



Paris attacks: Why France must avoid viewing its Muslim population as a security threat



*The terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November have prompted discussions from several commentators concerning levels of integration among France's Muslim population. **Joseph Downing** argues that claims of a substantive link between the marginalisation of French*

Muslims and the terrorist attacks that have hit France in 2015 are deeply misleading. He writes that while several French citizens have been involved in the attacks, they must be viewed as acts of international terrorism, not the result of domestic factors.

This year marked a decade since the **2005 riots** that brought France to its last state of emergency. Friday's horrific attacks on targets in central Paris have once again caused, for very different reasons, a French government to place the country into emergency measures, this time going as far as temporarily **suspending** the Schengen Agreement and putting Paris under its first mandatory curfew since 1944.

Both incidents also share an ominous and dangerous commonality in their connection of France's significant post-colonial, post-migration diversity with threats to the country's security and stability. Here, in both cases, the danger is that events will further stigmatise and securitise Muslim minorities in France, the vast majority of whom have no sympathy for violence and terrorism.

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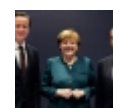


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However, it is important to unpick this connection, and the way it plays out in these two very different cases to understand the nature of the challenges now presented to French and European policy makers when attempting to both combat the threat of Islamist terror and protect Europe's well established, peaceful and valued Muslim minorities. The 2005 riots saw the largest and most widespread unrest in France since the Second World War. Groups of largely male youths of ethnic minority extraction fought **pitched battles** with the French authorities in the deprived suburban housing estates of almost every French city (the notable exception being Marseille).

Here, sociological explanations rightly focused on the role of socio-economic deprivation, as well as discrimination in the labour market and public life directed towards those of visibly non-French, especially North African, origin. Indeed, this was apparent in the 'spark' which lit the fires of 2005 – the death of two teenage boys fleeing police in the suburb of Clichy-Sous-Bois, one of North African and one of Sub-Saharan African origin.

While 2005 represented the culmination of a series of sociological, economic and political processes of marginalisation and discrimination felt by a significant number of those of minority origin, Friday's events are very different. Friday represented the actions of individuals pledging allegiance to a fringe group, ISIS, which does not have widespread political, economic or moral support from the vast majority of Muslims in France.

While some of the attackers have been identified as French nationals, this was an act of international terrorism and as such has more in common with the Charlie Hebdo attack carried out by the Kouachi brothers. The Kouachi brothers' radicalisation took place outside of the country's Muslim institutions, such as mosques and community associations. Indeed, they met with significant resistance to their ideas at their local mosque, leading to their eventual exclusion.

Rather than examining the role of Muslims in France generally, the French government and European policymakers must instead accept that those who present a security threat are a small fringe minority whose actions will require significant police and intelligence efforts to counter. Here, both the statement from Emmanuel Cocher on embracing contemporary France's diverse and multicultural nature, and

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the moving act of 12 Imams singing the French national anthem outside the Bataclan concert hall, are valuable examples of attempts to address not just damaging perceptions of France's Muslim minorities, but also the supposed conflict between diversity and national identity so readily deployed by far-right groups in France and across Europe.

Another key feature of the French landscape so clearly associated with security issues in France is the pervasive insecurity and deprivation of the French '*banlieues*', so clearly evident in explanations of the 2005 riots. Sociologically, little on this front has changed – while in the wake of 2005 much was made of the need to clean up, police and develop these areas, very little has been achieved by any measure. The poor, suburban estates, especially those of Marseille, Paris and Lyon, are still neglected by both the central and local state and remain some of the most deprived areas in western Europe.

Indeed, some scholars have **argued** that the marginalisation experienced by their residents is unparalleled in Europe. However, the conditions, and indeed presence, of these areas should not be cited as a 'structural' explanation for the recent attacks. There are many thousands of individuals of Muslim faith in these areas experiencing marginalisation that do not conduct, condone or associate themselves with such violent acts, which are **prohibited** in the Muslim faith. Although such deprived areas may well feature in the biographies of some of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in France, the connection between these areas and terrorism is extremely tenuous.

The individuals involved in terror in France have much stronger links and associations with international forms of crime and terror. The Kouachi brothers had tried to reach Syria and had recruited fighters to go to Iraq to fight American forces. The perpetrators of Friday's attacks appear to have had connections both to Syria and Belgium, although it is still too early to know the full details of their background.

One area where lines may be blurred between the forms of localised insecurity present in the suburbs and national insecurity are connections to international crime networks. All of the large poor suburban housing estates are marred by significant organised crime activities, centred around the trafficking and distribution of drugs, primarily cannabis. As with illegal drug trafficking across the globe, this goes hand in hand with violence, and specifically gun violence. Indeed, there are no shortages

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of military grade weapons on French streets, with the AK47 becoming a **favourite weapon** in the assassinations carried out between rival drug gangs across France.

While it is overwhelmingly the residents of these poor areas that are the victims of this gun violence, the proliferation of heavy arms that comes with the drugs trade clearly has dangerous consequences for the rest of society. The vectors of insecurity present in the suburban estates provide a ready source of connections for the supply of military hardware, primarily smuggled from Eastern Europe, that prospective terrorists can readily draw from. The Kouachi brothers procured their arsenal through a **criminal arms trafficker** in Brussels, for a reported sum of €5,000.

As it happens, this cache of arms was **discovered** by the brothers' neighbours, who were too scared to report them to the police. While the exact reasons behind the neighbours' decision not to report the find to the police may never be known, it has been speculated that their fear stemmed in part from a generalised mistrust of the effectiveness of the French police.

It is highly likely in the coming days and weeks that many questions will again be asked of French and European law enforcement and intelligence services as to what information they had on Friday's attackers. Here, it is hard to argue against the idea that greater links need to be formed between the police and local communities in France: links that can only be made in conditions of increased police presence and security in areas of France that are currently perceived as no-go areas for law enforcement because of the drugs trade.

But beyond these limited qualifiers, we should echo Jocelyne Cesari's **words** from 2005 and strive to avoid making simple connections between insecurity and issues of ethnicity, religion and inequality within France. While significant social and economic problems undoubtedly still hang over those of minority ethnic origin in France, as they did in 2005, it is vital that we reject the narrative which views these as causal factors in the terrorism that has afflicted the country in 2015.

We have seen in the past ten years that religion has not in fact been an overwhelming force for insecurity in France. Rather, Islamic community organisations have played vital roles in integration amidst very difficult

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social and economic circumstances by [providing services](#) and institutions in areas where the state is struggling to meet its obligations. Many French and European Muslim leaders and organisations have simultaneously condemned terrorism in the strongest terms and excluded those who sympathise with violence from Muslim institutions, as in the case of the Kouachi brothers.

Rather, in understanding the terrorist attacks which have hit France in 2015, it is crucial that we uncover the international, rather than domestic, factors which make such events possible: from the instability in the Middle East that supplies training and radicalisation to isolated groups of terrorists in Europe, to the trans-national crime networks profiting from supplying heavy arms to the highest bidder.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: demonstration in Paris in January 2015, after the attacks on the Charlie Hebdo magazine. Credit: Eric Salard / Flickr

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