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From Hijra to Terror: The Islamic State's Threat to France

Adam Hoffman

On November 13, 2016, France marked one year since the brutal series of terrorist attacks carried out by the Islamic State (*Da'esh*) in Paris, which killed 130 people, injured hundreds more, and led the authorities to declare a state of emergency throughout the country that remains in place. Memorial ceremonies in Paris inaugurated monuments in memory of the victims.¹ A few days later the U.S. revealed the identity of the architect of the Paris attacks, Abu Souleymane al-Faransi (Abdelilah Himich), who was also suspected of planning the subsequent terror attacks on the airport and subway station in Brussels in March 2016.²

Despite the memorial ceremonies and the mourning of the victims, the Islamic State's threat to France is not just a traumatic memory of the past. On November 21, 2016, French officials announced the arrest of seven suspects in Strasbourg and Marseilles who were suspected of carrying out terrorist attacks in France. The suspects fought in Syria and were connected to the Islamic State terror cell that carried out the November 13, 2015 attacks.³ In September 2016, French authorities thwarted a plan to carry out an attack next on the Notre Dame Cathedral by a group of activists who had "adopted the ideology of Da'esh," according to officials.⁴ Former Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve noted that since the beginning of the year officials have arrested 418 terror suspects, and he defined the terror threat as "unprecedented."⁵

Notwithstanding the focus on terrorist attacks during the past year, France has been contending with the unique challenge of radicalization and Islamist terror

¹ Liz Alderman, "[From Bataclan to Street Cafes, Paris Is Quiet but Resolute as It Mourns on Anniversary of Attacks](#)," *The New York Times*, November 13, 2016.

² Rukmini Callimachi, "[ISIS Operative Suspected in Paris and Brussels Attacks Is Identified](#)," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2016.

³ Lizzie Dearden, "[ISIS: New terror plot foiled in France with arrest of seven suspects in Strasbourg and Marseille](#)," *Independent*, 21 November 21, 2016.

⁴ Michael Weiss, "[An ISIS Plot to Blow Up Notre Dame Cathedral—and Rule the World?](#)" *The Daily Beast*, September 8, 2016.

⁵ Lizzie Dearden, "[ISIS: New terror plot foiled in France with arrest of seven suspects in Strasbourg and Marseille](#)," *Independent*, 21 November 21, 2016.

for some time. This challenge is evident not only in the large numbers of attacks but also in the number of people who traveled from France to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, 1,700, as of May 2015).⁶ Furthermore, by September 2016, the French government had identified more than 2,000 people who had connections to terror organizations in Iraq and Syria, of which 244 had returned to France after an extended stay in Syria.⁷ These facts, exceptional in comparison to other states in Europe, have led to many attempts to identify the roots of radicalization in France.

Some analysts, among them senior scholars, have pointed to problems with integrating immigrants, who suffer from social and economic marginalization; while others have pointed to France's uncompromising secularism (*laïcité*), which does not permit the expression of religious symbols in public, as the root of radicalization amongst the part of the Muslim minority in France that has turned to violence and terror. Farhad Khosrokhavar, a sociologist, belongs to the first category, as does the France's Economic Minister Emmanuel Macron, who claimed a few days after the November 2015 attacks that "exclusion is a fact of life in France. These young people [that carried out the attacks in Paris] who were radicalized] have lost faith in society."⁸ Those researchers arguing that France's uncompromising secularism is the root of Islamist terror and radicalization include William McCants, Christopher Meserole, Jocelyne Cesari, and Jonathan Laurence.⁹ In contrast to these two explanations, other researchers explicitly relate to the role of Islam as the problem in radicalization and terror in France: Gilles Kepel claims that Islam — and particularly the Salafi stream — became "a clear identity marker" for many Muslims living in difficult socio-economic conditions in France's poor suburbs, enduring discrimination and unemployment.¹⁰ Researchers like Kepel see radicalization of the Muslim community in France as the heart of the problem. In response to Kepel's arguments, French political scientist Olivier Roy claims that Islamist terror in France is not an expression of the radicalization of the Muslim community as a whole, but the result of the generational revolt by a very specific category of Muslim youth (second generation Muslim immigrants to France and new Muslim converts) against the religion and culture of their parents. As such, "instead of the radicalization of Islam," argues Roy, "we are talking about the Islamization of radicalism" in France.¹¹

⁶ "[Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq](#)," *The Soufan Group*, December 2015.

