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Ideological and Theological Foundations of Muslim Radicalism in France

Samir Amghar[1]

MICROCON Policy Working Paper 4

Abstract: With nearly 5 million Muslims, France is home to more people of Islamic faith than any other European country. In the French public arena the 'Islamic threat', widely mediatised at the time of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, has taken on a connotation of combat and revolution and become a synonym of violence and terrorism. Yet, far from constituting a homogenous movement, the Islamic threat is polymorphous. In this paper, we document the different forms of radicalism in France, with a view to understanding its permutations over the last 20 years, along with the various motivations of the members and sympathisers of these diverse forms. We conclude that it is necessary to recognise that all these different forms of radicalism are the product of experiences of injustice and exclusion, which can be directly linked to realities on the ground. However, the link between Muslim populations and radicalism cannot be reduced to an economic equation in which poverty is the common denominator. It seems more likely to be the inadequacies of social and political regulation that is a problem, along with the lack of recognition, contempt and "the great wall" between the estates where Muslims live, and the rest of the population.

Keywords: Radicalisation; France; Islam; youth; terrorism; integration

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Introduction

With nearly 5 million Muslims, France is home to more people of Islamic faith than any other European country. The French territory is regularly shaken by events relating to its Muslim population. While the French public authorities worry about the risk of terrorist attacks inspired by Islam, it appears that ‘Islamic crises’ are multiplying – from the ‘Muslim riots’ in 2005 and the development of the re-Islamisation phenomena, to the threats made by al-Qaeda against France. In the French public arena the ‘Islamic threat’, widely mediatised at the time of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, has taken on a connotation of combat and revolution and become a synonym of violence and terrorism. Yet, far from constituting a homogenous movement, the Islamic threat is polymorphous. Islamic radicalism is neither incarnated in, nor limited to, al-Qaeda. It is a composite, heterogeneous movement based on the diverse projects (not always coordinated) of autonomous organisations or individuals acting alone or in small groups. As a circle of influence, it is both complex and continually evolving. It covers a wide range of political sensibilities stretching from religious radicalism, which is socially conservative and politically weak, and of which the sphere of action is based on religious training, to jihadism, which defends direct action, often with third-worldist overtones. Despite their divergences, these different veins of the Islamic threat have something in common: they have a direct impact on Muslim populations. In this paper, we document the different forms of radicalism in France, with a view to understanding its permutations over the last 20 years, along with the various motivations of the members and sympathisers of these diverse forms.

Religious radicalism and sectarian groups

1.1 Three religious groups convey religious radicalism

Salafists

This movement was established in France at the beginning of the 1990s through ex-militants of the Salafist wing of the Islamic Salvation Front (Front islamique du salut, FIS) who were refugees in France, fleeing the repression of the Algerian regime (Amghar 2005a). In its initial phases, Salafism in France was very strongly impregnated with the political issues and situation of Algerian Islamism, particularly through the FIS. At the Tariq Ibn Ziyad Mosque on Rue Myrrha in the 18th district of Paris, Abdelbaki Sahraoui, the imam and vice president of the FIS, was strongly critical of the repressive policies of the Algerian regime in his sermons at the Friday prayer services. He was assassinated in 1995 by members of the Armed Islamic Group (Groupes islamiques armies, GIA).

This 'first-generation' Salafism, combining a spiritual mission with political vision and revolutionary objectives was also represented by Abdel-Hâdî Doudi, the current imam at the al-Sunna al-Kebira Mosque, on the so-called 'international boulevard' in Marseille. Graduating from the University of al-Azhar at the beginning of the 1980s, Abdel-Hâdî Doudi was also the brother-in-law of Moustapha Bouyali (the founder of the first Algerian resistance movement in 1983) and the teacher of Ali Benhadj. He belonged to the Algerian Salafist movement, which later became part of the FIS at the beginning of the 1990s. He was sentenced to death by the Algerian regime, and then to life imprisonment for his support of the attacks led by his brother-in-law. But his sentence was later commuted to life in prison. He arrived in France in 1987 with the consent of the Algerian services, and was responsible for the introduction of the movement in the region around Marseille and in the Parisian suburbs, especially in Nanterre.

Revolutionary vision, political perspective and religious rigour were the characteristics of the Salafism of the 1990s. But, owing to the emergence of the second generation of Muslims born in Europe and the international evolutions of political Islam, it was progressively to become an actor in re-Islamisation.

While in its initial stages, Salafism incarnated a form of religiosity that was linked to a political and revolutionary vision impregnated with the realities of Algerian politics. From the mid-1990s, however, it became more and more an expression of social and political conservatism, distinct from an obsession with the conquest of the state. This shift towards an apolitical and pietist Salafism can be explained by two factors: the marginalisation of political Salafism under Algerian influence and the emergence of a new centre of influence in the Arabian Peninsula.[2]

Simultaneous with the decline of Algerian Salafism was the development, from the mid-1990s, of a new centre of influence in Salafism, stemming from Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula more broadly (the *dar al-hadith* (Islamic university) in Dammaj in Yemen, under the direction of Sheik Mûqbil, the al-Albani centre in Amman and the sharia department in Damascus). Within this framework, it was less a case of the decline of Algerian Salafism than of the rise of Saudi Salafism. This shift was partly owing to the policy of the Saudi royalty, who decided as early as the 1960s to establish themselves as a “religious superpower” (Amghar 2005b).[3] The expansion of this doctrine was essentially the work of proselytising by European students returning from Saudi Islamic universities (and training centres in Yemen), especially those in Medina. In France, it was thanks to the predication of the first generations of European graduates – who had gone to Saudi Arabia to study theology – that Saudi Salafism gained a foothold on the Continent.[4] This was the case for example of Abdelkader Bouziane, who was behind the development of the movement in the region around Lyon. Before becoming an imam in various mosques in the Rhône-Alpes region of France in the 1990s, he spent two years in Medina studying Islam with Salafist theologians. It is worth noting that Saudi Arabia has three Islamic universities (Medina, Riyadh and Mecca), although non-Saudi foreigners may only study in Medina. Numerous French students are attracted by the quality and reputation of the Saudi teaching as well as the scholarships on offer.

