

Chapter 5

Islamist terrorism in the French context

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Abstract: France is one of the Western countries most affected by Islamist terrorism. Moreover, most terrorist attacks are committed by French people. Even if these people are linked to immigration, they are radicalized on French soil. The issues raised by this phenomenon are social, economic, religious and security related. Fighting Islamist terrorism requires ambitious policies in several areas, and these policies must be coordinated, because terrorism is a global issue. Islamist terrorism is a subject that divides the French society, including the French universities concerning the analysis and explanation of the phenomenon. Islamism, in France, does not only have a religious or a social explanation. Even if its causes are sometimes difficult to define, political leaders are called upon to act to find solutions. In fact, despite numerous reforms, pressure from far-right parties tends to radicalize the other parties in their security posture at the risk of threatening the foundations of the French democracy, despite a desire to protect French citizens. This paper examines: a) the extent of the Islamism and Islamist terrorism in France as major security threats, b) the debate about security issues and c) the response of the French state to the threat posed by Islamists.

Keywords: Terrorism, Islamism, Islamist terrorism, Jihadism, Radicalization, Security, France

Introduction

This research paper emerges from the author's personal encounter with Islamist terrorism in France. While attending Sciences Po Strasbourg, the author participated in parliamentary simulations of the French National Assembly. On December 11, 2018, he was participating in one of these simulations in the administrative center of the city of Strasbourg the night a terrorist attack took place in the Strasbourg Christmas market. At the

time of the attack, the author, along with other students from Science Po Strasbourg were in a building where simulations were taking place. Following the attack, the students remained in the building all night in fear that the terrorist, still at large, would get closer to them. With limited information about the situation coming from social networks, television, students tried to reassure their families and our friends they would be ok, while remaining in fear. Apart from helicopters, police cars and other law enforcement officials, the students observed the streets were empty. As the terrorist came closer to their building, the military positioned themselves to neutralize him. Even though the students were guarded by police, they were all afraid. The next day, with the terrorist still at large, the author went to the university to follow classes to demonstrate he was not afraid, and that the terrorists would not succeed to change our – students and French citizens – way of life. While the author does not see himself as a victim of Islamist terrorism, he realizes how it could have been him who was attacked and understands better now the impact of the tragic events involving human lives that are constantly reported in the media, which causes fear in the families and friends of the victims.

The attempt to define terrorism

Bruce Hoffman's provides a clear and precise definition of terrorism stating it "is the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change."¹⁰⁶ The scale of fear instilled by a terrorist attack is larger than the direct human impact (that is victims). This is precisely the objective of the terrorists.

The concept of Islamism, like terrorism, is difficult to define. Definitions of Islamism usually include the choice of a specific interpretation of the Muslim doctrine as a guide for political action, and/or an ideology that manipulates Islam for a political project – to transform the political and social system of a state by making Sharia law, whose univocal interpretation is imposed on the whole of society, the sole source of law. Political Islam, or

¹⁰⁶ Bruce Hoffman, « Defining Terrorism », in *Inside Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2006), 1-42.

fundamentalist Islam, also appears as synonyms¹⁰⁷. For the purpose of this paper, Islamism is understood as the use of Islam for political purposes, or the political use of Islam. Islamism itself is not violent, but can be, because Islamist terrorism refers to terrorist attacks committed by members or sympathizers of Islamism movements, in the name of Islam. These acts qualify as terrorist acts because those who commit these violent acts, or threaten to do so, have a political purpose related to Islam that view Islam and the Muslim world as under attack, or at least under threat, of a global non-Muslim alliance¹⁰⁸.

The limit of these definitions is that they are theoretical. These concepts are very often difficult to define and to grasp, because these represent ideal types¹⁰⁹ rather than actual reality. Therefore, we should use these concepts with care to avoid offending Muslims, while working within the limits of academic research to better understand and fight against this phenomenon. What is certain, however, is that the answers to terrorism and Islamism are different depending on the definition given to these concepts. The definition process is thus very important, because it is the basis of the response provided by the public authorities.

A brief historical overview of islamist terrorism in France

This section is partly devoted to a non-exhaustive list of Islamist terrorist attacks committed on French territory. It is important to go back over it to better realize the extent of the phenomenon, or at least the extent of its perception. Because each attack is different and feeds fears a little more, it is necessary to mention them, to try to better understand Islamist terrorism.

¹⁰⁷ Adam Zeidan, "Islamism", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamism>.

¹⁰⁸ Europol (2021), European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, Publication Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

¹⁰⁹ Max Weber, *Essais sur la théorie de la science* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1965).

