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# JIHADIST TERRORISM IN JIHADISM IN FRANCE EUROPE

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Cynthia Salloum



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# JIHADISM IN FRANCE



## The state of the Jihadist Terrorist threat in France

Cynthia Salloum

# AT A GLANCE

In 2020 and 2021, it became clear that the danger emanating from organizations like the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda has not been eliminated. Instead, several European countries – and among them France – have recently fallen victim to a series of attacks. This publication is part of the series *Jihadist Terrorism in Europe*, in which renowned experts analyze the current state of the jihadist threat in various countries, as well as the related counter-terrorism strategies and the political debates.

- In this paper, Cynthia Salloum looks at France, one of the rare countries in the West to have repeatedly suffered from terrorist campaigns by groups claiming affiliations either to armed non-state actors based in the Middle East and North Africa or to global Islamist jihadi organizations.
- The destabilization of Iraq and the civil war in Syria led to the emergence of Daesh, which attacked Paris in 2015. The series of coordinated and simultaneous attacks at the Stade de France in 2015, with a death toll amounting to 131 individuals and over 400 injured, were the deadliest in France and the second deadliest in Europe since the end of World War II.
- Since 2013, around 1,300 French citizens joined Daesh in Syria. Not only did they defend Daesh, but some went back to attack their home country. With the defeat of IS, the issue of French returnees has become a question of national security.
- Since 2016, there is a gradual change from a terrorism of organization to a terrorism of opportunity, characterized by makeshift weapons like knives or vehicles. Attacks by individuals are, for French security services, the most difficult to detect online as well as offline. The decoupling of religious and political radicalization – distinguishing root causes from symptoms – is key for both threat analyses and the design of counter-policies.
- The author reviews the evolution of French counter-terrorism measures, beginning with the plan Vigipirate in 2001 and ending with the Inter-Ministerial Committee on the Prevention of Delinquency and Radicalisation (CIPDR) in 2019.
- A process of militarization of the fight against terrorism has gradually taken place in France. The scope of the French responses has included a heavy militarized response abroad, in Syria, Iraq and Mali. The militarization of counter-terrorism is not surprising for a country with an interventionist strategic culture and military capabilities to match it. Such strategy has so far demonstrated its limits.
- Political reactions to terrorism do matter. Compared to other European cases, France has seen a more vivid and acute polarization of its political debate around religion and secularism, Islam and separatism. This has largely influenced the 2022 Presidential elections.
- If the 2020s will keep France as a prominent target remains to be seen. If absolute security is utopia – no country is immune to terrorist attacks – adequate policies, foreign as well as domestic, can dramatically reduce the odds.

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This publication is part of a study series, which includes the evaluation of the terrorism threat, the jihadist scene's radicalization patterns and its root causes in different European countries. The series considers and explores different, at times opposing, positions of the scientific debate surrounding this topic.



Statements of condolence outside Le Carillon bar the day after the terrorist attack on Rue Bichat in Paris, November 14, 2015.

1.

# AFTER TERROR: A ‘NEW NORMAL’?

The place of Islam – beyond jihadi violent extremism – has become in France the most heated, polarizing and central debate since the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks claimed by the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> From a security perspective, these attacks are in no doubt the most significant in French contemporary history since the end of the Algerian civil war in the early 1990s. With a death toll amounting to 131 individuals and more than 400 injured, the series of simultaneous and coordinated attacks at the Stade de France, at cafés and restaurants in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> districts of Paris, and at the Bataclan concert hall, are the second deadliest in Europe, since the end of World War II, after the 2004 Madrid attacks.<sup>2</sup> They also followed the January 2015 attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*, a prominent controversial weekly satire magazine in France, as well as other attacks.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in reaction to the re-publication of the *Charlie Hebdo* caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in September 2020,<sup>4</sup> three attacks were committed on French soil: the attack near the former locals of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris,<sup>5</sup> the killing of Samuel Paty in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine<sup>6</sup> and the attack at the Basilique Notre-Dame de l’Assomption in Nice<sup>7</sup>. Altogether, these terrorist acts have played a significant role in stirring a fear of Islamism in France – political, missionary or violent jihadist – both at the local and transnational level, with overreaching political consequences.

Terror in the name of religion, precisely in the name of Islam, has dominated in France since the 1990s, with a culmination since the 2015 Paris attacks. But France has a rich history of terrorist political violence. Between the 1950s and the 1980s terrorist attacks remained largely politically motivated, led by activists belonging

## 1. AFTER TERROR: A 'NEW NORMAL'?

to militant groups and ranging from the far-right with the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (1960–1962), to the extreme left with the Action Directe group (1979–1984), alongside a variety of local and foreign groups linked to North Africa or the Middle East. Islamist narratives as such started playing a defining role in Teheran-inspired and Sunni radical violent extremism in the 1980s. Despite the progress of decolonization,<sup>8</sup> and an evolving 'Arab policy' since President Charles de Gaulle,<sup>9</sup> series of attacks were planned and conducted on French soil in the 1980s by, among others, the Carlos group, Abou Nidal, the Arab Organization of May 15<sup>th</sup>, Hezbollah and other Armenian and Kurdish groups, on French soil. Since, the French security landscape has been widely dominated by Sunni Islamist radicalism: from the 1990s with terrorist attacks carried out by the Armed Islamic Group – Groupe Islamique Armé or al-Jamaah al-Islamiyyah al-Musallaha (GIA) –, to the 2000s with al-Qaeda and the 2010s with the Islamic State.

Several other European countries share an equally rich history of political violence and terrorism by extreme left and far-right terrorist movements or more recently by violent Islamist or jihadist terrorists. But France remains *un cas d'école*. It indeed became, in the past half-a-century, the most frequently targeted Western country by violent Islamist terrorism – save the 9/11 attacks and its following decade. However, it is important to clarify that "France towers as the main target for jihadism in Europe" when counting successful attacks: "when foiled plots are included, the difference between France and some other countries (like the UK) becomes less pronounced".<sup>10</sup> Hence, rather than building on a quantitative threat analysis, we argue here that the French predicament is to be one of the rare countries in the West to have consistently suffered not only from terrorist attacks but from terrorist campaigns by groups claiming affiliations either to armed non-state actors based in the Middle East and North Africa or to global jihadi organizations. There is a crucial debate about whether French foreign interventions harvest radicalization at home. Two distinct campaigns appear as significantly related to France's foreign policy in the region: in the 1990s when France was supporting the regime in Algeria during the civil war, and after 2014 with the formation of the coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Whether the 2020s will keep France as a prominent target remains to be seen. However, even if absolute security is utopia – no country is immune to terrorist attacks – adequate policies, foreign as well as domestic, can dramatically reduce the odds. However, in France, sociological or socio-political considerations take precedence on strategy.

## 1. AFTER TERROR: A 'NEW NORMAL'?

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- 1 In this paper, we will use 'the Islamic State' and 'Daesh', as well as 'violent Islamist' and 'jihadist', interchangeably.
  - 2 On 11.3.2004, ten bombs exploded on four trains in and around the Atocha Station in the Madrid's city centre, leaving 191 dead and more than 1800 injured. The bombs were placed by thirteen terrorists from an al-Qaeda affiliated group known as the Groupe Islamique Combattante du Maroc (GICM) founded in Spain 1994. Cf. Fernando Reinares: Al Qaeda's Revenge: the 2004-Madrid Train Bombings. Washington, D.C./New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Columbia University Press, 2017.
  - 3 The first amongst them are the March 2012 Toulouse and Montauban attacks committed by Mohammed Merah who claimed affiliation to al-Qaeda. These attacks were executed in several locations, between 11 and 19.3.2012, killing three unarmed French soldiers as well as a Rabbi and three young children at a Jewish school.  
On 7.1.2015, the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, claimed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), were carried out in the premises of the magazine's headquarters by the brothers Kouachi, resulting in the killing of 12 people among whom were the cartoonists Georges Wolinsky and Jean Cabus. A set of attacks followed on 8 and 9.1.2015: the Fontenay-aux-Roses and Montrouge shootings and the hostage-taking at the Hyper Cacher store at the Porte de Vincennes carried out by Amédy Coulibaly who claimed allegiance to the Islamic State; in addition to a second hostage-taking in a printing plant at an industrial zone in Dammartin-en-Goëls where the brother Kouachi was killed. Other smaller-scale attacks, took place throughout 2015 (i.e., Villejuif, Saint-Quentin Fallavier) or were thwarted (i.e., the Thalys attack).
  - 4 The decision to republish the caricatures that had provoked the January 2015 attacks, was taken by the journal in September 2020, at the eve of the trial of alleged accomplices to the attack, resulting in al-Qaeda public threats against Charlie Hebdo, and France.
  - 5 The September 2020 attacks were tied to the Charlie Hebdo attacks and cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad: four people were wounded after a male attacked them with a butcher knife outside of the old *Charlie Hebdo* magazine headquarters. The magazine had just re-published the magazine cover which sparked a similar, more brutal attack in 2015.
  - 6 The October 2020 beheading of Samuel Paty was committed in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine (northwest of Paris) by Abdoullah Anzorov, a Chechen refugee. Paty was a middle school teacher who had recently held a class on freedom of speech in which he showed caricatures of the prophet Muhammad. Islamists had called for acts of violence in dozens of Internet posts encouraging "digital hatred" and ultimately the Islamist attack.
  - 7 The attack resulted in the killing of three individuals and took place on 29.10.2020. The assailant was Brahim Aïoussaoui, a young Tunisian migrant who had arrived in Europe to the Italian island of Lampedusa in September 2020.
  - 8 "Le colonialisme est fini" (colonialism is over), as it was very officially declared by former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in his speech "Adresse à l'Afrique" on 26.6.1977, at the occasion of the independence of Djibouti.
  - 9 Contrastingly with the United States' position. See among others, Samy Cohen: De Gaulle, les gaullistes et Israël. Paris: Alain Moreau, 1974; Daniel Colard: La politique méditerranéenne et proche-orientale de G. Pompidou. In: *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 43, Issue 3, 1978, pp. 283–306; Isabelle Avran: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, une diplomatie européenne active au Proche-Orient. In: *Orient XXI*, 14.12.2020. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/valery-giscard-d-estaing-une-diplomatique-europeenne-active-au-proche-orient,4364> (last accessed: 7.10.2021); Jean-Pierre Filiu: François Mitterrand and the Palestinians: 1956-95. In: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 38, Issue 2, 2009, pp. 24–41.
  - 10 The study on the jihadi plots in Europe dataset (JPED) by the Terrorism Research Group at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment accounts in 2020 for approximatively 45 launched versus 30 foiled plots in France. Petter Nesser: Introducing the Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED). In: *Journal of Peace Research*, Forthcoming, July 2022.

