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AUTHOR(S)

Virginie Andre, S Harris-Hogan

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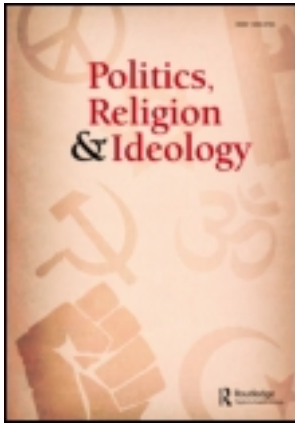
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Virginie Andre^a & Shandon Harris-Hogan^a

^a Global Terrorism Research Centre, Monash University

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Mohamed Merah: From Petty Criminal to Neojihadist

VIRGINIE ANDRE* and SHANDON HARRIS-HOGAN

Global Terrorism Research Centre, Monash University

ABSTRACT *The 2012 killing of three French soldiers and four Jewish civilians by a 23-year-old petty criminal turned neojihadist simultaneously manifested some of contemporary French society's worst fears, namely the radicalisation of its youth and home-grown terrorism. The attacks were the final step in Mohamed Merah's radicalisation, a process influenced during his family, accelerated during his time in prison and nurtured by divides within French society. This article aims to shed light on his radicalisation by examining the social and familial milieux he grew up in and the impact incarceration had on his identity and beliefs. More broadly, this article will demonstrate how in a country where the ultra-Right's hijacking of the Republican notion of secularity or laïcité is leading to an increasingly divided society, neojihadism is providing some Muslim youth with an alternative source of identity.*

During the mid 1990s France experienced a string of deadly bomb attacks perpetrated across the mainland by jihadist militants.¹ These acts of politically motivated violence were carried out by members of the Algerian GIA (Armed Islamic Group), which had only minimal contact with the Islamist community in France.² During the period from 1996 until 2012, France was able to prevent any successful neojihadist³ attacks emerging from within its own community.⁴ However, this dramatically changed when, over a period of 10 days in March 2012, a French national of Algerian origin carried out multiple acts of political violence in the name of neojihadist ideology. Mohamed Merah, then aged just twenty-three, shot seven unarmed people in the head at point blank range. His first three victims, killed in two separate incidents four days apart, were French paratroopers of North African descent who had recently returned from Afghanistan. The third attack killed, at a Jewish school, a rabbi, his two young sons and an eight year-old girl. Police eventually tracked the perpetrator back to his apartment via his mother's computer IP address, which was used to respond to an ad posted

*Email: Virginie.andre@monash.edu

¹Alison Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad: Radical Islam in Europe* (United States: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

²Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds* (United States: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 243.

³Neojihadism can be defined as 'simultaneously a religious, political, paramilitary and terrorist global movement, a subculture, a counterculture, and an ideology that seeks to establish states governed by laws according to the dictates of selectively literal interpretations of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (normally) through enacting violence'. See P. Lentini, 'Antipodal Terrorists? Accounting for Differences in Australian and "Global" Neojihadists' in Richard Devetak and Christopher Hughes (eds) *The Globalisation of Political Violence: Globalisations Shadow* (Australia; Routledge, 2008), p. 181.

⁴In 2000, French and German police prevented a major Al Qaeda bombing plot at the feet of Strasbourg Cathedral during the popular Strasbourg Christmas market.

by the first victim.⁵ In preparation for his capture Merah had turned his apartment into a virtual fortress complete with barricades, stockpiled at least eight guns, including three Colt 45 pistols, a Sten submachine gun and a shotgun (most likely bought illegally on the street) and purchased large amounts of ammunition and ingredients to make petrol bombs.⁶ He was eventually killed jumping from a window after a 30-hour stand-off with police.

The March 2012 attacks manifested one of contemporary French society's worst fears: an act of political violence perpetrated by a Muslim youth radicalised at home in those socio-economically disadvantaged suburban areas where the Muslim population has become segregated from the rest of French society. The killing of military personnel in Montauban and Toulouse were initially thought to be the actions of an Extreme Right anti-Muslim activist, akin to the Norwegian Anders Breivik. However, the subsequent shootings of Jewish children in front of their day school revealed a different reality. The murders were the final act in Mohamed Merah's radicalisation, a process, which began during his childhood and accelerated dramatically while he was incarcerated. This article sheds light on Merah's process of radicalisation from petty criminal to neojihadist by examining the social and familial milieu he grew up in, the effect imprisonment had upon his identity and beliefs and how his subsequent adoption of a fundamentalist ideology led him to commit these acts of politically motivated violence. More broadly, this article demonstrates how neojihadism is providing an alternative source of identity to some young Muslims in a divided society. Indeed, Merah's journey into radicalisation is symptomatic of the malaise severely affecting French Muslim youth, a problem exacerbated by the French Ultra Right's hijacking of the Republican notion of *laïcité*.

