

# Jihadists' Grievance Narratives against France

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France ranks first in the EU as a provider of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq, and as the most-targeted European country in the context of the Syrian-Iraqi conflict. France has a longstanding history related to jihadism, correlated with multiple grievances from jihadist groups: it has been depicted as an enemy of Islam because of its foreign policy, its domestic policy towards religion, and, last but not least, its very essence. These grievances have been conveyed, like the baton of a relay race, from the first generations of North-African Islamist networks and the “elder brothers of jihad” to contemporary jihadists. The French jihadist media ecosystem has been instrumental in attracting a particularly large contemporary following. From the French perspective, a range of social, cultural, religious, economic, political, demographic drivers and identity factors converged to create a fertile ground for receptive radicals to emerge and break away from democratic values. Informed by these issues, this Policy Brief aims to identify avenues of further development for the French counter-terrorism strategic communication strategy. It concludes by stressing the need for this communication strategy to strive for positive, alternative messaging to re-create a continuum between individuals in the jihadist milieu and France as a nation state.

Keywords: France, Grievances, Jihadists, Alternative narratives, Propaganda, radicalization drivers, Republican Pact

## Introduction

*“Following the decision of the French government that prevents our righteous women from wearing the veil as required by Allah’s order, who constantly fights Islam and Muslims, who is present with the Crusaders in Afghanistan, France is today the flagship of disbelief and of Allah’s enemies, in attacking Islamic Mali. We call and incite Muslims worldwide and Muslims who live in France, as a Trojan horse, to accomplish their religious duty and strike French interests, institutions, soldiers as well as civilians on French soil and worldwide.”<sup>1</sup>*

This “Message to France on behalf on Mujahidin from Sham” was released in a video in French in January 2013.



Figure 1: “Message to France on behalf of Mujahideen from Sham” (January 2013)<sup>2</sup>

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, France has proved itself to be the “first provider” of the EU in terms of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), with a total of about 1,300 individuals having travelled to theatre and more than 2,300 people involved in the Syrian-Iraqi jihadist networks.<sup>3</sup> In the same time period, France has also been the most-targeted country of the Western world, with more than 64 attacks, plots, and attempts between March 2012 and August 2017.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, French returning foreign fighters are considerably more involved in terrorist attacks than returnees with other nationalities, with a percentage of 10.6 percent versus a global 3 percent in the whole Western world, between 2013 and 2016.<sup>5</sup> France has thus both provided large numbers of FTFs and been among jihadist groups’ most frequently selected targets.

<sup>1</sup> (“En conséquence de la décision du gouvernement français qui, non satisfait d’empêcher nos vertueuses sœurs de se voiler conformément à l’injonction d’Allah, et de combattre constamment l’islam et les Musulmans, aujourd’hui, outre sa présence aux côtés des croisés en Afghanistan, la France se place aujourd’hui en porte étendard de la mécréance et des ennemis d’Allah en attaquant le Mali islamique. Nous appelons et incitons, donc, en amère conséquence, les Musulmans dans le monde entier ainsi que ceux résidant en France tel un cheval de Troie, à accomplir leur devoir religieux qui est de frapper les intérêts français, ses institutions, ses militaires, de même que ses civils, sur le territoire national ainsi qu’à l’étranger.”) “Message à la France de la part de Mudjahidines du pays du Sham” (January 2013) <http://memri.fr/2013/01/24/internet-un-djihadiste-menace-les-civils-francais-sur-le-territoire-francais/>

<sup>2</sup> Middle East Media Research Institute TV Monitor Project “Jihadist Calls on Muslims in France to Become a ‘Trojan Horse’ and Attack French Civilians,” (January 2013) <https://www.memri.org/tv/jihadist-calls-muslims-france-become-trojan-horse-and-attack-french-civilians>

<sup>3</sup> Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, “European Jihad Watch #4”, (Paris, Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, November 2017) <http://cat-int.org/index.php/2017/11/30/european-jihad-watch-112017/?lang=en>

<sup>4</sup> Canelle Beuze, “Terrorist Attacks, Failed Attacks and Plots in the West linked to the Syrian-Iraqi Context (2013-2016)”, (Paris, Center for the Analysis of Terrorism, March 2017) 7, (<http://cat-int.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Terrorist-attacks-Report-2013-2016.pdf>) and Gérard. Collomb (French Minister of Interior) - Declaration in the French National Assembly (September 25, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Beuze, “Terrorist Attacks”, 3. This percentage of 10.6% is limited to the terrorist attacks between 2013 and 2016 in the context of the Syrian-Iraqi context, making French returnees the most active in external plotting, ranking second after Belgium returnees (13.5%). Nevertheless, this last figure is biased by the fact that the terrorists who conducted the March 2016 Brussels attacks were initially targeting France. See “Les terroristes de Bruxelles voulaient frapper Paris

The purpose of this Policy Brief is to analyse the correlation between official jihadist narratives against France – currently mainly issued by Islamic State (ISIS) or al-Qaeda-linked groups – and the terrorist attacks that transpired these past few years in the streets of Montauban, Toulouse, Paris, Magnanville, Nice, Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, and Marseille – to name only a few. What are the “official” jihadists’ grievances against France? How have they been conveyed through the last decades, and transmitted, like the baton of a relay race, from the first generations of North-African Islamist networks, the “elder brothers” of jihad? How have they, more recently, been magnified and readapted by the powerful French jihadist media ecosystem? And what other factors contributed to provide receptive and responsive individuals to this propaganda? In light of these factors and mechanisms, this Policy Brief aims to identify what policy makers could implement to improve and expand their counter-terrorism strategic communication.

## Jihadists’ long list of grievances against France

France has a longstanding history with jihadism and, as suggested in the statement mentioned above, has been subject to fierce and recurrent criticism on perceived evidence of its hostility towards Islam. This criticism is both a way to recruit among French Muslim youth, by instrumentalizing local grievances, and a way to incite against France. These grievances are part of jihadists’ victimization scheme, building blocks in a narrative of humiliation that is used to legitimize a slide from defensive to offensive jihad.

Similar to other countries participating in the international coalition against ISIS, jihadists’ legitimation of recent attacks against France include the *immediate reprisal narrative*, namely that the attacks avenge France’s military involvement in the coalition.<sup>6</sup> As early as January 2015, ISIS released a video featuring French fighters legitimizing the Paris attacks conducted a few days earlier because the French “do everything to destroy the Khilafah”.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2: “Report on the blessed operations of France” (Wilayat al-Raqqah - January 2015) (author’s archives, video originally downloaded from ISIS-linked social media)

Nevertheless, the will to strike France long precedes its involvement in the international Coalition in Iraq and Syria, and the grievances expressed have deeper and older roots.<sup>8</sup>

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avec des voitures piégées” L’Express (December 2016) [https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/les-terroristes-de-bruxelles-voulaient-frapper-paris-avec-des-voitures-piegees\\_1857215.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/les-terroristes-de-bruxelles-voulaient-frapper-paris-avec-des-voitures-piegees_1857215.html)

<sup>6</sup> “(...) in response to calls to target coalition countries”, read attack claims released by ISIS, such as the one following the Marseille attack on October 1, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> “Reportage à propos des opérations bénies de France”, (Wilayat al-Raqqah, January 2015)

<sup>8</sup> Operation Chammal, France’s military involvement was launched in September 2014 in Iraq and September 2015 in Syria

They cover three main areas: France's international stance vis-a-vis Muslim countries and jihadist fronts, France's perceived hostility towards Islam domestically and last but not least, the country's very DNA, which has made jihadists label it the "flagship of disbelief", as quoted in the January 2013 video mentioned above. Over the following pages, each of these aspects of jihadists' grievance narratives against France will be analysed.

