France’s Determined Struggle Against Salafi Jihadism

Lessons Learned

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THE ISSUE

Since 2015, terrorist attacks have killed 246 people in France, deepening political divides and undermining the country’s unity. France has undergone drastic reforms to reshuffle its judicial, security, and intelligence architecture to address the threat; it is now mobilizing the entire society to counter Salafi-jihadi radicalization. This brief examines how France escaped the trap of division, which sacrifices it accepted, and how such unique experience can prove useful to other Western countries.

Between January 7 and January 9, 2015, three decades of jihadism in France converged in the execution of what was then the deadliest terror attack in France since 1961. Among the three perpetrators, two were brothers who attacked the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo on behalf of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), leaving 12 dead. The third perpetrator, who killed four people in a widely-watched hostage situation at a kosher grocery store, claimed to have carried out the attack on behalf of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—although it was never confirmed by the terrorist group. At the time, al Qaeda was more known to the French public than ISIL.

The perpetrators all had one thing in common: they had all met an individual in jail, Djamel Beghal, a figure from the Algerian terrorist networks of the 1990s who had emerged as an Al Qaeda operative in Europe after having trained in Afghanistan.

The French public understood that the January 2015 attacks constituted a historic moment—a tipping point.

The largest public demonstrations in France since the end of World War II—approximately four million people—were held to publicly champion freedom of speech and unity, known as “Je suis Charlie” (I am Charlie). It was believed that the attacks were in retaliation for Charlie Hebdo’s reproduction of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed as well as Charlie Hebdo’s general rejection of Islam (as of any religious dogma). The magazine had received death threats for years.

But internationally, the response was more ambiguous. While there was an outpouring of support from foreign officials after the attacks, the international commentariat opined on Charlie Hebdo’s alleged lack of “respect” for religion as a cause for the attack or Europe’s inability to assimilate multicultural communities. The heinous attack had to be an isolated, if regrettable incident, not the harbinger of a new normal for France and Europe.

In retrospect, the disquieting feeling of the French people was justified. Since then, 12 terrorist attacks have left 246 dead in France with more deadly incidents occurring across Europe, the United States, and the Middle East.
Still, rather than trying to understand the complexity of the rising Salafi-jihadi challenge in Europe, journalists and pundits still frequently describe immigration, lax border security, French secularism, or even the French language as underlying causes.

The magnitude and scale of the attacks has driven France to undertake radical institutional and ideological evolutions; this unprecedented effort by a Western country to tackle the jihadi threat which is important to understand and assess. Although France generally views terrorism as a persistent yet manageable challenge, in recent years France has made important doctrinal and institutional changes in response to new terror dynamics, all with strong support from the population. The country has fundamentally reshaped its security, intelligence, and judicial bodies to address the jihadi challenge internally and externally. French society (state institutions, civil society organizations, and individual citizens) has been mobilized to tackle the issue of violent radicalization. This extends beyond undermining ISIL narratives to include transdisciplinary efforts to reintegrate former ISIL supporters, as well as long-term efforts aimed at building resilience through education and greater interactions between Muslim communities and the state.

As prelude to a groundbreaking forthcoming report from the CSIS Transnational Threats and Europe Programs on jihadism in Europe and lessons for the United States (expected in September), this policy brief draws key lessons from France’s evolutionary effort to tackle the jihadi challenge. Although some of these lessons are unique to France, some may prove useful to the United States in confronting the jihadi threat as well as political and religious violence in a digital era.

ASSESSING THE THREAT

LESSON 1
JIHADISTS TARGET WESTERN COUNTRIES NOT BECAUSE OF PAST MILITARY INTERVENTIONS BUT BECAUSE THEY HATE AND WANT TO DESTROY WHAT THESE COUNTRIES REPRESENT.

Terrorist attacks in France did not start with France’s 2001 intervention in Afghanistan against the Taliban or because of its intervention against al Qaeda in Mali in 2013. Moreover, France’s rejection of the 2003 Iraq War did not make it a sanctuary. France has been a direct target of Sunni jihadism since 1994. Salafi-jihadi movements are motivated to exert pressure on Western foreign policy preferences (to favor their interests), boost recruitment, or reject Western cultural and political models. Jihadists claimed attacks were a payback for France’s struggle against al Qaeda in the Sahel since 2013—yet as early as 2012, wannabe foreign fighters trying to reach Syria from Tunisia claimed they would come back and strike Europe.¹ Over the past three years, attacks have targeted a wide range of countries in Europe—from Spain to Sweden and Finland—regardless of whether they were militarily involved

