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State and Religion: The French Response to Jihadist Violence †

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Abstract: The five acts of jihadist violence between 2012–2020, particularly the 2015 Paris attacks, combined with an increasingly polarized political discourse in France, have pushed jihadist extremism to the center of government policy and public opinion. Approaches to jihadist extremism in the last decade have comprised two characteristics: claims amalgamating Islam and Muslim religious practice—especially in its stricter forms—with extremist violence, along with the idea that such forms of dangerous religious indoctrination are best battled through education. As a result, there has been a renewed debate concerning the principle of *laïcité* (secularism) within public schools and other public institutions. One of the leading efforts in this context has focused on processes of “deradicalization”. These projects include various educational tools, rehabilitation attempts inside and outside of prisons, cultural and artistic initiatives, and administrative bans imposed on organizations inciting violence. However, the most ambitious of these efforts have also been subject to the greatest criticism. Projects within the public school system have been accused of securitizing education and stigmatizing Muslim students, whereas measures undertaken in prisons are currently limited to risk assessment of inmates linked with jihadist violence, while lacking more meaningful plans for their rehabilitation. Public-private partnerships have developed more promising initiatives, but their moderate success is still recent and requires further study.

Keywords: France; radicalization; terrorism; jihadist; Islam; religious minorities; religion; reintegration; separatism



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1. Introduction

In the past decade, jihadist terrorism and radicalization have become the predominant preoccupation for politically motivated radical violence in France. The increase in jihadist violence in recent years is a key reason for this attention. Fifty-three completed, foiled, or failed jihadist attacks occurred in France in 2012–2019, compared with only four in 2001–2011. In six out of eight years in the 2012–2019 period, France also ranked first among other EU member states in the number of jihadist terrorist incidents (Europol 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). But numbers do not reveal the whole picture. Rather, the explanation is also rooted in the tremendous symbolic weight of the “French 9/11” Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan attacks in 2015, as well as subsequent incidents, such as the recent October 2020 beheading of a French teacher who showed caricatures of Mohammed to his students. Amplified by media coverage and inflammatory political discourse, the collective trauma of these events continues to have an overwhelming effect on the perceptions of radicalization in the eyes of the government, as well as in public opinion. Against this background, other politically driven violent manifestations in France have received less attention and raised fewer concerns.

This paper accounts for the structure and stakeholders of (de)radicalization regarding jihadist violence in France. For our purposes, we understand radicalization as processes involving the increasing rejection of established law, order, and politics, and the active

pursuit of alternatives, in the form of politically-driven violence or the justification of violence; deradicalization refers to processes countering such rejection at individual (micro), organizational (meso), or societal (macro) levels, resulting in a shift from violent to nonviolent strategies and tactics (deradicalization might or might not be an outcome of deradicalization programs).

This article offers a general overview of jihadist radicalization agents and deradicalization stakeholders in France. We do not seek to identify or map the drivers of jihadist violence or estimate the role of religion in the processes of jihadist radicalization. Instead, we analyze the framing of jihadist radical violence in the French public opinion and political discourse and examine the deradicalization policies devised by the French government in response to it.¹ Having set the contextual background of jihadist violence in France, we examine the perceptions of violent threats by the political elites and the general public. Next, we provide an overview of the main stakeholders of radicalization and deradicalization in France. This includes a review of actors engaged in jihadist violence and the prison system's share in the exacerbation of radicalization. Finally, we evaluate the efficacy of government attempts at deradicalization in schools, prisons, and rehabilitation centers.

2. Contextual Background

2.1. Immigration and Integration

Immigrants currently make up about 10% of the French population (~6.5 million); more than one-third are naturalized. A total of 46.5% of immigrants living in France were born in former French colonies in North and West Africa (mainly in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia), and another one-third were born in Europe (primarily in Portugal and Italy) (INSEE 2019). Immigration is a recurring, but remarkably fluctuating, topic in French election campaigns—it was highly politicized in the 1988, 2002, and 2012 elections, but received less attention in the subsequent 1995, 2007, and 2017 electoral cycles (Grande et al. 2019). More generally, immigration and the French colonial past, the intersection of which is most vivid in the large waves of migrants arriving from Algeria in the 1960s and 1970s, continue to play a significant role in the country's politics and affect its collective identity.

The struggle of second- and third-generation immigrants from former colonies against discrimination and for recognition of their identity began in the 1980s. It is still far from being fully addressed by the state. Revolts against the effective transparency of these conditions have been breaking out in the banlieues since the 1980s. The protests peaked in 2005, with violent riots that started in a northeast suburb of Paris and grew into a two-week uprising in 300 towns, involving the setting on fire of some 10,000 vehicles. The 2005 riots were met with severe police response with more than 3000 arrests, leading the president to declare a state of emergency for the first time in metropolitan France since the Algerian war (Dikeç 2007; Horvath 2018). A new, similar wave of revolts took place in June 2023 following the police shooting of an unarmed young man in Nanterre, a Parisian suburb.

Except for an initial period of relative openness to immigrants' identity in the mid-1980s, French governments tend to downplay the grievances and demands made according to minority identities. Multicultural attitudes regarding ethnic and religious minorities are rejected in favor of a policy of *intégration* into the French republican project, which "requires the effective participation of all those called to live in France in the construction of a society that brings [its citizens] together around shared principles as they are expressed in equal rights and common responsibilities".² In recent years, the integration rhetoric has become increasingly focused on the religious dimension of the problem, underscoring *laïcité*—the French notion of secularism—as the regime's foremost "shared principle" (Chebbah-Malicot 2018).

2.2. *Laïcité*, Jihadist Violence, and the Far-Right

The two principal mechanisms employed by the French government to deal with jihadist violence are its security apparatus and the public education system. Constitutional and legislative reforms, supported by emergency executive prerogatives deployed in the

wake of global jihadist terrorism after 9/11 and intensified after the 2015 Paris attacks, have equipped the state with extensive police powers to detect, trace, and foil violent activity. The centralized nature of the French administration, further enhanced by the creation of inter-ministerial bodies, notably the CIPDR (*Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation*), that coordinate the government's security activities, has also implemented deradicalization programs on a national scale, but this initiative has not prevented some local initiatives or public–private partnerships (Samaan and Jacobs 2020).

Coinciding regulatory reforms in the school system have sought to ensure that the next generation of French citizens subscribes to the regime's "fundamental values," the most important of which, in this context, is the *laïcité*. Officially written into law in 1905 as a standard ensuring strict institutional separation of (the Catholic) church and state, *laïcité* has been gradually transformed under the Fifth Republic into a principle that extends to the regulation of individual conduct in the public sphere and encourages "moderate" religious practice. Over the past twenty years, it has been famously mobilized to prohibit visual manifestations of religious belonging, such as hijabs in schools and burqas in public places, and has been presented as a method of preserving a common denominator for all French citizens.

The French government has clearly stated that the preventive and integrative policies ensuing from the combination of law enforcement and the principle of *laïcité* target only radicalized "Islamist" individuals and by no means intend to stigmatize Islam or Muslim French citizens and residents as a whole. Yet, notwithstanding the official declarations regarding equality and religion-blind actions, there are signs that among some political figures and new outlets French legal reforms and political discourse have increasingly conflated Islam with jihadist ideology.

