

# Radicalization in Prisons and Mosques in France

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France has the largest Islamic population in Europe (~5.7 million) and one of the largest percentages of total population (~8.8 percent), along with Sweden, Bulgaria, and Cyprus.<sup>1</sup> While the Arab Spring and associated conflict in the Middle East have triggered a significant influx of migrants into the country, France has been a destination for immigrants from its former colonies like Morocco and Algeria since the second half of the twentieth century. While many issues regarding radicalization stem from migration stretching back decades, the rapid increase in immigrants from war-torn areas, combined with prevalent Islamist extremism, presents extremely serious issues for the French government. For perspective, the Islamic population in the country in 2011 was roughly 4.7 million, or 7.5 percent of the total population.<sup>2</sup> However, as France refrains from conducting censuses on the basis of religion, there are no official statistics about the subject—only estimates.

The phenomenon of Muslim immigration to France became significant in the 1960s, following the granting of asylum to hundreds of thousands of Algerians who fought on France's behalf in the Algerian War of Independence. After that, an economic boom led to the country welcoming millions of immigrants, many of whom were Muslim. While the French polity and society has continued from that time to be welcoming and accommodating of cultural and religious differences, many present-day points of contention regarding Islam were prevalent even before the significant Wahhabi and Salafist radicalization that is noted today.<sup>3</sup> These include conflicts over the *hijab*, extremists silencing of moderate Muslim voices, poor living conditions and ghettos, and so forth.<sup>4</sup> Islamic traditions have often clashed with French ideals, as exemplified by former French Interior Minister Charles Pasqua's statement that has been echoed by later presidents: "It is not enough simply to have Islam in France. There must now be a French Islam."<sup>5</sup>

Since 2011, the world has had to deal with a shift in tactics by terrorist groups because of factors such as the phenomenal progress seen in digital communications and technology, as well as increased radicalization aimed at migrants and "home-grown" terrorists. This is reflected in France as well, with major attacks like the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, November 2015 Paris shootings and bombings, and the July 2016 Nice vehicle attack (accompanied by myriad smaller attacks), all in the name of radical Islam. Similarly, as of 2018 an estimated 2000 French

nationals traveled to the Middle East to fight for the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>6</sup> While keeping in mind the significant roles technology plays in radicalization today, one must not forget the continuing influence other organizations and institutions like mosques and prisons have played in radicalization.

French Muslims have historically suffered poor socioeconomic conditions as compared to other groups, with higher rates of unemployment, gentrification and ghettoized living spaces, and increasing Islamophobia and discrimination.<sup>7</sup> This is a distinct phenomenon even culturally, where the French word for suburbs, *banlieue*, is understood to be used only with negative connotations because of their poor living conditions and large, visible Muslim populations.<sup>8</sup> Youth unemployment in Sevrans and Grigny, both suburbs of Paris with visible Muslim populations, is over 40 percent. In 2005, martial law was declared to quell riots across suburbs in response to the death of two teenagers who were evading the police.<sup>9</sup>

While many commentators and studies would like to make the easier rationalization for radicalization, that of poor socioeconomic conditions and poor integration with French society,<sup>10</sup> the issue is far more complex. For instance, a study by the *Centre de prévention contre les dérives sectaires liées à l'Islam* in 2014 stated that 67 percent of the radicalized youth the center studied belonged to a middle-class backgrounds and 17 percent came from an upper-class backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> Related studies have also reiterated that poor socioeconomic conditions alone cannot explain patterns of radicalization in countries like France.<sup>12</sup> While socioeconomic backgrounds definitely influence the radicalization of individuals, such as through institutions like the prison system, it is clearly only one aspect of a larger problem many countries in Europe must deal with immediately.



(Photo: Twitter, @ManikTyagi)

**Figure 1. Riots.** French Muslim youths rioting in Paris during a July 2014 anti-Israel demonstration.

As can be evinced from France's recent counter-radicalization and antiterrorism measures, mosques are often the first step in influencing individuals and making them sympathetic toward radical views and a precursor to some choosing to pick up arms against the state. France has approximately 2,500 mosques and prayer halls, and in just nine months after the November 2015 Paris attacks, 20 were shut down for preaching radical Salafist ideologies.<sup>13</sup> After the introduction of a controversial antiterrorism law in November 2017, a further seven mosques were shut down for similar reasons.<sup>14</sup> The French government has stated that an estimated 30,000–50,000 French Salafists have ties to approximately 140 Salafi mosques in the country.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, the French government's strict adherence to secularism, called *laïcité*, bolstered the role of mosques in radicalization. The strict separation of church and state leads to the government's inability to play a role in the funding or running of religious institutions. This has resulted in funds and training originating from countries such as Algeria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco, with a report claiming that 70 percent of the imams preaching in French mosques are not French nationals and are trained and paid only by their country of origin.<sup>16</sup>

Though the imams from these countries are often investigated before being allowed to preach in France, the significant number of informal congregations, with any individual volunteering to be the imam of the day, ensure that it remains extremely difficult to monitor and control such religious sermons.<sup>17</sup> Oversight of religious sermons has resulted in the expulsion of 40 clerics between 2012 and 2015, with 52 individuals, including clerics, expelled through 2017.<sup>18</sup> In April 2018, Algerian imam El Hadi Douidi was expelled from France for preaching that Jews are "unclean, the brothers of monkeys and pigs," women should not leave their homes without permission, and that apostates need to be eliminated by the death penalty.<sup>19</sup> Though the exact methods undertaken to monitor these sermons are opaque, they are unlikely to have changed from the pre-Arab Spring era, where sermons were collected, centrally analyzed on the basis of certain indicators, and then classified as requiring further surveillance or not.<sup>20</sup>

