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TERRORISM IN FRANCE : OVERVIEW OF THE FRENCH EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN 2023

The year 2023 showed a series of developments within the various extremist movements present in France. Despite the end of the pandemic, there is an overall upward trend in propaganda activity and violent action. Taking advantage of the growing polarization of opinion in French society, the various movements have exploited a number of crises, whether local, as in Sainte-Soline, Saint-Brévin or Annecy, national, such as the pension reform or the July riots, or international, notably linked to the Israeli Palestinian or Russian-Ukrainian conflicts. There is thus a resurgence of terrorist activity in France, but the situation differs for the three main threats - the jihadist (I), ultra-left (II) and ultra-right (III) movements - and this just a few months away from the organization of the 2024 Olympic Games.

I) Jihadism: renewed activity and rising number of victims

The jihadist movement has increased its activity and remains the main terrorist threat in France. Two jihadist attacks took place on French soil, in Arras and Paris, killing two people and injuring five. The first attack took place on October 13th 2023, in Arras (Pas-de-Calais). At around 11 a.m., Mohammed Mougouchov, a 20-year-old Russian of Ingush origin, appeared in front of the Gambetta-Carnot school complex. Armed with two knives, he stabbed French teacher Dominique Bernard to death and wounded a physical education teacher as they tried to prevent him from entering the school¹. Once inside the school, the jihadist wounded two other people who opposed him in the courtyard. Law enforcement officers arrived on the scene 4 minutes after the emergency call, and arrested him using a taser². His brother, aged 17, was then arrested outside another school in the town, not carrying any weapon³ on him at the time of his arrest. Investigators discovered a recording in which the perpetrator pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The message, which was not broadcast, describes the terrorist's motives in the following terms: "*Oh French, people of cowardice and miscreants. I was in your schools for years and years, I lived among you for years and years, for free. [...] You taught me about democracy and human rights, and you pushed me into hell.*"⁴. Mougouchov was born in Malgobek (Ingushetia, Russia) in 2003 and arrived in France in 2008⁵. He was S-carded and his house was searched by agents of the Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure (DGSI) on the eve of his arrival in France which may have precipitated the attack. The attack took

1 Arras attack: shock at the death of Professor Dominique Bernard [online]. *L'Express*, October 15, 2023. Available at : <https://www.lexpress.fr/societe/attentat-darras-effroi-apres-la-mort-du-professeur-dominique-bernard-22322ALNMRDLZMFETTLXXZ637A/>

2 Minute by minute, account of the Arras high school attack [October 14, 2023] [podcast]. In: *Radio France* [3']. Available at : <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/le-zoom-de-la-redaction/le-zoom-du-samedi-14-octobre-2023-6016425>

3 LE PARISIEN. Knife attack in Arras: suspect's brother extracted from cell and taken into custody [online]. *Le Parisien*, October 13, 2023. Available at : <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/direct-attaque-au-couteau-a-arras-un-enseignant-tue-deux-blesses-graves-13-10-2023-DMOX65PZTVHV7JZA6EC326372Q.php>

4 SEELow, Soren. Indicted, the author of the Arras attack was driven by a "hatred of France", of democracy and of school: "You pushed me towards hell " [online]. *Le Monde*, October 17, 2023. Available at : https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2023/10/17/l-auteur-de-l-attentat-d-arras-etait-mu-par-une-haine-de-la-france-de-la-democratie-et-de-l-ecole-vous-m-avez-pousse-vers-l-enfer_6195022_3224.html

5 His older brother, Mosvar, has already been convicted of several terrorism-related offenses, including a false bomb threat at Gare de Lyon on November 13, 2015, an attempted departure for Syria in 2017 via Germany, as well as contacts with jihadists seeking to attack suburban police stations and/or the Élysée Palace in 2019, and for terrorism apology in 2023.

