

## **“INTERVIEW WITH A FORMER FOREIGN FIGHTER FROM MOROCCO”**

**Interview with a former foreign fighter, Rachid Lemlihi, from Morocco published by al-Maghribiyyah.**

Some key topics are extremely relevant in this interview. Rashid was not a radical before his departure to Syria. The main driver for his decision to come back was the internal infights between the different terrorist and insurgent groups.

INTERVIEW WITH RACHID LEMLIHI Magharebia: Tell us about yourself. Rachid Lemlihi: I'm a young Moroccan Muslim born in 1981 in Tetouan. I hail from a conservative family. My father died when I was less than 3 years old. I quit school at an early stage when I was in the second preparatory grade although I was doing fine and working hard. However, my unstable family conditions forced me to quit school to look for work. I got married when I was 24 years old. I have four children, and my oldest son is just 8 years old....

Magharebia: Have you ever had any radical religious views at any stage of your life? Lemlihi: Frankly, I was not an extremist or radical at any stage of my life...I liked playing football and going to the beach to spend a nice time with my friends...I was a normal young man. I was addicted to social networking websites, especially Facebook, and I used to spend hours browsing internet websites.

Magharebia: What made you think about going to Syria to fight? Lemlihi: I used to feel pain whenever I saw or heard about the suffering of the Syrian people. The news, satellite channels and internet websites carried such news day and night and depicted how they were being killed and displaced in their own country... Anyway, I travelled to Syria...to help.

Magharebia: How did you get to Syria? Lemlihi: I spoke with one of my neighbors who went there before me and encouraged me to go. I was in touch with him via Facebook and on the phone to co-ordinate and make the final arrangements before the start of journey. The journey started from Mohammed V Airport in Casablanca. They asked me about my destination, I said I was going to Turkey ... The plane landed and my Moroccan friend was waiting for me. He took me in a four-wheel drive vehicle to the Syria border.

Magharebia: What happened next? Did you join up right away with other Maghreb jihadists in Syria? Lemlihi: ...When I arrived in Syria, I was taken to a living quarter which they call "guest house." It's in the form of three large housing buildings, each consisting of three large floors featuring large reception areas, fully equipped air-conditioned bedrooms, flat TVs, satellite internet, and all types of delicious foods and drinks. I was just amazed. I spent two months there. I then met many Moroccans. Each had chosen the group or faction he felt comfortable with and wanted to fight for... My friend was a member of ISIL [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], which I didn't feel comfortable with. I had my own harsh criticisms on Twitter and Facebook of that group and its movements when I was still in Morocco. I felt that even Syrian citizens in the Aleppo countryside didn't feel comfortable with the group and were not pleased with us...They are simple citizens who want to live in peace and security, away from the daily infighting of groups and factions in Syria. I was in real pain when I saw that...

Magharebia: What happened once you saw the reality on the ground? Lemlihi: I was afraid to die for a cause I no longer believed in. I thought I was wrong because I left my family and children and rushed to Syria where I was shocked with the daily infighting between people. I didn't cover all these distances to come and fight. I started to feel that my presence in Syria was a big mistake, and I had three options: stay until I die for a cause I no longer felt comfortable with or believed in; travel to Turkey or to another place where I would live alone until I died; or return and bear the consequences. Finally, after some thinking, I decided to return...I told myself that the Moroccan authorities wouldn't arrest us, but would only ask us some questions about the journey and its motives and then we would be released. However, I was arrested at the airport, and I was taken to prison pending trial.

Magharebia: What advice can you give other young men who are thinking about going to Syria? Lemlihi: I want to tell them the following: "Don't run after illusions and don't believe videos in which Syrians appear calling for assistance and support." Related Articles

Militants use man's death as a recruiting tool for Syrian conflict When I was there, many young people active on Facebook using aliases asked me about jihad and fighting in Syria. I told them: "Don't come. Stay in your country because I regretted coming in search of a mirage." There's nothing in Syria except factions and groups fighting each other. This type of fighting is not accepted by any mind or logic. These are the words of someone who lived the experience. Don't be deceived. Going to Syria is an adventure of unknown consequences. As to reward, there is none... The only reward there is death.

