CIDOB **opinion**

PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN FRANCE: from a society of vigilance to a society of suspicion?

Moussa Bourekba, Researcher CIDOB

600

NOVEMBER
2019

The French government has called for a general detection of "early signs" of radicalization. But, what does it mean exactly and how the listing of these considered "early signs" can avoid generating a climate of generalized suspicion? In the field of preventing violent extremism (PVE) policies, the use of such indicators is not only questionable in theory but dangerous in practice.

"It is our responsibility to build a society of vigilance." These are the words used by French President Emmanuel Macron to urge the servants of the State to participate in the detection of violent radicalization —in the work place, at school, in places of worship, or "close to home". In his speech, made in tribute to the four civil servants killed at the Paris police headquarters on 3 October 2019, the Head of State clearly distinguished between "vigilance" and "suspicion". Yet recent statements by some members of the government blur this distinction. There is, for example, talk of extending the use of "early signs" of radicalization which, according to the authorities, will help to detect and prevent violent radicalization.

Five days after the attack at the Paris police headquarters, the minister of Home Affairs, Christophe Castaner, suggested that any individual who appears to be showing signs of radicalization should be reported more systematically. At the hearing before the Law Committee of the National Assembly, the minister of Home Affairs listed some of these "clues" that should trigger a thorough investigation: "rigid religious practice, particularly exacerbated during Ramadan", the growing of beard, the fact of no longer kissing someone on the cheek as a way of greeting, the refusal to "team up with a woman", a "regular and ostentatious practice of ritual prayer", the presence of a mark on the forehead (tabaâ) or the "wearing of the full-face veil for a female civil servant on public roads".

This listing may appear coherent, but it actually mixes together acts, appearances and practices that can and should be sharply disaggregated in assessing the phenomena of radicalization. It makes a jumble of religious

practices common to devout Muslims (practices more frequent during Ramadan, wearing of beard), religious practices that can be considered rigid (refusal to kiss somebody on the cheek) or acts against the law (wearing the full-face veil). In a context where thousands of Muslims (and non-Muslims, for that matter) respond to one or more of these indicators, how can we believe that the use of these "early signs" can avoid generating a climate of generalized suspicion?

In this respect, the controversy surrounding the sending of a questionnaire to staff of the University of Cergy-Pontoise in order to detect "early signs" of radicalization provides an illustration of the practical dangers that such an approach can generate. Entitled "Fiche de remontée des signaux faibles" (weak signals detection form), the questionnaire consists of a list of criteria that are just as questionable as the "clues" listed by the minister of Home Affairs. In addition to the elements listed out by the minister, the form contains even more surprising elements such as "sudden interest in national and international news", the fact of "no longer partying" or recurrent absenteeism.

In the field of preventing violent extremism (PVE) policies, the use of such indicators is not only questionable in theory but dangerous in practice.

First, it should be noted that the use of these indicators of radicalization has no scientific basis. Though they are used in many countries, there is no evidence that the presence of these early or warning "signs"—often focused on religious appearance and practice in this case—leads to accurate diagnosis of the process of radicalization. At best, a combination of indicators, encompassing not only appearances but also certain behaviours (conspiracy discourse, tendency to isolate oneself, etc.) may indicate that a process of radicalization is ongoing. But this same combination may indicate the presence of other phenomena that have nothing to do with violent radicalization: Can the rejection of female authority, say, not simply result from a macho attitude? Is the rejection of authority not a general feature of adolescence? In other words, indicators of radicalization that are supposed to objectively define or "profile" a radicalized individual can refer to a multitude of situations, practices, or attitudes that have nothing to do with violent radicalization.

Second, as noted above, these "signs of radicalization" focus largely on religious appearance or practice. In so doing, public authorities base their strategies in the field of PVE on two assumptions: (1) these signs, when observed in an individual, indicate that the person is radicalized (at least, religiously speaking); and (2) if there is "radicalization" in religious matters, there is a risk that the individual in question may commit violent acts//there is a risk that the individual opts for violent action. In this sense, during his hearing before the Senate Law Commission, the minister of Home Affairs indicated that the signs he listed would help to identify "radicalization towards a radical Islam, a political Islam and terrorism". This pattern of thinking is therefore based on the assumption that there is a continuum linking a certain practice of Islam, which some may describe as rigid ("radical Islam"), and jihadist terrorism. Based on this assumption, "early sign" would help to detect people who seem "radical" in their religious practice and thus better prevent those who would slowly shift into jihadism.

However, this analysis faces two pitfalls: on the one hand, it demonstrates confusion about what is religious practice and what is violent ideology. On the other hand, this approach does not distinguish cognitive radicalization, i.e. adopting radical ideas, and violent radicalization, i.e. adopting violent behaviour (or justifying the use of violence in the name of a radical ideology). Although a majority of jihadists act in the name of a radical ideology (jihadi-Salafism), a large majority of individuals who adhere to this ideology do not act in a violent way. In other words, adopting ideas that are considered radical does not necessarily lead to violent behaviour. Thus, although there may be a correlation between radical views and violent behaviour, there is no causation. This inextricable problem (correlation but no causation) is a fundamental issue in the field of PVE.

In practice, the use of "indicators" in this way is akin to dragging a huge fishing net through a pond because you saw a few air bubbles: State authorities, helpless in the face of a phenomenon that is difficult to predict or detect, trawl through whole societal sectors or geographical areas because of vague indicators that there might be a few problematic individuals present. With a list of vaguely formulated "early signs" and "warning signs", practitioners find themselves carefully scrutinizing any Muslim (real or perceived) who shows one or more of these "symptoms". At what cost can such a strategy be implemented?

The use of these indicators of radicalization has no scientific basis.

In Europe, in some countries where indicators have been or are still being used (e.g. Spain and the United Kingdom), many voices are being raised in academic circles but also within human rights organizations to warn about the harmful effects that these tools can have on coexistence. Among the main unintended consequences of these measures, there is discrimination based on appearance or certain religious practices; the emergence of a climate of suspicion towards certain real or supposed members of the Muslim community; or mistrust on the part of Muslims who feel watched or suspected by their teachers, doctors or colleagues.

Therefore, indicators that are presented as a reliable means of detecting violent radicalization and thus promoting a "society of vigilance" are in fact a tool whose design is not based on science and whose practical use can encourage suspicion and denunciation. In such a context, the authorities' action may encourage the marginalization of certain segments of the society, and work against the inclusion that would make vulnerable communities more resilient to radicalization.