One of the first Islamist attacks in France took place in Paris in 1985. Hezbollah organized a series of thirteen bomb attacks between December 1985 and September 1986. These attacks, some of which were foiled, resulted in a total of thirteen victims and more than three hundred injured. Less than ten years later, between December 1994 and December 1996, France was targeted by eleven attacks committed by the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria. This is an Islamist organization created during the Algerian civil war in 1991, whose objective is to overthrow the official Algerian government and replace it with an Islamic state. France is said to be targeted by these attacks because of its foreign policy with Algeria, which does not support the Islamists but the military regime in place. The deadliest attack was the bombing of the Saint-Michel station of the RER B in Paris on 25 July 1995, with eight victims and one hundred and fifty injured. The last Islamist attack of the century in France was committed by the same group in December 1996 in the Port-Royal station of the RER B in Paris, resulting in four dead and one hundred and seventy injured¹¹⁰.

Between 1996 and 2012 Islamist terrorist attacks subsided, with only one Islamist terrorist attack by the armed French Islamist Front (*Front islamiste français armé*)¹¹¹ in front of the Indonesian embassy in 2004 with no victims.

Since 2012 France has been the target of many terrorist attacks, committed by Al-Qaeda or by the so-called Islamic State – or at least claimed by these organizations – with more than two hundred and sixty people killed. Between 2014 and 2017, France was the country most affected by Islamist terrorism in Europe and the US¹¹². Moreover, in 2018, 2019 and 2020, France had the most completed, failed, and foiled Islamist attacks in the EU,

¹¹⁰ Édouard de Mareschal, “La France a déjà été la cible de multiples attaques terroristes”, *Le Figaro*, September 24, 2014, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/09/24/01003-20140924ARTFIG00347-la-france-a-deja-ete-la-cible-de-multiples-attaques-terroristes.php>.

¹¹¹ Patricia Tourancheau, “Étrange revendication de l’attentat de l’ambassade”, *Libération*, October 9, 2004, https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2004/10/09/etrange-revendication-de-l-attentat-de-l-ambassade_495449/.

¹¹² Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, and Eva Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*, (Milan: Ledizioni, 2017).

where the most Islamist terrorists were arrested, representing half of the EU total¹¹³. The following list highlights the many tragic events that have recently shaped the French collective memory about Islamist terrorism. These events have been widely covered by the media and have provoked an increasingly strong political response, requested by the French people. In March 2012 in Toulouse and Montauban, during the presidential election campaign, Mohammed Merah, a French, killed three soldiers and four people in front of a Jewish school. This attack was claimed by Al-Qaeda¹¹⁴. A year later, in May 2013 in the La Défense district in Paris, a French soldier was stabbed by a French convert to Islam¹¹⁵.

January and November 2015 particularly stand out in the history of Islamist terrorism in France. The most spectacular and symbolic attack took place on the 7th of January, an event that everyone still remembers. The satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* was targeted by a shooting, killing twelve people, and injuring eleven others, among them cartoonists known in France for their satirical drawings¹¹⁶. The killers, brothers Chérif and Saïd Kouachi, were French and claimed to be from Al-Qaeda, which later officially claimed responsibility for the attack. More than five years after these attacks, they remain as a scar not completely healed for many French people. *Charlie Hebdo* is a satirical newspaper which openly mocks all religions, including Islam, not hesitating to present the prophet, Mohammed. This newspaper is a symbol of freedom of speech, associated with the French conception of secularism (*laïcité*). In France, according to the first article of the Constitution of October 4, 1958, the Republic is secular, there is a separation

¹¹³ Europol (2021), European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, Publication Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

¹¹⁴ Christophe Cornevin, "Il y a quatre ans, Mohamed Merah faisait basculer la France dans le terrorisme", *Le Figaro*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2016/03/18/01016-20160318ARTFIG00021-il-y-a-quatre-ans-mohamed-merah-faisait-basculer-la-france-dans-le-terrorisme.php>.

¹¹⁵ Angélique Négroni, "La Défense : à 22 ans, il voulait tuer au nom d'Allah", *Le Figaro*, May 25, 2013, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2013/05/29/01016-20130529ARTFIG00661-la-defense-a-22-ans-il-voulait-tuer-au-nom-d-allah.php>.

¹¹⁶ "Comment s'est déroulée l'attaque contre 'Charlie Hebdo' ?", *Le Monde*, January 7, 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/attaque-contre-charlie-hebdo/article/2015/01/07/comment-s-est-deroulee-l-attaque-contre-charlie-hebdo_4550930_4550668.html.

between the State and religions¹¹⁷. Moreover, because the State is neutral regarding religions, it ensures freedom of conscience. Being able to criticize a religion is a fundamental right guaranteed by the constitution. These drawings are however contested by many Muslims in France and around the world, because of their blasphemous and provocative nature. *Charlie Hebdo* first published such drawings in 2006, and since then, they have continued to receive death threats, even after the January 2015 attacks. Moreover, on the 9th of January, there was a killing and hostage-taking in a kosher shop in Paris by Amedy Coulibaly, a French claiming to be from the Islamic State, causing four deaths¹¹⁸. The day before, on the 8th, he killed a policewoman in Montrouge¹¹⁹. In total, the Islamist attacks of January 7, 8 and 9, 2015 caused seventeen victims¹²⁰.

