

France vs. Jihadism: The Republic in a New Age of Terror



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January 2017

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ISBN: 978-2-36567-674-8

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How to quote this document:

Marc Hecker and Elie Tenenbaum, “France vs. Jihadism:
The Republic in a New Age of Terror”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, January 2017.

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Introduction

The terrorist threat in France has dramatically increased since 2012, and especially over the past two years. Several fatal attacks occurred during this period: 17 people died in January 2015, 130 in November 2015 and 86 on Bastille Day 2016. Other attacks, though less lethal, have also attracted significant media coverage. In June 2015, a man claiming to be part of the “Islamic State” (IS, also known as ISIS) beheaded his boss and attempted to blow up a chemical plant. In June 2016, a policeman and his wife were killed in their home. A month later, an 85-year-old priest was executed by two men during a church ceremony in a small provincial town. In addition, at least a dozen attacks had failed or were thwarted, but which demonstrated that Jihadis could strike anywhere, at any time.

There are several reasons why France has become a prime target for Jihadi groups. In the past, groups such as the Algerian-based Islamic Armed Group (GIA), the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), and later *al-Qaeda* in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) all blamed France for its colonial history and its ties with Algiers’ perceived infidel government. They also criticized the French for being impious and perverted. Today, ISIS puts a heavier emphasis on these kinds of essentialist remarks. Furthermore, this organization targets France specifically for three reasons: First, Jihadis condemn France for its “anti-Muslim policies” at home. ISIS has repeatedly used the 2004 law prohibiting religious signs in schools and the 2010 law banning face covering in public spaces – both voted on according to the French principle of *laïcité* – to underline how Muslims are consistently humiliated in France. Second, Jihadis fault France for intervening militarily in the Muslim world. France’s operations in Mali, Iraq and Syria have predominantly been pointed out, assumptions that prompt ISIS to claim that France is waging a war against Islam. Consequently, they view terrorist attacks on French soil as just reprisal. Finally, Jihadis target the French population – of which Muslims represent approximately 8% – because they view French society as weak and extremely divided. Jihadis hope to create chaos, enabling them to extend their influence and eventually carry out their order.

The French Way of Jihad

Over the summer of 2016, several municipalities across France cancelled popular events out of fear of an attack. For example, the city of Lille cancelled its annual garage sale and Nice cancelled the European road cycling championship. In turn, ISIS exploited these preventive measures to bolster its propaganda messages, insisting on having successfully spread fear across the country.¹ Local authorities based their decision on their inability to protect huge crowds given the breadth of the threat.

Jihadism looming over France may be outlined in the following four threat categories:

The most immediate threat originates from the wars in Syria and Iraq. Among Western states, France has the highest number of nationals that have joined Jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. The French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, presented alarming figures before the National Assembly on July 19, 2016,² noting that 680 French adults – a third of which were women – and 420 minors were living in Syria or Iraq at the time. He added that 187 more had died in combat there. When people return from war zones, authorities struggle to distinguish those who present a genuine threat from those who can integrate back into French society. For now, anyone returning from Syria is prosecuted, and most individuals are put into pre-trial custody. In June 2016, the Minister of Justice, Jean-Jacques Urvoas, revealed figures that highlight how France's judiciary system is facing an unprecedented challenge, stating that currently there are 317 legal proceedings being processed concerning people returning from Syria.³

In addition to the returnees identified by authorities, there is also the risk of terrorists clandestinely infiltrating French borders. The November 2015 attacks exemplify this menace. The nine terrorists that coordinated these attacks had trained with ISIS in the Middle East, returned to Europe unidentified, and then traveled freely within the

1. See the tenth issue of ISIS' Francophone online magazine, *Dar al-Islam*, August 2016, p.26-27.

2. Full transcript of July 19, 2016 National Assembly session, www.assemblee-nationale.fr, page visited on August 24, 2016.

3. Jean-Jacques Urvoas, hearing before the National Assembly, June 1, 2016. All hearings referenced in this article took place under the inquiry commission on the government's measures implemented since January 7, 2015 to fight terrorism.

Schengen area. Most of them arrived with the hundreds of thousands of refugees that had fled to Europe over the course of 2015.⁴ Such a large influx of people proved difficult to manage. Later, investigators discovered that two of the three suicide-bombers that blew themselves up outside of the *Stade de France* had arrived on the Greek Island of Leros with fake passports, along with about 200 refugees.