However, the danger today is the role technology plays in radicalization, as it lessens the dependence on large, physical congregations to spread extremist ideas widely. Radical preachers can now spread their sermons through videos and chatrooms accessible on individuals' phones, with places like mosques and ghettos often being the gateway or introduction to individuals who share such content. The internet resources accessed act as constant echo chambers and allow exposure to extremist content throughout the day, as opposed to a few minutes or hours an individual would be influenced in physical congregations, allowing then for self-radicalization.<sup>21</sup> The French government has an Internet Referral Unit to study and take down websites if necessary (as of 2016 almost 5,000 websites were

blocked for connections to radical Islam<sup>22</sup>) and until recently had also deemed making regular visits to jihadi websites illegal.

Another institution that acts as a breeding ground for radicalization is the prison system in France, as is the case in many other countries as well.<sup>23</sup> Depending on the location, some prisons in France are estimated to house approximately 50 percent Muslim inmates.<sup>24</sup> More worrisome is the fact that Muslims constitute 8.5 percent in the 18–24-year age demographic in France but account for 39.9 percent of all prisoners in that age cohort.<sup>25</sup> Scholars have theorized that the feeling of “frustration,” minimal contact with the outside world, limited effectiveness of Muslim chaplains, and a strict enforcement of French secularism have all contributed to prisons creating micronetworks of radicalized individuals who interact and communicate even after their prison terms.<sup>26</sup> Considering the continuing phenomena of a disproportionate number of Muslims in France being incarcerated, prisons and mosques often work hand-in-hand to introduce individuals to radical theologies and slowly increase their participation in the same, all assisted by increasingly sophisticated digital communications.

The focus of radicalization and its effects, violent or otherwise, has traditionally focused only on Muslim males, often ignoring the radicalization of Muslim women. Until 2016–17, returning women jihadists from Syria were treated as victims of ISIL rather than criminals themselves and were rarely prosecuted.<sup>27</sup> This has changed in recent years, as French authorities realized around 28 percent of returning ISIL fighters were women, with home-grown radicalization also resulting in instances of female-only groups attempting terrorist attacks, such as the 2016 Notre Dame terror plot.<sup>28</sup> Even nonviolent radicalization has many women-centric issues at its heart; for instance the French government’s pushback against the *hijab* has created resentment in many communities in the country and is often used as a tool to radicalize.

The French government is aware of the gravity of radical Islam and its growth, resulting in a series of new laws and reforms in recent years, often with bipartisan support. In February 2018, a 60-point plan was unveiled to seek to prevent radicalization and focus on tackling many of the foundational issues that allow/encourage radical Islam to flourish. Measures include the inception of 1,500 separate units for the incarceration, education, and evaluation of radicalized individuals in prisons; programs for the reintegration of radical fighters returning from the Middle East; and increasing oversight of French private schools (out of which less than 100 are for Muslim children).<sup>29</sup>

It remains unclear whether any of the proposed measures will be adequate to deal with this issue. President Emmanuel Macron has considered the possibility of an interlocutor for French Muslims, a framework to monitor and facilitate

funding for places of worship and seek ways to stop the foreign funding that keeps the mosques in France running.<sup>30</sup> Many of his proposed measures may have to amend the 1905 law of separation of church and state in France and are the subject of much debate. In 2016, the French Muslim Council proposed the creation of a foundation to finance mosques and wean them off their dependence of foreign funding, but the proposal has not seen any progress since. Similarly, a proposed deradicalization center was established in 2016 but shut down five months later and criticized for a heavy handed approach.<sup>31</sup> All this indicates a willingness by the Muslim community in France to work with the government on issues of extremism, but the criticism of some proposed moves is also indicative of how much the community is amenable to French secularism making demands of Islam. Moderate and progressive voices like that of Tareq Oubrou, Grand Imam of Bordeaux, have to contend with a community that is increasingly fearful of rising Islamophobia and susceptible to extremist views, while dealing with government measures some deem draconian along with death threats from extremists.<sup>32</sup> A comprehensive plan to tackle radicalization has to deal with French secularism, which is often at odds with the Muslim community, who view it as an attack on their religion. Additionally, would-be reformers must contend with rising Islamophobia and political parties like the National Rally; poor socioeconomic and living conditions for most Muslim immigrants; and juggling all these issues with the very real threat of increasing extremism in mosques, prisons, community centers, and even schools. One often associates discussions about radicalization with its violent strains, and yet its nonviolent forms are as worrisome for national and social cohesiveness, if not more so. An example of this would be the many Muslim school students refusing to observe a minute of silence following the Charlie Hebdo attacks.<sup>33</sup> In a country with an exceptionally high regard for free speech and secularism, what policies can work to bridge the gap between different communities?

As of today, possibly the most consistent efforts to combat radical Islam in France are being implemented by the country's security apparatus, such as Operation Sentinelle, in which 10,000 military troops are tasked with patrolling and safeguarding key areas, and the new antiterrorism law providing greater powers to the government. With regards to a comprehensive deradicalization program tackling the root of the problem, there appears to be no consensus or concerted policy shift that can actually solve many of the societal issues that turn individuals to extremist strains of Islam.

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## Notes

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