

The Tale of Two Countries:

Parallel Societies, the Clash of Civilizations, and Jihad in France

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ABSTRACT

Islamist terrorism in France has been especially pernicious, with several high-profile attacks over the past decade earning France the dubious distinction of being ranked #1 worldwide for the impact of terrorism among countries that are not currently experiencing severe internal conflict. Existing research has discovered that the single greatest determinant of a country's Sunni radicalization rate is whether it currently or previously listed French as a national language. This paper seeks to explain how the intricacies of contemporary French culture have generated a widespread and unrivaled sense of alienation among the nation's Muslim population, which creates a fertile recruiting ground for extremists. It argues that three primary factors are driving jihadism: militant secularism under *laïcité*, widespread poverty and discrimination in the Muslim-dominated banlieues, and an increasingly vocal and prevalent Islamic fundamentalism, exacerbated by the first two factors, that targets angry and disaffected young Muslims in France. Finally, it is proposed that, to decrease the appeal of Jihadism, the French government take steps to address these three factors by liberalizing *laïcité*, pursuing increasingly targeted research programs to understand and eventually alleviate the widespread poverty and economic desperation, and by creating a more moderate brand of Islam compatible with French values.

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”

-Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

“France and those who follow its path must know that they remain the principle targets of the Islamic State and they will continue to smell the odor of death for having taken the leadership of the Crusade, having dared to insult our Prophet, having boasted that they were fighting Islam in France . . . The attack is only the beginning of the storm.”

-ISIS Claim of Responsibility following November 2015 Paris Attacks

INTRODUCTION: JIHAD IN FRANCE

While the specter of jihad has haunted the entire Western World for decades, Islamist terrorism has been an especially pernicious threat to France. According to the 2019 Global Terrorism Index (GTI), France is ranked 2nd in Western Europe (as well as 3rd on the entire continent, and 30th worldwide) in terms of the impact of terrorism.¹ Although this is a marked improvement from the 2017 GTI, when France was ranked 23rd worldwide and the 1st country on the list not simultaneously experiencing severe internal conflict, it still signifies a severe terrorist menace.² While this index does not focus solely on jihadism (terrorist incidents from across the spectrum of motivations are recorded), the past decade has seen many incidents of grievous jihadist violence across France.

In January 2015, gunmen killed 12 people at the Paris office of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in the worst terrorist attack in France since the Algerian War (1954-1962). 11 months later, 130 people were killed when an ISIS cell simultaneously committed suicide bombings outside the Stade de France, shootings in cafes around the 10th and 11th Arrondissements, and a mass shooting and hostage-taking at the Bataclan Theater during a concert. It was the deadliest act of violence on French soil since the Second World War (1939-1945). Since then, there have been attacks on French soldiers and police, the murder of a priest, and a truck barreling into a crowd at a Bastille Day celebration in Nice.³ And most recently: in September 2020, two people were non-fatally stabbed outside Charlie Hebdo's new offices; in October, a French

teacher was beheaded after showing cartoons of Muhammad during a lesson.⁴ All were committed by jihadis, many of whom were inspired by or connected to ISIS or Al Qaeda.

William McCants and Christopher Meserole, scholars of radical Islam from the Brookings Institution, discovered that the single biggest predictor of Sunni Islamist radicalization is whether a country currently or previously lists French as a national language. When radicalization is viewed as a function of the total number of Muslims in a country (i.e. x number of radicalized/ y number of Muslims in country z), France has the highest rate of Islamist radicalization in Europe.⁵ Something integral to France is driving radicalization.

This paper argues that radicalization is so prevalent in France because of three deep fissures in French society: 1) aggressive secularism under the policy of *laïcité*, 2) social and economic inequalities between Muslims and non-Muslims, and 3) fundamental cultural differences between Muslims and non-Muslims regarding social issues. These three conditions have formed of parallel societies – “traditional” France and “Islamic” France – thus creating prime conditions for jihadi recruiters to lure disaffected Muslims to join their movements with Manichaeic “clash of civilizations” rhetoric.

