



# France's legendary terror cop

Carlos the Jackal's nemesis walks the global beat, warning of a "permanent" threat.

By **JAY CHESHES**

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**A**s the most senior counter-terrorism man in France, Jean-Louis Bruguière has often felt like there's a bull's-eye painted on his forehead. Over the years he's made mortal enemies of some of the world's most prolific political killers. In 1987, one of them tried to blow him to bits by placing a primed hand grenade on the doorknob of his Paris apartment. The attempt on his life was foiled by a vigilant member of Bruguière's security detachment, who spotted the explosive and defused it while the judge was still at work.

After the attack Bruguère, an investigating magistrate in the counter-terrorism division of the French judiciary, started carrying his own gun to the office -- a .357 Magnum he proudly showed off to visiting reporters. "I'm quite a good shot," he liked to say, brandishing the weapon like a Gallic John Wayne.

The judge, who a few years ago started leaving his gun at home, now travels in an armor-plated car with two full-time bodyguards. His work quarters are the most heavily fortified in the Palais de Justice, with security cameras, two levels of bulletproof glass and a small detachment of heavily armed judicial police on duty 24 hours a day. Although much of the 17th century complex is ornate and gilded, Bruguère's office itself is unremarkable. A drab institutional space at the end of an attic-like corridor lined with wooden benches, it looks more like it might house a private-school headmaster than a man known in law enforcement circles as one of the world's most tenacious terrorist hunters. Besides a brightly hued abstract painting of squiggles and swirls that hangs over his big wood desk there's nothing much on the walls -- no plaques, pictures or framed press clippings immortalizing his exploits tracking down killers of every ideological persuasion.

Bruguère is 58 years old and has tiny eyes and a hangdog scowl that flattens his pencil-thin lips and blows out the puff in his cheeks. In his office, whether leafing through a case file or staring down his nose at a terrorist suspect, he is usually sucking on a pipe or chewing on a cigar. He favors pinstripe suits and wears a trench coat and wire frame reading glasses. He speaks softly, in short, unadorned sentences. Although he sometimes flashes the slightest self-satisfied smirk, Bruguère's poker face gives away next to nothing, which has led many to underestimate him -- and to learn of their mistake the hard way.

When Bruguère discovered in late January 1992 that officials in the government of Francois Mitterrand had secretly given the green light for a notorious terrorist leader to slip into Paris for medical treatment, he decided very quickly to take matters into his own hands. Old and frail and recovering from a stroke, George Habash, the founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine -- a radical splinter group of the PLO that virtually invented airplane hijackings -- had flown into Le Bourget Airport and, with a clandestine wink from the right people, quietly checked into a Red Cross hospital.

By that time, despite what often seemed a lack of French political will to support his efforts, Bruguière had been waging his own personal war on terrorism for nearly a decade. Under the French system, investigating magistrates are like supercharged district attorneys: Entirely independent and unconstrained by politics, they have extraordinary powers. In directing criminal investigations, they can file charges, issue search and arrest warrants and commandeer detectives, spies and diplomats. And, like an independent counsel in the U.S., they can even bring their own government to the verge of collapse.

Habash's presence in Paris offered Bruguière the opportunity to plumb unanswered questions about unsolved hijackings and a large arms cache found hidden in the woods near Fontainebleau; but most of all, it offered the chance to make headlines, the kind that would teach the politicians a painful lesson. A few days after Habash checked into the Hopital Henri Dunant, Bruguière made a public announcement that he was heading down there to question him. "We didn't know what would happen," explains Alain Marsaud, a former judge and politician who founded the counter-terrorism division of the French judiciary. "Bruguière really did it to amuse himself, to force the government to its knees." Because case files under French law are closed to public scrutiny, nobody had any idea what the judge had on Habash - - whether he planned to merely question, or possibly arrest, the man. "The politicians were terrified," continues Marsaud. "Over a period of 48 hours he made them very, very scared."

