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Terror in the Terroir

The Roots of France's Jihadist Problem

Jytte Klausen

Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West
BY GILLES KEPEL. Princeton
University Press, 2017, 220 pp.

Since the start of 2015, jihadists have killed over 300 people and injured thousands more in a string of gruesome attacks in European cities. The assailants have driven trucks and vans into crowds, detonated suicide bombs, carried out mass shootings, and used knives and axes to attack, even behead, their victims. By and large, the attackers have been locals, but they have often received ideological support and practical instructions from members of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).

In his new book, the French political scientist Gilles Kepel argues that among European countries, France has experienced the worst of this new wave of terrorism. Although the phenomenon of Islamist extremism “is not exclusively French,” he writes, “the French case is stronger and deeper” than the cases of other countries. Some 6,000 people, around 1,800 of them from France, have traveled from western Europe to join

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ISIS in Iraq or Syria or in one of the so-called caliphate’s “provinces” in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mali, or Yemen. When they return home, they form terrorist cells. The French-Belgian jihadist network, largely made up of returning ISIS fighters, has proved the largest and deadliest of Europe’s terrorist gangs, killing 162 people in multiple attacks in Brussels and Paris in 2015 and 2016.

Kepel’s aim in *Terror in France* is to place the recent burst of jihadism in his country in the context of the political upheaval that France has undergone in recent years. He primarily blames Islamist fundamentalism for the terrorist threat but sees it as just one part of a larger rise in identity politics. In his view, this broader trend presents a profound threat to French society, as it is incompatible with traditional French ideals. For this reason, the book is not really about jihad “in the West,” despite its English subtitle. (The title of the French version of the book translates as *The Genesis of French Jihad*.) Rather, Kepel offers an impassioned indictment of religious and nationalist extremism in French politics, which, despite the recent election of the centrist Emmanuel Macron to the presidency, remains deeply divided.

THE RISE OF IDENTITY

Kepel identifies two main causes of the jihadist surge in France: the Internet and the emergence of “ethnoreligious fissures in the social fabric,” which he believes are breaking the French Republic apart. “The departure [of young Frenchmen] for Syria to engage in jihad and undergo martyrdom there is the natural and concrete sequel of their virtual indoctrination,” he writes, although he

does not provide much evidence to support this idea. He highlights the online publication, in 2005, in Arabic, of *The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, a long historical analysis of terrorist tactics written by the al Qaeda member Abu Musab al-Suri. Kepel mentions Suri's manifesto at least 20 times. But as he acknowledges, there is little chance that many French jihadists have ever read it. Nevertheless, he suggests that Suri's ideas inspired a new generation of French terrorists.

Kepel argues that France is particularly susceptible to online jihadist propaganda because of a breakdown of allegiance to the once fundamental French principles of secularism and colorblindness. On the political left and right alike, a defection from core French republican virtues has created "ruptures" within the nation and given rise to a new form of identity politics. On the left, multiculturalism and an insistence on respect for difference are usurping *laïcité*, the traditional French republican ideal of civic secularism. (Anti-Semitism, long present on the French right, now taints the left as well.) On the right, xenophobia and ultranationalism have pushed voters into the arms of the populist, anti-immigrant National Front, the party led by Marine Le Pen. Although their adherents consider themselves adversaries, Kepel sees "right-wing ethnic nationalism and Islamism as parallel conduits for expressing grievances."

Successive presidents have stoked these fires, Kepel argues. Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, played on both Muslim and nationalist identities simultaneously. On the one hand, he gave Muslim organizations the official recognition they had been calling for, while on the other, he

turned tough on immigration in order to take votes away from the National Front. In the 2012 presidential election, some 700,000 newly registered voters from immigrant backgrounds—what Kepel calls "the 'post-colonial' immigrant vote"—supported the Socialist candidate, François Hollande. (French law prohibits polls from registering people's religion but not their former nationalities.) Kepel predicted in *Terror in France* that when Hollande failed to help these supporters, they would turn to identity politics and the Muslim voters among them would start supporting candidates running on explicitly Muslim platforms.