THE MEANING OF *LIBERTÉ* – IS *LAÏCITÉ* FREEDOM OF RELIGION, OR FREEDOM FROM RELIGION?

Public religion has been integral to the development of modern France. Nowhere was this more apparent than with the Revolutionary (1789-1799) Jacobins, who sought to extinguish Catholicism and replace it with new cults.⁶ The next century of French history can largely be understood as a reaction either against or in favor of the historical role played by the Catholic Church. An uneasy truce between the liberal secularists and the conservative Catholics was reached in 1905, with the enactment of the *laïcité* (secularism) law. The compromise guarantees freedom of religion in France, so long as religious practices do not infringe on “public order.”⁷ A century later, it is this caveat which has spurred so much animosity.

Under this policy of *laïcité*, the Islamic hijab (headscarf) was banned in French public schools in 2004 (alongside all other religious apparel), and the niqab (face-covering) was banned in all public spaces in 2010.⁸ These actions were taken under the guise of protecting secular society from the perceived pernicious influence of public displays of religiosity. It is the wording of the laws, however, that proves especially controversial in Muslim communities. Specifically, the laws ban religious signs that are “ostentatious” in schools and ban all religious face coverings, without mentioning specific religions.⁹ For many Muslims, this is perceived as a backhanded attack on Islam under the guise of equal treatment. This tension between secularism and Islam was further

exacerbated following the 2015 terror attacks, as many towns across France banned the controversial “burkini” swimsuit, modest swimming attire designed to respect Islam’s mandate on female modesty. In August of 2016, Nice made worldwide news as images spread of police forcing a woman to remove her burkini on a public beach.¹⁰ Around the same time, police in Cannes fined a Muslim female beachgoer for not dressing in “an outfit respecting good morals and secularism.”¹¹

Support for laws targeting Islamic clothing reveal the deep fissure in French society regarding Islam. On both the left and right, French politicians see secularism, and particularly secular laws that target Islam, as an important bulwark against the “Islamization of France.” Former center-right President Nicolas Sarkozy stated during his campaign that “there needs to be a law to keep these Islamic bathing suits out of our swimming pools and off our beaches,” and went so far as to suggest changing the constitution to make this happen. On the left, Socialist former Prime Minister Manuel Valls described the ideal French woman as Marianne, the historic female embodiment of the French nation, who “is not veiled because she is free!”¹² Likewise, the Socialist Minister Laurence Rossignol stated that Burkini manufacturers had been irresponsible by creating oppressive clothing, and compared Muslim women who freely choose the garment to “American negroes who favored slavery.”¹³ This rhetoric reinforces the perception of a bipartisan French government that uses the law as a bludgeon against (particularly Muslim) communities of faith, under the guise on defending secular society.

These policies are exacerbating, rather than ameliorating, tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. The 2004 law, which banned religious symbols in public schools, did not force Muslim girls to abandon their head-coverings, as intended. Instead, the demand for private Islamic schools skyrocketed, further separating many Muslims from the mainstream.¹⁴ The perception of *laïcité* in the Muslim community is “unintelligible and even shocking . . . an assault, an injunction to give up their religion.”¹⁵ The burkini, viewed as a symbol of oppression by much of France, was envisioned by its creator as a tool of liberation for women, who would be free to exercise and relax on beaches while retaining their modesty.¹⁶ This perceptual cleavage exposes the innate tension between *laïcité* and multicultural liberalism, especially in the face of the increasing threat of terrorism.

Laïcité, insofar as it is meant to ensure a liberal, secular France that is immune from the pernicious influence of competing factions, has failed with regards to Islam. By aggressively enforcing secularism that targets Muslim religious expression, the French state has fomented the exact outcome they sought to avoid: a parallel society, a “nation within a nation,” a distinct minority identity within a state that claims as a fundamental value drawing no distinctions between citizens of the French Republic.¹⁷ This feeling of

alienation, driven by the perception of religious discrimination, is one major factor in the exacerbation of militant Islam in France.

