



PERSPECTIVES

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France and the Urban Guerrilla Warfare of the Black Blocs by Dr. Tsilla Hershco

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: France has been contending for years with violent anarchist gangs known as the Black Blocs, who have been piggybacking on the mass demonstrations of the Yellow Vests to commit acts of vandalism and wreak considerable economic damage. The Black Blocs' destructive riots on the Champs-Élysées prompted the French government to take tougher preventive measures against the gangs, sparking criticism from both right and left. The government will have to keep fighting the Black Blocs and the radicals among the Yellow Vests, who are trying to achieve their economic and political goals through violence.

France is contending with serious challenges that call for a national stocktaking.

The traumatic incident of the fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on April 16, 2019, induced shock and pain as well as feelings of unity and national pride. It prompted an outpouring of funds to renovate the cathedral, as well as admiration for the firefighters who risked their lives to salvage it. Expressions of sympathy from abroad bolstered France's pride in its historical, artistic, and architectural heritage.

The incident, potent in itself, came on the heels of the mass demonstrations of the Yellow Vests, held every Saturday since November 17, 2018. These demonstrations have placed complex economic, social, and political problems, which have been building up for many years, at the center of the public stage.

One serious problem that has not been adequately addressed is the phenomenon of the Black Blocs, also known as the *casseurs* (breakers). These organized groups espouse an anarchist ideology and use carefully developed tactics. They piggyback on the Yellow Vest demonstrations to commit severe acts of violence.

The Black Blocs originated in Germany in the 1980s and spread to other countries in Europe. They oppose the political establishment, the police, and the capitalist and global economy, operate in relatively small groups, and are connected through their own social networks. They join the Yellow Vest demonstrations in various French cities, and at a certain stage, particularly when events are about to wind down, they attack the police with petrol bombs, large stones, and bottle fragments that they have prepared along the route of the demonstration.

Members of the *casseurs* can be identified by their black clothing and their masks, which protect them against the smoke grenades of the police. They create provocations that compel the police to react forcefully so as to protect themselves and the more peaceful demonstrators. The *casseurs* turn into side streets that are not on the pre-approved route and wreak destruction on public and private property.

When the violent activity comes to an end, they usually manage to escape and change their clothes. They do not take any identity papers with them. If arrested, they are forbidden from disclosing their real personal details or those of their comrades to the police, or, if they have been brought to a hospital for treatment, to doctors.

Many Black Blocs members have come to demonstrations, not only from France but from other European countries as well. Most are affiliated with the radical left, but they also include radical-right groups. Through their violence, the Black Blocs endanger those demonstrators who want to protest and convey social and political messages but who have no desire to clash with the police. The *casseurs* in fact use such demonstrators as human shields. Sometimes, demonstrators are hurt by smoke grenades and other devices because unlike the Black Blocs, they are not skilled at escaping the police.

To boost their campaign to delegitimize the police and governmental forces via the media, the Black Blocs are given precise instructions on how to document their injuries or those of nearby demonstrators. They exploit their proximity to the demonstrators to try to convince them to join their ranks, and the police have indeed reported cases of Yellow Vests who have been radicalized. They provide cover for the Black Blocs during demonstrations, adopt their methods, and sometimes even become part of the gangs. In a sign of the Black Blocs' influence, many Yellow Vests have ramped up their demands on the government and declared to the media that they will not settle for increasing the people's purchasing power or reforming the electoral system; instead, they demand the resignation of Macron, the dispersal of the National Assembly, and a fundamental revolution in France's system of democratic government.

The Black Blocs' violent involvement in demonstrations did not begin during Macron's presidency. When François Hollande was president, they engaged in severe violence during environmentalist demonstrations against a new airport in the Notre-Dame-des-Landes commune near the city of Nantes. Black Blocs gangs, who made up most

of the demonstrations, ensconced themselves in places designated for the building of the airport and clashed violently with police.

The state did not exercise its authority against the rioters. Instead, it proved that violence pays by giving in and agreeing to hold a referendum for the residents of the area. President Macron, who inherited the problem, canceled the project in January 2018 though a majority of referendum voters had favored it. It was then decided, as an alternative solution, to widen the existing airport of Nantes and to evacuate those residing illegally in Notre-Dame-des-Landes – an evacuation that was met by violent opposition from the Black Blocs in May 2018.