## France's past and current foreign policy

France's military involvement in Iraq and Syria, which earned it the qualification of being the "small zealous France in the International coalition against the Caliphate", only comes as the latest layer of grievances and accusations regarding its perceived longstanding hostile actions in Muslim countries.<sup>9</sup> From a political and military standpoint, in addition to being an ally and supporter of the United States and Israel,<sup>10</sup> France has been criticized for its various counter-jihadist operations, be it in coalitions or in cooperation with Muslim regimes hostile to Islamist and jihadists movements. Its military involvement in Afghanistan, the participation of French peacekeepers in the UNIFIL force in Lebanon in 2006,<sup>11</sup> perceived as a US-Israeli operation to support Israel's position in the area, are but a few examples of actions quoted by jihadist leaders as warranting retaliation.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 3: "Message from the Frontlines"(as-Sahab Media, September 2017) (author's archives, video originally downloaded from al-Qaeda-linked social media)

But beyond France's military involvement in international coalitions, grievances are, above all, linked to the French presence and influence in Muslim countries. First, France is accused of maintaining close relations with so-called apostate regimes (mostly those of former colonies), and influencing them politically. France is considered arrogant and is sharply criticized for its perceived tendency to regard its former colonies as its backyard.<sup>13</sup> These grievances resurface regularly and go back several decades. The Algerian GIA (Armed Islamic Group), responsible for the 1994 Air France Flight 8969 hijacking and the 1995 Paris metro and train bombings, called on France to cease all

<sup>9</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 7 (December 2015), 38. This issue was mostly dedicated to the Paris attacks of November 2015. Founded in 2014, Dar al-Islam (land of Islam) was a French language magazine. Ten issues have been released until October 2016 when it was supplanted by Rumiya, multilingual magazine.

<sup>10</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 10 (August 2016), 21

<sup>11</sup> Resolution 1701 of 2006 aiming to end the Israeli-Lebanese conflict of 2006 between Israel and the Hezbollah

<sup>12</sup> "Al-Qaïda vise aussi la France", *Libération* (September 2006) [http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2006/09/14/al-qaeda-vise-aussi-la-france\\_5071](http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2006/09/14/al-qaeda-vise-aussi-la-france_5071)

<sup>13</sup> "They Ask You ... What Are Their Initiatives Breeding?", Statement released December 20, 2017 on the al-Qaeda linked Africa Muslima Telegram channel, criticizing the G5 Sahel force

support to the Algerian regime, be it military, political, economic or social.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the threats against France broadcast from London by GIA member Mustapha Kamel, *aka* Abu Hamza, for having interfered in Algerian political issues and supported the military junta repressing their militant brothers, also designate France a legitimate target for deadly action.<sup>15</sup>

Beside its political support to so-called apostate regimes, France is also regularly blamed for helping these regimes loot the natural resources of Muslim lands for its own economic interest, be it the exploitation of uranium mines in Niger,<sup>16</sup> or, more generally, the seizure of lands or properties of the Muslims and the plunder of their wealth.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in Africa, France is seen as the spearhead against jihadist groups operating in the Sahel and Sahara, similarly “as America in other regions of the world”.<sup>18</sup> This is due to its military interventions in these areas in order to protect its economic assets, its expatriates, and to support its allies,<sup>19</sup> seen by jihadist groups as puppets and proxies of the West in the fight against the Mujahideen.<sup>20</sup> In short, France’s decades-long support for ‘apostate’ regimes and the country’s actions against Islamist or jihadist groups were central to jihadists’ foreign-policy based grievances well before France launched Operation Chammal and engaged in military action against ISIS.

Moreover, France’s colonial past is regularly recalled with bitterness, thus feeding grievances among the children of non-Western immigrants: “The same French [person] who had killed your forefathers, occupied your lands, and tortured your ancestors” stated al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in one of his latest audio releases, calling upon his followers to “teach [them] a lesson whose bitterness and pain they will narrate for generations to come”.<sup>21</sup> This colonial past has also endowed France with a proximity and understanding of the Muslim world that jihadists now accuse it of using against Muslims. France’s colonialism is seen as the patronage of a paternalist country, which led to an imposition of French education, culture and political institutions, effectively erasing the Muslim identity of those nations and their inhabitants.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, France’s historical role in redrawing borders in the Levant has been repeatedly highlighted in jihadist propaganda, in particular as a legitimization of one of ISIS’ first achievements, namely putting an end to Sykes-Picot and the neocolonial order imposed by the British and the French on the Arabic Provinces of the Ottoman Empire after World War 1.<sup>23</sup> ISIS’ ability to end the Sykes-Picot border was thus turned into a propaganda coup, allowing the organization to present itself as ending the injustices of colonial empires.<sup>24</sup>

In presenting foreign-policy based grievances against France, jihadist propaganda sometimes goes even further back in time. First of all, France is considered to be “the flag bearer of the Cross in the First Crusade”.<sup>25</sup> But more recently, France’s role as a Shia ally has also emerged in jihadist propaganda, referring to the naval support given by

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<sup>14</sup> “Le GIA menace de détruire la France. Les islamistes algériens lancent un ultimatum à Chirac”, *Libération* (December 1995) [http://www.liberation.fr/france-archive/1996/12/25/le-gia-menace-de-detruire-la-france-les-islamistes-algeriens-lancent-un-ultimatum-a-chirac\\_190173](http://www.liberation.fr/france-archive/1996/12/25/le-gia-menace-de-detruire-la-france-les-islamistes-algeriens-lancent-un-ultimatum-a-chirac_190173)

<sup>15</sup> “Un dirigeant du GIA menace la France depuis Londres”, *l’Humanité* (Octobre 1997) <https://www.humanite.fr/node/167444>

<sup>16</sup> Africa Muslima, “They Ask You ...”

<sup>17</sup> Inspire issue 17 (August 2017), 47, Interview with Sheikh Abdul-Wadood (Abdelmalek Droukdel), leader of AQIM. Founded in 2010, Inspire is an English-language magazine published by AQAP. 17 issues have been released up to now.

<sup>18</sup> Africa Muslima, “They Ask You ...”

<sup>19</sup> Operation Epervier in Chad (1986), operation Serval in Mali (2013), merged into Operation Barkhane (2014)

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Sheikh Abdul-Wadood (Abdelmalek Droukdel), leader of AQIM, Inspire issue 17 (August 2017), 47

<sup>21</sup> “Message from the frontlines”, *Sahab Media* - al-Qaeda Central - (September 2017)

<sup>22</sup> Inspire issue 17 (August 2017), 47, Interview with Sheikh Abdul-Wadood (Abdelmalek Droukdel), leader of AQIM

<sup>23</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 9 (April 2016), 61

<sup>24</sup> Pierre-Jean Luizard, “Le piège Daech”, *La Découverte* (2015), location 374-404

<sup>25</sup> Inspire issue 17 (April 2017), 25

France's King Louis XIV to Persian Sultan Shah Husayn, when he was overthrown in 1722.<sup>26</sup>

## A domestic policy perceived to be hostile towards Islam

Beside France's foreign policy both past and present, the country's stance on religion constitutes one of the most often-quoted grievances in official jihadist propaganda. This has strongly contributed to France being singled-out as a nation triggering resentment and deserving retaliation. France's stance on religious issues is indeed unique, and its specific secularity has been repeatedly interpreted as a sign of aggression towards Islam. French secularity was established in 1905 with a law enacting the separation of church and state. This was the result of a compromise between Catholic hard-liners and supporters of the eradication of the Church, thus allowing for religious freedom and separating public institutions from organized religion.