A Social Familial Milieu of Delinquency, Violence, Racism and Hatred

In Toulouse, we are all infamously known by the social services and the police. My father, a former drug dealer, did five years of imprisonment; my brothers Kader and Mohamed are thugs, recycled in the most radical Salafism, my sister Souad is a notorious fundamentalist, my mother is a scandalous woman, most of our relatives are delinquents.⁷

This is how Mohamed Merah's eldest brother Abdelghani describes the Merah family.⁸ Mohamed Merah himself was born in Toulouse in October 1988 and appears to have had a troubled childhood.⁹ Unlike his other siblings who were born in Algeria, Merah was born in 'Izards', a suburb of Toulouse with a predominant gypsy community. His parents divorced when he was around five and his father, who was physically abusive towards his two oldest sons, spent most of his time in Algeria where he was illegally importing French goods. He was also later convicted of dealing drugs in France.¹⁰ At the age of

⁵L. Smith-Spark, 'Who was French Gunman Mohammed Merah?', CNN, 23 March 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/21/world/europe/france-shooting-suspect-profile>.

⁶Mohammed Merah and Abdelkader Merah (Shootings in Toulouse, France), *The New York Times*, 4 April 2012, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/mohammed_merah/index.html.

⁷Abdelghani Merah, *Mohamed Merah, Mon Frere Ce Terroriste* (Paris: Calmon-Levy, 2012).

⁸It is important to note that Abdelghani Merah broke away from his family after marrying a non-Muslim woman with Jewish ancestry. Though his writing gives valuable insight into the life of Mohamed Merah it must be acknowledged that his views would likely be impacted by this event.

⁹Merah, op. cit.

¹⁰Ibid.

eight Merah was temporarily placed in care due to neglect by his mother.¹¹ Merah perceived both his parents' separation and his forced placement in State care as parental abandonment, and he expressed his frustrations through violence and delinquency, which resulted in regular suspensions from school.¹² According to a social services' report, Merah had difficulty 'in school. He was however an intelligent child who had capacities to succeed... He had no structured activities, preferring to spend his time in the company of his neighbourhood friends without any adult supervision'.¹³ Merah eventually dropped out of school and began living off the proceeds of petty crime. This lifestyle was encouraged by his mother who celebrated the numerous misconducts committed by her children.¹⁴ Abdelghani recalls how his little brother spent most of his time in the street with his gypsy friends:

It was the city of the Izards that was taking care of his education. He stayed out without anyone caring for him... Mohamed had the same life as the street children. He could manage on his own and based his way of living on the neighbourhood's young gypsies he frequented with morning to evening. Pilferage and mendicancy became his specialisation... Instead of telling him off, my mother would laugh at his mischief.¹⁵

Mohamed Merah was arrested for the first time at age 17, as part of a group of youths who stoned a bus.¹⁶ He proceeded to earn another 17 convictions for various misdemeanours over the following few years.¹⁷ In 2007 Merah was imprisoned for the violent theft of an elderly woman's handbag¹⁸ and sentenced to 20 months incarceration with no opportunity for early release.¹⁹ Significantly, it was while in jail that Merah turned to Salafism; his sister noting that he 'rediscovered Islam... having largely ignored his family faith as a young man'.²⁰

In part due to his heritage, Merah was exposed to radical ideology from a young age. His upbringing coincided with a dramatic upsurge in violence and Salafist ideology in Algeria, which he was exposed to during annual family vacations to a country on the brink of civil war. Merah's relatives in the village of Oued Bezzaz were supporters of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a group which aimed to establish an Islamic state ruled by sharia law. Most were also sympathisers of the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA) and some relatives joined the militant organisation.²¹ Mohamed's father also began adopting an Islamist discourse around 1992. The Merah children were subsequently exposed to violent images. In

¹¹J. Lichfield, 'Scooter Terrorist Mohamed Merah "Was Not a Lone Wolf"', *The Independent*, 4 September 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/scooter-terrorist-mohamed-merah-was-not-a-lonewolf-8102822.html>.

¹²Merah, op. cit.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., English translation by Virginie Andre.

¹⁶H. Alexander, 'Toulouse Shootings: The Making of a French Jihadi Killer with a Double Life', *The Telegraph*, 24 March 2012.

¹⁷O. Moore, 'Mohammed Merah: Petty Criminal, Part-time Jihadist, Polite but a Loner', *The Globe and Mail*, 6 September 2012.

¹⁸*The New York Times*, op. cit.

¹⁹Merah, op. cit.

²⁰Alexander, op. cit.

²¹Merah, op. cit. In 1991, the FIS won a majority of seats in parliament in the first round of elections. The FIS would have won the absolute majority if the military had not cancelled the second round of elections in January 1992. This led to the radicalisation of the FIS, the subsequent creation of the splinter group GIA and the beginning of the Algerian civil war. See Luis Martinez, *La Guerre Civile en Algérie, 1990–1998* (Paris: Karthala, 1999).