Laïcité must be reformed. Ironically, the French principle of secularism has become fundamentalist itself – in the face of increasing diversity in France, the government has redoubled its efforts while forgetting its aims. Instead of compelling Muslims to integrate, it simply drives them away from mainstream society. Secularism is an admirable goal – the separation of church and state is a bedrock principle of both France and Western Civilization. The French government must, however, shift their view of secularism away from the dogmatism of *laïcité*, and closer to the models of the United States and United Kingdom, in which religious freedom is largely celebrated and embraced, so long as it does not hinder the rights of others. In other words, laws against religious expression in public places should be revoked and the concept of a *citoyen de la république* (citizen of the republic) should be one in which religion is not hidden, but in which citizens of different religions come together for the common good of France.¹⁸

(IN)ÉGALITÉ– INTER-GENERATIONAL POVERTY IN THE BANLIEUES DE L’ISLAM

Further creating prime conditions for radicalization is the rampant poverty in France’s Muslim communities. Neighborhoods that are largely composed of ethnic and religious minorities and immigrants dot the outskirts of major cities. The French word for these communities is *banlieues*, which although literally translates as *suburbs*, holds almost the opposite connotation as in English. It is here, in what the French press has deemed “zones of banishment” and “the lost territories of France,” that the hopes and dreams of Middle Eastern and North African immigrants, and those of their descendants, live and die in endemic, crushing poverty.¹⁹

The most infamous of the *banlieues* is undoubtedly Saint-Denis, one of the poorest areas in the country. Less than 10 kilometers separates the Champs-Élysées, the heart of Paris, from the center of Saint-Denis, yet the difference is stark. The majority of residents are believed to be ethnically African or Arab, and largely Muslim.²⁰ One-third of residents live below the poverty line. Nearly 40% of Saint-Denis’ citizens are below the age of 25, and youth unemployment is over 40%, compared to the national average of 22%.²¹ A 2015 study found that otherwise qualified candidates with Arab- or African-sounding names were four times less likely to be hired. A 2016 study found that a candidate’s *banlieue* address alone makes him or her 22% less likely to be hired than a resident of Paris proper.²²

In attempting to address the economic and cultural rot that has decayed the *banlieues*, the French government has directly intervened to improve

development, housing, public safety, and education.²³ Since the 1980s, the government has taken steps to fix the problem by first declaring the poor areas “sensitive urban zones” and then “priority neighborhoods of the city.” These designations were meant to facilitate expanded government intervention in housing, public safety, economic development, and education. After 40 years, the widely held consensus among residents and experts alike is that this effort has been a dismal failure – a “solution-façade, rather than an actual solution.”²⁴ The poverty, especially for young people, appears inescapable.

Arguably even more damaging to the citizens of the *banlieues* than the abject poverty is the widespread perception of the suburbs as breeding grounds for criminals, drug dealers, and jihadis. Despite the common belief that the *banlieues* are *zones de non-droites* (no-go or lawless areas), there is actually a disproportionately large police presence in the regions. Allegations of racial profiling, harassment, and outright physical abuse by law enforcement are well-documented and widely accepted.²⁵

Two major events in the 21st century sent the message to the world that the *banlieues* are lawless regions mired in subversive and antisocial behavior. In fall of 2005, two Muslims youths were accidentally electrocuted while fleeing from police. Ensuing riots lasted for weeks, beginning in the *banlieue* of Clichy-sous-Bois before spreading across France. The world watched in horror as a protest over police profiling spiraled into a national emergency, with nearly 10,000 cars, and dozens of public and private buildings torched.²⁶ The second event was the pre-dawn National Police raid on the safehouse of Paris attack ringleader Abdelhamid Abaaoud in Saint-Denis, just blocks from the Stade de France. The six-hour shootout, in which police and jihadis exchanged nearly 5,000 rounds, resulted in the deaths of two terrorists. Witnesses described the scene as comparable to a “warzone” and news footage broadcast around the world showed heavily armed police, dressed in all-black combat fatigues and helmets prepared for an all-out assault.²⁷ The footage sent the message that a hotbed of jihadism lies with commuting distance from the heart of Paris.