In 2004, following decades of debate on whether to allow the headscarf in government (public) schools, the French Government passed a law prohibiting conspicuous religious symbols in schools. Two weeks later, al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri stated that the decision by then French President Jacques Chirac was part of an ongoing campaign against Islam and reflected the "Crusaders' resentment towards Islam".<sup>27</sup> Similar sentiments were echoed by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in May 2005 and in 2009 by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who called France the "mother of all evils" and threatened retaliation for its "fierce war on our daughters who wore Hijab".<sup>28</sup> These statements, joined by others expressing similar criticism, have been widely relayed and have fed into the notion that France harboured "tremendous revulsion for Islam itself".<sup>29</sup>

Despite such critiques, an additional law banning face coverings was passed in September 2010. Supporters argued that face recognition was necessary for security reasons as well as in furtherance of the struggle against the discrimination of women. In a recording released in October 2010, Osama bin Laden accused the French of having banned "free women from wearing the burqa".<sup>30</sup> Since then, this theme has remained one of the most prominent and recurrent grievances against France, with numerous mentions in al-Qaeda or ISIS-linked publications on France's "secularist aggression".<sup>31</sup> Recent propaganda contents have highlighted France's "laicity charter", referring to a document published in 2013 which aims to reassert the country's secular values, in government schools in particular, as opposing the laws of Islam ("Nowadays, the laicity charter is taught at school. (...) these values are nothing but a tissue of lies and disbeliefs to the Muslims, that Allah ordered to fight and reject."), which positioned the French educative system as conflicting with Islam.<sup>32</sup>

France is also accused by jihadist groups of promoting corrupted Muslim clerics and a deviant form of Islam, not only because of their acceptance of democratic values, but above all because of their organization in an official body, the CFCM (French Council for

<sup>26</sup> Dabiq issue 13 (January 2016), 12. Dabiq was a magazine published by ISIS in Arabic, English, German and French, founded in July 2014, and supplanted by Rumyah at the end of 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Dumond Julien, "Al-Qaïda menace à nouveau la France", *Le Parisien*, (February 2004) <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/al-qaïda-menace-a-nouveau-la-france-25-02-2004-2004782930.php>

<sup>28</sup> "France, mother of all evils", audio communiqué by Sheikh Abu Musab Abdul-Wadood (Abdelmalek Droukdel), AQIM's leader (June 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Inspire magazine issue 1 (AQAP, July 2010), 7

<sup>30</sup> Usama bin-Laden, al-Jazeera audio release (September 2010) <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/10/27/france.bin.laden/index.html>

<sup>31</sup> Inspire magazine issue 14 (September 2015), 16

<sup>32</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 7 (December 2015), 13

the Muslim Faith), acting as an interlocutor with the State in the regulation of Muslim religious activities.<sup>33</sup> A “made in France” Islam, the “Islam of Place Beauvau [Ministry of the Interior]” are the terms used to discredit these Islamic representatives.<sup>34</sup> The CFCM-affiliated Imams are frequently labelled Imams of “distraction”, “apostasy” and “disbelief”<sup>35</sup>, and the organization and its representatives are essentially portrayed as sell-outs.<sup>36</sup> Several of them were sentenced to death in jihadist propaganda on the ground of supporting democracy, the right to vote, and for challenging Islamic shariah law.<sup>37</sup>

## France’s essence perceived as a threat to Islam

On top of all this, France is targeted by jihadists for its very essence, for being the so-called “flagship of disbelief”. Like other Western countries, its *modus vivendi* is qualified as perverse (“fornication and homosexuality being banalized”),<sup>38</sup> but France is also singled out for its personification in the figure of Marianne, who is stigmatized as an idol and the French as idol worshippers.<sup>39</sup> Consider, for instance, this sentence from the ISIS claim for the 13 November 2015 attack, which refers to “hundreds of idol worshippers having been targeted in a celebration of perversity”.<sup>40</sup>



Figure 4: “The idol Marianne”, poster released in several Telegram channels ahead of the French 2017 presidential elections (author’s archives, picture originally downloaded from jihadists’ social media)

Although blasphemy does not exist in French legislation, unlike some other countries in the European Union, believers can still file suit on grounds of “antireligious statements”. Even so, jihadists regard France as being more permissive towards blasphemy than other countries. This might be attributed to France’s specific heritage, notably in the form of a libertarian and anticlerical satirical press. The latter, particularly virulent against Christianity in the years preceding the 1905 law on secularity (Figure 5) and aftermath of

<sup>33</sup> The CFCM (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman) is a natural elected body created in 2003 by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Deprived of legal prerogatives, he nonetheless plays a *de facto* representative role of French Muslims before the French government.

<sup>34</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 8 (February 2016), 8

<sup>35</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 6 (September 2015), Dar al-Islam # 8 (February 2016).

<sup>36</sup> “Des Imâms qui égarent” (Imams who mislead), recording released by ISIS Radio al-Bayan (August 2017)

<sup>37</sup> Tarek Oubrou, Rector of the Bordeaux mosque, was sentenced to death by ISIS for his support of democracy and his approval of Charlie Hebdo’s caricatures: Dar al-Islam issue 9 (May 2016), 53.

Rachid Abu Hudeyfa, Imam of Brest, was sentenced to death for his support to the election and the democratic system and for his invocation to the King of Morocco: Dar al-Islam issue 10 (August 2016), 47.

<sup>38</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 7, 15

<sup>39</sup> Picture released in May 2017 in several French jihadist Telegram channels, days before the French presidential elections, depicting Marianne as an idol.

<sup>40</sup> ISIS claim for the 13 November 2015 attacks, 14 November 2015

the Dreyfus affair,<sup>41</sup> has been used as a political and antireligious weapon since the French Revolution and the subsequent de-Christianisation. This heritage contrasts with a satirical press in the UK or the United States which has usually been more respectful of religion.<sup>42</sup> This corrosive nonconformity and provocative disrespect are repeatedly quoted by jihadist propaganda: “France (...) never stopped insulting and mocking the prophet Muhammad through caricatures and attacking Islam in heinous movies”.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 5: Front page of anticlerical paper “La Lanterne”: Here is the enemy!” 1902, <https://www.histoire-image.org/etudes/mouvement-anticlerical-veille-1905>

Beyond that, France’s history as the symbol of the nation state has also been brought to the fore. France’s very centralized Jacobinist model, opposed to regionalism and perceived as hostile to communities or to the unification of the “Ummah Nation”, has sparked anger: “We want to re-establish the prophetic State, and that of the four well-guided Califs, not the Nation-State of Robespierre, of Napoleon, or Ernest Renan”.<sup>44</sup>

Having outlined jihadists’ main grievances with France, the next sections consider how these grievances played a role in inspiring and activating thousands of French foreign terrorist fighters. How have these grievances been conveyed, how did they take root among young French Muslims to such an extensive degree and, possibly, with more ease than in some other European countries?

## France responsiveness to jihadist propaganda

The French foreign fighter contingent did not arise spontaneously. If the recent and easily accessible jihadist propaganda, including a significant amount of content in French, has easily reached new potential targets, this should be viewed as part of a longer trend.

<sup>41</sup> Vincent Doumerc, “Le mouvement anticlérical à la veille de 1905”, *L’histoire par l’image* (February 2007) <https://www.histoire-image.org/etudes/mouvement-anticlerical-veille-1905>

<sup>42</sup> Guillaume Doizy, expert of the history of press drawings and author of “A bas la Calotte ! La caricature anticléricale”, quoted by G. Varela in “La presse satirique française, une arme politique héritée de la Révolution”, *20 Minutes* (January 2015) <https://www.20minutes.fr/medias/1513135-20150108-presse-satirique-francaise-arme-politique-heritee-revolution>

<sup>43</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 10 (August 2016), 21

<sup>44</sup> Dar al-Islam issue 3 (April 2015), 14



Indeed, if the latest layer of propaganda has influenced or inspired a large number of young people, this is due at least in part to the fact that many of them had already been exposed to radical beliefs, through the transmission of jihadist or radical Islamist views passed down from “elder brothers”.

