

Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West

Gilles Kepel

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Gilles Kepel is a French political scientist and Arabist with a global reputation for understanding Islam as an ideological, political, and social force. Among his books are *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh* (1985), *Allah in the West: Islamic Movements in America and Europe* (1996), *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam* (2003), *The Roots of Radical Islam* (2005), *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words* (2006; co-edited with Jean-Pierre Milelli), *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (2006), and *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom: The Future of the Middle East* (2010).

In *Terror in France: The Rise of Jihad in the West*, his latest and best-selling book for 2016, he makes the case that this phenomenon has passed through two phases and recently entered a third one. The first phase began in the 1990s with Mohamed Kelkal and was related to the Algerian civil war. Terrorism was used as a tool to force France to end its support for the coup that had negated the Islamists' electoral victory. The second phase began in 2012 with the Toulouse and Montauban shootings that were linked to al-Qaeda. Globalization now enabled a network of jihadists linked to Afghanistan to serve the Muslim cause. The (posited) third phase, which would develop after the Arab Spring was launched, would see French jihadists sent to fight

abroad. A creation of ISIS, its goal was to mobilize and then convince those French Muslims who felt marginalized, treated as second-class citizens, and suffering from Islamophobia to ignite a religious war.

Remarkably, Kepel traces many recent terrorist attacks to document the stories behind them. For instance, he says that between the attack on Charlie Hebdo's offices in Paris on January 7, 2015, and the assassination of the priest Jacques Hamel on July 26, 2016, 239 persons were killed by jihadist terrorists in France. Included are the 130 people murdered in the attacks at the Stade de France, in the streets of Paris, and at the Bataclan music hall. If France experienced the worst of these attacks, other European countries had their share too. During March 2016 there was a suicide attack on Brussels National Airport and the Maelbeek metro station – which serves the European Unions institutions. Denmark and then Germany were attacked by Anis Amri, a truck driver who drove into the Berlin Jurfurstendam Christmas market, killing twelve people, as a reminder of the attack in Nice that killed eighty-six people on Bastille Day. In his analysis, Kepel makes a possibly debatable analogy: he says that the first truck's color is white and that black and white are the colors of the ISIS flag. This assumption led him to welcome the group's claim of carrying out both attacks.

The third generation of jihadists spread after 9/11 failed to mobilize the world's Muslim masses. Kepel contends that the wave of terrorism expanded to the United States with the June 12, 2016, shooting at Pulse, a gay club located in Orlando. Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old security guard, killed 49 people and wounded 58 others.

Kepel has also linked the rise of terrorism with the continuing rise of the far right political parties, such as the National Front (France), *Alternativ für Deutschland* (Germany), and the Party for Freedom (the Netherlands). Austria and Denmark have been flooded by anti-immigrant and, more generally, anti-Muslim coalitions. He contends that such attacks are more visible and large-scale in Europe because its right-wing parties are conducting two simultaneous campaigns: fighting Islam and trying to rebuild a national identity among people who feel threatened by globalization and the transfer of national sovereignty to the European Union.

Kepel describes the three generations (or waves) as “fruitless sequels” that lasted until 1995 in France; a Bin Laden-led jihad against the United States, as a reaction to the invasion and subsequent occupation and war in Iraq, that reached its peak in 2001 (a down-to-top wave); and one that began in 2005 and benefited from social media (a top-to-down wave). Although he talks about al-Qadea, he examines more closely ISIS' ideology as a revival

of the caliphate concept. He describes how marginalized and “doomed” members of this generation of Muslims in Europe, especially in France, were recruited due to their “fragile” personal circumstances. But this is not entirely convincing, for data exists that many impoverished Muslims consider ISIS their enemy.

Kepel also mentions the 2005 riot in France launched by North African immigrants’ children. This wave, according to him, was incubated in the French prison system by jihadists who mentored petty delinquents and offered them the eschatological prospect of redemption through politico-religious violence and martyrdom. In his analysis, the 2015 riots that began in Clichy-sous-Bois transformed society and paved the way for creating a new Islam at the same time that Syrian ideologue Abu Musab al-Suri was developing a third generation of terrorism in the Middle East.

In a correlation that might be true, Kepel contends all of these events – the Paris massacre perpetrated by Cherif and the brothers Said and Ahmed Kouachi, Bataclan, and Saint-Denis on November 13, 2005, to the riots of 2005, as if it were a way to celebrate its anniversary – are a normal end to a disturbed scene. He also considers this date an echo to the Arab Spring, which broke out during November 2011. With that said, he describes France as entering its “retrocolonial” era, an era characterized by the return of the North Africans repressed in French postcolonial history and the seismic revolutions launched throughout the Arab world.