place three days before the commemoration of the three-year anniversary of the murder of history teacher Samuel Paty, and the "Day of Jihad" decreed by Khaled Mechaal, one of the leaders of Hamas, which may also have been a factor in Mougoushkov's act⁶. The second attack took place on December 2, on and near the Bir Hakeim bridge (Paris, 15e and 16e districts). Armand Rajbpour-Miyandoab, a French jihadist of Iranian origin, stabbed a group of tourists on the bridge at around 9:15pm, shouting "Allah Akbar". One of them, Collin Christian Bröter, a 23 year old German-Filipino, was killed. As the terrorist assaulted his victim's girlfriend, he was driven away by a cab driver⁷. He then struck a British tourist with a hammer, before fleeing again. Once surrounded by police officers, he claimed to be carrying an explosive device, before being arrested⁸. The investigation reveals that he also recorded a message in Arabic before the attack, broadcast on X (ex-Twitter), in which he declares his allegiance "to the Commander of the Believers and Caliph of the Muslims [of the Islamic State], the Mujahid Sheikh Abu Hafis al-Hashmi al-Qurachi" and threatens "impure unbelievers", stating that "the supporters of the caliphate are in the heart of your home. We have not forgotten and Allah has not forgotten your crimes against Muslims [...]"⁹. Rajbpour-Miyandoab, aged 26, was S-carded and had already been convicted for terrorism. He converted in 2015, was arrested for the first time in July 2016, while he was planning a knife attack in the La Défense district. He was then linked to Maximilien Thibault, a French jihadist killed by the Iraqi army in Syria, but also to Larossi Abballa, the murderer of two police officers in Magnanville (Yvelines) in June 2016, Adel Kermiche, responsible for the attack on the church in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray (Seine-Maritime) and Aboullakh Anzorov, who beheaded Samuel Paty in October 2020¹⁰. Sentenced in 2018 to five years in prison, he was released in 2020. Rajbpour-Miyandoab suffers from psychiatric disorders and is subject to obligated to follow a psychiatric treatment, which was interrupted in March 2022, then reinstated in September, before being interrupted again in April 2023, following an opinion from the doctor and positive observations from the psychologist of the Penitentiary Integration and Probation Services¹¹. In addition to these two attacks, there was a deliberate bus accident and the assault of two gendarmes on May 6 and 7 near Mornas (Vaucluse), by a 32-year-old Tunisian. During the attack on the gendarmes, he brandished two knives while shouting "Allah Akbar" and was carrying religious literature. The attack has not been classified as terrorist by the national anti-terrorist prosecutor's office (PNAT), despite a number of factors suggesting that it could have been¹². Beyond these attacks, jihadist arrests have multiplied in France, in June in Alpes-de-Haute-Provence and Seine-Saint-Denis¹³, and also in September in Indre-et-Loire¹⁴, Alpes-Maritimes¹⁵ as well as in Paris¹⁶. In October, following the Hamas attacks in Israel, a series of arrests took place in Haut-Rhin¹⁷, in Bas-Rhin¹⁸, in Seine-et-Marne¹⁹ and in Seine-Maritime²⁰.