**2.**

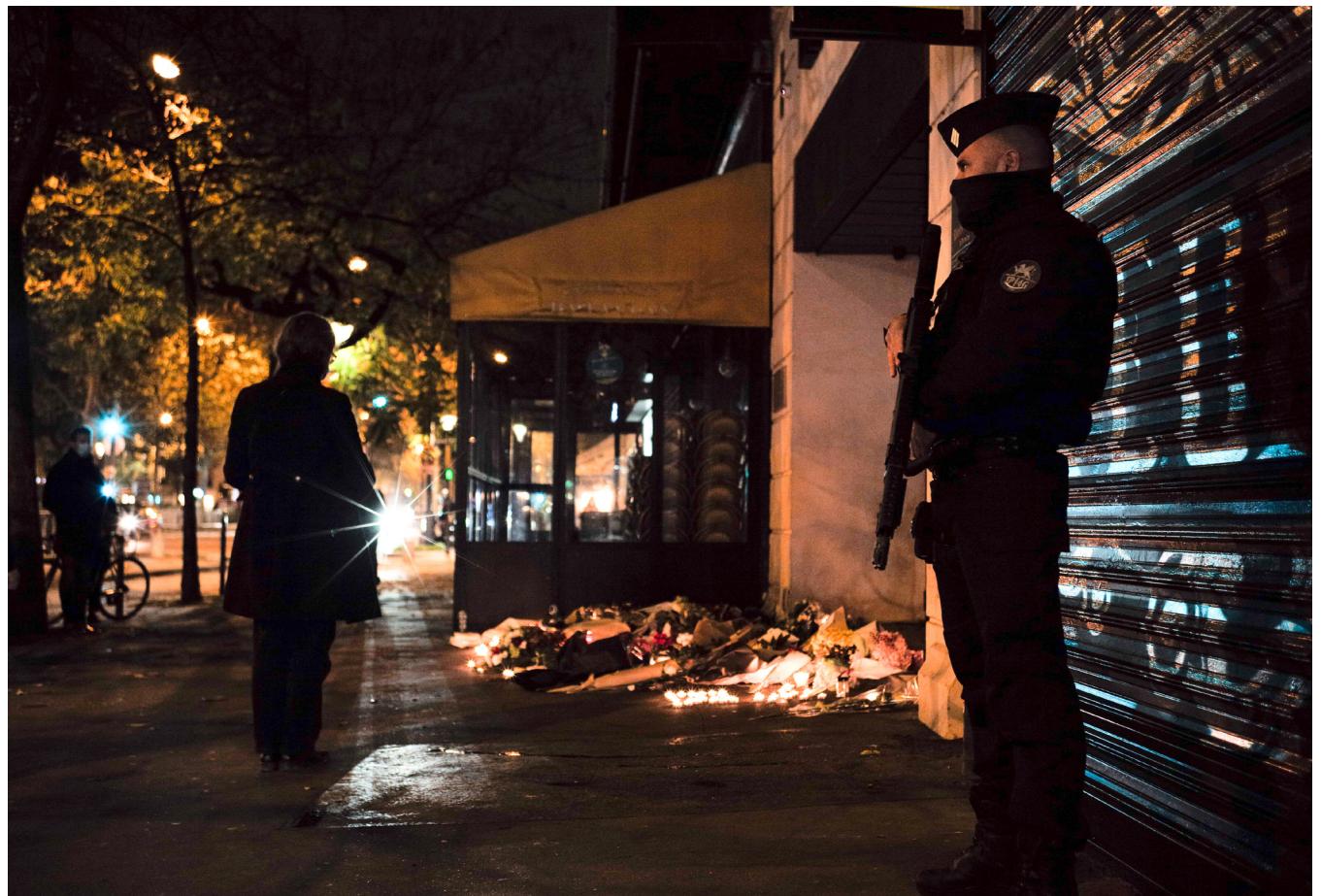
# THREAT IDENTIFICATION

## Al-Qaeda: From an Organized Group to a Brand Name

There is no need to revisit al-Qaeda's trajectory, from its rising force in Algeria and Tanzania to its demise in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Briefly put, from a central organization able to send commandos wherever it wanted, al-Qaeda core organization has become a mostly empty cell, but its ideology survives and is still flourishing in some parts of the Middle and the Far East. Most importantly, al-Qaeda has become a brand name, a group that will claim attacks on a wide variety of targets after they occurred but that is unable to actually carry them out. Several attacks in France have thus been echoed by an al-Qaeda sponsorship – the Kouachi brothers' attack against *Charlie Hebdo* –, yet the actual assistance of the group was probably minimal.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Qaeda's came to be known in France, as in many European countries, after 9/11. Yet, its influence and reach were not particularly significant. Young people, from popular background but also from well-integrated parts of the middle-class, embraced violent action. Most were disenfranchised, facing multiple crises of identity – not feeling at home either in their country of residence or their country of origins –, and enrolled in militias in the name of Islam, often by travelling to Chechnya, Afghanistan or Syria. Most are recent converts – a third of those who went to Syria are converts – they were not part of a community, they practiced a "nomadic jihadism", moving from cause to cause, conflict to conflict. They joined al-Qaeda because the reference is the "best and most well-known brand on the nihilist market"<sup>12</sup>. There seems to be little in terms of real affiliation, just a brand name temporarily useful.

However, as far as al-Qaeda is concerned, there are some historical connections, which remain significant for France. At the end of the civil war in Algeria, the GIA began its transformation, becoming the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998, and declaring its allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2007 under the name of AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). This affiliation marked a widening of its activities to the region – Mauritania, Mali and Niger – and to Western targets, especially France. AQIM specialized in the often highly profitable kidnapping business of Western nationals, assassinations of tourists, and extensive arms and drugs trafficking.<sup>13</sup> In the past two decades, the weakening of several states in the Sahel led to a further deterioration of the economic and social fabric that fed grievances and polarization. In Mali, several groups took control of the North: The predominantly Arab AQIM, mostly Algerian, Mauritanian and Malian; the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), a splinter movement from AQIM which joined the Signatories in Blood or Mokhtar Belmokhtar's group in 2013 to form al-Mourabitoun; and Ansar Eddine, a group established in 2012 which is exclusively Tuareg.<sup>14</sup> Mostly local, these groups were evicted by the French intervention Serval decided in December 2012.<sup>15</sup>



*The Bataclan, five years after the attacks. Paris, November 13, 2020.*

## 2. THREAT IDENTIFICATION

Clearly, al-Qaeda's pyramid structure has changed, and relations between al-Qaeda Central and these peripheral groups are sometimes tense, with ambition and personal rivalries playing their role.<sup>16</sup> Within the loose conglomeration of al-Qaeda, there is also some competition that may drive groups to attract as much attention as possible, and to commit increasingly spectacular and deadly acts. Their reach remains mostly local or regional and as such do not represent a high-level threat for intelligence services in France. Yet, their ideologies could always inspire isolated individuals and provide motives for radicalization.

### Daesh: Rise and Fall

If al-Qaeda still represents the ideological foundation for global jihad, the Islamic State, or Daesh, became its strong and advanced arm in the fight. The control of a large territory in Syria and Iraq has provided it with a distinct strategic position and advantage. Daesh was a sort of proto-state with its taxes, communication lines, military capabilities and its own army estimated at its peak at 40,000 soldiers. Al-Qaeda had none of this. Yet, once a terrorist group controlled a territory, counter-terrorism morphed into a much simpler battle: invade and destroy. This happened relatively quickly, in less than five years.<sup>17</sup> The Daesh interlude has been extremely violent and the ramifications of the main battle quickly reached Europe. Between 2014 and 2018, more people have died from jihadi terrorism linked to Daesh – at least 345 – than in the previous 20 years. For France, the figure reached 271. Apart from the response covered below, France became thus one of its main acting spots, in at least three ways.