Moreover, encouraged by certain French students, religious teachers of a Salafist persuasion came to France from Saudi Arabia, Egypt or Jordan. Sheik Abdel Salam al-Bourjis (a disciple of the former mufti of Saudi Arabia) or Sheik Muhammed Bazmoul, who was Egyptian and a professor at the University of Mecca, participated in several religious conferences in France (as well as in Belgium, the UK and the US). Until 2001, a pious form of Salafism developed and was successful in France, especially with the arrival of Saudi teachers. Mosques were built (or taken over), and there was even talk of setting up an axis of Salafism in France. There were roughly 20 Salafist cultural centres in France (Marseille, Paris, Lyon, Roubaix, Valence, Romans-sur-Isère, Aix-en-Provence, Stains, etc.) that organised many events. Every year since 1998, a large Salafist convention has been organised in the Parisian suburbs by a middle-aged Dutchman named Yacoub Leenen, who now lives in Saudi Arabia and directs a publishing house that translates works from Arabic into French. In 2001, this gathering attracted close to 1,000 participants from all over France, but also from Germany. Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the French police authorities decided to limit the development of the movement they saw as being behind the terrorist attacks perpetrated against the West, particularly as Salafism was beginning to develop internationally and establish an organisational structure. Salafist sheiks were therefore refused entry to France; a Salafist convention to be held in June 2001 was suspended and the theologians who had come to address it were arrested at the Charles de Gaulle airport and sent back to their countries. Moreover, numerous imams were expelled or placed under surveillance. The imam who was behind the introduction of Salafism in Lyon, Abdelkader Bouziane, was sent back to Algeria for misogynist imprecations. The imam of the mosque in Argenteuil, Ali Yashar, of Iraqi origin, was dismissed; he now lives under surveillance in the region of Lozère.

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[2] Saudi Arabia played a central role, but countries like Jordan where Sheik Nassir ud-dîn al-Albani lived, and Yemen, with Sheik Mûqbil ibn Hadi, also contributed to the spread of Salafism in Europe and in France.

[3] Numerous pro-Saudi international institutions were created and the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-islamiyya al-‘alamiyya), created in 1963, is one of the largest Saudi institutions to participate in the expansion of Salafism in the world.

[4] This is true of Reunion, for example. Salafism is present through two mosques, the imams of which were educated at the University of Medina.

Ahbâch

Originating in Lebanon, this movement was founded by Sheik Abdallah al-Habachi in the 1950s before developing in France in the 1990s. The movement developed thanks to the proselytism of students from Lebanon studying in France. In 1988, a young science student of Lebanese origin, Khaled al-Zanat, created an association in Montpellier. In that town, the Ahbâch controlled a 400-seat mosque in a converted abbey: the al-Tawba Mosque. Simultaneously, in Paris, an Ahbâch activist network was set up by a Lebanese computer scientist named Tamim Abdelnasser. In 1991, he co-founded the Association for Islamic Charity (Association bienfaisance islamique, AIB). With the arrival of the leader of this movement, Sheik al-Habachi, in 1996, the Parisian leaders decided to federate all these associations to create the French division of the Ahbâch: the Association for Islamic Charity Projects in France (l'Association des projets de bienfaisance islamique en France, APBIF). In this new structure, the Lebanese members (notably Khaled al-Zanat in Montpellier, Walid Dabbous[5] in Nice and Tamim Abdelnasser in Paris) formed the ideological and administrative backbone, although they were surrounded by young persons from Muslim immigrant families (from north and sub-Saharan Africa). The group has 20 or so centres at its disposal (in Saint-Etienne, Saint-Dizier, Nice, etc.), which are particularly well anchored in the south of France (Narbonne, Perpignan and Avignon) and in Paris, where they have a 300-seat mosque. Very dynamic, the movement has opened a number of places of Islamic teaching and learning as well places of worship over the last few years (in Marseille, Toulouse, Lyon, Strasbourg and Alès). As a place of postulation, France is of strategic interest for the Ahbâch because the French Muslim community is the largest in Western Europe; indeed, it is larger than the Muslim population of Lebanon. As proof of the particular attention paid to French Muslims, Sheik al-Habachi (who died in September 2008) came regularly to France, as did the president of the Lebanese branch, Houssam Qaraqira (himself married to a French woman who is also a member of the movement).

Tabligh

This movement was founded by Muhammad Ilyas in 1927, in Mewat in India, then under British administration. Responding to a desire to re-Islamise the local populations that he judged only superficially Islamised, the founder of this movement sought to preserve Indian Islamic identity through religious postulation, and protect it from what he saw as the dangers of the English presence and Hindu hegemony. Before establishing itself in France, the movement had a significant impact on the entire Indian sub-continent, such that many individuals were converted or re-Islamised through contact with the proselytism of the Tabligh.

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[5] Walid Dabbous is currently president of the French branch of the Ahbâch, the APBIF. Having arrived in France in the mid-1990s to study, he graduated with a Doctorate in Computer Science. The author of numerous articles, he is currently a researcher at the National Institute of Research in Technology and Computer Science.

In 1944, upon the death of the founder, Ilyas's son decided to internationalise the movement by taking its proselytising beyond the borders of the Indian sub-continent and setting up permanent missions throughout the world. At the beginning of the 1950s, the movement settled on the pilgrimage routes in the Middle East and in East Africa. In the 1960s, it spread to West Africa and South East Asia. In the space of a few years, the Tabligh became a religious multinational, following the example of the Muslim Brotherhood. Wherever it is found, the organisation operates a policy of systematic management of the Islamic domain through the control or the construction of mosques, and through the numerous preaching activities that it organises. The internationalisation of the movement, which led to its presence in a number of countries, was the response of its leaders to their desire to spread the universal message of Islam, following the logic of proselytism. At the end of the 1940s, when the movement reached its peak on the sub-continent, it was also a matter of ensuring the continued development of the organisation by not hesitating to recruit in other parts of the world. Indeed, even at that time, there was a high turnover in the structure of the organisation: many of those who were re-Islamised through contact with the Tabligh left it after a certain number of years. In this context, it became vital for a movement as structured as this one was to find new populations to seduce in order to ensure the continuation of the movement.

