

The Wave of Islamic Terrorism in France: Political and Social Effects

Yaron Gamburg | No. 1806 | December 31, 2023

In recent months, France has weathered a wave of severe violence rooted in Islamic radicalization. The tentative and inconsistent government response has increased public outrage and strengthened the far-right parties. Mass demonstrations by Hamas supporters have triggered antisemitic violence, and the attempt to present a united front in the fight against antisemitism was met with President Macron's indecisive stance and the left's refusal to condemn Hamas. Domestic considerations have also influenced the President's viewpoint on the war in Gaza, joined by efforts to appease Muslim immigrants and prevent escalation. The political dynamics in France are challenging and compel Israel to prepare for what lies ahead.

Since October 2023, France has confronted a new wave of violence attributed to Islamic radicalization in the country. On October 13, a young Chechen Muslim murdered a literature teacher in the northern French city of Arras, three years after a similar attack shook the country. On December 2, a young man of Iranian descent murdered a tourist in central Paris, avenging the death of Muslims "from Gaza to Afghanistan." The killers were known to the security forces as Islamic radicals and were branded as a threat. Government representatives claimed that one of the attackers had a psychiatric disorder, and this was perceived by the public as further proof of the government's incompetence.

France was particularly outraged by a violent incident on November 18 in the town of Crépol in southern France, an outlying agricultural area that is less exposed to the Islamization threat. During a party of young people, about ten Muslim youths from a nearby town raided the party, shouted that they would "kill all whites," brutally attacked the participants, and murdered a 16-year-old boy. Apart from the event's racist and brutal nature, the public was outraged over the government's response. Law enforcement authorities delayed announcing the suspects' names to avoid exposing their Muslim heritage, and the government even attempted to bar demonstrations in solidarity with the victim, claiming it was an initiative of the radical right-wing and a danger to public order. The public and media accused the government of bias and recalled the riots that erupted

throughout France in June 2023 after a young Muslim who had disobeyed police orders was killed. It noted the government's incompetence regarding vandalism of public property, assault of police officers, and terrorization of civilians. Instead of taking Islamic radicalization seriously, the French media charged, the government continues to divert the discussion to the danger of the "radical right" – a threat that most of the public perceives as irrelevant.

The French public is mindful of the real dangers that threaten public order. According to a recent survey, about 87 percent of the country fear a civil war as a result of the loss of control over immigration and Islamic radicalization. The phrase "civil war" has been particularly prevalent in the public discourse across the political spectrum. While far-right leaders Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour reflect sentiments of concerned citizens, President Macron and his government seem at a loss, unable to rise to the challenge. In fact, since entering the Elysée Palace six years ago, Macron has failed to present a clear and firm policy on immigration and radical Islam. His endeavors have been geared toward maintaining quiet in the "suburbs" and "popular towns," a euphemism for Muslim immigrant communities.

Although Macron weathered socio-economic protests ("yellow vests," strikes against pension reform) and handled the COVID-19 crisis thanks to his economic and administrative expertise, he has displayed weakness when confronting the migration and radicalization crises, including the current crisis. In early December, the French Parliament rejected the government's immigration bill that was in preparation for over a year and a half. To avoid a severe political defeat and obtain a majority to pass the bill, the President was compelled to incorporate the amendments demanded by the right wing parties. This caused a crisis in the ruling party; many members voted against it, one of the senior ministers resigned, and the President's zigzagging policy was heavily attacked.

President Macron, who has habitually cultivated his media image, has been absent from the public discourse regarding the violent incident in Crépol and the recent terror attacks. The President was also absent from an event of major national importance – a demonstration of solidarity with the Jewish community and against antisemitism initiated by the President of the Senate and the President of the National Assembly. The event was held against the backdrop of a sharp rise in antisemitism in France following the massacre by Hamas in the Negev (about 1600 antisemitic incidents in the last month and a half, compared with 450 in all of 2022). His failure to attend the demonstration undermined the organizers' aspiration to create a united national front in the fight against antisemitism, and

aided the far left in portraying the event as biased and controversial. The leader of the far-left party, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who refuses to condemn Hamas and draws most of his electoral support from France's Muslim community, boycotted the demonstration of solidarity, and praised President Macron for not participating. In politically troubled times, one mistake leads to another: To express solidarity with the Jews, the President invited the Chief Rabbi of France to the palace on the first night of Hanukkah. This endeavor is contrary to the principle of secularism and separation of church and state, and therefore led to various condemnations, including from the president of Crif, an umbrella organization of the Jewish organizations in France.

