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The "Merah Affair": The "Sea Change"
in Islamism's Terror Footprint
to Holy Jihad in France

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The “Merah Affair”: The “Sea Change” in Islamism’s Terror Footprint to Holy Jihad in France

Ellen Cannon*

On December 16, 2020, a panel of French judges found all fourteen defendants guilty of involvement in the 2015 attacks on the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and the Hyper Cacher kosher supermarket in Paris. As reported by James McAuley of the *Washington Post*, the long-awaited verdict followed a three-month trial that captivated the French public even amid a deadly pandemic. More than any other Western nation, France has been a constant target of Islamist terrorism in recent years: more than 260 people have been killed here in attacks since 2012. Simultaneously, since 2012, France has suffered from a significant increase in the number and severity of antisemitic and anti-Zionist hate crimes and terror attacks. These form part of a rise in contemporary antisemitisms across most of Western Europe, with heightened expressions of antisemitic behaviors, attitudes, and attacks from radical Islamism, as well as from left-wing and right-wing movements and parties.¹

It is important to emphasize that there is a clear distinction between Islamism and Islamists, on the one hand, and the faith of Islam, on the other. According to Bassam Tibi, “Islamism emanates from a political interpretation of Islam: it is based not on the religious faith of Islam but an ideological use of religion within the political realm.” This distinction

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is crucial, according to Tibi, as it underscores the fact that “the religious faith of Islam is not an obstacle to peace or a threat to the non-Muslim other. Islamism, on the other hand creates deep civilizational rifts between Muslims and non-Muslims.... Islamism classifies all non-Muslims as infidels and thus enemies of Islam.” Furthermore, Islamism contributes to “polarization between Muslims and the non-Muslim other” and also “generates ferocious infighting within the community of Islam.”²

This paper will limit its focus to examining the impact of Islamism on the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher terror attacks of January 2015. It will be argued that the significance of the three days of terrorism that shook France to its core on January 7-9, 2015, must be understood within the framework of the rise of Islamist terror attacks in 2012. This rise in attacks heralded a “sea change” in the style, destructive intent, weaponry, and ideology of terrorism in France that continues to be felt today. This “sea change” will be explored through a close examination of the “Merah affair,” a series of Islamist attacks that took place in southern France in March 2012. In this context, particular attention will be given to: (1) exposure to extremist jihadist Salafist indoctrination; (2) family dysfunction; (3) the internationalization of domestic terrorism in France; (4) the wide-spread publication of jihadist “playbooks” that provide required steps toward successful terror actions; and (5) the limited response by French terrorism officials.

French Jewry facing contemporary attacks

According to Noam Schimmel, author of “The ‘Loneliness’ of French Jews,” since 2012, France has suffered from a steady increase in the number of anti-Jewish hate crimes.³ France has Europe’s largest Jewish population, which is estimated at between 500,000 and 600,000 individuals. Paris has the highest population with 300,000, followed by Marseilles with 70,000 Jews, mostly from North Africa. Attacks on Jews in France have been particularly violent and more frequent than in other European countries. The climate of aggression against Jews is without precedent in the post-WWII era.⁴ Attacks occur in multiple contexts, including private homes, supermarkets, schools, religious institutions, and public institu-

tions. As a result, France's Interior Ministry and the Jewish Community Security Service (SPCJ) have partnered to collect data on anti-Jewish acts in France. For example, the 2014 SPCJ report showcased a 100 percent increase in antisemitic threats and actions in the course of one year, with a rise in violent actions and assaults. In 2014 alone, there were 851 such acts recorded.⁵ The report further highlights the fact that Jews, while constituting less than 1 percent of the French population, are victims of most racist attacks in the country, with 51 percent of racist acts committed in 2014 targeting Jews. Racist acts, excluding antisemitic acts recorded in 2014, decreased by 5 percent compared to 2013. Thus, anti-Jewish attacks had become the predominant form of racist attacks in France by 2014.⁶