¹ Marie Botrel, winner of a contest celebrating secularism organized by Observatoire de la Laïcité, 2015. The poster reads “I AM A / dark-haired / student / Muslim / vegan / rock-loving / CITIZEN

Image: Marie Botrel
The idea that European “visa-free terrorists” would pose a threat to the U.S. territory has little grounding in reality.

in fighting jihadists abroad. Abstaining from repressing Salafi-jihadi ideology is no path to increased safety. Such policy failed in France in 1994, in the United Kingdom until 2005, in Turkey between 2012 and 2015, and would fail in other countries too. Jihadists falsely use repression of and hostility toward their goals as a pretext to justify the targeting of civilians - and lasting conflicts in the Middle East help them build their narrative.

LESSON 2

THERE ARE NO “LONE WOLVES” BUT THERE IS A FERTILE SET OF SOCIOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS THAT COULD MAKE INDIVIDUALS MORE RECEPTIVE TO RADICALIZATION.

Intelligence services reject the idea that “lone wolves” might pose a significant threat to Europe, since the common element between (almost) all terrorists in France is that they had direct connections, either virtual or physical, to other radicalized individuals. Various paths may drive individuals to support ISIL, which can create confusion about the political dimension of their actions, but it is mostly a rational process. Most individuals demonstrate durable beliefs and try to educate themselves. There are exceptions: in the Nice attack on July 14, 2016 (symbolically France’s independence day), the path to radicalization of the truck driver was unclear; while in other cases, a mix of mental health issues, extremist convictions, and personal grievances lead the perpetrators to radicalization (e.g., Saint-Quentin-Fallavier in 2015, where the attacker expressed intense resentment toward his employer whom he later killed). Yet according to a recent study, some profiles are more prone to radicalization than others: young males (24 years old on average), single, no children, with a relatively low education level, unemployed or living in precarious conditions. Half of those convicted for terrorist activities had prior run-ins with the judicial system. Despite these statistics, experience suggests women should not be discounted as potential perpetrators (though often they are viewed as victims of ISIL): they usually demonstrate an even higher degree of radicalization than men, and have increasingly attempted to carry out attacks (e.g., failed attempt to blow up gas canisters at Notre Dame in September 2016). Other studies suggest many French recruits joined jihadi groups because they viewed this as an opportunity of liberation from their social circumstances and potential recognition by society. By contrast, media insistence on mental health issues as a single explanatory cause may stem from the oft-used broad definition of radicalization, confusion about what constitutes a terrorist attack, and lack of understanding about the attractiveness of ISIL.

LESSON 3

NEITHER MIGRANTS NOR ASYLUM SEEKERS HAD A DECISIVE IMPACT ON TERRORIST TRENDS IN FRANCE.

In the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks in Europe, a flurry of studies sought to explain the surge of jihadi activities through the lens of Europe’s 2015 migration crisis, where nearly 2 million migrants sought refuge in Europe. While ISIL did threaten to use migration flows to send supporters back to Europe and, in the case of the November 2015 attacks in Paris, terrorists used forged identities and the western Balkans migration route to reach France, the situation was more a consequence of deficient border controls in southeastern Europe than the migration crisis itself. According to a study by Marc Hecker, about 90 percent of convicted jihadi supporters in France had French citizenship (even though most had parents who came from Northern Africa). By contrast, the importance of converts in ensuring the spread of ISIL ideology seems overlooked. 26 percent of all individuals involved in terrorist activities were converts; in Iraq and Syria, they were known to be extremely radical, determined, and more violent than others. Although migrants are not the core issue, dismantling transnational terrorist networks sometimes require reestablishing temporary border controls to impede the militants’ movement.

LESSON 4

EVEN LOW-COST AND POORLY-DESIGNED TERRORIST ATTACKS, IF REPEATED, MAINTAIN AUTHORITIES UNDER HEAVY PRESSURE.

Since 2014, authorities have demonstrated a greater ability to detect plots and thwart attacks (85 percent) which, even when they unfold, have a high failure rate (about 60 percent). While more than 80 plots have been uncovered in France, only 12 attacks have caused fatalities, and just 3 attacks caused 95 percent of casualties. Only one attack orchestrated by ISIL from the Syrian and Iraqi theaters succeeded. Since 2016, terrorists caused an even smaller number of deaths (6 fatalities compared to around 850 non-terror murders per year in France). But because one successful attack can cause a significant number of victims (the Nice truck attack caused...
86 fatalities), authorities are under pressure to anticipate any possible attack and means of action. They have implemented heavy protection and deterrence responses ranging from Operation Sentinel (up to 10,000 armed French police officers and soldiers patrolling the streets) to the building of a 10-foot glass wall to protect the Eiffel Tower. The economic burden of additional security measures to respond to this challenge and the associated human capital and readiness costs have strained France’s budget and its ability to conduct military operations abroad.