The President's absence from the demonstration damaged his image and boosted his main rival, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the right wing National Rally party. Le Pen expressed solidarity with Israel's struggle against Hamas and announced her participation in the demonstration. Government representatives attempted to obstruct her participation, claiming that it was an extreme right wing party, but their opposition led to the opposite outcome. Influential public figures, Jewish and pro-Israel, praised Le Pen's participation in the demonstration, boosting her efforts to gain broad public legitimacy. According to recent polls, Le Pen is viewed as the second preferred political figure of the French (the first being former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, a potential presidential candidate in the 2027 elections). Her party surpasses the ruling party by a considerable margin ahead of next year's European Parliament elections.

The attempt to balance conflicting interests has induced a vacillating position in French foreign policy, as well as in the domestic arena. After the October 7 atrocities in Israel, the French President expressed support for Israel's right to defend itself. On October 24, Macron visited Israel and surprised many, including his Foreign Ministry staff, by announcing France's initiative to foster an international coalition against Hamas, similar to the coalition against ISIS. The initiative, which was President Macron's improvisation alone, was dropped from the agenda two weeks after he visited Israel when in a television interview, the President called on Israel to immediately stop the murder of innocents in Gaza, and at the COP28 conference in Dubai even claimed that eliminating Hamas "is not a clear enough objective and would mean the war might last ten years."

In practice, France has focused its efforts on providing humanitarian aid. On November 9, Paris convened an international conference on Gaza reconstruction, in which the participating countries pledged to establish a one billion dollar fund for aid. Previously, France sent a mobile hospital aboard a helicopter carrier

docked in El Arish and continues its endeavors to construct a field hospital in the southern Gaza Strip. France also supports the initiative to increase sanctions against Hamas, headed by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs vis-a-vis the European Union, and convened a conference on the topic on December 12. In parallel, France voted in favor of the Security Council and UN General Assembly resolutions for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

It would not be an overstatement that President Macron views the Middle East through the prism of his country's volatile social situation and walks a tightrope between his desire not to outrage the suburbs and simultaneously support Israel and ensure the safety of the French Jewish community. At the same time, he strives to be portrayed as a supporter of an immediate ceasefire and to provide humanitarian aid to the Gaza population while demonstrating a certain distance from Israel. It appears that, in his mind, this stance helps him to not be perceived by France's Muslim population as collaborating with Israel. The dubious effectiveness of this policy suggests it is a strategy likely prompted by his close confidants, such as Moroccan-born comedian Yassine Belattar, who reportedly assists him in understanding the suburbs' climate.

All this has brought to light and honed the French government's strategy in dealing with domestic affairs – balancing conflicting interests to prevent escalation and a surge in violence. This is a challenging task in a country with the largest Muslim population (about 7 million) and the largest Jewish community (about 450,000) in Europe, with the security of the Jewish community and even its existence in France at stake.

Beyond the fate of the Jews, Islamic radicalization undermines the French way of life and the fundamental values of the country, primarily its traditional secularism (*laïcité*). An IFOP French poll published on December 7 found that nearly 80 percent of the country's Muslim population opposes French secularism. Meantime, social polarization deepens and the far right parties grow stronger.

Israel's strategy in managing its relations with France should consider these trends. Bilateral cooperation between the countries should be heightened – inter alia, based on President Macron's appreciation of Israeli technological excellence. France's willingness to assist in the fight against Hamas, even if it is far from its original declaration of a broad international coalition, contributes to Israel's struggle. It is essential to support the French government's efforts to combat antisemitism and anti-Zionism that is currently associated with the alliance between the extreme left and radical Islam. In addition, it is vital to heed the changes in the French right wing camp regarding its position on the fight against

antisemitism and support for Israel, and its efforts to establish Marine Le Pen as a legitimate actor in the political arena. These issues require innovative thinking and policy formulation to address subsequent challenges.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen