# REPORT
# Fighting islamist terrorism, a challenge for Europe's security and future
# WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23, 2021

On Wednesday, June 23rd, the third session of the European Summit on Islamist Radicalization and the Terrorist Threat was held, organized by **ELNET** in partnership with the **Institut Montaigne** and the **Hanns Seidel Foundation**. It dealt with the assessment of European public policies on deradicalization, the fight against Islamist propaganda online and its violent translation: terrorism.

A dozen experts, historians and politicians spoke of the **failure of deradicalization and the future of cyberjihadism.**

**DEBATE**: THE FIGHT AGAINST ISLAMISM, A CHALLENGE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

**Theresa May,** former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (2016–2019) and **Manuel Valls**, former Prime Minister of France (2014-2016), opened the summit by discussing the fight against Islamism. Both were Interior Ministers before being Prime Ministers and implemented prevention policies. They declared that the attacks have not stopped since and the threat remains unresolved today. It still has an impact on the collective psyche of our societies.

**Theresa May** said from the outset: "We have not yet won the war against radical Islam". As former leader of the British Conservative Party, she suffered the brunt of the attacks wave on British soil in 2017 and 2018, and knows that "radical" ideology is not to be underestimated. "We must stop the expansion of this ideology". She also blasted the extremists who "have perverted Islam". In terms of solutions, she advocated making "young people on the ground" understand that these individuals "are attacking our values".

According to **Manuel Valls**, "it is a philosophical, ideological, security war" which must be waged with "the Muslims of the world". Denouncing "those who help Islamists from outside through television and significant financial resources, such as Turkey or Qatar", goes hand in hand with tracking radicalization on social networks. "I refuse to talk about Islamophobia. It is a cultural and religious battle within Islam itself" he defended, by referring to the successes and failures of the French secular model.

**Theresa May** thinks that the danger stems from the fact that some people fear being labeled as Islamophobic and racist by the Islamists themselves, who are trying to divide Western societies. They want to distinguish between Muslims and the Brits. She also believes that the left does not serve the fight against Islamism, and cited the example of Jeremy Corbyn.

**Manuel Valls** recalled that France defends the separation of "the Church and the State", and fights against anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. According to him, the left has made unnatural alliances. "We must protect our Muslim citizens in the name of European civilization and our democratic values", he insisted. "We must not give up the rule of law."

## ROUNDTABLE: ASSESSING EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICIES ON DERADICALIZATION

The first roundtable was moderated by journalist **Gauthier Rybinski**, columnist at **France 24** and focused on the difference between disengagement and deradicalization. Disengagement implies that a person is no longer linked to a radical group by abandoning violence, thanks to people or institutions (judicial institutions or the Ministry of the Interior).

Limiting the Islamist phenomenon can only be achieved with effective deradicalization methods. However, **Marc Hecker**, director of research and communication at the **French Institute of International Relations (IFRI)** pointed out that "there is no European policy". **Dr. Ali Al Nuaimi**, CEO of **Hedayah** (an Emirati think tank and center against extremism), argued that "there is a denial on the part of the Europeans: the absence of a national integration plan for Muslims prevents them from feeling fully European when they face real identity problems".

**Marc Hecker** considered that France has focused on counter-radicalization rather late, as compared to other countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom or Scandinavian countries. French efforts only began in 2013-14 and had several failures. Since 2016, disengagement practices have been stabilized with the RIVE then PAIRS programs, which are dedicated to the reintegration of terrorists once out of jail. So far, no case of terrorist recidivism has been observed. The results are encouraging but remain fragile.