The perpetrators of the November 13th attacks had obviously trained in a terrorist sanctuary. On that day, 3 commandos acting simultaneously killed dozens using suicide belts. This level of sophistication could not have been reached had they only trained in France, where firearm sales are heavily controlled and it is nearly impossible to practice shooting without catching the attention of French authorities. Thus, so long as Jihadi groups have sanctuaries at their command around the Mediterranean Sea, the threat will remain high in Europe. Today, the “Islamic State” is the organization most likely to send fighters to carry out more attacks. This is reinforced by the fact that a former soldier in the French foreign legion, known by the *nom de guerre* Abu Suleiman al-Firansi, allegedly holds an important position among those responsible for organizing attacks abroad.⁵

The threat of an attack operated by *al-Qaeda* should not be underestimated either. By committing a spectacular attack in a Western country, *al-Qaeda* would prove that it still competes against ISIS for the leadership of global Jihadism. Moreover, several former French residents, such as David Drugeon and Said Arif (both killed by Western air strikes in Syria in 2015) had joined the Khorasan group, which is allegedly responsible for *al-Qaeda*'s foreign operations. Finally, many Frenchmen who decided to join Jihadi organizations abroad have chosen *al-Qaeda* over ISIS. For instance, the main French-speaking recruiter, Omar Omsen, has successfully recruited dozens of young Frenchmen into *al-Qaeda*'s networks. He was very active in the region around Nice before he left for Syria. He is also the author of propaganda videos that were widely circulated across the Internet.

4. Philippe Chadrys (deputy director in charge of anti-terrorism for France's judiciary police), hearing before the National Assembly, March 9, 2016; J.-C. Brisard and Kevin Jackson, “The Islamic State's External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus”, *CTC Sentinel*, November 10, 2016.

5. S. Seelow, “Abdelilah Himich, le légionnaire devenu cadre de l'organisation État islamique”, *Le Monde*, November 23, 2016.

The second type of threat emanates from the reactivation of older Jihadi networks. Before the civil war in Syria, France already had a 30-year-long history of confrontation with Jihadism. Dozens of Frenchmen had trained in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Sahel, Somalia or Yemen. However, French authorities only recently became conscious of the risks these men engender. In the past, jail sentences rarely exceeded a few years for men who were caught as they returned from Jihad fronts, and only a few months if they were arrested before leaving. For example, in January 2009, Walid Othmani was intercepted at Charles De Gaulle airport when he returned from Turkey. The authorities later found out he had spent five months in a training camp on the Afghan-Pakistan border. During the investigation, he confessed to having learned how to shoot automatic weapons and build explosives. He was sentenced in February 2011 to five years of imprisonment, 30 months of which was suspended. Judges were lenient as they thought Othmani was “becoming increasingly respectful of public order.”⁶ He was released soon afterwards, given that he had already spent a significant amount of time in pre-trial custody. No later than April 2011, he visited Said Arif, who was under house arrest in a small provincial town. Both men disappeared but were later identified in Syria, where Othmani was purportedly killed in early 2016.

Boubakeur el Hakim is another Jihadi who served time in French prisons before leaving for Syria. This Franco-Tunisian man was handed over to France by the Syrian authorities in May 2005. The investigation disclosed that el Hakim had fought in Iraq and recruited other Frenchmen, such as his brother who died in the Battle of Fallujah in 2004. El Hakim told investigators that “attacks against Americans or Iraqi police forces were legitimate” and that “Jihad should eventually result in the establishment of an Islamic State.”⁷ He was sentenced in 2008 to seven years in prison. After he was released in 2011, he joined the Jihadi group *Ansar al-Shari’a* in Tunisia. In 2015, el Hakim gave an interview to *Dabiq*, ISIS English-speaking online magazine, in which he took credit for killing the Tunisian Member of Parliament, Mohamed Brahmi, before heading to Syria.⁸

6. “Ministère public contre Othmani, Aziri, Ghamri et autres”, Paris District Court, sentenced February 18, 2011.

7. “Ministère public contre El Ayouni, Bouchnak, Benyettou et autres”, Paris District Court, sentenced May 14, 2008.

8. “Interview with Abu Muqatil”, *Dabiq*, No. 8, March 2015.

