

HSPI Commentary Series


THE TRAGEDY IN TOULOUSE: WHEN KINETIC COUNTERTERRORISM TACTICS AREN'T ENOUGH

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In light of recent events, is France sufficiently prepared to deal with the challenge of homegrown violent Islamist extremism? The question could have been posed to French officials in the days since Mohammed Merah murdered seven people in Toulouse, including French soldiers of Muslim descent, a Rabbi, and several Jewish children. In fact, my colleagues and I posed the question to a group of French intelligence and security officials four years ago. The reactions of French officials to the Toulouse murders today echo the comments we heard four years ago, suggesting little has changed in the French approach to radicalization over the past four years. To prevent the next jihadist-inspired shooting spree, authorities – whether in France, the United States, or elsewhere – must make a conscious decision to expand their focus from only the expressly violent to even non-violent extremism. Contesting the ideologies that drive extremism is a critical, but still overlooked, element in the overall effort to prevent and defeat the violence that emerges from it.

Little did we know when we put in the request to meet with a group of French officials involved in countering violent extremism that our request would lead to the first time these French officials ever met. As we went around the table introducing ourselves, we were amazed that our hosts were meeting each other for the first time as well. When our meeting ended, our French counterparts stayed behind for what they described as their first ever interagency meeting to coordinate French government action on this critical issue. Looking back through the lens of the tragic loss of life in Toulouse, it appears French society has made precious little progress on the critical issue of countering radicalization since my colleagues and I sat down with these French officials in June 2008.

At the time, French officials were just beginning to come to terms with the challenges posed by radical Islamist extremism. Five suspected radical Islamists were detained in southern France in early March 2008 on charges they trained for combat in attempt to join the Iraqi insurgency. French judicial authorities reported that as of 2008 dozens of French youths traveled to Iraq to join the insurgency. Concerned that militants might return home and employ the skills they picked up



in combat in Iraq to carry out terror attacks in France, French officials began to consider how to preemptively address the conditions that might lead a French citizen of the Muslim faith to pursue militancy abroad, or at home. So the timing of our visit was fortuitous and, despite the warnings of several intermediaries who helped us submit requests for meetings but cautioned that none were likely to be accepted (“this is not an issue they are keen to discuss,” we were told), we held several productive meetings and found ourselves serving as the vehicle for France’s inaugural interagency roundtable on countering radicalization.

France, we were told in our meetings with officials and academics alike, did not engage in counter-radicalization, per se, because they did not view the terrorist threat as an ideological or religious issue. To French officials, still contending with the fallout of riots in predominantly Muslim immigrant Paris suburbs in 2005, problems relating to radicalization were best addressed through enhanced integration of immigrant communities. No stranger to the threat of terrorism, ever since the 1990s France leveraged its far-reaching counterterrorism authorities to deal with the threat of terrorism primarily through aggressive domestic law enforcement and intelligence operations. This, our colleagues explained, was coupled with a softer foreign policy designed to avoid adding to the Muslim and Arab worlds’ grievances against the West.

The idea of combining tactical counterterrorism measures with strategic efforts to contest the extremist narrative of radicalizers and counter the appeal of violent ideologies was anathema to our hosts. For them, the French secularist ideal precluded any discussion about contesting al Qaeda’s ideology, principally because the ideology in question was presented in religious terms. We did have a very blunt conversation with two French academics, who stressed the need to couple enhanced social integration policies with efforts to sideline extremists, but while other European countries invited them to speak about the jihadists they interviewed in French prisons and other research, French officials had not. Toward the end of our discussion one scholar lamented, “I’m not sure a meeting like this is possible in France.”

French officials were quick to list the number of extremist preachers from the Middle East denied entry into the country since September 11th (20), or the number of foreign extremists deported for engaging in support for terrorism (115), but the only domestic counter-radicalization program they could point to focused on prison populations. Asked what kind of follow up there is after at-risk inmates are released from custody to facilitate their re-integration into society, we were told follow up was the responsibility of law enforcement and intelligence agencies. That is, nothing was done proactively to facilitate their successful integration, but failure would be dealt with harshly.

In the weeks following our fact-finding mission to Europe, French Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie lamented that “Attacks organized long in advance are giving way to unplanned attacks of opportunity committed by individuals indoctrinated via the Internet. Sometimes they are not even part of a network. This new danger is therefore much harder to detect and follow.”

Alliot-Marie's description referred to cases emerging back in 2008, but it is just as applicable to the Toulouse case today. Looking only for the expressly violent extremist, French authorities missed the signs that might have prevented the Toulouse attacks. Merah, French officials maintain, exhibited no outward signs of violent extremism since returning from trips to Afghanistan in 2010 and Pakistan the following year. But he clearly struggled to find a place to belong. Cited for robbery as a juvenile, he was rejected twice when he applied to serve in the French armed services because of his criminal record. Meanwhile, his step-brother reportedly was a key player in a foreign fighter facilitation network which helped Islamic militants travel illegally from Europe, through Syria, to fight in Iraq.

