France, Terror, and the Future of Secularism

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

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Introduction

With the brutal and pitiless beheading of Samuel Paty on October 16th 2020 for teaching schoolchildren about satire, a strong defence of secularism and freedom of expression from President Emmanuel Macron, and widespread condemnation of French secularism as blasphemy by Islamists across the world, there is little doubt that France has become a flashpoint for the confluence of far right backlash against Muslims, the battle over freedom of expression versus offending religious sensibilities, and issues over the feasibility of immigrant assimilation. These issues will undoubtedly be exacerbated by another recent Islamist attack on October 29th, 2020, in Nice, France in which a man armed with a knife killed three people – two women and a man – in a terrorist attack at a church[1]. From Ankara to Dhaka to Islamabad[2], Islamists and their followers have decried Macron and France as catalysing prejudice and fomenting anti-Muslim hatred through defending satirists' rights to freely express views that are offensive to some.

This accusation is wildly misguided. Emmanuel Macron is no Geert Wilders, and humourist satire, however offensive to religious sensibilities, must be emphatically differentiated from far right anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments which should be rapidly disavowed by anyone who cares for the future of Europe and its large Muslim population. Is it possible to forge a balance between defending secular, liberal principles such as freedom of expression whilst not fanning the fires of anti-Muslim hatred that drives far-right extremists and leaders alike in Europe? Can Europe edge off the precipice of civil strife and encourage Muslim assimilation and coexistence rather than balkanization, isolation, and intergroup conflict? There is no doubt that this balance, however tenuous, must be struck both to protect the rights and ensure the livelihood of Muslims, denounce overt racism, prejudice, and extremism, and also protect the venerable tradition of criticizing and satirizing religious ideas in France, extending from Charlie Hebdo all the way back to Voltaire.

The Principle of Laïcité in France

The French term laïcité, meaning secularism, is derived from the Latin lāicus, which is itself a derivative of the Greek λᾱϊκός lāïkós "of the people." Laïcité is a cornerstone principle of the French constitution. Article 1 of the French Constitution is interpreted by most as a discouragement of religious intervention in the affairs of politics and government, perhaps most significantly the influence of religion in dictating the policies of the French state. Significantly, it also precludes the involvement of the government in strictly religious affairs, and especially bans government influence in determining which religion people decide to practice in their own homes[3]. Laïcité is truly a principle the enacts rigorous separation between political affairs in the public sphere and religious affairs in the private sphere. Secularism in France does not prevent people from religious practice or ritual or exercising religious customs. Relevant to the aim of this paper is the fact that secularism has an extensive history in France, and thus should be viewed as an essential element of French culture and national identity.

1 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/29/knife-attack-in-nice-france-people-killed-church

2 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54704859?fbclid=IwAR0VwMHNkW4rY-IFtmij0VZjMyBhIEnF20LlhqKAxjYCWz5axhBGNHkG_eU

3 Religion and Society in Modern Europe, by René Rémond (Author), Antonia Nevill (Translator), Malden, MA, U.S.A.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

For approximately a century the French government and its policies have been based on the law ensuring the Separation of the Churches and the State, which dates back to 1905.[4] I argue that a practice so inveterate to French society and culture necessarily mustn't perish. In fact, it should be defended staunchly by anyone who values the cornerstone principles of Western civilization. If the liberally minded and tolerant do not take this stand, then undoubtedly it will pave the way for intolerant right-wing leaders to take power and enact policies deleterious to vulnerable minority groups in France and broader Europe.

The Rising Tide of Islamist Terrorism in France

France has become a hotbed of extremist activity in recent years. Historically speaking, France had its first instances of religious extremism in the 1980s which stemmed from French involvement in the Lebanese Civil War. In the 1990s, an unfortunate sequence of attacks on France were carried out by a terrorist group known by the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, France suffered a serious of attacks linked to various international jihadist groups, all with origins in various Islamic countries and spanning a vast geopolitical and geosectarian origins. The French media outlet Le Monde reported in July of 2016 that "Islamist Terrorism" had resulted in 236 dead in France in a period of 18 months preceding the investigation.[5] An unacceptable number of 249 people have been killed and 928 wounded in a total of 22 terrorist attacks from 2015–2018 in France[6]. Thus, from a counterterrorism perspective, it is undeniable that a new approach is necessitated both by the historical ramifications of terrorist activity in France and disturbing new trends which couple domestic discontent with widespread international condemnation from the Muslim world. Thus, it seems as if Samuel Huntington's formulation of a "Clash of Civilizations" is unfolding both in France and a wide range of Muslim countries, from Turkey to Pakistan, as the robust tradition of satire and secularism in France clashes with the steep stigma surrounding blasphemy, apostasy, and unbelief in the Muslim world.