One of the aggravating factors contributing to the problem is the instrumentalization of *laïcité* to confront violent radicalization, and more generally, religious *communautarisme* (communitarianism). "Communitarianism" is commonly understood in France as a problem in which an ethnic group prioritizes traditional or religious values above the interests of the nation and the republican society. Historically, French governments have favored *communautarisme* as a sign of the failure to achieve social integration of immigrants, and other manifestations of systemic racism and discrimination. Save for the radical left, *communautarisme* is routinely denounced by politicians across the political spectrum who invoke *laïcité* as the ultimate antidote against the "desire to secede from the Republic in the name of a religion" (Faye 2019). Since the *laïcité* is presented as being threatened by jihadism, the critique of *communautarisme* has gradually been conflated with a concern for jihadist violence (Chabal 2015, chps. 4, 8; Geisser 2020a).

The 2021 law "confirming respect for the principles of the Republic" illustrates the problem. It has been criticized for blurring the line between jihadism and Islam by lumping together security procedures aimed at curtailing terrorism (e.g., "expansion of the national file of perpetrators of terrorist offences to those who advocate and provoke terrorist acts") together with measures limiting the place of religion in the public and private spheres (e.g., "respect for the principles of equality, neutrality and *laïcité* by employees participating in a public service mission" and "strengthening the fight against forced or fraudulent marriages") (*Loi n° 2021*; Geisser 2020a).³ The coincidence of these attempts to securitize and deradicalize "Islamists" risks discrediting the government's repeated declarations that in the eyes of the law, "*communautarisme* is not terrorism" (Faye 2019).

Perhaps most importantly, the legal and political amalgamation of jihadism and Islam plays into the hands of the political far-right. *Rassemblement National* (former *Front National*) and its leader, Marine Le Pen, amplify the alleged contrast between Islam and the republic's basic values, positioning themselves as the "true" defenders of *laïcité*, deriving from it their anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agenda. To date, while extreme-right radicalization is also growing in France, it has not been included in government deradicalization efforts. Incidents of extreme-right violence in France include "harassment, threats, recording and dissemination of images of violence; destruction, degradation, deterioration; condoning

crimes, and inciting discrimination, hatred or violence; insult and defamation" (Ressiguiet and Morenas 2019). Extreme right-wing groups in France boasted approximately 3000 members as of 2020, ~1% of whom are incarcerated. The terrorist extreme-right threat currently emanates from small cells of "super-patriots", individuals with police or military backgrounds preoccupied with and operating against what they perceive as the "Islamisation" of France. Among these groups are the Action des Forces Opérationnelles (AFO) and the Barjols. AFO members, aged 32 to 69, are responsible for the 2018 plot to kill Muslims. The group calls for a "war of civilisations" and prepares "French citizen-soldiers for combat on national territory" against "Islamisation" (Deve 2018). The Barjols plotted to attack Emmanuel Macron with a ceramic knife in 2018 and claimed to have thousands of followers on social media (Camus 2020; Soullier 2018; *Le Figaro* 2021). Over the past fifteen years, the French media has also reported multiple incidents of dozens of members of the French military being involved in racially motivated violent attacks or expressing sympathy for neo-Nazi and with other types of extreme right-wing ideology and symbols (Bourdon et al. 2021a; Bourdon and Suc 2020; Rouagdia 2019; Atchouel 2014; Laffargue and Rangin 2013; Vironneau and François 2008). The official responses of military and government officials to these revelations condemn the acts, but tend to treat such radicalization in very different terms as purely criminal activity (Bourdon et al. 2021b).

3. History of Jihadist Violence

Jihadist extremism is characterized by attacks that have been carried out in France since 2012 that are associated with or inspired by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS). Jihadist violence stands out among earlier types of terrorism in two elements. The first is the medium of its proliferation—widely available online means of recruitment and diffusion of radical propaganda reaches an audience of a previously unimaginable scale. The second is the new profiles of its adherents: foreign fighters, hundreds of whom are returning to France from Syria, Iraq, and other warzones; and "homegrown" terrorist groups or "lone wolves", who are often self-recruited, are not formally controlled by a terrorist organization, and are motivated by perceptions of personal grievance and marginalization (Galli 2019; Gregory 2003).

3.1. International Terrorism

In the second half of the 20th century, the French state and its nationals have experienced multiple violent attacks by foreign militant organizations based in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South-East Asia. Some of the attacks were a radical manifestation of national liberation struggles against French colonial rule, primarily in Algeria. The most notorious of these were carried out by the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) in Algeria during its War of Independence (1954–1962).⁴ Other violent incidents, typically classified as "transnational" or "international terrorism," are related to French involvement in the affairs of other states, predominantly in its ex-colonies. The main chapters belonging to this category are: first, Palestinian attacks aimed at Israeli targets in France and at the French government institutions, as a response to the French involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the 1960s–1980s; and second, terrorist operations carried out in the 1990s by the *Groupes Islamistes Armées* (GIA) in Algeria (against French and francophone Algerian nationals) and France, with the purpose of destabilizing domestic Algerian politics and disentangling Algeria from French meddling (Gregory 2003).

Most of the attacks in the 1970s–1980s were executed by the Lebanese-Palestinian "Committee for Solidarity with Near Eastern Political Prisoners" (*Le Comité de Solidarité avec les Prisonniers Arabes et du Proche-orient*, or CSPAP); others were committed by the Lebanese Hezbollah, the PLO, or were instigated by the governments of Syria, Iran, and Libya who had particular grievances against the French policies in the Middle East (Foley 2018; Gregory 2003; Shapiro and Suzan 2003). The CSPAP alone is responsible for attacks "in Paris, Cannes, Marseilles, Nanterre and Toulon between 1975 and 1987, including attacks on the Marseilles-Paris and Paris-Lyon high-speed TGV trains in 1983 and 1986

respectively as well as against numerous Paris metro stations, shops and public buildings” (Gregory 2003, p. 130). However, although the violent acts committed by the CSPAP “had an Islamist dimension, [they] had nothing to do with the Algerian- and Al-Qaeda-linked terrorism that would later threaten France in the 1990s” (Foley 2018, pp. 529–30).

The rise of jihadist violence in Algeria during its civil war in the 1990s spilled over into France due to its support of the Algerian regime, thus “making it the first Western country to experience this form of terrorism on home soil” (Foley 2018, p. 530). *Le Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA), the foremost organization engaged in extremist violent struggles against the Algerian government and France in that decade, received funding and training from Al-Qaeda. In the 2000s, Al-Qaeda and the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prediction et le Combat* (GSPC), which split from the GIA and was later rebranded as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), became the main source of transnational terrorist threats in France. However, the majority “of jihadist plots foiled by the French security services on home soil throughout this period were planned by lower-level individuals or small groupings, including numerous home-grown terrorists” (Foley 2018, p. 530; 2013, pp. 35–37).

3.2. Islamic State (IS)

The Islamic State is responsible for the deadliest terrorist attacks in France in the last decade. As of 2017, it is estimated to be “the organization most likely to send fighters to carry out more attacks” (Hecker and Tenenbaum 2017). The perpetrators of the November 2015 attacks in Paris trained with the IS in the Middle East. Most arrests in regards to jihadist terrorism in 2019 involved individuals linked to the IS. At least three out of the seven attempted or accomplished jihadist attacks in 2019 were associated with this organization (Hecker and Tenenbaum 2017; US Bureau on Counterterrorism 2019).

IS cites three main motives for targeting France: (1) French domestic policies claimed to be discriminatory and oppressive towards Muslims (e.g., prohibiting the wearing of hijabs in schools and burqas in public spaces); (2) French military interventions in Muslim countries, such as Mali, Iraq, and Syria, that are presented as a general war against Islam; and the (3) destabilization of the regime and of social cohesion to increase the IS influence in Europe (Hecker and Tenenbaum 2017).

