The Role of Religion for Countering Violent Islamist Extremism — The Situation in France

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Keywords

Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism; Islamism; Radicalisation; France

Abbreviations

CVE: Countering Violent Extremism

FTF: Foreign Terrorist Fighters

IS: Islamic State

PVE: Preventing Violent Extremism

Abstract

France has been the target of numerous jihadist-inspired terrorist attacks, especially since the 2015 attacks in Paris. Islamist radicalisation seems to be of a more intense nature in France compared to its neighbouring countries, posing severe challenges to the security and cohesion of French society. This article addresses the question of how this situation came about and how it relates to the debate on preventing and countering violent Islamist extremism (PVE/CVE).

German Synopsis

Frankreich steht im Fadenkreuz dschihadistischer Terrorattentate, vor allem seit den Pariser Anschlägen des Jahres 2015. Im Vergleich zu seinen Nachbarländern scheint islamistische Radikalisierung in Frankreich von intensiverer Natur zu sein. Diese Bedrohungslage stellt die franz*ösische Gesellschaft vor ernsthafte Herausforderungen, die sowohl die öffentliche Sicherheit als auch den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt bereffen. Der vorliegende Artikel befasst sich mit der Frage, wie diese Situation entstanden ist, und in welchem Bezug sie die Debatte zur Pr*ävention und Bekämpfung des islamistischen Extremismus beeinflusst.

The Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher terrorist attacks of January 2015 in Paris marked the beginning of an ongoing series of attacks inspired by jihadism, an extreme version of radical Islamist thought and action which endorses and propagates violence in the name of Islam. Some of these attacks were successful, others failed; some were more sophisticated, some less.

Compared to its neighbouring countries, Islamist radicalisation – understood here as a process of adopting an extremist interpretation of Islam, usually accompanied by a certain set of rigid behavioural rules – seems to be of particularly intense nature in France, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. France has suffered a high number of attacks and experienced a high rate of thwarted ones; it has recorded a record number of individuals reported to have been radicalised and an elevated number of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) who left the country to join jihadist groups in various conflict zones, e.g. in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, France has not only been a particular target for terrorists but has also been catapulted into the limelight of international public interest with regard to how it is handling the challenges posed by jihadist-inspired terrorism, both in terms of threats to the safety of its society as well as to societal cohesion.

A question frequently debated in this context is: how did this situation come about? And, though less often addressed: how does the situation relate to the debate on preventing and countering violent Islamist extremism (PVE/CVE), especially given the laic definition of the French state and society?

Terrorism isn´t new to the country. In its history, France has experienced a significant number of shootings, bombings, hostage takings, vehicle rammings, arson attacks, and hijackings by right-wing extremists, left-wing extremists, nationalists and, lately, jihadist perpetrators. In 1995, the GIA-affiliated terrorist network of which Khaled Kelkal was part conducted several attacks, as did the Al-Qaida–affiliated *gang de Roubaix* one year later; but until the murders committed by Mohammed Merah in Toulouse and Montauban in 2012, terrorist attacks were treated as political violence in the context of anti-colonial struggles or connected to other instances of violent conflicts abroad, such as the Bosnian War, rather than being viewed as inspired by religion or connected to social, societal and/or political issues within the country. Terrorist perpetrators and their networks and milieus were counteracted with repressive instruments – a wider angle of analysis, which would have allowed tackling the threat from a more holistic perspective, had not been incorporated into the design of counterterrorism policy.

For almost 30 years, empirical studies have warned of possible future developments which might threaten societal cohesion and ultimately result in different forms of violence. In 1987, Gilles Kepel, in his pioneering study titled *Les banlieues de l'Islam, Naissance d'une religion en France* ('The suburbs of Islam, Birth of a religion in France'), which was based on fieldwork in the suburbs of Paris, analysed the realities of the everyday lives of the people who live in these suburbs. Acknowledging that most of the immigrants were of Muslim heritage and intended to stay in France permanently, Kepel stressed the importance of changing the concept of 'Islam *in* France' to 'Islam *of* France' – in other words, integration was to be a challenge for and responsibility of both Muslims and non-Muslims. At the same time, he pointed out that a failure to merge successfully French and immigrant/Muslim identities and a failure to enhance the social participation of the inhabitants of the *banlieues* would carry with it the risk that communitarianism would establish itself in the suburbs.

In French public opinion, Islam is widely perceived as inherently violent. The violent conflicts in the context of the French colonies' struggle for independence politicised public perception of the presence of foreign workers from the colonies, particularly Algerians. In light of violent conflicts within metropolitan France in the context of the Algerian War (1954–1962) and terrorist acts during the 1990s, Algerians were increasingly perceived as posing a threat to national security. This perception strongly influenced the national discourse about immigrants not only from Algeria, and has become part of France's collective memory. Events such as the *affaire du foulard* (the headscarf controversy), which originated around Muslim schoolgirls wearing their headscarves at school in the Paris *banlieue* of Creil in 1989, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, and the riots in several French *banlieues* in 2005 further strengthened the prevalent opinion in French society that Muslims are not capable of integrating. This, in turn, further entrenched the notion that Islam is a form of communitarianism which imports not only a foreign religion and foreign habits considered alien to French culture but also external conflicts. This view was further reinforced by the French republican ethos, which demands absolute assimilation of all people, native or foreign, into the cultural and social norms prevalent in French society.