In the 1960s, the movement was also established in the UK through the Indo-Pakistani population, and it then increasingly turned towards Europe as a new land of postulation. Thus it was that the early Tabligh missions emerged at the same time as immigrants from the sub-continent settled in the UK. The leaders of the movement set up their European centre in Dewsbury in Yorkshire. They then spread to France in 1968 following a mission run by Pakistani preachers operating with immigrant workers, in what is probably the oldest re-Islamisation movement in France. Under the authority of Sheik Hammami, the movement was officially established in 1972 with the creation of the Muslim association Faith and Practice (Foi et Pratique). Not long afterwards, the movement founded the mosque of Abou Bakr on the boulevard Belleville in Paris, in 1973. The mosque can hold 800 faithful and is one of the largest in the capital. Other mosques were created (in Mantes la Jolie, Creil, Goussainville, Le Mans, Rouen, Lyon, Toulouse, Marseille, Roubaix, etc.).

In the middle of the 1980s, the movement underwent a crisis as a result of an internal conflict, when the authority of the charismatic figure of Sheik Hammami was contested. Under the instigation of a young Lebanese man, a dissident association was set up called ‘Tabligh wa daoua ila llah’. In 1985, it organised a large gathering in Lille. Despite being a new association, it managed to draw a certain number of the founding members of the Tabligh and the auspices of Indo-Pakistani leaders into its wake. At the end of the 1980s, this association had become the official representative of the movement in France. Its leaders founded their French centre in Saint-Denis in the Parisian suburbs, where they could accommodate close to 500 faithful. Faith and Practice and Tabligh wa daoua ila llah control roughly 50 places of worship in France (Marseille, Saint-Denis, Dreux, Montereau, Mulhouse, etc.). In spite of having few mosques under their authority, the influence of the Tabligh extends beyond these places of worship. Indeed, a non-negligible number of first-generation immigrants were re-Islamised through the predication of the Tabligh. Today, many of those in this first generation are imams or leaders of ‘independent mosques’ and even those who are no longer official members of the Tabligh maintain friendly relations with Tabligh missionaries. Thus, Tabligh missionaries are authorised to preach in certain mosques. For example, in the mosque–cathedral in Evry-Courcouronne, the rector Khalid Merroun (himself a former member of the Tabligh) regularly hosts Tabligh meetings. In Sens, a town of 30,000 residents, Tabligh missionaries from Auxerre preach with the agreement of the managers of the mosque.

1.2 The content of the radicalism of these movements

These movements set up a sort of ‘safety barrier’ between their militants and society, between a community that is conceived of as pure and French society that is seen as corrupt. This endows the movement with a number of the features that are characteristic of a sect in the sense that the German sociologists Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber (Troeltsch 1931) understood it. These movements developed a “negative attitude” towards France (Marty 1960): they did not recognise the dominant values of society as legitimate. Indifferent to projects of social reform or to the political solutions to social problems – even when they concern Muslims – these movements have all the qualities of pietist sects as defined by the sociologist of religions, Bryan R. Wilson (Wilson 1963). Proponents of these movements prefer to withdraw from the world in order to bask in the self-assurance of their own personal sanctity and the feeling of belonging to a chosen people. They are opposed to all forms of political participation in French society by Muslim populations, on the pretext that such participation is contrary to Islam. Democracy is thus assimilated into a form of associationism (*shirk*), which gives way to heresy because French ministers legislate in the name of values that are not those of sharia, and which occasionally even contravene Islamic norms – such as the 2004 law on the wearing of religious symbols at school. In France, they defend the idea of reticence, bordering on indifference, with regard to official politics, even when the debates concern French Muslims. During the demonstrations against the proposed law banning religious symbols at school that were organised by Muslim associations in December 2003 and January 2004, members of these movements were rare among the several thousand participants, according to personal observations. More recently, in 2005 and 2006, the demonstrations organised in support of Lebanon during the Israeli bombing or against the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed did not attract many Salafist or Tabligh participants. Along these lines, Salafist websites encouraged individuals to refrain from participating in these gatherings. The conspicuous absence of these movements from these marches, which contrasted with the presence of militants and sympathisers close to the Muslim Brotherhood, should be interpreted as a form of generalised indifference to the questions of citizenship and foreign policy that affect Muslims in France and the Arab world. In the words of one Salafist from the Parisian suburbs, “when there are demonstrations by Muslims to defend other Muslims, my brothers and I never go along. We shouldn’t use Western methods to make our voices heard. I don’t want to mix Islam up with the politics of the French. The [s]heiks tell us not to go.” [6]

For these movements, Islam is thus above political parties and issues. Consequently, the Muslim religion cannot be restrained through negotiation with the state, which implies that questions of secularism (*laïcité*) do not concern them. Their interpretation of religious faith as being based on the primacy of Islam over all other systems – especially secular ones – prevents them from considering themselves actors in a non-Muslim political system. Participation implies recognising an identical status between social questions and Islamic ones. An Ahbâch in Paris stated: “If I demonstrate or sign petitions or if I vote, it’s as though I’m putting Islam, the best of religious and the best of humanity, in with the political baseness of the French. Never in my life! I prefer to do nothing. In any case, that’s not how you should act.”[7]

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[6] Derived from an interview with Abdelkrim, aged 19, Paris, 23 February 2004.