While increased government funding is beneficial, it has little to no impact on two major problems: the widespread perception among white French that the *banlieues* are crime- and jihad-ridden ghettos, and the actual discrimination faced by *banlieue* residents who try to escape their humble surroundings. The two are intimately intertwined, with poverty breeding crime and alienation, which in turn breeds the fearsome reputation, further driving away opportunity in a ceaseless cycle.

A key problem that needs correction is France’s stubborn refusal to officially acknowledge race or religion in censuses or official surveys, (affirmative action is obviously out of the question) based on the reasoning that there should be no subdivision between one citizen of the Republic and another.²⁸ In a perfect world, it is undoubtedly an admirable policy. However, the past few decades

have revealed France to be a less than perfect republic than that envisioned by her founders. A key first step in resolving the *banlieues* situation is to lift the ban on government censuses and researchers from measuring populations by race and religion; if concrete, reliable statistics were available about who exactly is impoverished in the *banlieues*, their ages, races, and religions, then anti-poverty measures could more precisely target the groups in need. Likewise, it would be a major step towards addressing the discrimination that *banlieue* residents are believed to face regarding employment (again, it is impossible currently to say for sure, because official records are not collected).

Previous government attempts at resolving *banlieue* poverty failed because they focused their efforts based on common perceptions, stereotypes, and hearsay (i.e. certain cities need x amount of aid, and those same cities appear to be heavily Muslim and North African) – concrete facts supplied by government efforts simply did not exist.²⁹ Affirmative action in employment, education, and housing, is deeply antithetical to French values and is almost certainly a non-starter. However, a gradual acceptance of official data collection of citizens' races and religions is an essential first step in addressing the pervasive poverty and hopelessness that often breeds radicalization among Muslims in the *banlieues*.

THE FAILURE OF *FRATERNITÉ* – INTEGRATION, FUNDAMENTAL ISLAM, AND THE PRISON-JIHAD PIPELINE

Islam within France has grown more fundamentalist compared to French society writ large. A 2009 Gallup poll provides stark insight into the divide: 58% of French Muslims “very” or “extremely” strongly identify with their religion, as opposed to less than 25% of the public at large.³⁰ On the issue of homosexuality, which France prides itself on embracing with liberal progressivism, 78% of the French population views it as morally acceptable. For Muslims, it is 35%.³¹ Similarly, Muslims are much more likely than non-Muslims to believe that blasphemy should not be protected speech and that written or verbal criticism of Muhammad, Islam, or the Quran should be punished criminally under hate speech laws.³² This difference in perception is a major indicator of the fundamental differences in the ways that French Muslims and non-Muslims see the world.

The January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attack, in which jihadis gunned down 12 people at the Paris office of the irreverent, often controversial publication, has been a flashpoint in this culture war. Across France, and across the free world, “*Je Suis Charlie*” (I am Charlie) became a rallying cry to defend free speech, regardless of its unpopular or offensive nature. In the *banlieues*, however, the support was muted at best. Some Muslim schoolchildren believed that the attack was staged by the government or the far-right to blame Muslims. Many ignored the moment of silence in schools, while others vandalized signs

mourning the victims or pretended to reenact the shooting in hallways and schoolyards. The boldest students publicly voiced what many of their peers and relatives believed about the journalists: “They got what was coming to them. You do not mock the prophet.”³³

French society sends the contradictory message – intentionally or not – that Muslim minorities are not French, but that they should be; that French society is blind with regards to religion, but that, at the same time, Islam is anti-French. This message of alienation has been reciprocated in many Muslim *banlieues* – women have voluntarily veiled themselves, men have abandoned the perceived meaninglessness of French society and turned to Islam for meaning, and children have been enrolled in Islamic schools.³⁴ What has developed is a culture on the periphery – not fully French, yet not fully Arab either – that feeds on the resentment of social exclusion and seeks to give meaning to life when the future appears hopeless. This was exemplified by the incident at the France-Algeria soccer match in October 2001. It was the first time the two countries – former colonizer and former colony – had met for a match since the end of the Algerian War in 1962. Thousands of young Arab-French spectators booed the *Marseillaise*, repeatedly shouted “Bin Laden” and mobbed the field, canceling the game.³⁵ In essence, the youths were unifying around a country – Algeria – the vast majority knew nothing about, by insulting the only country – France – that they had ever known.

