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Combatting radicalisation in France: from experimentation to professionalisation

La lucha contra la radicalización en Francia: de la experimentación a la profesionalización

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Abstract: Before the murders committed by Mohammad Merah in 2012, the French authorities dealt with terrorism almost exclusively as a problem of public order. Hence the country was late in producing measures to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism. Analysing how France's utopian approach to deradicalisation shifted to a more pragmatic one based on disengagement and focused on primary prevention when tackling radicalisation, especially in its Islamic form, this article presents the successes and failures of the various plans implemented by France since 2014. Over time, these strategies, revised and improved (in particular, by means of interpreting the concept of radicalisation) culminated with the national Prevent to Protect strategy of 2018. Among other aspects, laicism, republican values, and the legal and educational systems have been mobilised.

Key words: France, radicalisation, preventing violent extremism (PVE), combatting violent extremism (CVE), deradicalisation, disengagement

Resumen: *Antes de los asesinatos perpetrados por Mohamed Merah en 2012, las autoridades francesas trataban el terrorismo únicamente como una cuestión de orden público. De ahí que el país llegara tarde en la elaboración de medidas para prevenir la radicalización y el extremismo violento. A partir del análisis de cómo Francia pasó de un enfoque utópico de desradicalización para abordar la radicalización, más concretamente la islamista, a uno más pragmático, basado en la desvinculación y poniendo el foco en la prevención primaria, este artículo presenta los éxitos y los fracasos de los diferentes planes implementados por Francia desde 2014. Con el tiempo, estas estrategias, revisadas y mejoradas (principalmente apoyándose en la interpretación del concepto de* radicalización*) culminaron con la estrategia nacional de 2018 «Prevenir para proteger». Entre otros aspectos, se movilizan el laicismo, los valores republicanos y los sistemas educativo y judicial.*

Palabras clave: *Francia, radicalización, prevenir del extremismo violento (PEV), combatir el extremismo violento (CEV), desradicalización, desvinculación*

In March 2012, Mohamed Merah, a 23 year old with dual French-Algerian citizenship, killed three soldiers and four Jewish civilians, three of them young children, in Toulouse and Montauban (South of France). Merah's rampage and the terrorist attacks that followed – Paris in 2015 and 2020, Nice in 2016, Strasbourg in 2018 to mention a few - are still painfully fresh in public memory. Until mid-2021, more than 260 people have been killed by terrorists, most of them home-grown, claiming allegiance to or inspiration from Al Qaeda, ISIS, or Islamist religious fanatics. The country remains a target for Islamist terrorism. Prior to the 2012 killings the French authorities treated terrorism almost only as a matter of law enforcement. Hence, the country was late to develop any measure designed to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism.

The issue of 'radical Islam' has been a preoccupation of the French anti-terrorist apparatus for already twenty-five years: the adoption of the anti-terrorist laws[1] of 1996 and 2006 was already "a response to attacks claimed in the name of political Islam, as was the creation of various sections and units dedicated to 'radical Islam' in the Paris anti-terrorist prosecutor's office and the intelligence services" (Ragazzi, 2014). The shift from the 'fight against radical Islam' to the 'fight against radicalisation' thus reflects the broadening of the anti-terrorist issue.

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In response to the rising and changing trend of violent extremism, France developed and implemented, since 2014, several national plans to tackle and prevent violent radicalisation as events unfolded. Therefore the public policies and strategies have been established, in times of political and media turmoil, in response to attacks and in order to cope with paradigm shifts and an evolving terrorist threat. France opted for a top-down approach (decision-making and coordination by the authorities). The prevention of radicalisation has been organised at the central (government) and local (prefectures) levels and covers primary prevention (anticipation of the risk), secondary prevention (mitigation of the risk and support to radicalised individuals) and tertiary prevention (monitoring of radicalised individuals to prevent violent actions and Countering Violent Extremism measures). Each of the stakeholders faces unique challenges.

1. For more information, see: https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/18530-trente-ans-de-legislation-antiterroriste (online) [Accessed: 20.01.2021]

The French authorities focus predominantly on Islamist radicalisation and jihadism, even though violent extremism is not bound by a certain ideology and neither is radicalisation. How then were strategies to combat radicalisation and more specifically jihadist violence articulated?

It is not the ambition of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of the French policies implemented but rather to explore the process that fostered their improvement, and to better grasp the response of the French authorities to the phenomenon of violent radicalisation. To do so, we will first briefly discuss the terminology surrounding radicalisation and extremism in order to delineate some general features of the concepts. Then, we will attempt to shed light, in part, on the various plans implemented since 2014, moving from a de-radicalisation to a disengagement approach. The chronological approach points to the evolution, uncertainties and progress made. We will draw on official documents, academic literature, as well as on some of the semi-structured qualitative interviews with stakeholders and actors involved in counter-radicalisation and prevention policies, conducted as part of previous work in recent years. The fieldwork experience constitutes a backdrop for the analysis.

