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**The French approach to dealing  
with Salafist/Jihadist radicalisation**

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**The French government's scheme for preventing and combating Jihadist radicalisation was introduced in April 2014.** Having now been running for three years, I would like to draw a few conclusions on the way France is dealing with this phenomenon.

## **My first conclusion: we are dragging our heels and need to catch up**

### **The limits to fighting anti-terrorism**

The French authorities, aware of the threat presented by the spread of Salafist Jihadist ideology in France and of the terrorist strategy clearly stated by Abu Musab al-Suri in his 1500-page book *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* (published in London), are putting their trust in their surveillance and anti-terrorism services to prevent violence in the country. Indeed, France escaped Jihadist attacks between 1995 and 1996 and it was not until March 2012 that the murderous wave struck France, when a French-Algerian Islamic terrorist – i.e. a *homegrown terrorist* – went on a murderous rampage in South-West France, killing 7 people (including 3 Jewish children). This attack changed the French perception of the danger. But even before that date, many French citizens had already gone off to fight in Iraq and Syria.

Salafist/Jihadist radicalisation is being treated by the French authorities from an anti-terrorism perspective, negatively impacting implementation of the prevention side of the government's policy.

### **Departures to combat zones and despairing families**

Starting in 2012, Miviludes has been getting reports from parents describing situations where children break with their families, where there is a lack of understanding – situations very similar to those described by victims of sectarian movements. New profiles are emerging, including women, many of them very young, and there are many converts. In the face of this distress in the families and the large number of departures, the idea that people who have left will never return is no longer tenable.

Since 2012, more than 1800 French citizens have departed, and 200 have been killed fighting for the IS or the Al-Nusra Front. The defeats suffered by the IS in the past few months are highlighting the question of people returning to France. Some 400 children are involved, more than half of whom were born in the combat zones and are under 5 years' old. The new strategy of the IS and other Jihadist movements, calling on their recruits to take up arms without travelling to the combat zones and receiving training there, is considerably increasing risks.

### **Little focus on prevention and research**

In contrast to the Anglo-Saxon countries, little research into the question of radicalisation was done in France before 2014 and there is no prevention policy. The magnitude of the phenomenon has caught politicians and researchers off-guard.

Sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar, a specialist in the field of prisons, is the author of the definition of radicalisation used by the French authorities: “**a process** by which an individual or group adopts a **violent form of action** directly linked to an extremist ideology with a political, social or religious background and **contesting the established order** on a political, social or cultural level.”

Adoption of a common vocabulary is an important step: radicalisation allows us to influence the process that takes place before any terrorist act is committed; legitimisation of the inherent violence is not the prerogative of radical Islam, enabling us to consider a broad prevention policy.

## Second conclusion: the magnitude of the phenomenon and its specific features

A figure showing the magnitude: 16,000 people are reported to be in the process of becoming radicalised in France in mid-2017. On top of these, we have 2,000 people under surveillance by the security services as proven radicals. In relation to the whole French population, the 15-25 age group or the importance of Islam in France, Salafist/Jihadist radicalisation affects just a very small minority, and of these only a very few will actually take up arms. However, the difficulty of preventing people taking up arms, combined with the mass of sympathisers, make the phenomenon a top priority.

### The figures highlight the diversity of profiles

**The extreme diversity of profiles makes it difficult to find mono-causal explanations:**

- a large majority of adolescents (the 15 - 25 age bracket) and increasingly very young people (13 - 14 years' old);
- the average age is around 26;
- 30% are women
- 38% are converts, of whom 25% come from families without no Islamic background
- different social and socio-economic categories: from working- to middle-class backgrounds, and even some with upper-class ones; – from people with hardly any school education to university graduates; - from people in good jobs to those with little chance on the labour market;
- isolated individuals, brothers and sisters or groups of friends, whole families;
- people with or without a criminal record;
- all regions of France are affected, though big cities are the main regions affected.

### Combination of factors

Over and above specialist debates, **those in charge agree on the necessity to look at an individual's whole life, how he or she slowly becomes radicalised in a non-linear manner, understanding the interaction between a person's individual problems and a defined social and historical context.** Four major factors are put forward: the geopolitical situation in the Arab Islamic world; the country's socio-economic and political difficulties; the evolution of the religious landscape marked by individualism and a return to fundamentalism; the development of the Salafist/Jihadist ideology which seeks to recruit new adherents, create a strong sense of identity and establish a divide between a "Muslim population" and a "Western population." Going a bit deeper, local (withdrawal, integration problems, discrimination) and personal (family history, trauma, aggression, etc.) factors also play a role.