However, "we can not control the minds of citizens, it is not the responsibility of the State", underlined German expert **Sofia Koller**, project director at the **International Forum for Expert Exchange** on countering Islamist extremism. **Hugo Micheron**, researcher at the Institute for Transregional Studies at **Princeton University**, identified "cycles" of jihadism in Europe. Since the 90s, there has been an alternation between "phases of strength and weakness". "Since the fall of Daesh, we are facing one of these phases of weakness and I fear that we are making the same mistakes: by believing that jihadism is behind us and by not paying attention to the different spaces and places where jihadist thought is expanding", he warned. **Sofia Koller** confirmed: "You can't control spirits. Individuals pretend to deradicalize, but a lack of voluntary disengagement may exist. We have to build a useful "narrative" to attract individuals who are sensitive to extremist discourse towards our social model". In Germany, deradicalization is first and foremost resting on prevention, which is carried out by the federated states (Länder) and not by the federal government. There is a differentiated approach in each Land. The German experience of extremist movements is plural: far left, far right neo-Nazi, and now Islamism. The role of civil society is very important regarding deradicalization. Deradicalization requires a long-term effort, with a large budget in each country but which has not been voted so far.

Understanding the mind of extremists is fundamental according to **Dr. Ali Al Nuaimi**. Extremists think that civil laws and freedom of speech have no value: "There is an urgent need for political will in Europe to control the Muslim 'narrative, under penalty of seeing the extremist narrative win over among believers." **Thomas Renard**, senior fellow at the **Egmont Institute**, recalled that in Belgium, no one longer speaks of deradicalization (there has been changes in discourse and practices) but rather of prevention.

The support for radicalized individuals is very recent and is the work of the local police, as inspired by what is done in the United Kingdom and in Denmark. The field of anti-terrorism is widening upstream and downstream thanks to a multi-institutional approach and to the development of a network to share information. The skills distribution is very clear as regards counter-terrorism : the judiciary falls to the federal government while prevention and support fall to the local authorities of provinces and cities.

## KEYNOTE SPEAKER: COUNTER-SPEECH, THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS REFERENCE

**Rachid Benzine**, Islamologist and political scientist, spoke about the counter speech during his testimony. "Daesh's strength was to propose a theological and political narrative based on four ideas: the dream of unity between Muslims through the memory of the old Empire, the reminder of the humiliation that prepares violence as a response to injustice, the dream of purity that distinguishes "them" from "us". And finally, the question of meaning, of eschatology, which gives a meaning to death," he recalled. In order to convince radicalized people to give up this model, he thus propounded to "develop a positive relationship with oneself and with the other". "Our European societies are illiterate regarding religion: it is necessary to understand how it works. Religion has its own specificity, it can not be completely grasped by psychoanalysis or sociology (...). It is a discourse that gives a meaning to young people and calls them to act", he analyzed.

## ROUNDTABLE: HOW TO FIGHT AGAINST CYBERDJIHADISM?

The second roundtable was moderated by **Etienne Jacob**, journalist at *Le Figaro,* and dealt with the fight against cyberjihadism.

Today, ISIS has withdrawn on the ground, but the threat remains very vivid on the web. Despite the efforts of platforms and governments to stem this propaganda, it is harder to catch the terrorists. **Laurence Bindner**, co-founder of **JOS Project**, warned: "Media jihadism is still resisting". "Terrorists do not radicalize alone in front of their screens," she said. While propaganda is not necessarily the starting point for radicalization, it can "accelerate" it. And it "can have compulsive effects as it was the case during the Rambouillet attack", since the author had watched violent videos, a few minutes before killing a police officer with a knife on April 23rd, 2021.

Cyberjihadism remains a transmission belt for ISIS despite its crushing on the ground. During investigations, all the attacks have revealed compulsive consumption of propaganda before taking action. It is imperative to watch on the offer of jihadist propaganda online. Propaganda is very voluminous, with characteristic features: the denunciation of demonization of Muslims and Islam, and extreme violence. In these speeches, humiliation is omnipresent. States are accused of instilling systemic racism that prevents people from fully living their Islam. Media exposure of ultra-violence also has tenfold mobilizing effects. Today, one can notice encouraging evolutions: the volume has shrunk considerably, and the propaganda is limited to more confidential platforms.

**Antonis Samouris**, director of Terrorist Propaganda Analysis at **Europol's European Counterterrorism Center (ECTC)** said that recent attacks in Europe have radically changed the European Union's response to the terrorist threat. In order to fight terrorism effectively on a European scale, Europol created the European Counterterrorism Center (ECTC) in January 2016, which has several objectives: to serve as a European counterterrorism information hub; to provide operational support and effective expertise to Member States in their investigations; to limit the use of the Internet and social networks for terrorist purposes; to maintain strategic support and sensitize international partners, including in the technological field; and to provide direct and immediate on-site assistance during member state investigations.

