



# PERSPECTIVES

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## The French Double Standard on Fighting Terrorism

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Despite its oft-stated determination to fight terrorism, France has struggled to establish an effective intelligence system and adequate legislation to combat Islamist terrorism, in part due to fears of upsetting its large Muslim population. French sensitivity to Muslim public opinion has led to the creation of a double standard regarding Israel's fight against terrorism. France's own fight against Islamist terrorism is viewed as justified, but Israel is to be condemned for fighting Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip.

During the May 2021 Gaza war, which began with a salvo of Hamas missiles on Israel's capital of Jerusalem, France condemned the terrorist organization's attacks on Israeli cities and expressed support for Israel's right to self-defense. At the same time, it demanded restraint from Israel on the alleged grounds that the violence was the product of a lack of political progress with the Palestinians, the (supposedly) provocative nature of Jewish communities in the West Bank, and the purported violation by Israel of the status quo in Jerusalem.

France has not yet internalized that its double standard regarding Israel's fight against terrorism emboldens not only Israel's Islamist enemies, such as the terror organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but also France's own Islamist enemies, who pose a very real danger to secular French republican values and style of life.

On August 8, 2021, the "Trial of the Century" opened in France. The accused were allegedly involved in the worst terrorist attack in modern French history, which occurred on November 13, 2015.

On that day, 130 people were killed and almost 400 people injured as result of coordinated terrorist attacks that took place simultaneously at the Bataclan Theater, the football stadium (Stade de France), and several cafes in Paris. About a year ago, a separate trial was conducted against some of the people accused of involvement in

the January 2015 attacks that targeted the editorial offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical newspaper and a Jewish supermarket. Those two major terrorist assaults shocked the French people, as did other horrendous terrorist attacks subsequently carried out in France, mainly by French Islamists.

France enacted a series of laws designed to combat terrorism as well as illegal immigration to France, which is often perceived as a threat to national security. These urgent reforms were somewhat diluted by major political disagreements between political parties on the left and right, as well as by the subsequent disqualification by the French Constitutional Court of some of the new laws' provisions over their alleged infringement of human rights.

While France harshly condemns Islamist terrorists operating on its soil and frequently reiterates its determination to fight Islamist terrorism, it remains ambivalent about Israel's fight against the same problem.

This was highlighted during the Gaza war in May 2021. On May 13, 2021, President Emmanuel Macron issued a statement in which he "strongly condemned the rocket launches against Israeli territory for which Hamas and other terrorist groups claimed responsibility, seriously endangering the people of Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities and undermining Israel's security." At the same time, Macron expressed condolences "for the many deaths of Palestinian civilians as a result of military operations and clashes with Israel." Macron failed to acknowledge that Hamas deliberately used the citizens of Gaza as human shields and fired rockets from civilian areas, as well as the fact that many of the Palestinian casualties were caused by Hamas itself as a result of faulty missile launches that fell short of Israel and landed in the Gaza Strip. Macron also reiterated the traditional French theory that the crisis was a result of the stalemate in the peace process with the Palestinians, and called for a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

The French Foreign Ministry issued several statements from May 10 to May 21 in which it condemned Hamas's actions while refraining from calling it a terrorist organization. The French statements were critical of Israel. For example, on May 10, the ministry condemned the previous night's rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory but at the same time called "on all actors to show maximum restraint and to refrain from any kind of provocation so that calm may be restored as quickly as possible."

FM Jean-Yves Le Drian repeated Macron's declaration regarding Israel's right to self-defense. However, in an interview with French media on May 23, when the ceasefire in Gaza had come into effect, he made an extremely problematic statement. He referred to the mass riots by Israeli Arabs in several Israeli cities during the flare-up and warned of the risk of "long-lasting apartheid" in Israel should the Palestinians fail to obtain their own state.

This statement was strongly condemned by then-PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who called Le Drian's comments "an insolent, false claim that has no basis," adding that Israel will "not tolerate any hypocritical and mendacious preaching of morality." The Israeli Foreign Ministry announced that FM Gabi Ashkenazi had summoned the French ambassador and told him that Le Drian's comments were "unacceptable, baseless, far from reality, and Israel rejects them out of hand." "Israel expects its friends to not express themselves in an irresponsible way," the statement added. Ashkenazi called Le Drian's comments "a prize to extremist elements and terror organizations."

Apparently, France's reactions stemmed not only from concern for the citizens of Gaza but also from domestic considerations. France feared that the events in Gaza would lead to violent demonstrations by French Muslims and an increase in antisemitic attacks on French Jews (as had occurred in previous rounds of war). Indeed, the French interior minister banned a demonstration by "supporters of Palestine in Paris" on May 14. Despite the ban, hundreds of French Hamas supporters gathered to demonstrate, refused police demands that they disperse, and attacked police officers with dangerous objects.

These events in France illustrate its vulnerability when dealing with growing pockets of poverty and crime, frequently in suburbs with a significant Muslim population. Obviously, the attempt to please Muslims in France by adopting a show of a balanced position on the Israeli-Palestinian problem does not solve the serious problems associated with the French Republic's relations with its Muslim population. Many Muslim immigrants, particularly of North African origin, have not integrated into French society and economy and are alienated from France. The growing influence of radical Islamists among French Muslims is reflected, *inter alia*, in the increase in the number of those who regard sharia law as above the laws of the French Republic. Other alarming phenomena are the French authorities' loss of control over Muslim-populated suburbs, increased attacks on policemen, and shocking acts of terrorism by radicalized French individuals.

One of the most appalling incidents occurred in October 2020, when high school teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded by a radicalized Muslim immigrant as revenge for his having shown his students the *Charlie Hebdo* caricatures of Muhammad. Macron's declaration of support for the publication of the caricatures as consistent with the French republican ideal of freedom of expression led to huge anti-France demonstrations across the Arab and Muslim world. Macron, who was surprised by the extent of the mass demonstrations of hatred toward France, issued a kind of public apology during an interview with Aljazeera. Macron said he understood the feelings of Muslims who were shocked by the displaying of cartoons of Muhammad, but added that "radical Islam...is a threat to all people, especially to Muslims." He

added, "The caricatures are not a government project but emerged from free and independent newspapers that are not affiliated with the government."

The historic Bataclan trial, while hopefully bringing some justice to the victims, does not necessarily indicate that France has fully internalized the ominous threats emanating from radical Islamism inside the country. Nor has it internalized the urgency of persistently carrying out anti-terrorist measures without compromise. France has not yet grasped that its double standard toward Israel's fight against terrorism emboldens not only Israel's Islamist enemies, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, but also France's own radical Islamist enemies, who pose a very real danger to secular French republican values and way of life.

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