### The attraction of Salafist/Jihadist propaganda

The authorities should not ignore another key to understanding the phenomenon: **Salafist/Jihadist propaganda attracts a wide range of profiles, presenting itself as a counter-culture** opposed to the dominant culture. It is characterised by:

- a politico-religious, moral and normative ideology based on a remodelled fundamentalism;
- an identity proposition playing on mobilising an individual within a vast transnational movement and an exclusive and hateful identity perception;
- a fantasy world drawing on many things at once: religious fantasy, eschatology and a *mainstream* or "young" culture;
- use of the Internet, a powerful medium in all its forms, whether as a traditional content supplier or as a socialising agent.

## Third conclusion: a rapidly structured government scheme and a resilient society

### The main features of the government scheme

The aim of the late but pro-active government scheme for preventing and combating radicalisation introduced from April 2014 onwards is to stop people departing for the combat zone and to prevent acts of terrorism on French soil. It involves: identifying risk situations, making arrangements to deal with them, using legal means to prevent people taking up arms, and a discourse countering the ideology.

**A national hotline** is available to families or any person wanting information. Trained listeners backed up by a psychologist perform a first analysis, sorting out situations presumed to involve radicalisation, while the security services provide further information. **An individual file** records the people reported via the hotline and the data of local security staff. All situations are passed on to the prefectures of the person's place of residence. As the representative of the State in the French départements, **the prefect is responsible for the local handling of the situation**. Working in coordination with the courts, he mobilises all services (social, psycho-social, integration, education), as well as coordinating with local politicians.

At the same time, the judiciary and the administration (in particular the security services) have seen an upgrading of their prevention toolbox: criminal charges for vindicating terrorism or providing logistic support for planned terrorist activities; judicial or administrative measures such as banning people from leaving France, blocking bank accounts and websites. The state of emergency decreed after the attacks of 13 November 2015 has strengthened the administrative measures.

#### **State of play after three years: a proactive administration, progress in detection**

Over the past three years, some 20,000 officials, magistrates and people in charge of detecting or caring for people subject to radicalisation have been trained. Matrices for assessing situations have been established, as have radicalisation indicators. The identification and detection of risk situations now function well, as does the feedback of information. Reports are for the most part relevant, despite initial fears of misleading reports. Both families and those reporting situations do so in a responsible manner.

#### **Societal resilience in the face of terrorist attacks**

In the aftermath of the 2015-2016 attacks, the French sought to understand them, going beyond the idea that the jihadists were just mad. No increase in attacks against the Muslim community has been registered.

However, the potential terrorist seen in anyone starting to become more radical complicates any dealings with him/her. Professionals do not hide their concern and state that they do not have the resources to approach radicalised persons. They are now calling for concrete prevention instruments.

### **Fourth conclusion: our understanding of the phenomenon has progressed**

The expertise found at Miviludes on sectarian phenomena has been a great benefit here, as certain characteristics are also to be found in Jihadist radicalisation: unconditional adherence to a set of beliefs: their pivotal role in establishing the group, in motivating the individual and legitimising his or her action (in contrast to other processes leading to violence); the "extreme" character of these beliefs.

The heterogeneity of the people reported, the magnitude of the phenomenon and its specific features have resulted in out-of-the-box thinking, not keeping to an established interpretation framework and thereby risking underestimating the role played by voluntary commitment, conversion, impulsive behaviour and solidarity with a group or a community. These distinctions are all the more important for dealing with the phenomenon, as a number of radicalised persons clearly express in their feedback and testimonials their refusal to be treated as victims.

Observation of the phenomenon shows that there are several paths leading to radicalisation. Some are slower, some are faster, not all lead to a person committing an act of violence, and backtracking is always possible.

**The first steps** are generally the result of meeting someone with links to the Jihadist movement, as well as a certain disposition towards radical thinking.

**Engagement for the Jihadist cause takes place progressively.** As time goes on, the beliefs and arguments pushed by the propaganda evolve. The person shuts himself out of the real world, instead upholding a new vision of the world and becoming deaf to any information or arguments going against it. The group, whether physical or virtual, to which the person belongs plays a role in strengthening convictions, as its members use it to share the same information and the same arguments without encountering any objections. Group dynamics lead to a hardening of positions. The doctrine itself encourages intellectual isolation through its totalitarian (there is just one truth) and all-encompassing character, able to explain everything and answering all questions posed by the individual. It demands a break with all those who do not share the same vision of the world, on the basis of black-and-white choices: good/bad, pure/impure, them/us.