Despite the territorial decline of the IS, it continues to pose a threat via two main channels. The first is the return home of “foreign terrorist fighters” (FTFs)—French nationals who left for Syria to train and fight with the IS. The estimated number of French FTFs in 2018–2019 was 1324, with 398 returnees (Heide and Bergema 2019). In 2015, The French Ministry of Interior had estimated that about 1700 people joined militia groups in Syria, 250 of which returned to France (Samaan and Jacobs 2020). According to the 2019 Europol report, “Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, countries such as Austria, Belgium, Finland, France and Italy have seen a return rate of between approximately 20% and 30%”.

Second, IS has reportedly been successful in online radicalization by propagating jihadist ideology, training sympathizers, and recruiting potential perpetrators, including women. Online information and interaction are not considered to be sufficient for the completion of a radicalization process. Still, they become increasingly central in this process by providing jihadist texts, nasheeds (songs) and videos, virtual proximity, means of communication, and a coordination platform for extremist violence (Hecker 2018; Lacroix 2018). The internet is a significant—yet not the ultimate—factor for radicalization among French youth, nurturing “homegrown” and “lone-wolf” terrorism (Galli 2019; Hecker and Tenenbaum 2017). Researchers cite a “large number of examples of individuals who have admitted to having used the internet intensively in their radicalization process before switching to terrorism or joining extremist organizations” (Breton 2016; Guidère 2016). A typical radicalization process for young men and women is individualized, conducted in French, adapted to their interests and beliefs, and involves manipulation (Breton 2016; Sebar 2017). IS has, for example, alternately used the “empowerment” and “purity” discourse for their online marriage announcements to attract both progressively and conservatively leaning young women (Breton 2016; Dearden 2017; Thomson 2014, p. 65).

More generally, IS has made extensive use of video and social media networks—e.g., YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook—and regularly publishes literature rationalizing its philosophy and calling for attacks in France. One such publication is the *Dar al-Islam* online magazine, published in 2014–2016 in French, and still available online. A recent increase in online content regulation pushed the IS to switch to more confidential platforms, such as Telegram, where it continues to regularly publish its materials in various languages, including French (Camus 2020; Sparks 2020; Zelin 2016). IS has managed to reach populations of all socio-economic levels and all across France, from big cities to poorer suburbs and remote rural areas (Hecker and Tenenbaum 2017).

3.3. Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda follows patterns of recruitment and radicalization methods similar to those of the IS. The organization's affiliate in Yemen claimed responsibility for the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* team in January 2015, explaining it as revenge for the journal's insult of Mohammed (Europol 2020). Other branches, such as the "al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM), justifies its attacks against France because of the country's colonial past and current "occupation" of Muslim territory in Mali (Europol 2014).

Al-Qaeda competes with the IS to recruit radicalized French residents and spreads online propaganda (Hecker and Tenenbaum 2017). YouTube videos distributed by Al-Qaeda members have hundreds of thousands of views. One of the prominent figures active in this field was Omar Omsen, a French-speaking recruiter for the Al-Nusra Front, considered singlehandedly responsible for the departure of 80% of young French to Syria and Iraq as of August 2016, thanks to an effective online campaign (Elbagir et al. 2016; Toscer 2015). Another example of jihadist propaganda is the *Ansar Al-Haqq* website, which served as a "jihadist library of reference in the Francophone world" and "openly supported jihadist fighters and terrorist organizations" in a "media jihad" up to its demise in 2015. The site's managers were tried in France and sentenced to up to four years in prison for indoctrinating, inciting, and recruiting individuals for armed combat (Le Monde 2018; Hecker 2018).

While divergent in their occasional allegiances, statements, and declared ideology, the recruitment networks and various online and offline mechanisms of radicalization employed by the GIA, and later by Al-Qaeda and ISIS, occasionally intertwine. Thus, "key members of GIA's networks in the 1990s joined al-Qaida's networks in the 2000s, and played a crucial part in recruiting and socializing a new generation of militants in Europe in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq." Some of these militants were subsequently identified as having inspired jihadist attacks on behalf of ISIS (Nesser et al. 2016). One of the most conspicuous threads that represents these links and exchanges of experience is the profile of Boubaker El Hakim. A French-Tunisian born in Paris, El Hakim worked for the Iraqi, and possibly Syrian, security forces prior to the American invasion, and he became a central figure in the recruitment to the "Buttes-Chaumont" network that enlisted French youth to fight the Coalition forces in Iraq, two members of which were involved in the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris in 2015. El Hakim was also involved in the rise of ISIS in Iraq and in Syria, as well as the military branch of the Salafist *Ansar al-Sharia* group in Tunisia, before being assassinated by a American drone strike in Syria, in 2016 (Filiu 2016).

Finally, the type of jihadist violence prevalent in France is a European phenomenon, with France being only one, albeit a central, target. Even if jihadist attacks in France are increasingly committed by French nationals, the militant networks and online materials that drive their radicalisation are active in other francophone countries such as Belgium and Switzerland, and similar patterns of attacks are observed in the UK, Germany, and elsewhere in Western Europe. Some of the cases, such as the 2015 Paris attacks, bear direct financial and organizational links to Al-Qaeda or ISIS. Increasingly, however, radicalisation takes place online, via the consumption of disinformation and loose social media contacts that serve as inspiration, but stop short of recruitment to militant cells, such as in the case

of the murder of a French school teacher in 2020 (Hassan et al. 2018; Huey 2015; Nesser 2014; Oftedal 2015; Sawyer and Zinigrad 2021a).

4. The Statistics of Jihadist Violence in France

In the past decade, France has seen a substantial increase in transnational jihadist terrorism. Between 2001 and 2011, only four (foiled) attacks were linked to jihadist groups.⁵ The shift was marked in 2012 by Mohamed Merah, a solo terrorist trained in Afghanistan/Pakistan who killed seven people and wounded five in three shooting incidents. In the following 2014–2019 period, 42 completed or attempted jihadist attacks took place in France. Jihadist terrorism reached its most infamous and lethal peak in 2015. The first among the fifteen incidents of that year were the attack on the offices of the *Charlie Hebdo* journal, the shooting of a police officer, and the siege at a kosher supermarket in January 2015, committed by individuals associated with AQAP and the Islamic State.⁶ In November of the same year, the IS claimed responsibility for a series of coordinated attacks at a sports stadium, the Bataclan theatre, and several restaurants in Paris that left 130 dead and 493 wounded (Fenech and Pietrasanta 2016). The Bataclan attack alone, with 89 people killed, is the single deadliest incident of political violence ever committed on French territory (*Le Parisien* 2015). The threat continues to linger in France and is higher than in its neighboring countries. France was the only target of jihadist terrorism in the EU in 2019. Unofficial statistics count as many as nine attacks in 2020, most notably, the beheading of Samuel Paty, a public school teacher who displayed Mohammed's caricatures in his classroom.

4.1. Statistical Profile of Jihadists Extremists

The majority of jihadist radicals in France fit a specific profile—these are non-immigrant, young French men of Maghrebin origin, raised in a Muslim family and coming from poor urban districts (Karoui and Hodayé 2021; Crettiez and Barros 2019; Hecker 2018). According to a recent study, 61% of individuals engaging in jihadist violence are 18–26 years old; 80% are men; 94% are French nationals, and 89% are born in France; 76% have family ties in countries other than France (at least 55% are descendants of immigrants from the Maghreb); 70% to 75% are born to Muslim parents (i.e., not converts); and 86% live in poor metropolitan areas or cities suffering from urban decline (Karoui and Hodayé 2021).