(Mis-)Used concepts: radicalisation, extremism and violent extremism

The very understanding of the concept of radicalisation has underpinned the framing of the French public policies since 2012. Yet the concepts of radicalisation, extremism and violent extremism are often mis-understood and mis-used by the policy makers.

The meaning of the terms 'radicalisation' and 'extremism' has evolved during the last decades as political, economic, social and security dynamics have transformed (Winter *et al.*; IJCV, 2020). The term 'extremism' has been used extensively in recent years because a shared definition of terrorism is still missing (Marchetti, 2003: 3; Hennebel and Lewkowicz, 2009: 18; Berger, 2018; Gaspar *et al.*, 2020). This has to do with political sensitivities, but also with the complexity of providing a compelling definition of what terrorism means (Pugliese, 2018). However, a number of definitions of the term have been developed at the national, regional and international levels. It has to be reiterated that not every harmful or violent act is necessarily extremist, not all terrorists espouse radical ideological views, and radicalisation should not be

confused with the actual practice of terrorism (Francis, 2014; Horgan, 2008; Strieger, 2015).

The subjective term extremism "may describe ideas that are diametrically opposed to a society's core values, which […] could be various forms of racial or religious supremacy, or any ideology that systematically denies basic human rights. Or it can refer to the ruthless methods by which political ideas are realised" (Neumann, 2017:14). What is considered as 'extremist' has fluctuated with time. It can take on different meanings depending on who defines the norm and decides what is acceptable or not, and it is not limited to any single race, religion or political view (Berger, 2018). Extremist ideologies meet a need for certainty by providing clear boundaries, internal homogeneity, social interaction, clear internal structures, common goals and a common fate. Narratives uses include impurity, conspiracy, dystopia existential threat and apocalypse (Berger, 2018). Extremist groups offer pathways for action, purpose, a sense of belonging, and that is a strong pull factor (Hamid, 2018).

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There is no internationally agreed-upon definition of violent extremism. It is a generational challenge and French authorities refer to the most common understanding of the term as defined by the Council of Europe: "behaviour promoting, supporting or committing acts which may lead to terrorism and which are aimed at defending an ideology advocating racial, national, ethnic or religious supremacy. This may include the violent opposition to core democratic principles or values" (European Committee on crime problems, 2016: 9). This includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and sectarian violence. 'Violent extremism' also identifies an enemy, or enemies, who are the object of hatred and violence. Not all violent extremist groups use terrorism as a tactic, so it is imprudent to conflate the terms 'violent extremism' and 'terrorism'. Violent extremist groups' narratives tend to have several of the following elements: anti-constitutional/ anti-democratic, fanatical, intolerant, single-minded, rejection of the rule of law, use of force/political violence, uniformity over diversity, collective goals over individual freedom (Schmid, 2013: 8-9).

As with the term 'extremism', the term 'radicalisation' is highly debated when used in the context of violent extremism. The concern being that it may serve to justify limitations to the freedom of speech and the stigmatisation of some minority groups. Indeed, 'radical' can be defined in varying ways depending on circumstances. In France's context of efforts to prevent violent extremism, 'radicalisation' is commonly used to describe the processes by which a person

adopts extreme views or practices to the point of legitimising the use of violence. Khosrokhavar defines radicalisation as "a process whereby an individual or group adopts a violent form of action, directly linked to an extremist ideology with political, social or religious content that challenges the established political, social or cultural order" (*Radicalisation*, 2014: 8). The word is often thrown around with little regard for the context and the complexities to which it refers. Indeed, the paradigm of 'radicalisation' has been massively embraced by the media, think tanks, policy makers, researchers and the general public. In the space of a few years, this notion has become a 'catch-all concept' in the field of studies on terrorism and political violence as well as among counter-terrorism practitioners. It remains the subject of much criticism and debate within and outside scientific circles.

There is indeed a polarisation and a taste for polemics in the French intellectual world around the issues of Islam, terrorism, jihadism and radicalisation. The debate between academics on the 'Islamisation of radicalism (Roy) and the 'radicalisation of Islam' (Kepel), to explain the current situation, exists only in France. Any serious practitioner considers these positions to be complementary and the polemic to be sterile. For years, academics, like Burgat, Kepel, Roy, Filiu, have been engaged in a series of controversies that are constantly being recomposed (Dakhli, 2016). Their arguments are based on different political strategies, backgrounds and personal convictions. This brings into play a specific relationship between science and political power that has been denounced by other researchers (Ferret and Khosrokhavar, 2020; Dakhli, 2016).

From de-radicalisation to disengagement

The fight against radicalisation can be perceived as "the extension of a security paradigm into the field of antiterrorism" (Sèze, 2019: 207).

The French strategies to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism (PVE) evolved according to the terrorist threats (Islamist terrorism being the more lethal in the country) and the lessons learnt. The goals of the programmes designed and implemented by the French authorities changed according to the context and the reality on the ground. They first focused on de-radicalisation before realising that it was a dead-end. According to Berger, the key question that should be asked and answered before implementing any CVE/PVE programme is whether it seeks "to counter the V, acts of violence, through disengagement, or the E, the adoption of extremism, through de-radicalisation or counter-radicalisation (Berger, 2016: 3). There is some consensus in academia on the need for differentiating 'de-

radicalisation' (i.e. focus on extremist beliefs and ideas) from 'disengagement' (i.e. focus on behavioural role change only) (Neumann 2013; Horgan 2009; Borum 2011). There is also a need to take into consideration the fact that "not all violent extremists hold strong, extreme beliefs, and not all extreme ideas lead to violent behaviour" (Hellmuth, 2015; Mucha, 2017).

France values its anti-terrorist apparatus but it was severely questioned after the Merah case, and the continuous influx of French nationals into the Syrian-Iraqi area (the so-called foreign fighters) highlighted the inadequacy of a strictly repressive approach. France hurriedly adopted the approach of de-radicalisation. In April 2014, the first French plan against radicalisation (PLAT) was launched. Through it, the government and the different stakeholders involved in the fight against radicalisation recognised that a comprehensive Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) and counter-terrorism (CT) approach should address the factors deemed conducive to radicalisation and violent extremism.

In April 2014, the first French plan against radicalization (PLAT) was launched. Through it, the government and the different stakeholders involved in the fight against radicalisation recognised that a comprehensive Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) and counter-terrorism approach should include addressing the factors deemed conducive to radicalisation and violent extremism.

One of the barriers to designing a comprehensive P/CVE programme was defining its scope. The first European countries to get involved in the fight against radicalisation in the 2000s did it by using religious approach. France was presumably reluctant to do so, both out of respect for religious freedom and for fear of being suspected of neo-colonialism towards its Muslims communities. This first plan highlighted that safety was no longer the sole responsibility of the 'regalian' apparatus, but must mobilise various professional sectors and associations. In the French context in terms of managing 'de-radicalisation' or the exit from jihadist trajectories, the republican model of secularism raised a series of frictions regarding the development of support structures in which police authorities, members of civil society (educators, etc.) and religious figures -the only ones capable of deconstructing the belief systems endorsed by 'radicalised' individuals- would work side by side (Khosrokhavar, 2014). Some at the Paris police prefecture were at first reluctant to accept what appeared to them to be a breach of secularism[2]. The measures were linked here and there according

2. 8 interviews conducted in Paris, in 2016, with law enforcement and social actors.

to the vagaries of current events, actions were experimented in different fields, and plans/projects were developed as events unfolded. Hence the confusing, sometimes contradictory, nature of the set of actions grouped under the expression "fight against radicalisation".

When the 'Plan de Lutte Anti-Terroriste'-PLAT was introduced, in April 2014, it consisted of 24 measures meant to prevent young French people from departing to Syria. At the time, 250 French nationals were reportedly already in Iraq and Syria, among them many under-aged persons. The mandatory 'exit authorisation', suspended in January 2013, was then reinstated for minors (Ministry of Interior). Prevention campaigns were announced in cooperation with the Ministry of National Education and municipalities. A nationwide counselling hotline, with a toll-free number for reporting suspected radical individuals, was set up and run by the Ministry of Interior. Up to August 2018, it dealt with thousands of reports (half of them through direct phone calls, the other half through the prefectures). At the time, the government considered investing in the field of counter-narratives but decided not to embark on this path, especially after exploring initiatives conducted in the United Kingdom. It would have been complex as different kinds of counter-messaging would have been required to address the different stages of an individual's radicalisation process (Berger, 2016). A cult-based approach was however attempted via the de-radicalisation centre "Maison de la prévention et de la famille", founded in spring 2014, with the financial support of the government, and based in Saint-Denis (outskirts of Paris). The centre relied on a quietist salafist mediator to engage with radicalised youth (Boutin and Jacquemet, 2017: 24). But the opaque management of the structure, and the lack of tangible results prompted the government to stop subsidising the centre, which led to its closure, in November 2015. An anti-terror law promulgated on November 2014 included a travel ban on French nationals suspected to leave France to commit 'terrorist activities, war crimes or crimes against humanity' abroad. The law also authorises the authorities to block websites that glorify terrorism and jihadist ideology.

