

## The Rise of Jihad in Europe: Views from France

[Gilles Kepel](#), [Tamara Cofman Wittes](#), and [Matthew Levitt](#)

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Leading American and French experts discuss the evolution of modern jihad and Europe's concerns about radicalized foreign fighters returning home from Iraq and Syria.

*On May 15, Gilles Kepel, Tamara Cofman Wittes, and Matthew Levitt addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Kepel is a professor at Sciences Po in Paris and author of the French bestseller *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West*. Wittes is a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy. Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Fellow, director of its Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, and editor of its recent bipartisan transition paper [Defeating Ideologically Inspired Violent Extremism: A Strategy to Build Strong Communities and Protect the U.S. Homeland](#). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

### GILLES KEPEL

A new era has begun in France with the inauguration of President Emmanuel Macron. His opponent, Marine Le Pen, repeatedly attacked him as soft on terrorism, to which Macron countered that the jihadists' goal was to spur the extreme right to victory. Indeed, jihadist ideologue Abu Musab al-Suri's 2005 manifesto *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance* argued that conducting attacks on European soil, the "soft underbelly of the West," would strengthen extreme-right politics there, allowing jihadists to convince European Muslims that there is no coexistence to be found on a racist, xenophobic continent.

To put these arguments in perspective, it is important to contrast the three phrases of modern jihadism. From 1979 to 1997, the jihads undertaken in Afghanistan, Algeria, and Egypt defined the movement's opening "affirmation" phase. Sunni-financed and CIA-backed efforts against the Soviets in Afghanistan seemed to kill two birds -- the Russians and Shias -- with one stone. At the time, Sunni Gulf monarchies felt threatened by Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and saw Sunni jihadism as a counterweight to his depiction of Shia extremists as the champions of oppressed Muslims.

After Soviet troops pulled out of Kabul in 1989, jihadist fighters sought to re-create the Afghan jihad in their home countries. Yet without Saudi money in Algeria and Egypt, they could not attract large followings. By 1997, al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri had internalized the lessons of the post-Afghanistan failures. Zawahiri refocused his efforts on combatting the "far enemy," the United States, based on the notion that striking a blow against America would expose it as a colossus with feet of clay. In his view, this would assuage the fears that were preventing the masses from mobilizing under the banner of jihad.

Phase two, the "negation," began with the bombings of American embassies in Africa and culminated in 9/11. Yet while al-Qaeda succeeded in executing complex, transnational attacks, it had no grassroots access to Muslim

populations. Moreover, the group's goal of engaging the West in a war of attrition in Afghanistan and Iraq did not come to fruition. In Shia-majority Iraq, Sunni jihadists were left cornered in their sectarian strongholds.

Phase three, the "overtaking," shifted the focus from America to Europe. The deaths of Muslims at the hands of jihadists had made it difficult to attract followers, and the U.S. homeland was too distant to ignite a mass movement. Europe, with its large, conservative, and often discontented Muslim populations, was the target in this new era of network-based jihad. These strategic changes, coupled with the advent of social media, created a culture in which smaller attacks could gain attention and recruits without traditional media.

European prisons became a particularly ripe breeding ground for jihadism. French intelligence agencies had jailed numerous key radicals throughout phase two, but these actors found a new opportunity for proselytism in the overcrowded prison system, leading to incidents of "bottom-up" jihadism like Mohammed Merah's 2012 shooting rampage in Toulouse. A Frenchman of Algerian descent, Merah seemed to be reigniting the anti-colonial war against France; his final attack marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Algerian Revolution. This brand of retro-colonial backlash became the fuel for modern jihadism in Europe, and battlefields across the Middle East offered humanitarian motives to join the fight abroad.

Since January 2015, jihadist terrorism has killed 239 people in France. The wave of violence slowed in September 2016, and nearly all plots since then have been foiled. Given the pressure placed on the Islamic State in recent months, the group has had little time or resources to plan external attacks, and the recently closed Turkish borders restrict the movement of militants. The third generation of jihadism is under duress, and no Suri has yet risen to usher in the fourth.