Recognizing that terrorism is a contagious phenomenon and that new terrorists follow in the footsteps of their predecessors, the author cites a case in which two young imprisoned Muslims, neither of whom had any known interest in Islam, were Islamized by militant prisoners. In fact, he points out, the use of Islam in prison to stigmatize a person causes some nominal Muslims to respond by turning Islam into a source of religious pride to survive the pressure placed on them by fellow prisoners. Kepel concludes that www.youtube.com fed the third generation: French-language videos posted to the site proclaimed the caliphate’s establishment in Iraq and Syria and called upon young French Muslims to join their jihad because it was their religious obligation to do so. He focuses on the site’s role in developing terrorism through the concept of contagion.

A different scenario in Kepel’s list shows just how contagious terrorism really is. Tunisian-born Housseem was brought by his pious father to France after his mother’s sudden death. A local Tabligh group helped him tremendously to heal and to overcome his trauma. His friend Rafael, a Jewish guitarist and son of computer scientist and a psychologist, was astounded by

this help and, despite his lack of interest in religion, accepted the group's new identity for him: a descendant of Moroccan Muslims. One day he decided to join Housseem in Syria and, fascinated by the utopic ISIS, encouraged his fellow converts to join him. Housseem and Rafael, along with Housseem's brother Sabri, were killed during a bombardment in Deir al-Zor in October 2014.

But why France? Most terrorist attacks happen there because of the high rate of unemployment in the French slums, which are filled with the children of Muslim immigrants. Their backgrounds echo their parents' colonial past, as they are primarily from North Africa. It seems that this may also become a serious social issue in Germany after the arrival of 1 million primarily Middle Eastern refugees, even though that country does not have a high unemployment rate. A contributing factor to the second wave was Nicolas Sarkozy's victory in the 2007 presidential election. A former minister of interior, he had vigorously repressed the riots in the slums and was an anti-immigrant politician from a non-Catholic European background.

Thanks to the political strategies employed by leading French politicians, Kepel asserts that two types of protests have developed as parallel conduits for expressing grievances: right-wing ethnic nationalism and Islamism. As communism has fallen, those in power have no interest in dealing with the proletariat or resolving the ongoing class struggle. Kepel therefore calls what is happening in France today as "the fachosphere," noting that radical ethnic identity parties are calling for all "Native Frenchmen" to stand together against "the Muslim invasion" that, according to conspiracy theorists, wants to mobilize the true children of "our ancestors the Gauls" and recent French people, such as young French Muslims, against "Zionism."

Kepel examines the power of the country's Muslim population (8 percent), which many individuals and/or groups would love to control. For instance, the Union of Islamic Organisations of France (UOIF) is facing strong competition from the Salafist movement in its "battle for the Muslim mind." Another example is the Mitterrand presidency that, Kepel maintains, featured a twofold "ruse": (1) federating and publicizing the young people's movement in order to stir up and then stigmatize the far right as racist, as well as (2) diluting "the marchers" demands, particularly those connected with the pro-Palestinian affinities some of them expressed by wearing the kaffiyah: "We shall see how Mitterrand's Machiavellian malediction has endured down to the present and has been exacerbated to the point that the far right is now established at the heart of French political life, in a position to win its bet."

One consequence of marginalizing and stigmatizing these French Muslims has been the growth and spread of Salafism and jihadism.

Terror in France is a balanced book written by an objective expert. To my knowledge, it is the first book to link generations of terrorism to the politics of elections and political elections. Kepel studies the reason for terrorism and its growth from various innovative perspectives. His two most important conclusions are that politics causes long-term harm and that these alienated North African youth have to be included in society. His particular focus on Islamic fundamentalism reveals that fundamentalism has also been a crucial force worldwide among Protestants and Catholics, as well as Jews and Muslims, since the 1970s. In my opinion, he should elaborate upon the term *Salafist*, for the lack of a concise definition might lead to confusion, given its various strands: the Sheikhist, who follow the Qur'an literally and isolate themselves from society; the Harakiyyah, who engage in social work; and the Jihadists.

In addition, the media's role in causing terrorism cannot be ignored, for they both stigmatize and discriminate against an entire generation. A media-based production that relies only upon suspense attracts a large number of spectators; however, the invited "experts" are often chosen based upon underlying media interests. Intellectuals who provide an objective critical analysis are not invited as much as are those "experts" who often have no expertise at all and are located on the extreme right of the political spectrum. Thus the media are only confusing and agitating the people by presenting incorrect information, spreading Islamophobia, and stigmatizing adherents of France's second-largest religion.

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