Brussels that Mehdi Nemmouche, the main defendant in the May 2014 Jewish museum murders, had imprisoned and tortured them in Syria. The journalists who were freed in April 2014 came to the Belgian capital to testify about the character of Nemmouche, a 33-year-old Frenchman who faces a life sentence if convicted of the murders.



Benoit Peyrucq, AFP | A cartoon shows Mehdi Nemmouche, January 10, 2019.

“I have absolutely no doubt about the fact that Mehdi Nemmouche who is present here was my jailer and torturer in Syria under the name of Abu Omar,” former hostage Nicolas Henin told the trial. Henin described Nemmouche as a

“sadistic, playful and narcissistic” man. He said Nemmouche expressed “admiration” for Mohammed Merah in the year after he shot dead a teacher and three children at a Jewish school in the French city of Toulouse in 2012.

His colleague Didier Francois also said he “had no doubt” Nemmouche had held him hostage along with fellow Frenchmen Edouard Elias and Pierre Torres who were not present Thursday. “I came for three things: to say that we know him, how dangerous this person is and the risk he will repeat the crimes,” the 58-year-old Francois told the court.

The prosecution and a lawyer for Jewish groups asked the journalists to attend the trial to show what Nemmouche had done in Syria between January 2013 and February 2014. Michele Hirsch, the lawyer for the Jewish groups, said their testimony was “extremely important” to show the judges and jury what motivated the alleged gunman. It will also show how much his “idol” Merah influenced him, Hirsch added.

Nemmouche’s lawyers charged that their testimony amounts to a “stunt” and a “trial within a trial” because their kidnapping is the subject of separate proceedings in France.

Also on trial in Brussels is Nacer Bendrer, a 30-year-old Frenchman accused of supplying Nemmouche with the weapons. Bendrer also faces a life term if convicted of the same charge of “terrorist murder”.

Investigators said Nemmouche attacked the museum shortly after returning from Syria, where he had allegedly fought on behalf of jihadist groups. He allegedly killed an Israeli married couple, a young Belgian employee and a French volunteer. Six days after the attack, Nemmouche was arrested in the southern French port city of Marseille. Bendrer was arrested in Marseille in December 2014.

The trial is due to end in late February or early March.

Some observers and lawyers hope the trial may yield more detail about Nemmouche's alleged links with other jihadists.

Henin told the court on Thursday that he also recognised among his jailers "Abu Idriss," the alias of the Belgian-Moroccan Najim Laachraoui. Investigators say Laachraoui made the bombs for the Nov 13, 2015, attacks that killed 130 people in Paris and wounded hundreds of others. Laachraoui was one of the bombers who blew themselves up at Brussels airport and a city metro train on Mar 22, 2016, killing 32 people and wounding hundreds of others.