Kepel devotes an entire chapter to the failure of economic reform and the effects of globalization on the French population, in particular the descendants of immigrants. But he does not argue that economic stagnation or the inability to integrate immigrants has driven terrorist recruitment. Instead, he blames dangerous forms of Islam. He points to the emergence of ultraconservative Salafi enclaves, which have bred a new generation of violent Islamists. Salafi preachers advocate a "whole-life" version of Islam that isolates Muslim communities and encourages confrontation with the infidel French state, which Salafists regard with "suspicion, fear, or indifference," Kepel writes. And lax government supervision of mosques has allowed non-Francophonic imams to preach on the evils of French society.

Kepel accepts that the French right has fueled the rise of Muslim identity politics by lending credence to the view that Muslims are unwelcome in France. But he charges the French left with "criminal blindness" for failing to understand the

threat posed by identity politics to the French Republic and for casting French Muslims as victims of Islamophobia. He calls this tendency “Islamogauchism” (Islamic leftism). Kepel also decries the appearance of new Muslim political parties that aim to mobilize Muslims to vote and stand for office, which he lumps together with Islamists, Salafists, and jihadists under the label of “communitarianism.”

American readers may be surprised to see bloc votes regarded as suspicious and even illegitimate, but many French intellectuals are deeply distrustful of communitarianism, the catch-all label for any acknowledgment of religious or ethnoracial identity as a source of civic engagement.

Macron’s election seems to run counter to Kepel’s predictions about the imminent collapse of the republic. In his campaign, Macron emphasized universalism and secularism and affirmed his allegiance to the EU and to traditional French republican values—and won decisively. (Kepel is a committed supporter of Macron.) But there was enough ambiguity in the election results to support Kepel’s view that all is not well. In the second round, 20.7 million voters turned out for Macron, but 10.6 million voted for Le Pen, and 12 million eligible voters stayed home or submitted blank ballots, the highest abstention rate in decades.

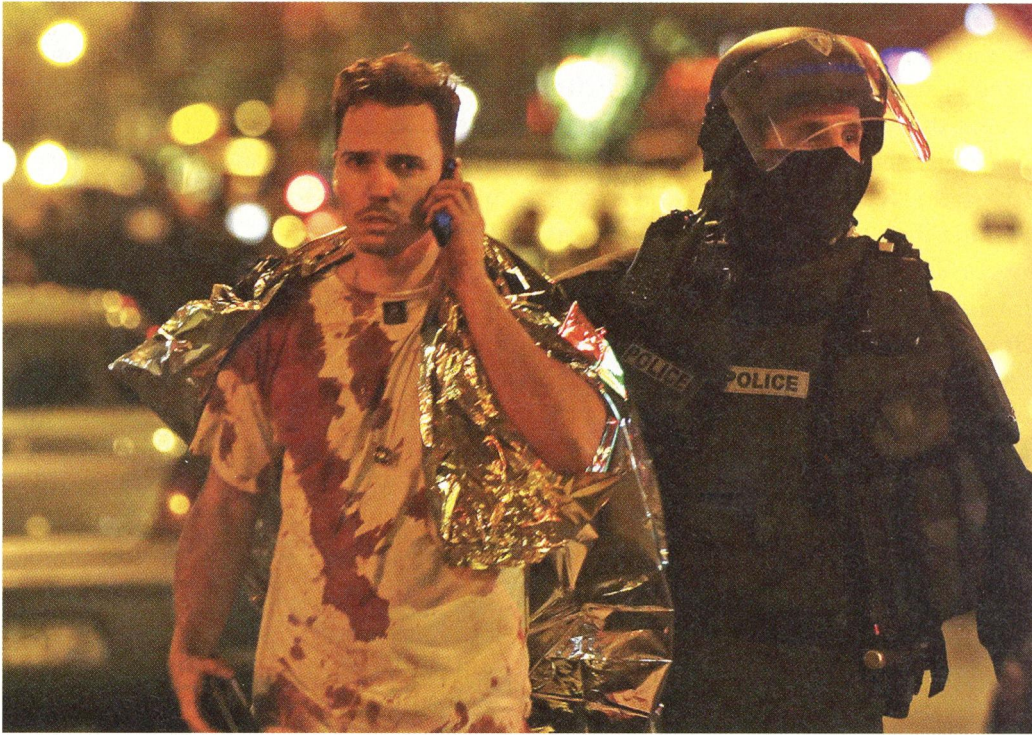
RELIGIOUS WARS

Kepel’s views have made him a deeply controversial figure in France. (They have also earned him jihadist death threats, leading the government to provide him with 24-hour security.) In 2015, a public fracas broke out between Kepel and another French political scientist,