Chérif Kouachi was prosecuted at the same time as Boubakeur el Hakim. They were both part of the “Buttes Chaumont” Jihadi network, which was named after the Parisian park where the group used to workout. Kouachi was arrested the day before he had intended to leave for Iraq in January 2005. In addition to finding his flight tickets, the police discovered documents on Jihadism and suicide attacks. The group leader, Farid Benyettou, told investigators that Kouachi was ready to die in combat. Despite this confession, Kouachi was only sentenced to three years of imprisonment, of which half was suspended. Ten years after this arrest, he and his brother Said – who trained with *al-Qaeda* in Yemen – committed the attack against *Charlie Hebdo*.

A year and a half after the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, Larossi Abballa broke into a policeman’s home in Magnanville, located in the suburbs of Paris. After killing the police officer and slaughtering his wife, while streaming it live on Facebook, Abballa questioned whether he should also kill the couple’s 3-year-old son. He too was a former convict of terrorism. In 2013, he had been sentenced to three years of imprisonment, with 6 months of it suspended, for being part of a French Jihadi network that sent fighters to Pakistan.

Thirdly, France faces the threat of people who did not receive training abroad but were radicalized at home. These individuals are often referred to as “lone-wolves.” Yet, police investigations have shown that, in fact, they often retain ties with other radicals through the Internet or in real life. The “home-grown” threat has become an increasing concern over the past two years as it has gradually become more difficult to leave Europe for Syria. What’s more, Jihadis have encouraged their supporters to take up action independently. These messages have been broadcast by important leaders such as ISIS’ spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani – killed in August 2016 – as well as foot soldiers. For example, in February 2015, two francophone fighters broadcast a video, from Salah al-Din’s *Wilaya* in Iraq, urging French Muslims to perpetrate attacks at home. They claimed “Defend the honor of your Prophet! Fight them, kill them! [...] Spit at them, burn their cars, burn down their police stations, don’t ever pity them.”⁹

9. M. Hecker, “Web social et djihadisme. Du diagnostic aux remèdes”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 57, Ifri, June 2015, p. 21.

The French government has tried to identify the people who may be receptive to this kind of message. In 2015, a national database of suspected radicalized individuals was created, listing 13,000 persons by mid-2016.¹⁰ Cases of radicalization have been reported throughout the country. Through the Internet, ISIS has been successful in reaching big cities and their *banlieues* as well as remote rural areas. Radicalization does not only affect marginalized Muslims with poor backgrounds and lacking prospects for the future: all levels of society are concerned. The French Member of Parliament, Sébastien Pietrasanta, wrote a report on deradicalization, in which he sampled 2,281 individuals tagged for radicalization. He highlighted that 25% were minors, 42% were women and 56% were converts to Islam. According to him, “the new Jihad candidates are increasingly young, come from various social backgrounds and many have no criminal record.”¹¹

Security forces do not have the means to constantly monitor the individuals who have been tagged for radicalization. The level of surveillance depends on how dangerous the individual is presumed to be. Of course, such measures can never be completely reliable. For example, the two men who slaughtered the priest in July 2016 were included in the list. In addition, some resort to ‘*taqqiya*’, an Arabic word that refers to an act of dissimulation, in order to prevent them from being tagged as ‘radicalized’. This seems to be the case for Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, who ran over the crowd with a truck in Nice on July 14, 2016. The police only knew of him for assaulting another driver but never suspected him to be radicalized.

The fourth threat comes from what French intelligence specialists call ‘oblique attacks’. This refers to attacks committed in France by foreign nationals. France particularly fears two scenarios. The first consists of European nationals, taking advantage of free movement of people within the Schengen area, committing attacks on French territory. This is what some of the assailants of the November 13th, 2015 attacks did. Among the nine terrorists who were killed, two had Belgian citizenship and two others were residing in Belgium. The head of the French Domestic Intelligence Agency (DGSI), Patrick Calvar, stated that the attackers had only come to France from Belgium the day before the attacks.¹² Thus, it was

10. Olivier de Mazières (head of the general staff for the prevention of terrorism), hearing before the National Assembly, May 23, 2016.

11. S. Pietrasanta, *La déradicalisation, outil de lutte contre le terrorisme*, report drafted for the Minister of the Interior, June 2015, p. 8.

12. Patrick Calvar, hearing before the National Assembly, May 24, 2016.

nearly impossible for the DGSI to identify and prevent the terrorists from perpetrating the attacks.