The end of 2015 also saw events of this type, but on a completely different scale. On November 13, 2015, there was a series of six coordinated Islamist terrorist attacks in several places in Paris. The first attack was three suicide bombers around the Stade de France, during a friendly football match between France and Germany, with the French president François Hollande in the stands. There were also four restaurant shootings and bombing in other places. The final and the more brutal attack was in the Bataclan theater, it was a mass shooting during a concert of the American rock band Eagles of Death Metal, to which one thousand five hundred people were present. The result of these massive attacks, claimed by Islamic State, is one hundred and thirty deaths and four hundred and sixteen people injured¹²¹. These attacks were

¹¹⁷ *Constitution française du 4 octobre 1958*, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGITEXT00006071194/>.

¹¹⁸ Jean-Marie Guénois, "La communauté juive tétanisée après le drame de la porte de Vincennes", *Le Figaro*, January 9, 2015, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/01/09/01016-20150109ARTFIG00335-la-communaute-juive-tetanisee-apres-le-drame-de-la-porte-de-vincennes.php>.

¹¹⁹ Marion Van Renterghem, "Attentats de janvier 2015 : Clarissa Jean-Philippe, l'abandonnée de Montrouge", *Le Monde*, January 5, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2016/01/05/clarissa-jean-philippe-l-abandonnee-de-montrouge_4842188_3224.html.

¹²⁰ "Les dix-sept victimes des attentats de janvier 2015", *Le Figaro*, January 22, 2015, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/01/22/01016-20150122ARTFIG00297-les-dix-sept-victimes-des-attentats-de-charlie-hebdo.php>.

¹²¹ Clémentine Maligorne, "Attentats du 13 novembre : retour sur une semaine bouleversante", *Le Figaro*, November 20, 2015, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/11/20/01016-20151120ARTFIG00404-attentats-du-13-novembre-retour-sur-une-semaine-meurtriere.php>.

the deadliest in France since the Second World War, and the deadliest in the European Union since the Madrid train bombings of March 11, 2004¹²², with almost two hundred people died and two thousand people injured.

Other attacks have taken place since then, targeting different people. In January 2016 a Jewish professor was attacked with a machete by an adolescent claiming to have acted in the name of Allah and the Islamic State¹²³. On July 14, 2016, a truck attack took place in Nice. July 14 is the French National Day, during which fireworks are launched in the evening in all French cities. In Nice, it was on the Promenade des Anglais, one of the most famous avenues in France, along the beach. A nineteen-ton cargo truck, driven by Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, a Tunisian living in France, was deliberately driven into crowds of people celebrating, killing eighty-six people, and injuring four hundred and fifty-eight others. This attack was claimed by Islamic State¹²⁴. It was during this day that François Hollande, during the traditional presidential speech on July 14, announced the end of the state of emergency, set up after the Paris November 2015 attacks. But it was extended because of this attack¹²⁵. Another attack took place in July 2016, when two terrorists attacked the participants of mass in Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray, Normandy, holding hostages and killing the priest. These two French citizens claimed to be from Islamic State, which claimed responsibility for this attack¹²⁶. In March 2018 in Trèbes and Carcassonne, Radouane Lakdim, born in Morocco but later obtained French

¹²² "L'attentat le plus meurtrier en Europe, après Madrid en 2004", *Le Figaro*, November 14, 2015, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/11/14/01016-20151114ARTFIG00016-l-attentat-le-plus-meurtrier-en-europe-apres-madrid-en-2004.php>.

¹²³ Aliette de Broqua, "Sept ans de prison pour avoir tenté de tuer un professeur juif", *Le Figaro*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2017/02/28/01016-20170228ARTFIG00247-yusuf-un-jeune-djihadiste-de-17-ans-en-proces-a-paris.php>.

¹²⁴ Anne-Laure Frémont, "Attentat de Nice : le point sur les derniers éléments de l'enquête", *Le Figaro*, July 17, 2016, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2016/07/17/01016-20160717ARTFIG00050-attentat-de-nice-le-point-sur-les-derniers-elements-de-l-enquete.php>.

