



France's Skirmishes with Violent Islam

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,791, October 30, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: France has insoluble problems with part of its Muslim population. This recently became apparent once again when a high school teacher who had shown controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to his students was beheaded by an 18-year-old Muslim. The French government's current skirmishes with radical Islam will ultimately be seen as a footnote in a massive and lengthy battle.

France has problems with part of its Muslim population that simply cannot be solved. It is unlikely that there are any acceptable measures within the framework of a liberal democracy that can deal effectively and appropriately with this issue, even if there were the political will to do so.

President Emmanuel Macron has been aware of the problem for years, and has spoken out strongly that the government is going to deal with it. Yet he has done relatively little on the ground during his time in office. Currently, the major problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have provided a convenient excuse for inaction.

In recent weeks, however, reality took over. A high school teacher, Samuel Paty, was murdered on October 16 in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, a northwestern suburb of Paris. He was beheaded with a large knife by an 18-year-old Muslim who was apparently enraged that the victim had shown the controversial *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to his students.

A father of one of Paty's Muslim pupils expressed his fury on the internet. He was contacted by the future murderer, a son of Chechen immigrants who came to France more than 10 years ago. The young man paid a few students

to point out who Paty was so he would be sure to kill the right person. After he committed the murder, he was shot and killed by the police.

A public uproar followed the crime, and Macron and his government understood that swift action had to be taken. A government program was announced that consisted of dozens of raids and arrests, as well as the disbanding of a few Muslim associations with connections to radical Islam. One of these was the "Cheikh Yassine Collective," which was named after the founder of the Hamas terror group. French interior minister Gerard Darmanin said the group's president, Abdelhakim Sefrioui, had launched a *fatwa* against the teacher. Furthermore, the expulsion of a number of radical asylum seekers was announced.

In the background, there is at least one more major reason for Macron to take strong action. The next presidential elections will take place in 2022. As matters stand, it seems that in the runoff the two contenders will be (as in the 2017 election) Macron and Marine Le Pen, leader of the populist rightist party National Rally.

After the murder, Le Pen gave a press conference in which she said France needs wartime legislation to combat "an organized and already installed force." She added that Macron had proposed an inadequate and anachronistic containment strategy while the situation called for a strategy of re-conquest.

Macron was a star pupil of the French elite state academic establishment. He is far more intelligent and knowledgeable than Le Pen. Macron is also a much better debater, as became very clear in the runoff debate during the 2017 elections. But in a future debate, Le Pen will have a huge argument: A major threat to France's fundamental values and society is coming out of a significant part of the Muslim community living in the country. She might even drop the word "part."

The number of Muslims in France is often estimated at 6%, which is probably on the low side. In a debate, Le Pen can say: "You have talked a lot about the radical Muslim problem but you haven't dealt with it structurally." She can give many examples, as the number of ghettos in France—which are almost entirely populated by Muslims—has not shrunk from 750 during Macron's term. Authorities have difficulty entering these so-called "no go" areas. Any additional incident between now and the elections can be used by Le Pen to strengthen her case.

There are two levels of consideration that arise regarding Le Pen's proposals and their compatibility with French law. The first is that within the rules of liberal democracy, violent Islam can probably not be fought effectively. If push comes to shove, it may well be that in the battle against radical Islam, a majority of the French favor taking action outside the boundaries set by liberal democracy.

For many years, a partly erroneous idea has been promoted in Europe that there is a fundamental difference between Muslims and Islamists. According to this concept, Islamists are defined as adherents to political Islam. Other religious Muslims concentrate on Islam's spiritual aspects. Yet in reality the difference is far less clear. Muslim populations show a continuous pattern. At one extreme are people who declare that they are Muslims because they were born as such. Their commitment to Islam in practice ends with that. At the other end are those who believe Islam instructs them to conquer the world, be it with the word or with the sword.

While the difference between the extremes is huge, there is movement along the lines. The young murderer of Samuel Paty was not a known radical. He had never been identified as such at any time during the 10 years since he and his family moved to France. Among the millions of Muslims in the country, this cannot be an isolated case. Some of those who are not radical today can quickly become radicalized, and vice versa. An additional factor, which probably plays a role in radicalization, is the serious unemployment rate among young Muslims.

The role of basic French values is also very important. Separation between state and religion is a key part of French society. Thus, the protection of the secular state has high priority. The author Caroline Fourest, a long-time critic of many aspects of Islam, recently wrote that France needs a secularism watchdog "to supervise the intoxication campaigns instead of promoting them."

If France starts to take stronger action against radical Islam, it may lead to stronger reactions from Muslim countries. Turkey, which already has tense relations with France, is one candidate to be a leader here. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said that Macron needs a check of his mental health. Boycotts of French products in the Muslim world are currently underway.

Various authors in neighboring countries have pointed out that the impact of the beheading and the publicity given to it there were minor. This is an

indicator of how limited European awareness is in this important area. The fact that radical and violent Muslims exist in other European countries provides an additional perspective, but France is at the forefront of the challenge that radical Islam represents to liberal democracy.

The French government's current superficial skirmishes against radical Islam will in the long run be seen as a footnote in a massive and lengthy battle. This is a fight for which much of the basic research hasn't even been done. Jerome Forquet, one of France's leading sociopolitical commentators, put it well: "A race has started; because of ideological blindness, misjudgment or fear to name things as they are, much time has already been lost."

Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center, a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and author of The War of a Million Cuts. Among the honors he has received was the 2019 International Lion of Judah Award of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research paying tribute to him as the leading international authority on contemporary antisemitism.