The second scenario France fears is the cultural and geographical proximity of the francophone world. Calvar openly acknowledged that “We should no longer think in terms of French nationals or residents, but rather in terms of French speakers. Thousands of Tunisians, Moroccans and Algerians could be sent to our country.” Tunisia is a particularly worrying case, given that around 6,000 of its nationals are thought to have fought in Syria. Calvar added, “My problem is that we have no way of monitoring French speaking people coming from Northern Africa.”

In sum, Jihadis use a full spectrum of terror tactics to try and undermine France. They range from individual violence inspired by ISIS’ propaganda to much more sophisticated attacks planned from war zones. In light of these security threats, France’s measures to combat terrorism have constantly evolved since 2014.

The French War on Terror

The January 2015 attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* caused great tremor within French political life. Although this was not France's first encounter with Jihadi terrorism, it prompted stronger reactions within civil society than any other in the past. In the days following the attacks, millions of people marched the streets of France – along with dozens of leaders from all around the world – in opposition to terrorism and unconditional support for liberal values such as freedom of expression, which many had interpreted as being the Jihadis' target.

The unprecedented scale of the movement incited French political leaders to widely adopt the '*Je suis Charlie*' slogan. This was originally used to show solidarity with the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, which had been the first target of the attacks. Although this motto was supposed to unite all strata of society, it was perceived by some as conveying a secularist – and even antireligious – message. It was particularly true for a portion of French Muslims, who already felt stigmatized by the media and discriminated against in the economy, and thus could not feel they were part of this union.¹³

Despite these unresolved tensions within French society, the Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, delivered a warlike speech before the Parliament. He declared that France was, from then on, engaged in a “war against terrorism.” The use of this Bushian phrase by a French leader came as a surprise, as it had long been castigated by most French politicians. In 2006, the expression was even formally rejected in the *White Paper* on Internal Security and Terrorism. However, the warring rhetoric slowly crept in as France increased its interventions abroad. Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to step up French troops in Afghanistan in 2008 and François Hollande's choice to go to war in Mali against AQIM in January 2013, both contributed to bolstering the idea of a French war on terror. Hollande's Defense Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, was the first official to speak of a “war against Islamic terrorism,” without it attracting much attention from the press at the time.¹⁴

13. E. Todd, *Qui est Charlie ? Sociologie d'une crise*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2015.

14. D. Revault d'Allonnes, *Les guerres du Président*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2015.

But it was the November 13th attacks that really tipped the balance. These were immediately qualified as “acts of war” by President Hollande. In a dramatic address to the Nation, he declared a “state of emergency,” which had only been declared twice since the end of the Algerian war. In his speech before Congress in Versailles on November 16th, the President offered to amend the Constitution in order to strip any French national convicted for terrorism of their citizenship. This suggestion triggered endless political and media debates, which eventually convinced the executive to give up its attempted reform.

In France, unlike in the United States after the September 11, 2001 attacks, the threat was not only coming from abroad, but also from within, given that French nationals had turned against their own country. The expression ‘war on terror’ was therefore somewhat associated with the idea of a ‘civil war.’ This domestic dimension to Jihadism is actually part of the strategy, as it has been stated by Jihadi ideologues such as Abu Musab al-Suri or Abu Bakr Naji, under the terms of waging a “war of enclaves.”¹⁵ This led some right-wing politicians to refer to Jihadis as France’s “fifth column.” The Army’s Chief of Staff did not hesitate to talk about an “enemy within,” while the Chief of General Staff warned French MPs against “a comprehensive project of political and religious subversion.” Jihadis, and especially the “Islamic State” organization, were referred to by the Ministry of Defense, as a “terrorist army,” a “militarized threat,” which would have to be responded to in kind.¹⁶

Yet President Hollande did not wait for the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks to happen to start his “war on terror.” In January 2013, the French Army deployed 4,000 troops to Mali to halt Jihadi armed groups advancing toward Bamako. In less than six weeks, the French “liberated” the northern part of the country, which had been living under rigorous *Shari’a* law for six months. Paris knew, however, that a one-shot military victory would not put an end to endemic Jihadism in the region. In agreement with its local allies, France decided to adopt a “low-cost, long-endurance” approach in order to contain – rather than eradicate – terrorism. Operation *Barkhane* started in 2014 and comprised about 4,000 troops at the end of 2016. They are spread throughout the Sahel region (Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) forming a small but highly mobile force. They are supported by jet fighters, MQ-9 *Reaper* drones and attack helicopters, which can strike quickly on locally implanted terror groups such as AQIM, *Al-Mourabitoune* or *Ansar Dine*. France is working hard, at the