¹²⁵ Hélène Bekmezian, "L'état d'urgence prolongé pour six mois par l'Assemblée nationale", *Le Monde*, July 19, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/07/19/etat-d-urgence-le-gouvernement-se-veut-ouvert-aux-propositions-de-la-droite_4971808_823448.html.

¹²⁶ Christophe Cornevin, "Mardi, 9h25, Daech assassine un prêtre dans son église", *Le Figaro*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2016/07/26/01016-20160726ARTFIG00310-daech-assassine-un-petre-dans-son-eglise.php>.

nationality, killed five people and took people hostage in a supermarket. He said he was a member of Islamic State and demanded the release of Salah Abdeslam, the only surviving terrorist of the November 2015 Paris attacks. A senior gendarmerie officer, Lieutenant Colonel Arnaud Beltrame, voluntarily swapped places with a hostage. After a three-hour stand-off, the terrorist shot and fatally stabbed Arnaud Beltrame, who received a national tribute and is celebrated as a hero in France for his sacrifice¹²⁷. He was posthumously promoted to colonel and received the Legion of Honour (*Légion d'honneur*), France's highest order of merit¹²⁸. On December 11, 2018, an Islamist terrorist attack took place in the Christmas market in Strasbourg¹²⁹, as mentioned earlier. In October 2019, Paris police headquarters were attacked where three police officers and one administrative officer were stabbed and died¹³⁰. Finally, the most mediatized and recent attack was in October 2020, when a teacher, Samuel Paty, was decapitated in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine by Abdoullakh Anzorov, a Russian of Chechen origin, whose parents were given asylum in France and therefore had refugee status. Ten days before, the teacher had shown the caricatures of *Charlie Hebdo* during a civics class about freedom of speech, which led to a heated controversy with some Muslim parents of its pupils¹³¹.

¹²⁷ "Attaques de Carcassonne et Trèbes : ce que l'on sait", *Le Monde*, March 28, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2018/03/23/prise-d-otages-dans-un-supermarche-de-l-aude_5275306_1653578.html.

¹²⁸ Cécile Bouanchaud, "Hommage national : 'Le nom d'Arnaud Beltrame est devenu celui de l'héroïsme français'", *Le Monde*, March 28, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2018/03/28/attentats-dans-l-aude-la-france-rend-un-hommage-national-au-gendarme-arnaud-beltrame_5277389_1653578.html.

¹²⁹ "Strasbourg : ce que l'on sait de l'attentat", *Le Monde*, December 12, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2018/12/12/strasbourg-ce-que-l-on-sait-de-la-fusillade-qui-a-fait-au-moins-deux-morts_5396056_1653578.html.

¹³⁰ "Attaque au couteau à la préfecture de police de Paris : ce que l'on sait", *Le Figaro*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/attaque-au-couteau-a-la-prefecture-de-police-de-paris-syndicats-20191003>.

¹³¹ Cécile Chambraud, Nicolas Chapuis, and Élise Vincent, "Attentat de Conflans : ce que l'on sait de l'enquête après le meurtre brutal de Samuel Paty", *Le Monde*, October 17, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/10/17/attentat-de-conflans-un-hommage-national-sera-rendu-a-l-enseignant-assassine-vendredi-annonce-l-elysee_6056408_3224.html.

The international reaction to the attacks in France

The impact of the January 2015 events was considerable, both in France and abroad: demonstrations of support took place in many cities in France and around the world. Forty-four heads of state and government took part in a republican march in Paris on the 11 January, which brought together more than one and a half million people. Over the course of two days, more than four million French people marched throughout the country – the largest demonstration ever recorded in France¹³² – showing their support for freedom of speech, with the slogan “*Je suis Charlie*” (I am Charlie), used and posted all over social media¹³³. Other demonstrations of support and for freedom of speech took place after the murder of Samuel Paty, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the participation of the Prime Minister, Jean Castex¹³⁴. Despite this massive support for freedom of speech, there have been debates in the media on whether there needs to be some limits on this freedom. Although freedom of speech is enshrined as a constitutional value in France as written in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789¹³⁵, defenders of the limitation of freedom of speech argue that it should not permit the insult of others’ beliefs. Whether there should be restrictions on freedom of speech and to what extent remains unresolved. However, the larger problem at hand is whether by restricting this freedom, it signals to terrorists that they win in trying to fracture French society, its democratic model, and its culture¹³⁶. Terrorists do not

¹³² “Contre le terrorisme, la plus grande manifestation jamais recensée en France”, *Le Monde*, January 11, 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/11/la-france-dans-la-rue-pour-defendre-la-liberte_4553845_3224.html.

¹³³ Frédéric Potet, “‘Je suis Charlie’, c’est lui”, *Le Monde*, January 9, 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2015/01/09/je-suis-charlie-c-est-lui_4552523_4497186.html.

