



## **France's Fight Against Islamic Radicalization: The Writing Is Still on the Wall**

**by Dr. Tsilla Hershco**

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 967, October 5, 2018

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The lack of integration into France of many Muslims over a long period, combined with severe socioeconomic problems, has produced bitterness, alienation, and fertile ground for radical imams who use the French separation between state and religion (*Laïcité*) to promote uncontrolled Islamist radicalization. The French leadership has failed to cope with these problems as it is not politically correct to intervene in religious matters. The ISIS terrorist attacks, perpetrated by radicalized French Muslims, brought the issues to the center of the public discourse. President Macron embraced many of his predecessor's counterterrorism measures and moved further with ambitious de-radicalization plans designed to address the core problems, including mounting suburban crime. However, increasing Muslim radicalization, as well as a growing left-right polarization regarding the ways to tackle the problem, still present serious challenges to the French republican order.

French president Emmanuel Macron, in a major policy address at the August annual French ambassadors' conference, reiterated that the fight against Islamist terrorism is his top priority goal. During his presidential campaign and soon after his election, Macron underlined that his main objectives – alongside his social and economic platform – were to ensure security within France and to fight Islamist terrorism as a central pillar of his foreign policy.

Macron inherited the complicated problem of Muslim radicalization, which for years had been either swept entirely under the carpet or inefficiently dealt with. Initially, the problem relates to the lack of integration into the French society and economy of numerous second- and third-generation French Muslims of North African descent who live mainly in the suburbs around Paris and other cities in France (they are

estimated to number between six and eight million). Many years of unsolved socioeconomic problems such as high unemployment (especially among young people), poverty, poor housing, and low-level schools produced a vicious circle of high crime rates, resentment, and alienation on the one hand and growing discrimination towards Muslims in French society on the other.

Additionally, radical imams from abroad who provide religious services in France have taken advantage of the French law of separation between state and religion (*Laïcité*) to promote uncontrolled radical Islam. Radical imams have also provided religious services to Muslim prisoners, leading to their radicalization. Indeed, many perpetrators of terrorist acts, such as those of Toulouse in 2012, Paris in 2015, Nice in 2016, and Trebes in 2018, were criminals who had undergone radicalization in French prisons.

From time to time, this complicated problem has exploded in mass riots, accompanied by violent confrontations with police and the burning of public and private property. The most challenging riots (in October 2005) lasted about three weeks and were followed by President Chirac's declaration of a state of emergency.

Geostrategic factors – particularly the so-called “Arab spring,” the Syrian civil war, and the strengthening of ISIS – also contributed to the radicalization process. Radical Islamist internet messages encouraged young Muslims and non-Muslims to join the ranks of ISIS, or detailed how to carry out terrorist attacks. Hundreds of French Muslims joined ISIS and became security threats upon their return to France.

Growing Muslim radicalization has also been reflected in the increasing number of incidents of violent anti-Semitism in France. The French authorities and media preferred, at first, to view the crimes as stemming from socioeconomic factors rather than from Islamic radicalization. They occasionally presented or even justified the increase in anti-Semitic violence as a product of the Muslims' identification with the Palestinians. It seems that the *Laïcité* principle created a barrier that prevented an examination into the intensification of anti-Semitic violence as a result of radicalization and religious incitement.

Even when the French political leadership became aware of the problem of radicalization, it did not sufficiently internalize the threat. France passed laws banning the carrying of religious symbols by Christians, Jews, and Muslims in French schools (2004) and prohibiting women from hiding their faces behind the Muslim burqa while in the public sphere (2011). These laws sparked debates in France about their legality and effectiveness while also stoking bitterness among Muslims.

The appalling ISIS terrorist attacks of 2015-17 caused deep shock due to their frequency, their scope in terms of casualties, and their disruption of citizens' sense of security. The shock was particularly severe as the perpetrators were French citizens

who had undergone a process of radicalization and carried out acts of terror by joining ISIS or identifying with it. The terrorist attacks opened a Pandora's Box and brought the problem to the epicenter of French public discourse.

However, even after the terrible attacks of January and November 2015, President Hollande's messages to the nation continued to reflect a politically correct attitude. In accordance with the *Laïcité* principle and in order to prevent the stigmatization of the Muslim community, he refrained from explicitly naming Islamists as the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks as well as of the increasing anti-Semitic violence.

