
Q&A with Professor Malcolm Anderson: FRANCE, TERRORISM AND SECURITY POLICY

Summary

- The present series of attacks is without parallel in recent French history in terms of casualties, the range of targets, methods, potential damage to community relations and the degree of pressure put on the political establishment.
- So far the “Islamic state” has acted as a franchise, in which local militants plan and carry out their actions independently. This could change if militants return from Syria and Iraq *en masse* in future years.
- Terrorism tends to make public authorities react with far-reaching measures which are difficult to roll back. We can already identify the kind of over-reaction which usually characterises government responses to terrorist outrages.
- Taken singly, the terrorist attacks can be managed with reasonable success but the impression that there is a cycle of terrorist attacks, which current policies cannot prevent, presents an insuperable problem.
- After recent outrages, the government has changed the form and content of its communications but not the substance of policies.
- Recent opinion polls suggest that no candidate stands to gain many additional votes in the 2017 presidential elections from their proposals on counter-terrorism.
- The one great uncertainty is how far terrorist incidents are likely to benefit the National Front.
- Most of the French media and the political establishment now realise that within France there is a serious problem but there is a diversity of views about its nature and what should be done.

“The number of casualties, the range of targets, the variety of methods, the potential damage to community relations and the degree of pressure put on the political establishment are without parallel in recent French history”

How do the recent terrorist attacks in France fit with France historically?

There is a long history of terrorist incidents in France perpetrated both by French nationals and by foreigners. It is not the first time that the country has been the target of “international terrorism” - in the last half century Middle Eastern and North African groups as well as the infamous South American “Carlos” have committed outrages in France but none has had the potential to de-stabilise the country and to put the political establishment under extreme pressure.

In terms of potential threat, the only comparable case of a terrorist group was the home grown

Secret Army Organisation (OAS) in the early 1960s, composed of diehard supporters of French Algeria, which narrowly failed to assassinate President de Gaulle and caused considerable casualties in what were then the Algerian *départements*.

The present series, commencing in 2012 with attacks in Toulouse and Montauban, has resulted in over 230 deaths and hundreds more injured. As well as random killings - the most serious being in Paris (2015) and Nice (2016) - there have also been targeted attacks against Jews, journalists, cartoonists and the Catholic Church. The number of casualties, the range of targets, the variety of methods, the potential damage to community

relations and the degree of pressure put on the political establishment are without parallel in recent French history.

What are the profiles of the perpetrators? Could the attacks be described as international?

The question of whether terrorists are international or home grown is complicated because they are both. The great majority of terrorists have been French and, if not French, people with close connections to the country. Only the November 2015 incidents at the Bataclan and the Stade de France were organised abroad (in Brussels). But the common denominator of recent terrorists is that they claim allegiance to militant Islam, usually of the Salafist variety, and to “Islamic state”. Many have connections with those who have gone or have returned from fighting in Iraq and Syria. It is this allegiance which permits the campaign of violence to be qualified as international terrorism.

In the latest foiled plot, an [explosion planned near Notre Dame](#) in Paris (September 2016), the public prosecutor stated that the three women suspects involved were “directed” by the “Islamic state” but, as yet, the evidence is not persuasive and the assertion is likely to prove an exaggeration. So far the “Islamic state” has had the character of a franchise, in which local militants plan and carry out their actions, rather than a centrally controlled campaign. This could change with possible future defeat of the “Islamic state” in the Middle East and the return of militants who have fought there who may carry specific instructions on targets and procedures.

Terrorists are almost always young with either a background in petty delinquency or others marginalised by failure (even, apparently, marital failure [as in the case of the criminal who killed 86 people in Nice in July 2016](#)). They have little or only recent attachment to religion or to mosques and have often a past of drinking alcohol, taking drugs and having girlfriends. The large majority are second generation immigrants, estranged from their often divorced parents. Their motivation is obscure, some radicalised through the internet and others by networks of family and friends. In two cases, at least, homosexuality, rigorously condemned by the jihadists, and the self-hatred induced, has been a factor in turning to violence.

One respected authority on the Muslim world, [Olivier Roy, has argued](#) that they are representative of an intergenerational nihilistic revolt which has little to do with religion. This is clearly a provocative exaggeration because the religious context and the symbolic importance of

the “Islamic state” are also important factors. Without this context, a sustained campaign of violence is impossible to envisage.

What can France do to counter the current wave of violence? Have France’s security services failed to deal with the violence?

Anti-terrorist policies, in France and elsewhere, pose intractable problems because of public, media and political reactions. [Michel Serres](#), member of the Académie Française and professor in Stanford, has remarked, the risk of death in a terrorist attack is less than any other cause of death. But amongst the general public there is always, at least in rich democratic societies where levels of violence are low, a reaction of profound moral outrage over innocent lives being lost.