In Kepel's sequel study, *Banlieue de la République: société, politique et religion à Clichy-sous-Bois et Montfermeil* ('Suburb of the Republic: society, politics and religion in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil'), which dates from 2011, i.e. six years after the 2005 riots that took place in these two municipalities in the north-east of Paris, his assessment of the situation 24 years after his initial study is grim: unemployment, isolation, and social segregation

had become persistent structural problems. Billions of euros that were spent on suburban renovation had contributed to improving the cityscape, but not social cohesion. Quite the reverse, in fact: the nicknames of the *département* in which the two municipalities are located, derived from the first two digits of their post code, *quatre-vingt-treize* ('ninety-three') or, for short, *neuf trois* ('nine three'), have become a synonym for failed integration, ghettoisation, and the disintegration of the Republic in general. The *département* belongs to the French region of Île-de-France, which, together with the south-west of the country (with one of the hotspots being Nice, the scene of truck attack of 14 July 2016), is the part of France most heavily affected by concerns relating to radicalisation.

Factors such as the authorities' misplaced focus on building concrete structures rather than developing the human aspect (to paraphrase Kepel), their ignorance of the root causes of social and economic exclusion and seclusion, their lack of understanding of how to break the vicious cycle associated with such exclusion, precariousness, and a lack of options for developing cultural capital and social advancement were exacerbated by denial and a lack of sincere interest in the problems of the denizens of the *banlieues*. This led to poor social policies. Even today, pupil achievement rates in the *banlieues* are considerably lower than the national average, while the unemployment rate – especially among young people – is higher, providing additional motivations for engaging in crime, violence, and drug dealing. The French model for national integration has failed, as Kepel states repeatedly, while the issues resulting from this failure combined with the resulting structural problems, such as high unemployment, rates seem to paralyse political leaders. Especially in the *banlieues*, the *République* fell short of its promise.

At the same time, Islam was increasingly being used and/or propagated as a means for compensating for the shortcomings of the services usually provided by the state, and the influence of strict preachers has steadily been growing. The Tablighi Jamaat movement, which had been proselytising (not only) in the *banlieues*, has now been replaced with Salafi actors, who are actively reinforcing a Muslim Salafi identity – with sustainable outcomes.

The social and cultural rupture with French society of certain milieus in France, and/or their withdrawal into a closed religious identity as a result of their continued (self-)alienation, outcomes of which Kepel had warned, is obvious to those who have been observing the situation. Among them is Nadia Remadna, a social worker and activist with Algerian roots from Sevran, one of the poorest municipalities in France, located in the notorious *neuf trois*. Police have been reluctant to penetrate certain parts of Sevran, access to which was temporarily controlled by gang members. Desperate to gain control, and with drug trafficking and violence

related to gang wars peaking in Sevran in 2011, the commune's mayor called for UN-peacekeeping–style interventions to pacify the situation.

Remadna and others report that inhabitants of Sevran have been increasingly selecting their healthcare provider according to the religious affiliation of the doctors who would treat the patient. And slowly but surely, Islamists have been infiltrating and taking over youth clubs, according to Remadna's observations over the past couple of years.

In her book titled *Comment j'ai sauvé mes enfants* ('How I saved my children'), she states how parental concern for children has changed from a fear that children will become involved with drugs and crime to a fear that children will fall prey to Salafi 'radicalisers' and end up as terrorists with the so-called Islamic State (IS). In Remadna's view, local structures and dynamics have never been properly analysed. As a result, at least some of the money that was made available to fund, for example, youth workers and sports coaches with the aim of keeping vulnerable young people out of trouble has gone to individuals who are using their proximity to their target group of vulnerable young people to exert psychological pressure to behave in ways that 'will please God', i.e. not to mix with the other sex, to dress modestly, to pray, etc, and not do drugs.

Remadna accuses local politicians of having tried to buy social peace at the expense of giving up the values of the Republic in general, and giving up on Sevran in particular. She has witnessed for several years how Salafis 'Islamicised' not only the public spheres in the *banlieues*, but also increasingly private lives and homes. She has observed Islamist recruiters emerging who know exactly what they are doing and who are going about their tasks more and more openly. She describes how, during the 'Salafisation' of Sevran, radicalisers have been working on taking over cultural hegemony by either bullying or luring young people into displaying certain behaviours and adhering to a specific dress code. Conduct comes first; next, the young people will slowly but surely be groomed into a mindset that at its core relies on the dichotomy of 'you are Muslim, not French', with 'French' and 'Muslim' being constructed as two exclusive, irreconcilable identities. Virulent anti-Semitism and the widespread dissemination of conspiracy theories contribute to the hardening of enemy images.