Olivier Roy. In an essay titled “Jihadism Is a Generational and Nihilistic Revolt,” published in *Le Monde* just two weeks after a jihadist group had killed 130 people in a series of suicide bombings and mass shootings in Paris that November, Roy argued that most experts, including Kepel, had misunderstood the jihadist movement. France’s problem with angry young Muslims had nothing to do with Salafi fundamentalism, Roy maintained. The new generation of extremists wasn’t genuinely interested in religion; its members knew hardly anything about Islam. In Roy’s words, France was dealing “not with the radicalization of Islam but with the Islamization of radicalism.” Groups of young men from poor urban communities were turning to Islamist extremism in a nihilistic rejection of society. In the process, they were abandoning their parents and the wider Muslim community. “They have no place in the Muslim societies that they claim to defend,” Roy wrote.

The French edition of *Terror in France* appeared shortly after Roy’s essay. As Kepel made the rounds on French talk shows promoting his book, he called Roy an “ignoramus” and derided him for not speaking Arabic. (Kepel trained as an Arabist and wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Islamist movements in Egypt.) Then Kepel published a critique of Roy in *Libération*, a left-leaning newspaper. Making a pun on Roy’s last name, which is pronounced like the French word for “king,” *roi*, the headline read, “Le roi est nu” (The King Is Naked). Roy responded in *L’Obs*, a weekly magazine, by accusing Kepel of seeking fame and money at the cost of his intellectual integrity.

Kepel and Roy’s disagreement resembles the long-standing debate



Under siege: a victim of the Bataclan theater attack, Paris, November 2015

among scholars of migration over whether push factors, such as wars and natural disasters, or pull factors, such as economic opportunities, do more to explain why, when, and how people move. Roy focuses on the push toward extremism, which he believes comes from social exclusion and the discrimination experienced by second-generation immigrants. Kepel, on the other hand, sees growing extremism as the result of the pull exercised by Salafi preachers.

Despite their differences, Kepel and Roy agree that push factors matter. They both point to the failure of the French government to provide opportunities for the children of immigrants. Poor housing and an underfunded educational system have landed many young men on the street, without jobs or any realistic prospects of setting up their own households. Kepel and Roy

both decry the dislocation and stagnation caused by globalization and blame successive French governments for failing to address these problems. Where they part ways is over the role of religion, which Roy mostly dismisses and Kepel regards as far more significant than economics.

One significant pull factor is social pressure. To become a jihadist, you have to already know one. Members of a group tend to see themselves as similar to other members and are therefore predisposed to value the same ideas and behaviors. Most jihadists, however, do not emerge from the public housing projects in the *banlieues*, or suburbs, on the outskirts of Paris, where isolated Muslim groups have traditionally proliferated. In recent years, the fastest-growing jihadist enclaves have cropped up in the south of France. In one of the most interesting passages in *Terror in France*, Kepel discusses the

small town of Lunel, near the Mediterranean coast, which has fallen prey to competing forms of extremism. In 2014, it sent more young men to fight for ISIS per capita than any other town in France; that same year, the National Front became the town's largest political party.

As Kepel acknowledges, French jihadists also do not usually come from Salafi homes. The Kouachi brothers, who shot and killed 12 people at the offices of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015, were French citizens of Algerian descent who grew up as Catholics. Their friend Amedy Coulibaly, who in the days after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack killed five people in a string of shootings in Paris, was a French citizen of Malian descent who came from a secular background. These men encountered jihadist networks not in the *banlieues* but in the prisons of the French state.