The Black Blocs riots of May 18, 2016 were especially intense. On that day, hundreds of thousands of people all over France protested a new labor law. Masked rioters shattered display windows and threw smoke bombs into stores. They set a police car on fire and attacked the policemen who were inside it. About four months later, one of the policemen who fled the rioters was decorated for heroism and given a promotion. During the ceremony and on social networks he was praised for his (supposed) level-headedness and for not having used his gun despite having been savagely attacked. In an interview, he said he forgave his attackers – and added that if he had in fact struck back at them, his career would be over and he would not have become a decorated hero.

This Orwellian message of governmental weakness was conveyed to the entire French public. It offered encouragement to the rioters to continue to flout law and order, commit acts of violence, and attack policemen in order to achieve their political and economic goals.

On May 1, 2018, about 1,200 Black Blocs rioters joined a traditional demonstration by professional unions against Macron's labor reforms. The rioters threw petrol bombs, damaged shops, and clashed with police. The media later focused on an incident in which Macron's security guard Alexandre Benalla, who is not a policeman, reacted violently to one of the rioters. The media and opposition politicians exploited the incident to censure Macron, claiming an attempt had been made to cover it up. As in the past, the Black Blocs problem was pushed under the rug of the public discourse – only to return in all its severity as they took part violently in Yellow Vest demonstrations.

The violence of the Black Blocs mounted. During the Yellow Vest demonstrations on December 1, 2018, they perpetrated a massive attack of mayhem and plunder in Paris against government, tourist, and economic institutions such as the Arc de Triomphe, the Paris Bourse, and the Tuileries Gardens. They broke into banks, burned cars (including a police car), blocked main thoroughfares, and more. The media referred to the violent demonstrations as "urban guerrilla warfare"; Interior Minister Christophe Castaner, who is in charge of the police, demanded that a state of emergency be declared

(as was done at the time of the 2015 terror attacks). President Macron, who is authorized to make such a decision, was on a presidential visit to South America at the time.

The “urban guerrilla” attacks reached a new peak in the Yellow Vest demonstrations of March 16, 2019. While a large part of the police force was escorting the mass demonstrations, which were demanding action on climate change and included an estimated 45,000 people, the Black Blocs took advantage of the relatively meager police presence in other areas to riot on the Champs-Élysées and in nearby streets. The spectacles shown on live television shocked the French public. Members of Black Blocs gangs were seen attacking police, looting and burning stores, restaurants, banks, and cars, and setting fire to a residential building. The beautiful Champs-Élysées became a battlefield. Joined by rioters from the suburbs, the Black Blocs damaged about 600 shops on the avenue itself and nearby. The damage to the elegant, tourist-attracting avenue prompted shock and harsh criticism by the public and the media of the complacency that had caused the failure of the French police and security forces. The criticism was directed specifically at Interior Minister Castaner and also at President Macron, who went on a skiing vacation that weekend despite warnings that the demonstrations would be particularly fierce.

In the wake of these violent incidents, PM Édouard Philippe and the interior minister formulated, at Macron’s behest, a new strategy and a set of preventive measures against the rioters. A ban was instituted on demonstrations along the Champs-Élysées and at other major sites in French cities. A special police force was created for purposes of deterrence and rapid intervention against violent outbreaks (DAR, or Détachement d’Action Rapide et de Dissuasion). Police were authorized to make operative decisions in the field without need for approval from central headquarters, something that had delayed the response in previous rounds of violence. Other measures included higher fines for taking part in illegal demonstrations in locations that the police had not approved, preventive detention for people who wore masks during demonstrations, inspection of handbags and cars, and arrests of people carrying weapons. It was also decided to develop and begin using new technical means such as drones, to spray paint on violent demonstrators, to install video cameras, and to identify masked lawbreakers in the aftermath of demonstrations by such indicators as eyes or manner of walking. In addition, the Paris police commander was dismissed – which presumably pleased the rioters, who could then take credit for it. These measures were spelled out in an “anti-casseur” law after approval by the parliament, the Senate, and the National Assembly.

At the same time, in a much-publicized press conference on April 25, Macron said he was ready to consider the Yellow Vests’ demands regarding an array of economic and political measures, such as lowering taxes, increasing welfare payments, making the electoral system more representative, and promising not to cut budgets for schools and hospitals during his presidency. These measures were added to economic

palliatives in December 2018 that had raised the public's purchasing power. Macron also announced the closing of the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA), whose graduates constitute a governmental and economic elite, occupy key positions in the state, and enjoy privileged economic status and conditions. The Yellow Vests say these people are unaware of the reality in the periphery.

The Yellow Vests reacted to Macron's measures with distrust. They said they would not settle for ways of increasing purchasing power or for greater representation. They intend to continue their demonstrations while demanding a participatory democracy with popular "tribunals" and an equitable distribution of wealth.