¹³⁴ Morgane Rubetti, “Hommage à Samuel Paty : la foule et l’émotion partout en France”, *Le Figaro*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/hommage-a-samuel-paty-la-foule-et-l-emotion-partout-en-france-20201018>.

¹³⁵ *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen*, August 26, 1789, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/contenu/menu/droit-national-en-vigueur/constitution/declaration-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-du-citoyen-de-1789>.

¹³⁶ Gilles Kepel, *La Fracture* (Paris: Gallimard / France Culture, 2016).

attack France, or other countries, just to kill people, but to create a dynamic for political change. If the Islamist attacks make France doubt its own values, the terrorist organizations only win.

The November 2015 events in Paris also had a profound effect on society. The terrorists targeted French citizens, sometimes foreigners, very often young people, in their leisure activities – concerts, dinners or drinks on a terrace. The term “Bataclan generation” is used to describe these young people who feel their way of life is under direct attack¹³⁷. We can thus observe a form of resilience from these young people and, more generally, from society, which is reflected in a desire for commitment to defend their way of life and their country. For example, applications to join the French army increased just after the attacks¹³⁸. Also, demonstrations of support for France and the French people took place all over the world, due to the large scale of these attacks. The support was also massive on social networks, with the slogan “Pray for Paris”, posted by Internet users around the world¹³⁹.

The French debate: “a radicalization of Islam” or “an Islamization of radicalness”?

Because Islamism is an elusive concept, it makes it difficult to grasp and fight. Politicians, and even researchers, do not all agree on how to define Islamism. Indeed, the question of Islamist terrorism seems unsolvable. In France, the debate about Islamism and Islamist terrorism is best personified by two academic figures: Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy.

Gilles Kepel defends the explanation of Islamism as a radicalization of Islam. He questions the nature and function of jihadist actions and the true

¹³⁷ Noémie Rousseau, “Un an après. L’insaisissable génération Bataclan”, *Libération*, November 11, 2016, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/11/11/l-insaisissable-generation-bataclan_1527805/.

¹³⁸ Daisy Lorenzi and Laura Fernandez Rodriguez, “Après les attentats de Paris, l’engagement s’offre une nouvelle jeunesse”, *Les Échos*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.lesechos.fr/2016/02/apres-les-attentats-de-paris-l-engagement-soffre-une-nouvelle-jeunesse-202845>.

¹³⁹ “Attaques à Paris : des manifestations de soutien dans le monde”, *Le Monde*, November 14, 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/attaques-a-paris/article/2015/11/14/attaques-a-paris-le-world-trade-center-en-bleu-blanc-rouge-en-solidarite-avec-la-france_4809618_4809495.html.

intentions of their perpetrators. For him, it is essential to start from Islam and the Salafist discourse – a tradition of Islam which is a conservative revivalist and reform branch movement within Sunni Islam. Terrorists are Jihadists – Jihadism is a violent sub-current of Salafism, arguing that human legislation is at variance with God’s status as the sole lawgiver¹⁴⁰. Islamists have undertaken or undergone an ideological radicalization¹⁴¹. He considers radicalized people as utopians, who project an ideal world, with a political goal. According to him, it is values, principles and Western culture in general that are targeted. In fact, to say that Islamist terrorists are lost or unbalanced is an illusion. The crimes committed by Islamist terrorists are deliberate and the victims are not chosen at random. For example, *Charlie Hebdo* was a target because it symbolizes freedom of speech.

Unlike Kepel, Olivier Roy views religion as a pretext, because radicalization has been present long before the terrorist act, committed in the name of Islam. Jihadist radicalization is not the mechanical consequence of religious radicalization, it is a nihilistic revolt¹⁴². Therefore, Islamism is not the radicalization of Islam, but the Islamization of radicalness. This terrorism is not rooted in religion, but is rather the expression of a malaise, of a generational revolt. In fact, the cause of these young people’s commitment to terrorism is social, not religious¹⁴³, this is a social revolt. Moreover, radicalization is based on a “deadly dimension”¹⁴⁴, because during an attack, it is a destructive passion that is unleashed, death is at the heart of the jihadist project. This propensity for destruction is symptomatic of the generational revolt of many young people, fueled by multiple social causes.

In sum, Kepel and Roy analyze Islamist terrorism from a different point of view. While Kepel does not deny that Islamist terrorism can have social

¹⁴⁰ Europol (2021), European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, Publication Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

¹⁴¹ Kepel, *La Fracture*.

¹⁴² Olivier Roy, « Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste », *Le Monde*, November 23, 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/11/24/le-djihadisme-une-revolte-generationnelle-et-nihiliste_4815992_3232.html.

