



The French Disconnection: Francophone Countries and Radicalization

by [Olivier Decottignies](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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A recent article on the Francophone origins of foreign jihadists fighting in Syria shows a surprisingly shallow understanding of the French-speaking world.

In a [recent article](#), William McCants and Christopher Meserole, both from the Brookings Institution, argue that "the best predictor" of foreign fighter radicalization is whether their country of origin is Francophone. Rather than incriminating the French language as such, the authors see a connection between radicalization and what they call "French political culture." They lay special emphasis on the "strident" and "aggressive" French approach to secularism. Radicalization in Belgium and France, in their view, fit into a pattern that they say holds true with other Francophone countries, in particular the most economically developed.

McCants and Meserole's indictment of "French political culture" negates the diversity of the Francophone world; think of an "English political culture" that would encompass, say, the United States, the Palau Islands, and Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Sentences such as "If anything, it's a story of what happens when French economic and political development has most deeply taken root" also carry unsavory undertones. For comparison, replace "French" with "Arab," "Latino," or any other group.

If anything, the McCants-Meserole thesis illustrates the pitfalls of data-based analysis in the study of terrorism. Although the two scholars initially aimed at "explaining the Sunni militancy around the world," they ended up focusing on a couple of European countries that together make up slightly more than one percent of the world's population...

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