For some of these young people, adopting 'radical' styles of behaviour, Salafi dress codes, and aggressive ways of communicating is simply a way of getting the bullies off their backs. For others, it is a means for channelling their frustration and aggression into avenues that will be acceptable to their peers: namely against 'the French', the Republic, and everything it stands for in their minds. This does not necessarily mean that they hate *liberté, égalité,*

fraternité as such; after all, these youngsters are, at least in part, looking for exactly these qualities when becoming 'radicals'. Some of the young people do feel exempt from the values that these words are supposed to represent but to them have become simple slogans, void of content and commitment. These young people seek shelter in an ideology of demarcation because *égalité* does not seem to apply to them; they feel attracted to a Salafist interpretation of Islam. Other young people find it especially appealing to devaluate those whom they themselves exempt from their own, new construct of the *fraternité* of 'true Muslims'.

For those who lost the opportunity of living a self-determined life to drug abuse and/or crime, belonging to the Muslim *fraternité* can feel like they reclaimed control over their lives or can provide an avenue for seeking redemption in the same way that it can provide certainty and meaning to those lacking orientation. Some young people use Salafi 'radicalism' to liberate themselves from the authoritarian grip of their parents, or even – as absurd as this may sound – to seek the *liberté* (or rather, deliverance) from the 'impertinence' of postmodern life in order to craft their own futures and create meaning in their lives such that living feels worthwhile; often enough, a lack of access to quality education and attractive jobs (attractive both in terms of the nature of the job and the financial rewards it offers) makes it difficult for young people to take ownership of their lives and to leave the *banlieue*.

But it is not only in this sense that *Paris intra-muros* (the term used to refer to the city of Paris without its suburbs, for example on the metro map) is often off-limits for the youngsters of the *banlieues*. The process of ghettoisation is a physical as much as a mental one, as Remadna points out. Many of the youths of Sevran have never been to Paris, a mere twenty-minute train journey away, not because they cannot go there, but because it never enters their mind; the city and the *République* seem worlds away.

The formation of a secluded identity predominantly in the *banlieues* combined with Islamisation, polarisation, and radicalisation processes within the local microcosmos and thus formed a recruiting pool from which extremists draw. Meanwhile, a hardcore, home-grown jihadist movement has materialised.

France is facing a complex and complicated situation. This article aimed to trace its genesis in, admittedly, very broad outlines. To sum up, key factors influencing the current situation and its development seem to be

- historical baggage that relates to a violent past which is rooted within the French colonial context and has become part of France's collective memory

- external events, ranging from the violent colonial conflicts to the conflicts in the Middle East, both past and present
- insufficient options for social and economic participation, including disadvantageous conditions that hinder the accumulation of social capital, e.g. in the *banlieues*
- communitarism and seclusion, including a withdrawal back into a closed religious identity, and/or into gangs/crime/drugs
- qualitative and/or quantitative lack of adequate means to effectively handle the above-mentioned structural problems
- insufficient means to sustainably develop an inclusive local and/or national identity in a culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse country
- a very active scene of 'radicalisers' who offer social services, leisure activities and empowerment through the devaluation of others as a means to groom persons vulnerable to radicalisation into an extremist interpretation of Islam
- the 'Salafisation' of public venues and private lives and homes, resulting in the evolvement of Salafi milieus through cultural hegemony
- hardened enemy images among the radicalized clientele, i.e. persons prone to radicalisation, including anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories
- the development of a hardcore, ideologised home-grown jihadist movement, channeling hate against presumed enemies into violent action
- polarisation of French society

The above (incomplete) list suggests that religion as such is not necessarily the key factor in the development of the situation. Historical, structural, and social constellations play a role as well. Within this complex interplay, religion – or, rather, religious ideology – can probably best be understood as a vector, which in combination with several of the aforementioned factors transfforms individual vulnerability to radicalisation into an extremist set of thought- and/or action-related orientations. The interplay of (self-)segregation, extremist interpretations of Islam, and Islamist radicalisation has by now become a central part of the public and political discourse on terrorism and PVE/CVE efforts in France. The role of religion versus ideology within radicalisation processes – with leading scholars theorising on the 'radicalisation of Islam' (Gilles Kepel) vs 'Islamisation of radicalism' (Olivier Roy) – has become part of a fierce debate. Focal points of the debate have been long-neglected ideological

aspects of jihadist radicalisation in the West (Kepel), and the functions which 'radicalism' and Islamist extremism fulfil for individuals at a socio-psychological level in liberal European countries (Roy). Still lacking in this very necessary, but also very polarised debate, is an examination of the roles which the strong emphasis on laic principles and the partly aggressive pursuit of an essentialised republican identity play in the genesis of radicalisation, the analysis of the phenomenon, and the design, implementation, and effect of PVE and CVE measures.

Maybe the question that needs be asked is not so much what the role of religion in French PVE/CVE efforts is – but rather why it is so potent in its function as a radicalising vector within the specific social, societal, and political French context.

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