⁷ Elizabeth Zerofsky, "[How to Stop a Martyr](#)," *Foreign Policy*, September 1, 2016.

⁸ Farhad Khosrokhavar, "[Jihad and the French Exception](#)," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2016; Geert de Clercq, "[French minister condemns social exclusion of young Muslims](#)," *Reuters*, November 29, 2015.

⁹ William McCants and Christopher Meserole, "[The French Connection: Explaining Sunni Militancy Around the World](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2016; Jocelyne Cesari, "[The existential war between Islamic State and secular France](#)," *The Conversation*, July 28, 2016; Jonathan Laurence, "[Laïcité Without Égalité: Can France Be Multicultural?](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, November 18, 2015.

¹⁰ Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, "['Terreur dans l'Hexagone,' by Gilles Kepel: The author explores opportunities missed by the French elite](#)," *Financial Times*, January 10, 2016.

¹¹ Olivier Roy, "[France's Oedipal Islamist Complex](#)," *Foreign Policy*, January 7, 2016.

The Islamic State is not the exclusive owner of the jihadist threat in France. Muhammad Merah, who carried out the shooting at the Jewish Day School in Toulouse in May 2012, acted alone but declared his allegiance to al-Qa'ida;¹² the terrorists who attacked the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 were said to have belonged to al-Qa'ida of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).¹³ Nonetheless, France's experience with acts of terror inspired by radical Islam prior to the rise of Da'esh notwithstanding, the Islamic State has carried out the most deadly attacks and has demonstrated a unique ideological and operational commitment and capability.

The Islamic State's terrorist attacks in Europe indicate a strategic change in the group's behavior. From the summer of 2014 until the start of 2015, after the declaration of the caliphate, the Islamic State focused on the occupation and control of the territory it conquered. As part of this, its principal efforts were to enlist Muslim volunteers from around the world through a call to *Hijra* (emigration, in the spirit of the journey of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina in 622) to the territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, the Islamic State needed skilled manpower in a number of different areas. Hence, its first issue of *Dabiq*, the group's English language propaganda organ, called for every Muslim— but mainly religious scholars, judges, people with military training, managers, doctors, and engineers — to emigrate to the Islamic State.¹⁴ However, beginning in the middle of 2015, after the IS began losing territory to the international coalition arrayed against it, Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, the IS spokesman at the time, urged Islamic State supporters in Europe to carry out terrorist attacks in their home countries, saying that "the smallest operation that you carry out in your countries is dearer to our hearts than the largest operations that are carried out here [in Syria]; these operations are more effective for us and more damaging in their eyes [the unbelievers]." He also called for intentionally targeting civilians, because in the "lands of the Crusaders there is no sanctity of blood and nobody is 'innocent'."¹⁵

'Adnani's call for terrorism in Europe has received even more expression in recent months, when another propaganda organ of Da'esh declared that shedding "the blood of unbelievers is *halal* [permitted according to Islamic religious law] for you, do so. In turning directly to "Muslims living in *Dar al-Kuffar* [lit. the land of unbelievers - lands that are not under Muslim governance]," it was argued that "killing unbelievers is a form of worshipping Allah...and terrorizing the hearts of all of the unbelievers is an obligation of every Muslim."¹⁶ American sociologist Jeff Goodwin stated that this call refers to "categorical terrorism" — in other words, terror directed at civilians that do not belong to the attackers' ethnic, religious, or national group. And such action

¹² "Obituary: Toulouse gunman Mohamed Merah," *BBC*, March 22, 2012.

¹³ Jytte Klausen, "France on Fire: The Charlie Hebdo Attack and the Future of al Qaeda", *Foreign Affairs*, January 7, 2015.