4.2. Racist Violent Offences

Ethnic, religious, and migrant communities in France suffer from hundreds of cases of violence and threats that are not legally classified as terrorism, but which constitute criminal offences “committed on the grounds of origin, ethnicity, nationality, a claimed race or religion.”⁷ The numbers of antisemitic, anti-Muslim, and other racist acts have increased between 2018 and 2019 (by 27%, 54%, and 130%, respectively). Yet, while the trends of “other” racist offences and the total number of cases are up, the figures show downward trends for antisemitic and anti-Muslim violence in 2001–2019 (CNCDH 2020). No recent official or precise data is available regarding the characteristics and profiles of the perpetrators of racist violence.⁸

5. Perception of Violent Threats by Political Elites

Two predominant elements characterize political discourse and government reforms targeting extremist violence in the past 10–15 years: the risk of amalgamating Islam—especially in its stricter forms—with extremist violence; and a stronger emphasis on education as a complementary measure in addressing potential violent threats. The combination of the two elements has resulted in a special emphasis on the principle of *laïcité* in schools and the public sphere.

5.1. Trends

A recent empirical study of the interpretations of terrorism by the French political elites provides a valuable source for understanding shifts in the political discourse concerning violent threats (D'Amato 2019). The work is based on content and discourse analysis of French parliamentary debates and strategic documents released between 2001 and 2015. The study identifies several trends, all of which indicate an increasing perception of jihadist political violence by policymakers as the main threat to the nation's values. According to this study, the trends include a progressive favoring of religious characterization of terrorism over the political; developing a perception of terrorism as an "Islamization of criminal behavior" (as opposed to politically motivated crimes); and growing emphasis on the tension between the perceived French republican values and national identity, and the religious values associated with jihadist terrorism. Crucially, jihadist violence "has been increasingly understood and discussed as a threat to national values more than to citizens' physical safety" (63% of policymakers consider terrorism to pose a threat to the national identity and culture, versus only 21% considering it a threat to citizens).

5.2. Social Spaces of Radicalization

Some policymakers have perceived social exclusion and marginalization as the predominant causes of radicalization that render "at-risk" individuals more susceptible to terrorist propaganda. Parliamentary debates in 2012–2015 reveal an increasing awareness of the weakened social resilience of marginalized individuals and contribute to their characterization as victims of social circumstances. Some MPs consider repressive counterterrorism policies to be counterproductive for this very reason (D'Amato 2019). Notably, Gérard Collomb, Minister of Interior under President Emmanuel Macron, in 2017 suggested the mobilization of "all the psychiatric hospitals and psychiatrists so as to try to ward off [the] individual terrorist threat" (Calvi 2017). These views, however, increasingly give way to a more forceful and belligerent discourse.

5.3. Hardening of Policies and Discourse against Jihadist Radicalisation

Emblematic and large-scale jihadist terror acts in France—such as the 2012, 2015, and the recent October 2020 violent attacks—pushed politicians to pledge new extensive counter-terrorist measures (not all of which eventually materialized), hardening the political discourse against "Islamist radicalization", and more recently, against "Islamist separatism". The reforms are not always intended to fight terrorism as much as to make symbolic statements and typically play into the hands of the right and extreme-right political factions (Faucher and Boussaguet 2018a).

Thus, in the aftermath of the 2012 attacks, the rhetoric of war against "these fundamentalist political, religious groups who are killing our children" was enunciated by Marine Le Pen (National Front/National Rally), the extreme right candidate for president. Three years later, however, the war rhetoric showed signs of spilling over into other parts of the political spectrum. Whereas the January 2015 attacks triggered only "the identification of France as a 'victim' [...] accompanied by calls for 'unity', 'solidarity', and 'fraternity', the leadership added in November the notions of 'war', 'act of war', and 'terrorist army'. The symbolism of unity no longer sufficed. Acts were needed (constitutional reform, police in the streets, raids, military investment), as was an action discourse" (Faucher and Boussaguet 2018b). The November 2015 Paris attacks were immediately branded as "acts of war" by President Hollande (Socialist party), who proceeded to declare a national "state of emergency", a mechanism invoked in France only twice since the Algerian war (Hecker and Tenenbaum 2017). Another measure urged by Hollande was a constitutional amendment allowing for the denaturalizing of bi-national convicted terrorists, seemingly unaware that the change is neither politically nor legally feasible (Faucher and Boussaguet 2018a, p. 189).

5.4. Links between Immigration, Islam, and Extremist Violence in Political Discourse

The most blatant claims that immigration and Islam are major sources of extremist violence are raised by the French far-right. Since the early 2000s, local and national officials of the far-right Front National party (rebranded as *Rassemblement National* in 2018) draw connections between immigration from the French former colonies and terrorism. After the 2012 shootings committed by Mohamed Merah in Toulouse, Marine Le Pen—the chairman of Front National—blatantly asserted that “radical Islam” is a “consequence of mass immigration”, asking “How many Mohamed Merah are there in the boats, the planes, which arrive in France every day filled with immigrants?” and “How many Mohamed Merah among the children of these unassimilated immigrants?” (Geisser 2020b).

President Macron has attempted to nuance this picture of the relationship between immigration and extremist violence. In November 2020, Macron stated that “we must in no way confuse the fight against illegal immigration and terrorism, but we must clearly look at the links that exist between these two phenomena” (*Propos liminaires du Président de la République* 2020). Ministers of the Interior, however, have made statements that seem to blur the line between extremist violence and Islam, thus portraying extremely devout practice of the Muslim religion as potentially posing a violent threat. Christophe Castaner said in a 2019 speech before the National Assembly that such signs as “the wearing of a beard, the refusal to shake hands with female colleagues, hyperkeratosis in the middle of the forehead [. . .], untimely religious proselytism, frantic consultation of religious sites from his workstation, [. . .], the wearing of a full veil on the public highway for a female civil servant [. . .] might, after analysis, characterize radicalization”. His successor, Gérald Darmanin, has taken a particularly hawkish and aggressive stance on the topic. Darmanin said that “political Islam is a mortal enemy for the Republic” and that France “must fight all forms of communitarianism” (*Sénat* 2020). In a recent debate with the head of the extreme-right party, he consciously positioned himself as more radical than his opponent regarding the anti-Muslim agenda (Mestre 2021).⁹

5.5. Increasing Focus on Educational, Secularizing, and Pre-Emptive Measures

More recently, the government discourse has gone beyond predominantly militaristic and securitized strategies. It increasingly includes a wide-ranging set of policing and educational preventive measures that aim to stop radicalization at the early stages. Prime Minister Philippe noted in 2018 that laws “strengthening internal security and the fight against terrorism” are being supplemented, stating that “a prevention approach has been developed, based on detection, training and support” (*Discours d’Édouard Philippe* 2018). However, some of the preventive measures seem to increasingly bear only a very loose connection to violence and target general religious practices that are found to conflict with the French principle of *laïcité*.