First, France became a significant recruiting ground for the IS cause. Between 5,000 and 7,000 EU citizens chose to join the ranks of Daesh.<sup>18</sup> In France, the figure is estimated at around 1,300 of its citizens who joined Daesh in Syria, located mostly around Aleppo.<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, strong ties emerged among French-speaking combatants. Several reasons explain this relatively high number: it was easy to travel to Syria through Turkey, Assad's mass violations of human rights gave a just cause dimension to the departure; a failed secular bargain that excluded an increasing number of youth men from mainstream economic and social life; active social networks and circles of friends and most significantly the presence of networks and groups for recruitment such as Sharia4France.<sup>20</sup>

Second, during, and even more after, the battle for the caliphate, these recruits may represent a specific source of danger if convinced to return and strike back home. Indeed, it appears that the French-speaking fighters' connection in Syria was very strong and that, more than any other group, it intended to target their country of origin. In this respect, as soon as 2013, a cell of French and Belgian foreign fighters, the Katibat al-Muhajirin (KAM) based in Aleppo, was extremely active in encouraging and organizing attacks in France and in Belgium. In May 2014, Daesh struck for the first time in Europe, Mehdi Nemmouche attacked the Jewish Museum of Brussels and in January 2015, the Verviers-plot was foiled.

That failure only encouraged the Islamic State in Syria to target Europe, recruiting willing candidates for external operations, among them, it seems, "francophone recruits proved the most eager to strike home"<sup>21</sup>. It appears that the scenario of striking civil-

ians, rather than institutional targets, took precedence, and to carry out these attacks, young and inexperienced volunteers were selected, sent back to Europe through the Balkan route using forged Syrian passports. We now know from intelligence reports that most of the Bataclan attackers sent progress reports to their patrons in Syria and that IS exercised “robust command and control” on the group’s external operations planning.<sup>22</sup> Documents and computers seized reveal the scope of the planned attacks, with a folder entitled ‘November 13’, detailing several commandos and their targets, from the Stade de France in Paris, to the Brussels metro and Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam.<sup>23</sup>

Third, with Daesh defeated, the fate of French recruits in Syria became a question of national security. At the end of 2020, more than half were presumed dead or missing; less than a quarter were recorded as returnees; and 55 were located in a third country after leaving Syria.<sup>24</sup> The scope of the threat from foreign fighters is generally considered somewhat limited. Blow back rates do vary, with Al-Qaeda it was estimated at 10 percent; with IS it seems to be much lower.<sup>25</sup> However, France decided to take no chance. According to the French Ministry of Justice, every foreign fighter wishing to return to France is immediately remanded in custody. Even if a “case by case” policy applies when dealing with women or children, the crime of terrorist association is automatically applied for anyone coming back from territories formerly held by Daesh, with a 30 years imprisonment sentence.<sup>26</sup> It is tempting to overblow the issue, yet as long as the narrative of Daesh is appealing, former combatants will keep a special influence and attraction. Contrary to some other European countries – Sweden or the Netherlands – France has no policy or program of reinsertion.

### Lone Actors: Less Lethal, More Diffuse

Daesh has been largely destroyed but jihadism is not dead. The group has probably lost its capacity to launch another international attack like the ones in Paris in 2015, yet it is rebuilding its operational capabilities regionally and still capable of mobilising its forces in the wastelands between Syria and Iraq, to recruit and recover fighters.<sup>27</sup> Also, the IS franchise remains active globally: the Islamic State – Khorasan in Afghanistan, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in North East Nigeria, the Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP) in Mozambique, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the Sahel. In Europe, if the ideology is still spread on social media, the trend however is decreasing. New modi operandi have emerged, most notably individual attackers. For the last five years, jihadi plots in Europe involved higher proportions of attacks with simple weapons such as cars and knives compared to bombs and nearly half of the terrorist plots involved single agents, rather than a group. France saw around 30 attacks by so-called lone wolves since 2016.

While barely surviving in Syria and Iraq, IS has adopted the tactic declaring in 2016 that “the smallest action you do in the heart of is dearer to us than the largest action by us and more effective and more damaging”<sup>28</sup>. To that end, Daesh has reinforced its propaganda apparatus, especially its digital platforms and networks. And current efforts to combat jihadi propaganda seem to be insufficient. For example, in April 2015, Twitter suspended more than 10,000 IS-linked accounts in a single day, yet

this number appears to be just “a drop in the ocean of IS and other terrorist-related Twitter accounts”<sup>29</sup>. Moreover, by avoiding mainstream networks – using channels such as Telegram – Daesh is able to disseminate instruction manuals about how to build explosive material devices and how to carry out an attack using a bomb as well as low-tech attacks such as knife attacks, vehicle attacks, arsons, and train derailments among others. It also spread operational security material (OPSEC) that enhances the capacity of individuals to escape monitoring and to avoid detection.<sup>30</sup> France has been subject to these attacks, and will likely continue to be so, since this type of plots is nearly impossible to prevent. Lone actors are extremely difficult to identify unless through the internet or through pressure exerted on their immediate circles (family and close friends) in order to provoke denunciations.<sup>31</sup> The challenge will be for French security services and for the French political establishment not to over-react: amplification and hyperbole can only transform a single individual act of folly into a strategic endeavor of an organized group.

No one knows when, where and why terrorists will strike. Some may highlight lone actors, others may point to IS resurgence, threats remain both endogenous and exogenous, both are unpredictable. What we do know is that particularly challenging times are ahead: the next Presidential election will take place in April 2022 and the forthcoming months are thus fertile grounds for terrorist strikes. Such action would not be new, al-Qaeda’s stroke in Madrid three days before the 2004 legislative election.<sup>32</sup>

- 11 They declared their allegiance to al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQPA), one of the brothers has been military trained in Yemen in 2011. Their mentor seems to have been an Algerian, Djamel Beghal, an activist from GIA, trained in Afghanistan who plotted an attack against the American embassy in Paris. They met him in prison. See : Ce que l'on sait sur la radicalisation des frères Kouachi. *Le Monde*, 9.1.2015. [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/09/ce-que-l-on-sait-sur-la-radicalisation-des-freres-kouachi\\_4552422\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/09/ce-que-l-on-sait-sur-la-radicalisation-des-freres-kouachi_4552422_3224.html) (last accessed: 7.10.2021).
- 12 Olivier Roy: Al-Qaida et le nihilisme des jeunes. In: *Esprit*, March/April 2014, pp. 112–116; Olivier Roy: Al Qaeda in the West as a Youth Movement: The Power of a Narrative. In: *CEPS Policy Brief* No. 168, August 2008.
- 13 After al-Qaeda in the region was mostly about making money rather than launching jihad. "Al Qaeda has used the region less to foment terrorism than to protect and expand its finances". Princeton N. Lyman/J. Stephen Morrison: The Terrorist Threat in Africa. In: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 1, 2004, p. 83.
- 14 See Pham J. Peter: Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. In: *Orbis*, Vol. 55, Issue 2, 2011, pp. 240–254.
- 15 On the changing dynamics in the Sahel Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos: Une guerre perdue: La France au Sahel. Paris: JC Lattès, 2020; Yvan Guichaoua: The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel. In: *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, Issue 4, 2020, pp. 895–911; Rainieri Luca: Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara. In: *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2020.
- 16 Like in the case of HTS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or the "Organization for the Liberation of the Levant". Tensions amounted to rupture in 2017, then a policy of containment from 2019 up to an armed confrontation in 2020. See: Jerome Drevon/Patrick Haenni: How Global Jihad Relocalises and Where it Leads. The Case of HTS, the Former AQ Franchise in Syria. In: *European University Institute Working Paper Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies*, No. 8, 2021.
- 17 Audrey Kurth Cronin: ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group: Why Counterterrorism Won't Stop the Latest Jihadist Thread. In: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, Issue 2, 2015, pp. 87–98.
- 18 See: Florence Gaub: Waging #Eurojihad: foreign fighters in ISIL. In: *EU-ISS*, Vol. 53, December 2015, p. 1. [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUSSIFiles/Alert\\_53\\_Foreign\\_fighters\\_in\\_ISIL.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUSSIFiles/Alert_53_Foreign_fighters_in_ISIL.pdf) (last accessed: 7.10.2021).
- 19 This is a figure calculated based on several sources. In May 2015, the French Ministry of Interior estimated that 1,700 French citizens had left for Syria. This figure seemed to have been scaled down. Europol put it at 1451.
- 20 Hamed el-Said/Richard Barrett: Enhancing the Understanding of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon in Syria. In: *United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism*, July 2017, p. 35ff.; Petter Nesser: Military Interventions, Jihadi Networks, and Terrorist Entrepreneurs: How the Islamic State Terror Wave Rose So High in Europe. In: *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, March 2019, pp. 15–22. <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CTC-SENTINEL-032019.pdf> (last accessed: 29.10.2021).
- 21 Quoted in Jean-Charles Brisard/Kévin Jackson: The Islamic State's External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus. In: *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9, No. 11, 2016, p. 10. [https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel\\_Vol9Iss1118.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CTC-Sentinel_Vol9Iss1118.pdf) (last accessed: 7.10.2021).
- 22 Ibidem, p. 13. Also: Matthieu Suc: Ces terroristes qui menacent la France: La chaîne de commandement qui conduit aux attentats. *MediaPart*, 23.3.2016. <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/230316/ces-terroristes-qui-menacent-la-france-23-la-chaine-de-commandement-qui-conduit-aux-attentats?onglet=full> (last accessed: 7.10.2021).
- 23 See: Elise Vincent: 13-Novembre: l'enquête dévoile un projet terroriste de grande ampleur. In: *Le Monde*, 5.10.2016. [https://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2016/10/05/13-novembre-l-enquete-devoile-un-projet-terroriste-de-grande-ampleur\\_5008251\\_4809495.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2016/10/05/13-novembre-l-enquete-devoile-un-projet-terroriste-de-grande-ampleur_5008251_4809495.html) (last accessed: 7.10.2021).
- 24 Figures are from Europol's TE-SAT Report, 10.2.2021, p. 62.
- 25 It is estimated that roughly 10 percent of returnees want to continue the fight either by turning against their home country or by becoming a recruiter. On the ratio, see: Thomas Hegghammer: Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting. In: *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, Issue 1, 2013, pp. 1–15. Moreover, comparing to the al-Qaeda wave, the blow-back rate from the IS wave is much lower when considering the number of foreign fighters versus the number of plots – launched and foiled – involving foreign fighters. Cf. Petter Nesser: Op. Cit. Introducing the Jihadi Plots in Europe Dataset (JPED). In: *Journal of Peace Research*, Forthcoming, July 2022.