The establishment of a jihadist milieu in France occurred in a succession of waves, with individuals being the transmission belts between generations, sometimes over more than 20 years, dating back to the rise of the Algerian FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) in 1989.<sup>45</sup> The individuals acting as transmission belts between generations of French jihadists often fought in jihadist battle zones, participated in radical Islamist groups or engaged in terrorism, making them authority figures eminently suited to perpetuating their extremist views and fostering engagement with jihadism from a younger generation of militants. Initially focused on providing support to Algerian Islamist groups, their involvement slid over the years towards various jihadist fronts (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq) and the global jihad.

This is exemplified by the case of Djamel Beghal. He was 22 when he arrived in France in 1987 from Algeria. Beghal became radicalized after the crackdown against the FIS in Algeria and got involved in the GIA before rallying to the global jihad and traveling to the Afghan training camps in 2000. In 2005, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for the crime of terrorist conspiracy. During his imprisonment,<sup>46</sup> he met Cherif Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly, who would go on to participate in the January 2015 Paris attacks (Charlie Hebdo, Montrouge, HyperCasher).<sup>47</sup> Beghal’s prestige, as a former trainee in an al-Qaeda camp and an acquaintance of prominent jihadist figures, fascinated the future assailants, and Beghal played the role of mentor to them. When he was released from jail to full house arrest in the Cantal region, Kouachi and Coulibaly visited him regularly.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, a 2013 document from the Paris prosecutor’s office named the two men as “Djamel Beghal’s students”.<sup>49</sup>

Farid Melouk is another example of an iconic figure in the French jihadist scene with a trans-generational influence. Melouk rose from the Algerian networks in 1992 and ultimately joined ISIS ranks in Syria. His hatred of France was shaped in Bosnia, where he saw the country’s involvement as having a treacherous influence.<sup>50</sup> Like other figures of the jihadist constellation, Melouk was a veteran of the first generation of jihadists and “transmitted his experience to the young, far from the Algerian history, but galvanized by the rise of global jihad and the internet”.<sup>51</sup>

A second factor of particular relevance for explaining the high degree to which jihadist propaganda has been able to resonate with young French citizens, is the emergence of key French media leaders within the jihadist milieu. Often acting as middlemen, these individuals have translated, relayed and adapted official jihadist narratives to make them easily accessible and able to resonate with local circumstances. Through this adaptation, these narratives have been fed into local situations and grievances, thus exacerbating but also framing personal experiences and discontent. This online propaganda relied on an active French jihadist media ecosystem consisting of French jihadist websites, ranging

<sup>45</sup> See Romain Caillet, Pierre Puchot, “Le combat vous a été prescrit”, *Stock* (October 2017)

<sup>46</sup> On radicalization and recruitment in prison, see also Farhad Khosrokhavar “L’Islam dans les prisons”, *Balland* (2004) and “Quand al-Qaïda parle: témoignages derrière les barreaux”, *Grasset*, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Cherif Kouachi was jailed for his participation in the Buttes-Chaumont jihadist network, which would help jihadist recruits to reach al-Qaeda in Iraq, whereas Amedy Coulibaly was sentenced for common law crimes.

<sup>48</sup> Beghal was then sentenced again for his prison break project of Smain Ait Ali Belkacen, a former GIA militant.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Follorou, Simon Piel, Suc Matthieu “Djamel Beghal, maître à penser du terrorisme”, *Le Monde*, (January 2015)

<sup>50</sup> Caillet, Puchot, “Le combat”, location 1090

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, location 1103

from the sites Minbar-SOS or Ribaath.org in the early 2000s, to jihadist forums, such as Ansar al-Haqq that attracted thousands of French radicals since 2006, to, nowadays, the dozens of French Telegram channels, posting or relaying hundreds of messages in French every day.<sup>52</sup>

Having reviewed key aspects on the 'supply-side' of French jihadist propaganda, what are some of the important elements at the other end of the spectrum? What makes thousands of French youngsters receptive and permeable to an ideology that instigates them break away from society and become involved in political violence and terrorism?

## Snapshots of French jihadists

There is little point in trying to depict a *typical* jihadist profile. Nonetheless, a note by the French Co-ordination Unit of the Fight against Terrorism (UCLAT) outlines sociological trends and constants for a sample of 265 French jihadists killed in Syria and Iraq: most of these individuals are young (average of 28 years old when killed), 52 percent are of immigrant descent, 48 percent of them have a criminal past and 56 percent came from "priority neighbourhoods" with particularly pronounced socio-economic issues.<sup>53</sup>

These individuals mostly belong to the second or third generation of immigrants, whose recent history saw a much stronger assertion of their Islamic identity coming to the fore. Many factors converged to feed this trend. Among the most prominent were the successive failures of the population with immigrant descent to reach full political representation and to structure their claims. Two salient events and their aftermaths have a symbolic significance and must be stressed. The first one is the March for Equality and against Racism (the "Marche des Beurs"), that took place in 1983, marking the first mobilization of this population to invoke its rights and to protest the first political achievements of the National Front. For multiple reasons, including a discrepancy with the then-incumbent socialist party and internal conflicts in the movement, the desired political recognition, appropriated by the anti-racist association "SOS Racisme", was not achieved at the national level.<sup>54</sup>

The second event, 22 years later, were the 2005 French riots - triggered by the death of two teenagers and amplified by the throwing of a tear gas grenade which landed in front of a mosque, the riots failed to canalize the mobilization into a political project, despite the new generation's full access to citizenship.<sup>55</sup> This lack of political representation was one of the factors that gave way to other types of extremisms, in particular the far right and radical Islam. This rise was also favoured by the decline of a class-belonging feeling, along with the declining influence of Unions and the communist party, which could formerly erase racial and religious differences up to a certain extent. Besides, the failure of Islamic bodies to represent French Muslims like the UOIF (Union of the Islamic Organizations of France) - the enactment of the 2004 law prohibiting the veil in schools being a major setback for the UOIF, paved the way for their subsequent supersession by

<sup>52</sup> On the development of online jihad, see Marc Hecker "Web social et djihadisme", *Institut Français des Relations Internationales* (June 2015) <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/enotes/focus-strategique/web-social-djihadisme-diagnostic-aux-remedes>

<sup>53</sup> William Molinie "Quels sont les profils de 265 djihadistes français tués en Irak et en Syrie", *LCI* (September 2017) <https://www.lci.fr/international/info-lci-quels-sont-les-profils-de-265-djihadistes-francais-daech-tues-en-syrie-2063073.html>

<sup>54</sup> Sylvia Zappi, "La Marche des Beurs veut entrer dans l'histoire de France", *Le Monde* (October 2013) [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2013/10/11/la-marche-des-beurs-veut-entrer-dans-l-histoire-de-france\\_3494031\\_3224.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2013/10/11/la-marche-des-beurs-veut-entrer-dans-l-histoire-de-france_3494031_3224.html)

<sup>55</sup> Gilles Kepel "Terreur dans l'Hexagone", *Gallimard* (December 2015), 15-23

the activism of groups linked to diverse forms of radical Islam, advocating a break with the Western model of society.<sup>56</sup>

In addition, the economic crisis of 2008 significantly raised unemployment rates, especially the long term one, and particularly affected vulnerable communities, further increasing inequalities.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the rhetoric of the French far right began to instrumentalize secularity to assert that Muslim communities can't belong to the nation.<sup>58</sup> All these factors contributed to feelings of exclusion among some young people (in the Muslim community but also well beyond, as proved by the significant percentage of converts) and a tendency to think in "us" versus "them" terms.<sup>59</sup>