Although the Salafists, the Tabligh or even the Ahbâch are perceived by the French authorities as just a step away from violent action, one cannot help but notice that they do not constitute a vector of political radicalisation in the name of Islam – even if they are very critical of France. This form of religiosity is opposed to any form of political engagement in the name of Islam. Lacking in any will to involve themselves in French society and without a political project other than messianic expectation (with no immediate implications), they defend an apolitical and non-violent vision of Islam. This is founded on a desire to organise all of their existence around the advice of their religious leaders.

Out of fear of *fitna* [division] and anarchy, they advocate the non-contestation of political authority, even when the power is in the hands of non-Muslims. The Salafist preacher Sheik al-Albani, who was of Syrian origin and who died in 1999, argued that the only solution to the problems of Muslims was not the Islamisation of the state but what he called “*al-tasfiyatu wa-tarbiyya*”: the purification of education. On the one hand, this suggests the purification of the Muslim religion from all the forms of ‘innovation’ that have marred its precepts and dogmas, in order to return to the original religion such as it was conveyed to the Prophet. On the other hand, it implies educating Muslims so that they conform to this purified religion and leave behind their bad habits. Persuaded of the inevitability of Allah’s reign on earth, they deem that the establishment of Koranic law will follow a number of stages. Through education, they aim at creating an Islamic consciousness, and through predication at provoking a total reversal of the social hierarchical organisation of the world that will leave them collectively dominant. Hence, they are waiting for a future social and political revolution, as only then will the return of the true Islam lead to the emergence of a social movement that will allow the development of an Islamic state (Amghar 2008).

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[7] Derived from an interview with Abdelkader, aged 34, Paris, 25 February 2004.

Still, are these movements as apolitical and as pious as they pretend? It seems clear that the relations they maintain with the public sphere are not based on a strictly religious vision of Islam. Their discourse is in many ways very politically charged. In the Arab world, the appearance of neutrality presented by these movements with regard to political life conceals their support for the regimes in place.[8] In Lebanon, the Ahbâch benefited from the support of the Syrian regime in exchange for the movements defending pro-Syrian positions. In Algeria, President Abdelazziz Bouteflika encouraged the development of Salafism to combat the development of jihadist Salafism. He institutionalised and operationalised many actors within this movement, and in Algeria, an exponential growth of this form of Salafism has been observed. From Algiers to Constantine and Béjaïa, Salafism has become the primary re-Islamisation movement in the country, well ahead of the Muslim Brothers and the Sufi Brotherhood. Although the Saudi theologians advocate a pious vision of Islam, they openly support the monarchy, which they consider the best guarantee of Islamic values and the national cohesion of the country. A young person becoming Salafist reproduces the ideological positions of the Salafist clerics in France, and thus s/he also becomes pro-Saudi. One young person who has turned to Salafism told us that

> Saudi Arabia is a magnificent country. I've never been but one day, God-willing, I'll go. It's magnificent, it's a country that defends Muslims throughout the world in contempt of the West. When you see documentaries on TV on Saudi Arabia that show how it's a bizarre society or that it's corrupt, it's just propaganda and manipulation by journalists. Saudi Arabia is the land of Muslims, is my country in a way, if I can say that.[9]

In this context, the numerous French youth who embrace Salafism constitute a loyal client network that is uncritical with regard to Saudi Arabia. Through these Salafist theologians, the Saudi monarchy facilitates the greater visibility of Saudi foreign policy by portraying themselves as a patron of European Muslims – while simultaneously discrediting the demands of certain Islamists for a more equitable repartition of oil revenue. A young French person wishing to study in Saudi Arabia will often benefit from scholarships and lodgings from the Saudi authorities. This strategy enables Saudi Arabia to inscribe itself in the minds of the French Salafists as the only religious and political power that benefits European Muslims. Through their pro-Saudi position, the Salafists contribute to maintaining the symbolic influence of that country in the construction of an ideological and religious zone of influence. Eventually, the objective is to defend the national and strategic interests of the Saudi kingdom through the promotion of a vision of Islam that is favourable to Saudi Arabia.

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[8] Algerian Salafist preachers have always supported the Algerian regime and this is particularly true of that of Abdelazziz Bouteflika, who encouraged the development of the movement. Even the Saudi Sheik Uthaymin, before his death in 2001, had been the object of praise by the Algerian president for his policy of national reconciliation, through his civil agreement.

[9] Derived from an interview with Nadir, aged 27, 28 May 2003, Saint Denis.

While in the Arab world they have developed a form of loyalty and established non-conflictual relations with the authorities, in France these movements represent a powerful critical voice vis-à-vis the political system. Both their preachers and the Arab world more broadly rail regularly against the political, moral and social values of France. Salafists encourage the faithful to leave France, which they consider a land of *kufr* [unbelievers], for a Muslim country. They condemned the 2005 law on the wearing of ostentatious religious symbols at school. Although this discourse might lead young Salafists to refuse the examination of their wives by a male doctor or to physically threaten an imam whom they consider too conciliatory in his attitudes towards France, the trend tends simply to be avoidance. Salafists or Tabligh members have a tendency to flee from contact that might lead to clashes. Instead of continuing to go to the mosque of an imam of whom he is critical, a Salafist or a Tabligh member will move to a place of worship that better corresponds to his religious and ideological expectations. Rather than accompanying his wife to a hospital where he knows a male doctor will examine her, he will opt for a clinic where he can choose the doctor.