The lethal attacks in 2015 caused France to shift its approach from viewing the problem of the Islamist terror threat and spectre of radicalization from an issue of purely security to a problem of societal and cultural nature. Prime ministers François Hollande and Manuel Vallis saw the fundamental problem as being a clash between religious fundamentalism and a theologically inspired worldview and democratic and secular values. These values are perhaps most pronounced and emphasized in the context of France, more so than America and even other relatively secularized European nations. Some jihadists have voiced that they are acting in retaliation against France for the counterterrorism effort against Islamic State, although deeper investigation clarifies that Islamist terrorism in France has a more inveterate, historically contingent legacy that must be analysed *vis a vis* more modern manifestations of terrorism and this clash of values. At this juncture it is relevant to enumerate some of the deeper grievances that make France a favourite target for Islamist terrorists[7]:

4 Evelyn M. Acomb, *The French Laic Laws, 1879-1889: The First Anti-Clerical Campaign of the Third French Republic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1941

5 "Le terrorisme islamiste fait 236 morts en France en 18 mois". Le Monde (in French). 26 July 2016. Retrieved 27 July 2016. De l'attaque de « Charlie Hebdo » et de l'« Hyper casher » en janvier 2015 à la mort du père Jacques Hamel à Saint-Etienne-de-Rouvray, mardi 26 juillet, ce sont 236 personnes qui ont perdu la vie dans des attentats et attaques terroristes

6 "By the numbers: France's battle against terror | CBC News". CBC. Archived from the original on 4 April 2019. Retrieved 23 April 2019. 22 — the number of terror incidents on French soil since the beginning of 2015. / 249 — the number of dead in those attacks. / 928 — the number of wounded.

7 Bindner, Laurence (2018). "Jihadists' Grievance Narratives against France". Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies: 4–8.

1. France's foreign policy towards Muslim nations and jihadists in a variety of geographical contexts ranging from the Sahel to the Levant. France is viewed by many jihadists groups as essentially a spearhead focused against jihadist groups in Africa, specifically the Sahel, in a similar manner to how the United States is viewed as the main force countering terrorist influence in places such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. France's past legacy of colonialism in North Africa and Lebanon, for example, and the influence of French language, culture and way of life is also viewed by Islamists as impeding the flourishing of Muslim majority countries in which France has a colonial legacy.
2. France's secularism and domestic policies, under the influence of which jihadists view the central government and broader culture as explicitly hostile to and pitted against the core premises and beliefs of Islamist doctrine and practice. Additionally, France's official secular principles which compel jihadists to label France as "the flagship of disbelief".
3. The broader consideration of jihadists of France as a forceful catalyst of disbelief also merits mention as a core grievance. France also has no explicit legal framework to counter blasphemy and, perhaps most relevantly, has a highly controversial satirical press and legacy which is less respectful and more disdainful towards religion and specifically Islam than that of the US, United Kingdom, and other Westernised, secularised nations. France is also viewed as an impediment to the establishment of a caliphate[8].

The Necessity Free Expression and a Defense of French Values

President Emmanuel Macron has shown himself a courageous defender of French culture, values, and way of life by strongly condemning these heinous attacks as acts of Islamist terror, unlike leaders such as Barack Obama who, under the superficial guise of tolerance and political correctness, refused to call the problem by its name. He has met considerable resistance and backlash from Islamist leaders, from Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Imran Khan, and their followers across the world as a result. Macron and the French people must stand firm in their commitment to secularism, free expression, and liberal principles. If Macron were to soften his tone, this would undoubtedly pave the way for right wing leaders such as Marine Le Pen to come to power, because they condemn Islamism and its terror productions unequivocally. This disavowal must fall to those who care about the confluence of freedom and tolerance, and the defence of all people and their rights, whether it be secularists, free thinkers, satirists, or devout Muslims who are able to confine their faith to the private sphere and practice peacefully. This essential shifting of religious faith to a secondary role in the private sphere is the essence of laïcité and a fundamental element of French culture that France relinquishes at its own peril.

***ITCT** does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.*

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8 Ibid.