In the aftermath of the January 2015 terrorist attacks to *Charlie Hebdo*, the government launched its *Stop-Djihadisme* online based campaign, which includes tools for practitioners and resources to educate citizens to understand the issues, spot and prevent radicalisation/jihadism (stop-djihadisme official website). The CPDSI, *Centre de Prévention des Dérives Sectaires liées à l'Islam*, made a significant contribution to the shaping of the public actions implemented in 2015. Dounia Bouzar, its founder, created the centre in 2014 during the wave of departure to Syria by young people. She identified a set of 'radicalisation criteria' (Bouzar, 2014; Sèze 2019) and developed a de-radicalisation method (Bouzar, 2015). Her theory of *sectarian grip* to explain radicalisation has been widely embraced by the French

governments and the media. Thus, the CPDSI was officially commissioned by the government, in April 2015, to work under the supervision of the country's *Comité Interministériel de Prévention de la Délinquance et de la Radicalisation*-CIPDR, and in partnership with the prefectures. However, their agreement ceased a year later over political dissensions.

The law had been enforced and courts ruled a broad range of crimes as terrorism-related offenses. The Official Bulletin of the Ministry of Justice specified, in October 2016, that "Since being extremist or radical is not in itself a criminal offence, the judicial institution has the duty to respond to extremism when it uses violence and the methods of terrorism. The problem being tackled is therefore not the one of radicalisation in its broadest sense, but the one of violent radicalisation, the association of an extremist ideology with the commission of a criminal offence". The government allocated more human and financial resources. A budget of €735 million over three years would be dedicated to preventing and countering violent extremist, to monitor the jihadist threat and fight terrorism (government official website, 2015).

In the aftermath of the 2015 attacks – to Charlie Hebdo in January and to Bataclan in November, the 2014 plan was updated by the Government in May 2016 under the name Plan d'Action contre la Radicalisation et le Terrorisme (PART).

In an effort to counter Islamist extremism in its prisons, the government engaged, in January 2016, in a short-lived experiment to isolate radicalised suspects from the rest of the prison population. The government ended the experiment in late October 2016, after concerns emerged that the programme was contributing to deepen radicalisation networks within prisons rather than contain it.

The 2014 plan had led to the creation, under the supervision of the CIPDR (which became the Secrétariat Général-CIPDR in May 2016), of a pattern of 'indicators of change' assessing the radicalisation. The plan created a pattern of 'exit' indicators and called on academics, as well as representatives of the Muslim communities and internet stakeholders, to contribute to the development of counter-narratives. The criteria for reporting and radicalisation quickly appeared to focus solely on radical Islam, creating a confusion that undermined the objectives of prevention, while the scientific definitions demonstrate that everything is potentially subject to radicalisation.

The 2014 plan was updated in May 2016, in the aftermath of the November 2015 attacks to Bataclan. The 'Plan d'Action contre la Radicalisation et le Terrorisme' – PART was a €40 million plan consisting of 80 measures, amongst 15 dedicated to prevention. The resources (human, funding, legislative bills) were increased again. The budget devoted to the fight against radicalisation has thus exploded since the wave of attacks in France, reaching 123 million euros

in 2017 (Inter-ministerial Delinquency and Radicalisation Prevention Fund, 2017). The aim was to demonstrate the reactivity of the authorities, at the risk of going too fast in releasing the sums allocated.

One of the flagship measures of this plan was the opening of so-called 'de-radicalisation centres'. In September 2016, the government opened the first of 12 planned 'reintegration and citizenship' centres in Pontourny, to address the danger posed by France's radicalised youth. This de-radicalisation programme, run by the SG-CIPDR, was supposed to rehabilitate individuals deemed to be at-risk of radicalisation or individuals who 'repented' and wanted to reintegrate back into society. The idea was to instil 'French civic and Republican values', with flag raising every morning, as some form of counter-narrative to the violent extremism ideology (Alber *et al.*, 2020). One-to-one tailored mentoring were organised for the volunteer residents. But the only centre that actually opened received only 9 residents. It had to close down in July 2017, after many controversies, among which the confusion around the concept of radicalisation and the objectives to be reached, the local opposition to have radicalised young people in the neighbourhood, and the unqualified staff[3]. €2.5 million were spent and considered insufficient by the centre's managers (Senate committee report, 2017). The experiment, conceived in hast, had the merit of being tested.