Yet, neither their verbal violence towards France, nor their orthodox conception of Islam should be taken as the prelude to an engagement in jihad (even if this was the case in the 1990s). On the contrary, this form of religious radicalism and the anti-French tirades of its militants act as a sort of ‘safety valve’ that diverts the militants from direct action. Hence, violence is no longer necessary. Moreover, the Salafists, the Tabligh and the Ahbâch living in France continue to affirm that they respect the laws in force in their host country. According to them, they do not call for violence and rebellion each time their movement is accused of terrorism. A Salafist in the Lyon region explained to us that "the minhaj salafi [Salafism] has nothing to do with terrorism. The expectations of Salafists, the real ones, are never attained. The Sheiks teach us peace and good behaviour. It annoys me that Salafism is confused with terrorism." [10]

Politico-religious radicalism (jihadism)

Since 2002, a hundred activists have been jailed in the fight against terrorism, according to the figures given to members of parliament by the then Minister of the Interior Nicholas Sarkozy on 23 November 2005. Actions of the French security services included the neutralisation of a 'Chechen group' in the suburbs of Lyon and Paris in 2002, the dismantling of Farid Benyettou's group in the 19th district of Paris in January 2005, and the identification and arrest of volunteers leaving for Iraq in 2005. There were also arrests of militants associated with the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat, GSPC), in September 2005 in the Yvelines. This armed Algerian movement has been directed by Safé Bourrada, himself already associated with the 1995 bombings in Paris.

As noted earlier, far from representing a homogenous and well-structured trend, the politico-religious radicalism of these movements is made up of several tendencies and sensibilities. It stems from a composite, heterogeneous group, based on the diverse projects (not always coordinated) of individuals acting alone or in small groups, or of autonomous organisations. A trend that is both complex and evolving, it covers a large spectrum of political sensibilities. From the different examples of Islamic-inspired terrorism that can be seen in France, we can identify three types of radical or jihadist mobilisations of a politico-religious persuasion. We should also emphasise the great diversity of positions within this form of radicalism.

2.1 Islamo-nationalist radicalism: The construction of an Islamic state or a caliphate in immigrants' countries of origin

The first trend among these movements that can be seen in France concerns groups that seek to conquer power in order to establish an Islamic state (*dawla islamiyya*) in their countries of origin. Many organisations follow this kind of jihad, such as the GIA, the Takfir wal hijra (Anathema and Exile), and the GSPC, of which some members distinguished themselves in Afghanistan. Before it developed its terrorist actions in Algeria, the armed violence of the GIA struck French residents in Algeria. Shortly after the attacks, foreign residents were instructed to leave the country on pain of execution.[11] On the 24th of December 1994, the GIA struck outside Algeria: a commando hijacked an aeroplane leaving from Algiers, with the apparent intention of crashing it into the Eiffel Tower. Because of its colonial past, France appeared to be a scapegoat on which the jihadists of the GIA pinned the responsibility for Algeria's woes. These actions were designed to demonstrate that the Algerian state was not capable of ensuring the security of those whom it was supposed to be protecting, to make an impact on public opinion internationally and to make Western governments question the appropriateness of their support for the Algerian government. Because of their link to the problems of Algerian politics, these structures are principally composed of persons of Algerian origin, including some who were members or sympathisers of the FIS, such as Mohamed Chalabi. They also include new immigrants, such as Chellali Benchellali, and young persons of immigrant origin, such as Khaled Kelkal and Jamel Beghal. In 1995, the GIA organised a series of bomb attacks in the stations at Saint-Michel and Maison-Blanche in Paris. In 1998, to prevent possible attacks during the football World Cup, a hundred members of the GIA were arrested. On the 11th of June 1999, by way of a threatening letter to the press, the GIA announced a jihad on French territory.

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[10] Derived from an interview with Jamel, age 23, 3l March 2004, Vénissieux.

Expressing the return to a former political order that was perceived as ideal, these movements are prone to seeking Islamisation of the state by force. Often incarnating the most radical of the different currents of Islamism, this form of radicalism is the product of both state repression in the countries of origin and deception born of the vote-catching strategies of Islamism. Its central core is often composed of former mujahideen fighters who had joined the Islamist opposition in their own countries at the end of the war in Afghanistan. Within the Islamist opposition in Muslim countries, these militants were allied with those groups that had the most experience with political strategies. This form of radicalism believes that the jihad constitutes the only instrument capable of Islamising the state and then society if the political option does not work. Faced with state repression and the closure of the political sphere, the partisans of this movement encourage the whole Islamist movement and the wider population to take arms and rise up against the state. Considered the only obstacle to the establishment of an Islamic regime, the state is accused of *taghut*.[12] The urgency is thus placed on the mobilisation of combatants rather than on the political strategies of the Islamists, who are criticised for having negated the effects of an Islamic revolution. Although they continually attack political Islam, of which they are extremely critical, this movement does consider its objectives in line with those of the Islamists: the establishment of an Islamic state.

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[11] The first foreign victims were French: land surveyors killed in Sidi Bel-Abbès on the 18th of October 1993.

The terrorist attacks became progressively more frequent. Fearing for the political stability of the region, France acted by multiplying its declarations of support and its supply of material aid to the Arab governments. In fact, France was concerned that the insurrectionist rationale of the jihadists would bring the Islamists to power. The jihadists saw France as being a barrier to the establishment of the Islamic state, in cohort with the authoritarian regimes that curb the Islamic revolution. From then on, the jihadists sought to convince France to withdraw its support for the Arab regimes – and particularly Algeria – by direct action. France was not directly targeted but the attacks were seen as a way of destabilising and then overthrowing the regimes in the various countries of origin. The aim was to export the political crises of these countries into France to the 5 million or so Muslims residing there.

Embodying an important anti-colonial message, this form of radicalism accused France, a former colonial power, of having designs on the economic, cultural and political domination of the region and of continuing to support the Arab regimes. In these countries, this accusation was accompanied by violent action directed against political, economic and military personnel seen as being the manifestation of the state structure. Advancing the idea of the destruction of all non-Islamic authority and the rejection of the order of things, this form of jihadism assumes an anarchist and nihilistic dimension. The dominant figure of this jihadist militancy is that of the mujahideen. The jihadist Salafists consider themselves combatants for justice who are fighting for a legitimate cause: the construction of the Islamic state that is to precede the coming of divine justice on earth. This feeling of fighting for a noble cause is reinforced by certain religious authorities who authorise this type of jihad, whereas others, without explicitly legitimising it, do so by not condemning it.[13] Moreover, they believe that they have the support of Muslim communities in Europe, of whom they consider themselves the representatives. In polarising the attention of the masses through their actions, their objective is to awaken the popular consciousness of Muslims in Europe.

