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137 Nuances of terrorism

The jihadists of France in the face of justice

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Témoignages

This study, based on original judicial sources, analyses the profiles and backgrounds of 137 individuals convicted in France in jihadism cases. It shows that these individuals are characterised by a lower level of education and professional integration, a higher degree of poverty, a higher involvement in crime and a closer relationship with the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa than the average French population.

Beyond the figures, a qualitative analysis provides a better understanding of the processes of radicalisation and the switch to terrorism. For example, the roles played by group dynamics, the Internet or prison are detailed.

This study also sheds light on the way in which the jihadist phenomenon weighs on the judicial and prison administrations. The question of recidivism is specifically addressed, particularly through the cases of individuals convicted of terrorist acts who, after serving their sentence, have perpetrated attacks on French soil. This issue is all the more burning since some 60 persons convicted of terrorist acts are expected to be released in the next two years.

Introduction

"There is no standard profile. "There are no more press articles dedicated to jihadist channels containing this sentence. The diversity of profiles involved in these channels was also highlighted by politicians, senior officials and actors involved in the prevention of radicalisation.

From mid-2016, however, the discourse on the absence of a 'standard profile' began to be challenged. On the one hand, it came up against the reality of the attacks on French soil: several terrorists involved in these attacks - such as Chérif K. (attack on Charlie Hebdo),

Amédy C. (assassination of a policewoman and attack on the "hyper cacher"), Larossi A. (killing of Magnanville) or Karim C. (assassination of a policeman on the Champs-Élysées) had common characteristics: birth in France in immigrant families, a chaotic school career, a more or less heavy criminal record, etc.

On the other hand, this discourse has been challenged by two publications that have had a major impact: a book by journalist David Thomson and a study carried out for the Mission de Recherche Droit et Justice⁵. In his book - which won the Albert Londres Prize - Thomson describes poorly educated jihadists from working-class backgrounds, who often grew up in broken families and led a dissolute life before embracing radical Islam. He comments: "This is a cause for mockery among them, which proves the existence of a certain collective awareness of this general low level of academic and religious education. Between them, the insults of "cas soc" or "Segpa" - the adapted teaching sections - of the jihad are permanent. »

As for the authors of the study on the "mechanisms of violent radicalization", while they emphasize "the plurality of paths and the absence of a typical profile of the jihadist actor", they nevertheless point to recurring markers such as "... the lack of a standard profile of the jihadist actor". dysfunctional family pathways", the possession of "cultural capital that is sometimes limited but rarely zero", "the absence of individual experience of discrimination" or "the absence of automatic inclusion in a delinquent trajectory".

These two publications are very instructive and certainly worth reading. However, they suffer from one pitfall: the limited size of the samples studied, which induces a possible sampling bias. David Thomson interviewed about 20 "returnees", while the authors of the above-mentioned study conducted interviews in prison with 13 jihadists mainly from the Al Qaeda movement.

While these authors were careful not to draw general conclusions from such small samples, they did not escape criticism. Jean-François Gayraud, adviser to the national coordinator of intelligence and counter-terrorism, writes for example: "It seems strange to evacuate so quickly the frequency of criminality in these processes of 'radicalisation'. It is true that the research is based on only 13 interviews with Islamists. »

In order to limit sampling bias and to have a broader - and perhaps more accurate - view of the "true face of terrorists", the panel to be analyzed must be extended. The term "the true face of terrorists" is used deliberately, as it refers to the title of the book that introduced one of the leading American experts on terrorism, Marc Sageman.⁹ The term "the true face of terrorists" is also used deliberately, as it refers to the title of the book that introduced one of the leading American experts on terrorism, Marc Sageman.¹⁰ 9 For this book, first published in the United States in 2004, Sageman collected data on 172 individuals and studied their socio-economic status, level of education, religious practice, professional activity and psychiatric history.

Among his sources were trial transcripts. The initial objective of the present study was to draw on the "Sageman method" to produce a quantitative analysis of the French jihadist movement on the basis of trials that have taken place over the last fifteen years. For this purpose, we collected judgments or rulings concerning 137 individuals convicted in

terrorism cases.

On reading these court decisions, it became clear that a purely quantitative treatment did not do justice to the richness of their content. Sometimes very interesting facts appear in a single court decision or are present in several cases, but cannot be quantified. For this reason, the quantitative results presented here will be followed by remarks of a more qualitative nature. Before doing so, a few methodological clarifications are necessary.

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