LESSON 5
THE IDEA THAT EUROPEAN “VISA-FREE TERRORISTS” POSE A THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES HAS LITTLE BASIS IN REALITY.
First, most ISIL attacks on U.S. soil have been carried out by U.S. citizens (and the rest by non-EU foreigners), showing a pattern similar to France: radicalized individuals and foreign fighters tend to turn against their home country. Second, although more than 1,200 French adults successfully travelled to Syria and Iraq, many (at least 310, possibly as high as 500) have been killed on the battlefield, others are in detention or jail abroad, and only a minority (around 260 men and 60 women) have returned to France, leaving only a few hundred abroad. Departures and returns to and from Syria and Iraq have almost stopped since 2016 (ten returnees last year), and potential returnees are under close surveillance. All of them would be subject to prosecution in France, risking between 10 and 30 years in jail for their support of jihadi groups alone. Furthermore, since 2014 administrative measures have included passport confiscation, deportation, and a ban from French territory for convicted non-French radicalized individuals who used to live in France. Even individuals considered up to a low risk (just under 12,000 individuals) are under scrutiny from French intelligence services, although this also stretches resources considerably. Finally, the United States can request a visa from visa-exempt persons on a case-by-case basis if a suspicion were to emerge about these individuals under existing regulations. Overall, there is little reason to believe that the internal French situation would result in directed attacks on U.S. soil.

COUNTERING RADICALIZATION

LESSON 6
RADICALIZATION POSES A MORE COMPLEX CHALLENGE TO WESTERN SOCIETIES THAN PROJECTED TERRORIST ATTACKS.
Organizations like ISIL or al Qaeda and its many offshoots pursue a comprehensive and long-term strategy that may prove difficult to counter for Western democracies with short political cycles. Because of the inability of Western societies to entirely dismantle jihadi networks and undermine their narrative, Salafi-jihadists have been able to expand their circle of supporters, from a few dozens in France in the 1990s to a few thousand today. Although Salafi-jihadi radicalization is recognized as a challenge, the issue has become more pressing with the return of some foreign fighters who might attempt to convert others to their beliefs, especially during imprisonment. French authorities know that systematic surveillance and monitoring of the entire Muslim population would be both unfair and counterproductive (radicalized individuals known to pose a higher risk represent less than 0.1 percent of the Muslim population) and may miss the target (almost 50 percent of those reported for radicalization are converts). Trust-building efforts and intelligence collection can both be harmed if not well balanced, leading to difficult tradeoffs (in mosques, prisons, or family assistance programs).

LESSON 7
REQUESTING THE ASSISTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES, WHICH HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO SPREAD SALAFI-JIHADI IDEOLOGY, IS NECESSARY TO FIGHT IT.
In France, the nascent online jihadi community first coalesced around websites like Ansar Al-Haqq, which only attracted already-radicalized individuals. In the wake of the Syrian crisis, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and later apps like Telegram, were reluctant to alter their business model that encouraged the sharing of extreme content. This negligence inadvertently contributed to spreading jihadi propaganda, and at times provided recruiters and plotters with technological ways to hide from intelligence services by use of encryption. As the repositories of a great amount of data, it is very beneficial to have these social media organizations cooperate with authorities and design tools to impede the spreading of extreme content, helping to expose future terrorist networks and bring charges against those already under investigation. French and British authorities have initiated a fruitful dialogue to identify shared topics of interest, share information, and involve private actors in the fight against radicalization. In the United States, increased pressure on social media companies through dialogue and regulation would help accelerate progress.

LESSON 8
CAUTIOUS REGULATION OF FREE SPEECH AND GUNS MAY HELP CONTAIN TERRORIST ACTIVITIES.
In France, the consensus is that preserving a peaceful environment should take precedence over individual freedoms (around 80 percent of the population still supported the state of emergency when it was eventually
Radicalization poses a more complex challenge to Western societies than projected terrorist attacks.