By the early 21st century, most Jews and Muslims in France were of North African origin. Expressions of antisemitism were seen to rise during the Six-Day War of 1967 and the French anti-Zionist campaign of the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ By the 1990s, surveys suggested an increase in stereotypical antisemitic beliefs among the general population, which coincided with the increased electoral success of the extreme right National Front party. Holocaust denial was also evident during this period.⁸

The nature and the intensity of antisemitism in France was altered during the Second Intifada in Israel, resulting in anti-Zionism as a new form of antisemitism. Simultaneously, second-generation Muslim immigrants in France increasingly identified with the Palestinian cause, with some even identifying with radical Islamism. By 2000, political expressions of Jew-hatred and anti-Zionism increased based on attitudes toward the Israel-Palestine conflict, as well as Islamism.⁹ During this period, the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights recorded high levels of antisemitic threats and actions in 2002-2004 and 2009. This commission defined "actions" as homicides, attacks and attempted attacks, arson, degradations, violence, and assault and battery. Antisemitic threats included speech acts, threatening gestures and insults, graffiti, pamphlets, and emails.

Many French Jews have chosen to emigrate from France, largely in response to this rise in insecurity and the violation of their human rights and their rights as French citizens. The number of Jews that emigrated to Israel in 2014 was the highest recorded since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

How can one understand the depth of this hatred toward Jews? David Nirenberg, Professor at the University of Chicago and the author of *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, has written about the ways in which this hatred is rarely, if ever, confined to its seeming object. This has been true in the history of all antisemitism. “Within Islamic rhetoric,” Nirenberg states, Judaism is not just the Jews; it’s capitalism, colonialism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, America, homosexuality, Darwinism, and a range of modern threats to godliness.”¹⁰ He goes on to note that

For centuries, Muslims have even used “Judaism” as a way of criticizing each other. In the eighth century, Sunnis called Shiites “the Jews of the community.” Beginning in the Middle Ages, we find Muslim leaders attacked by their opponents as Jews who deserve deposition and murder, much as Islamists referred to Sadat, after he visited Israel and dealt with Menachem Begin, as a Jew. Today, all sides in inter-Islamic power struggles try to represent their rivals as supporters of Israel. ... For the hardcore Islamist, Judaism represents not just the Jewish people but the corrosive, materialist, modernity that threatens piety and godly rule.¹¹

The 2012 terrorist attacks: the “sea change” in Islamism’s terror footprint to holy Jihad in France

France had experienced a wide variety of modern manifestations of terrorism: anti-colonist terrorism in the 1950s; right-wing terrorism in the 1960s; left-wing and separatist terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s; and international and homegrown Islamic terrorism in the 1980s and 1990s.¹² However, according to Kepel and Jardin, the terror attacks in Toulouse in March 2012, now known as the “Merah affair,” established a “sea change” in French politics. They correctly argue that the affair put a “dramatic end to the sixteen-year illusion that France was immune to jihadist terrorism

on its own soil—in contrast to Spain and Great Britain, which had been the target of major attacks in 2004 and 2005.”¹³

In March 2012, a young French national of Algerian descent, Mohammed Merah, carried out a series of shootings in Montauban and Toulouse in southern France. According to news reports, his shooting spree started on March 11, when he methodically opened fire on unsuspecting people. According to police negotiators, his motive was to avenge the deaths of Palestinian children in the Israeli-occupied territories, France’s military involvement in Afghanistan, and a year-old French law banning full-face Muslim veils. On March 15, Merah shot two French soldiers, both Muslims, in the head and grievously wounded another, a black Frenchman whose family was from the Antilles. Videos of the incident show him shouting “Allahu Akbar” (God is Great) as he fires.¹⁴