## **TAMARA COFMAN WITTES**

Gilles' new book provides a detailed picture of the escalating terrorist threat in France, describing an interplay between internal and external forces. Internally, social and generational changes have had a significant impact, as have the successes and failures of various attempts to assimilate immigrants into French society. Externally, the evolution of extremist movements and the regional forces of state collapse and war have shaped the threat. The result is what Gilles describes as two separate discourses in France -- the "fasco-sphere" and the "jihado-sphere" -- that feed off one another in very destructive ways. Economic and political reforms are critical to overcoming the exclusionist platforms promoted by figures such as Le Pen and European Salafists. Le Pen supporters cannot be equated with individuals who are vulnerable to jihadist recruiters, but they do constitute one of two powerful opposing forces at play in France today.

More broadly, Europe has been suffused by a debate on integration and globalization. The social forces generated by these processes (including their high-profile examples of failure) have catalyzed movements that take a zero-sum approach to politics and deeply challenge liberal democracy. Several elections in the past few months have been driven by these dynamics. Macron is the latest victor over this exclusionism; he is decidedly in favor of openness. His success gives Europeans an opportunity to set aside the "yes or no" approach to integration and instead discuss pragmatic reforms to end what has become a dangerously polarizing social context.

## **MATTHEW LEVITT**

In his book, Gilles walks the reader through the events that provide the backdrop for Phase Three, analyzing forces unseen at the time they emerged. In many ways, today's threat nexus is far bigger than the Afghan jihad; whereas 100 French recruits joined that fight, approximately 2,000 have traveled to fight in Syria and Iraq, not to mention the many others who have been enabled, inspired, or directed by the Islamic State while remaining at home. Authorities in France and around the world are overwhelmed.

Law enforcement is only beginning to see the links between current cases and the networks they witnessed in the past. For example, Gilles documents the story of the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont in Paris, where jihadists would meet in the mid-2000s to radicalize, recruit, and facilitate travel for compatriots to fight in Iraq. Although this network was shut down in 2005, it reemerged a decade later via a series of attacks in January 2015, beginning with the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting. Initial reports were baffled by the apparent cooperation across enemy lines between the Kouachi brothers (the al-Qaeda supporters behind the *Hebdo* incident) and Amedy Coulibaly (the self-proclaimed Islamic State fighter who subsequently attacked a Kosher supermarket). Their relationship and mutual support were born out of the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, where they had met ten years earlier; these links persisted despite their avowed allegiance to rival groups.

Jihadist networks metastasized in prison on an even larger scale. Terrorism sentences in Europe are usually limited to just a few years, and in the past they were rarely coupled with rehabilitation programs in prison or reintegration efforts post-release. A decade ago, French politics deemed counterradicalization to be verboten. In 2008, experts from The Washington Institute led a trip to Europe in preparation for a bipartisan election-year report on countering violent extremism. There, they arranged a briefing with officials across the French government -- yet these French stakeholders had never met with each other previously, so the briefing inadvertently became the country's first interagency meeting on counterradicalization. On a return trip in 2012, it was clear that little had been achieved in four years. Today, however, escalating attacks have pushed the Europeans to progress beyond the United States on counterradicalization, while American agencies are overrun with concerns on how to mitigate risk and measure achievements in this controversial space.

Going forward, it is important for Washington to absorb Europe's hard-earned lessons and make reforms at home. For example, the Obama administration was overly reluctant to use the term "Islamist," so the current administration should make a point of distinguishing between "Islamist" and "Islamic" -- the former referring to a radical political ideology, not a religion or its institutions. In addition, initiatives to counter violent extremism need to be enhanced. Some tools used to counter Islamist extremism can be employed across the spectrum of violent ideologies, but others are not so flexible. The United States and its allies must also be careful not to fall into the trap set by jihadists, who seek to nurture extremism and social divisions in the West. Yet while governments should not overreact to nonviolent Islamist extremism, those ideas cannot go uncontested.

*This summary was prepared by Maxine Rich.*