In addition, the random nature of the attacks causes widespread insecurity. If, for example, an attack involves an area crowded with people, as in the incident in Nice, people become wary of all crowded spaces. The continuation of outrages over a protracted period heightens anxiety especially as Prime Minister Valls has said that [plots to commit outrages are being uncovered on “a daily basis”](#).

Several festivities were cancelled in France over the summer because of fear of attacks and a difficult internal problem clearly exists with alienation of young Muslims, difficult to tackle in the context of economic stagnation, with high levels of unemployment and inadequate educational achievements among this group.

Allegations have been made that the authorities are to blame for their inability to prevent attacks even though legislation has been strengthened and a series of stringent measures, devoting more resources to counter-terrorism have been put into effect over the last two years.

The allegations which attracted the most publicity included a controversial [parliamentary committee report of 5 July 2016](#), categorically rejected by the government, alleging weaknesses in the security apparatus and a lack of coordination between services for counter-terrorism. Added to this, the right wing mayor of Nice, [Christian Estrosi](#), backed by ex-President Sarkozy, asserting that the national police and the Minister of the Interior had been negligent in the security arrangements for 14th July in Nice and could have prevented the attack. His allegations against the National Police and the minister of the Interior were [denied by the government](#) and subsequently refuted by the police inspectorate (IGPN).

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What operational measures have been implemented by the French government so far?

From the beginning of 2015 the government has deployed and strengthened a range of counter-terrorist instruments:

- [The Vigipirate plan](#) (vigilance, prevention, protection), mobilising all the relevant services of central and local government which has two levels of threat and authorises military patrols and guarding premises such as schools, railway stations, airports and synagogues.
- [Operation Sentinel](#), deploying about 10,000 military personnel to protect a range of sensitive sites throughout the country; a whole series of legislative measures, restricting the rights of those accused of perpetrating or planning terrorist acts, allowing increased powers of intrusive surveillance and search of premises, culminating in the law of November 2015, described as the most draconian in Europe.
- [Declaration of a state of emergency](#), the most widely noticed counter-terrorist instrument used introduced after the killings of November 2015 renewed four times, most recently in July 2016 for six months, with some provisions strengthened. The government can implement measures which would otherwise be unlawful - search premises and seize goods without legal authorisation, place under house arrest, deny the right of residence, and use intrusive electronic surveillance.
- Confronted by an essentially internal security problem, the government has nonetheless [stepped up its contribution to the bombing campaign](#) in the Middle East to eradicate the important symbol for the terrorists of the “Islamic state”.

President Hollande proposed that terrorists be deprived of their French citizenship but was

compelled to abandon this proposal because there was no parliamentary majority for a change in the constitution. In addition, he attempted in 2015-16 to [modify the constitution](#) to make law on the state of emergency a constitutional provision. In both cases, he failed to convince members of his own parliamentary majority and the right wing opposition. The state of emergency has been criticised on the grounds that it does not substantially assist counter-terrorism (a view [now shared by majority opinion](#)) and has resulted in infringements of human rights.

The security services place everyone at risk of radicalisation, through journeys to the Middle East or through contact with known extremists or worshippers at Salafist mosques, on a so-called ‘[S list](#)’. It is virtually impossible to identify whom amongst them will engage in violence.

Among measures discussed is to intern all those on the S list (10,000 persons are on the list and according to Prime Minister Manuel Valls 15,000 people are under surveillance). It has been pointed out that about 20% of those on the list are there in error, others have no well-founded links with terrorist projects and it would take more than three years to provide secure accommodation for such a large number of people.

Also on the agenda is the [formation of a National Guard](#), although financial and organisational obstacles remain. Numbering some 84,000 by 2019, it would bring together the reserve forces of the police, gendarmerie and some armed forces, which young men and women could volunteer to join. The aim is to promote wider citizenship involvement in the counter-terrorist effort as well as to supplement over-stretched military and police personnel.

Taken singly, the terrorist attacks can be managed with reasonable success (the culprits are either killed or arrested quickly) but the impression that there is a cycle of terrorist attacks, which current policies cannot prevent, presents an insuperable problem.

The government is under pressure from the opposition and public opinion. President Hollande, Prime Minister Valls, and minister of the interior [Cazeneuve](#) have said that changing laws, organisations and procedures after each incident, reduces the effectiveness of the counter-terrorist effort, but the temptation to do so is great.

After recent outrages the government has changed the form and content of its communications but not the *substance* of its policies. An intractable problem is the blanket media coverage of terrorist

acts, which projects formerly petty delinquents into national and international prominence, thus inciting emulators.

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What kind of reaction has there been in terms of examining France’s relationship with its Muslim community?