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A parliamentary commission branded, in 2017, most of the P/CVE strategy implemented a failure (Benbassa and Troendlé, 2017). The report of the commission condemned the lucrative 'business of de-radicalisation' set by the organisations in charge of implementing the projects. Since the end of 2016, the inter-ministerial committee carries out an evaluation with revised criteria and programming mission with the specific aim of preventing this type of misappropriation and better monitoring and evaluation of the actions undertaken. Fraud and even abuse of clients were then revealed. About a hundred associations engaged in the prevention of Islamist radicalisation received funding from the state and public institutions, but it is difficult to evaluate the exact amounts granted as they could apply to the central

3. Interviews conducted with one agent of the Paris Préfecture de police in November 2017; two social workers based in Paris, in January 2018; and one sub-prefect of police – Paris area – in March 2018.

and local authorities for funding (Fournier, 2017). Within three years, the French government spent close to €100 million, without proper evaluations and monitoring of the subsidised organisations in charge of implementing prevention and CVE projects.

The de-radicalisation programmes didn't work as expected. The government had to react when faced with the tragic events in order to address the major threat of Islamist violent extremism. France launched extensive measures at the three levels of prevention but fieldwork and interviews with social actors carried out between 2015 and 2017 highlighted that these policies lacked attention towards the unintended effects of these specific measures. The polarisation and stigmatisation induced by these measures were likely to fuel radicalisation and the country was moving toward a 'police-based multiculturalism' in order to fight radicalisation (Ragazzi, 2014: 3).

In the years 2016 and 2017, radicalisation continued to assert itself in France as a lasting threat to the country's security and social cohesion. Faced with this threat, a public policy for the prevention of radicalisation, which combines social and security logic, was built up from 2014 onwards, with the counter-terrorism plan (PLAT) and the 2016 plan to combat radicalisation and terrorism (PART). These two plans, which brought together measures to counter terrorism and radicalisation, developed public prevention policy around detection, training for state agents and citizens, care and support in open and closed environments, the development of research and European partnership. Since then, the threat has evolved and has become more endogenous and more diffuse. This reconfiguration of the threat has led the French government to draw up a new plan, a first plan devoted exclusively to the prevention of radicalisation: the National Radicalisation Prevention Plan "Prevent to Protect" presented on 23 February 2018.

The "Prevent to Protect" strategy

"All the countries involved in anti-radicalisation initiatives are exposed to the failure of certain experiments", stated Muriel Domenach, General Secretary of the CIPDR, in July 2018. The French government was thus taking responsibility for the ineffective initiatives implemented during the previous years.

Although there were no more large-scale attacks as to the modus operandi, the problem of radicalisation was far from being solved. The threat had taken hold, it continues in endogenous and more diffuse forms. The French authorities had therefore reviewed the strategy for preventing radicalisation in order to deal with the new paradigm. This new national plan, Prevent

to Protect, launched in February 2018, was presented as a strategy for the prevention of radicalisation. Its key components are prevention and the 'disengagement' approaches. The best practices from European countries were adapted to the French context, in particular the Aarhus model from Denmark. That model comprises programmes for both early prevention and exit processes. The prevention programme aims to prevent further violent radicalisation of young people who do not yet represent any danger or security risk but may become dangerous if their radicalisation process continues in a violent direction (and who may then perpetrate acts of terrorism). The exit programme is directed at already radicalised people who have intentions and capabilities of committing politically and/or religiously motivated violent crimes and terrorism (RAN). The French plan also drew some elements from the German plan for the mobilisation of families. Finally, its counter narrative approach mirrors the British prevent strategy.

The new national plan, Prevent to Protect, launched in February 2018, was presented as a strategy for the prevention of radicalisation.

Prevent to protect has its specificities. It lists 60 measures divided into five pillars. The plan mobilises twenty ministerial departments including Justice, the Interior, Education and Youth, Health and Sports. It enhances the three levels of prevention, psychological and social support for families and individuals identified in referrals, and it emphasises the need for raising awareness and training of first line staff.

The *first pillar* is dedicated to preventing radicalisation. It involves the Education ministry at a much higher level than in the previous plans. It is no longer only a matter of preventing conspiracies or promoting media literacy, the Republican values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, or the secular value of *laïcité*, as it was the case in the 2016 plan. Schools are used as a tool to build young people's resilience to radicalisation thus to counter radicalisation (similarities with the British strategy). Researchers had argued for a while that more young people are likely to see violence as a legitimate means of defending their beliefs, pointing out in their work that there is a greater risk of 'radical temptation' among young people who declare themselves to be Muslim (Muxel and Galland,2018). So, the new French plan adopted an approach of the Belgian model involving artists or influencers who identify themselves as Muslims (Saidi, Benzine, 2018) and promoted ten plays aimed at raising awareness among students about the problem of violent extremism, and to stimulate reflection on the processes involved. Between February 2018 and April 2019, 350,000 young people had seen the plays (CIPDR, 2019). The evaluations carried out after the plays, and the discussions that followed,

revealed a transformation of the representations of youth concerning radicalisation and the concept of *jihad*[4].