These perceptions of exclusion and in-group versus out-group thinking appear to begin at an early age. In 2004, a report ordered by the Minister of Education on signs of religious belonging at school already raised the alarm. "The collective identity, that before referred to a community of origin, real or fictitious, (...) this 'ethnicization' of relationships seems to morph towards the feeling of belonging to the universal 'Muslim Nation', distinct and opposed to the French Nation. Its heroes are Palestinian teenagers (...) and jihadist leaders".<sup>60</sup> Such views became particularly tangible among some youth in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack. Some youngsters objected to the minute of silence in schools held in the memory of the victims, thus showing a refusal to adhere to the "Je Suis Charlie" tagline because they did not recognize themselves in the periodical's corrosive antireligious humour and perceived the caricatures as offensive towards Islam.<sup>61</sup>

An April 2017 survey that included in-depth interviews with jailed French jihadists helps refine our understanding of how young French people can become radicalized (Figure 6). A kaleidoscope of 35 radicalization drivers were identified and split into four categories: sociological factors, cognitive factors, the process of involvement and psychological factors.<sup>62</sup> Several trends emerged from these results (see graphic below): the overrepresentation of identity and "roots" issues, the absence of stable social foothold with a perspective, links to individuals or groups who were already radicalized, and perceived humiliation. The significance of ideology and religious texts coupled with discontent regarding Islamic representative bodies can be read as both a cause and a consequence of radical engagement.

<sup>56</sup> Chahla Beski-Chafiq, Jeanne Birmant, Hichem Benmerzoug, Akim Taibi, Ariane Goignard " Jeunes et radicalisation islamiste : parcours, facteurs et acteurs influents – Lille, France 2008-2009", (Aarhus, *Center for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation*, April 2010), 18-19

<https://f.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/2725/files/2016/04/Jeunes-et-radicalisation-islamiste.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques, "Portrait social de la France" (Paris, *INSEE*, 2014), 41

<https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1288529>

<sup>58</sup> Kepel "Terreur", 86-87

<sup>59</sup> This opposition between "we" and "you" was present during Abdelkader Merah's trial in his own words. Merah is charged with being an accomplice of Mohamed Merah, who assassinated three French soldiers and 4 people in a Jewish school, including 3 children, in March 2012. "Etranges confessions d'Abdelkader Merah", *La Dépêche* (October 2017) <https://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2017/10/04/2658486-etrange-confessions-d-abdelkader-merah.html>

<sup>60</sup> "L'identité collective, qui se réfère souvent hier chez les élèves à une communauté d'origine, réelle ou imaginaire (...) «l'ethnicisation» des rapports entre les jeunes, semble se transformer de nos jours en un sentiment d'appartenance assez partagé à une «nation musulmane», universelle, distincte et opposée à la nation française. Ses héros sont à la fois les adolescents palestiniens (...) et les chefs « djihadistes »" Jean-Pierre Obin, "Les signes d'appartenance religieuse dans les établissements scolaires", *French Ministry of Education* (June 2004), 23 <http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/02/6/6026.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> "Charlie Hebdo : 200 incidents dans les écoles, 40 signalés à la police", *Le Parisien* (Janvier 2015) <http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/charlie-hebdo-200-incidents-dans-les-ecoles-40-signalés-a-la-police-14-01-2015-4445479.php>

<sup>62</sup> Crettiez Xavier, Sèze Romain, Ainine Bilel, Lindemann Thomas, "Saisir les mécanismes de la radicalisation violente", *Institut National des Hautes Etudes de la sécurité et de la Justice, Mission de recherche droit et justice, CESDIP* (Avril 2017) [http://www.gip-recherche-justice.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Rapport-radicalisation\\_INHESJ\\_CESDIP\\_GIP-Justice\\_2017.pdf](http://www.gip-recherche-justice.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Rapport-radicalisation_INHESJ_CESDIP_GIP-Justice_2017.pdf)

## A cognitive and emotional appropriation of jihadist narratives

If some of these existing characteristics have naturally lead towards an extremist ideology, jihadist propaganda has also exploited them to attract, arouse empathy and recruit. Identity issues appear to be among the most significant drivers of radicalization. First, the belonging to a double culture stands out regularly among French jihadist of immigrant descent, eventually finding in radical Islam a strong identity marker.<sup>63</sup> Being “born between two cultures”, called “children of immigrants in France” and “children of abroad in Morocco”, some of them feel they belong to “an uprooted generation without reference”, and find a substitute identity in Islam, “for Islam is without borders”.<sup>64</sup>

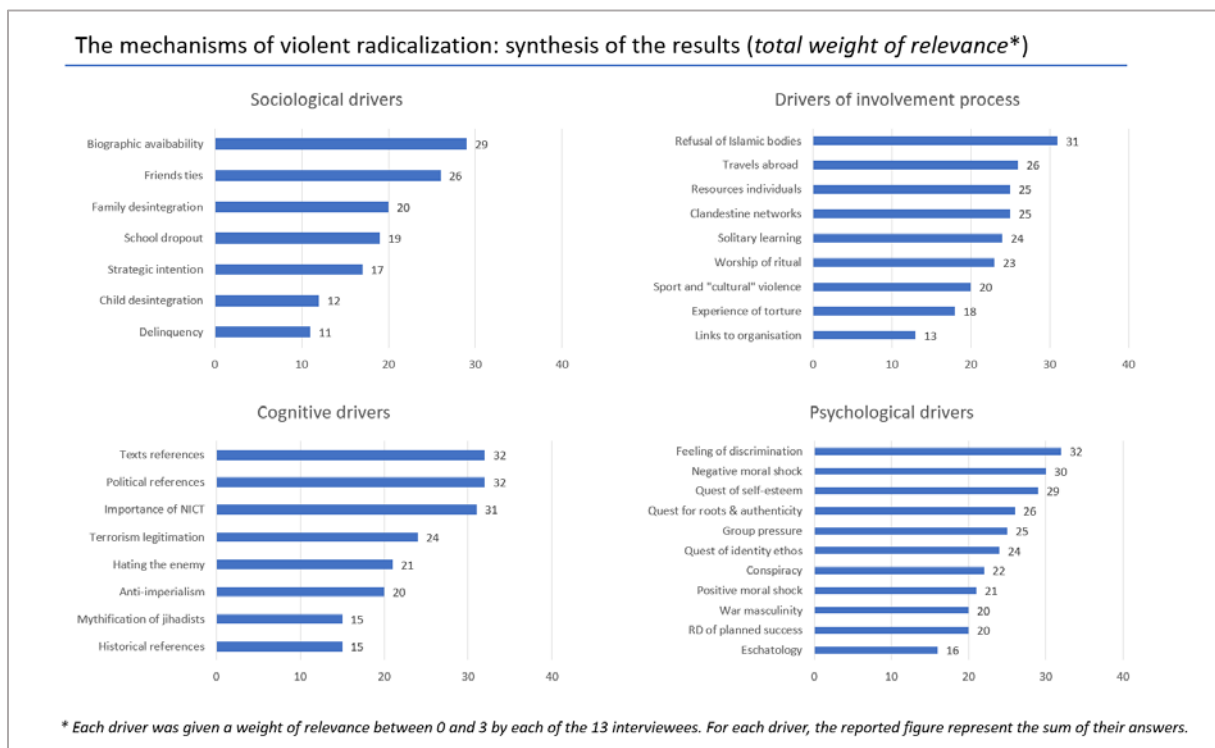


Figure 6 Numbers indicate weight of relevance per driver. Source: Crettiez, Sèze, Bilel, Lindemann “Saisir les mécanismes”, 85-86

Second, some youngsters have difficulties in seeing a continuum and filiation with their parents or grand-parents, who are accused by their more radical cohorts of having abandoned religion: “[My parents wanted to] follow the path: get a diploma and go work. But they were ignorant and I taught them religion (...). They made a choice (...), decided to earn money. (...) They were only thinking about work and religion went away”.<sup>65</sup> “Children think their parents have put themselves down, that their Islam was not proud enough, not undertaken, just to satisfy the French. They think their parents swapped their religion for a job. As a consequence, they endorse identity Islam, and claim it, with pride. They say: this time of compromise is over, we have to display this belonging”, explains Mourad Benchellali<sup>66</sup>, who travelled to Afghanistan in June 2001

<sup>63</sup> The significance of identity issues among French jihadist is also revealed by the overrepresentation of jihadists originating from French overseas departments.