15. G. Kepel, *Terreur dans l’Hexagone*, Paris: Gallimard, 2016.

16. *Conditions d’emploi des armées lorsqu’elles interviennent sur le territoire national pour protéger la population*, Report of the Ministry of Defense to the Parliament, March 2016.

diplomatic-level, to encourage a frustratingly long peace process in Mali. While doing so, it is also taking on a key military assistance role in helping local forces build sustainable security. However, the situation in the Sahel region is deteriorating, which is why the French government is now considering a possible widening of the *Barkhane* operation. They intend to hold back *Boko Haram*'s northern expansion around Lake Chad and contain the looming threat in southern Libya, which has become a new sanctuary for all kinds of Jihadi movements.

However important Africa is to French strategy, the Middle East is certainly the theater most immediately connected to the domestic threat in France. Ever since an international anti-ISIS coalition was formed under American patronage over the summer of 2014, France has participated in air operations over Iraq. A couple months before the November 2015 attacks, President Hollande received intelligence regarding terror cells planning to attack France from ISIS-held ground in Syria. He then unilaterally decided to extend the strikes to Al-Raqqah, invoking its right of self-defense. After the November attacks, the number of air strikes nearly doubled for the French *Rafales* deployed in Jordan and the UAE. When the *Charles de Gaulle* carrier battle group was deployed in the Persian Gulf, over 4,000 French soldiers and 40 jet fighters were directly involved in the fight against ISIS. These figures include approximately 500 soldiers on the ground, conducting artillery fire support and training missions with the Iraqi army in Baghdad and with Kurdish *Peshmerga* in Erbil.

But of all military missions, homeland security has been the most consuming in terms of personnel. A few days after the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, François Hollande decided to launch the *Sentinelle* operation. This led to the deployment of 10,000 soldiers – 15% of the French Army's operational land force – to perform internal security missions. Over time, *Sentinelle* has had a tremendous impact on capabilities. To make up for the numbers, the High Command had to reduce training time by up to 30%. Although the government adapted quickly and had the Parliament vote on new credits for the Army, additional resources will only partially fill the gap.

Beyond this numbers game, there have been recurring debates around the genuine purpose of the mission. Due to judicial constraints, soldiers are not allowed to conduct intelligence missions, make arrests, or engage in kinetic counter-terror operations on metropolitan territory. What is left of their mission is lenient street patrolling, and occasional static guard duties. This has been all the more frustrating because the police, on its part, has become increasingly militarized. This, in turn, generated the strange feeling of role reversal within the military.

The police is certainly the one French institution that has attracted the most political attention since the anti-terror campaign started. While the institution had been reducing its numbers under former President Nicolas Sarkozy, the police has again become a priority for the current socialist president. After November 2015, President Hollande committed to safeguard the “security pact” – labeled after his own pre-electoral “growth pact” promise – by hiring 5,000 new personnel to join the 240,000 French *gendarmes* and police personnel already employed.

Special intervention teams (RAID, GIGN and BRI) have been on the rise as they were allocated additional resources and are now distributed throughout the country. They should be able to get anywhere within less than 20 minutes. Regular police units are now also being equipped with assault rifles and bullet-proof vests. This militarization trend is well-known in the United States, but is quite new to a country like France where there are strict regulations on firearm sales. A new law was passed in June 2016 that extends the security forces’ right to use deadly force beyond self-defense in the specific circumstances of a terrorist attack.

The most spectacular transformation, however, has happened within the intelligence community, which has grown 10% in the past three years. The sector has finally recovered from the 2008 reform that seriously harmed its efficiency. French domestic intelligence has particularly suffered from the 2008 disbanding of the century-old *Renseignements Généraux*, the police intelligence institution which retained a thorough knowledge of French civil society. It was re-founded in 2014 under the label of *Renseignement Territorial*. Its mission consists of establishing a tight surveillance grid throughout the territory. Overall, the French intelligence community has been paying increasing attention to early warnings and weak signals detection. In the counter-terrorism field, these are usually tagged under the “radicalization” banner. France’s major domestic intelligence agency, the DGSJ has also benefitted from extended surveillance powers on personal data thanks to a law passed in July 2015. To many human rights activists, this law amounted to a “French Patriot Act.”