Although young men clearly reach jihadism in complex ways, Roy goes too far by dismissing the role of religion altogether. He suggests that because many terrorists use drugs, watch pornography, and eat non-halal food, they are not truly Muslim. But smoking marijuana and breaking dietary restrictions do not matter to someone about to commit the ultimate sacrifice for Allah. ISIS, for example, hands out amphetamines to its fighters to improve their stamina. Jihadists justify their religious transgressions by citing a saying of the Prophet Muhammad that however much a Muslim prays, if he acquiesces to the infidels, he won't get to paradise. Most Muslims see the adage as an injunction to do good deeds. But it serves as a convenient way for recruiters to convert people

with violent tendencies and a desire for perverse heroism who are unfamiliar with mainstream Islamic teachings. In their reading, the Prophet was saying that a Muslim who picks up a gun to fight for Allah is guaranteed a fast track to heaven.

Kepel and Roy also disagree over how the French government should deal with extremism within religion. Kepel argues that it should tackle the problem directly by enforcing the principle of *laïcité*, which banishes most religion from the public sphere. According to Roy, rather than suppressing Islam in public, the government should make more room for mainstream Islam to express itself. Doing so, he thinks, would restrict the space available to jihadist recruiters. After the London transport bombings in 2005, the British government tried that approach, paying imams and theologians opposed to jihadist violence to tour mosques and provide "faith-inspired guidance" to young Muslims. The problem with that experiment was that when some of the government-funded preachers proved less moderate than expected, the British government found itself in the untenable situation of having to express opinions on what was good Islam and what was bad.

FIGHTING BACK

As the British government's struggles with jihadism have shown, the problem is not confined to France. In fact, both Kepel and Roy exaggerate the extent to which jihadism in France is specific to that country. Jihadists everywhere tell the same stories about how and why they joined this or that jihadist group abroad and returned to "do something"

back home. Isis' and al Qaeda's propaganda outlets pump out the same narrative, with some localized content, to all potential Western recruits. It seems to work well enough everywhere.

There is also scant evidence that France is particularly vulnerable to jihadism. In March, a report prepared by a committee created by the French Senate to investigate radicalization in the country listed 17,393 people who had been classified by the French government as possible terrorist threats. In the United Kingdom, which has roughly the same population as France, the government said in May that it had identified some 23,000 jihadist extremists living in the country as potential terrorist attackers.

Moreover, many of the perpetrators of recent terrorist attacks in France came from abroad. The November 2015 attacks in Paris were carried out by teams of assailants who had driven down from Brussels. The network included some Frenchmen who had relocated to Brussels, French-speaking Belgians, and two Iraqis who had apparently never traveled to France before. Dutch, German, and Swedish militants were involved on the edges of the network, as well. None of the men was the product of specifically French dysfunctions.

This means that there are practical steps all European governments can take to reduce the likelihood of future attacks. Most important, they must fix the methods by which security agencies evaluate and monitor people and groups they consider dangerous. Thousands of people have embraced the idea of martyrdom, most of them young men. Not all will carry out a terrorist attack, so governments need to distinguish

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the truly dangerous from the merely noisy. This is a massive task, and authorities can manage it only with the help of families, neighbors, local mosques, and community groups. Law enforcement should reach out to these communities not because there is much hope of changing the minds of extremists (that approach has failed repeatedly) but because only those close to potential terrorists can help the authorities identify and stop them before they act.

It is painful that many of the perpetrators of recent attacks were already known to the police or security agencies. Often, they slipped through the cracks because governments did not have the resources to monitor every threat. In the short term, governments need to hire more analysts, social workers, and probation officers to keep track of the men and women who have been flagged as dangerous.

But simply hiring more people will not solve the problem if different law enforcement agencies fail to communicate with one another. In the United States, the 9/11 Commission found that repeated failures by the CIA and the FBI to share information with each other played a large role in the country's inability to prevent the 9/11 attacks. European countries, especially France and Germany, face the same problem. For example, Anis Amri, who drove a truck into a crowded Christmas market in Berlin last December, killing 12 people, was already on the German terrorist watch list and was being considered for deportation. But the decentralized nature of German law enforcement meant that the authorities had no idea where he was. Legal restrictions often make sharing

information difficult or impossible. Those laws were largely designed to protect citizens' privacy and keep them safe from police excesses. But those concerns are becoming increasingly outdated. Only by breaking down the silos of law enforcement will European states be able to prevent large, fluid terrorist networks from carry out more mass attacks.

Taking these steps would not solve Europe's terrorist problem. But doing so would reduce the number of attacks and, by breaking up dangerous jihadist networks, make those that are carried out less lethal. 🌐