Four days later, Merah launched a horrendous attack on the Ozar Hatorah school in Toulouse. This was the deadliest attack against Jews in France since a 1982 assault on a Paris kosher restaurant. In 1980, a terrorist group also attacked a Jewish synagogue on the Rue Copernic, killing four and wounding 40. At Ozar Hatorah, Merah “shot at everything he could see, children and adults.”¹⁵ Among those killed was Rabbi Jonathan Sandler, 30, a religious instructor, his two sons, Arye, 6, and Gabriel, 3, and Miriam Monsonogo, 8, the school director’s daughter. The assailant pursued his last victim, an eight-year-old girl, into the concrete courtyard, seizing and grabbing her by her hair. A member of France’s most prominent Jewish association, the Conseil Représentatif des Institutions juives de France (CRIF), who viewed the video of the attack, said that while Merah was “still holding the girl, the killer then changed weapons [to a .45 caliber gun]. He shot her in the head and left.”¹⁶ The four victims were all dual Israeli-French citizens. Following the shooting, French authorities ordered heightened security and surveillance for all Jewish religious schools.

Merah was an internationally trained terrorist. He was a second-generation member of an immigrant family that failed to adapt to French

society, and together with his brother was exposed to extremist jihadist and Salafist indoctrination. He had been on the French intelligence radar since travelling twice to Pakistan and Afghanistan for operational training in 2010 and 2011. Merah was arrested in Kandahar and deported to France. According to the Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), Merah was linked to the jihadist group Forsane Alizza (Knights of Pride), a radical Salafist group that operated in France and was disbanded in late 2012. In a video that was filmed in Paris, the group decries Islamophobia and what it calls “the campaign of incitement and persecution being waged by French public figures, led by President Sarkozy, against France’s Muslim population and against the group.”¹⁷ Forsane Alizza did not recognize France’s secular democratic regime and worked to see Islamic law implemented in France. It was composed of “fundamentalist Muslims who are more than willing to take action against French society, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. A chief target of the group from among the non-Muslims—and by whose actions the group feels embattled—is the Jewish community and everything the group interprets as ‘Zionism.’”¹⁸ Furthermore, the group promoted the creation of a fortress for Islam, which could only be achieved through battle. Lastly, it asserted that a good society could only be established for Muslims through combat and physical struggle, not through education.

Merah’s family life added to the radicalization of Mohammed and his siblings. Merah’s older brother, Abdelkader Merah, mentored his younger brother and influenced his involvement in jihadist activities. Abdelkader described in detail the depth to which antisemitism and jihadism were embedded in the family dynamics and upbringing. According to Abdelkader, “as children, all the Merah kids were taught that ‘Arabs are born to hate Jews.’” According to Mitch Silber, “Merah’s sister, Souad, a fellow extremist, is reported to have provided money and mobile phones to Mohamed [sic] in the months leading up to the attacks.” She stated that she was proud of her brother Mohammed’s jihadist acts as “Jews, and all those who massacre Muslims, I detest them.”¹⁹

Seth Jones documents other 2012 Islamist terror developments that reflect the “sea change” in France’s history of domestic jihadism. These included the rise of the Cannes-Torcy cell, a jihadist network identified by French security services after their involvement in a grenade attack against a Jewish grocery store in Sarcelles. The internationalization of domestic terrorism, whereby French extremists go abroad for additional terror training and networking, also increased during this period. By the end of 2012, Jones notes that more than 200 French citizens traveled to fight in Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan, exceeding the number of citizens that had gone to Afghanistan and Bosnia in the 1980s and 1990s. Mohammed Merah was among these travelers. Following France’s air attacks in Iraq, jihadist terrorists further responded to the jihadist call by attacking French civilians.²⁰

The accumulated impact of these factors resulted in a paradigm shift in the French security strategy, from a focus on so-called lone wolves to an acknowledgment that France had entered a new phase of danger that was more sophisticated, more ideological, and far more dangerous than previous waves. Both Kepel et al. and Stein and Schweitzer echo this sentiment, suggesting that the Merah affair is to be understood “in terms of a retro-colonial backlash.” With this affair, France entered straight into a third wave of jihadism. This third wave was advocated by Syrian jihadist and thinker Abu Musab al-Suri in his widely read 1,600-page manifesto from 2004, *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*.²¹