1994, Abdelghani and his younger brother Abdelkader witnessed while visiting their relatives during the Algerian civil war:

... Islamic terrorists and security forces taking turns exhibiting the bodies of those they had killed during the night or early in the morning in the village square; one day it was a policeman or a decapitated civilian; the next day it was the body of a terrorist.²²

In addition to being exposed to the extremist discourse of his father, and daily physical abuse, Mohamed was raised in an 'atmosphere of racism and hatred' where the children were taught that 'Arabs are born to hate the Jews'. For instance, when one of the children asked if they could have a Christmas tree, the father forbade it, noting the concept to be 'contrary to Islam'. He went on to explain that his decision was based on the fact that a 'Jew wanting to kill the Prophet hid himself behind a pine tree'.²³ Additionally, during Merah's early childhood his uncle once explained to him that 'Jews should die to the last'.²⁴ Exposure to such comments appears to have normalised anti-Semitism to Merah and planted the seeds for his later acts of violence. Moreover, in 2003 Mohamed's brother Abdelkader stabbed the eldest brother Abdelghani seven times after he refused to leave a girlfriend with Jewish ancestry.²⁵ Abdelghani notes that 'Mohamed was immersed in all this' and later 'the Salafists gathered a bomb already wired to explode'.²⁶

It has been noted that normative support provided by families plays a significant role in sustaining violence.²⁷ Abdelghani blames Mohamed's eventual involvement with neojihadism mostly on the influence of his sister, Souad, and brother, Abdelkader.²⁸ According to a family friend: 'it was progressive in their family. It was Kader [Abdelkader] who was full on in it [radical Salafism]. . . He then played the role of the man. He indoctrinated [Souad] in this. It was a spiral. . . All three were radicalised'.²⁹ Both Souad and Abdelkader actively proselytised their relatives, friends and acquaintances, including Mohamed. Abdelkader also began to reprimand drug dealers and delinquent friends³⁰ and Souad began to radicalise their mother, who would soon applaud violent attacks conducted in the name of Islam.³¹ As early as 2008 Souad Merah was under surveillance as a 'follower of radical Islam' and in June 2011 she was listed as being 'known for her links' to radical Salafists.³² Significantly, following the Mumbai attacks,³³ Souad publicly claimed that she would one day commit a suicide bombing in the Toulouse underground taking her children with her.³⁴ Indeed,

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵J. Lichfield, 'How My Hate-filled Family Spawned Merah the Monster, *the Independent*, 12 November 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/how-my-hatefilled-family-spawned-merah-the-monster-8307341.html>.

²⁶'French Interior Minister Slams Toulouse Gunman Merah's Sister For "Religious And Racial Incitement"', *European Jewish Press*, 13 November 2012, <http://www.ejpress.org/article/63125>.

²⁷M. King, H. Noor and D. M. Taylor, 'Normative Support for Terrorism: The Attitudes and Beliefs of Immediate Relatives of Jema'ah Islamiyah Members', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34:5 (2011), p. 412.

²⁸Lichfield, *op. cit.*

²⁹'Mohamed Merah: Itineraire d'un Terroriste', M6 Television Production, 2012.

³⁰M6, *op. cit.*

³¹Merah, *op. cit.*

³²Lichfield, *op. cit.*

³³In 2008, militants belonging to Pakistani terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba staged an attack across the Indian city of Mumbai killing 164 people and injuring over 300.

³⁴Merah, *op. cit.*

rather than attending 'the school of the French Republic' which 'corrupts Muslim children', Souad's children have been educated from home. According to Abdelghani they are taught a curriculum that praises the heroism of Salafists and normalises violence.³⁵ Souad and Abdelkader also attempted to radicalise Abdelghani's son, exposing him to radical literature and telling him that he should commit a suicide bombing in the Toulouse underground.³⁶ Mohamed also shared a fascination for the morbid with his sister, an interest which developed significantly following his incarceration. He would attend funerals and slip inside morgues to watch dead bodies. Mohamed noted that, to him, 'death was beautiful'.³⁷

Even allowing for the influence of previously held ideas, beliefs and grievances, many individuals initially become involved with radical groups of all ideological persuasions through the influence of personal relationships. A study by the Saudi Ministry of the Interior found that 'nearly two-thirds of those in the sample say they joined Jihad through friends and about a quarter through family'.³⁸ An additional study of more than 500 Guantanamo Bay detainees further concluded that knowing an al Qaeda member was a significantly better predictor of those who may engage in politically motivated violence than belief in ideology.³⁹ This necessity of social interaction helps to explain why to date, there is very little evidence of lone-wolf neojihadists.⁴⁰ Despite initial reports of Merah acting alone it has subsequently become clear that the most significant early influence upon his radicalisation were in fact his social networks, particularly his family.

Mohamed's brother Abdelkader Merah was identified in a 2008 investigation into a Brussels, Belgium-based neojihadist recruitment network. The network was sending Belgian and French militants to Cairo en route to join militants in Iraq, and may also have connected Europeans to neojihadist groups in the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region.⁴¹ Indeed, Mohamed's family and their contacts appear instrumental in facilitating his travels through South Asia.⁴² The period Mohamed spent with his brother in Egypt following his imprisonment appears particularly significant in the development of his international neojihadist connections. Mohamed and Abdelkader were also linked to a militant neojihadist network known as the Toulouse group. The group, led by an imam of Syrian descent, was formed in 2006 with the aim of targeting American interests in France and sending recruits to Iraq.⁴³ The brothers also arranged for their mother to marry the father of Sabri Essid, a member of the group. Essid was detained in Syria while running an al Qaeda safe house with another Frenchman, which facilitated fighters going to Iraq.⁴⁴ Though he was convicted in a French court in 2009 Mohamed remained in contact with him while in prison.⁴⁵

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid. On active fascination with death and jihadism, please see Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

³⁸S. Atran, 'Who Becomes a Terrorist Today?', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2:5 (2008), p. 6.