France has ensured low availability of firearms, which, although not banned, can be possessed only under restrictive legal conditions, are sold in specialized stores, and require in-depth individual background checks. Its judicial system uses an expansive definition of terror-related activities to bring charges, which has raised criticism from civil rights activists but has the necessary tools to break up networks before they start planning concrete action. The law prohibits public expression of support to terrorist activities, which undermines attempts of Salafi-jihadi proselytism and helps detect radicalized individuals early in the process. Finally, France has very strong antimilitia and antiterror legislation that facilitates cracking down both on potentially violent Islamist groups (e.g., Forsane Alizza, 2012), far-right activists who may themselves seek “revenge” through terrorist attacks (two of which have been dismantled over the past two years), or any other radical group that could emerge from the current situation. The United States has different laws, as well as cultural and historical experiences, that diminish its ability to take these steps.

**LESSON 9**

**INTERNAL COUNTERTERRORISM AND COUNTER-RADICALIZATION EFFORTS SHOULD BE DRIVEN BY EXPERTISE, NOT POLITICAL HYSTERIA AND POLICY OVERREACTION.**

Terrorist actions seek to dictate the political agenda and increase divisions between communities. Emotionally-driven responses may meet the immediate demands from the public, but they are often ineffective and can inflame the situation. France’s “lone wolf” legislation (2014) responded to heated political debates at the time but proved of little relevance to tackling the challenges posed by ISIL. The recurring proposal to preventively jail any “radicalized individual” even if that person has committed no offense, for example, would be unconstitutional. By contrast, if interagency bodies responsible for counterterrorism or counter-radicalization are made resilient to political pressure, they can build mutual trust with other governmental bodies, gain their respect, and refocus political and public energies on long-term projects that focus on tangible results at the community level. Knowledge-building efforts directed at the political level (especially parliamentarians and local representatives) help design more implementable laws and fill known intelligence gaps.

**LESSON 10**

**LOCAL FIELD WORK IS ESSENTIAL IN UNDERSTANDING RADICALIZATION TRENDS.**

The growing number of attacks carried out by nationals in France, the rest of Europe, or the United States (with the San Bernardino and Orlando attacks in 2015-2016) emphasizes the need to better understand local dynamics and communities that gravitate towards influential individuals. When France was attacked by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in 1994-1996, local antiterrorist units became very effective in countering the threat, resorting to intense monitoring and infiltration of local groups to eventually dismantle them. As a result, France stayed immune to attacks in the 2000s, but overconfidence in past successes and misinformed reforms later reduced the authorities’ ability to understand a new wave of jihadi networks at the end of the 2000s. This has been corrected by renewed emphasis on human intelligence and systematic mapping of the internal threat. Increased governmental transparency toward private experts (statistics, etc.), though not always correct, also played a key role in both reassuring the population that it was handling the issue and helping civil society organizations propose tailored community solutions.

**BUILDING RESILIENCE**

**LESSON 11**

**BUILDING RESILIENCE REQUIRES A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH.**

It has taken France three attempts to reach a mature vision to counter radicalization. Contrary to early efforts, empirical studies have demonstrated that radicalization does not singularly occur in mosques or in prisons; it often develops among relatives and friends and is furthered online. Because radicalization pervades French society, the French government’s response (through the third Plan to Counter Radicalization,\(^8\) issued in February 2018) targets multi-stakeholders in a variety of environments. Resilience can be increased through awareness and collective efforts to fight back (more than 25,000 people have been trained to better detect and handle radicalized individuals). From classrooms to gyms, policemen to families, local representatives to religious leaders, state institutions to civil society organizations, psychiatrists to social workers, every segment of French society has a role to play. In spite of increased awareness of radicalization risks among the population (which typically means more people are reported), the trend is now reversing (40 percent fewer reports of newly radicalized minors in 2017 compared to 2016).
LESSON 12

EXPERIMENTAL WORK ON DISENGAGEMENT FROM VIOLENCE IS WORTH PURSUING.

Attempts to deradicalize dangerous individuals have sometimes rested on dubious assumptions and have yielded little demonstrable results. The French authorities first determine which radicalized individuals are more likely to resort to violent action through established criteria (such efforts to categorize detainees are being set up in French prisons). They then work to convince individuals who hold extreme views but have not taken action yet to express their views without challenging state authority. In France, building on previous experiences, the government is currently pursuing a new, low-key approach, offering support and reintegration as an alternative or a complement to prison (e.g., a center located in Pontourny and an initiative named RIVE for Research and Intervention on Extremist Violence). Resting on societal integration, family-oriented efforts, and religious dialogue, the goal is to avoid further alienating individuals who hold extreme views, and therefore avoid the emergence of new sources of radicalization in the future. Efforts aimed at disengaging radicalized individuals from violence still lack historical perspective, yet they bring hope that it is possible reduce the number of radicalized individuals while avoiding the side-effects caused by broad repression. Most importantly, the majority of these individuals will not pose a direct threat to the French society.