- 6 MARIANNE. "Jihad Day" and the Arras attack: "We must remain cautious about the link between these events" [online]. *Marianne*, December 13, 2023. Available at : <https://www.marianne.net/societe/terrorisme/jour-du-djihad-et-enseignant-poignarde-a-arras-il-faut-rester-prudent-sur-le-lien-entre-ces-evenements>
- 7 Anti-terrorism prosecutor holds press conference after Paris knife attack [December 3, 2023] [video] In : *Le Figaro TV* [11'20"]. Available at : <https://video.lefigaro.fr/figaro/video/test-341/>
- 8 Paris attack: the testimony of the police officers who neutralized the assailant [December 6, 2023 at 3:57 pm] [video]. Reported by Guillaume Chièze, cSylvain Rolland, Éric Vaillant and Quentin Danjou. In: *TF1 INFO* [2'31"]. Available at : <https://www.tf1info.fr/justice-faits-divers/exclusif-video-tf1-attentat-attaque-au-couteau-a-paris-pres-de-la-tour-eiffel-deux-policiers-qui-ont-neutralise-l-assailant-temoignement-2278605.html>
- 9 BFMTV. Deadly attack in Paris: claim spread on social networks [online]. *BFMTV*, December 3, 2023. Available at : https://www.bfmtv.com/paris/attaque-mortelle-a-paris-une-video-de-revendication-diffusee-sur-les-reseaux-sociaux_AV-202312030134.html
- 10 RIBAUD, Thomas. From Maximilien Thibault to the assassin of Samuel Paty: the "jihadosphere" of the author of the attack in Paris [online]. *Marianne*, December 4, 2023. Available at : <https://www.marianne.net/societe/de-maximilien-thibault-a-l-assassin-de-samuel-paty-la-djihadosphere-de-l-auteur-de-l-attaque-a-paris>
- 11 FOURNIER, Catherine. Attack near the Eiffel Tower: can we speak of a "failure" in the psychiatric follow-up of the suspect, as Gérald Darmanin asserts? [online]. *France Info*, December 4, 2023. Available at : https://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/attaque-au-couteau-a-paris/attentat-pres-de-la-tour-eiffel-peut-on-parler-de-rationnel-dans-le-suivi-psychiatrique-du-suspect-comme-l-affirme-gerald-darmanin_6223074.html
- 12 MISTRETTA, Alexandre. What we know about the attack on gendarmes in Mornas by a man suspected of being involved in a bus accident [online]. *France 3 Régions Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur*, May 9, 2023. Available at : <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur/vaucluse/ce-que-l-on-sait-sur-l-attaque-de-gendarmes-a-mornas-par-un-homme-suspecte-d-etre-implique-dans-un-accident-de-bus-2769198.html>
- 13 LE FIGARO with AFP. Two radicalized men, suspected of planning violent actions, indicted in Paris [online]. *Le Figaro*, June 20, 2023. Available at : <https://www.lefigaro.fr/faits-divers/deux-hommes-radicalises-soupconnes-de-projeter-des-actions-violentes-mis-en-examen-a-paris-20230620>
- 14 Indre-et-Loire: three radicalized minors suspected of violent plans indicted [online]. *La Nouvelle République*, 15 septembre 2023. Disponible sur : <https://www.lanouvellerepublique.fr/indre-et-loire/commune/joue-les-tours/indre-et-loire-trois-mineurs-radicalises-soupconnes-de-projets-violents-mis-en-examen>
- 15 OLIVIER, Claudia, FORICHER, Alicia. Le Cannet: the man suspected of preparing a violent act indicted for "terrorist criminal association" [online]. *BFM Côte d'Azur*, September 26, 2023. Available at : https://www.bfmtv.com/cote-d-azur/nice-l-homme-soupconne-de-preparer-un-acte-violent-mis-en-examen-pour-association-de-malfaitteurs-terroriste_AN-202309260787.html
- 16 F.B. with AFP. Suspicions of planning violent actions: a young man indicted in Paris [online]. *BFM Île-de-France*, September 30, 2023. Available at : https://www.bfmtv.com/paris/soupons-de-projet-d-actions-violentes-un-jeune-homme-mis-en-examen-a-paris_AD-202309300291.html
- 17 GUZZO, Paola. Mulhouse: suspected of having planned an attack, an 18-year-old teenager indicted [online]. *France Bleu*, October 22, 2023. Available at : <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/faits-divers-justice/mulhouse-soupconne-d-avoir-envisage-un-attentat-un-adolescent-de-18-ans-mis-en-examen-3641904>
- 18 ROUSSEAU, Céline. A teenager arrested with a knife near the Strasbourg synagogue [online]. *France Bleu*, October 20, 2023. Available at : <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/faits-divers-justice/un-adolescent-arrete-avec-un-couteau-pres-de-la-synagogue-de-strasbourg-3857873>
- 19 ACTU17. They wanted to attack "disbelievers": an attack plan foiled by the DGSJ [online]. *Actu 17*, October 20, 2023. Available at : <https://actu17.fr/faits-divers/ils-voulaient-sen-prendre-aux-mecreants-un-projet-dattentat-dejoue-par-la-dgsi.html>
- 20 MIDI LIBRE. A student suspected of radicalization arrested: he brought materials to make explosives to high school [online]. *Midi Libre*, October 21, 2023. Available at : <https://www.midilibre.fr/2023/10/21/un-eleve-suspecte-de-radicalisation-interpelle-il-amenait-de-quoi-fabriquer-des-explosifs-au-lycee-11534582.php>

The year 2023 saw a resurgence of jihadist activity on French soil²¹. While the number of attacks was identical to that of 2022, (two), the 2023 attacks took place in the public space and their toll (2 dead, 5 injured) was higher²². The profiles of the jihadists show a certain rejuvenation of the perpetrators, with a higher number of minors arrested. Because of their limited operational skills, they chose rudimentary *modus operandi*, such as bladed weapon attacks, which are now predominant. The typology of targets remains similar to previous years, with attacks aimed indiscriminately at the French population, although a succession of terrorist projects against the Jewish community have been prevented since October 7. The events in Israel have indeed catalyzed the jihadist threat on French soil and motivated a number of acts or preparations for attacks, and will probably continue to do so next year. For 2024, several factors remain worrying. Four hundred and eighty six convicted jihadists have been released from the correctional system²³. The Bir Hakeim bridge attack in Paris demonstrated the dangerous nature of these veterans of jihad, and the networks they were able to set up while in prison. Evolving *modus operandi* and a potential return to terrorist shootings also represent a growing risk²⁴ due to the weapon trafficking from Ukraine, as demonstrated by the Brussels attack in which an assault rifle from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was used.²⁵

