

What France's civil war warning told us about the French military, Islam, and the far-right

*Two open letters warning of a potential civil war have once again put Islam at the centre of the political agenda in France. **Joseph Downing** argues that instead of viewing French Muslims as a unique threat to the security of the country, politicians and the armed forces would be better served by focusing on France's secular security problems.*

Two [open letters](#) discussing the possibility of civil war in France have sent shockwaves through Europe. The letters, written first by retired generals and then by anonymous serving soldiers, have [raised questions](#) about whether French President Emmanuel Macron is losing control of the country's military.

Despite the furore, there are few reasons to worry about the French military. The rank and file [remain apolitical and loyal to their jobs](#). Indeed, neither letter specified that the military either wanted or would initiate a civil war, but only that it stood ready to intervene to protect the integrity of France should widespread unrest occur.

Rather, these remarkable interventions told us more about the historical context of the French armed forces, their difficult relationship with civilian rule, and the dangers of instrumentalising Islam in political discourses at the cost of tackling secular security problems.

The historical context

In 1961, during the end of French rule in Algeria, an attempted putsch was initiated by officers in Algiers. The failure of this putsch is generally regarded as a turning point in the involvement of the French armed forces in politics, signalling a '[defeat of the generals](#)' and the subordination of the military to civilian rule.

However, in recent years, some observers have begun to doubt the durability of this position. In particular, the increased professionalisation of the military officer class [has been held up](#) as a potential threat. This has been given further weight by the role of the armed forces in combatting domestic terrorism.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks that hit Paris in 2015, the French government established 'Opération Sentinelle', under which 10,000 combat troops were deployed to boost security at sensitive sites in France. In doing so, the government invited the French army to participate in the civilian arena in an unprecedented way.

Additional anti-jihadist deployments in West Africa and the Sahel have left the French army [badly over stretched](#) and exasperated long standing problems of underfunding. However, these civilian deployments [have also contributed](#) to the French Army's positive image in society. Thus, the far-right element in the French armed forces, though likely small in number, may anticipate that this context of an increased burden, increased popularity, and an unpopular civilian administration affords them an opportunity to embolden their presence in the political field.

The French military and Islam

Both letters were quite specific about what constitutes the primary threat to stability in France – namely Islam and 'concessions' made to Islamists by the French political class. This is problematic not least because there is no evidence that the French establishment has in any way made concessions to Islamism, either on French soil or overseas. Macron has notably [tacked to the right](#) recently, both rhetorically and policy wise, in adopting a controversial 'separatism' bill that targets 'radical' NGOs and mosques in France.

The bill represents an [obsolete conception](#) of where radicalisation takes place in France as mosques and NGOs have not been the primary conduits of radicalisation in France for some time, with individuals taking much more diverse paths to committing acts of Islamist inspired violence. The comments in the two letters also reflect another recent, and unfounded, polemic in France, namely that the country, and in particular its universities, are under threat from the '[Islamist-Left](#)' (Islamogauchisme).

The letters, however, go far beyond an abstract discussion of Islamism and feed into the long-standing marginalisation and stigmatisation of French Muslims. This is done subtly by identifying participation in Opération Sentinelle as a formative experience where the army saw first-hand the abandoned suburbs of France and associated 'delinquency'.

Here they also point to "religious communities, for whom France means nothing – nothing but an object of sarcasm, contempt and even hatred". The spectre of France's rundown housing estates as a hotbed of Islamist radicalisation [has been in the ether for some time](#), but is entirely unfounded. It represents a [long-standing misrepresentation](#) of secular security concerns and the failures of France's urban policies as a 'problem with French Muslims'.

This narrative is made all the more misguided by the fact that the French military is extremely diverse and a very popular career path for French Muslims. It is pragmatic about the practices of laïcité, the French form of secularism that bans religion in the state, by openly allowing imams, rabbis, and priests to [minister to soldiers](#), and providing soldiers with prayer spaces. While no official figures exist, [it has been estimated](#) that ten times as many French Muslims serve in the armed forces than have ever been active in al-Qaeda.

Indeed, anyone who has seen the Opération Sentinelle patrols in France would be struck by their multicultural make up. It is simply inaccurate to think of the current situation as a white French army and security establishment protecting France from Islamist terrorists. Rather, French Muslims play an important role in securing the Republic at all levels and those that have [refused to serve in operations in Muslim countries](#), such as Afghanistan, stand in the single figures.

French Muslims are also important victims of Islamist terrorism in France. These victims in the line of duty include the Muslim soldiers killed by the Toulouse attacker and failed army recruit, Mohamed Merah, or Ahmed Merabet, [the Muslim policeman killed in the Charlie Hebdo attack](#) and subject of the #JeSuisAhmed twitter campaign alongside #JeSuisCharlie. It is also worth noting that a number of the victims of the 13 November attacks and the bastille day attack in Nice were French Muslims going about their social lives in the bars and restaurants of Paris, celebrating the liberation of the Bastille, and performing an important part of being French in the public sphere.

Secular security concerns

None of this is to say that France is without significant domestic security problems. The proliferation of heavy military weapons in France, such as the infamous Kalashnikov AK-47, [remains a significant problem](#) for law enforcement across the country. Additionally, France, and in particular the rundown suburbs identified in the second letter from serving officers as a key inspiration for their intervention, has [significant and well documented social problems](#) with housing and a lack of employment.

However, what is not so well known outside of France is the significant threat to stability and security posed by [extremely well organised and armed organised crime networks](#) that operate at many levels within the country. These secular, multicultural 'narco-bandits', who have more in common with their criminal brethren in Italy, the Balkans and indeed the United States, represent significant challenges to security in France.

Indeed, a mayor of the infamous, poor northern 15th and 16th districts of Marseille, a woman of Muslim origin, Samia Ghali, called for the army to be deployed to her city to tackle the growing violence and instability caused by these organised crime groups. This year, these groups [made headlines](#) when five drug traffickers were sentenced for committing an infamous 'Marseille barbeque' where organised crime groups burn the bodies of their enemies in cars to send an example to those who would consider crossing them.

The French government, and indeed those concerned about French stability within the armed forces, would do well to focus on these secular forms of insecurity that French Muslims abhor rather than stoking the same divisive rhetoric they accuse their Islamist enemies of.

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