

# Many in France Ask Why the Latest Terrorist Attack Felt Like Déjà Vu

Karina Piser | Friday, March 30, 2018

PARIS—Last Friday, a gunman hijacked a car near the city of Carcassonne, in southwestern France, before shooting at national police officers finishing up a morning run. He then headed to the nearby town of Trebes, where he opened fire in a supermarket and held shoppers and employees hostage for several hours. By the time police arrived at the scene, three had died: two supermarket hostages and a passenger in the hijacked car. The following day, Arnaud Beltrame, a 44-year-old lieutenant colonel in the French police who used his body as a shield to protect one of the hostages, died of his injuries. Police killed the gunman, 25-year-old Redouane Lakdim, who had pledged allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

The incident was the latest in what has become a new era of terrorism on French soil, and the second since President Emmanuel Macron took office. In October, a man stabbed two girls to death (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-security-marseille/knifeman-yelling-allahu-akbar-shot-dead-after-killing-two-in-france-idUSKCN1C61DC>) at a Marseille train station in what officials called “a likely terrorist attack.” As the details of Friday’s attack, for which the Islamic State claimed responsibility, trickled in, they seemed to accord with a familiar pattern. Lakdim, a Moroccan who earned French citizenship in 2004, had since 2014 been on the official “Fiche S” list (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-security/french-security-agents-called-in-trebes-killer-for-evaluation-source-idUSKBN1H32GG>), which includes some 26,000 individuals considered a potential threat to national security. Ten thousand of those individuals have apparently been radicalized, with the most dangerous monitored directly by the intelligence agency known by its acronym DGSI.

It’s not the first time a dual-citizen on the radar of French authorities has perpetrated an attack in France. Prison officials had noted that Amedy Coulibaly, the French-Malian who killed four people at a kosher supermarket in Paris in January 2015, had been radicalized in prison, but they failed to share that information with the DGSI. That agency had also been tracking French-Algerian Said Kouachi, who killed 12 people at the Paris offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo days before the supermarket attack,



*A daughter of Christian Medves kisses her father's coffin during a ceremony for three victims of last week's extremist gun rampage in Trebes, southern France, March 29, 2018 (AP photo by Fred Lancelot).*

but had stopped monitoring him when he moved from Paris to Reims, in northern France. And despite a travel ban, Samy Amimour, a French-Algerian who was among the perpetrators of the November 2015 attack at the Bataclan theater on a night of coordinated terrorist attacks in the French capital, traveled freely to Syria in 2013. Nearly all had a history of petty crime; none were particularly religious, but they were radicalized fairly quickly.

That grim record led a parliamentary committee to call for an intelligence overhaul in July 2016. A week later, a Tunisian-born man living in France rammed a truck down a packed promenade in Nice, killing 86 people.

So it's not surprising that opposition politicians and the public are asking why the attacks in southern France felt like déjà-vu. Once again, the optics were bad. Just last month, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe released a new counter-radicalization strategy (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/23/world/europe/france-tough-new-anti-islamist-policies-in-schools-and-prisons.html>) that includes 60 new measures, involves 25,000 public officials and focuses on prevention, notably at schools, prisons and on social media.

Mounting frustration and national anxiety about terrorism and security have made the political rancor that followed past attacks even more acute this time around, though the opposition's proposals range from unfeasible to unconstitutional. Laurent Wauquiez, of the right-wing Republican Party, resurfaced a plan, which had originated under the previous government and caused widespread public outcry, to strip the citizenship of dual nationals accused of terrorism. Socialist lawmaker and former Prime Minister Manuel Valls called for a "ban on Salafism."

Many members of Macron's party, la Republique en Marche, or the Republic in Motion, which has a parliamentary majority, have expressed no desire to pass new laws. "We're not going to vote a new law with each attack," one majority lawmaker told the newspaper Le Monde

([http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/03/27/terrorisme-la-majorite-s-oppose-a-de-nouvelles-mesures-legislatives-securitaires\\_5277002\\_823448.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/03/27/terrorisme-la-majorite-s-oppose-a-de-nouvelles-mesures-legislatives-securitaires_5277002_823448.html)), noting that the new counterterrorism law, passed in October, already facilitates "the tracking of radicalized individuals, and the possibility of house arrest or closing places of worship."

