

Volume 25, Number 4, April 2016

Global politics

France's war on terror: a domestic or foreign threat?

Rob Murphy

This article examines why France has suffered at the hands of homegrown Islamist terrorists. Has the secular approach of French governance and society contributed to this? And how is the French government responding to this increased threat?

France has suffered two terrorist attacks within one year. In January 2015, gunmen broke into the offices of the satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, and killed 20 people during an editorial meeting. The defiant hashtag 'Je suis Charlie' (I am Charlie) swept across social media and street demonstrations in a national wave of solidarity in defence of freedom of speech. Days later, five people were killed in an attack on a Jewish supermarket in a Paris suburb.

Then, most shockingly of all, in November 130 people were killed in coordinated attacks in six locations, including the Stade de France during an international football match and a rock concert at the popular Bataclan concert hall. The style of attack had been long-feared by Europe's security services. By targeting multiple locations and aiming to create maximum panic and worldwide publicity, the terrorists drew inspiration from similar attacks in Mumbai, India in 2009.

What makes these attacks most unsettling for French society and politicians is that, in the words of President Hollande, 'we know that these were French people who killed other French people.'

Why France?

The November attacks in Paris were France's worst terrorist atrocity since the Second World War, and the deadliest in Europe since the Madrid train bombings in 2004. During 2015, five other terrorist attacks were prevented in France. 2015 has seen terrorism increase in France — but why?

Military intervention

France has been the most active European state in terms of its military action against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Under successive presidents of left and right since 2011, French foreign policy in general has become more involved in military action, just as the UK and USA have become ever more cautious and reluctant. France has led military action in Libya, Mali, Central African Republic, Iraq and Syria, and has been the most strident European voice against both the Assad regime and Islamic State.

However, establishing a connection between a more interventionist foreign policy and a domestic terrorist backlash is difficult to prove. Analysts point instead to tensions between immigrant communities, particularly in poor estates in city suburbs, as the main cause of France's difficulties with the radicalisation of a small but dangerous minority. Most of France's major terrorist attacks in 2015 or

plots were planned and carried out by French nationals, not by Islamic State militants travelling from Iraq and Syria.

Colonial links

France has colonial links to many countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and since decolonisation in the 1960s has received large numbers of migrants from the region. France is home to Europe's largest Muslim minority, which currently numbers between 5 and 6 million people.

Experts identify a risk from so-called 'third-generation jihadis', many of whom have grown up in poor suburbs and have been radicalised in marginalised communities. This grassroots radicalisation in France's cities has now seemingly found a dangerous partnership with the rise of a powerful and attractive brand in Islamic State. While Al Qaeda's goal of an Islamic caliphate was merely aspirational and its training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan difficult to access, Islamic State offers a ready-made (if fragile) caliphate and accessible training camps for disaffected third-generation jihadis close to Europe's border. Many of the attackers in the *Charlie Hebdo* and November attacks had travelled to Syria. France's security services estimate that as many as 520 French nationals are fighting in Syria and 250 have already returned to France.

A divided society?

The updated hashtag which followed the Paris attacks in November was 'Je suis Paris' (I am Paris) — a sentiment which swept the world's social media. The attacks were so indiscriminate that French society was unified in revulsion, but the attacks nonetheless exposed fractures in French society.

Challenging secularism

France has always organised both government and society on principles of secularism, with religion (historically the Roman Catholic Church) and state kept separate. One analyst has called this 'the most widely used, but least understood aspects of modern French politics.' Originally intended to remove state funding from all religious faiths, secularism has become a form of social policy to manage integration of France's immigrant communities. In particular, the question of assimilating France's second largest religion, Islam, smoothly into French society.

Critics of secularism suggest that measures banning the wearing of all obvious religious symbols have been directed at Muslims. A 2004 ban on wearing the hijab in schools attracted particular criticism. Others say that secularism is an insufficient social policy where unemployment, racial discrimination and extreme poverty in distant city suburbs marginalises young French Muslims. The OECD has highlighted the underachievement in education of immigrant communities as the worst in the western world.

There is evidence that some communities are responding by seeking to strengthen their own sense of Muslim identity. The French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, quoted one secular intellectual as stating that 'secularism is unintelligible and even shocking for practising Muslims, who view it as an injunction to abandon their religion.' An ultra-conservative branch of Islam, Salafism, has gained ground in some city suburbs and has been described as the 'fastest-growing Islamist movement in Europe.' Salafism is the same branch of Islam with which Islamic State associates itself.

Rising Islamophobia

At the same time, there is evidence that Islamophobia is rising. An independent report by the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) documented a 23% rise in 'Islamophobic attacks'

including physical assaults, verbal abuse and damage to property, since the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. A combination of terrorism, Europe's refugee crisis and economic instability in the Eurozone has seen France's anti-immigration National Front party gain ground in mayoral and regional elections. The party's leader, Marine Le Pen, has portrayed herself as a champion of secularism. Some young Muslims say that they feel caught between the two hostile extremes of Islamophobia and Islamic extremism.

French government responses

In November 2015, France announced a three-month state of emergency, and President Hollande declared that France would launch a 'pitiless war' against Islamic State. The military campaign in Syria and Iraq has been stepped up, with the UK eventually stirred to extend its air strikes to Syria in response to the Paris attacks.

French police have been given increased powers, including the ability to detain suspects without warrants and place under house arrest anyone suspected of being a security risk. The UN has warned France against extending these emergency powers, cautioning their 'excessive and disproportionate restrictions' on fundamental human rights. The French government and security services, which have received a much-needed financial boost, face a challenging balance between security and liberty.

Military action in Iraq and Syria has received strong support from the French people, with many persuaded by the argument that France's terrorist threat should be met with a foreign war on terror. Yet others argue that France's home-grown 'third-generation jihadis' are the real threat and that a failure to assimilate France's large immigrant communities and build a more cohesive society have contributed to the current terror threat. It is a debate that France's politicians and society have yet to resolve.

Rob Murphy teaches politics at Wellington College and is a former British diplomat.

This resource is part of POLITICS REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to www.hoddereducation.co.uk/politicsreview