The French born Muslim population is proportionately the largest in Europe with the best estimate at 4.7 million or 7.5% of the total population. It is a mobile population with close ties with the countries of origin and sometimes with relatives in other European countries. For many French people, the reputation of all French Muslims has been tainted and an increase in inter-community tension has been reported. The authorities are engaged in a delicate balancing act between appearing to do as much as possible to prevent attacks whilst not causing offence to the Muslim population.

A proposal which re-surfaces after each terrorist attack is to establish a new relationship between the Muslim community and the rest of society by [establishing a “French Islam”](#). The core problem is financing the building of Mosques, and educating and paying imams. The lack of adequate premises for prayers has been a source of tension.

Most of the mosques built are in part or wholly financed from foreign sources. Only 20-30% of imams are French nationals, just over 300 are on detachment from and paid by other countries (Turkey, Algeria, Morocco). Most do not speak French and have little understanding of the French cultural context. The 1905 law of separation of the Churches and the State forbids public financing of religion so the solution is complicated.

The present government is making specific proposals as well as [temporarily banning the foreign financing of mosques](#). The relationship with counter-terrorism is the belief that a reformatted French Islam inspired by Republican values would better integrate Muslims in French society, prevent obscurantist and extreme doctrines being preached in mosques, and isolate more effectively young, potentially violent, militants.

With the Presidential elections next year, who stands most to gain from the current crisis?

The primary election in November to [choose a candidate of the Right and Centre](#) for President and the pre-election atmosphere in general for the Presidential elections of 2017 have been the context in which a heated political debate on terrorism has taken place.

François Hollande in [a September speech](#) widely interpreted as launching his campaign for re-election, emphasised his role as commander in chief of a war against terrorism.

In doing so he argued that terror could only be defeated effectively by democratic means and by adhering to the rule of law. This was intended to distinguish his approach from the calls on the right for internment without trial and extension of arbitrary police powers.

On the right, five of the seven candidates in the election have attempted to outbid one another on security issues. The exceptions are a candidate with little chance of being elected, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet who prefers to talk about other things, and the leading candidate Alain Juppé, who whilst campaigning on a platform of a strong state, is closer to President Hollande on the substance of counter terrorism policy than he is to his closest competitor, former President Nicolas Sarkozy. The latter strongly backs the proposal for internment, which according to [recent opinion evidence](#) is supported by more than three-quarters of the population.

However, when a survey asked the question whether respondents thought the Right in government would do better than the present socialist government, the [answer was a resounding negative](#). This suggests that no candidate stands to gain many additional votes from their proposals on counter-terrorism. The one great uncertainty is how far the terrorist outrages are likely to benefit the National Front because of its anti-immigrant stance and its rejection of any public manifestation of Islam.

Can a wave of attacks really be prevented?

No - not if an extensive network exists of people prepared to engage in terrorist acts, with international contacts and a penumbra of sympathisers.

What are the prospects for the future?

Predictions in this field are always hazardous but certain lessons have been learned from recent experience. After the 2005 London bombings

complacent arguments were made about the superiority of the French “model” of integration of its Muslim immigrants to the British and American “multicultural model”. This has disappeared because none of the major western countries have been the target of as sustained a campaign of terrorism by persons drawn from the immigrant community as France.

Most of the French media and the political establishment now realise that there is a serious problem within France although there is a diversity of views about the nature of the problem and what should be done about it.

If some current views become dominant - such as the nub of the problem is that violence is intrinsic to Islam - this is likely to lead to serious policy errors involving the banning of symbols such as the burkini, enforced declarations of loyalty to the Republic lay state, thus alienating the Muslim community.

If the core problem is considered to be the weakness of the repressive apparatus of the State, the solutions simply will not work and can be counter-productive. The police, the security services and magistrates agree that improvements could be made, usually costing money, in their arrangements to fight terrorism. But imprisoning

more Muslim militants will exacerbate the problem of already over-crowded prisons, turning them into fertile ground for increasing radicalisation. More repression usually results in increasing the number of terrorist attacks as well as eroding popular support for hard-line measures.

If the problem is correctly diagnosed as the alienation of a significant section of Muslim youth as a result of educational failure, unemployment and social exclusion the problem is intractable. The political, economic and social obstacles to solutions can only be removed in the long term and, even then, with great difficulty.

Campaigns of terror almost never achieve their objectives although they occasionally win marginal concessions, but this does not seem by itself to deter terrorists. Terrorist campaigns fade away as a result of a declining internal dynamic. Militants become less committed, replacements are harder to recruit. The effects of the apparent inevitable military defeat of the “Islamic state” may result in a return of fighters to their home countries in Europe determined to create havoc. On the other hand, a lassitude could dominate and the militants become less convinced that violence has effects other than murdering people and killing themselves.

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About Culmer Raphael

Culmer Raphael is a political, regulatory strategy and communications consultancy working in the UK and across the EU.

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