Al-Suri’s manifesto directly impacted the evolution of French jihadism as well as jihadism throughout Europe. More than a philosopher, al-Suri provided a detailed strategy and an instructive plan that aspired to normalize and legitimize jihadist attacks in the 21st century. His jihadist theory is based on two key facets: “(1) solo or cellular jihad, the act of individual jihadists organizing and carrying out attacks without any connection to or support from an established jihadist group, and (2) travel to and establishment of open jihadist fronts, areas of the world with conditions suitable for sustained urban and guerilla warfare.”²² His ideas serve as a precursor to the ideology of ISIS and their eventual break from

al-Qaeda. Contemporary scholars and security experts agree that this manifesto served as a playbook for individual jihadists, including Mohamed Merah, as well as providing greater insight into acts that were committed in revenge for American hegemony and its attacks on the Muslim world, as well as Zionism and the power and influence of Jews.²³ Al-Suri writes:

Any change of balance in favor of the resistance and jihad, removes the influence of American hegemony in places that have the circumstances of open fronts, [and] as I mentioned before, brings back the issue of open confrontation to liberate the land ... and establishing the political and legal foundations of Muslim power a goal we must always strive for whenever the opportunity allowed.²⁴

Regarding Jews, al-Suri writes:

One must note the political cause that will be the issue of struggle and rallying to confront the enemy. For it must be ... a matter of throwing out the American invasion in the area, and a matter of the conflict with the Jews, a matter of throwing out the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula, a matter of oil and resources, a matter of American hubris, and the tyranny that came with the invaders and their allies in the area.²⁵

Al-Suri further argues that North Africa, and especially Morocco,

fulfills most of the conditions of a revolutionary jihadi revolutionary climate, [with] economic invasion, and Western and Jewish control providing the golden key to spark jihad, as well. ... In addition, there are many weapon resources in the areas, and there is a variety of borders and coasts and pathways. Also, Israel is a global Muslim motivator, and the American invasion adds a great revolutionary dimension as the key to jihad.²⁶

How do counterterrorism experts view the overall impact of al-Suri's directives on French Muslim neighborhoods? Yossef Bodansky, Director of the Congressional Taskforce on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare

of the US House of Representatives from 1988 to 2004, provides insightful analysis. According to Bodansky, a fundamental strategic change occurred in jihadist strategy in 2004, the year al-Suri's *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, was published. Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri moved away from their focus on "spectacular attacks" on a "far enemy" to the development of "European jihadist networks" that would be run by trained, influential, and charismatic imams, intellectuals, and community operatives who could capitalize on the economic deprivation and social decay of French Muslim neighborhoods across Europe, in order to alienate and radicalize the Muslim communities, especially the youth.²⁷

Furthermore, according to Bodansky, the key to this new Islamist grassroots strategy was to intentionally self-inflict isolation and segregation of the rapidly growing disenfranchised Muslim communities from the rest of society. The objective was to build distrust and hostility toward the government and society in the name of radical Islam. This distrust would then set the stage for the grassroots leadership to transform feelings of hopelessness regarding the future into an embrace of radical Islam, which provides meaning, belonging, and programs that serve the community.²⁸

This grassroots transition, according to Bodansky, begins with incessant pressure to isolate the population from society in the name of maintaining an authentic Islamic way of life. Starting with a focus on mundane aspects of life such as food and Muslim dress code, the transition then moves toward the eradication of Western influence. This phase is accomplished by grassroots leaders creating separate school systems that cut children off from non-Muslim students. Here, students are taught that Sharia law is above the law of the country and aspire for it to one day become the law of the land. Graduates of these institutions are, for the most part, unskilled and find work in low-paying menial jobs, adding to their hopelessness.²⁹

At the same time, Bodansky found that French intelligence and security officials failed to rise to the challenge posed by jihadism:

The main impediments facing them have been the political correctness and timidity of the Government. Most important is the overall reticence by the French security authorities to confront the overall phenomenon of Islamist-jihadist radicalization of the Muslim community at large, and particularly the dominant rôle of the Mosque and Islam in this process. Simply put, the French liberal authorities fear more political face-off with inherently anti-French Islamists leaders than the alienation and jihadist radicalization of the next generation of French Muslim youth.³⁰