This first pillar also includes training teachers to 'spot' the signs of radicalisation in students and to report their concerns to the school leadership or outside agencies. Therefore, the heads of school, the teachers and the security forces involved in prevention missions have to be trained on prevention of radicalisation. A lot of injunctions and pressures are imposed on social workers and teachers to be vigilant and detect the signs of radicalisation (behaviour, discourse) and to report them. The reporting protocols, based on the 'signs' of radicalisation, in use in the national education system have been extended to administrations, sport, business and universities as part of the second pillar dedicated to extend prevention network and detection. Within one year of its implementation, one million civil servants of the ministry of education received the vademecum 'secularism at school' and the booklet 'preventing radicalisation of young people' (CIPDR, 2019). The main measures envisage the dismissal of civil servants from their duties if their behaviour impact their obligations of *laïcité* and the development of administrative control by the prefectures of sports disciplines impacted by radicalisation, especially combat sports and non-established disciplines such as bodybuilding and paintball.

This *first pillar* also aims at enhancing the fight against online recruitment *(Stop-Jihadisme* online platform), and encourages counter-narratives initiatives. To ensure the efficiency, in a rapidly changing technological landscape, and the impact of these initiatives, the counter-strategic communication campaigns required quality, flexibility, a comprehensive 'whole –of-society' response (Weimann and Von Knop, 2008) and, above all, credibility.

In regard to online radicalisation, digital spaces have played an important role in the democratisation and large-scale diffusion of a jihadist corpus over the last two decades (Winter, 2020). But if it is agreed that internet impacts the radicalisation processes, the consumption *alone* of online propaganda does not usually cause radicalisation (Pauwels and Schils, 2016) as there is no simplistic or predictable reaction to propaganda. France has, since several years and in line with its European counterparts, exerted strong pressure on internet companies to undermine extremist networks present on their platforms, through censorship of propaganda and account suspensions. The authorities also launched in February 2018 a dispositive called 'Districts of Republican Reconquest' whose

4. Interviews with 3 head-teachers and 4 social actors, in Paris and Lyon, conducted in November 2018 and June 2019.

objectives was to combat both narcotics trafficking and radicalisation (Minister of Interior). 60% of the 2018 strategy target women from the districts that have been 're-conquered' by the state (CIPDR, 2019).

In the *second pillar*, priority is given to early detection (secondary prevention) and training (primary prevention), but the process after the referral of a suspected radicalised youth is unclear. Detection implies registration of suspects in the 'fichier S'. Created in 1969, the file 'S' is a list of people supposed to pose a security threat registered in the 'wanted persons file'. Up to December 2020, more than 25000 persons (exact number unspecified) were registered, 50% of which identified as radical Islamists (Ministry of interior). It doesn't mean that the person listed in the file is dangerous. He/she is under scrutiny; the intelligence services are informed in case of a control of the individual somewhere on the national territory (or at the borders) but not necessarily subject to active surveillance. To that file 'S' is added the FSPRT. Created in 2015, the Fichier des Signalements pour la prévention de la Radicalisation à caractère Terroriste-FSPRT (reports file for the prevention of radicalisation leading to terrorism) is a database flagging extremists whose radicalisation has a terrorist dimension (more than 22000 as of October 2020; Ministry of Interior, 2020). Not all of the S files are in the FSPRT file. Up to January 2021, the CIPDR, through the prefectures, took charge of more than 5000 young people, under 25 year old (CIPDR official website). The majority of reports now come from the field and no longer from the free-toll number.

The *third pillar* 'understanding and anticipating the evolution of radicalisation' provides some improvements compared to previous programs. The government aims at developing a French expertise on radicalisation. It thus set up a scientific committee for the prevention of radicalisation and started funding doctoral contracts and research on this issue. For a long time ignored in public policies to combat radicalisation, researchers and academics indeed are now making their voices heard and are building bridges between their work and political decision-makers. Sociologists, psychiatrists, political scientists, islamologists and anthropologists decipher the different mechanisms of radicalisation for the Committee. Amongst the French academics, "answers to the call to meet and form a new scientific community on security matters"[5] have been the starting point of an unprecedented profusion of books, articles, public interventions and reports on radicalisation (Bounaga and Esmili, 2020). University degrees and

5. For more information, see: http://www.cnrs.fr/fr/face-aux-attentats-un-de-mobilisation-au-cnrs (online) [Accessed: 12.01.2021].

certificates on radicalisation have also been initiated, often based on a multi-disciplinary approach.

