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Jihad and the French Exception

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By FARHAD KHOSROKHAVAR JULY 19, 2016

PARIS — Whether Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, who killed more than 80 people during Bastille Day celebrations in Nice, was an agent of the Islamic State or an unhinged loner who borrowed the group's jihadist symbols, the slaughter raises the same fundamental question: Why do so many more attacks of this magnitude occur in France than in other European countries?

Belgium has also been hit recently, but less often. In Britain and Spain no terrorist attack has killed more than 10 people in over a decade. In Germany, there hasn't been a major attack at all.

Failures in the French security and intelligence services cannot account for the difference, because communication problems afflict such services throughout Europe. The answer lies elsewhere: When it comes to jihad, too, there is a French exception.

France's distinctiveness arises in part from the ideological strength of the idea the nation has had of itself since the French Revolution, including an assertive form of republicanism and an open distrust of all religions, beginning, historically, with Catholicism. This model has been knocked around over the years, first by decolonization, then by decades of economic hardship, the growing stigmatization of cultural differences, the fervent individualism of new generations and globalization, which has narrowed the state's room for maneuver.

Above all, France hasn't been able to solve the problem of economic and social exclusion. Its system, which is too protective of those people who have jobs and not open enough to those who don't, breeds angst all around. Young people in the *banlieues*, marginalized and with few prospects, feel like victims. They become prime targets for jihadist propaganda, often after a stint in prison for petty crimes.

Neither Germany nor Britain faces the *banlieues* phenomenon, at least not on such a scale. The German town of Dinslaken, which is partly ghettoized, has become a hotbed of Islamist radicalization. The same goes for Dewsbury, in West Yorkshire, and the Molenbeek district of Brussels. But France seems to alienate many more of its citizens and residents, well beyond those who actually join the Islamic State.

One reason is that France's vision of citizenship, which strongly insists on adherence to a few exalted political values, has seriously eroded over time. By the 1980s, the republican ideal was floundering: It had promised equal opportunity, and that now seemed to be in short supply. The French Communist Party, which had long brought dignity to disadvantaged groups by proposing to fight injustice through class struggle, also greatly weakened during that period, partly because of the demise of the Soviet Union.

Postwar Germany, on the other hand, chose a far more modest and prudent vision: economic progress. Today, Germany has a rather muted foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and it displays no desire to unite all its citizens around universal principles. Britain isn't trying to create a monocultural society either. It has opted for multiculturalism, which can abide hyphenated identities and communal behavior.

France, however, remains resolutely universalist and claims it still has both the desire and the power to enforce inclusion. Yet its assimilationist ambitions are increasingly at odds with everyday reality, and this growing gap is a source of pervasive distress.

And so the strength — the weight — of France's national identity has become a problem. It only heightens the discontent of young people with foreign origins, especially North Africans or their descendants, all the more so because the Maghreb's decolonization occurred in pain and humiliation: When France withdrew

from Algeria, it left behind hundreds of thousands dead and created scars in the collective unconscious that remain to this day. British decolonization seems almost painless in comparison.

Certainly, Britons and Germans also express fears about immigration and Islam. Such concerns help explain Brexit. Acts of sexual harassment in Cologne around the new year, apparently committed by immigrants, sparked a heated debate in Germany (and beyond). But both Britain and Germany give non-local minorities ample leeway to publicly express and practice their religious and communal preferences.

France insists — in the name of republicanism — that religion should remain a strictly private affair. An ideological nation par excellence, it focuses on symbolic issues like wearing headscarves or holding collective prayers in public places. But restricting such practices causes wounds that go much deeper than the prohibitions themselves: It allows Islamists to exaggerate the implications and accuse France of Islamophobia. In fact, France is no more Islamophobic than its neighbors; it's just more frontal in the way it handles Islam in the public sphere.

French-style integration has had some successes. Most notable among them is a high rate of mixed marriages. The French public school system, by helping uplift the lower classes and, therefore, many children of North African parents, has also been a tool of integration (although lately it has seemed less effective). Sometimes precisely because they have faced prejudice in the job market, which has long been stifled by unemployment, children of immigrants have found refuge in state institutions like the army and the police, which recruit through anonymous competitive exams.

Although France has managed to integrate many immigrants and their descendants, those it has left on the sidelines are more embittered than their British or German peers, and many feel insulted in their Muslim or Arab identity. Laïcité, France's staunch version of secularism, is so inflexible it can appear to rob them of dignity. An additional factor is France's muscular foreign policy, which seems to target mostly Muslim countries, such as Libya, Syria and Mali.

France's model of integration is generous in its principles but too rigid in its practice. The realities of French society today call for a more pragmatic and flexible

approach, with fewer ideological diktats and less anxiety about plurality. France isn't what it used to be, and it's time it came to terms with that idea.

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