³⁹M. Abrahms, 'What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy', *International Security*, 32:4 (2008), p. 98.

⁴⁰S. Helfstein, 'Edges of Radicalization: Ideas, Individuals and Networks in Violent Extremism', *Combating Terrorism Centre*, 14 February 2012, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/edges-of-radicalization-ideas-individuals-and-networks-in-violent-extremism>.

⁴¹P. Cruickshank and T. Lister, 'How Did Mohammed Merah Become a Jihadist?', *CNN*, 26 March 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/26/world/europe/france-shooting-suspect>.

⁴²J. Klausen, 'France's Jihadist Shooter was No Lone Wolf', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304636404577299550343286104.html>.

⁴³*The New York Times*, op. cit.

⁴⁴Klausen, op. cit.

⁴⁵P.C. Siegel, 'French Counterterrorism Policy in the Wake of Mohammed Merah's Attack', *CTC Sentinel*, 23 April 2012, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/french-counterterrorism-policy-in-the-wake-of-mohammed-merahs-attack>.

After Prison: ‘Stealing Was No Longer For The Sake Of Stealing But To Please Allah’

My young brother was in terrible need of recognition. He wanted to exist. I’m convinced that Sabri Essid and his followers have in their own way succeeded to fill the several weaknesses that existed in Mohamed’s personality.⁴⁶

According to his elder brother, Mohamed’s radicalisation was significantly accelerated in prison. In a similar situation to his brother Abdelkader, Mohamed came under the influence of radical neojihadists while incarcerated. That Merah’s radicalisation significantly accelerated in prison is not surprising, given the hundreds of inmates convicted of offenses proscribed under preventative French terrorism laws. Based on figures collected by Europol, between 2006 and 2010 even though France recorded zero neojihadi terrorist attacks (including failed or attacks), the government arrested 439 individuals for ‘Islamist’ related activity. During the same period other broadly comparable European countries only detained a fraction of that number. For instance, Belgium arrested only 42 individuals for ‘Islamist’ related activity and Germany and the Netherlands detained just 35 respectively.⁴⁷ Additionally, this large number of inmates are also systematically dispersed across French prisons, meaning they are exposed (albeit to a limited degree) to the general prisoner population.⁴⁸ Evidence suggests that those who act as ‘radicalisers’ among this population do take advantage of the countries ‘poorly run and overcrowded prisons’ and that such conditions ‘not only provide the ‘breeding ground’ for radicalisation but may represent one of its causes’.⁴⁹

According to Philip Jenkins:⁵⁰

The prison experience has become a distressing normal expectation of the life of the poor. The result is to foster already strong forces alienating Muslims, and especially the young from mainstream society, and to foster new forms of solidarity. Increasingly too, those exposed to criminal and prison subcultures make those values and expectations a normal component of youth culture and of street society. Invisible cities develop their own laws, their own ethics, their own governments.

It can be argued that while in prison neojihadism provided Mohamed with a support network, a moral code, a new language of resistance and an identity. During his incarceration Merah adopted a new rhetoric and began to grow his hair and beard in the Salafist style.⁵¹ To him the Republic had become a Republic of infidels. According to his elder brother, Merah’s delinquent behaviour was given new meaning by the Salafi’s in prison. Abdelghani noted that Mohamed no longer saw stealing as a behaviour designed to enrich himself, but perceived the behaviour as a way to ‘to please Allah and serve the cause by dispossessing the infidels’.⁵² From a distorted religious point of view theft become legal if it served the cause of Allah

⁴⁶Merah, op. cit.

⁴⁷European Police Office, ‘Europol 2011: EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report’, 2011, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/te-sat2011.pdf>, p. 18.

⁴⁸The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries* (London: Kings College, 2010), p. 18.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 30.

⁵⁰Philip Jenkins, *God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 155.

⁵¹Merah, op. cit.

⁵²Ibid.

or if it was gained as spoils of war and used to help to fight the infidel.⁵³ From a petty criminal, Mohamed Merah began transforming into a violent neojihadist.

French sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar notes that within France, Islam is increasingly becoming 'the religion of the repressed'.⁵⁴ Olivier Roy takes this argument a step further contending that: 'Islam has replaced Marxism as the ideology of contestation; when the Left collapsed, the Islamists stepped in'.⁵⁵ In fact, it has become the ideology of the dispossessed. Merah is far from being the only individual within France who turned to this ideology of contestation. In 1995, another French Algerian youth, Khaled Kelkal, turned to Islam to express his rejection of French society.⁵⁶ Feeling excluded by what he perceived as French society's stigmatisation and racism he joined the GIA.⁵⁷ While acknowledging the country's political deficiencies Gilles Kepel notes that the most serious radicalising influence within French society remains the prison system:

The traditional networks of Corsican gangs and others, which controlled the penitentiary world. . . is now marginalised and it is the 'emirs' who now impose their authorities on lost individuals. These are individuals who are decultured. They neither have a French culture nor a North African culture; they are in between. They don't know where they live anymore. Salafism is very restrictive. It tells you how to shape your personality, how to dress. . . something very strong that gives an immediate identity to youths who are outside of any positive system with which they could identify. They will turn into heroism the stigmatisation they feel they are victims of.⁵⁸