<sup>64</sup> David Thomson, “Les Français djihadistes”, *les Arènes* (2014), location 222

<sup>65</sup> Crettiez, Sèze, Bilel, Lindemann “Saisir les mécanismes”, 38

<sup>66</sup> Interview with author, 22 September 2017

and spent two months in a training camp and who is now involved in disengagement programs.<sup>67</sup>

Another pervasive phenomenon highlighted in the survey is the lack of perspective in terms of jobs or career opportunities, the inability to acquire a foothold in the larger French society. This can be considered as a form of uncertainty, which can be an important driver of extremism.<sup>68</sup> “My greatest issue, in France, is that I cannot find a job because I wear a beard”, declared Gregory Boudrioua, who tried to join al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2012.<sup>69</sup> “Jihad is self-defense”, said Mehdi Hammami, who was arrested at the same time.<sup>70</sup> This feeling no less affects women, at the heart of the controversy on the veil. “In France, I can’t work. I’m rejected when I wear the veil, although I was born here. In the UK, it’s different, veiled women can work, even with a burqa”, protested Aicha, of Saïd and Cherif Kouachi’s sisters.<sup>71</sup>

## The exploitation of global and local grievances

Jihadist groups frequently exploit this perceived resonance between the global humiliation of Muslims and the lived experiences of men like Boudrioua and Hammami. This allows them to link “distant” and more general official narratives to the experiences of potential recruits in France and elsewhere.

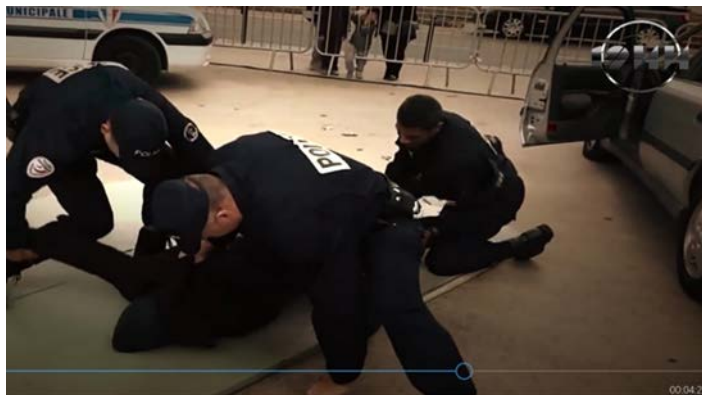


Figure 7 : “Il était une fois Charlie” (19HH, July 2017) (author’s archives, picture originally downloaded from jihadists’ social media)

Indeed, what (potential) recruits take from these global jihadist narratives are mostly those elements that can be linked to their subjective situations, to aspects of their own lives, histories or filiation. This appropriation process is enhanced by two important aspects jihadist propaganda: the promotion of empathy and identification with French “successful” jihadists, and the instrumentalization of local grievances for recruitment purposes.

French jihadists have appeared regularly on ISIS media, either as individuals who climbed the organization’s hierarchy, as fighters, or as former terrorists in various eulogies. A recent example is that of Macreme Abrougui, whose posthumous eulogy was published in issue 11 of Rumiya magazine in July 2017. The piece details his life in France as a

<sup>67</sup> Mourad Benchellali was then captured by Pakistanis, jailed for two weeks in Kandahar before being handed to US forces, sent to Guantanamo for 30 months and jailed in France for 18 months. Now involved in disengagement programs, Mourad Benchellali wrote with Antoine Audouard “Le piège de l’aventure”, *Robert Laffont* (September 2016)

<sup>68</sup> Haroro Ingram, “The Charismatic leadership phenomenon in radical and militant Islamism”, *Ashgate* (2013)

<sup>69</sup> Court sentencing decision of Mehdi Hammami, Gregory Boudrioua and Mohamed el-Hafiani (November 2014), 16

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>71</sup> Matthieu Suc “Femmes de djihadistes”, *Fayard* (May 2016), location 671-674

delinquent, and his exploits as a fighter for ISIS. The laudatory article describing his rise within ISIS naturally aims at arousing positive and inspiring feelings of esteem and identification with his destiny.<sup>72</sup>

The exploitation of local grievances is frequent and recurring. For instance, the perception among some Muslims that the French justice system is prejudiced against them has been exploited in a recent video by Omar Omsen. Omsen, an active propagandist who encouraged dozens of young people in Nice to emigrate to Syria where his Brigade Firqatul Ghuraba fought along al-Qaeda-linked groups, drew a parallel between the impunity with which Charlie Hebdo could insult the Prophet and the 18-months prison sentence for a young man having insulted former French President Nicolas Sarkozy.<sup>73</sup>

Rachid Kassim, who inspired numerous terrorist attacks in France in 2016 and 2017,<sup>74</sup> and directed the Magnanville and Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray attacks, presented himself as an expert of “proximity jihad”,<sup>75</sup> addressing directly his would-be recruits, linking them directly to the broader picture of Muslims humiliation worldwide. He used guilt and played on the promise of ego valorization. “You, who are so comfortable in the belly of the beast that devours your own Ummah!, he said, haranguing his audience in his posthumous testimony.<sup>76</sup> “Beside you, you have neighbours who pay taxes and finance the bombing of you Ummah (...) When [you] think [you] are sick of this humiliation... (...) You'll belong to the best people ever if you choose to do something like ‘that’”.<sup>77</sup>

The appropriation of these grievance narratives can sometimes be extremely intimate and deeply felt, a case in point being the profound rejection of French Muslim clerics and mosques: “Islamic places of worship are unholy. I even fear that my prayer is not valid for God. French mosques aren't mosques”.<sup>78</sup>

The mention of the Israeli-Arab conflict has also been used quite frequently by French middlemen propagandists, instrumentalizing the perceived injustice felt by young French Muslims in that context. This is an important point, as France is home to the largest Jewish and Arabic communities of the EU.<sup>79</sup> Omar Omsen often used conspiracy theories with a strong anti-Semitic character in his “19HH” videos,<sup>80</sup> and the fight against the Zionist lobby and the Jews was a recurring argument used by of Rachid Kassim. “The French people, criminal people (...) whose taxes finance the army of Tsahal [Israel Defense Forces] and the massacre of Palestinians”, Kassim said in a video released few

<sup>72</sup> On French jihadists in ISIS propaganda, see also Stéphane Mantoux “Les djihadistes français dans la propagande de l'Etat islamique”, *France soir* (October 2017) <http://www.francesoir.fr/politique-monde/les-djihadistes-francais-dans-la-propagande-de-etat-islamique-lexemple-de-macreme-abrougui-daech-abou-mujahid%20al-faransi-attentat-villejuif-sid-ahmed-glam-fabien-clain-djihad>

<sup>73</sup> Video 19HH “Il était une fois Charlie” broadcast on social media (July 2017)

<sup>74</sup> Rachid Kassim was killed in a drone strike in Iraq in February 2017. He inspired as many as 10 terror attacks in 2016 and 3 in 2017 in France. His name last appeared with foiled plot early September as a previous contact of one individual of the Villejuif bomb plot.