Chasing George Habash in Paris at his own government's expense all but cauterized Bruguière against political and administrative reprisals, guaranteeing him carte blanche to take his investigations wherever they might lead him. When the Palestinian's doctors insisted their patient was in no condition to talk to anyone, Bruguière holstered his guns long enough for Habash to be whisked from France. Afterwards Mitterrand made a very public show of denying foreknowledge of the fiasco and after calls for the resignations of both the foreign and interior ministers, scrambled to quiet the furor by canning a dozen lesser bureaucrats. The following year, many in that government were ousted.

Due in large part to his own bravado, Bruguière has truly become one of the most fearsome opponents of terrorism in Europe. For years he has enjoyed the kind of investigative freedom that was only recently approved for American law enforcement, with great leeway to authorize wiretaps and hold terrorist suspects for long periods before trial. With only a fraction of the

resources available to his FBI colleagues across the Atlantic, the judge has racked up an impressive string of coups -- although often at the expense, say critics, of the civil liberties that are the backbone of French democracy.

Over the last few months French police under his direction have smashed several al-Qaida cells, including a group that had been planning to attack a cathedral in Strasbourg and another that had been plotting to blow up the American Embassy in Paris. In the last two decades he has had his fingers in the investigation of just about every terrorist incident involving French victims. He is the man who finally put Carlos the Jackal behind bars, and he was the first investigator to publicly link the Libyan government to acts of terrorism. Last spring he traveled to Los Angeles to testify in the terrorism trial of Ahmed Ressam, an Algerian militant who'd crossed into the United States from Canada carrying powerful explosives he intended to use at Los Angeles International Airport.

The judge takes a fairly liberal interpretation of what constitutes terrorism. Authorized to pursue any case that abuts the interests of mother France, Bruguière seems to adopt any high profile act of violence that might thrust him further into the spotlight. A few years ago he flew to Cambodia to dig for information on the kidnapping and murder by Khmer Rouge guerrillas of a couple of French tourists. He later traveled to central Africa after opening an investigation into the attack that brought down the Rwandan president's plane and ignited that country's 1994 genocide. Bruguière has pursued terrorism cases against the governments of Libya, Iran and even Israel -- whose intelligence service he's accused of being behind the assassination in Paris of a Palestinian official. At times he seems to be making his own foreign policy, often to the great annoyance of French diplomats and politicians. "He likes playing ambassador, playing minister of foreign affairs," says a former colleague. "He adores that."

Since Sept. 11, Bruguière has been working almost exclusively on cases involving the European activities of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, which he has described as being "like a cancer ... spreading very quickly." He opened an official investigation into a bin Laden cell in France the day before airliners first screamed into American landmarks, and by the time U.S. bombs began raining down on Afghanistan, he had rounded up more than a dozen suspects. "We started working on these networks as early as '94," he says. "Unfortunately the

11th of September didn't change much in my work. All it did was accelerate investigations we had already started."

Bruguière likes to leave nothing up to chance -- trusting only himself and the colleagues in his unit to really get the work done. "The counter-terrorism division is so insular," says Jean-Pierre Dubois, a law professor and civil libertarian who three years ago helped write a report that offered a scathing indictment of Bruguière and his aggressive investigative tactics. "They believe they are the only ones who have any real sense of the threat posed by terrorism. Not the government or the parliament or us, only they understand."

A week after the World Trade Center collapsed, Bruguière was on a plane to the Arab emirate of Dubai, where last summer authorities had arrested Djamel Beghal, an Algerian traveling on a fake French passport. After undergoing what he later claimed were beatings and torture, Beghal told his captors that he'd traveled to Afghanistan where he'd met with top bin Laden aides who'd instructed him to organize attacks on U.S. targets in Europe. Working with other extremists across Europe, he'd hatched a plan to send a suicide bomber into the U.S. Embassy in Paris. In Dubai, accompanied by a small coterie of French counterintelligence officers, Bruguière grilled the Islamic militant and then applied diplomatic pressure to have him extradited immediately to France. A week later, he arrived shackled in Bruguière's office on the Ile de la Cité.