The *fourth pillar* aims at professionalising local actors and stakeholders and evaluate good practices. The SG-CIPDR was tasked with improving the training offer. These training sessions set up since 2014 are regularly consolidated and adapted to the public, as the threat evolves. Up to January 2021, nearly 30,000 civil servants and public officials have received that training on prevention of radicalisation leading to violence, including nearly 15,000 at the territorial level (CIPDR, 2021). The focus is essentially on Islamist radicalisation (interviews with stakeholders and social actors) and the following themes are addressed (CIPDR, 2021):

– Terrorist networks and conflict in Syria and the fight against radicalisation
– The key concepts of Islam
– Legal framework for Combatting radicalisation
– History of Global Jihad
– Presentation of the prevention system
– Child protection
– Support for the prevention of radicalisation
– Key elements of the radicalisation process
– Public response based on practical cases
– Care for returning minors
– The prevention of radicalisation in the prison environment

With this pillar, the plan includes the decentralised local authorities (departmental councils, municipalities) at a higher level than in the previous ones, both to benefit from their knowledge of local issues and to share the financial burden.

The *fifth pillar* concerns adapting disengagement and involves secondary and tertiary preventions. 'Disengagement' is the new word used in the plan instead of 'de-radicalisation', which had set high expectations in the past years and has been proved to be a wrong approach. Since 2017 and the collapse of the Islamic State, one major concern is how to deal with 'returnees': women, minors, and so-called foreign-fighters. On this issue, France, like other countries, faces a number of legal, ethical and security challenges. Child welfare concerns are being balanced with security concerns, such as the possible indoctrination with jihadist ideology. The pillar addresses these concerns by adapting the available procedures and tools to ensure a safe return, judicial and support mechanisms for those who manage to come back to their home country. Therefore, some of the measures set the framework

for the reintegration of children returning from Syria and Iraq. Up to July 2021, 169 had been repatriated and a few hundreds are still there, with their mothers (Chichizola, 2021).

Another key concern of this pillar is the evaluation, monitoring and rehabilitation of detainees convicted for terrorism-related offences or considered radicalised. There is currently a debate amongst academics around the issue of 'recidivism' bolstered by terrorism related violent actions of former detainees (Renard, 2020). In prisons, signs and degrees of radicalisation of the detainees are assessed through questionnaires. This tool is used to classify the detainees and define their rights (visits, adjustments of sentence, activities, etc.) and their level of isolation[6]. France expanded the so-called 'containment-oriented model', keeping high-risk terrorism-related offenders in specialised units or separate prisons, due to ongoing concerns about prisons being breeding grounds of violent extremism.

The last measures of this plan concern individuals under judicial control. "Talking to some of them made me scare for my children. I don't want them out in the street. They are dangerous because they still hold on their deadly ideology", R.H., a magistrate[7]. Up to November 2020, 504 were in French prisons for crimes or offenses related to Islamist terrorism (Ministry of Interior) and a further 1000 common law detainees were reported as radicalised (CIPDR). They can participate in programmes for the prevention of violent radicalisation (PPRV), planned since 2018. Several prisons have set up PPRV programmes without managing to make them sustainable, due in part to ill-defined concrete modalities and programmes that "struggle to reach their public". The construction of six new radicalisation assessment quarters (*Quartiers d'évaluation de la radicalisation*) is completed and one of them is dedicated to the evaluation of common law detainees.

According to the third report of the Controller General of Places of Deprivation of Liberty, on penitentiary care for radicalised people and respect for fundamental rights (January 2020) "Over the last six years, the succession of measures, the legal framework of which is always put in place a posteriori, has created instability that is damaging for both staff and detainees. These changes are not the result of a reflection that takes into account an appropriate evaluation of previous measures, but of current context and events or political pressure. The security measures, which are already exorbitant under ordinary law, lead

6. Interviews with two penitentiary staff in February 2020, in Paris.
7. Interview conducted in February 2020, in Paris.

to the further isolation of 'radicalised' detainees. The increasing demands for security infringe fundamental rights without being a guarantee of true security". This tends to mitigate the impact of the actions carried out in prisons.

Measures are also dedicated to the upcoming challenges. 64 detainees for terrorism and radicalisation will be released in 2021 (Ministry of Interior, 2020). They require intensive reintegration programmes to avoid violent actions when freed (interviews with law enforcement actors and magistrates carried out in February 2020). Two types of surveillance are provided for: judicial surveillance, by the anti-terrorist penalty enforcement judge, and police surveillance, in particular by the intelligence services. Individuals under judicial control outside the prison system are not left out. The *Recherche et Intervention contre les Violences Extrémistes*-RIVE experiment has been praised for its success (CIPDR). This project, inspired by the Danish model, is an ambitious programme (intensive, multidisciplinary, focus on mentoring) implemented in France since the end of 2016. It aims at the disengagement from violent extremism and the reinsertion into society of radicalised individuals (men and women). The approach is holistic and specific to the profile and needs of each individual.

With the 2018 strategy "Prevent to Protect", the tendency in France towards a more comprehensive approach continues, involving intelligence and security services, police and the judiciary but also social and healthcare professionals, and teachers.