## 2. THREAT IDENTIFICATION

- 26 During the debates on emergency measures after the Paris 2015 attacks, citizenship deprivation was discussed for any French nationals joining IS ranks. See: Retour des djihadistes "français" partis combattre aux côtés de l'État islamique. Réponse du Ministère de la justice, 19.12.2019. <https://www.senat.fr/questions/base/2019/qSEQ190208777.html> (last accessed: 1.11.2021). See also: Anna Benjamin: Retour de djihadistes: la délicate politique du 'cas par cas' de Macron. In: *L'Express*, 4.1.2018. [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/proche-moyen-orient/retour-de-djihadistes-la-delicate-politique-du-cas-par-cas-de-macron\\_1973466.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/proche-moyen-orient/retour-de-djihadistes-la-delicate-politique-du-cas-par-cas-de-macron_1973466.html) (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 27 Patrick Haenni/Arthur Quesnay: Coming Up Through the Cracks: The Islamic State's Resurgence in Syria and Iraq. In: *Policy Briefs, European University Institute Middle East Directions (MED), Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria*, No. 16, 2022, p. 26.
- 28 Quoted in: Daniel Byman: How to Hunt a Lone Wolf: Countering Terrorists Who Act on Their Own In: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, Issue 2, 2017, p. 100.
- 29 See: Aaron Brantly: Innovation and Adaptation in Jihadist Digital Security. In: *Survival*, Vol. 59, Issue 1, p. 84.
- 30 See: Bennett Clifford: Trucks, Knives, Bombs, Whatever. Exploring Pro-Islamic State Instructional Material on Telegram. In: *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, Issue 5, 2018, p. 26. [https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/CTC-Sentinel\\_Vol11Iss5.pdf](https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/CTC-Sentinel_Vol11Iss5.pdf) (last accessed: 7.10.2021).
- 31 Family members can be arrested and released within eight days.
- 32 Al-Qaeda considered an election period as, "the most appropriate time to strike". Quoted in: Brynjar Lia/Thomas Hegghammer: Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings. In: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 27, Issue 5, 2004, p. 370.

### 3.

# FRAMING TERRORIST ATTACKS

## Terrorism of Organization and Terrorism of Opportunity

There is a clear shift in the type of attacks committed on French soil from terrorism of organization to terrorism of opportunity. Up until 2016, jihadist attacks were executed by organized operational cells and professional commandos, in direct contact with a foreign terrorist organization dedicated to the planning and execution of attacks in Europe. The assailants were organized in networks with established links to foreign sponsors and had a significant logistical support. They were ideologically motivated and radicalized and claimed affiliation to al-Qaeda and later to Daesh. From 1995 up to 2015, there is a devolution of *savoir faire*, transmission and continuity between older and younger active cells and connections are essentially established in jails. When it comes to transnational connections, some of the groups active in the mid-1990s were autonomous (i.e., the Roubaix cell, and the Beghal group); since the end of the 1990s connections to al-Qaeda (and to IS from 2015-onwards) have been systematic. The high number of francophone foreign fighters is central in the constitution of Belgo-French networks. These terrorist plots pertain to the first category (organized) and include distinct categories of actors.

Also, within the first category, “the person we think of as ‘the terrorist’ is [...] fulfilling only one of multiple functions in the movement, albeit the most dramatic in terms of direct consequences” but neglecting other actors.<sup>33</sup> Petter Nesser distinguishes three types of actors, ‘entrepreneurs’, ‘misfits’ and ‘drifters’: “the entrepreneurs [in coordination roles] reach out to misfits (criminals and social losers) and offer them purpose

### 3. FRAMING TERRORIST ATTACKS

and community, or [they] recruit drifters from their own social networks, and mold them into terrorists [both misfits and drifters act as foot soldiers]"<sup>34</sup>. This categorization allows to cross both types, terrorism of organization and of opportunity. It is fertile when analyzing the relations between ideologically motivated radicals, petty criminals, and individuals with psychopathologies.

Nonetheless, the decreasing involvement of 'entrepreneurs' in terrorists plots is indicating a rise of terrorism of opportunity mainly led by misfits and drifters with no or little coordination, if at all. Lone actors or isolated individuals connected to small cells often act without external sponsors, without proper religious indoctrination, and with rather modest means. Clearly, it is not easy to differentiate between a directed attack organized from abroad and an inspired act of terrorism by lone actors. For example, evidence from the Nice attack is at best ambivalent, "where the boundary between madness and activism is blurred"<sup>35</sup>.

This shift is transforming the landscape in both a negative and a positive way: negatively, because the type of attack is very difficult to identify and to prevent; positively, because, as these are largely incompetent amateurs, attacks become less and less strategic. These changes point towards an increased decoupling of political and religious radicalization. Of course, lone actors are often trapped in narratives and strategies, available for all through tele-communication channels, providing narratives for jihad alongside general simple instructions and advice on how to attack. They script their action in a greater narrative: al-Qaeda from the years 2000s, Daesh from the mid 2010s.

#### Decreasing Lethality

Since 2016, there is a qualitative recess in terrorist plots, a passage from the use of Kalashnikovs to makeshift weapons. More than 20 attacks in France involving stabbing occurred between 2013 and 2020 (some more rarely involving beheadings).<sup>36</sup> Vehicle ramming was another widely used method between 2016 and 2020 (14 July 2016 Nice Attack).<sup>37</sup> It is also important to highlight the decrease in the involvement of foreign fighters in terrorist plots since 2016.<sup>38</sup> This is partially due to higher numbers of foiled attacks; attacks planned in networks with more ambitious aims and sophisticated means are being increasingly intercepted and thwarted. Radicalized individuals in contact with francophone jihadis based in war settings are prevented from executing attacks planned in the Middle East. The Franco-Belgian connection, the most active of the Islamic State's Western networks, was able to strike in a sustained tempo of terrorist activities in France and Belgium from early 2014 up until 2016 relying on foreign fighters clusters in Syria.<sup>39</sup> With the disintegration of IS's caliphate, the threat has significantly decreased even if returnees from Syria or Iraq remain on the watch.<sup>40</sup>

Quantitatively, the large majority of successful attacks is committed by lone actors. Qualitatively, the dominant type of the lone actor assailant is an iconoclast terrorist whose objective is to kill and be killed. Their attacks are aimed against either the 'largest target' (killing as many civilians as possible, in public transports and crowded public spaces) or against an 'emblematic target': representatives of public order and the State (armed forces, police and gendarmerie);<sup>41</sup> a specific religious community