<sup>75</sup> “Ma stratégie, c'est d'inciter (...) au djihad de proximité”, posthumous testimony, The audio was released via social media on February 15, 2017

<sup>76</sup> “Vous qui êtes confortablement dans le ventre de la bête qui dévore votre Oummah », posthumous testimony

<sup>77</sup> “A côté de toi, t'as des voisins qui paient leurs impôts, qui financent les bombardements sur ta Oummah (...) par exemple, j'en ai marre de cette humiliation (...) tu feras partie des meilleurs êtres qui existent si tu choisis de faire une chose comme ça”, Rachid Kassim's Telegram channel Sabre de Lumière (August 2016)

<sup>78</sup> Thomson “Les Français djihadistes ”, location 189

<sup>79</sup> Simon Patrick, Tiberj Vincent, “Sécularisation ou regain religieux, la religiosité des immigrés et de leurs descendants, documents de travail n° 196”, *Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques*, 2013, 8 and “La population juive retrouve un niveau proche de celui avant l'holocauste”, *Le Figaro* (2015)

<sup>80</sup> Serie of videos released by Omar Omsen to recruit and spread propaganda. 19 is a reference to the 19 terrorists of 9/11, HH representing the twin towers.

days after the 2016 Nice run-over attack.<sup>81</sup> “The resentment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can nourish the slide from defensive to offensive jihad. This can be instrumentalized by recruiters” confirmed Mourad Benchellali, the former radical quoted earlier in this piece.<sup>82</sup> A significant anti-Semitic component is therefore common to some Islamist groups or cells which emerged in the early 2010s and constituted the matrix of current jihadism, such as Forsane Alizza, a radical Islamist group that issued calls to armed struggle,<sup>83</sup> the Bekhaled family in Lyon, who plotted an attack against Jewish institutions,<sup>84</sup> or the Cannes-Torcy cell, which was the hyphen between an Islamic cell and a jihadist network linked to the Syrian-Iraqi conflict.<sup>85</sup>

## An ambiguous feeling towards France sometimes remains

In spite of the resentment linked to the local French context, and a hatred towards France widely shared among French jihadists, some of them still have ambiguous feelings about their nation.

On the one side, they castigate the perceived impossibility to fully live and practice Islam in France. This rejection of compromise often triggers a desire to travel to places where there is an opportunity to practice Islam in accordance to one’s faith: Afghanistan in the past or Cairo in the middle of the 2000s, where the French Salafist milieu settled around the Faydou Rahman mosque<sup>86</sup> before being expelled in 2009.<sup>87</sup> This theme emerges repeatedly, for instance during elections periods, during which radicals issue calls not to vote. An example of such a message posted on social media reads: “The French system, due to the ideology on which it is based, is contradictory to Islam. Ideology, values, laws and way of life are opposed to the Islamic message”.<sup>88</sup> Young radicals also repeatedly refer to the moral decay of an “effeminate nation” (“French youth are too effeminate. They fear death, they fear war”),<sup>89</sup> as opposed to the glorification of fighters’ “masculinity”. France’s weaknesses also generate a form of contempt (“France is the jackpot [for terrorist attacks]. France is starting to be the scapegoat, because France is showing she’s afraid”)<sup>90</sup> of those who intend to have a revenge regarding their former perceived humiliation.

On the other side, however, some within the French jihadist scene still acknowledge France’s openness and its positive influence on other nations (“France’s ideas and

<sup>81</sup> “Les Français, people criminel, qui, sachant que ses impôts financent l’armée de Tsahal et le massacre de Palestiniens”, vidéo released by ISIS’ Wilayat Niniwa (July 2016)

<sup>82</sup> See footnote n.66

<sup>83</sup> “Forsane Alizza : neuf ans de prison pour le fondateur du groupuscule”, *le Figaro*, (July 2015) <http://premium.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/07/10/01016-20150710ARTFIG00190-forsane-alizza-neuf-ans-de-prison-pour-le-fondateur-du-groupuscule.php>

<sup>84</sup> “Lyon : un attentat a été déjoué de justesse en septembre”, *le Parisien* (January 2015) <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/lyon-un-attentat-a-ete-dejoue-de-justesse-20-01-2015-4462767.php>

<sup>85</sup> Elise Vincent “Le procès de la cellule “Cannes-Torcy”, matrice du djihadisme hexagonal”, *Le Monde* (April 2017) [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2017/04/20/le-proces-de-la-matrice-du-djihadisme-hexagonal\\_5114008\\_1653578.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2017/04/20/le-proces-de-la-matrice-du-djihadisme-hexagonal_5114008_1653578.html)

<sup>86</sup> Including individuals like Adrien Guihal or the Clain brothers, who would later become high ranking ISIS media operatives.

<sup>87</sup> Caillet, Puchot, “Le combat”, location 2265

<sup>88</sup> French Telegram jihadist-linked channel Fiqh al-Waqi, (April 2017)

<sup>89</sup> Crettiez, Sèze, Bilel, Lindemann “Saisir les mécanismes”, 116

<sup>90</sup> “La France c’est le jackpot (...) La France commence à devenir la tête de Turc, parce que la France, elle montre qu’elle a peur.” Mohamed Yassine Sakkam, during his imprisonment by Kurdish forces in Syria (interview released on January 21, 2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aC7AEBO24w>

culture are shining worldwide”).<sup>91</sup> Some also recall that France is the Nation of Human Rights, acknowledge the welcoming conditions of a tolerant country, whose institutions “took care” of young immigrants when needed, immigrants who are lucky to be able to live there.<sup>92</sup> “Being a French national is like a sign of peace towards France”,<sup>93</sup> allegedly asserted Farid Benyettou in the early 2000s, despite being a radical preacher involved in a network linked to Afghanistan and Pakistan and despite being the mentor of the Kouachi brothers.<sup>94</sup> France is even sometimes credited with a “moral superiority”, and some young convicts admit that their detention conditions would be harsher in Muslim countries.<sup>95</sup>

Subsequently, even if these testimonies might not be widely representative, French authorities could leverage and take advantage of, as much as possible of what remains of the emotional links that some French jihadists still have with their nation. Strategic communication could attempt to leverage such links in order to prevent radicalization at an early stage, or attempt to reinforce these links in order to increase the ability of potential radicals to be resilient against jihadist messaging.

## French counterterrorism strategic communication efforts

Counter-terrorism messaging campaigns in France have essentially been set up and implemented by the authorities at the central and, more recently, regional levels. These campaigns were initiated in 2014, and were then set up slowly after the stunning effect of January 2015 attacks, all the more so as there have been few efforts to learn from, let alone use, the experiences of other countries engaged in similar counter-messaging campaigns.

Until recently, the focus was mostly on ISIS. The first campaign, for instance, targeted the discrepancy between the “pull” factors of positive ISIS messages (“They tell you: sacrifice yourself with us, the cause is fair”) and the harsh reality of Syria and Iraq (“In fact: you will discover hell on earth and you will die alone, far from home”).<sup>96</sup> Later, in 2016, two other campaigns were launched which emphasized the steps towards radicalization.<sup>97</sup> These were less focused on counter-messaging, and instead showed emphasized freedom of choice by showing scenarios in which a potential recruit could, and should, step aside and withdraw from the “slippery slope” towards terrorism (picture below). Its hashtag was #ToujoursLeChoix (#AlwaysAChoice).

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<sup>91</sup> Crettiez, Sèze, Bilel, Lindemann “Saisir les mécanismes”, 115

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 115

<sup>93</sup> “Il avait ajouté que quand on avait la nationalité française, “c’était comme un signe de paix avec la France” Court sentencing decision of the “Buttes-Chaumont” network (May 2008), 28

<sup>94</sup> Farid Benyettou in now involved in disengagement associations.

