

Brussels jihadists: Belgian recruiter Zerkani given longer term

From the [France 24](#)

Khaled Zerkani has been given 15 years in jail by a Belgian appeal court for recruiting Islamists, including some of the Paris and Brussels attackers.

He was jailed last July for 12 years but prosecutors called for a longer sentence, arguing he had corrupted entire communities of youth.

Among his recruits were Paris attackers Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Chakib Akrouh, and Brussels bomber Najim Laachraoui. "He's the emir, the leader...", a suspect identified as Yacine E. told investigators in a deposition leaked to Belgian daily *La Derniere Heure*.

Zerkani's fellow recruiter Fatima Aberkane was also given 15 years.

The Moroccan-born Belgian national operated from underground mosques in the now notorious Brussels suburb of Molenbeek, which has been linked to a string of terrorist attacks ranging from the 2001 killing of Afghan hero Ahmad Shah Massoud to the recent assaults in Paris and Brussels.

Zerkani ran a network of petty criminals and used the proceeds to send jihadists to Syria. His long beard and habit of allowing thieves to keep part of the spoils earned him the nickname "Father Christmas".

The radical preacher is known for his secrecy, including the use of coded speech to avoid detection, and his violent aversion to all things "*kuffar*" (infidel).

He was also involved in a second trial earlier this year, in which Belgian prosecutors requested jail terms of between two and 15 years for 30 alleged members of another jihadist cell linked to Zerkani. The accused included Laachraoui, the suspected bomb maker for both the Paris and Brussels attacks, who blew himself up in the Belgian capital's airport on March 22. The court's ruling is expected on May 3. At the start of the trial, Zerkani obtained the right to be tried separately. The prosecution against him can proceed now that the appeals court has ruled on his first conviction.