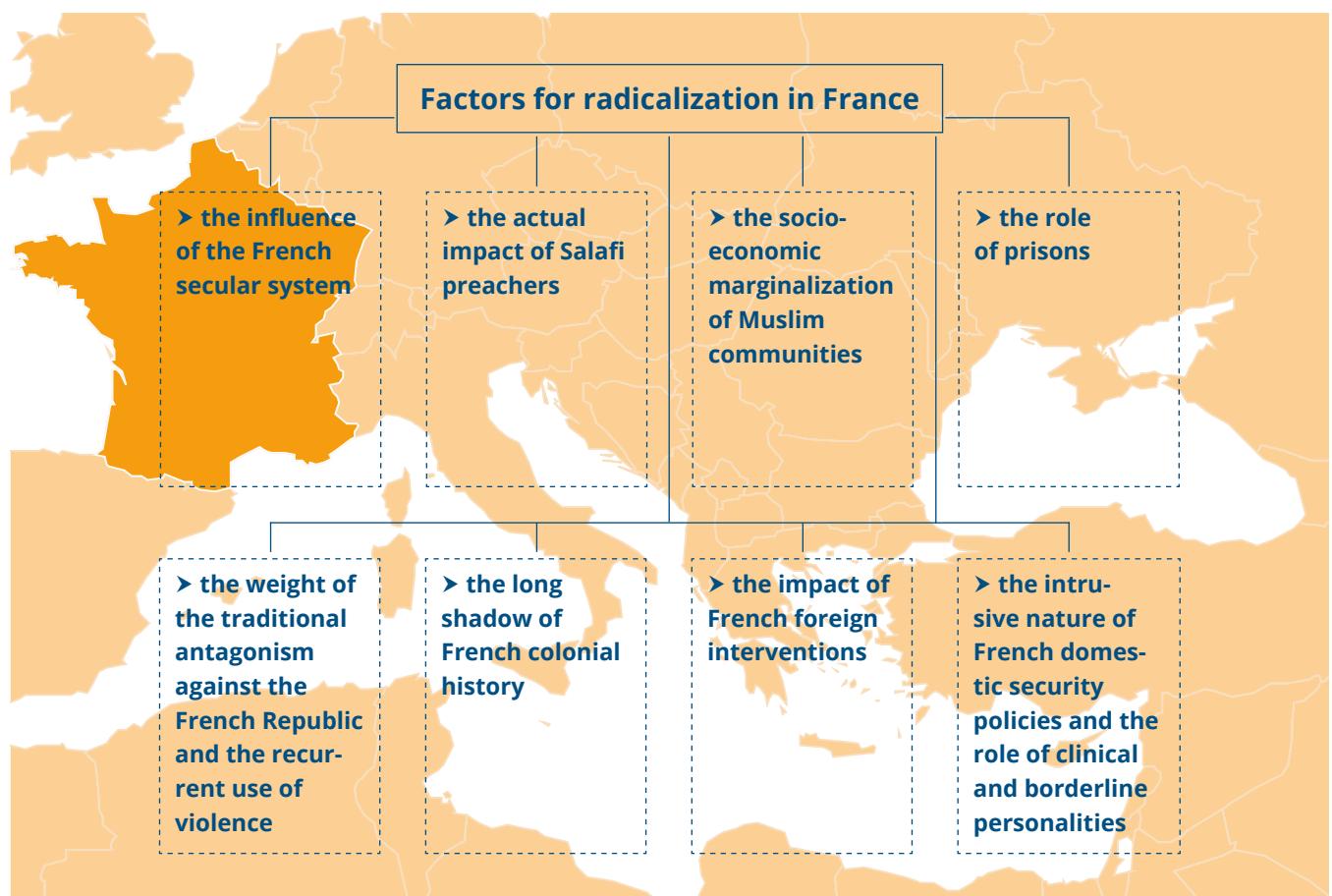
(Jewish schools and institutions; Catholic priests and churches, i.e., St-Etienne du Rouvray, Notre-Dame de Paris, Villejuif, etc.) or defenders of an uncompromising freedom of expression (i.e., *Charlie Hebdo*, Conflans-Sainte-Honorine).

If some analysts underline "the sociological characteristics of a population that would be objectively (pre)disposed to radicality relating to Islam"<sup>42</sup>, there is an agreement among experts that the profiles of terrorists vary widely. Some common traits however exist: the over-representation of second-generation North-Africans (*maghrébins*);<sup>43</sup> the increasingly significant percentage of converts;<sup>44</sup> youth from poor suburban backgrounds (*les banlieues*), mobility between several locations;<sup>45</sup> no or little Salafi background.<sup>46</sup> If there is no new generation, however there is a new population. Increasingly, the profiles of assailants include migrants rather than immigrants (asylum-seekers, refugees, tourists, individuals in circulation), and women.

### Motivations, Symptoms, and Structural Causes

The literature on terrorism, radicalization and violent extremism oftentimes falls into a set of common traps. First, studies on structural or – more commonly put – root causes of radicalization do not offer a synthesis between the social-psychological, socio-political and strategic analyses. Furthermore, in each of these perspectives, the study of the drivers conflates symptoms and root causes. Thus, drivers appear as over- or under-stressed. For instance, the role of religion is often presented as a root cause when in fact it is just a symptom. Second, research highlights correlations and variables whose meaning does not easily travel in variable settings, for instance, in Europe versus in Arab and Muslim countries. Third, the methodological fog surrounding the setting of databases still hampers the analysis. The criteria and methods for the design of databases remain undefined: what defines a terrorist group or individual? How are threat categories (often colors) actually designed, and how are national watch lists established? The criteria upon which a 'Fiche S' (*fiche 'sûreté' de l'Etat*)<sup>47</sup> is built are for instance murky: judiciary precedent, mosque affiliation, internet search history and activities, acquaintances, friendships and family connection. Intelligence services of course will not elaborate, for good reasons. But when the criteria considered to build the category of potentially dangerous individuals and organizations are symptoms that are increasingly removed from actual radicalization processes, a misleading analytical process is established. Labelling a 'radical' falls then into the trap of self-confirmation: those who correspond to an a priori definition of radicalization are declared 'radicals'. This leads to overlooking actual dangerous individuals or groups (including in the case of lone actors).

Illustration 1: Factors for radicalization in France.



In the French case, these problems appear as particularly relevant when it comes to analyzing the process of radicalization. Briefly put, a series of factors are put forth: the influence of the French secular system; the actual impact of Salafi preachers; the socio-economic marginalization of Muslim communities; the role of prisons; the weight of the traditional antagonism against the French Republic and the recurrent use of violence; the long shadow of French colonial history; the impact of French foreign interventions; the intrusive nature of French domestic security policies and the role of clinical and borderline personalities. These factors may seem remote or theoretical. Yet, they usually come down to very pragmatic interrogations: Do the *Daawas* (religious proselytizing publications) published by al-Qaeda or Daesh against 'the French' matter more than socio-economic hardship? How to identify and disentangle criminals, religious extremists or psychologically disturbed individuals? All these elements feed constant and sometimes acrimonious debates in France, with disagreements about the most important factors, and these may directly influence specific measures taken by the government.

For instance, there is a tense debate about the role of foreign interventions: do they harvest radicalization? Is there a correlation between European countries' military interventions in Muslim countries and spikes in terrorist attacks on their territory? In other words, without the French decision to join the coalition against Daesh in Syria, would the 2015 Paris attacks have happened? When declaring their motivation, many of the attackers do readily point to the crucial dimension of such foreign intervention in their mobilization, either via statements written before an attack or oral declarations for those who survived an attack. This was the case of Salah Abdeslam during the trial for the 2015 Paris attacks that started on 8 September 2021.<sup>48</sup> He declared that his action (and that of his co-attackers) came in response to former President François Hollande authorizing air strikes on IS militants in Syria. He specifically rejected that his actions were directed against "French values"<sup>49</sup>. Comparatively, two days after the 2004 Madrid terrorist attacks, in a video-taped statement a masked man, claiming to be al-Qaeda's military commander in Europe, declared the bombings were a punishment for Spain's involvement in the Iraq War.<sup>50</sup> In the same vein, the attacks against the London transport network that killed 52 people, were carried as a revenge against the British participation in the US-led coalition against Iraq. Such narratives must however be carefully considered. Why are such narratives articulated in the cases of Iraq and Syria but not for other interventions? Why did the French engagement in Mali – aimed against Islamist groups, in a predominantly Muslim country, a former French colony – not trigger a single attack while France counts one of the largest black African diasporas on its metropolitan territory?<sup>51</sup>

### 3. FRAMING TERRORIST ATTACKS

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- 33 John Horgan: From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism. In: *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 618, 2008, p. 86.
- 34 Nesser: Military Interventions, Jihadi Networks, and Terrorist Entrepreneurs, p. 19.
- 35 Some considered that Nice was a directed attack. See: Guido Steinberg: Jihadism in Austria: A Dangerous Scene with Considerable Ideological Reach. Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021, p. 21. Others put insanity and suicidal psychopathology as prime factors: Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death. The Global Appeal of Islamic State*. London: C. Hurst and Co, 2017, p. 36f. and p. 72. The two are actually not incompatible.
- 36 Historically stabbing was used in political assassinations against emblematic figures, as for instance in 1894 the assassination of Sadi Carnot, then President of the French Republic, by the Italian anarchist Sante Geronimo Caserio or the 1934 Assassination of Dimitri Navachine, former governor of a Soviet-controlled bank in Paris, by an extreme-right group, La Cagoule.
- 37 This type of attacks multiplied in Europe like for instance in the case of the Christmas market attack in Berlin in December 2016 or the Ariana Grande pop concert in Manchester in May 2017.
- 38 On the foreign fighter involvement in foiled plots, Nesser: Foiled versus Launched Terror Plots. Note that the figures "only represent direct participation by foreign fighters in plots, and not in-direct forms of involvement, such as instructing attackers via communication apps": *Ibidem*, p. 154.
- 39 Brisard/Jackson: The Islamic State's External Operations and the French-Belgian Nexus.
- 40 "At the end of 2020, 254 French citizens or residents (aged 13 or over) were detained in Syria/Iraq (84 men, 137 women and 33 minors). A total of 169 individuals remained in this area (not detained); 275 were considered missing; and 397 were presumed dead. Another 301 individuals were recorded as returnees; and 55 were located in a third country after leaving Syria": *Europol TE-SAT Report*, 10.2.2021, p. 62.
- 41 Among many others, an example is the foiled attack on the Toulon naval base in 2015; the attack perpetrated against soldiers of the Sentinelle Operation posted at the Louvre Carrousel in Paris, on 3.2.2017, or the stabbing of a French policewoman outside a police station in Rambouillet on 23.4.2021.
- 42 See: John Horgan: From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism. In: *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 618, 2008, pp. 80–94; and for a listing of French scholars stating this fact, see footnote No. 57, Romain Sèze/Pierre-Alain Clément: *État de littérature. Still routes over roots? Les introuvables racines du djihadisme français*. In: *Critique Internationale*, No. 92, 2021, p. 184.
- 43 But also in Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark; while in the UK, Pakistanis are over-represented. As an aside, it is worth noting that in the Netherlands, where there is a large Turkish immigration, most radicals are of a Moroccan origin or converts and basically none are of Turkish origin.
- 44 The percentage of converts in France is minimally estimated to 26 per cent. See: Marc Hecker: 137 nuances de terrorisme. Les Djihadistes de France face à la justice. In: *Etudes de l'IFRI, Focus Stratégique*, Vol. 79, 2018. [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/hecker\\_137\\_nuances\\_de\\_terrorisme\\_2018.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/hecker_137_nuances_de_terrorisme_2018.pdf) (last accessed: 29.10.2021).
- 45 The location of attacks is not necessarily a country of origin or a country of settlement, but rather often a third territory. "The mobility of radicals is emphasized by the fact that they do not define their target for strategic reasons, citing for instance, a given conflict, or connection with their family roots. The enemy is generic or even abstract. Geography and feasibility are prime factors in the selection of targets". In: Olivier Roy: Jihadi radicalization: between the local and the global. *NDC Policy Brief*, No. 8, April 2021, p. 3. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1555> (last accessed: 29.10.2021).
- 46 Salafism and jihadism de facto are not correlated: Cf. Xavier Crettiez/Romain Sèze (Ed.): *Saisir les mécanismes de la radicalisation violente: Pour une analyse processuelle et biographique des engagements violents*. INHESJ/CESDIP/Mission de recherche Droit et Justice, 2017, pp. 75–78.
- 47 In France, the Ministry of Interior holds a database of individuals (Fichier des Personnes Recherchées, FPR) divided in around twenty categories of interest. The FPR is amongst the most important French police databases both in volume and in frequency of use. A 'Fiche S' – 'S' for safety of the State (Sûreté de l'État) – is one among the FPR categories. The intelligence upon which is built the Fichier S stems principally from information collected by the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure (DGSI). The number of individuals listed with a 'Fiche S' is unknown. An individual who is subject to a 'Fiche S' is not necessarily actively surveilled. They can be used to gather information or carry out investigations for of counter-insurgency, counter-espionage or the fight against violent extremism. Several other types of confidential specialized databases are at the service of police investigations or targeted criminal prevention. The 'Fichier des signalements pour la prévention de la radicalisation à caractère terroriste (FSPRT)', or the database of alerts for the prevention of terrorist radicalisation, is more fit to monitor radicalisation. See: *Rapport d'Information No. 2082 de l'Assemblée Nationale sur les services publics face à la radicalisation*, 27.6.2019. [https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/rapports/cion\\_lois/l15b2082\\_rapport-information#\\_ftn13](https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/rapports/cion_lois/l15b2082_rapport-information#_ftn13) (last accessed: 1.11.2021).

