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French Counterterrorism Strategy at a Crossroads

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The terrorist attack in Nice in the heart of the Riviera on July 14, 2016, in which a Tunisian immigrant drove a truck into throngs of people celebrating Bastille Day and killed 84 people – citizens and tourists – and severely injured dozens more, traumatized France. Apart from instilling a sense of helplessness and fear in the face of this lethal mode of terrorism, the attack, which was assisted by a local terror cell, exacerbated the public rage over the government's string of failures, in face of the series of deadly terrorist attacks that France has suffered over the last two years. The brutal murder of Jacques Hamel, a priest from Normandy, by two assailants who identified with the Islamic State – one of whom appeared on the watch list in France – added to the rage, fear, and confusion.

It is now clear to France that it is in the midst of an all-out war against the threat of terror from both internal and external sources. The assessment by the French of their security situation stems from their concern about additional terrorist attacks planned by terrorist networks and individuals spurred to violence, sometimes by external organized directives, particularly from the Islamic State. Some of the attacks in France were committed at the personal initiative of second and third-generation immigrants who were raised and educated in France. Following the attacks in January 2015 at the headquarters of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and the Hyper Cacher grocery store, the French government launched a series of measures to prevent and curb terrorist attacks, including increased deployment of security forces throughout the country tasked with protecting symbolic public targets such as airports, religious institutions, and schools. However, the critical conclusions of a parliamentary committee of inquiry that examined the counterterrorism efforts cast doubt on the efficacy of the government's handling of the threat. Subsequently, in May 2016, the French government presented a comprehensive strategic plan, the first of its kind, to thwart terrorist attacks and radicalization in France.

The plan included a recommendation to institute new measures to heighten prevention, including surveillance of known radicals who are liable to pose a threat to public safety; the establishment of telephone hotlines enabling people to report relatives, neighbors, or others anonymously who are perceived as becoming radicalized; the activation of a

system to document airline PNRs (passenger name records); and the formation of intelligence units inside prisons that can monitor signs of radicalization among inmates. Following the terrorist attack in Nice, the government decided to extend the state of emergency declared in France on November 13, 2015 (which was scheduled to expire at the end of July) for another six months. The security deployment has also been adjusted: 12,000 police reservists have been called up to assist in the domestic counterterrorism efforts, and France has coordinated with the United States on a military response to the Islamic State.

Notwithstanding these efforts, French President François Hollande and his government face much public reproach that the past, existing, and future efforts are "too little, too late." The public pressure to find a response to escalating sources and evidence of home-grown terrorism is intensifying: a survey conducted by the Institut Français d'Opinion Publique (IFOP) and published a day after the terrorist attack in Nice, found that 67 percent of the French public have no faith in the government's ability to contend with terrorist threats adequately, and that 81 percent were willing to impose particular restrictions on the country's traditional liberal-democratic lifestyle.

Indeed, the intellectual debate about the threat raises complex dilemmas. Thus, for example, a fundamental public debate is underway between two leading French experts in Islamic studies, Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel. Roy argues that the current wave of terrorist attacks derives from the "Islamization of radicalism," whereby a minority of nihilistic youth adopt Islamic jihad as a cover for socioeconomic frustration and sometimes even for mental disorders, and stage violent activities under the guise of Salafi jihadism. In contrast, Kepel attributes the threat of terrorist attacks to the "radicalization of Islam" throughout the world and in France in particular, whereby extremist Islamic leaders are exploiting frustrated French Muslims to spark a civil war in France. The issue is not merely an intellectual and semantic debate, as each theory dictates different operational responses by the security authorities and demands that the cultural and social problems in France be effectively addressed.

Right wing and extreme right wing parties in the opposition have already filed a series of draft bills, proposing the imposition of additional civil rights restrictions. The controversial bills include stripping dual nationals convicted of terrorist activities of their French citizenship and deporting foreigners suspected of incitement or involvement in terrorist attacks; forcing thousands of suspects to wear electronic ankle bracelets so they can be tracked by security forces; incarcerating radicalized people in "deradicalization and reintegration" centers; incarcerating dangerous terrorists in segregated cell blocks; expanding the intelligence tracking of French Muslims already inside prisons; closing extremist mosques; limiting entry into the country by refugees and even closing France's borders to them; and deliberating the exit from the Schengen Agreement and its

replacement with an immigration policy and border controls coordinated with Europe. The Schengen Agreement, which was signed in 1985 and symbolized the vision of a borderless Europe, is now perceived as a security threat, particularly given that since 2015, the influx of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan into Europe has reached more than one million.

Furthermore, the recent terrorist attacks in France have aroused a debate about the extent of the French military's involvement outside France's borders; in this context, doubts are raised about the actual effectiveness of these operations. Despite the fact that since 2014 the French government has sent more than 3,000 soldiers to the Sahel and 1,000 soldiers to Iraq, in addition to deploying fighter planes to conduct airstrikes over al-Raqqah and deploying the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier to the Gulf, the right wing opposition has called for intensified French operations in the Sahel, Syria, and Iraq.

In an attempt to restore calm and due to the grave concerns about violent reprisals against Muslims in France – France's domestic intelligence chief, Patrick Calvar, warned recently that the escalating tensions are liable to bring France to the brink of civil war – the government is attempting to urge the French Muslim population to contend with the phenomenon of radicalization and combat it from within. In 2002, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy formed the French Council of the Muslim Faith, a national body to foster the creation of a unified, tolerant French Muslim community in France. Today, the government, in conjunction with the Muslim Council, is considering giving greater voice to loyal French imams challenging jihadist ideology in physical and virtual spaces, as a means to counter the pervasive impact of foreign Salafi preachers and as part of the attempt to create a counter-narrative to radical Salafi jihadist propaganda.

In its effort to contend with the threat of terrorist attacks, France is also analyzing the experiences of other countries, mainly Belgium, the United States, and Denmark. France borrowed the idea of deradicalization centers from Denmark and is considering setting up deradicalization centers in every French district. The terrorist attack in Nice serves as a reminder of the importance of such efforts, and many argue that the response to Salafi jihadism cannot be limited to reinforced security forces alone and must also include social change.

France considers Israel an important partner in the fight against Salafi jihadist terrorism, and sent a parliamentary delegation to Israel to learn from its experience. Inquiries on behalf of various French mayors, including of Cannes and Nice, have been forwarded to Israeli security experts in order to learn how mayors can reinforce their municipal security systems. Moreover, the recent terrorist attacks in Europe have weakened the earlier prevailing perception among decision makers and opinion-leaders on the European continent in general and in France in particular that the roots of the attacks by Islamic

terrorists lie in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that once the conflict is resolved, the attacks in Europe and the terrorist threats from the Islamic State will come to an end.

Israel's professional, decades-long experience in fighting terrorism and the deep friendship between Israel and France obligate Israel to offer France assistance – to the extent requested – to fight their common enemy. Despite the legitimate disagreements between the two countries about the best way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as reflected in the Israeli reservations to the French initiative for advancing the political process, the grave security situation in France may serve to shift public sentiments in France, and make the French more attentive to Israel's concerns and security requirements in any future agreement with the Palestinians. For its part, if Israel demonstrates initiative and willingness to promote a political process, it can expect better cooperation and understanding on the part of France and its friends in the European Union.