<sup>95</sup> Crettiez, Sèze, Bilel, Lindemann “Saisir les mécanismes”, 115

<sup>96</sup> “Ils te disent...” (they tell you...), launched in January 2015

<sup>97</sup> #ToujoursLeChoix, (#AlwaysAChoice), launched in November 2016 and a campaign on testimonies of families and returnees (“Ils nous racontent” – They tell us).





Figure 8: The "They tell you..." #StopDjihadisme campaign (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ke3i9-7kkQM>)



Figure 9: The "Always a choice" #StopDjihadisme campaign (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COA7zRVMwLs>)

Despite their large reach (2 million views in less than a month for “they tell you”, and 8 citizens out of 10 having seen the “#ToujoursLeChoix campaign”), the French government’s expectations were not met for at least two reasons.<sup>98</sup> First, in the case of the “they tell you” campaign, French authorities were positioning themselves in a defensive stance against the offensive pull factors of ISIS’ narratives, directly countering its promises of an opulent Caliphate and military victories (coloured pictures) with the harsh reality (black-and-white pictures). In adopting a reversed Manichean view from that of ISIS, the authorities were fighting on the same ground, thus providing “oxygen” the opponent’s narratives by just mentioning them.<sup>99</sup> But above all, as official state communications, these campaigns were met with considerable scepticism the jihadist milieu, thus generating at best indifference and at times resentment and mockery. For instance, some jihadists responded to the “#AlwaysAChoice” campaign with the hashtag “#NoChoice”. Lastly, the campaigns were linked to the reporting body of radical behaviours, thus implying their association with law enforcement and generating suspicion on that account.

On the other hand, these campaigns did largely succeed in raising awareness within the general population, in particular among family members of potential recruits or individuals in the early stages of radicalization.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the lessons taken from these campaigns have led the French government to encourage non-state actors to become involved in these counter-messaging efforts, encompassing civil society to a greater degree.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Marylou Magal, “Stop-Djihadisme : quel bilan pour la campagne du gouvernement ?”, *Le Point* (January 2017) [http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/stopdjihadisme-quel-bilan-pour-la-campagne-du-gouvernement-24-01-2017-2099706\\_23.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/stopdjihadisme-quel-bilan-pour-la-campagne-du-gouvernement-24-01-2017-2099706_23.php)

<sup>99</sup> Alastair Reed “Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communication: Back to the Futures, lessons from Past and Present”, *International Center for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* (July 2017), 5 <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FINAL-Reed-CTSC-Back-to-the-Future.pdf>

<sup>100</sup> It should be mentioned that an information campaign is still currently carried on to alert and inform.

<sup>101</sup> Muriel Domenach (Head of the French government’s task force for the prevention of radicalization) “Contre la radicalisation, il faut se concentrer sur la prévention”, *Le Monde* (March 2017) [http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/03/15/muriel-domenach-contre-la-radicalisation-il-faut-se-concentrer-sur-la-prevention\\_5094655\\_3232.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/03/15/muriel-domenach-contre-la-radicalisation-il-faut-se-concentrer-sur-la-prevention_5094655_3232.html)

## Avenues for increased CT counter-messaging effectiveness

These initiatives, though, should be intensified, and several avenues could usefully be further investigated: increasing the involvement of civil society, segmenting the targeted audience, and remaining committed to a positive messaging campaign centred on the Republican Pact.

Civil society empowerment needs to be fostered and expanded pragmatically, both in top-down and bottom-up approaches. The inclusion of local communities, Muslim clerics or scholars and the private sector (communication agencies in particular) should be prioritized in a large and well-structured effort. Muslim clerics or scholars in particular should be emphasized, both as opinion leaders and spiritual guides. The possibility to use religious arguments should be further explored, not in a reconsideration of the principle of secularity, but to contextualize or re-contextualize sacred scriptures, with religious arguments challenging the perceived damage caused by laicity, enhancing the possibility to live an “appeased” Islam in France, and firmly rejecting the parallel between integration and apostasy.

Communication experts and agencies should equally be part of these messaging campaigns, bringing new blood, “out of the box” ideas, and expertise. This engagement would favour the diversity of final products, both in terms of styles and the messaging itself. Here another benefit of civil society engagement presents itself, as such bodies may be able to develop more audacious messages than an official government-stance would permit. This broadening of the CT counter-messaging task force would also result in shorter decision cycles and a lighter validation process than would be possible under purely state-run campaigns, increasing their efficiency.

Second, the target audience of these campaigns should be segmented according to specific criteria: gender, age, geographical location, fields of interest and activities. There is no one-size fits all solution when it comes to strategic communication. A message addressing members of a sports club is likely to differ in tone and content from one aimed at pious individuals. Efforts should furthermore be proportional to the segment’s significance in the radical population.

But most of all, while diversifying campaign producers, messages should remain focused on the future and provide a hopeful message, one geared towards overcoming the negative stereotypes that jihadist propaganda perpetuates about France. Campaigns should capitalize on the remaining links, attachments and positive opinions toward France. This allows them to stand alone and strive for their own goals, rather than embody a tit-for-tat reaction to jihadist campaigns, as such purely defensive messaging efforts appear to be of limited longer-term utility.<sup>102</sup> Messages should be avatars and facets of a positive and pro-active campaign that is farsighted, concerned with an audience still at an early stage of the radicalization process.

One of the main purposes of such a campaign should be to rebuild the broken Republican Pact by recreating a link, be it historical, social or psychological, between the individual experiences of those citizens most at risk of jihadist radicalization and their place in the inclusive history of the French nation state. To do so, messaging campaigns need to tell

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<sup>102</sup> Reed “CTSC: Back to the Future”, 5

their own true success stories: alternative narratives to those ‘successes’ emphasized by jihadist propaganda that have the ability to inspire by making new role-models emerge. Community leaders and personalities with high popularity could endorse that role. Last, but not least, “formers” can be an integral part of these campaigns as well, as the legitimacy and credibility afforded them by their own involvement in jihadism may make them especially effective interlocutors, able to deliver fact-based arguments. Some formers have already accepted such roles, despite the potential backlash from their old organization. These individuals’ reconciliation and re-affiliation processes with democracy could be further analysed and spotlighted.

## Conclusion

Testimonies have emerged that schools where the director had a strong personality, charisma and inspired respect, where rules were applied and openness promoted were less exposed to conflicts, even in deprived areas. “The internal rules are simple, clear, known to all and most of all enforced (...). No transaction on principle, no negotiations on rules (...) beliefs are firm”.<sup>103</sup> This approach should be leveraged on a much broader scale, with firm adherence to Republican principles and with intellectual respect towards audience and targets, who should regain confidence in the French meritocratic system. Considering the age of young radicals and the pervasive penetration of the phenomenon in French society, France should strive to produce messaging campaigns *en masse* around the steadfast belief that the sense of belonging to the French nation can coexist with other belongings and links, and perhaps transcend them.

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<sup>103</sup> “Un règlement intérieur simple, clair, connu de tous et surtout appliqué (...) mais jamais de transaction sur les principes ni de négociation sur les règles (...) [Une] clarté dans les convictions” Obin, “Les signes d’appartenance”, 34

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Laurence Bindner is the former Director of Development of the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism (CAT) in Paris. Her work covers analysis in terrorism financing, the links between terrorism financing and illicit trade and the quantification of jihadist networks in France and the EU. Laurence delivers expertise on the organization of jihadist online activity and the spread of content, provides knowledge on the evolution of jihadi narratives and rhetoric, and advises on the setting up of alter-narratives.

# Jihadists' Grievance Narratives against France

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