Over the past six years, the European Union benchmark unit has assessed more than 130,000 items of terrorist content located on 361 platforms. And while the number of contents has decreased recently, **Antonis Samouris** said that "the Islamic State media have compensated by recycling old content or producing new versions inciting violence". "This type of production experienced a peak in activity following the terrorist attacks that happened in Europe in 2020," he said. Contrary to popular belief, "Lately, ISIS propagandists and online supporters have stepped up their circumvention measures in an attempt to regain digital power on the ground," he revealed.

Before the Charlie Hebdo and November 13th attacks, Daesh propaganda was widely disseminated. Then the platforms reformed. In 2017, via the **Global Internet Forum to Counter-Terrorism (GIFCT)**, Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube joined forces to stem terrorist propaganda (before being joined by Amazon, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and ten other companies). If such content emerges, it is marked with a "hash", a digital fingerprint, and is listed on software common to GIFCT companies. This mark prevents it to go up on other networks and to invade them by becoming viral. **Erin Saltman**, GIFCT director of programs, said: "Tech companies can share their information in open source. If propaganda appears on social networks, this content can be shared and analyzed". However, some platforms still protect their users, by promising total anonymity. "They may not want to participate in this dialogue or censor their content. Governments will have to encourage them", she pleaded.

**Benjamin Hodayé**, historian and expert on Islam at the **Institut Montaigne**, stressed that propaganda is today "more and more difficult to track", and that one must see "beyond the mere 'Jihadospher' ". He cited the example of Jamel G., the assassin of Stéphanie Monfermé in Rambouillet. The analysis of his Facebook profile over ten years showed "a religious commitment, which has become increasingly harsh, fueled by publications linked to identity concerns about Islamophobia and then Salafist content". These are publications which are not outlawed, but which can "be part of an ideological sphere that makes some Internet users lock themselves into a system of thought", he continued. This idea was also defended by **Laurence Bindner**, who developed the concept of "degraded hatred". "The window of acceptability of online violence has widened," she noticed.

**Ezra Saar**, researcher at the **International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)**, worked in Israeli intelligence for 35 years: he was the head of a counterterrorism unit in the West Bank then head of international cooperation with other information services. He explained that Israel has faced a wave of terrorist attacks on Temple Mount from Daesh and Islamist movements belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. Most of these terrorists were not assisted by a group. They had no ideological bedrock. Many women and children took part in these attacks. These attacks were impulsive, identifying the process behind was thus difficult. Often in their twenties, single, with no religious background, some of them had psychological disorders or difficult social relationships. All came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and were exposed to incentives. In 2015, 28 people were killed including 25 individuals between October and December. **Ezra Saar** explained that his teams were not prepared for this looming threat.

Terrorists used all kinds of weapons: axes, knives, to attack Israelis or innocent citizens. They were not under surveillance: young people or women have so far not been targeted by the security services. These young people were encouraged by social networks. Intelligence therefore had to reorganize itself and seek to arrest the terrorists before they leave their homes. Police services also had to adapt : it took some inventiveness to catch them. The population and the media were very worried at that time. Intelligence tools focusing on words, texts, images or other elements have been developed to track terrorist networks and individuals. It was also necessary to identify the needs concerning the systems of recognition of terrorists and their declarations. A data mining device has also been developed. According to **Ezra Saar**, the regulation of social networks does not work. One must therefore consider more intense cooperation between the police and intelligence services while continuing to monitor the networks with appropriate tools.

**Arié Bensemhoun**, CEO of **ELNET France** and **Camille Godeau**, deputy director of the **Institut Montaigne** concluded this third session of the European Summit on Islamist Radicalization and the Terrorist Threat, by recalling that the next session will take place in October 2021. They insisted on the importance of this kind of event to carry out this fight at the European level and to inspire European policies.