

Contending with New and Old Threats: A French Perspective on Counterterrorism

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Brief Analysis

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A top intelligence official discusses domestic radicalization, the AUKUS crisis, potential Afghanistan fallout, and other key security issues, emphasizing the need for strong U.S.-French cooperation.

On October 12, The Washington Institute hosted a virtual Policy Forum with Laurent Nuñez, who has served as France's National Coordinator for Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism since 2020. See above for video of the event with English translation. See below to read a full English transcript of his remarks or watch the untranslated French video.

Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State continues to survive, although clandestinely, but it is still acting and committing attacks, likely with the intention to commit terrorist acts in Europe and the Western world.

Another source of concern with regard to projected threats is that there are certain fighters in Syria and Iraq who were able to return to their country of origin in places where they haven't necessarily been brought to justice, which is why we must be extremely vigilant, especially in the Balkans and the Maghreb. This has attracted much of our attention because many individuals could have returned from Syria and Iraq and stayed in these territories. We also have to be careful of any potential jihadist hotbeds, as in Syria, Iraq, or the Sahel, where al-Qaeda or the Islamic State are suffering due to French and local action but still remain in these territories, or in other hotbeds like Afghanistan and Mozambique. So we must pay attention to all of these jihadist hotbeds around the world that can set up bases of projection to direct attacks on France and Europe. This is why we must be extremely vigilant in this regard.

We talk a lot about Sunni terrorist threats and endogenous threats, but we also consider other types of terrorist threats, many of which are very well known here in the United States. We have seen terrorism coming from the ultra-right and ultra-left develop in European democracies. In the last few years, French intelligence dismantled six clandestine ultra-right hotbeds that intended to attack democratic institutions in order to ultimately topple those in power. This is done for various reasons—some groups hope to replace the state, while others who are driven by conspiracy theories will attack a state that they believe is attacking its own population. So we see these types of groups taking a lot of power similar to what is witnessed in the United States. We have dismantled six small ultra-right groups in France—it is a significant number even though it concerns a minority of people, but the threat remains. The characteristics of these groups are very similar to those of groups in the United States: they start in secret with the intention to move on to more daring action, in general envisaging terrorist actions. In France, it is the anti-terrorist prosecution office that handled those cases. At the end of 2020, we dismantled an ultra-left group that intended to pursue violent terrorist action. Thus, we are paying attention to all of the various terrorist threats, which is why we depend on partnerships with the intelligence services of other countries.

The second point of my talk, and I'll try to go fast so that we have time for questions, is the system we have put in place in France to respond to the terrorist threat. This system serves to reinforce the intelligence services in France, which have seen their human, technical, and budgetary resources as well as their judiciary means increase. As for human resources, since the election of President Macron in 2017, the domestic services alone have recruited about 2,000 people. Since 2017-2018, we have increased hiring by 20 percent in the intelligence services. We have also increased our budgetary and technical resources, which expands our technical ability to collect more information. This effort extends to all intelligence services—domestic and external, and in particular the DGSE, which is under the Department of the Army.

We have also put legislative measures in place with better follow-up for people who are at risk of radicalizing and resorting to terrorism. We adopted a law in October 2017 that helped us end our state of emergency, which I could maybe say more on during the questions later. This law enables us to go to people's homes when judicially authorized, in addition to other measures regarding individuals who are suspected to have violent intentions. A system of coordination between the different services was also implemented. It is my job to oversee cooperation between the services, so we asked the intelligence services to help ensure better flow of information.

In addition, since 2001, information sharing between different states has increased substantially. Since 2015, this exchange has multiplied again. Today, international cooperation on counterterrorism is at a very high level, and the exchange of information is far more fluid. As far as France is concerned, we are participating in this information exchange, and the reinforcement of counterterrorism action is also seen at the EU level. Of course, the European Union has no powers when it comes to the area of counterterrorism, but it has powers to furnish a number of relevant legal tools to its member states. In that framework, several regulations have been adopted that are applicable in all European countries on matters such as the carrying of weapons, the detention of explosives, and the travel of people within the Schengen agreement, which enables us to track suspected and identified people.