¹⁴ *Dabiq*, Al-Hayat Media Center, Issue 1, p. 11.

¹⁵ "That They Live by Proof: An Address by the Official Spokesman of the Islamic State The Mujahid Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani ash-Shami," *Al-Hayat Media Center*, Sha'ban 1437.

¹⁶ *Rumiyah*, Al-Hayat Media Center, Dhul-Hijja 1437, Issue 1, p. 36.

provides the legitimacy, encouragement, and guidance for murders and massacres, without any religious limits or moral inhibitions.¹⁷

What is the logic behind the Islamic State's acts of terror? An article in *Dabiq* claims "it is very important that acts of terror will be carried out in every state that joined the coalition against the Islamic State," and characterized France as one of these states, emphasizing that "one must injure civilians in every Crusader state, in every place that it is possible to find them."¹⁸ From the Islamic State's perspective, the terrorism in France was designed to punish French citizens for the bombs the French Air Force used in Raqqa and in other territory controlled by the Islamic State, and to deter the French government from carrying out additional attacks against it.

Second, the Islamic State encourages terrorism with simple but deadly results, with the goal of preserving its murderous monopoly on the global jihadi camp. There was, for example, the terror attack with the truck on the Nice promenade on Bastille Day last July, which killed 86 people. The use of vehicles in terror operations was described as "one of the most simple and secure means to use against unbelievers, and at times also one of the most deadly and successful methods of attack from the point of view of reaping the largest number of deaths of unbelievers."¹⁹ These kinds of attacks are very easy to carry out, helping to preserve the IS's image of a powerful terrorist organization in the West's consciousness.

Third, these attacks offset the territorial contraction of the Islamic State and the difficulties facing foreign fighters who wish to travel to the territory under IS control in Iraq and Syria. According to Rachid Kassim, a French citizen and a senior member of the Islamic State, who was responsible for planning the attacks in France, "At first, the caliphate called for hijra. Today, the best thing is to carry out terror attacks in *Dar al-Kuffar*, because the hijra is very difficult to execute now." Kassim added, "when the door to the hijra closed, the door to *jihad* opened."²⁰ In other words, the success of the coalition's military operation against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the different means that have been taken by European countries to make it difficult to travel to the Middle East to join the Islamic State, altered the strategy of the organization and actually increased its incentives to carry out terrorist attacks in France and other European countries.

The international coalition's effort to damage the Islamic State succeeded in reducing the territory under its control and killing senior members of the organization's leadership, like Abu Muhammad al-ʿAdnani, who was the Islamic State's spokesman,²¹ and Wa'il ʿAdil Hasan al-Fayed, who was the Minister of

¹⁷ Jeff Goodwin, "A theory of categorical terrorism," *Social Forces* 84: 4 (2006), 2027-2046.

¹⁸ *Dabiq*, Al-Hayat Media Center, Issue 4, p. 44.

¹⁹ *Rumiyah*, Al-Hayat Media Center, Safar 1438, Issue 3, p. 3.

²⁰ Amarnath Amarasingam, "[An Interview with Rachid Kassim, Jihadist Orchestrating Attacks in France](#)," *Jihadology*, November 18, 2016.

²¹ Robin Wright, "[Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Voice of ISIS, is Dead](#)," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2016.

Information, and who was also known as Abu Muhammad al-Furqan.²² Nevertheless, these achievements did not damage IS's ability to carry out terror attacks in Europe. IS's call to conduct attacks against civilians presents France with a serious challenge. It has led to a new reality of constant fear and an official state of emergency in France, with laws that are supposed to help the security services thwart future attacks. Unfortunately, it does not seem like this situation will change any time soon.

Adam Hoffman is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a lecturer at the Rothberg International School, and an analyst at the Middle Eastern Social Networks Analysis Desk at the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies \(MDC\)](#), [Tel Aviv University](#).

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²² "[IS confirms death of propaganda chief Abu Mohammed al-Furqan](#)," *BBC News*, October 11, 2016.