Intellectual mechanisms lose their unique role in the process, with very strong **emotional mechanisms** also joining in. Many radicalised people state having experienced a revelation, of being born again, of being given a second chance, or of being truly converted. The group plays a dominant role in this respect, giving a very warm welcome to every new arrival. *Love bombing*, a well-known feature of other sects, is the keyword here. The very strong feeling of belonging to the group is also part of the doctrine. It creates a generalised defiance, a new affiliation defined by a religious belonging which transcends all others (especially national belonging), and the feeling of belonging to an elite.

**The individual's moral values and aspirations** similarly play a role in accepting violence as a legitimate form of action. Because the individual sees his cause as just, he is willing to commit himself to it. The sacrifice becomes acceptable because it is for the sake of higher values (a divine cause). Sensitivity to injustice makes people susceptible to revolt, just as sensitivity to frustration and humiliation gives rise to a desire for vengeance. But there are also more trivial motivations: material wishes, a need for recognition or a desire for adventure or to give free rein to urges of violence.

The path taken may be intentionally guided by recruiters or induced by polarisation phenomena within the group. These function as triggers of the ideological and emotional transformation of the individual and his system of values. Recruiters have the role of targeting people and getting them, via various manipulative techniques (non-stop pressure, change of habits, etc.), to serve the cause in line with their potential, especially for violence. The profiles of delinquents, violent individuals, passionate idealists or people with mental disorders are not all used the same way, and ways of serving the cause vary from providing logistic support to suicide attacks.

## **Fifth conclusion: the difficulty of defining objectives and assessing treatment**

### **De-commitment, de-indoctrination, but not de-radicalisation.**

The goal of all treatment is to lead people away from the intrinsically violent Salafist/Jihadist movement, i.e. getting them **to renounce violence** and possibly to start a new life.

Though the specifically religious motivation and the extent of knowledge of the religious culture may vary from one person to the next, the religious dimension nevertheless remains an essential element in the process of radicalisation and is thus the most delicate aspect in any treatment.

It needs to be highlighted that Salafist Islam is very divided and that the strict practice of religion is often a bulwark against the violent sect and not the first step towards it. Nevertheless, the

secularism enshrined in the French constitution stipulates freedom of religion, meaning that it is very dangerous to venture any interpretation of Islam. By contrast, while any questions related to religion are banned from the scope of public intervention, the treatment of radicalised people now includes taking account of this question on a case by case basis. Instruments used in philosophy, anthropology or sociology are suggested for initiating a debate on religion and its identity-giving, moral, political and epistemological dimensions. In the field of primary prevention, education fostering open-mindedness and the sense and place of religion in a secular society needs to be developed.

### **Consensus over individualised and multidisciplinary treatment**

- an individualised approach covering a person's whole life up to now;
- a multidisciplinary approach;
- the importance of the environment and not just personal vulnerabilities;
- proactive prevention measures;

#### **Possible levers:**

- family and emotional ties (the suffering of families, construction or reconstruction of family ties);
- reconnection with reality (group therapy, involvement in a concrete project)
- awareness of the harm caused (testimonials of victims and people returning from the combat zones)
- psychological support (and psychiatric support in certain cases)
- socio-economic integration and the offer of training.

### **The question of dissimulation and evaluation tools**

Sophisticated methods of concealment, the theorisation of "religious" duty (*taqiya*), and people's knowledge of how Western societies "function" constitute real difficulties for identifying and evaluating risks, but also for assessing treatment.

The other difficulty is the **absence of evaluation tools for the various treatment plans**. This requires the definition of exact goals, sufficient authority to assert oneself vis-à-vis the various stakeholders, and a comprehensive overview of practices. We are also too involved. Assessment is absolutely necessary, though it mustn't discourage good intentions. Up to now the French authorities have tried to mobilise professionals as much as possible.

### **Challenges to be overcome in the field of prevention:**

- The further development of research, cooperation and the sharing of experience between teams on the ground
- The question of sharing information must take account of individual freedoms and security aspects
- The anticipation of developments (recruitment strategies)
- The development of secondary prevention for young people: better protecting vulnerable families, educating young people to develop systems of intellectual defence against conspiracy theories.