¹⁴³ Olivier Roy, *Les illusions du 11 septembre. Le débat stratégique face au terrorisme* (Paris: La République des Idées / Seuil, 2002).

¹⁴⁴ Olivier Roy, *Le djihad et la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

roots and that economic, social, and political marginalization can lead some to seek a model of integral Islam¹⁴⁵, even if it is a social revolt, he maintains that it is always linked to religion; whereas Roy argues the basis of radicalization is social. Unlike Roy, Kepel has a more historical and micro analysis of the phenomenon, trying to elucidate the motivations of radicalized individuals and the pathways to radicalization. Whereas Roy has more of a macro, global analysis, focused on the social explanations of the phenomenon.

Although both theoretical explanations provide us with a better understanding of the phenomenon, they both fall short conceptually when confronted with the reality of terrorist actions. There are different types of radicalized people with diverse radicalization profiles. Both theoretical frameworks are too simplistic and not academically and politically satisfying to apply to reality as the phenomenon is extremely complex. However, it is possible to identify constants inherent to Islamist terrorism. In both cases, Islamist terrorists have a political aim. This aim can be religious, with the will to impose religion as a means of regulating society. Terrorists who act with these goals in mind believe that Islamic law is more important than the law of the French Republic. This poses a problem in terms of respect for the law. However, it is the objective of French secularism to allow for the free exercise of religion, while preventing religions from having an influence on the exercise of political and administrative power. It is in no way a question of combating religions, secularism allows for the free exercise of worship, through the neutrality of the State regarding the religious sphere. It is precisely what France and/or the West stands for that is being fought by Islamist terrorists who are driven by their beliefs. But when the terrorists are seeking social justice and act out, they are not necessarily attacking what France stands for, and its values, although sometimes this is still the case, but rather a system, in which they feel disadvantaged (poverty, unemployment, insecurity), sometimes with international claims, the Palestinian cause for example. It is evident that several policy objectives are often linked.

¹⁴⁵ Gilles Kepel and Antoine Jardin, *Terreur dans l'Hexagone. Genèse du djihad français* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

This French quarrel around the explanations of Islamist terrorism on the national territory shows the fractured state of French society and the extremism that can emerge in a society that is no longer able to live together¹⁴⁶. This opposition of concepts sometimes even seems to be a “false opposition”¹⁴⁷. The real problem is to grasp empirically the articulation between the two forms of radicalization, which is not an easy task. Indeed, the radicalization process can be religious and social at the same time, one may also occur before the other, and sometimes a certain resentment towards France can accentuate this process.

To address the conceptual shortcomings of either approach, Antoine Menuisier have suggested applying a Third-Worldism explanation, based on the geopolitics of the Middle East, the post-colonial legacy and its consequences for racism and discrimination in European societies¹⁴⁸. Although colonization has been dismantled, the power structures remain with the North still dominating the South, which has consequently caused people to continue to suffer permanent humiliation, as in the time of colonization. The second or third generation of immigrants, born in France but whose families are coming from former French colonies, perceive as Islamophobic the evocation of Islamism by the supporters of French secularism. This would be part of an attempt to persecute Muslims by the West, always perceived as a colonist wanting to impose its law on populations that it dominates.

In an effort to find an explanation for Islamist terrorism, it is necessary to conduct sociological investigations of jihadist militants. These studies however tend to show that in France there is only one profile of jihadists: from disadvantaged neighborhoods, socially precarious and linked to immigration – the second or the third generation of immigrants¹⁴⁹. These holistic types of studies are necessary to provide guidance to policy makers to resolve the root cause of the problem with Islamist terrorism.

¹⁴⁶ Leyla Dakhli, “L’islamologie est un sport de combat. De Gilles Kepel à Olivier Roy, l’univers impitoyable des experts de l’islam”, *Revue du Crieur* 3, n° 1 (2016): 4-17.

¹⁴⁷ Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Le nouveau jihad en Occident* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2015).

¹⁴⁸ Antoine Menuisier, *Le livre des indésirés* (Paris: Éditions du cerf, 2019).

¹⁴⁹ Hakim El Karoui and Benjamin Hodayé, *Les militants du djihad. Portrait d’une génération* (Paris: Fayard, 2021).