2017: The Trial of the “Merah affair”

On November 2, 2017, five years after Mohammed Merah’s terrorist rampage and subsequent death, the highest French criminal court reached a decision in the case against his oldest brother, Abdelkader. Abdelkader was charged with criminal terrorist conspiracy and complicity in the attack, while Fattah Malki was accused of providing the weapons that Mohammed Merah used. Abdelkader was acquitted of charges of complicity but was found guilty of criminal terrorist conspiracy, receiving 20 years in prison. Fattah Malki was handed a 14-year sentence.³¹

The atmosphere in France was tense at the time of the trial. Since the 2012 terror attacks in Toulouse, nearly 250 people had been killed on French soil. Two of the most infamous terror attacks to ever hit France took place in 2015. Taken together, the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Casher attacks and the November 2015 Paris attacks resulted in the deaths of 147 individuals and wounded hundreds. At the same time, significant security concerns remained unattended. Many young people continued to travel to join ISIS groups and other extremist fighters in Iraq and Syria. The French daily, *Le Monde*, noted that “due to European unwieldiness and sensitive debates over data protection the creation of a Passenger Name Record (PNR) was only approved by the European Parliament in mid-2016, and modifications to the Schengen border code necessary to enlarge border checks to European citizens only came into effect in April 2017.”³²

According to Mathieu Guidere, Professor of Islamic Studies and author of *Historical Dictionary of Islamic Fundamentalism*, France has not been the same since 2012:

France has entered a new era [with the Merah killings]. ... Beginning in 2012, we entered an age of terrorism where before we believed ourselves to be protected. It was a turning point in French history. ... In attacking, in killing at the same time soldiers and Jewish citizens, [Mohamed Merah] smashed two taboos and opened the path psychologically for those who came after, who saw in him a model and who said to themselves they could do the same thing, if not worse.³³

Kepel and Jardin agree, detailing the extent to which the Merah affair set the stage for the terror attacks of 2015. They write:

Merah's killing spree was the first in a series that was raised to new heights by the massacres committed in January 2015 at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, in November 2015 at the Bataclan nightclub, and on Bastille Day 2016 in Nice. That first incident thrust France into a global web of jihadism in which social dereliction, the colonial past, political disillusionment, and Islamist provocation were interwoven. Suddenly, the taboo on murder for a political/religious cause was swept away by a new, radical Salafist doctrine that redefined the boundary lines between good and evil by making it permissible to kill "infidels" on French soil.³⁴

The subsequent impact of the Merah affair and trial on French society is captured by Rachel Donadio:

With every day it became clearer to me that Abdelkader Merah—and a second defendant, Fettah Malki, who was handed a 14-year sentence for providing Mohammed Merah the weapons later used in the murders—weren't the only ones on trial here. France itself ... was also on trial: Its justice system, its rule of law, its intelligence gathering, its police, its education system, its troubled inner cities, its failures of "integration," its centralized and often imperious state institutions, its tradition of Cartesian logic, its republican ideal of citizenship that does not bow to ethnic religious identity. The trial made clear just how entrenched the problems are ... and just how hard it is to fight them in the courts.³⁵

France remained unaware of the extent to which the 2012 Merah attacks created not only a martyr for French jihadists to follow but also a framework or blueprint for future terror attacks that would become the norm by 2015.

2015: From “sea change” to the new norm: the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher attacks

January 7-9, 2015, marked a turning point in French history. It represented three days of extreme terrorism: killing 20 people, including three terrorists, in three separate attacks. Known as the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher terror attacks, this period reflects the terrorist phase that began in 2012. Three assailants were killed in shootouts with police, leaving only accomplices to face trial in the fall of 2020. In terms of the events and the assailants, the terror attacks reflect the ideology and strategy of Islamist jihad, which was fully in place by 2015, having been passed on to generations of French-born youths that produced legions of homegrown terrorists on French soil.