The number of preventive actions skyrocketed after the state of emergency was declared. Born out of the Algerian war, this regime of exception temporarily transfers judicial attributions to the executive power. Although it renounced the authority to press censorship (present in the 1955 version), the updated 2015 law gave authorities the right to summon suspects to house arrest, and order police searches without judicial warrant. In its first six months of application, the state of emergency authorized nearly 3,500 searches, 400 house arrests and the

closure of a dozen mosques. These measures have led to nearly 600 legal proceedings. However, only 5 individuals were charged with terrorism. Emergency procedures have not only been criticized by human rights activists but also by the National Ombudsman Jacques Toubon. The latter, who is a former Minister of Justice, claims that these measures encroach on civil liberties and jeopardize “social cohesion in the country.”

Operational efficiency has also been an issue. It would seem that emergency measures have a destabilizing impact on Jihadi networks in France, however, their efficiency has been rapidly dwindling because the terror cells they were targeting quickly adapted to the new context.¹⁷ Doubts regarding their effectiveness grew bigger as people found out that Adel Kermiche, one of the authors of the July 28 attack, was under both house arrest and electronic tagging but was still free to come and go at certain times of the day.

Despite these shortfalls, French domestic intelligence services have thwarted at least 15 terror plots since January 2015. One should also note that 69 counter-terrorism operations have been conducted from abroad since January 2013 by France’s external intelligence service, the DGSE. Many of these operations have helped prevent attacks on French soil.¹⁸ And, France is not alone in the fight. It coordinates closely with the United States, especially since the signing of a bilateral agreement regarding intelligence sharing in February 2016. European cooperation is also improving. Europol has been empowered and created new databases regrouping Foreign Fighters. Though slow in its enactment, the European Union is adopting the European Passenger Name Record. With hundreds of thousands of people illegally crossing the European Union’s borders in 2015, the current refugee crisis also presents a formidable security challenge, which France cannot deal with alone.

However, counter-terrorism measures in a democracy cannot solely depend on police and intelligence operations. To counter the current Jihadi wave, France also needs to cope with its judicial issues. Terrorism as a criminal offense entered French law in 1986. A specialized public prosecution office, responsible for leading investigations, was also created at that time. Although this anti-terrorist section was sufficient to handle a relatively scarce quantity of cases until 2012, it is now overwhelmed because of the massively increasing French Jihadi threat. The number of

17. S. Pietrasanta, *Rapport fait au nom de la Commission d’Enquête relative aux moyens mis en œuvre par l’État pour lutter contre le terrorisme depuis le 7 janvier 2015*, National Assembly, July 5, 2016, p. 263.

18. Bernard Bajolet (head of the DGSE), hearing before the National Assembly, May 24, 2016.

cases has quintupled since 2012, and lawsuits have become increasingly complex. For example, the lawsuit pertaining to the November 2015 attacks already has a list of 500 plaintiffs. The saturation has worsened with the series of anti-terrorist laws, all of which created new charges and modified others such as “individual terrorism” (specially directed at “lone wolf” profiles), “apology of terrorism” (especially online), or even “repeated visits to terrorist websites.” This piling up of new offenses contributed to the saturation of the under-resourced judicial system that comprises only nine anti-terrorism judges for the whole country.

Relatedly, prisons may in fact be the weakest link in the security chain. French jails are faced with new challenges with more than 260 terrorism convicts and at least 1,500 “radicalized” inmates incarcerated. Beyond the previously mentioned problem tied to the length of sentences, the penitentiary system is confronted with a major radicalization problem due to the wide circulation of pro-Jihadi media content within penitentiary establishments and the proselytizing behavior of some convicts. The latter try to convert petty criminals into Jihadis within the prisons. Therefore, French prisons are increasingly perceived as the number one incubator of Jihad.