Hollande's politically correct messages were at a dissonance with the reality in which Muslims, particularly young ones, defiantly expressed their religious identity as standing above their allegiance to the French republic and its values. For instance, Muslim pupils in French public schools refused to respect a nationwide moment of silence in memory of the victims of the "Charlie Hebdo" terror attack in January 2015. They reportedly said the terrorist act constituted justifiable vengeance, as the satirical magazine had published caricatures of the prophet Muhammad. This shocked the French public, which viewed the attack on the Charlie Hebdo office as an attack on freedom of speech – one of France's central republican values.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls deviated, to some extent, from Hollande's politically correct discourse. He spoke of a new type of anti-Semitism in France, created in the suburbs and driven by hatred of Israel. Moreover, he stressed critically that people refrained from overtly condemning radical Muslims for fear of being charged with racism and "Islamophobia," and that fear prevented an open public debate.

Concurrently with Holland's politically correct discourse, he approved several counterterrorism measures, such as allocating budgets for increasing the number of counterterrorism agents as well as boosting intelligence gathering units designated to monitor and curb jihadists. In addition, he announced the formation of a military force of 10,000 soldiers and 4,500 policemen and gendarmes (Operation Sentinelle) to protect "sensitive" points in France from terror attacks.

Following the "Black Friday" Islamist assaults in November 2015, Hollande decreed a state of emergency, which allowed the French security powers to (*inter alia*) carry out preventive arrests of suspects, conduct massive raids without a judge's warrant, ban demonstrations, and close websites considered to pose a danger to public order. Hollande also proposed tougher measures such as expelling foreigners viewed as security threats, rescinding French nationality from dual nationals implicated in terror activities, introducing greater state involvement in the training and appointment of imams, and making emergency laws part of the constitution. However, Hollande withdrew from most of these tougher proposals because of protests by civil rights supporters.

Hollande later unveiled an extensive plan to fight delinquency and radicalization in order to strengthen the republic's values among pupils in the suburbs. In May 2016, the government created an inter-ministerial committee for the prevention of delinquency and radicalization (CIPDR). At the end of September 2016, an experimental center was set up in Pontourni, in central France, aimed at the de-radicalization of young Muslims who had expressed a desire to join ISIS. The center, which was supposed to serve as a model for additional centers, was closed several months later, due in part to the small number of participants and in part to the opposition of local residents.

It should be noted that the security services and general intelligence services have increased their alertness with regard to outward signs of radicalization. For instance, they wrote a report in 2015 stating that fitness clubs are a magnet for radicalized Muslims as part of their training for terrorist acts. However, it was not until 2017 that they organized sessions for educators and social workers to teach them to recognize signs of radicalization such as beard-growing or changes of lifestyle.

The terrorist attacks, combined with the deteriorating economic situation involving high unemployment and a large public deficit, led to a massive drop in Hollande's public support. Conversely, the attacks increased support for the far right in France. Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front party (FN), demanded that the authorities clearly pronounce the connection between Islamists and terrorist acts, that all religious activities be banned from the public sphere, that radical imams be expelled, and that Muslim immigration to France be stopped. Le Pen also demanded that the Schengen agreements be annulled, arguing that a closure of the borders would prevent illegal immigration to France. Le Pen's views on Islamic radicalism and immigration increased her popularity, and for the first time, the FN representative reached the final stage of the presidential elections.

In May 2017, Emanuel Macron was elected president. He managed this by winning the support of a large proportion of the public that did not necessarily support him but wished to prevent Le Pen's election. At his inauguration, Macron used symbolic gestures to manifest the importance he attached to the fight against terrorism. For instance, on his way from the Elysees Palace to the traditional ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe, he stopped to pay tribute to the memory of the policeman shot dead by French Islamists in April 2017. In addition, one of his first trips outside France as president was a visit to French troops stationed in Mali to fight terrorism.