Khosrokhavar notes that such 'emirs' not only play a role in spreading ideology in prison but also provoke feelings of admiration among North African youth as they symbolise courage in the fight against western imperialism.⁵⁹ He observed that young North African prisoners draw an immediate parallel between their treatment within French society and the Palestinian plight, and therefore associate closely with incarcerated Muslim radicals.⁶⁰ Roy contends these men are part of 'a lost generation, unmoored from traditional societies and cultures, frustrated by a Western society that does not meet their expectations'.⁶¹ According to Neumann, for such individuals joining an Islamic group, rather than the gangs that traditionally operate in prison, gives them a unique sense of strength and superiority; this new-found identity in turn makes them even more vociferous in the defiance of the rules and regulations to which they are subject.⁶² Given Merah's upbringing and sympathies, it is easy to understand his attraction to the ideology of such radicals while in prison.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Quand Al Qaeda Parle: Témoignages Derrière Les Barreaux* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 2006), pp. 52–53.

⁵⁵Cited in C. Smith, 'Europe's Muslims May Be Headed Where the Marxists Went Before', *The New York Times*, 26 December 2004.

⁵⁶For an understanding of Kelkal's pathway within the French Algerian context, see Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁵⁷James Beckford, Daniele Joly and Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Les Musulmans en Prison en Grande Bretagne et en France, Atelier de Recherche Sociologique* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2005), p. 273.

⁵⁸Interview with Gilles Kepel in special television report 'Mohamed Merah: Itineraire d'un Terroriste', M6, 2012.

⁵⁹James Beckford et al., op. cit., p. 175.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 175.

⁶¹O. Roy, 'Islamic Terrorist Radicalisation in Europe', in Samir Amghar, Amir Boubekeur and Michael Emerson (eds) *European Islam: Challenges for Public Policy and Society* (Brussels: CEPS, 2007), p. 55.

⁶²Peter Neumann, *Joining Al-Qaeda: Jihadist Recruitment in Europe, Adelphi Papers* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 26–27.

Merah emerged from prison in 2009 almost fully radicalised, and openly proclaimed his fascination for violent jihad.⁶³ A friend of the Merah family recalls that ‘he didn’t say “I” anymore but “us”’. He thought ‘the Muslim brothers. . . would kill everyone, all the militaries of France and then all the Jews and France would become a country, a Muslim state’.⁶⁴ Merah began to repeat that ‘Muslims would conquer the world’ and French military personnel began to be perceived by him as legitimate targets. Each time he heard of a French soldier being killed in Afghanistan, Merah would cheer and cry ‘God is with us’.⁶⁵ Merah also attended secret religious classes taught in apartments by self-proclaimed ideologues, and regularly consulted with a French Syrian Salafist who had direct ties to Sabri Essid. He also became increasingly interested in public political and social debates, particularly on issues that dealt with Islam and Muslims.⁶⁶

In Search of the ‘Real Brothers’

In the year following his release from prison Merah traveled extensively in search of ‘the real Muslims and to learn the real Islam’.⁶⁷ Neumann notes that once released some radicalised inmates ‘will become “seekers” who will try to establish a connection with the movement on their own’ or alternatively others may have established links to facilitators who ‘may facilitate the integration into the Islamist militant structures after their release’.⁶⁸ Merah’s contacts to radicals overseas appear to have been facilitated by the Toulouse group, notably through Abdelkader and Essid. After his release Merah spent time with his brother Abdelkader in Egypt, where he was studying at a Koranic school. He also travelled to Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and even Israel, where he was briefly detained by police.⁶⁹ Significantly, in 2010 Merah entered Afghanistan, via Tajikistan. A short time later he was detained at a roadblock in Kandahar and turned over to American forces. After being placed on a US ‘no-fly’ list Merah was deported back to France. Despite this setback Merah was able to return to Northwest Pakistan in 2011.⁷⁰ He told police later that he was trained by al Qaeda in Waziristan during this period, and that the ‘brothers in Pakistan’ supplied him with funds for his attacks.⁷¹ Indeed, during his final stand Merah boasted that he was acting under instruction from al Qaeda. However, the only posthumous claim of responsibility for the attacks came from central Asian group Jund al Khilafah (JaK).⁷²

Although the Amir of JaK, Moez Garsallaoui, was a contact of Merah⁷³ an attack in France would be a completely new tactic for the group, which has no known track record of attracting Western operatives. Additionally, being predominantly based in the North Caucasus, JaK’s presence in the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region is likely to be small. However, it is possible they have become integrated with a larger group like the IMU (the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), which has close ties to al Qaeda and

⁶³Merah, op. cit.

⁶⁴M6, op. cit.

⁶⁵Merah, op. cit.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷M6, op. cit.

⁶⁸Neumann, op. cit. p. 26.

⁶⁹Cruikshank and Lister, op. cit.

⁷⁰Klausen, op. cit.