A speech against “Islamist separatism” given by centrist-right President Macron in October 2020 reflects an evolution of the French attitude towards jihadist violence. His speech warned against stigmatizing Islam as a religion and targeted only “radical Islamism”, whose aim is to “contravene the Republic’s laws and create a parallel order, establish other values, develop another way of organizing society which is initially separatist, but whose ultimate goal is to take it over completely”. At the same time, Macron advocated for significantly tighter control of religious institutions and practices. Thus, the speech announced an anti-radicalization legislative reform that would include “forging a type of ‘Enlightenment Islam’” in France, strengthening *laïcité* (the French model of secularism), and consolidating “republican principles”. Macron promised to effectively eliminate home-schooling (later softened), prohibit public pools from offering separate time slots for men and women, close schools where girls wear full-face veils, and dissolve religious associations not only on the grounds of terrorism or antisemitism, but also, more vaguely, for “violations of human dignity and psychological or physical pressures” (Macron 2020).

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the radical left party, *La France insoumise* (LFI), has denounced Macron’s reform as targeting Islam rather than “Islamism” and warned against

reviving “religious warfare” (Vincendon 2020). In response, government officials have defined his statements as a manifestation of “*Islamogauchism*”.

5.6. *Islamogauchism*

“*Islamogauchism*” (Islamist-leftist intersectional radicalism) is a term suggesting an overlap between the radical left and radical Islamist ideologies. Although several researchers—some of whom are themselves accused of *Islamogauchism*—recognize historical, revolutionary, and cultural links between the radical left and Islamist movements, the recent use of the term is widely claimed to be used to ostracize and discredit the progressive and radical left as an accomplice of jihadist terrorism (Faure 2020). The term emerged in the French political discourse in the early 2000s. Initially, it was employed primarily by the right-wing party, *Les Republicains*, and later by the extreme right-wing *Rassemblement national*. But recently, it has been used by three acting ministers to stigmatize the LFI, and more generally, the intellectual left. Minister Darmanin accused an LFI deputy of being “linked with an *Islamogauchism* that is destroying the Republic” (Corbière 2020); the Minister of National Education said that *Islamogauchism* “wreaks havoc at the university” (Guedj 2020); and the Minister of Higher Education has requested the CNRS to explore its effects out of worry that *Islamogauchism* “plagues the society as a whole and universities are not impervious” (Franceinfo 2021).

6. Perception of Violent Threats by the General Public

In French public opinion, domestic jihadist terrorism is perceived as a predominant violent threat, at least since the 2015 attacks. Data collected by the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP, a major international private polling firm) and published in its most recent report from October 2020 offers a twenty-year perspective on the evolution in the assessment of the jihadist threat by the general public (IFOP-Fiducial 2020). The report suggests that levels of concern about extremist violence closely correlate with the number, intensity and visibility of jihadist terrorist attacks in France. Major terrorist attacks outside of France in the period of 2001–2020 were rarely followed by a substantial increase in public alarm among the French. The percentage of people considering the threat to be “very high” or “rather high” dropped after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the London attacks in 2005, or the Boston terror act in 2011 (although the most significant decrease in these numbers was recorded after the 2011 assassination of Bin Laden). But the attacks committed by Mohamed Merah in 2012 and subsequent acts of jihadist terrorism up to the January 2015 attacks at Charlie Hebdo increased the assessment of the threat from 53% to a then-record high 93%. Between August 2015 and December 2018, the “very high” and “rather high” estimates of the threat remained above 90%. The all-time peak of 99% was detected in July 2016 (after a truck deliberately ran into a crowd in Nice on Bastille Day), and the evaluation of the threat as exclusively “very high”—for more than two-thirds of those polled—was at its highest in the immediate aftermath of the November 2015 Paris attacks. Finally, after some decline in the perceived level of threat in October 2019–September 2020, the murder of Samuel Paty in October 2020 was followed by a 13-point increase in “rather high” and “very high” responses combined (from 76% to 89%) and a 22-point spike in “very high” estimates alone (from 16% to 38%) (IFOP-Fiducial 2020, pp. 7–8).

Note that reliance on the IFOP data warrants some caution due to the surveys’ implied presumption that “terrorism” refers exclusively to violent jihadist attacks. The relevant question in the survey states simply, “How do you evaluate the terrorist threat in our country today?” without specifying any specific type of terrorism. Yet, the answers are correlated only with incidents of jihadist terrorism, ignoring multiple incidents of ethno-nationalist and separatist terror mentioned above. Accounting for this difficulty seems to weaken any conclusions drawn in the report regarding this topic, at least up to 2015. Nevertheless, the relative decline in separatist terror and the increase in the visibility of jihadist terrorism since 2015 provides more solid grounds for a presumption of causal links between domestic jihadist attacks and the perceived level of threat.

The above data and analysis demonstrate that jihadist extremism is constructed by the political elites as the main, perhaps only, threat to the French values and public peace; it is also perceived as such by the general public. The highly polarized political discourse favors the representation of jihadist terrorism as a direct continuum of strict Muslim conduct, and even the political mainstream alludes to links between terrorism and immigration. Some right-wing and centrist politicians and journalists argue, furthermore, that radical jihadism shares interests with the radical left.

Organized jihadist networks continue to exert influence over radicalization processes in France, even as they lose territory and resources. Online information and communication with members of extremist organizations have considerable impact on the development of domestic jihadist extremism, especially among marginalized youth. Despite government efforts to prevent jihadist violence—especially in prisons—the systemic discrimination and stigmatization of incarcerated individuals in fact contributes to their alienation and radicalization.

7. Stakeholders and Channels of Deradicalization

A diverse and intricate network of government institutions within the executive and judicial branches is heavily invested in countering jihadist extremist violence. This section presents an overview of the programs and strategies employed by these actors, with a focus on educational efforts in public schools and the public sphere, administrative sanctions against individuals and organizations inciting violence, and rehabilitation plans inside and outside of prisons for individuals who have been prosecuted for terrorist activity or identified as undergoing a process of jihadist radicalization. Given the focus on jihadist violence in the public and political discourses, it is hardly surprising that deradicalization plans target, almost exclusively, “Islamist” individuals and networks.

7.1. Schools (*Emphasis on Laïcité and Securitization of the Educational System*)

French public schools play a central role in the government’s strategy of deradicalization. The two main pillars of the current “policy for the prevention of violent radicalization” implemented by the Ministry of National Education are civic education and securitization of the school, with an increasing emphasis on the latter. According to the Ministry of Education website, the plan revolves around “4 axes: prevention, identification and reporting, monitoring of young people in the process of radicalization and staff training” ([Politique de prévention de la radicalisation violente en milieu scolaire 2020](#)).

The pedagogical aspect of preventing radicalization consists of moral and civic education. The main components of this curriculum are the principle of *laïcité* (the French notion of secularism); media and information education; the development of critical thinking and of a “feeling of belonging to a society”; and a “nuanced and objective approach to the history of religious ideas and facts”.

Civics classes are supplemented by a variety of security mechanisms. These include extensive staff training to identify students at risk of radicalization; creation of special inter-governmental bodies in charge of assessing the reports on students and monitoring “young people reported as being ‘in the process of radicalization’ but not charged with ‘terrorist acts’”; instituting “multi-category watch units” in schools, consisting of school officials together with social services and medical professionals and responsible for identifying situations that must be reported to government officials responsible for the prevention of radicalization; and instructions on supporting minors returning from combat zones in Syria and Iraq ([Ecole et radicalisation violente 2020](#); [Politique de prévention de la radicalisation violente en milieu scolaire 2020](#)).