- 48 The trial is the biggest criminal trial ever held in France and is expected to last nine months. Twenty men are accused of planning, facilitating and executing the terrorist attack – among which six are tried *in absentia* as five are presumed dead in Iraq or Syria and one is imprisoned in Turkey. The key figure of the attacks is Salah Abdeslam, a Brussels-born French citizen, thought to be the last survivor from the cell of ten attackers. Most of the others either killed themselves or were killed by the police.
- 49 Salah Abdeslam declared: "On a visé la France, et rien d'autre. Parce que les avions français (...) bombardent l'Etat islamique (...) François Hollande dit que nous combattions la France pour vos valeurs. C'est un mensonge manifeste." Cf. Soleen Seelow: Au procès du 13-Novembre: face à une victime musulmane, les justifications de Salah Abdeslam. In: *Le Monde*, 30.9.2021. [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/09/30/au-proces-du-13-novembre-face-a-une-victime-musulmane-les-justifications-de-salah-abdeslam\\_6096650\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/09/30/au-proces-du-13-novembre-face-a-une-victime-musulmane-les-justifications-de-salah-abdeslam_6096650_3224.html) (last accessed: 7.10.2021).
- 50 Spain Says Tape Claims Al Qaeda Behind Attacks. In: *Reuters*, 13.3.2004.
- 51 See: Oliver Roy: Jihadi radicalization, and La spécificité négligée des djihad locaux. In: *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 2021.

# 4.

# THE RESPONSE

## Distinguishing Threats and Vulnerabilities

Any counter-terrorism policy must start with the distinction between an analysis of threats and an identification of vulnerabilities. While threats are related to endogenous and exogenous nature as well as scope and danger of the enemy, vulnerabilities include, but are not limited to territorial characteristics, societal polarization, economic well-being. France by history and geography is at the crossroads between the North and the South of Europe and at the frontline of the Maghreb and Mashreq.

In most of counter-terrorism planning, these two levels require a specific set of actions. The first includes a pursue objective where intelligence officers, police and armed forces work to reduce the likelihood of an attack either by bringing terrorists to justice or by eliminating elements deemed too dangerous.<sup>52</sup> This strategy of pursue includes the use of armed forces abroad and sometimes, as we shall see in the case of France, for domestic purposes. Other countries specifically forbid the use of the military for internal security. It also includes a large prevention aspect where the goal is to reduce violent radicalization at home but also overseas. For most European countries, the prevention aspect became a significant part of the arsenal; it translated a clear worry about specific communities' receptivity to terrorist propaganda. It also included a much wider debate about the role of religion, immigration and minorities. That debate is still ongoing – raging might be more accurate – in France, and will represent a significant dimension of the forthcoming Presidential election.

The second part of any counter-terrorism policy has to deal with vulnerabilities. It includes measures of protection to dissuade any attack. Airports, metro networks, train stations have all been transformed by these protective measures. Paris has significantly changed to protect the public: any visitor to the Eiffel Tower may have noticed the difference compared to a decade ago: access is strictly monitored; high walls have been built. All infrastructure essential for normal life has to be safe-guarded, from water sanitation to nuclear power plants.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, large programs to form, equip, and train emergency services and first respondents had to be put in place to mitigate the effects of an attack. As we shall see, the latest trend of lone wolf attackers using cars and small trucks (vehicle ramming), has shown how insufficient these protection measures might be and how invaluable emergency services are to help communities struck by these terrorist attacks.

For members of the European Union, one element must be added: their vulnerabilities include an open-border system where a free-flow of goods and people is the rule. Needless to say, terrorists could benefit from the weakest point of entry to hit targets all over Europe. Between immigration and security, a link has been established by politicians and decision-makers. Yet, if the relevant level is Europe, decisions remain mostly national.<sup>54</sup>

### French Counter-Terrorism Arsenal

After 2001, the French government reinforced national security measures, known as the plan Vigipirate,<sup>55</sup> and directed its efforts on the connections between criminal and terrorist activities to prevent, disrupt, prosecute, and improve coordination between units, while supporting European measures (external border control, strengthening common security, and defense policy, establishing a counter-terrorism coordinator office, etc.).<sup>56</sup> France has traditionally deployed large investigative, some will say intrusive means, to monitor part of its population deemed either suspicious or dangerous. The police with its traditional tools – through informers and confidential informants, counter-terrorism measures online, and a high-level of intelligence – did prevent several attacks. Of course, it is unable to be full proof. On the national territory, after the 2012 Toulouse and Montauban attacks, new security measures were introduced under President François Hollande, most notably the establishment of a state of emergency.

One may legitimately question why, with such a proactive counter-terrorism apparatus, the 2015 massacre could take place? Responses are complex but several aspects were often underlined. First, the attackers came from a neighboring country and took advantage of the European open borders regime. These individuals may have been already monitored by the Belgian police but information did not travel properly between Brussels and Paris. Moreover, even if a high alert warning existed, there was no operable intelligence upon which to act. Police efforts remained national, only after the attacks, cross-borders cooperation did intensify. Second, when information about possible radicalization existed – as in the case of the Kouachi brothers –, it did not lead to preventive arrest. Information was not shared between the intelligence services.<sup>57</sup> Third, even with a former arrest for a terrorist offense – as with Amedy Coulibaly –, his release was not followed by any special surveillance although his radical Islamist views left no doubt.<sup>58</sup> Finally, the French and the Belgian governments who took the decision to join the anti-Daesh coalition, under-estimated the reaction of Daesh in Syria.



*After the beheading of a teacher outside his school in a Paris suburb followed by a deadly attack inside the basilica, police officers stand guard near Notre Dame church in Nice, southern France, October 29, 2020.*