Charlie Hebdo, a French satirical newspaper, had a history of attracting considerable controversy for its satire and cartoons of religious figures, political leaders, and ideologies. The 2015 terror attack, killing twelve and wounding eleven staff members, occurred as a reaction to the magazine’s recent cartoon depiction of the Prophet Mohammed, which some Muslims viewed as blasphemous and punishable by death. The two assailants—brothers Chérif Kouachi, 32, and Saïd Kouachi, 34—fit the profile of radicalized Muslim youth that had adopted radical jihadism over time, a process that intensified during their time in prison. While in prison they befriended Amedy Coulibaly, who would go on to become the assailant in the Hyper Cacher attack on January 9, 2015. Coulibaly’s jihadism resulted in him pledging allegiance to ISIS.³⁶

The three terrorists’ journey of radicalization from amateurs to ruthless jihadists in France was documented in great detail by *New York Times* journalists Rukmini Callimachi and Jim Yardley. The thousands of pages of legal documents obtained by the *New York Times*, including minutes of

interrogations, summaries of phone taps, intercepted jailhouse letters, and a catalog of images and religious texts found on the laptops of Chérif Kouachi and Amedy Coulibaly, revealed an arc of radicalization that saw them go from timid youngsters to professional terrorists. One source of this influence came from their radical imams at the Adda'wa Mosque. In particular, the teachings of doctrinaire Farid Benyettou offered them lessons in religion and encouraged young men to join the jihad. Benyettou served as the “pipeline” for young French Muslims to travel to join al-Zarqawi’s network in Iraq, which would soon become al-Qaeda’s franchise in the region. Court documents revealed that by October 2004 the two brothers regularly met with Benyettou to discuss the religious justifications for suicide attacks. They talked about how to load a bomb into a truck and drive it into an American base. Chérif was eager to develop a plot to attack France. “[He] never stopped talking about the Jewish shops, of attacking them in the street in order to kill them.”³⁷

2020: The *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Cacher trial and its effects

The trial relating to the attacks of January 2015 began five years later on September 2, 2020. Because the three primary perpetrators were killed, the trial focused on those accused of aiding the assaults on *Charlie Hebdo* and the Hyper Cacher kosher market. The trial gripped the attention of the French public. Not since the trial of Klaus Barbie, the former Nazi Gestapo chief of Lyon, had France experienced such widespread interest and concern in a trial.³⁸ The trial forced France to confront not only the growth of home-grown terrorism and the balance between security and civil liberty but also an intense public debate concerning secularism, freedom of expression, and the integration of France’s Muslim minority. The seriousness of the situation and the trial itself was expressed by the then-president of France, François Hollande, who said in an interview that he “had been afraid that French society was going to dislocate [after the attacks] because that was what the terrorists intended: to divide the French. ... They lost.”³⁹

The defendants were accused of criminal conspiracy and/or terrorist complicity. Ali Polat was accused and convicted of having provided

weapons for both Coulibaly and the Karachi brothers. The judge handed him the heaviest sentence of the trial: thirty years in prison, of which twenty without parole. Thirteen others were found guilty of involvement in the deadly attacks.

Among the most chilling moments in the trial was the testimony of Zarie Sibony, the cashier at the Hyper Cacher supermarket. Still terrified, she described the attack as the most frightening experience of her life. Once the shooting started, she hid under the counter, but Coulibaly confronted her. Her testimony was reported in the media as follows:

“I was sitting on the floor and he was there in front of me with his arms, two Kalashnikovs, one in each hand, and he said a phrase that I will never forget: ‘You, you’re not dead yet. You don’t want to die?’ and he fired. I saw the impact of the bullet in my till and I understood that I had almost died. I still don’t understand how he missed me when I was in front of him,” Sibony said.

Thinking Coulibaly was a robber, Sibony said she offered the gunman money to which he replied: “You think I’m doing this for money? The Kouachi brothers and I are part of the same group. You Jews, you like life too much when what’s important is death. I’m here to die. You are Jews and French, the two things I hate the most.”