In March 2009, my colleagues and I published the findings of the blue-ribbon bipartisan task force we led on [confronting the ideology of radical extremism](#)¹. The group benefited from our fact finding mission to Europe, a two-day conference in Jordan with activists and reformers from across the Middle East, and a series of briefings and meetings in Washington, D.C. Our core strategic recommendation for the incoming Obama administration was this:

The Obama administration needs to view the spread of an ideology of radical extremism with urgency and seriousness comparable to its view of the spread of violent groups animated by that ideology. Obviously, the first priority for the government is to prevent and deter radical extremist groups from using violence to achieve their goals. But in addition, the government needs to elevate in bureaucratic priority and public consciousness the need to prevent and deter the spread of radical extremist ideology. At the same time, the United States will need to make very clear that it does not consider Islam itself a danger, but only the distorted version of Islam perpetrated by radical extremists.

In other words, tactical counterterrorism measures are critical, but they are not enough to counter the threat of violent extremism. Integral to a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy is a corresponding priority to counter the violent extremism underlying the terrorist threat we face today. That reality becomes even more acute in the context of homegrown violent extremism. At the end of the day, whether Mohammed Merah was tied to al Qaeda or another jihadist group or not, he carried out his attacks in the name of a shared, radical Islamist ideology. Insufficient integration may have made him more amenable to the nihilistic message of Bin Ladenism, but it was the ideology that ultimately led him to murder. The greatest failure in Toulouse was the failure to counter the radical ideology to which Mr. Merah ultimately subscribed. The scope of this effort extends beyond al-Qaeda and its immediate affiliates to include "conveyor belt" groups like Hizb-ul-Tahrir, radical websites, and other elements and media that purvey extremist ideologies and direct vulnerable youths down a path toward acts of terrorism and political violence.

¹ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PTF2-Counterradicalization.pdf>

A year after the publication of our task force report, three colleagues and I collaborated on a follow up report highlighting the ideological contest as [the missing link in the U.S. strategy to counter violent extremism](#).² Among my co-authors was Juan Zarate, a former official in the Bush II national security council, and Steven Simon, a former member of the Clinton national security council and later, well after the release of our report, a future and current member of the Obama national security council. In the wake of the tragedy in Toulouse, our central argument bears repeating:

Since 9/11, U.S. efforts to counter extremist ideology have spanned a spectrum that has included a mix of engagement, counterradicalization, and tactical counterterrorism efforts. Today, significant programs and initiatives have been expanded at one end of the spectrum to advance global engagement and strategic communication objectives abroad and community engagement and town hall meetings with immigrant communities at home. At the other end of the spectrum, counterterrorism officials have concentrated their attention not only on preventing the plots being hatched today, but also on developing and deepening fissures within and among al-Qaeda, its affiliated terrorist groups, and their supporters.

These efforts have borne fruit and are to be praised. But on their own, they fall short. Engagement and counterterrorism are key elements of this comprehensive strategy, but the wide space between them must be addressed. Missing are the policies and programs that should suffuse the space between these two poles on the counterradicalization spectrum, including efforts to contest the extremist narrative of radicalizers, empower and network mainstream voices countering extremism, promote diversity of ideas and means of expression, and challenge extremist voices and ideas in the public domain. Contesting the radical Islamist narrative does not mean arresting or banning despicable but protected speech; rather, it means openly contesting extremist views by offering alternatives and fostering deeper ideological debate. The objective in either case is to strengthen the moderate center against the extremist pole and help Muslim communities become more resilient in confronting the challenge.

This is not the way French officials think about the problem of extremist ideologies. In the wake of the Toulouse shootings, and in the context of a presidential election, President Nicolas Sarkozy recognized the need to address radicalization but instead of targeting the ideology itself he proposed targeting those drawn towards it. Sarkozy's proposal that people who regularly visit extremist websites should be subject to arrest and imprisonment misses the point. Typical of France's traditional law enforcement approach to extremism, the idea would be more likely to increase extremism and drive it further underground. Instead, officials should aim to stimulate

² <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/StrategicReport04.pdf>

competition for the would-be radicalizer, whether in person or online, by empowering diverse voices to offer a broad spectrum of competing ideologies that are neither violent nor extremist. We should be challenging dangerous ideologies, and addressing the conditions that draw people to them, not arresting people drawn to view extremist material online.

Four years ago, French officials were just beginning to think through these issues and were not receptive to the idea of countering violent extremist ideologies. Today, the single most effective thing French officials can do today to prevent the likelihood of another Toulouse-style tragedy tomorrow is to acknowledge the role of extremist ideologies in perpetuating violence and develop policies aimed not only at countering terrorism and political violence but the underlying ideologies fueling this violence as well.

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