All of the measures that have been put in place since 2017 have helped us prevent thirty-six Islamist terrorist attacks and dismantle six ultra-right groups and one ultra-left group. We must stay vigilant in order to continue seeing the results I have just discussed. This increase in legal competence for intelligence services has always been proportional and respected the state of law. Thus, the intelligence services are required to undergo controls by the Senate and National Assembly. In addition, when the services set up new measures, these are controlled by an independent administration, the National Commission for the Control of Intelligence Techniques, which thoroughly reviews the new measures, thus ensuring proportionality. This ensures that democracies do not fall into the trap set by jihadists, which would push them to become totalitarian in a way. On the contrary, all of these measures are set up within a legal framework, and the control powers of the Parliamentary delegation and the National Commission have been increased.

Regarding the state of the threat and the reaction to it in our society, the challenges we face when it comes to countering the terrorist threat include the legal system, international cooperation, and domestic issues. We must be vigilant about projected attacks, but they are less probable. The challenge for intelligence services today—and I believe you face a similar threat in the United States with what you call the "domestic threat" and individuals who act without having been previously identified by the intelligence services—is to be able to identify actors of whom agencies are unaware and who may act quickly and with determination. It is very important that our services jointly consider the question of how to deal with unknown individuals whose only trace is on the internet. This raises questions for us on issues such as

algorithms and the contributions that platforms can have to help detect these people. For those challenges, cooperation between states is necessary. I know that several ultra-right terrorist actors in the United States were not necessarily known by intelligence services.

My third point, quickly, is the resilience of French society and Western democracies. The reality is that after every attack, we have seen the mobilization of the local population. As you know, right now, the trial of the terrorists of the November 13, 2015, attacks is underway. One of these attacks took place at the Bataclan, which is a show venue in France. We also had an attack the same day at the Stade de France, a football stadium in Paris, as well as on terraces and restaurants. Now, relatives of the victims are coming forward to share their humanity, their strength, and their resilience in their testimony.

In a few days, we will commemorate the death of Professor Samuel Paty, the history teacher who was murdered one year ago next to his high school in a terrorist attack that was very traumatic for the country. In spite of this, the French population stood together and showed its unanimous support to the education system. So I think our resilience in the face of the terrorist threat is extremely powerful. We never let it take us where it wants to take us, which is a place of hatred and division. Our democracies rise above these obstacles and we owe it to the victims of terrorism to keep our determination. Right now, I want to remember all of the victims of terrorism in French territory, especially with the ongoing trial and as we prepare to commemorate the death of Samuel Paty.

Since we are discussing this attack, I would like to briefly discuss a policy we have in France that sometimes attracts confusion, especially in English-speaking countries and Muslim countries. This policy aims to fight against Islamist separatism. It is important to understand this in order to understand the policy implemented in France. Until 2017-2018, all of the measures in place targeted violent radicalization, which means trying to identify individuals who are likely to act violently and commit terrorist attacks. This measure aims to evaluate and stop these individuals. What we and the president aimed to do in 2017 was create a policy that could identify all forms of radicalization—not just those that were directly expressed through violence, but also those that led people to believe that religious laws supersede those of the republic. Among these views are the lack of belief in equality for women, the placement of children in religious schools with all-religious programs that differ from the national education program, and opposition to public services that do not comply with religious doctrine, for instance promoting different times of access to public services for men and women. Radicalization could also include infringements on the freedom of expression, which is a basic right in our democracy.