To curtail this trend, the Ministry of Justice has engineered an evaluation grid to help detect convicts that have already been, or are being, “radicalized.” After this stage, prisoners are to be closely monitored by special penitentiary intelligence services that received additional resources since January 2015. Small teams of social workers, psychologists and imams acting as Muslim chaplains have also been hired to help deal with these convicts. The Ministry of Justice is also conducting an experiment in five prisons, which consists of separating terrorism convicts so they can no longer preach their extremist views to other inmates. Some convicts are also invited to attend a tailored program made up of individual interviews and thematic seminars intended to help them question their views regarding issues such as faith, geopolitics, citizenship, etc.. Although the program was launched recently, it has already been severely criticized. In a June 2016 report, the chief prison inspector stressed the great disparities between the different programs and the failure to effectively isolate the targeted convicts.¹⁹ At the end of October, the Minister of Justice announced the suspension of this experiment.

Despite these shortcomings, prisons seem to have served as laboratories of “deradicalization” for policies applied to the rest of society.

19. *Radicalisation islamiste en milieu carcéral*, Rapport du Contrôleur général des lieux de privation de liberté, June 7, 2016.

In May 2016, Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced a new “anti-radicalization plan,” which announced the inauguration of 10 “reinsertion centers” by the end of 2017. These facilities are created for individuals who are not subject to imprisonment, because they either did not commit any crime or against whom no reliable evidence was found. In the future, they might also serve as an “airlock” for ex-convicts at the end of their sentence time. The first pilot facility opened last summer in Indre-et-Loire. It should be able to host, on a voluntary basis, around thirty former aspiring Jihadis who sought to join Jihad in Syria. Another center should be operational soon, which should host individuals returning from foreign theaters of operation who were not found to have taken part in combat or violating human rights.

This almost “medicalized” approach to counter-radicalization is heavily influenced by a long history of French anti-cult policies. It has already been vigorously criticized for being a naïve, patronizing and hopeless attempt to “cure” – some may say “brainwash” – Jihadis as if they were the abused victims of some sort of mental indoctrination. Specialists on Islam and some security experts have called, on the contrary, to acknowledge the ideological consistency of the Jihadi discourse. They have advised their audience to consider radicalization as a serious challenge for Western democracies. Such a perspective would give way to a more traditional view of “ideological struggle” or a “war of ideas” as witnessed in the past.²⁰

A good example of this more political approach is *stop-djihadisme.fr*, which was launched at the end of January 2015. It is a governmental website aimed at deconstructing the Jihadi discourse. It has used video clips to target a wider audience through social media. Civil society and/or clandestine service activities may be participating in the new psychological warfare by engaging in more covert forms of “grey” and “black” counter-propaganda. Moderate Muslim leaders are also being solicited to join the fight against violent extremism.

This ideological approach to counter-radicalization also raises concerns about the possible continuum between Jihadism and other rigorist branches of Islam, and especially the Salafi school of thought. There is a risk in fighting Jihadi ideas that may overlap with those of other non-violent fundamentalist movements. This may further marginalize a wider spectrum of French Muslims who already feel stigmatized by an allegedly anti-Muslim climate. With this perspective in mind,

20. P.-J. Salazar, *Paroles armées: Comprendre et combattre la propagande terroriste*, Paris: Lemieux, 2015.

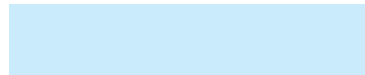
“radicalization” may become a central political issue, functioning as multiplier of existing social tensions.

Conclusion

The current French Administration has certainly been very active in fighting terrorism. However, the threats originating from both within and outside the country remain extremely high. As ISIS is slowly dwindling in Iraq and Syria, the flow of returning Jihadis will likely increase. This terrorist organization may be tempted to make up for its territorial loss by committing spectacular attacks in the West. France is also challenged internally. It must deal with unrelenting social and religious tensions, but also, more pragmatically; it must deal with the fact that 80% of terrorism convicts will be released over the next five years.²¹ This undoubtedly casts an ominous shadow over the future.

Jihadis intend to trigger a spiral of violence that will allow them to convince French Muslims that they have been rejected by their very own government and society. This spiraling scenario has been pointed out by the head of France's main domestic intelligence agency. He fears that the next attack will foster violent reaction on the part of far-right hate groups. At the other end of the spectrum, the far-left has also become increasingly violent, as they are upset by the emergency measures and obsessed with their fear of a rising "police-state" in the country. The answer to these challenges obviously lies in a strong national resilience. However, given the upcoming May 2017 presidential election, with the far-right on the rise and the divisions within parties, national cohesion will be seriously tested.

21. Didier Le Bret (National Intelligence Coordinator), hearing before the National Assembly, May 18, 2016.



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