The plural response of the French government

To fight against Islamist terrorism a security-based answer is needed, apart from a social policy approach to deradicalize. That is why, after the 13 November attacks, the French government has declared a state of emergency, which last until November 2017¹⁵⁰. It allowed the powers of civil authorities to be strengthened and certain public or individual freedoms to be restricted for persons suspected of being a threat to public security. The initial duration of the state of emergency was twelve days and its extension had to be authorized by Parliament, which ensured its function of government control. The state of emergency authorized the Minister of the Interior to restrict or prohibit traffic in certain places; prohibit certain public meetings or temporarily close certain public places; requisition persons or private means; authorize administrative searches; prohibit the residence of certain persons; impose house arrest. From November 2015 to November 2017: 45 attacks were foiled, and 19 places of worship were closed¹⁵¹. To have more concrete means to fight against Islamist terrorism, a law was voted in 2017 to provide the State with new counter-terrorism instrument, putting an end to the derogatory regime of the state of emergency, by incorporating into ordinary law provisions previously reserved for the state of emergency¹⁵².

One of the instruments of the fight against Islamist terrorism that the state has adopted is the deployment of military operations. After the January 2015 attacks a military operation was deployed on the national territory, the *Opération Sentinelle*, to protect the deemed sensitive points of from

¹⁵⁰ "Attentats du 13 novembre : ce que veut dire la déclaration d'état d'urgence en France", *Le Monde*, November 14, 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/11/14/attaques-a-paris-ce-que-veut-dire-la-declaration-d-etat-d-urgence-en-france_4809523_3224.html.

¹⁵¹ Ministère de l'Intérieur, "Sortie de l'État d'urgence. Un bilan et des chiffres clés", Press information, November 2017.

¹⁵² Olivier Laffargue, "État d'urgence dans le droit commun : les enjeux de la loi", *Le Monde*, September 26, 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/09/26/etat-d-urgence-dans-le-droit-commun-les-enjeux-de-la-loi_5191447_4355770.html.

terrorism¹⁵³. It is still going on, with military patrolling the streets to protect the population from a sudden attack.

Military operations are also conducted in the territories where terrorist networks are located. France is one of the countries most involved in this war on terror. France has been participating in the International military intervention against Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant since 2014¹⁵⁴ and is leading the *Opération Barkhane* (previously *Opération Serval*) since 2013 against Islamist groups in the Sahel¹⁵⁵, even though president Emmanuel Macron recently announced the end of this operation as an external operation, seeming to prefer a support operation towards regional countries and armed forces¹⁵⁶.

However, responses to terrorism cannot be only security-based but must also include a de-radicalization approach, otherwise referred to as de-indoctrination, de-enrollment or even de-ideologization. Whether one views Islamism as an Islamization of radicalness or as a radicalization of Islam, policies to solve the problem related to the threat of Islamist terrorism must be as broad as possible since it is impossible to understand well the true intentions of the terrorists. The counter-radicalization policy is a three-part policy, which includes prevention, de-radicalization, and disengagement policies¹⁵⁷. The prevention policy has to target a large population, but particularly populations potentially at risk. The de-radicalization

¹⁵³ Delphine Bernard-Bruls, "Comment les militaires de l'opération 'Sentinelle' peuvent-ils répondre à une attaque armée ?", *Le Monde*, June 8, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2018/06/08/comment-les-militaires-de-l-operation-sentinelle-peuvent-ils-repondre-a-une-attaque-armee_5311965_4355770.html.

¹⁵⁴ Alexandre Pouchard, "L'intervention militaire française en Syrie décryptée en 5 points", *Le Monde*, September 27, 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/09/27/5-questions-sur-les-frappes-francaises-en-syrie_4773838_4355770.html.

¹⁵⁵ "Opération Serval : qui sont les militaires engagés au Mali ?", *Le Monde*, January 14, 2013, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/01/14/operation-serval-qui-sont-les-militaires-engages-au-mali_1816675_3212.html.

¹⁵⁶ Christophe Châtelot, "La fin de l'opération 'Barkhane' au Sahel : sauve-qui-peut ou rebond ?", *Le Monde*, July 4, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/07/04/la-fin-de-l-operation-barkhane-au-sahel-sauve-qui-peut-ou-rebond_6086919_3232.html.

¹⁵⁷ Pierre Conesa, "Quelle politique de contre-radicalisation en France ?" (Fondation d'aide aux victimes du terrorisme, 2014).

policy consists of changing an already radicalized individual to make him or her abandon their views. And the disengagement policy has to convince an individual in a group to give up his or her activities and if possible, his or her world view. In France, the deradicalization policy is led by NGOs, with support from the government. There is the Center for the prevention of sectarian abuses linked to Islam (*Centre de prévention des dérives sectaires liées à l'Islam*), whose objective is to participate in research related to the prevention and the treatment of radical Islamic recruitment, but this association is no longer active because the association's leadership, led by researcher Donia Bouzar, disagreed with the government's policy of disqualifying French-born citizens with dual nationality, a measure designed by President François Hollande after November 2015 attacks and aimed in particular at French terrorists of immigrant background¹⁵⁸. There was also a state deradicalization center, in Pontourny, for volunteers who wish to emerge from a process of radicalization, but this center was closed, because it did not work. The project had obvious shortcomings: individuals who had served the Islamic State were not included – although they seem to be the most radicalized individuals – and the voluntary basis did not allow the structure to really find its audience¹⁵⁹. This part of the deradicalization policy was a failure, as the government implemented these policies in a panic, due to the wave of Islamist attacks in France in 2015¹⁶⁰.