After the 2015 series of attacks, the state implemented a policy to prevent and detect radicalization, led by the Ministry of the Interior and the state of emergency was extended several times. Furthermore, border control was reestablished and the operation Sentinelle put in place.<sup>59</sup> An unprecedented overhaul for intelligence surveillance led to the passing of the July 2015 Intelligence Act.<sup>60</sup> In addition to increased surveillance measures, the militarization of the French response – including the use of armed forces on its own territory – is unique in Europe. One may question whether the presence of soldiers in the public space, instead of gendarmerie or police officers, is a pacifying or provocative factor. On the one hand, the domestic deployment of soldiers might incite attacks and thus play as an aggravating factor. On the other, soldiers are trained to face such risks and if their role is to deviate the threat from civilian targets, acting as ‘standing docks’ and visible targets serves then the overall objective. Whether the military is a credible deterrent is an open question. It is fair to say however, that these measures have been widely supported by the French public.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, in October 2017, the law SILT (Sécurité Intérieure et Lutte contre le Terrorisme) reinforcing domestic security and the fight against terrorism was adopted, taking over the state of emergency measures.<sup>62</sup> The law allows local prefects to establish special protection perimeters around places and/or events deemed vulnerable to attacks; to close down places of worship where terrorism, hatred, or discrimination are promoted; to establish “individual monitoring and surveillance measures”, and granting sizeable powers to search homes and other premises. These measures designed to counter terrorist activities are also presented as measures meant to enforce the respect of the principle of *laïcité* in France. Overall, they provoked heated debates domestically and with the United Nations.<sup>63</sup> The July 2021 law permanently renewed these measures. President Macron’s next step was to plead for an overhaul of Schengen.<sup>64</sup> Also, a set of instruments was put in place. In 2017 the CNRLT (Coordination Nationale du Renseignement et de la Lutte Contre le Terrorisme), a national coordination taskforce working on intelligence and the fight against terrorism under the authority of the Presidency was established. In 2018 a ministerial circular placed the coordination of all the services responsible for the fight against terrorism under the General Directorate of Internal Security (DGSI).<sup>65</sup> In 2019, the Inter-ministerial Committee on the Prevention of Delinquency and Radicalisation, the CIPDR (Comité Interministériel de Prévention de la Délinquance et de la Radicalisation) was placed under the authority of the Ministry of Interior and its scope was widened to the fight against “separatism” through the promotion of a moderate Islam in accordance with the values of the Republic. Finally, at the EU level, alongside the declarations on the necessity to strengthen European intelligence sharing, skepticism of what the EU could actually do remains dominant.<sup>66</sup> How do national watch lists – how does the French ‘Fiche S’ for instance – compare to their Belgian, Danish, German or British equivalents, if any? While some countries might be over-profiling and overexerting measures of control, others are not doing enough. Unless some congruence is found in the tools of identification and monitoring of dangerous individuals and organizations at the European level, the response will remain at best insufficient.

## War Abroad

The November 2015 Paris attacks were strategically most significant when it comes to the shift provoked in the French response both at home and the intensification abroad. In the aftermath of the attack, President Hollande declared that “France is at war”<sup>67</sup>. Until then, and since 9/11, the French, with other Europeans, had maintained a critical approach to the United States’ posture of “the global war on terror”<sup>68</sup>. In Europe, a terrorist act was precisely framed as a criminal act subject to law enforcement by civilian authorities and terrorists were thus not seen as belligerents but as criminals. The 2003 European security strategy did not refer to any act of war but only the fight against terrorism. The American “call to arms” was fast considered counter-productive as “it arouses an immediate expectation, and demand, for spectacular military action against some easily identifiable adversary, preferably a hostile state – action leading to decisive results”<sup>69</sup>. Some may think that the French refusal to join the US-led coalition in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 may have offered some respite in terms of terrorist attacks on its soil, however French officials themselves considered that their involvement in Afghanistan could be used by terrorists to strike.

Hence, a process of militarization of the fight against terrorism has gradually taken place in France. Already in 2012, France intervened militarily against what it considered at the time as a clear and present terrorist danger in the Sahel, starting with the destabilization in Mali. As Jean-Yves Le Drian, then Defense Minister, argued, "the scale of the arsenals that we discovered, particularly in the North, shows that there was a real intention to export terrorism beyond Mali's borders, and that if we had not intervened, attacks would certainly have been committed in France"<sup>70</sup>. The fear of a "Sahelistan" led to a broadening of the intervention from Mali to the entire Sahel strip (the so-called G5 Sahel countries – Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad) where 3,000 French troops since August 2014 were hunting down terrorist leaders and factions in a vast territory with mixed results.<sup>71</sup> This French strategy has so far demonstrated its limits: terrorist attacks have increased, stabilization remains limited, and political solutions were still largely missing — how can an asymmetric threat be the subject of a symmetrical response? France's focus on the military aspects of counter-terrorism led to the neglect of political and social factors. Paris also refused to engage in peace talks with groups labelled as terrorists, fearing that this would legitimize them and force its president to publicly admit the failures of Operation Barkhane.<sup>72</sup> In June 2021, President Macron announced a recalibration of the operation and he recalled some troops.<sup>73</sup> The gap with the Malian authorities increased and it led to President Macron's decision, on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2022, to initiate the complete departure of the French and international troops from Mali.

More importantly, President Hollande decided in August 2014 that France would join the Global Coalition against Daesh in support to Iraqi authorities engaged in the fight. In a speech at the International Conference on Peace and Security in Iraq held in Paris, President Hollande decided to engage French air forces in the US-led coalition against the Islamic State in Northern Iraq. The Operation Chammal —as it was named after the dominant Northern Wind in Iraq—, was later extended to target in Syria, including al-Raqqa, the de facto capital of the Islamic State. These decisions to pursue terrorists abroad were thus initiated before the Bataclan massacre, none of which was controversial.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, this military use of force was also included in the domestic responses after the Bataclan massacre. The Hollande Presidency employed French soldiers – not only the traditional police and gendarmerie –, to patrol, protect and reassure French citizens. Operation Sentinelle – a rather preventive measure – deployed 11,000 troops all over the national territory, including around specific strategic targets and highly symbolic touristic sites and is still in place today, although in a less demonstrative fashion.

The militarization of counter-terrorism is not surprising for a country with an interventionist strategic culture and military capabilities to match it. It was also a traditional way for France to hold its rank, especially in a wide international coalition. Lastly, the French domestic security apparatus has always been very intrusive and the state never hesitated to show its force and its scope when the security of its citizens was at stake. Yet, to get out of this perpetual state of emergency and bring France back into a more normal setting of governance will represent a key challenge for any forthcoming President.

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- 52 The policy of eliminating leaders and active elements of terrorist groups has been at the core of the French operations in Mali. Yet, the strategy of decapitation has not been very successful. See: Daniel Byman: Do Targeted Killings Work? In: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, Issue 2, 2006, pp. 95–111; Jenna Jordan: Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes. In: *International Security*, Vol. 38, Issue 4, 2014, pp. 7–38.
- 53 The protection of these nuclear facilities is of course critical. Since 2015, 20 Special Units of the French Gendarmerie are dedicated for their monitoring and defense in case of attack, while airspace around these facilities, named "highly sensitive defense areas" (zone de défense hautement sensible) is closed and subject to military defense systems. See the 2.6.2015 law: Loi relative au renforcement de la protection des installations civiles abritant des matières nucléaires. Loi No. 2015-588 du 2.6.2015. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2015/6/2/DEFX1506466L/jo/texte> (last accessed: 29.10.2021).
- 54 The day after the 13.11.2015 attack, President Hollande, with the backing of most political parties, decided to close French borders. In fact, controls at the borders had been already decided to 'secure the territory' in view of the Paris Climate Conference (COP21), that took place at the end of November.
- 55 The plan Vigipirate is a central tool with measures dating back to the end of the 1970s, redefined and updated in the 1990s (and later on in the 2000s and more significantly in 2016) and putting in place a series of security measures, with special units in ministries and creating the position of the "juges d'instructions".
- 56 "Between 2001 and 2010, at least eight attacks had been planned against France, all of them prevented, primarily by French authorities": Pernille Rieker: Fighting International Terrorism the French Way. In: *French Foreign Policy in a Changing World*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 133–157.
- 57 Despite the highly centralized system, numerous agencies are not sufficiently coordinated: the Direction Générale de Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE), Direction Générale de Sécurité Intérieure (DGSI); Direction du Renseignement Militaire (DRM), Direction de la Protection et de la Sécurité de la Défense (DPSD), Directions Nationale du Renseignement et des Enquêtes Douanières (DNRED), Service de traitement du renseignement et de l'action contre les circuits financiers (Tracfin).
- 58 See Rapport No. 3922 de l'Assemblée Nationale relative aux moyens mis en œuvre par l'État pour lutter contre le terrorisme depuis le 7 janvier 2015, 5.7.2016, pp. 145–147. <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/rap-enq/r3922-t1.pdf> (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 59 Opération Sentinelle was put in place after the January 2015 attacks, and reinforced after the November 2015 attacks.
- 60 The law takes into account the evolution of technologies and modes of communication used by terrorists, granting intelligence services new means of control, in particular the possibility, on an experimental basis, of intercepting satellite communications: Loi relative au renseignement. Loi No. 2015-912 du 24.7.2015. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000030931899/> (last accessed: 29.10.2021).
- 61 One reason might be that France was hit by a "terrorism from the inside", resulting from the radicalisation of an "enemy from the inside", contrarily to the United-States for instance that were hit by an exogenous violence. Sèze/Clément: *État de littérature*, p. 180.
- 62 Cf. Loi No. 2017-1510 du 30.10.2017 renforçant la sécurité intérieure et la lutte contre le terrorisme, which measures were subject to an experiment until prorogued on 31.7.2021 by the Loi No. 2021-998 du 30.7.2021 relative à la prévention d'actes de terrorisme et au renseignement, that perpetuates and adapts measures tested with the SILT law and creates a security measure for terrorists leaving prison and strengthens the 2015 intelligence law (increased use of algorithms, etc.): Loi renforçant la sécurité intérieure et la lutte contre le terrorisme. Loi No. 2017-1510 du 30.10.2017. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000035932811> (last accessed: 29.10.2021); Loi relative à la prévention d'actes de terrorisme et au renseignement. Loi No. 2021-998 du 30.7.2021 relative à la prevention d'actes de terrorisme et au renseignement. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2017/10/30/INTX1716370L/jo/texte> (last accessed: 29.10.2021).
- 63 Preliminary findings of the visit: UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism concludes visit to France, 23.5.2018. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23128&LangID=E> (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 64 See Maité Sélynan: Immigration: Macron plaide pour une refonte de Schengen. In: *Le Figaro*, 25.4.2019. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/immigration-macron-plaide-pour-une-refonte-de-schengen-20190425> (last accessed: 7.10.2021).
- 65 The ministerial circular INTK1824920J, French minister of Interior, 14.12.2019.