II) Ultra-left: maintaining activity and diversifying targets

The ultra-left movement remained active in France, claiming 159 violent actions²⁶ this year. Their aim is to pursue a strategy of "*sabotage*" aimed at destroying and disabling "*logistical, energy and technological infrastructures*". By avoiding violent assault, except against law enforcement officers, ultra-left activists are trying to keep media coverage to a minimum. In 2023, 57 departments in metropolitan France were affected by actions. 11% of these acts took place in Haute-Garonne, which remains the department most affected, for the fifth year running. It is followed by Isère and Rhône, with the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region the target of almost a third of ultra-left actions this year. The movement diversified its targets last year, focusing on energy-related ones, which accounted for 18% of actions in 2023. The telecommunications network, hitherto the main target, saw a significant drop in the number of actions aimed at it (-55%). Nevertheless, actions against the building and public works (BTP) sector, and especially concrete plants, intensified, particularly at the end of the year, with an increase of over 40% during 2023. The activity of the ultra-left movement varied greatly last year, but peaked in March. The protests against pension reform and the particularly violent demonstration in Sainte-Soline (Deux-Sèvres) were catalysts for the militants, who stepped up their actions. Violence against law enforcement officers was also particularly high during this period, largely due to activists linked to the ultra-left: almost 1,518 law enforcement personnel were injured in the spring, during the protest against pension reform²⁸ including 47 gendarmes during the particularly violent clashes at Sainte-Soline²⁹. This increase in violence, and its scale during demonstrations, whether authorized or not, remains unprecedented on the part of the ultra-left movement. During the July riots, following the neutralization of a 17 year old in Nanterre (Hauts-de-Seine), ultra-left militants repeatedly shared the police officer's personal information on social networks, and tried unsuccessfully to join the rioters. Following the Hamas attacks in October, they also showed their support for the Palestinian cause. In addition, the cancellation of the dissolution of the collective "Les Soulèvements de la Terre" led to renewed activity on the part of the movement's radical ecology tendency, particularly after the call for days of action in December, which resulted in major damage to several concrete plants following actions by the "Les Soulèvements de la Terre" collective "*acts of disarmament*". The movement has also signaled its firm opposition to the organization of the 2024 Olympic Games, circulating pamphlets against the event and threatening to carry out destructive actions during its course. The rhetoric of part of the radical ecology trend seems to be moving towards more violence³⁰ taking up the "*radical fringe*" theory of Andreas Malm's³¹, who was also present at the clashes in Sainte Soline. As in 2022, the movement's many international contacts, particularly in the United States, where a French activist was arrested in March, require international monitoring and make it difficult to anticipate its activities in France.

21 Abroad, 42 French people were killed in jihadist attacks: 1 in Djerba (Tunisia) and 42 during the Hamas attack in Israel on October 7th.

22 See RODDE, Alexandre. *Le Jihad en France : 2012-2022*, Éditions du Cerf, octobre 2022.

23 MOLINIÉ William. Disengaged, proselytizing or ambivalent: the three faces of those convicted of Islamic terrorism upon their release from prison [online]. *Europe 1*, December 5, 2023. Available at : <https://www.europe1.fr/faits-divers/desengages-proselytes-et-ambivalents-les-trois-visages-des-condamnes-pour-terrorisme-islamique-a-leur-sortie-de-prison-4218129>

24 RODDE, Alexandre. Arms Trafficking and Terrorism : Analysis and Anticipation of the Threat. CREOGN Reserch Note, Issue 78, October, 2022. Available at : <https://www.gendarmerie.interieur.gouv.fr/crgn/publications/the-creogn-research-note/arms-trafficking-and-terrorism-analysis-and-anticipation-of-the-threat>

25 Militant Wire. Available : <https://www.militantwire.com/p/colt-m4a1-and-ar-15-platform-rifles>

26 All figure are from the author's research.

27 These comments come from several publications shared on the movement's social networks.

28 LA RÉDACTION. Demonstrations in spring 2023: assessment of law enforcement operations [online]. *Vie publique*, November, 2023. Available at : <https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/291832-manifestations-du-printemps-2023-bilan-sur-le-maintien-de-lordre>

29 Sainte-Soline: the commander of the gendarmes has "never seen such a level of violence". *La Nouvelle République*, March 27, 2023.

30 We also note that the first terrorist trial of ultra-left activists took place in 2023 and led to several convictions.