School securitization as an instrument of deradicalization, especially when the line between education and surveillance remains unclear, is controversial. First, it erodes the role of the school as a pedagogical and autonomy nurturing institution. Consider, for instance, cases of students who refused to observe a minute of silence or subscribe to the “I am Charlie” (*Je suis Charlie*) slogan after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 and were

reported to the police as potential cases of radicalization (Suc et al. 2015; Michalon-Brodeur et al. 2018, p. 239). Second, an empirical study of reports submitted by school personnel to law enforcement has recently raised concerns about the stigmatization of Islam implicit in the government's policy of deradicalization. The study demonstrated a "tendency to conceptualize Muslim religiosity as potentially dangerous for minors [thus] reshaping the relationship forged between schools and religion, both in its historical foundations and in its daily practices" (Donnet 2020). Finally, studies have also shown that more than reducing violence and radicalization in schools, surveillance may drive students to conceal their internal conflicts and violent plans for fear of being classified as "dangerous" (Michalon-Brodeur et al. 2018, p. 238).

7.2. Prisons (Questionable and Counterproductive Initiatives)

7.2.1. UPRA: Units of Prevention of Radicalization

The first deradicalization programs for French prisons were swiftly developed after the 2015 Paris attacks. Prior to that, penitentiary authorities did not run any special deradicalization programs, assuming that the regular disciplinary sanctions were sufficient for the control and rehabilitation of all incarcerated persons (Robert 2017). But in March 2016, the government decided that radicalized individuals should be isolated and grouped in "units for radicalization prevention" (*unités de prévention de la radicalisation*), specially created to this end in four prisons across the country. The units hosted "people imprisoned for acts of terrorism linked to violent radical Islamism as well as those identified in detention as radicalized, or in the process of radicalization, and advocating the use of violent action" (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017). The stated goal of these units was deradicalization, which involved assessing the level of radicalization and the risk of engaging in violent actions or the propagation of violence among other prisoners, and the subsequent referral to a personalized "program of care" that would provide "better treatment" (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017; Conti 2020).

The nature and functioning of the special units received severe criticism. The Controller-General in Places of Deprivation of Liberty disapproved of the urgent and underdeveloped planning in creating the units, as well as of the disparities in the evaluation methods and care programs across penitentiary institutions. More critically, the Controller-General questioned the judiciousness of bringing together radicalized individuals who may only benefit from the situation by creating new networks and concluded that given the overcrowded nature of prisons, further extension of the program was not realistic (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017; *Contrôleur général des lieux de privation de liberté* 2016).

Ultimately, the program was abruptly discontinued before any improvements could occur due to an assault of two correctional officers by a detainee in one of the special units. The new strategy prioritizes security and safety in prisons and shifts the focus away from care and deradicalization.

7.2.2. QER: Districts of Evaluation of Radicalization

The current approach to radicalization in prisons focuses on the assessment of risk and securitization. In February 2017, the deradicalization units were replaced by six "Districts of Evaluation of Radicalization" (*quartiers d'évaluation de la radicalisation*) that accommodate around 120 detainees for four months. The primary purpose of the "districts" is not rehabilitation, but determining whether the radicalized individuals may be assigned, depending on the risk they are considered to pose to others, to a regular or a high-security detention facility (Chantraine et al. 2018; Conti 2020; *Observatoire International des Prisons* 2020). Under this model, the notion of deradicalization is estimated to transform into yet another method of policing, to the detriment of potential recovery and social reintegration:

Within the framework of the fight against radicalization, detection appears to be aimed not at assisting the detainee but at providing information to intelligence services and helping the process of criminal judgement. Concerns about taqya (dissimulation) and thus the possibility of 'missing' a threat, mean that the imperative to 'reduce the risks'

prevails and the work of professionals is torn between the security approach (oriented towards reducing risk) and the social approach, which aims to establish a relationship of trust with the detainee, to help social reintegration. (Conti 2020)

7.3. Rehabilitation Programs (Failures along with Signs of Humble Success)

7.3.1. CPIC

The “Center for Prevention, Integration and Citizenship” (*Centre de prévention, d’insertion et de citoyenneté*, CPIC), colloquially known as the Pontoury Deradicalization Center, was opened by the government in September 2016 in the aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks. The center was legally defined as a public interest group (regulated by public law) and subject to the Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Prevention of Crime and Radicalization (CIPDR).

The program was intended for individuals in the process of radicalization who are yet to engage in criminal terrorist activity—“people whose behavior may lead to fear of the preparation or even the commission of violent acts inspired by jihadist ideology, while constituting the ‘bottom of the spectrum’ due to a weaker radicalization than people being in the process of taking action” (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017). The participation in the CPIC program was voluntary and involved isolation from the family and social environment. It was meant to “constitute a medium-term between a totally open environment and prison” (Sénat 2017).

Initially, the government hoped to extend the program and open a CPIC in every French region by the end of 2017. Instead, the one operating CPIC lost all its participants by February 2017 and was shut down in July of the same year, mainly due to difficulties in convincing individuals with the right profile to sign up and stay in the program. At its peak, the center hosted only nine individuals (in a facility that had a maximum capacity of 25 people, employed 27 people, and operated on a EUR 2.5 million budget), and the last person left in the program was expelled, having been convicted for violence and the glorification of terrorism (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017).

7.3.2. RIVE

The RIVE program (*Recherche et intervention sur les violences extrémistes: “research and intervention on extremist violence”*) is the French government’s first attempt at a public–private partnership for the deradicalization of persons convicted of terrorism. The program’s integrative approach was determined by law to provide “health, social, educational or psychological care intended to allow [...] reintegration and the acquisition of values of citizenship [...] in a suitable reception establishment in which the convicted person is required to reside” (*Code de procédure pénale*, Art. 138-18).

The pilot ran for two years (October 2016–November 2018) and was operated by APCARS—a private association specializing in the social reintegration of criminal offenders. The program targeted individuals already convicted of terror-related crimes, before or after serving their sentences. The participation did not require internment in a closed institution and included frequent and substantial encounters with social, religious, and psychological mentors.

The government contract with APCARS was not renewed, despite overall positive reviews of its work. Instead, the RIVE model was reintroduced under a new name (PAIRS) and in partnership with a new private body. In the two years of its operation, the program had 22 participants, none of whom has thus far relapsed into terrorism (Hecker 2021).

7.3.3. PAIRS

The Program of Individualized Support and Social Reaffiliation (PAIRS) succeeded RIVE in 2018 and is executed by *Groupe SOS*, a voluntary association specializing in social entrepreneurship. The declared objective of PAIRS is “the disengagement” of persons convicted in terrorism “from violent radicalization and the prevention of risk of a violent act while promoting social reintegration and the acquisition of the values of citizenship”.

The program accepts participants that attend it voluntarily or due to a court order. As of the end of September 2020, it has hosted 120 individuals in its four centers (Paris, Marseille, Lyon, and Lille), including those ranking “high” on the “radicalization spectrum”. To date, none of the participants has returned to terrorist activity.

Each of the PAIRS centers is required to employ a multidisciplinary professional team of educators, social service assistants, professional integration counsellors, clinical psychologists, a temporary psychiatrist, and “specialists in contemporary Islam”. As disclosed by an official working for the Ministry of Justice, PAIRS accepts only participants whose radicalization involves a religious dimension (Hecker 2021).

7.3.4. Mulhouse Program

The Mulhouse Program is an example of a regional reintegration project initiated by a local authority in Alsace. After the January 2015 attacks, an attorney general in the Mulhouse region defined “the fight against violent radicalization as an objective of the regional criminal policy” and set up an experimental three-month care program with the participation of judicial, municipal, and medical stakeholders. The project targets individuals that are already undergoing criminal proceedings for involvement in violent crimes. It is not restricted to a specific type of violence and pertains to adherents to “jihadist violence, which represents most cases, and members of extreme right-wing groups” (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017). Participation in the program is mandatory for those found suitable. It is offered as an alternative to prosecution, or in case of an already convicted offender, in conjunction with a suspended sentence (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017).

