

France Refuses to See Islamism as a Cultural Problem

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If European countries keep dodging difficult questions about Islamism for the sake of political expediency, international jihadists will continue to emerge from within.

Despite the terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015 in Paris, the French government refuses to acknowledge the link between terrorism in France, the crisis in the Middle East, and the complacency towards the threat of political Islam on the domestic scene. The truth is that the jihadists who hit Paris and then Brussels on March 22, 2016, had been indoctrinated in the Salafi ideology sponsored by Saudi funded mosques, indirectly financed by private donors in the Gulf, and tolerated by Turkey -- the country through which they pass to Europe. Moreover, these jihadists operated out of sympathetic "immigrant" communities in Paris and Brussels. When French President Francois Hollande decorated Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Nayef with the Legion of Honor last March, voices were raised to denounce the award's recipient in the post-attack environment. But the French Prime Minister asserted "France must assume its strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia." Thus, to keep favor with its most lucrative arms client and to maintain other contracts, France should refrain from any criticism of the Saudi political system and its dangerous links with radical Islamism. The responsibility of Saudi Arabia in promoting Salafism is a topic constantly sidestepped by western governments, who should be pressing the Saudi government to "de-salafize" its educational system and prevent it from graduating tens of thousands of new radical Imams each year who then sweep throughout the world, including France, to preach the hate of the "kafir" (infidel and generally non-Salafi).

Perhaps France, like other western countries, is really a prisoner of its geopolitical relationship with Saudi Arabia; that is why it's so difficult to combat foreign sources of evil. But French authorities could at least attempt to address the internal causes. Unfortunately, radical Islam, including Salafists or the Muslim Brotherhood, has influential support within France thanks to a strong group of Islamic-leftist intellectuals. They have achieved the synthesis

between Edward Said and Sayyid Qutb. For them, Islamic terrorism is the consequence of autocracies prevailing in the Arab world, especially Egypt, Algeria and Syria, and of western support for Israel. The protection of Israel and the absence of foreign intervention against Bashar al-Assad belong to the same western plot against the Muslim world. This mix of conspiracy theory and lack of reflection on the internal causes of the failure of development and modernization in most Arab countries allows them to synthesize Islam and the world revolution. The former Trotskyist militants bring their experience and their ideological baggage to the Islamists. Their speeches manage to convince local politicians anxious to win the "Muslim vote" in the elections.

In a recent interview (*Le Monde*, April 2, 2016) the philosopher Elisabeth Badinter denounces the position of the French left towards sectarianism; she describes the left as split in two. On the one hand there is a respectable ideological stance, while on the other, political -- and less respectable -- motivations. Upholding the right of everyone to be different, some people, she says, think that all cultures and traditions are equal and therefore we have no right to impose anything. So, the wearing of the burqa, segregation and gender inequality, and refusal to submit to the laws of the Republic, under the pretext that only the laws of God are acceptable, should be therefore lawful on French territory. Regarding the political motivations, Badinter is referring to those promises to build a mosque or to serve 'halal' meals in public schools in exchange for Muslim votes.

According to a study by the French Poll Institute in 2012, the Socialist candidate in the presidential election, Francois Hollande, received 86% of the Muslim vote. This disproportionate share of the Muslim vote clearly enabled Hollande to prevail against the center-right candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, who lost with 48.4% of the vote. The Muslim voters are considered a 'reserve of votes' essential to the Socialist Party, since most of the "Gallic" popular vote is driven to the National Front (27% of the vote in the regional elections, in December 2015). Within the "original" French population, the Socialist Party receives votes from civil servants anxious to preserve their social gains, and wealthy urban liberals living in city centers. The same calculation was made by the Belgian Socialist Party which voted in 2004 for the immigrant vote in municipal elections, enabling it to win in large cities like Brussels and Antwerp in the 2006 election. Long-term integration policy is sacrificed for short term electoral interest.

A serious integration policy requires long-term planning, but primarily, it involves asking difficult questions about the fraught integration of Muslim populations. Islamism and ghettoization are not only the result of economic difficulties, but also a cultural gap. The fight against Islamism must start firstly in schools (primary and secondary) which long served as the nation's crucible, but no longer fulfill this function. Since the 1980s new teaching practices (little knowledge and lots of fun activities) and laxness have all but destroyed the education system in populous suburbs and especially those areas where immigrant populations are concentrated, despite the profusion of resources allocated by the state. In the "suburbs of the Republic," according to the political scientist Gilles Kepel, a low level of knowledge is delivered and any form of discipline banned in order to defuse conflicts: "Ducking, simplify and flatter" are the three magic words of today's teaching methods.

The theoretical goal of the "new pedagogy" was to promote another form of learning to prevent school failure for socially disadvantaged children. But it has only amplified the phenomenon of inequality -- this inadequate education fails to prepare students for the demands of the post-industrial economy because unskilled jobs are declining with deindustrialization in France. The predominantly Muslim neighborhoods have become communities with a parallel economy where drugs and weapons trafficking meet. Salafi preachers justify the crimes of these lost youth by saying they are victims of discrimination against Muslims by the "kafir" political system. Unfortunately, this rhetoric of victimization is furthered by the well-meaning speeches of leftist politicians and intellectuals. In this mix, it is easy for both extreme-right populism and radical Islamism to develop. These are the two faces of the decadence of the French republican model, but Belgium, Netherlands, United Kingdom and other western European countries are facing the same phenomena. While France and other countries refuse to recognize Muslim sectarianism as a threat,

international jihadists will continue to emerge from Bradford, Molenbeek and Saint-Denis.

Fabrice Balanche, an associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2, is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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