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Indeed, the fact that France suffered another attack doesn't imply that the nature of the threat has changed or rendered obsolete the new counterterrorism law, which replaced the state of emergency that had reigned since November 2015, in part by turning some of its provisions into common law, to the dismay of civil-liberties advocates. Rather, it attests to the difficulty France faces in tackling "underground Islamism, an insidious enemy," as Macron said in his speech ([http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2018/03/28/attentats-dans-l-aude-la-france-rend-un-hommage-national-au-gendarme-arnaud-beltrame\\_5277389\\_1653578.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2018/03/28/attentats-dans-l-aude-la-france-rend-un-hommage-national-au-gendarme-arnaud-beltrame_5277389_1653578.html)) honoring Beltrame, the lieutenant who died in Trebes.

The Trebes attack comes after Macron announced (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/islam-france-macron/556604/>) an ambitious if vague initiative in February to "restructure Islam in France." It is an apparent push to foster a "moderate" French Islam that could counter radical ideologies. The president's blueprint largely focuses on breaking with foreign influence and potentially training imams domestically, though many experts are skeptical it would be an effective strategy. "If radicals came from mosques, then it would make sense to try to control what's being preached—but they don't. And we know it, and the government knows it," says Olivier Roy, an expert on Islam and a professor at the European University Institute in Florence.

Instead, radicalization takes place more often online, while many French jihadis have been small-scale criminals who seek refuge in extremism to fill an ideological void, rather than satisfy religious convictions. That was the case for Lakdim, who had a history of petty crime (<http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/qui-est-le-suspect-des-attaques-terroristes-dans-l-aude-23-03-2018-7625091.php>), serving brief prison stints in 2015 and 2016 for firearms and drug possession, respectively, and was active in online Salafi chat rooms. It's often while serving those short sentences that future jihadis are indoctrinated. Extensive studies characterize French prisons as hubs for radicalization (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/26/opinion/the-mill-of-muslim-radicalism-in-france.html>).

According to Nathalie Cettina, the research director of the French Center on Intelligence Research in Paris, the government needs to "develop human intelligence," particularly in neglected, low-income neighborhoods, often on the outskirts of French cities, where many of the jihadis that have struck France grew up. After the 2015 and 2016 attacks, "the focus was on the technical side of intelligence—global coordination, and a particular focus on Iraq and Syria," she explains, at the expense of on-the-ground work that would make it easier to "recognize just when a potentially radicalized individual takes action." After all, attacks affiliated with the Islamic State aren't necessarily coordinated from above. The group issues nebulous calls to action that can inspire potential radicals in search of a cause, often claiming credit for those who succeed.

Eyes on the ground would help to monitor individuals like Lakdim, who Interior Minister Gerard Collomb said ([http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/societe/video/2018/03/23/trebes-l-assaillant-est-passe-a-l-acte-brusquement-sans-radicalisation-apparente-explique-gerard-collomb\\_5275596\\_3224.html](http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/societe/video/2018/03/23/trebes-l-assaillant-est-passe-a-l-acte-brusquement-sans-radicalisation-apparente-explique-gerard-collomb_5275596_3224.html)) hadn't displayed "apparent signs of radicalization," despite being on the state's watch list. But that kind of monitoring is absent from the new counter-radicalization

plan, which focuses more on prevention than keeping tabs on individuals who have already become radicalized.

Macron has bolstered counterterrorism initiatives, notably with his creation last June of a centralized national counterterrorism center, though that doesn't exactly address the local efforts Cettina describes. But there are some promising developments. The prime minister announced an increase in "proximity police"—patrols that are present on a regular basis in rough areas, rather than only during crises. While they're not intelligence officials, they could develop the quotidian familiarity necessary to notice the kind of subtle behavioral shifts that could transform a petty criminal into a terrorist. With proper coordination, they could transmit that information to central intelligence officials.

But it's clear there still won't be an easy fix. "We're dealing with people who use Islam as a catch-all for their radicalism," Cettina says. "And when they're ready to die for it, stopping them from taking action becomes all the more complex."

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