This is emblematic of deep alienation – and a perfect recruitment base for jihadi ideologues. While most young residents of the *banlieues* are looking for jobs, for money, and for social success, what they are looking for most of all is meaning. When mainstream society refuses to provide a meaning for French natives who also happen to be brown, poor, and Muslim, the extremists are all too willing to provide one. This is evidenced in the strikingly similar backgrounds of a great number French jihadis – both those who committed attacks in France and those who traveled to the Caliphate for jihad. Many begin as petty criminals involved in drugs, theft, and prostitution, with little to no interest in serious religious study or proselytization, before making a rapid shift to Salafism.³⁶ For the radicalized, Islamism becomes more about brotherhood, greater meaning in life, and a nihilistic rejection of French society through the use of violence.³⁷ Islam is a foundation upon which drifting and marginalized young men can find purpose, and radical Islam is a foundation upon which that purpose can be coupled with violent revenge against the society that is perceived to have wronged them.

The mechanism by which the actual recruitment occurs is often prison. Although prison radicalization is by no means exclusive to France or to jihadism, it is especially pronounced in the land of the Bastille because approximately 70% of prison inmates are Muslim (compared to less than 10% of the French population).³⁸ Most eventual jihadi converts enter prison on

petty crime charges, often totally ignorant of religion. What these prisoners do have is an abundance of anger and alienation – the consequences of a life in the banlieues – and often come from broken homes.³⁹ It is here that the ideologues – the true, diehard Islamists – pounce on the new inmates.⁴⁰ French secularism has, until recently, prevented the prison system from applying the lessons repeatedly learned in contemporary history – that it is extremely dangerous to mix extremists in with the general population.⁴¹ The recruiters witness the anger, resentment, and psychological vulnerability of prisoners, and indoctrinate them into jihadism.⁴²

Extremism gives these angry young men (not all, but most – 80%, according to one study – are men⁴³) a purpose, a cosmic meaning that explains everything – the poverty, the discrimination, the decadent societal embrace of homosexuality, secularism and women’s liberation, the individual misery they are experiencing. They are reborn in the image of the Prophet and his earliest followers (the *salaf*) – dedicated Salafi-jihadists eager to commit violence in Allah’s name.⁴⁴ After release, many travel to the Middle East and become willing soldiers of the Caliphate.⁴⁵ The most dangerous ones return, battle-hardened, skilled at violence, and entirely committed to the jihad.

These experienced jihadis pose a serious threat to France and the rest of Europe. Estimates predict that, since its foundation in June 2014, 1,300 French citizens traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State. As of February 2020, roughly 270 have since returned home, and many more likely will attempt the journey as ISIS continues to be dismantled.⁴⁶ Whether or not returning fighters are imprisoned, it is likely that many will continue to radicalize others and plan attacks.⁴⁷ According to Thomas Hegghammer’s research on jihadi returnees between 1990-2010, the likelihood of a terrorist attack being successful increased by over 50%, and its lethality increased by 100%, if a veteran of foreign jihad joined the plot.⁴⁸ For the period of 2011-2015, while the likelihood of success for returned fighter attacks dropped by 10% (likely due to increased tracking by security services), the lethality increased by a staggering 600%.⁴⁹ At least seven of the perpetrators of the November 2015 Paris attacks – most notably, mastermind Abdelhamid Abaaoud – spent time in Syria.⁵⁰ As France in particular, and Europe at large, struggles with how to handle foreign fighters, leaders must remember the horrific violence of which jihadis are capable.