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[12] *Taghut* is the name that the Islamists give the state. In the jihadist vocabulary, it means ‘tyrant’, ‘oppressor’ and ‘false god worshipped out of fear’. See Martinez 2003.

2.2 The politico-religious radicalism of al-Qaeda: Fighting American imperialism

Many organisations claim to belong to the same kind of jihadist Salafism as the ‘Gang of Roubaix’. In 1995, Christophe Caze and Lionel Dumont, two French converts, went to Bosnia with friends of Algerian origin to fight against the Serbs. When they returned to France, they embarked on recruiting their friends and did not stop until they had convinced all of them to take part in the jihad in Bosnia. The following year they launched a number of attacks in the north of France, against businesses and armoured vans to collect funds to finance the jihad, before they were shot by police. Several years later, in 2002, another group of a dozen or so individuals was arrested in the suburbs around Lyon. The police suspected them of preparing terrorist attacks against France. This group was organised around the Benchellali family, of Algerian origin, of which the father was an imam in the working-class area of Minguettes. Just before 1990, he created a humanitarian association called ‘Openness’ (Ouverture) with a friend who was a nurse. These two men collected funds, medicine and supplies ‘for the Chechen cause’. They went regularly to Bosnia in a truck carrying humanitarian aid. On one of these trips in 1993, Benchellali was captured by the Croatians, who suspected him of being an Islamic soldier. He was released some months later, after undergoing torture. His son, on the other hand, left with some friends for Chechnya to fight the Russian army.

This form of radicalism is incarnated for the most part by al-Qaeda, and all the organisational structures that have set up allegiances with it in France, such as the GSPC. These are organisations that originally operated within a nationalist paradigm (often

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[13] Youssouf al-Qardawi never condemned this kind of jihad. See (el Oifi 1998).

Algerian nationalism), and which are now reorienting their activism according to the jihadist ideology advanced by al-Qaeda. This recycling of the Algerian jihadists into the al-Qaeda network is explained by the strong links between those who are active in France and the members of Osama bin Laden's organisation. In many cases, the Algerian jihadists first took up arms in the war in Afghanistan. Moreover, there was a lack of well-known Algerian spiritual guides – some of whom had been assassinated, such as Mohammed Saïd – capable of influencing the ideological direction of the jihad in Algeria. This lack led the Algerian jihadists to turn to leaders of other nationalities, who were also active in other forms of jihad and often moved by internationalist visions. Finally, the pressure for security by the Algerian army and the French secret services led the Algerian emirs to reconsider their strategy and find another ideology for the fight. It was thus that in 1998, the emir of the GSPC, Hassan Hattab, swore allegiance to the World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders, created by Osama bin Laden.

Although the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the first form of jihadist radicalism are part of a process of extending the activism of Islamo-nationalist radical movements in foreign countries, the violent action of the second kind of jihadist mobilisation is no longer an imported reality. It now concerns French (European) residents and draws on an anti-imperialist Islamised discourse, fed by the questions of Palestine and Iraq, as well as the question of discrimination in France (International Crisis Group 2006). The combat is now of a different nature. Whereas the first form of jihadist radicalism aimed at seizing power and establishing an Islamic state in a given country, the second form is part of a larger confrontation with the enemies of the resolutely transnational Islamic community (*umma*). Contrary to the first kind of mobilisation, which had a nationalist dimension, the second is part of an international rationale that sanctions the transfer of the oppositional struggles in the Arab world to the international scene. Several factors are behind the emergence of this kind of violent radicalism. Faced with police action from the secret services, the lack of success in mobilising Muslim populations living in France (as well as in Europe) in support of insurrection, and incapable of changing the foreign policy of Western countries in their support of Arab regimes threatened with Islamic terrorism, this form of Islamo-nationalist jihadism has progressively reoriented itself towards international networks. The enemy is ever less specific countries that support Arab states and ever more the new world order dominated by the US, the government of which makes demonstrative use of Christian religious references. Even if the choice of targets remains the same, the reasons for targeting them have changed. Unlike the first type of jihadism, in which the criticism of France was part of an anti-colonialist rationale, the second is characterised by its anti-imperialist dimension. The globalisation of American power is increasingly answered by the internationalisation and the re-territorialisation of armed combat (Burgat 2004). According to its supporters, the universal battle must set in opposition a coalition composed of jihadist movements from the different lands of Islam and a clearly defined enemy – Western countries such as France and the US (the latter being the principle enemy to be defeated).

While the first form of jihad followed a political logic of negotiation by violence aimed at pressuring states and eventually overthrowing them, the second form of jihad does not seek to negotiate or compromise but annihilate the opposition. Motivated by an extremist logic, their action seeks neither to change political power relations nor to overthrow the regime but to upset the social order profoundly. The combatant feels compelled by a mission: saving an endangered Islam and the project of an Islamic state is merely a necessary utopia that serves to maintain a tension that liberates bellicose energy. From that point on, violence is understood as a sacrifice cloaked with meta-political significance. Indeed, jihadist violence has risen above politics to become a vector of meaning that gives it an air of intransigence, of non-negotiability and the religious impact of absolutism. This is de-territorialised violence, beyond borders, and the issues that it targets are so vital to its militants that they are willing to sacrifice their very existence for them.

