

France: Police raid Muslim club in counter-terrorism operation

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France, Lille: French police raided a Muslim faith centre and arrested three of its leaders for illegal weapons possession in pre-dawn swoops on Tuesday that government officials said were prompted by suspicion of links to terrorist organisations.

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Some 200 police officers including elite troopers from Paris took part in raids that began under darkness at the Centre Zahra France and homes of a dozen of its members, in Grande Synthe near the northern port town of Dunkirk.

"This is a counter-terrorism operation," the local prefect's office said a statement.

"The activities of Centre Zahra France are under particularly close watch given its leaders' clear support for several terrorist organisations and movements espousing ideas contrary to (French) republican values."

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The raids coincided with an announcement that France had also seized assets belonging to Iran's intelligence services and two Iranian nationals over a June plot to attack an exiled Iranian opposition group's rally outside Paris.

Two sources said there was no direct link between the raids and the Iranian intelligence asset freezes.

Assets of the Centre Zahra France were frozen too, along with financial assets held under other names, on orders issued by France's interior and finance ministry, a notice published in the official government journal of legal acts said.

The centre's website says it has some 8,000 "followers" on social network sites and its goal is to spread the message of Islam via film, radio, writings and conferences. It also offers a contact point on social, family and religious matters.

France, which is historically a predominantly Roman Catholic country, is officially secular, with separation by law between matters of state and religion for over a century. It is home to five million or more Muslims out of a population of 67 million.

President Emmanuel Macron, under pressure to get tougher on radical preachers, has promised to produce plans better defining the place of Islam's representatives in France. A radical imam was expelled to Algeria last April from

a mosque in Marseille.

- Reuters