Part of the policy, which is still in place in France, aims to identify each time we see this separatist environment—where religious law supersedes the laws of the republic and could potentially lead to reprehensible outcomes—and act upon it. We do this in part to respond to what French Muslims are asking for, and also because this form of separatism can lead to violent action. This is why I wanted to make this digression when talking about the murder of Samuel Paty. In this particular attack, he was targeted because he was at the center of a debate, raised by political Islamist movements, following a course he gave on freedom of speech, and we saw here how religious extremism can lead to the murder of an individual by designating the target to terrorists. The link between religious radicalization and terrorist attacks exists. And this applies to all religions, of course. Most individuals in France completely align with our republican policies that aim to guarantee freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and individual freedom, all of which are protected by the French republic. The republic is a space for people living together, and members of a religion cannot divide it and impose their own law, and this is what we are trying to express to our population: that the principles of our republic are the strongest. Like the United States, France is a country that upholds freedom. Of course, we respect the national traditions that each country has.

To finish with my fourth point, transatlantic cooperation on counterterrorism is very dense. We do work together militarily with the United States. France is the second contributor to the coalition against ISIS led by the United States. This is also true in the Sahel, where France is engaged with several partners including the United States. On top of this, we exchange a considerable amount of intelligence and cooperate at the senior level. This is true for other countries, of course, but it is particularly true between our two countries. We do not believe that this cooperation should change considerably based on the shift that is taking place in America—we should not devote all of our efforts to jihadists when local terrorism, like white supremacy, has also proven to be a major threat. But just because we must look inward at our own terrorism does not mean we cannot still work together internationally. These groups in North America and Europe may not work together, but they do have similar motivations, so cooperation in this fight is essential. The approach of the racist ultra-right should be explored and exploited to help our intelligence services prepare. I want to emphasize that this counterterrorism partnership must continue in order to protect our citizens, even if the acts of terrorism change.

Question & Answer Session

Matthew Levitt, The Washington Institute: Let's first address the elephant in the room—is U.S.-French counterterrorism security cooperation at risk of being impacted by the fallout of the AUKUS agreement and the submarine technology deal?

Laurent Nuñez: After the announcement of the AUKUS deal, there has obviously been a crisis of confidence between our two countries, which France did not appreciate. It wasn't just an issue of commercial interest, but also an issue of trust and confidence in our collaborative efforts. President Biden and President Macron have wished to launch bilateral discussions and concertation. We are now in this phase. We will continue to discuss in a transparent and frank fashion.

Levitt: So the United States and France see the terrorist threats facing each country slightly differently. In the United States, we're paying a lot more attention to white supremacists and other domestic violent extremist threats. And as you noted, in France the most pressing threats come from the radical jihadist milieu, even as there are also far-right and far-left threats. But I wonder if, coming off the Trump administration which wasn't so supportive of multilateral agreements, and now more recently following the Biden administration's mishandling of the Afghanistan withdrawal, if there is a bigger background and foundation for French concern about U.S. commitment to transatlantic counterterrorism cooperation, to which we've become accustomed over the years?

Nuñez: The French right-wing threat has never been neglected in France—efforts have not been aimed solely at jihadists. Jihadist threats have been prioritized because they pose the greatest threat to France, so it is important to stay on top of this issue. Nevertheless, just as we see in America, right-wing groups in Europe are now getting stronger and share many of the same goals as groups in America. They want to commit acts of violence at a massive scale. They do not appreciate institutions, they do not appreciate our government, and they do not believe that the government is there for them. As in the United States, they very quickly turn to clandestine action, which is new and did not happen in France until a couple of years ago. Of course, U.S. and French intelligence services will cooperate on this issue because it is important. We also cooperate with other states that have these issues. In France, we were able to stop six ultra-right groups before they were able to act, but in Germany, for example, a prefect was killed, and in the UK a member of Parliament was killed. We also saw what happened with the Anders Breivik tragedy in Norway.

Levitt: I'd like to follow up on your comments about what some still refer to as the "anti-separatism law." The bill has gone through multiple name changes, of course, reflecting its sensitivity—it started off as anti-separatism and ended up as a law to reinforce republican principles. What I'd like to ask you is, what is the French government doing to make Muslim French citizens feel that this law is not targeting them, but rather reinforcing republican principles?