Jean-Louis Bruguière was born into a judicial dynasty in the Aveyron, peasant country in the highlands of central France. His family boasts 10 generations of magistrates, including his father and grandfather, both of whom finished their careers in the Supreme Court. After a brief stint in the Air Force, Bruguière, an amateur pilot who used to fly his own Cessna, followed his destiny and began the studies that would lead him as a young man into the judiciary. He arrived in Paris in 1976 and, already thirsting for the media spotlight, began to specialize in sensational murders and organized crime. He took down a high-class call-girl ring whose client list included many high-ranking government officials. In 1981, in what would become the first of many extraterritorial excursions, Bruguière traveled to Japan to hunt down information about a Japanese student living in Paris who had dismembered and then cannibalized his Dutch girlfriend.

The following year, on a warm Monday afternoon in August, he got his first taste of the terrorist onslaught when masked gunmen stormed Joe Goldenberg's, a well-known Jewish restaurant, in the middle of the lunchtime rush, spraying the dining room with machine gun fire and leaving six patrons dead and more than a dozen wounded. At the time the judge, who is now married to a corporate lawyer with whom he has two young teenagers, was still a bachelor workaholic. He liked to work the month of August when most of his colleagues, along with just about every other Parisian, had skipped town for some congested beach. As one of the only judges on duty the day of the attack he inherited the case -- the first of what would quickly become his judicial niche. He arrived on the scene while the splattered blood was still fresh.

The restaurant attack, the beginning of a wave of assaults all across Europe, sent French counter-terrorism policy into a tailspin, inspiring a froth of criticism against President Mitterrand and his prime minister, Pierre Mauroy -- who, that evening inside the restaurant, looked the stoic French judge in the eyes and told him in no uncertain terms to find the guilty parties and put them away. "I will put all means necessary at your disposal," Mauroy told Bruguière. "I mean all means."

Abu Nidal, a Palestinian extremist who, before bin Laden came along, held the title of the world's single most murderous terrorist leader, was the prime suspect in the attack. Without success for more than two decades, Bruguière has tried to pin the killings on Nidal, who is still at large somewhere in the Middle East. "I'm still working on this case 20 years later," he says. "A democracy must never forget. There is no pardon, there is no forgiveness for those who carry out a deliberate attack on civilians."

Around the same time that Bruguière started to carve out his niche on terrorist cases, Alain Marsaud, then an influential magistrate in the Paris court, began lobbying the Mitterrand government to approve the formation of a special counter-terrorism unit of the French judiciary. The measures pushed through by Marsaud in 1986 called for all terrorism cases to be centralized in the hands of a small collection of Paris-based judges, who would be granted far greater investigative powers than their colleagues in the judiciary. Marsaud was appointed to head the new unit. He chose Bruguière as one of four investigating magistrates who would work alongside him on nothing but acts of terror.

Bruguière quickly came to dominate the division, and when Marsaud left to run for public office in 1990 he essentially took over. He worked overtime to push the limits of judicial independence by traveling extensively and insisting on being on the ground through the most crucial steps of a terrorism investigation -- to witness the gunfights and busted down doors.

When a French passenger jet, UTA Flight 772, went down over the Teniri Desert in Niger in 1989, in the worst terrorist incident in French history, Bruguière flew immediately to the scene. The debris and pulverized remains of 171 passengers were scattered over 50 square miles of rocky dunes many miles from the nearest civilized outpost. Clad in military garb, Bruguière jumped from a helicopter alongside French commandos brought in to secure the area. He stood under the blazing African sun surveying the wreckage and then ordered all 14 million pieces of debris collected from the hot sand and transported by truck to the closest airport. From there they were flown to Paris and laid out in a giant hangar at Le Bourget Airport, where technicians painstakingly reconstructed the downed aircraft. Under the gaze of American observers from the National Transportation Safety Board they managed to isolate the location of the suitcase bomb that had destroyed the plane.

The UTA case became the most important of Bruguière's career. He spent eight years chasing down leads, flying personally to the Samsonite factory in Colorado, where suitcase fragments were tested to determine the exact model of the valise used for the bomb. He tracked a tiny piece of a circuit board found in the desert to a small factory in China. That company, he discovered, had provided orders to a manufacturer in Germany that had used them as components in timers, 100 of which had been sold to the Libyan secret service. Bruguière conducted interviews all over the Middle East and Africa and then decided that the evidence he sought was in fact in Tripoli.