The Mulhouse Program consists of three phases: (1) understanding the person’s personal situation and causes for their radicalization and building an adjusted care program; (2) reestablishing their social ties; (3) designing a plan for future educational or professional prospects and acquiring a critical view on their radicalization. It is considered a success and has hosted eighteen participants as of 2017 (Benbassa and Troendlé 2017).

7.3.5. Association Itinéraires

Another example of a local initiative of a public–private partnership is the activity of the Itinéraires Association operating in the north of France, which was, until recently, one of the regions most affected by jihadist radicalization. Itinéraires (Itineraries) was founded in 1991 by a group of smaller organizations with expertise in social work and youth development. It offers services of “specialized prevention” in the form of counselling, support and social activities to youth and adults dealing with issues of school dropout, first employment, prostitution, and, since 2015, radicalization. Unlike the abovementioned initiatives, the activities of Itinéraires are not limited to jihadist violence. Since 2022, they aim to also tackle “non-religious” radicalization (Itinéraires 2021). The association is run by 126 full and part-time employees, manages eight reception centers in the city of Lille and two neighboring towns, and is affiliated with other organizations specializing in prevention and social integration (Association Itinéraires, prévention spécialisée Lille | L’organisation n.d.). Its official agenda underscores the importance of public interest work, innovation, expertise, and quantitative and qualitative assessment, as well as sound management and efficient administration (Association Itinéraires, prévention spécialisée Lille | Nos fondamentaux n.d.).

As of 2021, the Itinéraires team has assisted 139 individuals and their family members. The average period of support is eight months. Itinéraires concludes that the “phenomenon of radicalisation or the process of conversion appears to be an expression of underlying personal problems”. The main factors identified in the association’s 2021 report as linked with radicalization are: spiritual or existential search around a religious practice; social issues (e.g., dropping out of school, professional integration, access to rights, social isolation of children, intellectual deficiencies, traumatic migratory paths); and psychological problems (e.g., personality disorders, psychiatric disorders, emotional deficiencies, traumas

resulting from sexual, physical and/or verbal aggression, school bullying, bereavement, and abandonment during early childhood) (Itinéraires 2021).

In 2021, the “primary prevention” activities of Itinéraires in the field of deradicalization included an educational project, which consisted of “developing actions and workshops on republican values for young audiences and their families” with an emphasis on gender equality, secularism (*laïcité*) and prevention of radicalization; professional development workshops for municipal actors working with radicalized youth; sports activities, such as boxing sessions; and awareness-raising events for the youth focused on the themes of “living together” and prevention of radicalization (Itinéraires 2021). The recent extension of the association’s activity into non-jihadist radicalization included organizing a conference on far-right radicalization in December 2022 (Itinéraires 2022).

7.4. Dissolution of Violent Organizations

French law authorizes the government to issue an administrative order of dissolution, effectively banning “associations or de facto groups”:

1. Which provoke armed demonstrations in the street;
2. Or which present, by their military form and organization, the character of combat groups or private militias;
3. Or whose aim is to undermine the integrity of the national territory or to attack by force the republican form of government;
4. [...]
5. Or whose purpose is either to bring together individuals who have been condemned for collaboration with the enemy, or to exalt this collaboration;
6. Or which either provoke discrimination, hatred or violence against a person or a group of persons because of their origin or their belonging or not belonging to an ethnic group, a nation, a race or a specific religion, or propagate ideas or theories tending to justify or encourage such discrimination, hatred or violence;
7. Or who engage, on French territory or from this territory, in acts with a view to provoking acts of terrorism in France or abroad.

(Code de la sécurité intérieure, Art. L212-1).¹⁰

The state resorts to administrative bans on associations when it lacks sufficient evidence for the pressing of criminal charges (reconstituting a banned association is a criminal offence). Over the past twenty years, the French government has used these provisions to ban more than 30 jihadist organizations (Ressiguier and Morenas 2019). Most recently, decrees were controversially issued against the Collective Against Islamophobia in France in December 2020 (*Décret du 2 décembre 2020*; *Décret du 3 mars 2021*).¹¹

However, experts call into question the efficacy of the dissolution, citing two recent examples in which the organizations quickly regrouped and continued their activity under a different name (Ressiguier and Morenas 2019).

7.5. Civil Society Initiatives

Citizen initiatives to promote tolerance and dialogue include cultural events and awareness campaigns. The government advertises theater plays, educational media tools, sporting events, exhibitions, and other events advocating against violence. Some projects receive financial support from the Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Prevention of Crime and Radicalization (SG-CIPDR). Initiatives from recent years include the plays “Jihad” (2014) and “Géhenne” (2018), by Ismaël Saïdi, intended for a young audience and focusing on jihadism, racism, and antisemitism; “Spotlight on *laïcité*”: a YouTube series of short clips “aimed at deconstructing received ideas on one of the fundamental values of the Republic”; and “the tournaments of fraternity”, mixed sports events organized throughout France (Prévention de la radicalisation 2019).

7.6. Comparative Outlook on Deradicalization Policies

The above mechanisms attempting to tackle jihadist violence represent only one share of the numerous legislative and administrative reforms in the fields of counterterrorism, intelligence, and deradicalization undertaken by the French government in the last 10–15 years. These changes may be characterized by an increasing securitization of the public sphere, exclusive focus on jihadism, emphasis on *laïcité* as the forefront educational principle in the fight against radicalization, and the (dangerous) entrenchment of the doctrine that there is a directly proportionate link between one's Muslim religious beliefs or practices and their likelihood to engage in violence (Sawyer and Zinigrad 2021b).

Deradicalization policies implemented elsewhere in Europe feature similar programs developed for schools, prisons, and the public sphere. The closest model to that of the French, especially concerning the sphere of education, is the United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism (CONTEST). The "Prevent" axis of the UK scheme prescribes a set of measures aiming to "safeguard and support those vulnerable to radicalisation, to stop them from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism" (Secretary of State for the Home Department, United Kingdom 2018). The overarching elements in both countries' recent educational reforms are starkly similar: they target primarily jihadist (as opposed to extreme-right) radical violence and are, not coincidentally, characterized by clear ethnic demarcations; they were introduced in the aftermath of a series of jihadist, violent symbolic events that prompted public alarm; and most intriguingly, they introduced an obligation to initiate/improve the teaching of basic national values in schools as an important means of deradicalization: "fundamental British values", in the case of the UK, and "Essential values of the Republic" in France. In both cases, this obligation was more than mere lip service: the British government also undertook elaborate steps to integrate the notion of basic national values into the curriculum, which included breaking down the list of principles into clearer sets of skills and knowledge all students shall acquire, appointed officials to ensure the enforcement of these instructions in public and private schools, and devised mechanisms of close supervision of activities in private educational institutions (Bryan 2022; Revell and Bryan 2018; Starkey 2018).

Another instructive example of deradicalization strategies comes from Germany, where the main stakeholders of deradicalization are private institutions funded by the state and where much attention is paid to other types of political violence and radicalization, most notably, on the extreme right. This scheme stands in contrast with the French case, where private organizations play only an auxiliary role to the government efforts and where extreme-right radicalization is largely ignored by the state. The German approach resembles that of the French in the diversity of its measures, which include "family counselling, local information centers, telephone help-lines, civic education programs and youth work on the community level", but is characterized by "decentralized and highly individualized approaches, often including family structures and the personal environment of the target subject" (Samaan and Jacobs 2020). Aside from efforts targeting jihadist radicalization, in the 2000s, almost every German Länder has developed deradicalization programs aimed at far-right violence, with financial support from the federal government (Koehler 2021).