Nuñez: The French government works with representatives from these communities and with religious clerics. We do not want the separatism that Islamic jihadists are trying to create, and the French public, including the Muslim community, is growing to understand this goal, and they agree that they do not want to be subjected to such an extremist view. Of course, a minority feels attacked. However, our president explained in October 2020 that a segment of radicalized individuals were radicalized because the French republic was not present in areas like education, work, and community insertion. When this was announced, we did a lot of work with the communities, particularly in terms of urban policy, and we received a lot of support from the communities at this time. Thus, we must be equal in the way we approach these communities, as we do not want to push people to become radicalized, or worse, violently radicalized. Of course, we must explain these laws, which can be complicated and difficult. But every time we have the opportunity to explain them, anywhere in the world, we take advantage of this opportunity.

Levitt: One of the most significant areas of disagreement between the United States and its European partners on counterterrorism relates to addressing extremist material on social media. It has to do with European ways of addressing privacy and America's way of addressing First Amendment rights relating to freedom of speech. When you sit down with your American counterparts, what's your message to them on what you would like to see America do related to the social media giants?

Nuñez: There are multiple aspects to this question. We cannot be naïve—part of the radicalization process, particularly for violent radicalization, happens on social media. Part of hate speech is also spread on social media. We have to react in a way that is clear, depending on the issue. When it comes to counterterrorism and terrorism content, we have been working on an effort that would block content in all European countries if it is blocked in one European country. On the second issue, we must also address content that may not be considered purely terrorist material, but it may talk about hate, separatism, or manipulation of information. We need social media platforms to work with us in this space by self-regulating. In this way, companies can detect, moderate, and suppress messages like this. This summer, the French government adopted a law requiring social media companies to moderate certain content. Now, a similar law is being considered in the EU, the Digital Services Act. It is extremely important that social media companies are responsible, and that they remove this kind of content from their platforms. But at the same time, from an investigative point of view, we also need to be able to access these platforms as quickly as possible. It is essential for the American intelligence community to help us, from a jurisdictional point of view, so that we can share information.

Levitt: Shortly before the Syrian revolution began, I was in Paris and I spoke to one of your counterparts who told me about young French Muslim teenagers who were telling their parents they were going to the south of France for spring vacation but were in fact going to Syria for a week or two. I think many people forget that there were foreign fighters flocking to Syria long before there was ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra. Are you at all concerned about the normalization of the Assad regime in terms of potential security threats to France?

Nuñez: It is true, around 2012-2015 several young teenagers traveled to Iraq and Syria, some supposedly for humanitarian reasons, and we realized later on that they went to fight and they became members of a terrorist organization. Right now, we do not have any additional people traveling to this area. There may be some exceptions, but most young people cannot travel to Syria and Iraq at this time. But France was very concerned about this issue—we had 1,400 young people that left France and traveled to the region, and this number was higher than that from many other European countries. But this is no longer an issue.

Levitt: One of our participants asks a bit of a historical question. At the height of ISIS in Syria, let's say 2014-2016, what do you think was the relationship between ISIS and the Assad regime? Was the Assad regime in any way helping ISIS, doing business with them, releasing prisoners, et cetera?

Nuñez: I cannot answer this question, which is out of my field of competence. What I can say is that between 2014 and 2016, all the intelligence services knew that ISIS was a terrorist group wanting to commit terrorist attacks. There was no ambiguity on what Daesh was. I will not answer on the link with the Assad regime.

Levitt: Following the withdrawal from Afghanistan, can you assess the external terrorism threat you see emerging from there after the Taliban takeover? In your view, is it likely that we will see the reemergence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan with the intent of carrying out attacks against the West?

Nuñez: The problem that the Taliban in Afghanistan creates for intelligence services all over the world and their fight against terrorism is related to four different problems that I believe we are all facing, and this is why we absolutely need a strong partnership with America and other Western actors.