Through diplomatic channels, Bruguière applied political pressure on Libyan president Moammar Gadhafi to throw open his doors and, when approval arrived, turned to the French Ministry of Defense for transportation across the Mediterranean. With the nod of the prime minister himself in October 1992, the judge hitched a ride on a French nuclear warship. "I said now they've gone crazy," recalls Alain Marsaud. "I mean, to give a warship to a judge to go to Tripoli? I think when he asked for this, Bruguière did it just to provoke a reaction, being certain

it would be turned down." Needless to say, Gadhafi wasn't about to let a missile-laden warship into Libyan waters and Bruguière was turned away.

Eventually, through conventional means, he wound up spending 10 days conducting interviews and gathering evidence on Libyan soil. In the offices of the Libyan secret service the judge found a suitcase bomb that was identical to the one that had been used to destroy the French airliner. The Libyans claimed they'd seized the device from an opposition group. "We never found out if these supposed opposition members even existed," recalls another judge who was on that trip with Bruguière.

When he returned to Paris, a growing body of evidence in hand, Bruguière began to build a case against six Libyan agents, including Gadhafi's own brother-in-law. In 1999 those men, who have never been apprehended, were sentenced in absentia to life in prison. Bruguière's work on the UTA case helped set the stage for the imposition of United Nations sanctions against Libya and the eventual prosecution, in an international court, of another group of Libyan agents accused of destroying Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie Scotland in 1988. Two years ago, even as the government of France was pursuing a policy of rapprochement with the Libyan regime, Bruguière tried to extend the case even further, pushing to indict Gadhafi himself for complicity in the attack. That headline-grabbing move was definitively squashed last spring when France's highest court of appeals ordered the investigation closed on the grounds that it was contrary to international law to pursue a criminal case against a sitting world leader.

These days Bruguière has two real nemeses -- Osama bin Laden and Carlos the Jackal, the colorful terrorist for hire who for many years was Bruguière's most elusive prey. In 1994 he was snatched by commandos from his Sudanese hideout and dropped on the judge's doorstep. When the two men first met in Bruguière's office, Carlos, who claims to be responsible for more than 80 murders, showed his admiration for his jailer by calling him a "star" and inviting him to lunch. Bruguière responded by gathering enough evidence to put Carlos behind bars for the rest of his life. His dealings with the judge, whom he continues to threaten and sue, have soured considerably since their first encounter. "Evidently when you have two strong personalities like Bruguière and Carlos, things are going to get sticky," says



Charles Villeneuve, a friend of the judge and the author of a 1987 book on terrorism.

"Bruguière doesn't care about the insults and the threats. He loves that, it validates him."

Last spring Bruguière flew to Los Angeles to be an expert witness at the terrorism conspiracy trial of Ahmed Ressam, an Algerian militant whom he'd tracked from France to Canada before he disappeared under a false identity, eventually slipping across the U.S. border with a trunk full of explosives. Bruguière spoke for hours before U.S. District Judge John Coughenour outlining the complex links between Ressam, bin Laden, Algerian extremists and a European network known to be trafficking in fake passports. Eventually the judge ruled most of Bruguière's testimony inadmissible on the basis that it might prejudice the jury. In his briefcase, the French magistrate had a mountain of material he never was able to discuss -- although he did hand most of it over to the FBI -- including statements from a source about a pair of blond-haired Americans who'd returned to California after being spotted training at a bin Laden camp in Afghanistan. Those men have never been apprehended.

After testifying, Bruguière spoke with a reporter from the right-leaning French daily Le Figaro, who'd followed him to the U.S. In an ominous bit of foresight, he warned that now was not the time "to let down our guard." "Remember that these groups, mostly supported by Osama bin Laden, are targeting the West and especially the United States," he said. "The radical Islamists have not disarmed ... The threat, in fact, is permanent."

By **JAY CHESHES**

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