8. Conclusions

In recent years, jihadist terrorism seems to have replaced nationalist-separatist violence. Jihadist extremism has come to dominate the public and political agenda, and since the traumatic 2015 Paris attacks, is widely perceived to pose the biggest threat to France. Organized jihadist networks like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are still a significant factor in the proliferation of extremist ideology and violence. Online radicalization plays a substantial role in the formation of domestic jihadist extremism, especially among marginalized youth. The success of these strategies is evident from the high number of completed or attempted jihadist attacks in France in recent years. However, the overwhelming attention of political elites and the general public on jihadist violence and the aggressive response towards it are rooted not only in statistics, but in the astounding traumatizing effect of the

2015 Paris attacks on the individual and collective experience of violent threats. Jihadist extremism is increasingly characterized as religious, rather than political, violence that threatens not only the physical safety of the French, but also their national identity and fundamental values. The most flagrant claims that Islam and Muslim immigrants are the most dangerous source of extremist violence come from the French far right, but the narratives of anti-Muslim hardliners have been making progress into mainstream politics. Two Ministers of the Interior have made statements that blur the line between extremist violence and Islam.

Consequently, the extensive security measures of surveillance, detection, and prevention of violent attacks employed by the state law-enforcement apparatus target primarily agents of jihadist violence. The deradicalization programs established by the government for this purpose include the promotion of *laïcité* and monitoring radicalization of students in public schools; special units in prisons evaluating the radicalization of incarcerated persons; pilots for the social reintegration of individuals linked to or convicted of terrorism-related activity; and other sanctions and public campaigns aiming to reduce the levels of jihadist violence. Not all of these initiatives are equally successful or functioning. While social reintegration programs show signs of success, deradicalization efforts in schools, and especially in prisons, are criticized for an excessive focus on securitization, stigmatization of Islam, and ineptitude.

The main issue with the French attitude towards jihadist radicalization appears to be the double meaning consciously assigned to it by the government, i.e., as a process that nurtures violence and as a process that leads to stricter religious observance. Presenting both as the same phenomenon risks exacerbating the Muslim population's systemic discrimination in France and elevating their sentiments of injustice, grievance, and alienation.

Moreover, these attitudes and reforms play into the hands of the far right and contribute to the re-emergence of extreme right violence. Right-wing extremism is less present in the French public and political discourses, but multiple agents of extreme right-wing radicalization are currently active in the political sphere or engaged in violence. The *Rassemblement/Front National* party is the main far-right political party, but other political organizations promote more radical and straightforward racist, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant agendas. Violent groups differ in the age of their members, education and professional backgrounds, and level of organization and type of violent activity, which ranges from vandalism to terrorist schemes. The government, however, takes no significant steps to prevent this type of violence and is generally reluctant to address extreme right radicalization.

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Notes

- 1 On the roles of religion, culture, politics, colonialism, and other factors in the emergence of jihadist radical violence, see the famous “French Quarrel over Jihadism” (as it was branded in Daumas 2016), between Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy who debate whether jihadist extremism is a result of the “radicalization of Islam” or “Islamization of radicalism”, respectively. Kepel advances a culturalist thesis and explains post-9/11 jihadist violence as a derivative of Islamist ideology and Salafist teachings, whereas Roy’s “Westernization” theory sees this phenomenon as a “nihilistic generational revolt” that uses religious discourse only incidentally and is linked to processes of “individualization, generation gap, crisis of social authority, emotional religiosity versus intellectualism and delinking between faith and culture” (Daumas 2016; Kepel 2016; Roy 2004, 2015, 2016; *An Interview with Olivier Roy* n.d.; Khosrokhavar 2018; Hedges 2017; Boily 2019). For other accounts of the drivers of jihadism see, e.g., the “Third-Worldist” frameworks of François Burgat and Jean-Pierre Filiu (Burgat 2019; Filiu 2015a, 2015b), emphasizing the political aspect of jihadist violence and claiming it must be understood primarily as a revolt against past and present Western oppression and analyzed within a broader geopolitical context of conflicts in the Middle East and in Algeria; or Fabien Truong, who provides a sociological narrative and accentuates the “the context of tumultuous social, familial, educational, emotional, and spiritual trajectories” (Truong 2018; See also, Dakhli 2016; Lazar 2017; Mauger 2016). See also critical scholarship pointing to Islamophobia as a major radicalization factor: “The exponential growth of Islamophobia and anti-immigrant policies [which] enhances the political influence of anti-Muslim politicians, activists and organizations [and] enables the passing of legislation and security measures that [. . .] increases a sense of marginalization, alienation and outrage and thus the danger of radicalization among a distinct minority” (Esposito 2019; See also O’Brochta et al. 2022).
- 2 This definition—quoted in (Chabal 2015, p. 91)—was framed by the French High Council for Integration. This government institution was dissolved in 2012, but the definition continues to reflect the government’s approach.
- 3 See also the formulation suggested by the Senate “Commission of Inquiry into the Responses Provided by the Public Authorities to the Development of Islamist Radicalization and the Means to Combat it”: “Islamist radicalism is not only about the issue of terrorism or the shift to violent action, but also involves behaviors that can be peaceful and that do not lead to violence. It can be the work of groups that advocate identitarian closure or entryism into the associative and political world. For the commission of inquiry, it is a question of the desire to ensure, in certain parts of the territory, a so-called religious norm over the laws of the Republic” (Eustache-Brinio 2020).
- 4 At the same time, the pro-colonial *Organisation Armée Secrète* (OAS)—a paramilitary group founded by members of the French military in 1961 and fighting against the self-determination of Algeria—was the first in this period to “import” large scale terrorist attacks into Metropolitan France (Gregory 2003).
- 5 Two incidents in 2001, one in 2002, and one in 2001. One of the plots was directed against the US embassy in Paris, a non-French target. Data on the incidents in 2001–2005 are based on (Bakker 2006; Nesser 2008).
- 6 17 killed, 20 wounded (Fenech and Pietrasanta 2016).
- 7 The French Central Territorial Intelligence Service (SCRT) monitors these incidents based on “feedback from its territorial representatives, its local partners, the media and associations representing the Muslim and Jewish religious communities with whom they have a partnership”. The data, available in reports by the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDDH), are broken in three categories: antisemitic, anti-Muslim (recorded as a distinct type only from 2010), and other offences of a racist nature (e.g., against black or Roma). According to the CNCDDH the numbers account only for a tiny proportion of the actual scale of the problem, as racist offences are massively underreported.
- 8 The last available data include information on perpetrators of antisemitic violence in 1997–2011, see e.g., (Jikeli 2018, pp. 304–5).
- 9 Although Darmanin’s public statements target mainly jihadist terrorism, he also expresses occasional concern for “other forms of action” originating from “small radical groups or isolated individuals” resorting to violence out of white supremacist ideology (Le Monde 2020).
- 10 This provision was enacted in 2012, replacing an older version from 1936 (*Loi du 10 janvier 1936*).
- 11 The dissolution of the latter was criticized by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as being unfounded in fact, violating the freedom of association of the Collective’s members, and creating a cooling effect on the fight against discrimination in France (Amnesty International 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020).

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