The first problem that we have to pay attention to is: will the fact that the Taliban is now in charge of Afghanistan mean that it will invite people to come and train to become jihadists, like we were just discussing about Iraq and Syria between 2012, 2013, and 2014? In France, we don't believe this will be a major issue for us and will not concern French citizens, as there is no longer ease of access or organized networks, but we have to remember that between 1996 and 2001, about 100 young Frenchmen went to fight with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. That was the first time something like this happened.

The second problem is that we must figure out if people arriving in France from Afghanistan can be properly screened and assessed.

The third problem is that parts of the Taliban will be unable to stop some members of al-Qaeda, ISIS, or Wilayat Khorasan from coming and reinstalling themselves in remote areas. Will these cells be able to prosper? We do not know if the Taliban can stop these kinds of groups from resetting in this country. As we know, Wilayat Khorasan has already conducted attacks in Afghanistan, and we don't know how the new Taliban state can address this. Thus, the risk grows larger if they cannot resolve this issue.

The fourth point, of course, is that they've finally created a state. Is it possible to inspire young people from European countries to commit attacks because they are galvanized by the fact that we left Afghanistan? This has not happened, but we are vigilant.

These are the four points that we have to deal with now that the United States and Europe have left Afghanistan. These are not minor problems, so the French intelligence services, both external and internal, are paying attention to this and are working very closely with all of their partners.

Levitt: When the Biden administration explained the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, one point it made is that there are more pressing venues where terrorism is happening today, pointing in particular to Africa. France, of course, has been very active in counterterrorism in Africa. So I'd first like to ask you how you perceive the nature of the terrorist threats from Africa, both to French interests in Africa and to France itself back home?

Nuñez: France intervened in Mali in 2013 to prevent the state from being lost to jihadist terrorists, and we stayed in the Sahel with what we call the Barkhane group. France has remained in this area and is adapting its presence because you are correct, al-Qaeda still exists there. There are multiple groups there that feel they can gain territory and create a caliphate there, but with local and European allies, we are trying to eradicate these terrorists. But this won't happen with military action alone. We work with local states to help them establish local jurisdiction, reaffirm rule of law, and apply their sociopolitical approach with local tribes and citizens in the various territories affected by the growth of al-Qaeda. It is true that we have had considerable success in this area, and we should recognize this. In particular, we neutralized the leader of the Islamic State in the Sahel, and we should emphasize that we are working very hard to counter terrorist groups in these territories.

Levitt: In your remarks, you spoke about a range of different types of terrorist threats, not just Sunni extremism but far right and far left. I'd like to ask you about Shia extremist groups as well. To start, can you speak about how you see the threat of Iranian state terrorism in Europe and France in particular, especially coming off the plot targeting the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) conference in Paris?

Nuñez: This is very confidential, so it is not something I can express right now. I cannot add any comments, but we are being vigilant on all forms of terrorism and paying close attention to this issue. In particular, this has been dealt with by a Belgian court. There was an attack plot in Villepinte, France, in June 2018. We were able to stop this attack, and the issue was addressed in Belgian court.

Levitt: So talking in detail about Iran is a little too sensitive. Let's talk for a second about Lebanese Hezbollah, which appears to still be active in Europe, including France. Of course, France participated in a very significant way in Operation Cedar, leading to the conviction of a Hezbollah operative in French court. In 2010, a Lebanese French professor in Lyon rented a safe house in Cyprus where Hezbollah was found to be storing ammonium nitrate. And we heard from the previous administration here that Hezbollah was moving ammonium nitrate through Europe, including through France. What is your sense of the threat from Hezbollah in France?

Nuñez: It is true that France and the United States have sometimes held different positions, especially when qualifying the different branches of Hezbollah—I know you are a specialist on the topic. I can't answer your question directly due to confidentiality, but French services are interested in all forms of terrorism, and we take all information seriously. No information is left aside, and the French services are always motivated and focused on these questions. There are some things I cannot say or discuss, but you can be assured that we are very focused, as you can see by the June 2018 case discussed earlier. ❖

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