Although it is not in the logic of political negotiation, this is not apolitical violence: the political elements of its objectives are just associated and subordinated to other goals, defined in cultural and religious terms, which will suffer no concession. This violence is about identities, which is foreign to the political sphere. This jihadist militantism applies the sectarian disqualification to those it means to fight: Muslims, who in their eyes are not sufficiently Muslim, as well as Jews and Christians. Faced with another Muslim, the rhetoric of *takfir* [excommunication] is mobilised to deny the adversary the guarantees of legitimate belonging. Faced with a non-Muslim, the person is disqualified through recourse to the identity of the unbeliever (*kufr*). Whereas the first kind of radicalism is aimed against the *taghut* state, the second form of radicalism is aimed at the society that is accused of impiousness. Excommunication, *takfir*, is the response in this case. The movement holds that the society is in the *jahiliyya* (a period before the Islamic divine revelation) and the combatant is not regarded as noble (as a jihadist would normally be), but as a pure figure in a sullied world. The jihadist militant is no longer a *mujâhid* [warrior of the holy war] but a *shahid* [martyr]. In this kind of jihad, the repertoire of action in combat is not taken from the guerrilla logics of bombing and so forth, but from that of suicide attacks. The objective is not to set up an Islamic state but to create hell on this world for all those who, for one reason or another, are not considered Muslim (2002).

The first form of jihad found the justification to overthrow the state in certain fatwas, approved by some of the Muslim population who saw democratic virtues in the holy war. The second form, however, is unanimously condemned by the entire body of Muslim theologians and Muslim populations of Europe. Thus, the day after the attacks in New York on 11 September 2001 and after the attacks in Madrid on 11 March 2004, the religious authorities of Islam in both the West and the Muslim world condemned these acts, which according to them had nothing to do with Islam. It is worth noting that some of these clerics simultaneously justified the first form of radicalism.

Stemming from a feeling of belonging to the global *umma*, and not being linked to any country of origin, the defenders of this kind of jihad take little account of nationalities and national reasoning. This movement is transnational because the networks have become global and intertwined with the international operators of jihadism. This undoubtedly explains the diverse national origins among these jihadists, compared with those of the first category, and their recognition of themselves more easily in internationalist claims. Therefore, compared with the first form of jihad in which there was an over-representation of persons of Algerian origin, this second form of jihadist radicalism mobilises individuals of different origins (e.g. Moroccans and Tunisians). This jihad also facilitates the conversion of French-born members, the centrepiece of the jihadist operation in France since 1995 and an increasingly important one. These new networks evolve in a ‘de-territorialised’ imaginary space.

2.3 Radicalism mobilising the defence of Muslims' agenda

The third movement of jihadist radicalism does not seek to fight against 'Jews and Crusaders' by direct action and the use of violence, nor does its action seek the establishment of an Islamic state and society, as it is not concerned with the question of *dawla islamiyya*. The jihad actually waged by this group aims at defending and supporting Muslim populations whose territorial, political and physical integrity is threatened by foreign powers. For its members, the use of violence is legitimate if it is consecrated to the defence of Muslims put in danger by non-Muslim armies. In the name of transnational Islamic solidarity, they have an obligation to provide military and financial assistance to their brothers in arms, in the defence of *dar al-Islam* and in maintaining the cohesion of an imaginary *umma*. Within the logic of patriotism and Islamic independence, this jihadist radicalism takes the form of a national war of liberation, in mobilising a sovereigntist discourse.[14] Comparing himself with the International Brigade, a jihadist told us during an interview that "we are for the jihad in Iraq or anywhere because our brothers are in mortal danger. We want to defend them and France doesn't understand, even though some French people did the same thing in the 1930s to defend the Spanish democrats against the dictator Franco." Therefore, while the dominant figure of the second type of jihadism is that of the kamikaze, the third type is characterised by the figure of the *mûhtal* or the *mûnâdil* [resistance fighter] or the *mûqatil al-oumma* [the fighter of the *umma*] fighting against occupation. They consider themselves the protectors of Islamic unity and fight to save the morality and piety of Muslims who could no longer live their Islamic way of life under the occupation of impious armies. These jihadists wage a sacred war to defend a sacred nation, a belief that reinforces in their mind their feeling of performing a higher task. Contrary to the kamikaze, death is not the goal of these jihadists, but rather military victory against the occupying armies. This is what constitutes the ultimate objective of this form of jihad. It is heavily marked by mythologised stories of a war in which the Afghans "threw rocks at the [S]oviet tanks and made them explode, where an army of mountain people defeated the most powerful army in the world”, according to one former soldier who today runs a Koranic school in Paris. He suggests that this holy war is part of a logic of negotiation by force: to cause the opposing army to capitulate so that it leaves *dar al-Islam*. The soldiers of the opposing armies are undoubtedly deemed impious but this religious disqualification is only relevant in the context of the war.

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[14] This support operates on several levels: first, it involves the collection of funds to help Muslim populations that are victims of war to buy weapons; second, the aim is to gain media coverage for the conflict to facilitate the exchange of opinions. Finally, this logistical support is complimented by the sending of militia troops to join national forces.

The jihad does not happen in the West; instead, it is deployed in all the conflict zones in which Muslims and non-Muslims are in opposition (Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Iraq). Although these jihadists are very critical of the West and they condemn its bellicose politics towards Muslim countries, this movement maintains peaceful relations with Europe. It draws a parallel between the situations of Muslims in war against foreign armies where it is necessary to go and fight on the one hand, and on the other hand the conditions of Muslims in Europe who, although they are subject to discriminations, are not threatened militarily by the armies of the Old World. Farid Benyettou told us, before he was arrested for having been behind the Iraqi group, that

> France is a country of unbelievers. I don’t like this country. It doesn’t respect Muslims, there is discrimination and Islamophobia. We must fight in France to defend Muslims but we must do so by legal means. We must turn democracy against France. But we must not use arms or lay bombs. France has not declared war on us.