⁷¹Cruikshank and Lister, op. cit.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³J. Zenn, ‘Militants Threaten to Return to Central Asia after NATO’s Withdrawal from Afghanistan’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10:6, 14 January 2013.

has been implicated in several plots to attack Europe.⁷⁴ Merah's attack does also fit with modern al Qaeda strategy. In June 2011, al Qaeda's media production arm released a video urging sympathisers to attack western targets with firearms and *Inspire* magazine has also repeatedly urged such undertakings. A document found on an alleged Austrian al Qaeda operative (believed to be written by a senior al Qaeda figure), recommended that foreign fighters should be trained quickly and sent back to their home countries to enhance the group's ability to target the west regularly.⁷⁵ However, whether Merah was acting under directions from al Qaeda or an affiliated group, or simply in the name of the ideology, remains unclear.

It also appears as though his siblings may have known about Mohamed's specific intentions and actively encouraged his behaviour. Souad provided money, mobile phones and Internet addresses to Mohamed in the months before the attacks⁷⁶ and noted afterwards that: 'Mohamed had the courage to act. I am proud, proud, proud... Jews, and all those who massacre Muslims, I detest them'.⁷⁷ Abdelkader was also with Mohamed when he stole the scooter used in the drive-by shootings and the two men dined together the night before the attack on the Jewish school.⁷⁸ Indeed, Abdelkader has been detained since the attacks and is under investigation for complicity in the murders.⁷⁹ Notably, police found explosives in Abdelkader's car when he was arrested.⁸⁰ The police also detained Zoulikha Aziri, the mother of Mohamed, and Yamina Mesbah, Abdelkader Merah's wife. However, both women were released without being charged.⁸¹ Interestingly, Merah also divorced his wife just prior to the first attack⁸² and though he publicly espoused extremist rhetoric he was witnessed at a *rai*⁸³ nightclub around the time of the first shooting.⁸⁴

In addition to the time spent in the company of radicals at home and overseas there were a number of indicators of Merah's radicalisation immediately prior to the first attack. He spent significant amounts time on the Internet surfing neojihadist websites, and participating in associated forums. In 2010, he also made a short film praising neojihadist ideology.⁸⁵ Merah was also known to have extensively sought out and viewed violent jihadist videos online.⁸⁶ Watching such material would likely have increased his desensitisation to violence while simultaneously reinforcing his ideological worldview. Several years prior to the attack Merah had forced a young boy from his local neighbourhood to watch beheading videos with him. Upon discovering that the boy's mother had complained to police, Merah travelled to the family's house in full military clothes and proceeded to wave a sword around while chanting 'Al Qaeda! Al Qaeda!'⁸⁷ However, towards the end of 2011 Merah became more discreet in his behaviour. After reading the works of Abu Musab al-Suri online, notably the *Global Islamic Resistance Call*, he

⁷⁴Cruikshank and Lister, op. cit.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Lichfield, op. cit.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Alexander, op. cit.

⁷⁹Lichfield, op. cit.

⁸⁰D. Gardham, 'British Links to Toulouse Terrorist', *The Telegraph*, 23 March 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/9163544/British-links-to-Toulouse-terrorist.html>.

⁸¹*The New York Times*, op. cit.

⁸²*The New York Times*, op. cit.

⁸³*Rai* is a type of contemporary Algerian music mixing traditional Arab vocals and popular western music.

⁸⁴Moore, op. cit.

⁸⁵Merah, op. cit.

⁸⁶Smith-Spark, op. cit.

⁸⁷Alexander, op. cit.

began to employ counter-surveillance strategies such as shaving his beard and avoiding Islamic dress.⁸⁸ He also became conscious of possible phone surveillance and tried to avoid public spaces where he may have been monitored.⁸⁹ Instructions were also found on his brother's portable hard-drive including 'how to dress for the jihad', 'what to do when you're being followed' and 'how to deceive people in order to integrate their community'.⁹⁰ This shift in behaviour demonstrates Merah's killings to have been carefully and consciously thought out, planned and executed actions.

Paul Wilkinson noted that 'it is intrinsic to the very activity of terrorism that a form of media, however crude, is utilised as an instrument to disseminate the messages of threat and intimidation'.⁹¹ Mohamed Merah went to significant lengths to gain notoriety and publicity for his attacks. Video footage of the killings, filmed by Mohamed himself, was sent to *Al-Jazeera* on the day before he was killed. The video had been edited and manipulated with religious songs and recitations of Koranic verses laid over the footage.⁹² Kepel contends that neojihadists such as Merah who advocate a method not an organisation, act out individually against proximity targets and then post the images on the Internet in an attempt to create emulators.⁹³ Merah was also an active user of Twitter and YouTube and his last tweets, sent during the siege, were signed 'Mohamed Merah-Forsane Alizza'.⁹⁴ Forsane Alizza or 'Knights of Glory' is a radical Salafist group established in France in 2010. It appears to be part of a loosely connected network of European Islamists and according to the group's website its main objective is to support the Mujahideen throughout the world.⁹⁵ The group has no formal structure yet counts between 30 and 100 official members and likely many more sympathisers.⁹⁶ Both Mohamed and his brother were known to the French DCRI, the domestic intelligence agency, as members of Forsane Alizza.⁹⁷ Significantly, the group lists its principal targets as, 'the French military, which is portrayed as destroying Muslim lands as part of a Western conspiracy to destroy Islam' and 'Jews, Jewish institutions, and Israel, which are blamed for the global persecution of Muslims'.⁹⁸ Considering the targets chosen by Merah it would appear that the group's ideology had a significant influence on his actions.