The young woman recalled ... how the killer became annoyed by moaning noises from the fatally injured [Yohan] Cohen and asked hostages if he should finish him off. “Of course we all said no,” Sibony said adding that Coulibaly left her colleague in agony but eventually shot and killed him.

She told the court [that] Yoav Hattab, 21, a student, ... was shot when he tried to grab one of the terrorist’s guns. “He doesn’t even know how to use a weapon,” the killer said, laughing and kicking his victim in the face.⁴⁰

According to journalist Marc Weitzmann, the threat to the Jewish community could have been worse. Investigators viewing surveillance camera footage found a still photo of Coulibaly and his girlfriend taken in

late August outside a Jewish school. The surveillance footage shows the couple approaching the school guard and asking if it was true that there were Jews inside the building. The security guard found their behavior so strange that he asked them to leave.⁴¹

The security situation during and after the conclusion of the trial remained on high alert. One factor leading to the increased concern was the decision of the *Charlie Hebdo* staff to reprint the political cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed at the start of the trial. As a result, al-Qaeda called for the murder of those who disseminated the caricatures. Marie Bret, the head of human resources at *Charlie Hebdo*, was forced to leave her home twelve days prior to the start of the trial, after security guards received detailed and precise threats against her.⁴² On September 25, 2020, a knife-wielding assailant wounded two people in Paris near the former *Charlie Hebdo* office.⁴³

This incident was followed by the barbaric beheading of Samuel Paty, a middle school history teacher, who announced in his class in October that he would show some of the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed first published in *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015. Paty had an established reputation for teaching the importance of tolerance and pluralism, and had previously dedicated learning sessions to Islamic culture, history, and literature. The teacher was chosen by the jihadists as a result of a Twitter mob started by one of the students' fathers, who fabricated a story that incited others.⁴⁴ In another incident that took place near the Eiffel Tower, police arrested two women on charges of attacking two others, yelling slurs and telling them "go back home" and "this is not your home."⁴⁵

Then, in October 2020, on the heels of the beheading of Paty, another deadly and barbaric terror attack took place at the Notre Dame Basilica in Nice. A 21-year-old Tunisian man entered the basilica and attacked and virtually beheaded a 60-year-old woman who died immediately. He subsequently attacked a second woman who died on the way to the hospital. The third victim, a devout Catholic who had worked at the basilica for more than ten years as a lay leader, had his throat slit.⁴⁶

Conclusion

It is clear that jihadist terrorism intensified between 2012, the year of Merah affair, and 2020, the year of the *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Casher trial.⁴⁷ At the same time, there is evidence of growing insecurity within the French public and the French Jewish community. Following the verdicts in the 2020 trial and in response to the growing political threat posed by the National Front, President Emmanuel Macron delivered a one-hour speech on the growing dangers posed by radical Islam to the future viability of the French Republic. A policy to promote and preserve “Republican principles” and reduce the threat of radical Islam was presented to the French Parliament at the end of December 2020.

The uneasiness felt by the French Jewish community has also intensified. A 2019 survey on French antisemitism conducted by the American Jewish Committee in partnership with Fondapol found that antisemitism is pervasive in everyday life.⁴⁸ Seventy-seven percent of Jews and 53 percent of the general public believe that anti-Jewish hatred is on the rise. Rising levels of antisemitism in France have caused a significant percentage of French Jews to take action to protect themselves, including steps to hide their Jewish identity by not displaying Jewish symbols and refraining from wearing clothing that would identify them as Jews. Forty-three percent of French Jews also noted that they intentionally avoid certain locations. French Jewry thus recognizes that, in addition to far right and far left attitudes, Islamist ideology remains highly problematic.⁴⁹ At the same time, the French public is generally in agreement with the Jewish community in viewing antisemitism as a problem affecting society as a whole.

As the French government takes positive measures to deal with this situation, it remains to be seen how effective government policies and programs will be in combating Islamist terrorism and antisemitism.

Notes

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