31 HOSPITAL, Alix. Andreas Malm, new guru of radical ecologists: "The revolution is his obsession" [online]. *L'Express*, April 2, 2023. Available at : <https://www.lexpress.fr/idees-et-debats/andreas-malm-nouveau-gourou-des-ecologistes-radicaux-la-revolution-est-son-obsession-P25YPIYQPRGHXOUKLSVNFJK7V4/>

III) Ultra-right: limited activity and growing number of rallies

Ultra-right-wing activity remains limited in France in 2023. Only one major event occurred this year: the arson attack in Saint-Brévin-les-Pins (Loire-Atlantique). On the night of March 22th, a fire started in the vehicles and then at the home of the village's mayor, Yann Morez, who managed to leave the premises unharmed with his family³². Although the investigation is still underway, the mayor has been the regular target of threats from the ultra-right, since his decision to move a reception center for asylum seekers close to a school. The number of arrests within the movement appears to be falling slightly, although two activists returning to Paris from Ukraine were arrested in April³³, a man in his twenties, close to the "incel" ("involuntary celibate") trend, in Hauts-de-France in September³⁴ and four people in Brittany and the South of France in November³⁵. Low level actions, threats, acts of vandalism and brawls with ultra-left militants continued across the country. The presence of ultra-right militants in public gathering is also much greater, representing an evolution in their modus operandi. Over 500 activists gathered in Paris in May in support of the far-right Comité du 9-Mai. There were also a number of rallies, both authorized and unauthorized, in response to attacks or other events: several in Saint-Brévin against the reception center for asylum seekers at the start of the year, in Annecy (Haute-Savoie) in June after a Syrian refugee stabbed young children, and in Romans-sur-Isère (Drôme) following the murder of a teenager at a local dance in Crépol. The action taken by crowd control units to put an end to some of these illegal gatherings has reinforced the hostility of ultra-right militants towards law enforcement, further signifying the rise of the accelerationist tendency within the movement, which considers that they should be a priority target for a "collapse of the system". Internationally, the movement remains divided on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with some activists supporting Hamas out of anti-Semitism and a call for an "intifada", while others declare their support for "neither kippah nor keffiyeh" and their desire for a "Christian Jerusalem"³⁶. The movement continues to closely monitor the conflict in Ukraine, where dozens of French activists continue to fight. The use of drones to drop explosives on military targets is a regular occurrence during in Ukraine, and the transfer of this type of techniques for terrorist use in France remains a possibility. In the Western world, the growing number of seizures of 3D-printed firearms and the live broadcasting of mass killings by ultra-right-wing militants raise fears of this type of action in France.

The year 2023 saw a resurgence of terrorist activity in France. The jihadist movement, remaining the main threat in France, carried out a succession of attacks at the end of the year, including one committed by a jihadist released from prison. The ultra-left continues to act in a diffuse manner throughout the country against building or logistical targets, while the ultra-right, despite not being very active, is consolidating its positions and multiplying its rallies. The rapidly evolving situation in France is impacted by a tense international context, from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to that between Israel and Hamas. The year 2024 and its upcoming challenges, from the Olympic Games to the commemorations of the 80th anniversary of D-Day, presents particular risks. At a time when opinions are becoming increasingly polarized, collective vigilance in the face of these threats remains necessary.

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The content of this publication is to be considered as the author's own work and does not engage the responsibility of the CREOGN.

32 BÉRANGER, Fabienne. Update. Fire at the home of the mayor of Saint-Brevin: police custody lifted for the two suspects arrested [online]. *France 3 régions Pays de la Loire*, June 21, 2023. Available at : <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/pays-de-la-loire/loire-atlantique/nantes/incendie-de-la-maison-du-maire-de-saint-brevin-deux-suspects-interpelles-et-places-en-garde-a-vue-2800304.html>

33 COURTINE, Denis. Paris: two far-right activists arrested with military equipment on their return from Ukraine [online]. *Le Parisien*, April 24, 2023. Available at : <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/paris-deux-militants-dextreme-droite-arretes-avec-du-materiel-militaire-a-leur-retour-dukraie-24-04-2023-GFTKQ57YZJHMDDB2A5SDOKO7BU.php>

34 CONGE, Paul. An ultra-right "incel" arrested by the DGSJ for a planned attack in France [online]. *Marianne*, October 3, 2023. Available at : <https://www.marianne.net/societe/police-et-justice/un-incel-dultradroite-arrete-par-la-dgsi-pour-un-projet-dattentat-en-france>

35 Military, retired police officer... What are the profiles of the ultra-right suspects indicted? [online] *Ouest-France*, November 18, 2023. Available at : <https://www.ouest-france.fr/societe/faits-divers/militaire-policier-retraite-quels-sont-les-profil-des-suspects-dultradroite-mis-en-examen-29be58b2-860f-11ee-9632-b62f00689e79>

36 Comments collected in the movement's publications.