Mohamed Merah: A Backlash to *Laïcité*?

The Salafist's know how to recuperate the youths who are fragile, channel their anger and give a meaning to the lives of a few lost souls like Mohamed, who are in search of adventure and adrenaline.⁹⁹

⁸⁸For a discussion on the Abu Musab al-Suri's works and ideology, see B. Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁸⁹M6, op. cit.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹P. Wilkinson, 'Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9:2 (2007), p. 53.

⁹²*The New York Times*, op. cit.

⁹³Gilles Kepel, *Terreur et Martyre* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), pp. 189–190.

⁹⁴Klausen, op. cit.

⁹⁵International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 'Forsane Alizza: Background Brief', <http://www.ict.org.il/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=99fFLwpcQLQ%3D&tabid=320>.

⁹⁶P. Neumann et al., 'ICSR Insight: Toulouse Gunman's Link to UK Extremists', *Insights*, 21 March 2012.

⁹⁷Gardham, op. cit.

⁹⁸P. Neumann et al., op. cit.

⁹⁹Merah, op. cit.

While the case of Mohamed Merah clearly demonstrates the impact of social networks and prison on the radicalisation process, the killings in Montauban and Toulouse also expose larger issues which exist within French society. This is clearly illustrated in the question of French *laïcité* and how its hard interpretation is pushing a minority of Muslims towards extremism. In the years prior to Merah's attacks, there was continual public debate around issues such as the *hijab*, the *burqa* and street prayers as well as *laïcité*, contributing to a stigmatisation of Islam and Muslims within French politics and society.¹⁰⁰ Merah was particularly sensitive to this atmosphere, his brother noting that the anti-Muslim discourse of Marine Le Pen and debates regarding street prayers infuriated Merah.¹⁰¹ Controversial policies regarding the behaviour and dress of Muslims in French society, and the stigmatisation of the community as a whole, likely accelerated Merah's radicalisation and commitment to violent action.

According to French sociologist Jean Baubérot, the historical *laïcité* established by the law of 1905 initiated an emancipation movement, determined to free the state from the dominion of religion and its institution, and to better establish equality, liberty and ultimately religious freedom and freedom of conscience, especially with respect to protestant and Jewish minorities.¹⁰² The consequence of the movement was the expulsion of religion from the political sphere into civil society. However, the concept of French *laïcité*, 'whereby the state expels the religious life beyond a border that the state itself had defined by law', differs from the concept of secularisation where 'a society emancipates itself from a sense of the sacred that it does not necessarily deny'.¹⁰³ In other words, *laïcité* should be viewed 'as the common principle of all laws that have regulated the place of religion in the French public sphere since the assertion of the principle of the separation of the church and state'.¹⁰⁴ Religion, consequently, became confined to the private sphere, in ways that did not accord fully with the spirit of the law of 1905, which aimed to increase freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and the possibility of its external expressions in the public sphere.¹⁰⁵ Paradoxically, this resulted in the increased empowering of the state over the individual. Over the last 20 years, an ideological interpretation of *laïcité* has become predominant in France, which sees a shift in the original meaning towards a hard *laïcité*. This interpretation started with the debate around the wearing of *hijab* in schools, which brought to the forefront the question of Islam and its place in French society. Baubérot calls this interpretation of *laïcité* by the political Right and the Front national '*lepenised laïcité*',¹⁰⁶ a concept instrumentalised as a weapon to fight Islamic communitarianism. French sociologist Valentine Zuber notes the increasing multicultural transformation of French society through the influx of non-Christian immigrants who remain attached to their religious rites are in conflict with the customs of the Republic life, and often do not feel at home in the *laïcité*'s radical separation between private and public spheres.¹⁰⁷ As result, Khosrokhavar contends that:

¹⁰⁰See Natalie Doyle, this issue.

¹⁰¹Merah, op. cit.

¹⁰²Jean Baubérot, *La Laïcité Falsifiée* (La Découverte: Paris, 2012).

¹⁰³O. Roy, *Laïcité Face à l'Islam* (Paris: Stock, 2005); translation – Georges Holoch, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 13.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Baubérot, op. cit.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷V. Zuber, 'La Commission Stasi et Les Paradoxes de la Laïcité Française' in Jean Baubérot (ed.) *La Laïcité à l'Épreuve: Religions et Libertés Dans Le Monde* (Paris: Universalis, 2004).

The refusal of intermediate communities and the will to replicate the hard version of *laïcité* in the world of the twenty-first century, very different to that of the nineteenth, has meant that we are helpless in the face of ultra fundamentalist Islam. Even if it only concerns a few thousand people (with a few tens of thousands of sympathisers), no other version of Islam is able to thwart the attraction that it exerts over the socially excluded.¹⁰⁸

Ultimately, this contemporary manifestation leaves the socially excluded within French society vulnerable to extremist interpretations of religion, particularly the stigmatised Muslim community.