It is thus that he demonstrated (peacefully) against the American military intervention in Iraq in March of 2003. To the question of which Muslim country he would choose in order to live his Islam fully, he replied “You think I’m going to say Saudi Arabia, Yemen or Algeria. These are not countries that are benevolent towards Islam. I would choose the United Kingdom or the United States. There they respect Muslims and I could be active in the defence of the Muslims of the world.” Whereas the jihadists of the second group live their engagement as a deviance and a social transgression that is punishable by the security forces, the third category is convinced of the legitimacy of its cause. This feeling is all the stronger for the fact that Arab countries tolerate imams who rail against “non-Muslim armies that attack impious Muslims”, to take the words of a religious leader and public servant during a Friday service in an Algerian city. In the eyes of these jihadists, this holy war is all the more legitimate because it benefits from the support of Muslim populations living in Europe (but also in the Muslim world) and has the backing of theologians. In fact, theologians encourage their followers through numerous fatwas to ‘go and fight the impious armies that are attacking Muslims’. From Youssouf al-Qardawi to the Salafist theologians in Saudi Arabia, they all justify this jihad, considering it an act of rightful defence and resistance. Because armed combat is part of the defence of the *umma*, the ethnic origin of the jihadist combatants is highly variable as was the case for the second group. As such, we find young persons of different origins (e.g. Moroccan and Tunisian) as well as converts in this group. The core of this third group, however, remains of Algerian origin (Benchellali, Benyettou and Fateh Kamel).

Secular political radicalism

This kind of radicalism or radicalisation is carried out by political groups and individuals of Muslim origin who do not incorporate a religious argument into their radical position. Their rhetoric is based on secular politics. It is in the name of political and ideological values that the partisans of this form of radicalism attempt to defend their position by force. This concerns groups such as those involved in the urban riots in the French suburbs in November and December 2005, and extreme left, rap groups.

The riots in the suburbs are the first form of this a-religious political radicalisation. This violence can be analysed as the eruption of an accumulated tension from daily frustrations and general annoyance about economic difficulties and precarious living conditions, the absence of opportunities, the perceived contempt of the political class, discrimination in housing, work and daily life, and so forth. For others, they were also witness to the general unhappiness over the policies of Nicolas Sarkozy. Most of the early acts of vandalism were spontaneous and isolated movements of idle youth in the streets among the housing estates. These acts then became veritable riots, notably involving direct combat with the riot squad. The riots were sparked by the death of two young men who were being chased by the police in Clichy-sous-Bois in the Parisian suburbs. They were also clearly the product of a yearning to break with what was seen as a repressive situation, linked to the inflationary security policies that had been in force in these areas for many years (Minguettes in 1983, Vaulx-en-Velin near Lyon in 1990, the suburbs north of Marseille and riots in the suburbs in November and December 2005). More than through the temptation of jihadism, it is through popular revolt that political claims are made when the citizenship structures are lacking.

The blaze in the suburbs at the end of 2005 was an episode without religious content or actors. In spite of a number of attempts to bring calm to the situation, the Muslim organisations did not play the role of social regulator expected of them. This showed that Muslim actors do not organise the riots, nor do the neighbourhoods, although sometimes they are active in the latter on a local level. These riots were manifestly the result of a desire to fight against an order perceived as authoritarian and repressive, especially stemming from the security policy in place in these areas since 2002.

This movement is part of a demand for social recognition, through the use of violence. In choosing to attack institutions, it is the state that is targeted for its shortcomings, e.g. the police for its repression, the bus stations because of geographical isolation and schools because they reproduce social failure.

The second element within this radical mobilisation is rap music. Part of the French rap scene aims at being radical. Its messages are provocative and seem to signify a desire for rupture, often by violence. In thematic compilations (e.g. “Patrimoine du ghetto”, 2005; “Yzo”, 2005; “Prison”, 2005) or through albums of groups such as Sniper, Bakar or Médine, the rappers point the finger at those guilty for social misery and exclusion. Among the accused, the state is represented as an oppressive machine, of which the armed presence is the police, the number one enemy. Constant identity checks, blunders, arbitrary arrests and so on, lead rappers to think of the police as an organised gang. Behind their critique of the institution of the police force, the state is incriminated, accused according to a vision of the world that resembles a conspiracy theory. Below are some extracts of their songs:

> For the kids with hands of vengeance
> To burn the police state and send
> The Republic to burn at the same stake, yeah...
> Why are we waitin’ to screw up their game,
> Why are we waitin’ to not play by their rules

(“What are we waiting for?”, NTM)

Fuck the system; they’ll get fire ‘cos they spread hate
Burn them, hang them, throw them in the Seine
The youth of the ghetto have rage in their veins
Gotta break the chains

(“The System”, Sniper)

Despite the dimension of extreme protest calling for an insurrectional uprising, these texts essentially play a role in channelling that violence. The violence expressed in these texts has a cathartic effect on rappers and the youth who listen to this music.

The third group that defends the idea of secular political violence concerns individuals belonging to movements on the extreme left. In the 1960s, there were already signs that small groups on the extreme left were trying to organise Muslim immigrant workers. Other structures for students of Middle-Eastern origin (e.g. Lebanese and Pakistani) who were close to the national liberation movements occupied themselves with radical political activities (political assassinations and hostages). Today, the ‘Islamic extreme left’ is principally incarnated by the Movement for Immigration and the Suburbs (Mouvement de l’immigration et des banlieues, MIB), which regroups former Maoists and uses direct action against discrimination in the legal system and against police violence, of which youth in the suburbs are often the victims.

Conclusions

The forms of radicalism among the Muslim populations in France are multiple and varied. To overplay the religious variable would prevent us from seeing the great plasticity of the phenomena of radicalisation. Political violence can take its source from religious justifications, or religious references can impede radicalisation, or Islam is absent altogether, even though the radicalism is practised by Muslims. Beyond this, it is necessary to recognise that all these different forms of radicalism are the product of experiences of injustice and exclusion, which can be directly linked to realities on the ground or to the political trauma of young persons having known delinquency and homelessness, personal failure, long-term unemployment and so on.

Yet, the link between Muslim populations and radicalism cannot be reduced to an economic equation in which poverty is the common denominator. It seems more likely to be the inadequacies of social and political regulation that is a problem, along with the lack of recognition, contempt and “the great wall” – in the words of Khaled Kelkal[15] (one of the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in 1995) – separating the estates where most of France’s Muslims live and the rest of the towns.

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[15] See the article, “Moi, Khaled Kelkal”, *Le Monde*, 7 Octobre 1995.

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