A perfectly tragic example of these factors converging is the case of Mohamed Merah’s killing spree in southwestern France. Over twelve days (March 11-22, 2012), the 23-year-old jihadist shot and killed three French soldiers, a rabbi, and three Jewish children, before being killed in a standoff with police.⁵¹ A native Frenchman from an Algerian family, Merah was raised in a *banlieue* of Toulouse by a neglectful mother and an abusive and absentee father.⁵² From a young age, he was exposed to violent Salafism – his environment

consisted of explicit sympathy for the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA), exposure to violent images celebrating jihad, and normalized anti-Semitism and racism.⁵³ In his teenage years, Merah was a petty criminal, before a prison sentence radicalized him by providing “a support network, a moral code, a new language of resistance and an identity.”⁵⁴

After his release, Merah traveled the Muslim world, eventually ending up in Afghanistan, where he was captured by US forces and subsequently deported to France.⁵⁵ At the time of his killing spree, Merah was a member of the extremist group *Forsane Alizza* (Knights of Pride).⁵⁶ The group, whose name is a reference to the manifesto of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, leveraged popular Muslim anger over the perception of “Islamophobic aggression” with traditional Salafi tenets, such as the establishment of a caliphate and imposition of Sharia law.⁵⁷ In Mohamed Merah, many elements – social decay in the banlieues, anger over secularism, broken homes, normalized Islamic fundamentalism, prison radicalization, and travel abroad for jihadi – combined to turn a 23-year-old native French Muslim into a mass murderer.

France has already taken steps to address both Islamic fundamentalism and the prison-jihad pipeline. President Macron announced the end of a program, in place since 1977, that allowed Muslim countries to send imams and teachers to France to teach Middle Eastern languages and culture – all without French government oversight. In its place, the government created programs that allows France oversight over the teachings of foreign imams, and encouraged the French Muslim Council to train imams in France, rather than send them to Muslim countries.⁵⁸ The intention is to build a brand of moderate Islam that is compatible with French liberalism, and is an important step towards both breaking the influence of radical religious figures, and the integration of Islam as an important part of French culture. Ideally, in coordination with the easing of aggressive *laïcité*, this will begin a gradual process of ending the perceived mutual exclusivity of “Muslim” and “French.”

Similarly, France has taken steps to address prison radicalization, a major pipeline for Islamists who both commit terror in Europe and become foreign fighters in the Middle East. In early 2018, France created 1,500 prison cells specifically for radicals, with the intention of quarantining Islamists from “normal” – non-politically-motivated – criminals.⁵⁹ While there is no ideal way to imprison extremists (mixing them with the general population risks their ideology spreading to common criminals, while segregating them risks creating “Jihadi University” in which they share ideas and plan future attacks), the most practical and effective policy is to isolate extremists from general population to prevent ordinary criminals from becoming radicalized. This is a good policy that France should continue expanding.

CONCLUSION

Islamist terrorism has been an especially potent threat to France over the past decade. Deadly attacks, such as those committed at Charlie Hebdo, the Bataclan, and Nice, have earned France the dubious distinction of being one of the most targeted nations in Europe. Key to the worldview of the jihadis is the concept of a “clash of civilizations” – the idea that the secular west and Islam cannot coexist and are destined to fight until one has extinguished the other.

There are three main elements in French society that have created a breeding ground for this rhetoric. The first is France’s aggressive approach to secularism, *laïcité*, which is perceived by many Muslims to unfairly target Islamic religious practices. Second is the economic and cultural situation in many of the Muslim-majority *banlieues* – poverty traps that are filled with failing schools, crime, and drugs. Third, and partly stemming from the first two factors, is that Islam has grown more fundamental and separatist, creating a profound disconnect between mainstream France and its “enclaves of Islam.”

As dire as the situation in France appears, there is hope. Smart and forward-thinking policies on the part of the French government have the potential to greatly ease the tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in France, denying the Islamists the “clash of civilizations” worldview on which they require to survive and propagate. France and Islam are not incompatible. Although at times they may seem so, the guiding principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity on which the French Republic was founded offer a vision of a future in which a united France stands triumphant against the forces of extremism and terror.

ENDNOTES

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