Macron also unveiled plans for numerous counterterrorism policy measures, such as increasing the security forces, enforcing the expulsion of migrant workers, initiating educational programs for de-radicalization, and allocating budgets for the suburbs. Additionally, he announced the creation of a national center for counterterrorism,

located at the Elysees Palace and operating under his command. The center, which operates 24 hours a day, unites internal and external intelligence services and monitors and coordinates all activities in the war on terror. Macron proposed a return to community policing in order to improve relations between the police and young people of the suburbs. Concurrently, he revived legislation that enshrines counterterrorism laws in the constitution. The French parliament voted with a significant majority in support of the law, which replaces the state of emergency.

Parliament members introduced amendments to the initial bill, according to which all the new measures will expire at the end of 2020. Civil rights groups criticized the law anyway, claiming that it will be used mainly against Muslims.

In February 2018, Prime Minister Edward Phillip unveiled a comprehensive plan to fight Islamist radicalism. It includes several key components, such as detection and prevention of radicalization in the education system and in prisons, interdisciplinary and inter-ministerial cooperation, professional specialization in the subject of radicalization, increases in financial and personnel resources, and collaboration and exchange of information among security authorities in the various French regions.

Macron also proposed replacing the traditional model “Muslims in France,” which implies non-governmental involvement, with the model “Islam of France,” which implies the shaping of a moderate Islam that adapts itself to French republican values and rejects the Islamist radical version of Islam. In this context, France has already promoted a university program for French imams that trains them, among other things, in French law. The program has not fulfilled its goal in terms of the number of participants. Many imams still receive their training and accreditation in Arab countries.

Liberal circles sharply criticized Macron’s plans, arguing that they do not conform to French liberal values, that they violate French republican laws of non-interference in religious affairs, that they contradict citizens’ freedom of religion, and that the French authorities use terrorist attacks to promote a nationalist agenda. Conversely, far-right circles persist in their arguments that Muslims in France present an inherent danger to the French republic as they do not wish to integrate but to impose sharia law over French secular law, as their values and way of life contradict the values of the republic. They also criticize French authorities for their weakness in confronting these threats.

Another criticism has surfaced regarding Macron's policy towards illegal immigrants in France. Macron emphasized that uncontrolled illegal immigration is a security problem as well as a burden on the budget of the French Republic. The interior minister Gérard Collomb accordingly ordered that immigrants in public shelters be registered and checked whether they are asylum seekers or migrant workers, who are liable to be expelled. However, intellectuals, opposition journalists, and social associations appealed to the Council of State (*Conseil d'Etat*), which advises the

government on legal and administrative matters, to cancel the order on the grounds that it is inhumane and illegal. In January 2018, the news weekly *Nouvel Observateur* published a provocative photo of Macron covered with barbed wire to illustrate its criticism of what it considers to be his inhumane attitude towards immigrants. Macron responded with a sharp message, stressing the need to be humane as well as effective and to be careful with “false good sentiments.” He also noted that France had given entry permits to 100,000 refugees, maintaining international humanitarian law. Far-right circles and particularly Le Pen continue to loudly oppose any additional Muslim immigration to France.

The growing right-left polarization regarding the ways to tackle these complicated problems increases the difficulties of the French authorities in shaping and promoting effective counterterrorist and de-radicalization policy. The numerous counterterrorism and de-radicalization measures embraced by President Macron and by his predecessor through trial and error have not yet effectively addressed the root problems that have bred Islamist radicalization and increasing anti-Semitic violence. Furthermore, surveys indicate an increase in the process of radicalization of Muslims in France and its expansion in French republican schools, including among teachers. Patrick Calvar, head of the Internal Security Agency (DGSI, or General Directorate for Internal Security) reportedly warned in June 2016 that additional terror attacks might ignite revenge attacks by right-wing circles against Muslims and lead to confrontation with Muslims. Calvar’s warning took on a more ominous significance when in June 2018 the French police arrested a radical right-wing group that planned to attack radical imams, radicalized ex-prisoners, and veiled Muslim women.

France has come a long way in its fight against Islamist terrorism. However, the unsolved core issues of increasing Muslim radicalization and the deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the “no-go” suburbs, combined with the growing left-right polarization regarding how to tackle the problem, still present serious challenges to the French republican order.

*Dr. Tsilla Hershco, a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, specializes in Franco-Israeli and EU-Israeli relations.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family