It appears that the radicals among them, with their refusal to engage in dialogue with the government, are now setting the tone. Yellow Vest representatives refuse to condemn the violent methods of the Black Blocs, going so far as to claim that they were what motivated Macron to make concessions. They say they will achieve their other demands, which include Macron's resignation, the dispersal of the National Assembly, and the holding of a popular referendum.

The Yellow Vests also took a radical line on the issue of the burning of the Notre Dame Cathedral. They criticized the fact that wealthy people contributed hundreds of millions of euros for the church's renovation, claiming these funds should have gone to assistance for the poor. In doing so, they showed a lack of identification with most of the French public, who consider the cathedral a symbol of France's historical and cultural heritage and support its rehabilitation. The Yellow Vests likewise reacted negatively to the public call to cancel mass demonstrations on the Saturday after the Notre Dame fire, which fell during the Easter vacation.

On that pivotal Easter Saturday, the police prepared beefed-up forces for the demonstrations. There was intelligence about thousands of Black Blocs rioters who had been summoned to Paris from all over Europe. The police conducted checks at train stations and on highways, made preemptive arrests, and deployed patrol cars. The demonstrations did include violence, but not to the extent that was feared.

The French public and politicians were nevertheless deeply shocked when some demonstrators called on policemen to commit suicide. Since the Yellow Vest demonstrations began, more than 20 policemen have indeed killed themselves, apparently no longer able to bear the tension and frustration stemming from their ongoing, intense weekend activity, the demonstrators' acrimony, and the strict limitations that stop them from enforcing the law against the rioters for fear of facing criminal charges.

On April 27, 2019, the police employed the new strategy and were largely able to contain the Yellow Vest demonstrations. Black Blocs from Germany and Belgium took part in the principal demonstration in Strasbourg, and the police kept them away from the city's EU

institutions. This was a significant success in light of what had happened there ten years earlier, in 2009, when the Black Blocs rioted and destroyed stores and institutions in a Strasbourg neighborhood as a NATO summit was being held in the city.

A few days later, on May 1, beefed-up police forces deployed for Labor Day demonstrations; in previous years, these had involved riots and clashes with the Black Blocs. There was great apprehension over intelligence reports that large groups of Black Blocs from other countries were preparing to come to the Paris protests. The police made preventive arrests, used surveillance techniques, and were able to hold back the Black Blocs, though there were several violent incidents. For example, demonstrators broke into the La Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in the 13th arrondissement and tried to get into the intensive care unit, but were ejected by police. The demonstrators also tried to enter the surgical department, but workers there barricaded the door.

Interior Minister Castaner called the event an “attack” on the hospital, sparking harsh criticism from the opposition. Castaner apologized and instead called it a “violent entry” into the hospital. But the extreme left aligned with Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who made use of the incident to demand Castaner’s resignation. The extreme right of La Pen exploited it to decry the conduct of the Interior Ministry.

The police, rather than getting credit for containing the violence, were targeted once again. Philippe Martinez, leader of CGT, the largest labor organization, accused the police of using force at the demonstration; he himself had been exposed to tear gas that had been directed at Black Blocs rioters. He even demanded that the policemen involved be put on trial. Some 240 complaints against the police were submitted. The media morally equated the “violence” of the police – who were attacked by the Black Blocs while fulfilling their task of maintaining public order – and the violence of the lawbreakers who instigated the attacks.

Amid all the intensive public discourse, the question never arose of who is funding the Black Blocs and the radicals among the Yellow Vests. Whoever is doing so may be trying to influence the European Parliament elections on May 26, 2019.

In principle, the use of force against the Black Blocs should be within the public consensus, like the war on terror. The ongoing violence in the streets of France, ancillary to the Yellow Vest demonstrations, is of no benefit to the French. Indeed the right to demonstrate is considered a democratic right. But intensive, protracted, and manipulative use of this right does harm to the French economy, to the state’s ability to aid citizens from disadvantaged sectors, and to the right of citizens to earn a living and conduct their lives in peace and security.

More than six consecutive months of disturbances in France, accompanied by the violence of the Black Blocs and the radicalization of the Yellow Vests, infringe upon the authority of the state and law-enforcement institutions. Cumulatively, these

events foster a kind of banality in the use of force and provide grist for the idea that political goals can be achieved through force. The intensiveness of the demonstrations may also be aimed at swaying the European Parliament elections and damaging the status and legitimacy of the president of France. It is also possible that political actors outside or inside France are trying to make political hay from the violent demonstrations. All this could endanger the foundations of French democracy and perhaps also spell trouble for other democratic regimes.

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