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French Resilience Is Being Tested by Another Jihadist Murder

by [Charles Thépaut](#)

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Brief Analysis

The circumstances of the latest attack give credence to President Macron's recent speech on the need for reengaging disenfranchised neighborhoods and defending secular principles in order to fight hate speech and jihadist violence.

The beheading of schoolteacher Samuel Paty near Paris on October 16 was the nineteenth terrorist attack France has suffered since 2012. To date, these attacks have killed 264 people, among them three French Muslim soldiers, a Jewish schoolteacher, and three students in March 2012; staff of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and police officers Ahmed Merabet and Clarissa Jean-Philippe in January 2015; audience members at the Bataclan theater in November 2015; inhabitants of Nice in July 2016; and Father Hamel, a priest, in July 2016. While thirty-two plots have been stopped by police since 2017, Paty's murder confirms the recent pattern of isolated knife attacks against highly symbolic targets, as opposed to large-scale attacks like that targeting the Bataclan.

The inquiry will have to clarify whether Abdullakh Anzorov, the eighteen-year-old Chechen who murdered Paty, acted on his own initiative or coordinated with terrorist groups. As Washington Institute terrorism expert Aaron Zelin pointed out on his website *Jihadology*, *Charlie Hebdo* continues to be an important issue for al-Qaeda to this day. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which took responsibility for the 2015 attack on the satirical magazine's offices, put out a statement a month ago calling for "support of the Prophet." Zelin also explained that jihadists can take advantage of local Islamist messaging, which provides an opening for them to recruit. There is, however, no evidence at this stage that Anzorov had any foreign support.

ONLINE ORIGINS OF THE ATTACK

The most distinctive feature of Paty's murder is that it was instigated by local French Islamist activists through an online mob. As he had done in previous years, Paty held a class session on freedom of expression; he had told his students he planned to use some of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons as examples to discuss the boundaries between freedom of belief, freedom of religion, and the right to blasphemy. He allowed those who might take offense to skip the class.

Yet the father of a pupil (who was not even in class that day) posted a video on social media in which he said that Paty had expelled Muslim students from the class in an effort to humiliate them. The father—whose stepsister joined the Islamic State in Syria in 2014 according to French reporter Matthieu Suc—received support from Islamist activists who ran an online campaign against Paty. Despite attempts by the Ministry of National Education to engage with the father to clarify the situation, the campaign had gained so much traction over the course of a week that it had convinced Abdullakh, who lived in another French city sixty miles away, to drive to the school where Paty taught and kill him in the street.

FRANCE'S SCHOLARLY AND POLICY DEBATE ON TERRORISM

The murder represents a junction of local controversy involving Islamist activists and jihadist attacks. In France, three perspectives have dominated the debate on the relationship between social marginalization, Islamism, and violence. Gilles Kepel, in his book *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West*, details young French Muslims' ideological and personal trajectories toward radicalization and violence. Olivier Roy, another renowned French scholar, challenges Kepel's argument, in his 2017 book *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*, writing that disenfranchised French citizens who are second- or third-generation immigrants have artificially "Islamized" preexisting patterns of violence, partly because of a disconnection with their parents' culture and religion. A third explanation has been framed by Francois Burgat, who argues in his 2019 volume *Understanding Political Islam* that terrorism is mostly a reaction to a perception of political violence against Muslims that is rooted in the legacy of French colonialism and Western interventions in the Arab world.

Every terrorist attack in France revives this debate and influences policy discussions, even when it takes place in a middle-class city like Eragny. French legislation introduced in 2015 and 2017 already addresses the purely security dimensions of counterterrorism. In an October 2 speech, however, President Emmanuel Macron presented the principles of a new law that aims to tackle issues related to the social roots of radicalization. The kind of mob-like campaign that led to Paty's killing is precisely the target.

Some international reactions have mistakenly likened Macron's speech to a far-right move, a "provocation against Muslims" worldwide, or an attempt to rule over religion. Yet his address was mostly about domestic French issues and in line with a century-old tradition of *laïcité* (republican secularism). Indeed, the speech recalled the religious neutrality of the state's institutions and civil servants, as well as the framework of a dialogue followed by the state in dealings with religious organizations to manage issues of security and public health while avoiding intervention in religious matters.

Domestically, French public attention fixed mainly on the notion of "separatism" mentioned in the speech. This term was used to label Islamist attempts to circumvent *laïcité*, among other types of "separatism," but was criticized for stigmatizing French Muslims. More broadly, the address emphasized freedom of religion and acknowledged the social and historical challenges behind homegrown extremism, including discrimination, economic disenfranchisement, and France's colonialist legacy. It also struck a clear balance, advocating for protection of French Muslims' rights and improving their opportunities while asserting stricter monitoring of

Islamist activities.

A first set of measures aims to control foreign religious influence more strictly in regard to funding and recruitment. A second set aims to improve the way in which French Muslim organizations can organize their worship services, develop programs to train French imams, and engage with state institutions at a more local level. A third dimension seeks to support secular civil organizations while monitoring Islamist organizations more strictly. A fourth priority intends to reinvest in public services in poor neighborhoods, especially public education and urban rehabilitation programs, while fighting discriminatory practices in hiring and housing opportunities. For instance, Macron announced the hiring of more teachers to reduce the number of pupils per class, as well as the opening of forty new community centers and three hundred local public service centers in working-class areas.

Because it was triggered by radical Islamist activism, the beheading of a schoolteacher dramatically validates this agenda and will necessarily shape the coming parliamentary discussions. More than ever, the legacy of *Charlie Hebdo* will be a central issue in France, which became even more a matter of principle with the death of Paty—another “republican martyr.” In a sense, *Charlie Hebdo* does not belong only to its small community of readers anymore. The murder of its staff members turned the cheeky, rebellious magazine into a solemn icon bearing a simple message: in a democracy, no one should die for a drawing, no matter what the drawing is about.

Beyond laws, the durability of principles such as *laïcité*, freedom of belief, and freedom of expression within French society largely depends on how they are experienced in daily life. The French people, including practicing Muslims, have repeatedly expressed their fervent attachment to these “ordering” societal principles, and it will be the people’s responsibility to embody the renewed *laïcité* framework proposed by Macron.

Apart from the police and judicial response to Paty’s killing, the central question is the issue of resilience. French society proved resilient after the 2015 terrorist attacks. Although some predicted a civil war at the time, millions marched together in France days after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. Similarly, French people of all backgrounds have gathered in public squares since Paty’s murder. While far-right voices are already targeting foreigners and immigration policies, many public figures and politicians have emphasized that the goal of terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda is to divide multicultural societies and sow the seeds of interreligious infighting in Europe. As the new bill is introduced in parliament, a frank public debate in defense of secularism can help defeat those goals.

CONCLUSION

A teacher simply doing his job has been beheaded, and the French people have responded with shock and outrage. The balance struck in President Macron’s October 2 speech—reinvesting in social cohesion while isolating and fighting local extremism—will be decisive in addressing the root causes of such a horrendous crime and keeping French society together to confront extremism. Equally crucial will be addressing channels for inspiring attacks—whether Islamic State propaganda or local institutions.

Now more than ever, the fight against terrorism will remain a foreign policy priority for the French government. Moreover, partnerships with European countries, the United States, and Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq—whose prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, visited Paris on October 19—will remain of the utmost importance. Sadly, the case of Abdullakh Anzorov shows that homegrown violent extremism often has international dimensions.

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