



PERSPECTIVES

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Macron vs. Radical Political Islam in France: A War of Civilizations?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: France has declared a state of emergency following the recent terrorist attack in Nice, and violent demonstrations are being held across the Arab and Muslim worlds amid calls for boycotts and terrorist attacks against France. Exacerbated by the severe economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, this crisis reflects France's failure to integrate its Muslim minority and to set and enforce clear boundaries against anti-democratic and separatist tendencies within it.

The shocking murder of teacher Samuel Paty by a teenaged Islamist Chechen immigrant provoked a tumultuous emotional response in France. Paty was killed after he showed his students the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published by the satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo* that led to the January 2015 Islamist massacre of that paper's journalists. Paty's object in displaying the cartoons was to prompt a class discussion on the values of freedom of speech and expression that characterize French society.

This murderous blow to the heart of the liberal French republic, which welcomes refugees and immigrants and grants them civil and economic rights, provoked a heated debate. In the past five years, France has experienced 33 terrorist attacks by French Muslim citizens. The targeting of Paty for assassination, his gruesome public beheading, and the posting of video of the murder on the internet illustrated that Islamic zealots pose an existential threat to France's basic republican order.

Over the years, French governments have tried to address the problem through two main venues: reforms to improve the economic and social situation in the suburbs and vigorous measures against extremist Islamist elements. The latter included overseeing religious teaching institutions; closing down radical institutions and

associations; deporting foreign imams who incite violence, citizens with dual citizenship who were involved in terrorist activities, and illegal immigrants; monitoring extremist social networks; and increasing budgets and manpower for intelligence and surveillance operations. President Macron's attempt to advance legislation to monitor more illegal immigrants failed due to political disagreements between right- and left-wing parties and the proposed laws' disqualification by the Constitutional Court on the grounds that they violate human rights.

Public criticism of the rise of radical Islam in France, combined with criticism of the failed management of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, seems to have contributed to Macron's decision to take a more resolute approach to escalating Islamist extremism, in part because doing so would improve his position in the run-up to the next presidential election vis-à-vis the far right's persistent demand for stricter measures against militant Islam and illegal immigration. The opening of the trial of the suspects in the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* massacre and the republication of the Muhammad cartoons that aroused the Islamist terrorists' ire have stoked fear of further attacks and ratcheted up tensions.

In a keynote address on October 2, two weeks prior to the murder of Samuel Paty, President Macron took a firm stand against "Islamist separatism" in France and defined it as a danger to the French Republican system. He warned of the intrusion of extremist Islamist associations into all spheres of public life in France, criticized the claim that Islamic law (*sharia*) supersedes the laws of the Republic, and denounced the Islamic aspiration to create a "state within a state" with goals and values that are inconsistent with those of the republic. Stressing that the solution lies in enforcing state laws on Muslim associations and dismantling those associations that disregard these laws, Macron went on to present a series of initial steps to combat religious extremism, including banning Muslim religious schools in private homes and enacting a Republican compulsory education law from age three. At the same time, he stressed the need to avoid stigmatizing the Muslim population in France, as it could lead to feelings of alienation toward the French Republic. In a tweet, Macron emphasized that he is determined to support and fight for freedom of expression, including republishing the cartoons of Muhammad.

Macron's statements and the punitive responses of the French authorities (which closed a mosque and an Islamist association that were involved in online incitement that led to the targeting and murder of Paty) provoked widespread protests in the Arab and Muslim world, led by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan denounced his French counterpart as mentally unstable and called for a boycott of French goods. Paris responded by recalling its ambassador from Ankara. The EU condemned Erdoğan for his remarks, demanding that he apologize.

The tidal wave of violent anti-French demonstrations reflects the ongoing civilizational war between Western democracies and the non-democratic Muslim

states, a war that has intensified against the backdrop of COVID-19 (which will have its own far-reaching economic and social consequences). The crisis between the French Republic and its Muslim population—especially its growing Islamist community—as well as the dramatic change in France's traditionally friendly relations with many Arab and Muslim countries illustrates that it was a serious mistake to avoid setting clear boundaries and enforcing restrictions on anti-republican sentiment and violent incitement within the country. Inevitably, the absence of such rules perpetuated the cycle of violence and harsh measures.

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