If the typical profile of terrorists is from disadvantaged neighborhoods, socially precarious and linked to immigration, as various studies tend to show it, social policies are essential. Because exclusion or discrimination based on ethnic origin or religious beliefs and, in many countries, the failure to integrate minorities or immigrants, create resentments that can be conducive to terrorist recruitment, including a sense of alienation

¹⁵⁸ "Dounia Bouzar renonce à sa mission sur la déradicalisation pour protester contre la déchéance", *Le Monde*, February 11, 2016. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2016/02/11/dounia-bouzar-renonce-a-sa-mission-sur-la-deradicalisation_4863906_3224.html.

¹⁵⁹ Gérald Bronner, *Déchéance de rationalité: Les tribulations d'un homme de progrès dans un monde devenu fou* (Paris: Grasset, 2019).

¹⁶⁰ Esther Benbassa and Catherine Troendlé, on behalf of the Law Committee, "Les politiques de 'déradicalisation' en France : changer de paradigme" (Sénat, 12 juillet 2017), <http://www.senat.fr/rap/r16-633/r16-633.html>.

and marginalization and a growing propensity to seek social integration with extremist groups, the government's social response must be strong. The target population is young people, so the focus should be on schools. The French Republic must be able to offer young people more than an immanent utopia (freedom, equality), given the transcendental nature of the Islamist utopia¹⁶¹. The Republic must allow young people from poor neighborhoods to concretely have the same chance to succeed as other young people and must review the policy of integration of immigrant populations. It is by stopping feeding resentment towards it that the Republic will be able to carry more weight than Islamism, while preserving the freedom of worship of Muslims in France, whether they are French or not.

An ostentatious legislation

The pace of terrorism-related legislation has been about one law per year for the past ten years¹⁶². On the one hand, this high legislative pace is a real attempt to respond to the security and social problems posed by Islamist terrorism. But on the other hand, it is to show that the government does act against Islamist terrorism. It is a direct response to public opinion and the rise of the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*), a far-right party at the gates of power in France. Indeed, the decisions taken to counter terrorism may be more political than useful from a security perspective. If "terrorism is theater"¹⁶³, so is the fight against it. The government must respond to public opinion seeking security measures to combat Islamist terrorism. This is the reason why it is not only the National Rally that makes security one of its favorite campaign themes. Presidents in power, such as François Hollande or Emmanuel Macron, or even other candidates, must take up this issue, to show that they provide a coherent response

¹⁶¹ Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Radicalisation* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2014).

¹⁶² Jean-Baptiste Jacquin, "Le projet de loi de prévention du terrorisme pérennise des mesures contestées", *Le Monde*, June 1, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/06/01/le-projet-de-loi-de-prevention-du-terrorisme-perennise-des-mesures-contestees_6082289_3224.html.

¹⁶³ Brian Michael Jenkins, *International Terrorism: A New Kind of Warfare* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1974).

to Islamist terrorism. But this one-upmanship, fed by the media, can only be dangerous for the respect of fundamental freedoms and democracy. Moreover, as the numbers of attacks and terrorist plots show – between 2014 and 2019 France recorded the most Islamic State-related terrorism deaths in the West¹⁶⁴ – the successive addition of laws is not necessarily an indicator of effectiveness in this area. This propensity to legislate could be dangerous because it creates an illusion of an effective fight against Islamist terrorism and is only partly a response to far-right parties.

Conclusion

France currently is the European country most impacted by Islamist terrorism, but Europe is not the region where terrorism is the most active. We always must remember that the first victims of these groups are civilian populations in the regions where they are implanted (South Asia, MENA region, Sub-Saharan Africa). Islamist terrorism is a subject that French politicians talk about frequently in times of elections, and will probably be, as always, one of the central subjects of the 2022 presidential election, in which the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen is likely to win, with a strong security discourse. Another debate is the question of French people involved with Islamic State troops. Given the difficult position of the Islamic State in the face of the international coalition, some have expressed the wish to return to France, or at least to Europe. Others are present in prison camps such as women and children who were brought there by their husband or father. This topic will be a major issue during the next presidential election and during the next few years.

¹⁶⁴ Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Sydney, November 2020. Available from: <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports> (accessed Date Month Year).