#### 4. THE RESPONSE

- 66 The development of the EU-wide Passenger Name Record system designed to improve monitoring air travel and to help thwart criminal terrorist activities is one positive step, and was backed by Paris. See: Décret No. 2018-714 du 3.8.2018 relatif au "système API-PNR France" et modifiant le code de la sécurité intérieure (partie réglementaire). <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000037301107/> (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 67 Cf. the speech of President François Hollande: "La France est en guerre. Les actes commis vendredi soir à Paris et près du Stade de France, sont des actes de guerre. Ils ont fait au moins 129 morts et de nombreux blessés. Ils constituent une agression contre notre pays, contre ses valeurs, contre sa jeunesse, contre son mode de vie. [...] Nous sommes dans une guerre contre le terrorisme djihadiste qui menace le monde entier et pas seulement la France": Les messages du Président de la République au Parlement, 16.11.2015. <https://www.senat.fr/evenement/archives/D46/hollande.html> (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 68 The French and European positioning against the global war on terror and the militarization of the fight against terrorism did not stop many to take part to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001, while maintaining their rhetoric.
- 69 Michael Howard: What's in a Name? How to Fight Terrorism. In: *Foreign Affairs*, February/January 2002. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2002-01-01/whats-name-how-fight-terrorism> (last accessed: 29.10.2021).
- 70 Jean-François Bayart: Mali: le choix raisonné de la France. In: *Le Monde*, 22.1.2013. [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/01/22/mali-le-choix-raisonne-de-la-france\\_1820680\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2013/01/22/mali-le-choix-raisonne-de-la-france_1820680_3232.html) (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 71 See: François Heisbourg: A Surprising Little War: First Lessons of Mali. In: *Survival*, Vol. 55, Issue 2, 2013, pp. 7–18 and Jean-Yves Haine: Robust Containment: French and US Security Policies in Africa. Note de l'Ifri, February 2016. [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/note\\_ifri-ocppc\\_jyh\\_en.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/note_ifri-ocppc_jyh_en.pdf) (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 72 Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos : Faut-il négocier avec les djihadistes au Sahel ? In: *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 85, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 175–187.
- 73 President Macron had sent diverging signals to African countries and to French domestic audience. See: Paul Taylor: France stuck in Sahel despite 'withdrawal'. In: *Politico*, 12.6.2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-france-stuck-in-sahel-west-africa-despite-withdrawal/> (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 74 For some, these actions demonstrated an increased normalization of France, especially in its transatlantic relationship. The cooperation with Washington was not perceived as a political problem and, more importantly, it offered a significant added-value to French counter-terrorism policy abroad, notably in the Sahel. See: Christian Lequesne: French foreign and security challenges after the Paris terrorist attacks. In: *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 37, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 306–318 and Haine: Robust Containment.

## 5.

# POLITICS VERSUS POLICY RESPONSES

On 3 September 2021 a Sri-Lankan national supporter of the Islamic State group well known by police services carried out a stabbing attack in a supermarket in the city of Auckland in New Zealand, wounding six people among which three were found in a critical condition. In response, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern gave a press conference qualifying the attack as criminal despite the identified affiliation to IS.<sup>75</sup> Her prudent public political response remained – as it should be – patently distinct from policy responses and counter-violent extremism measures already in place or to come. This distinction between politics and policy responses is all the more critical, and often ill-advisedly missing, in countries like France, where Muslim populations and the question of Islam have become central. Attacks, similar to the Auckland one, have been regularly taking place in France since 2016. Only to mention a couple: on 4 April 2020 in Romans-sur-Isère, a man attacked passers-by and small business owners with a knife, killing two and wounding five; and on 23 April 2021, in Rambouillet, a man attacked the police station killing one policeman. Their frequency, however, has anchored the doubt within the public opinion that such an ideology is being supported by local communities and that jihadism is thriving among French Muslim youth and among Muslim immigrants living in the country. French public authorities, from President Hollande to President Macron, while warning from the dangers of stigmatization of Muslims, have adopted a continuum in the language of war, made national, against Islamist terrorism. Also, they have not discarded publicly that the ideology of home-grown terrorists may be supported by local minorities. Whether there is evidence that this is the case is currently debated. In sum, the politics of French political leaders left little room for a sound public response, one that minimizes to the lowest the disproportionate psychological effects caused by a terrorist act.<sup>76</sup>

President Macron's public response against what he coined "Islamist separatism" has indeed provoked considerable political effects.<sup>77</sup> The President upheld that republican values need to be defended against "Islamist separatism" a couple of weeks before the killing of Samuel Paty in October 2020. His declaration put a seal on the blatant return of religion – of Islam – at the heart of political debates. It translated as well as it reinforced a general zeitgeist: in France, the belief in the performing principle of integration and republican citizenship is receding, while the fear of communitarianism and particularistic loyalties – diasporic or religious – is on the rise.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, two tendencies have emerged in French society and both cast doubt on French secularism, or *laïcité*. The first movement is suspicious of the Republic's ability to tame religious fundamentalism. It deems too weak the secular control over religious organizations. It opposes neo-communitarianism and a republicanism based on a liberalism of difference. The second trend, by contrast, calls into question the *laïcité* capacity to accommodate religious freedom – of belief *and* practice –, especially Islam. It warns that such a shortcoming feeds fundamentalist narratives, encouraging in turn illiberalism and the rise of populisms within democracies. The need to seat the religious observance of the Muslim faith within the frame of the Law of 1905, while drawing a line between accommodating a 'religious Islam' and countering the rise of 'Islamist movements' in society (especially in schools), appears to many as much necessary as it is surgical.<sup>79</sup>

The tension between both positions is central to the analysis of both root-causes of jihadi terrorism in France and the identification of relevant policy responses. At its heart lies a Gordian knot: whether there is direct correlation and continuity between widening the scope of the freedom of religion and belief (tolerating and accommodating novel, including traditionalist, forms of religiosities in society) and the development of fundamental movements. The suggestion that terrorism in France does stem from indoctrination and recruitment in Salafi clusters has not been corroborated.<sup>80</sup> As it is often the case, the reaction to terrorist attacks is as important, if not more, than the attack itself. In this respect, public declarations about fragmentation, separatism, secular crisis, and Islamist menace are not grounded in forensic evidence. Counter-terrorism policies essentially articulated on such theses can only further build the internal divide. And that would be a victory for terrorists.

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- 75 “[The attack was] carried out by an individual, not a faith, not a culture, not an ethnicity, but an individual person who was gripped by ideology that is not supported [here] by anyone or any community. He alone carries the responsibility for these acts. Let that be where the judgement falls”. See: Natasha Frost: New Zealand Police Kill ‘Extremist’ Who Stabbed 6 in ISIS-Inspired Attack. In: *The New York Times*, 3.9.2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/03/world/asia/new-zealand-isis-terrorist-attack.html> (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 76 “A violent action is called terrorist when its psychological effects are disproportional with its mere physical outcomes”: Raymond Aron: *Paix et Guerre entre les nations*, Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1962, p. 176.
- 77 “What we must tackle is Islamist separatism. A conscious, theorized, political-religious project is materializing through repeated deviations from the Republic’s values, which is often reflected by the formation of a counter-society as shown by children being taken out of school, the development of separate community sporting and cultural activities serving as a pretext for teaching principles which aren’t in accordance with the Republic’s laws.” President Macron also coined the responsibility of the other separatism, that of “neighborhoods, it’s the ghettoization which our Republic – initially with the best intentions in the world – has allowed to occur”. Cf. Fight against separatism – the Republic in action: speech by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the fight against separatism (Les Mureaux, 2.10.2020). <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/coming-to-france/france-facts/secularism-and-religious-freedom-in-france-63815/article/fight-against-separatism-the-republic-in-action-speech-by-emmanuel-macron> (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 78 Integration understood as a social process that ties inseparably the integration of individuals to society (tropic integration) with the integration of society as a whole through politics (systemic integration). Cf. Dominique Schnapper, *Qu'est ce que l'intégration?* Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2007.
- 79 See: Bernard Gorce: Islamisme: l'école fait face comme elle peut. In: *La Croix*, 21.10. 2020. <https://www.la-croix.com/Famille/Islamisme-lecole-fait-face-comme-peut-2020-10-21-1201120553> (last accessed: 1.11.2021); Projet de loi confortant le respect des principes de la République. Audition de Mme Dominique Schnapper, sociologue, présidente du Conseil des sages de la laïcité, 17.2.2021. <http://www.senat.fr/rap/a20-450/a20-4507.html> (last accessed: 1.11.2021).
- 80 There are few but vocal claims to the contrary. For the most notable see Gilles Kepel (with Antoine Jardin): *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français*. Paris: Gallimard, 2015 and Gilles Kepel: *La Fracture*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016.

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Since the 1990s, France has been one of the most targeted western countries by terrorists. Cynthia Salloum provides distinctly a threat analysis and an identification of vulnerabilities, differentiates terrorism of organization and terrorism of opportunity, and gives an overview of the French response to jihadist terrorist attacks. She analyses the acute polarization of the French political debate around religion and secularism and stresses the necessity to separate political from policy responses.