With the 2018 strategy "Prevent to Protect", the tendency in France towards a more comprehensive approach continues, involving intelligence and security services, police and the judiciary but also social and healthcare professionals, and teachers. But, political communication boasted high expectations.

Conclusion

For decades, French Counter-Terrorism policies have been primarily based on repression and prosecution (Mucha, 2017). Over the last nine years, the numerous terrorist attacks and the engagement of young French people with the Islamic State in Syria-Iraq spurred the French authorities to adopt a variety of pre-emptive and reactive counterterrorism measures. Three of these attacks by Islamist radicals happened over four weeks in the fall 2020 and have triggered a tense public debate about *laïcité*, Republican values and the place of Islam in France.

The authorities' responses to the issue of violent radicalisation were elaborated without a political vision (Sèze, 2019: 207). Until 2014, France did not view Jihadi/Islamist radicalisation as an issue that ought to be also tackled by means of

soft CT measures (Hellmuth, 2015). Faced with the threat of Islamist terrorism and home-grown terrorist, the authorities built up, from 2014 onwards, public policies for the prevention of radicalisation, which combines social and security logic: the counter-terrorism plan (PLAT) in 2014 and the 2016 plan to combat radicalisation and terrorism (PART). These two plans, which brought together measures to counter terrorism and radicalisation, developed public prevention policy around de-radicalisation, detection, training for state agents and citizens, care and support in open and closed environments, the development of research and European partnership.

After the attacks in January and November 2015, beside the 'politics of symbols' like unity around the French flag (Faucher and Boussaguet, 2018), the French authorities responded with exceptional measures, introducing the notion of 'war' to justify them. Amidst its efforts and attempts to counter the threats and mitigate the risks of terrorist attacks, the government established and repeatedly extended a national state of emergency. The gradual erosion of liberty rights which resulted were pointed out by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International (AI, 2016; Boutin, 2016). The criteria for reporting and radicalisation appeared to focus solely on radical Islam, creating a confusion that undermined the objectives of prevention (based on the scientific definitions everything is potentially subject to radicalisation). The prevention of radicalisation evolved around the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. De-radicalisation measures were initiated with little success.

Since then, the threat evolved and became more endogenous and more diffuse. This reconfiguration of the threat led the French government to draw up a new plan devoted exclusively to the prevention of radicalisation: the National Radicalisation Prevention Strategy 'Prevent to Protect', launched in 2018. The government adopted the concept of 'disengagement' and designed programmes based on the European good practices, adapted to the French norms. France gradually moved from timid experimentations and probing towards a form of professionalisation of the fight against radicalisation. The measures were adapted according to the changing nature of the threat and the lessons learnt. Major incidents in France were not prevented despite the expanding of the PVE and CT measures by the government. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, parliamentary commissions were established to investigate why the attacks had not been prevented and what are the lessons learnt from the failures of the programmes implemented. Evaluation remains difficult. The millions of euros invested in secondary prevention (among people who are already radicalised) generated a real 'de-radicalisation business' that attracted opportunists and swindlers of all kinds. Evaluating is even more complicated when it concerns primary prevention, which includes the mobilisation of schools around the values of the Republic and counter-discourse campaigns.

Over all, progress had been made since 2014. After the 2015 attacks, public policies were locked into the paradigm of *mental grip* (MIVILUDES[8]). Radicalisation was seen as the result of mental disorder and sectarian control whereas it is multifactorial, not just a matter of control of the mind, post-colonial reality, Islamisation of radicality or radicalisation of Islam.

The SG-CIPDR carry out regular follow-ups, monitor the implementation of the plan and presents its conclusions on a regular basis to an inter-ministerial committee supervised by the office of the prime minister. The evaluation process of the measures' impact is still to be defined but it can be difficult to measure short-term success. Furthermore, unpredictable attacks undermine the measures implemented.

The religious aspect of radicalisation is ignored in the successive plans as the government already intended to organise the 'Islam de France' in order to address Islamist radicalisation. Moreover, the authorities have for years sought the involvement of Muslim leaders, or self-proclaimed ones, in the fight against radicalisation.

Radicalisation and terrorism are considered by the French authorities to be the most serious symptoms of Islamism and communitarianism, (CIPDR-Islamisme/Séparatisme), and they remain on the political agenda. The government therefore submitted, in December 2020, a bill to the parliamentarians with the purpose of tackling radicalisation via the fight against communitarianism and the promotion of Republican values. This law is also meant to reinforce the legal tools available to the law enforcement actors in order to tackle radicalisation. A serious risk of stigmatisation exists in singling out the fight against Islamist extremism (the most lethal in France) amidst other kinds of extremism. It may also produce a counter-productive polarisation.

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