Recent research has revealed suburbs within French cities where law, and the republican social pact, no longer function as intended.¹⁰⁹ The study determined that within these communities many individuals could no longer find work, did not feel represented politically and blamed a racist and xenophobic French State and society for their situation.¹¹⁰ Kepel observes that these individuals fall into a communitarian logic whereby individuals shut off from society at large, live among themselves in their own community and their identity becomes centred on religion.¹¹¹ Merah was raised in just such a community. In some instances, these closed societies can foster extreme identities and interpretations of religion. Consequently:

‘Islamisation’ in disadvantaged French suburbs operates as much as a religion substituting for non-existent communities, and that is why this process is most widespread in the *banlieues*.¹¹² By becoming active Muslims, these socially disaffected people are seeking some form of community that could compensate for the lack of any social group capable of giving them a sense of dignity and identity within a society where they count for very little.¹¹³

In France, there is an Islam of the youth, predicated on a complex generational rupture, a quest for authenticity and affirmation of identity and protestation.¹¹⁴ Perceived attacks on the religion or identity of the community, such as the recent ideological debate regarding Muslims and *laïcité*, only serves to strengthen the youths’ sense of disaffection and radicalise their views. In Merah’s case, anti-Muslim attacks in the disguise of *laïcité* certainly reaffirmed his ideology of contestation and led to its violent expression. Roy notes that the hard *laïcité* ‘reinforces religious identities rather than allowing them to dissolve in more diversified practices and identities’.¹¹⁵ As *laïcité* relays the religious to the private sphere, the state has no control over a deterritorialised, decultured and global fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.¹¹⁶ By reconstructing the division between the public and private spheres, hard

¹⁰⁸F. Khosrokhavar, ‘Ce Que La Loi Sur La Burqa Nous Voile’, *Le Monde*, 1 August 2009, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2009/07/31/ce-que-la-loi-sur-la-burqa-nous-voile-par-farhadkhosrokhavar_1224664_3232.html.

¹⁰⁹Gilles Kepel, *Quatre Vingt Treize* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012). See also Gilles Kepel, *Les Banlieues de l’Islam* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²The term ‘banlieue’ refers to the housing complexes built by government on the outskirts of the major cities, in the suburbs.

¹¹³James Beckford et al., op. cit. p. 116.

¹¹⁴Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L’Islam Des Jeunes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).

¹¹⁵Roy, ‘Secularism Confronts Islam’, op. cit., p. 99.

¹¹⁶Olivier Roy, *L’Islam Mondialisé* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

laïcité is allowing extremism to flourish among vulnerable youth who find their identity marker in Islam.

The radicalisation of Mohamed Merah is symptomatic of a wider French identity crisis, if not a European crisis of illiberalism.¹¹⁷ The backlash of hard *laïcité* means that individuals, such as Merah, see the field of their individual religious freedom considerably reduced under the increasing pressure of illiberal French laws (e.g., the laws restricting the wearing of the *hijab* and the *burqa*). This results in individuals identifying with narrow identities and fundamentalist interpretations of religion that supersede the French national identity. Hard *laïcité* perversely encourages communitarian identities that can sustain extremists such as Merah. The difficult challenge now facing France is to realise the changing face of French society, and to promote a genuinely liberal understanding of its neutrality with respect to religious diversity. We can only hope that Merah's murderous path will not serve as a model for French youths looking for ways to express their discontentment with a society they feel in conflict with.¹¹⁸

Notes on Contributors

Virginie Andre is a research fellow with the Global Terrorism Research Centre at Monash University and graduate of the Catholic University of Louvain. Related areas of research are globalisation and conflict transformation, ethno-nationalism and terrorism, youth radicalisation and social media. Before coming to Monash University, she was programme officer for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and worked for the Asia–Europe Foundation. Her latest publications are 'From Colonialist to Infidel: Framing the Enemy in Southern Thailand's "Cosmic War"' (in Joseph Camilleri and Sven Schottnann (eds) *Culture, Religion and Conflict in Muslim Southeast Asia: Negotiating Tense Pluralisms*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013) and "'Neojihadism" and YouTube: Patani Militant Propaganda Dissemination and Radicalization' (*Asian Security*, 8:1, 2012).

Shandon Harris-Hogan is a researcher at the Global Terrorism Research Centre and a graduate of Monash University's Master of International Relations programme. He is currently engaged in a number of projects with partner agencies including Victoria Police, Federal Attorney-General's Department and the Australian Research Council. Shandon's work surrounds the radicalisation process. More specifically, this research involves the use of social network analysis to track neojihadist activity and individuals' links to the global movement. Other areas of expertise include analysis of the structure of terrorist networks and the logic of terrorist tactics and targeting. His work can be found in a number of leading academic journals and he is also a regular media commentator on issues regarding radicalisation and political violence.

¹¹⁷See N. Doyle, 'Lessons From France: Popularist Anxiety And Veiled Fears of Islam', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 22:4 (2011), pp. 475–489.

¹¹⁸One example of this risk was demonstrated during a BBC interview in April 2013. Medecins Sans Frontieres' co-founder Jacques Beres recounts how he met and treated in Syria two young French Muslim brothers who had been injured during the conflict. One of the two brothers told him he had been inspired by Mohamed Merah: 'He told me that the real hero is Mohammed Merah, that he was an example to follow'. Cited in D. Crawford, 'From Belgian School to Syrian Battleground', *BBC*, 24 April 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22277462> (accessed 7 May 2013).