LESSON 13

SECULARISM CAN BE PART OF THE SOLUTION.

France’s unique approach to secularism—known as laïcité—proclaims absolute freedom of worship, separation between religious offices and the state, and prohibits state financing of religion. This approach has been presented internationally (with little evidence) as a factor which encourages radicalization—particularly after local districts attempted to ban the “burqini,” a woman's modesty swimsuit. Yet, Denmark, which presents a different religious model (no strict separation between the church and the state, no niqab ban until recently, nor prohibition of blasphemy), had a proportionally higher number of jihadists than France. In France, ISIL actions eventually reinforced national unity, triggering public demonstrations of solidarity, with Muslims joining prayer services at churches (after a priest was assassinated in 2016) and inciting intellectuals to debunk ISIL propaganda.9 French authorities indirectly influence the Muslim community by training religious leaders, encouraging dialogue between the state and religious entities at the local and national level, and facilitating inter-religious dialogue. For example, the French Ministry of the Interior sponsors university curricula on religion and is involved in a partnership with a prestigious school (the “Emouna” initiative at Science Po) that brings together religious leaders. Secularism can be an effective protection against radicalization as the state acts as a facilitator, not just a regulator.

LESSON 14

COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS WILL NOT END WITH THE TERRITORIAL DEFEAT OF IS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA.

As means of communications evolve and information increasingly flows horizontally, terrorist networks can survive without carrying out terrorist attacks and can target new audiences by aggravating social tensions and deepening cultural divides. Al Qaeda did not disappear with the death of Bin Laden, who had been a mythical reference for jihadists. On the contrary, al Qaeda has mutated and generated dangerous splinter groups that are opening new franchises in Syria, the Sahel, and Afghanistan. ISIL may have lost most of its “caliphate” but it has dormant and active cells across the Middle East, and it continues to operate strongholds in Syria. About a hundred French citizens have been arrested by various sides, though predominantly by Syrian Kurdish groups. Their future remains unclear, as tensions deepen between the Syrian Kurds, Turkey, and the United States. Finally, the remaining European fighters are considering leaving for other theaters of operations (such as Yemen, Somalia, or Afghanistan). There will be plenty of opportunities for seasoned fighters to keep their dreams of armed jihad alive over the next decade, appealing to volunteers or destabilizing new swaths of territory.

Counter-terrorism efforts will not end with the territorial defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria.

LESSON 15

EFFORTS TO COUNTER FUNDAMENTALIST ISLAMIC RADICALIZATION MAY PROVE USEFUL TO COUNTERING EXTREMISM IN GENERAL.

Western societies seem increasingly polarized, and populations increasingly doubt democratic values and institutions (France less so than the United States). Understanding these underlying factors, and how ISIL was able to use them—especially through online propaganda—could help bridge social and cultural gaps far beyond the issue of religious radicalization. It is also critical to understand how, in spite of political and
economic challenges (e.g., unemployment, the rise of the French far-right, a surge of xenophobic and anti-Semitic sentiment across Europe), French society did not fall apart. According to an annual poll conducted since 1990, indicators of tolerance have increased by ten points since the Charlie Hebdo attack in 2015. As French researcher Romain Seze puts it, “what is at stake is the reinforcement of social cohesion and integration by fighting social and economic inequalities and multiple forms of discrimination (employment, health, gender based etc.), as well as transmission of values that found the French “vivre-ensemble” (secularism and tolerance), a common desire to live together as a single nation.” Understanding and enhancing the notion of societal resilience might be critical to countering the future rise of new forms of radicalization, be it on political or religious grounds.

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ENDNOTES

2. IS claimed the attack, the modus operandi was compatible with its calls to kill civilians, and the perpetrator had been preparing for this action for one year. However, no direct connection to IS has been made public by investigators.
5. At the end of 2014, just after Adnani called upon IS supporters to attack France, a series of car rampages and one knife attack at a police station were first believed to have been inspired by IS, yet it was later found that two of them were cases of insanity.
6. Author’s estimate, based on (updated) data from Le Monde, March 2018.
7. IFOP poll for Atlantico, August 2017.