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The Effects of a War Foretold: The War in Iraq and French Society

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Since 11 September 2001, France has considered itself an integral part of the war on terrorism. Concurrently, a second war, a U.S.-led war against Iraq, appears likely to begin in the next few months. These two simultaneous wars may have important consequences for French society—a society that is particularly sensitive to everything that touches on the Arab/Muslim world and in which anti-immigrant racism on the one hand and anti-Semitism on the other constitute undeniable threats to the social fabric.

Of course, one can imagine circumstances in which an American military operation against Iraq would have little impact on French society. In such a case, France would take certain anti-terrorist measures to protect itself, but would, in fact, face little direct terrorist threat and therefore be little concerned by the war. Such an outcome is conceivable because France has expended—since the United States first mooted the possibility of war against Iraq—considerable diplomatic efforts to avoid war, or in any case, to avoid a war not sanctioned by the United Nations. France cannot be accused of blindly following or even of moving in step with the United States in the march to war. France seems rather outside, even hostile, to the current talk of war against Iraq, and even to general U.S. policy in the Middle East. (French policy often does not support Israel in the geopolitical debates that surround the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.) For this reason, France would probably not become a major target for potential terrorists who would have as their goal the weakening of the American coalition.

Racism, Anti-Semitism and Insecurity

The scenario in which France is barely affected by war is certainly possible, but it fails to take into account the French experience during the Gulf War of 1990-91 as well the ethno-religious structure of France, which includes both a large population of four to five million Muslims and several hundred thousand Jews.²

¹ This is a reference to the book that began this furor, Daniel Lindenberg, *Le Rappel à l'ordre : Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires* (Paris: Seuil, la République des idées, 2002).

² The exact numbers are impossible to know because the French government does not keep statistics on the population's religion or ethnicity. A recent study by Erik Cohen for the *Fonds Social Juif Unifié* (available at <http://www.fsju.org>) estimates that there are 500,000 Jews in France, though because the study relied on family

The 1990-91 Gulf War had a profound impact on French society, particularly on its Arab and Muslim immigrant populations. At the time, the government took some initiatives to influence the opinion leaders most directly concerned—such as leaders of religious or community associations and the specialized media that serves the minority communities—to encourage them, discreetly but firmly, to resist all appeals toward radicalization of their communities. Moreover, the government activated a package of interior security measures, under the name of the *Plan Vigipirate*. The plan involves a large mobilization of a variety of police and military forces to protect sensitive sites within France such as industrial plants, airports, rail and metro stations, and tourist sites and gives the police added powers to make random stops and to search and arrest suspected terrorists. These measures not only seemed to reduce the terrorist threat, but also created a visible and reassuring police and military presence in everyday life and calmed both the passions and the fears of the population.

However, this period also created considerable resentment, particularly among the immigrant population. In the major media outlets, and particularly on television, government officials, expert commentators, and the various armchair strategists often lumped together all that was more or less associated with Arabs or Muslims. As a result, the enemy was described and thought of as Arab in culture and Muslim in religion. Very few of the commentators understood the stigmatization inflicted by this association on people who identified themselves, often for reasons beyond their origin, with Arab culture or the Muslim religion.

Moreover, the *Plan Vigipirate* has been implemented with a significant racial bias. The “random” stops by police and the questionings based solely on physical appearance, for example, demonstrated to those being harassed that their promised integration into French society did stop the police from noticing racial differences. The police and the military are not necessarily racist. However, they know that by stopping young men of color, while they will not necessarily find explosives or even drugs, they will at least happen upon some individuals that are violating the immigration laws. These discoveries allow them to demonstrate that their stops are producing valid arrests and thus to produce statistics that justify their activities. Such statistics, in turn, reassure the general, non-Arab population, of which not incidentally nearly all police officers and soldiers are a part.

Today, such problems still exist, and France remains a potential target for terrorists of “global reach,” as well as for other types of terrorists. This means that the *Plan Vigipirate* has technically remained in force continuously since the Gulf War. These problems have the potential to create new tensions if a new war breaks out in Middle East, even if France decides to participate only in the most minor way possible.

Moreover, there exists today a potential source of conflict that did not play any role at the beginning of the 1990’s: anti-Semitism. French anti-Semitism has been gathering strength since the early 1980’s and with the outbreak of the second Intifada in October 2000, has become fairly

names to identify people as Jewish, it may have been an underestimate. No similar study exists on Muslims in France.

overt.³ This new anti-Semitism complements the traditional French anti-Semitism of the nationalist extreme Right and of some parts of the extreme Left that is anti-capitalist and radically anti-Zionist. The new anti-Semitism flourishes among people who are often first or second-generation immigrants and who are filled with a rage formed from exclusion and from racism. They identify with the Palestinian cause and occasionally with political Islam and from those sources mold hatred of Israel and of Jews in general into a singularly virulent principle of social protest. In 1990-91, there were hardly any major tensions between French Jews and Arab immigrants from North Africa. Today, the Jews of France feel threatened by an anti-Semitism that consists not only of anti-Jewish discourse and of prejudices, but also acts of violence and of amateurish terrorist attacks.

It is not a paradox to point out that, when exacerbated by outside events, there exists a strong possibility of increased tension and violence between those groups that promote Anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim racism and those that preach anti-Semitism. That does not mean that one should expect, in such a scenario, inter-communal conflicts between Jews and Arabs, or religious ones between Jews and Muslims. Rather, smaller expressions of violence are more likely, and, as tensions and pressures spread, such expressions might possibly lead to some more serious incidents.

War and the Domestic Political Scene

A faraway war and France's counter-terrorist policies thus may weigh heavily on the French domestic scene. Possible terrorists attacks in France would only accelerate this process. Nonetheless, we should not expect that such events would cause any important changes to the French ideological and political spectrum, at least in the short-term.

To a certain extent, this is because the French Left remains incapable of forcing a public debate on the relationship between anti-terrorist measures and social problems. Rather the Left just continues to align with the rhetoric of the Right on the issue of public safety, as it has since the early 1990's. This is unlikely to change in the near future, as the Left still seems stunned by its spring 2002 electoral debacle—the communist party, after a long decline, has at last arrived in the dustbin of history; the Greens are tearing themselves apart with internal squabbles; and the Socialist party is preoccupied with its search for a leader. Last but not least, the forces that like to think of themselves as “to the left of the Left,” having obtained in last April's election the best result they could have hoped for—the failure of the traditional Left—have lost their *raison d'être*.

In the absence of a coherent opposition, a war—and a climate of increased concern for the internal security of the country—can only strengthen the current government. It will paralyze political debate in the name of achieving the necessary consensus to face the dangers of the moment and leave an immense political space to the government official in control of the internal security agenda, currently the Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy.

³ For numerous examples of anti-Semitic acts committed recently in France, see Emmanuel Brenner, *Les Territoires Perdus de la République* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2002).

No war, even if France takes only a very small part in it, could conceivably accelerate the reconstruction of the French Left. On the other hand, in the event of war, one can imagine a reinforcement of the current paralysis of government capacity vis-à-vis other crucial issues that the French state faces, particularly pension and healthcare reform. A climate of war and of increased insecurity combined with the economic effects that go hand in hand (slowed growth, higher price of oil, etc.) cannot possibly be favorable to the launching of major initiatives. The only significant reform under consideration by the government, decentralization, could well be the victim of this inopportune political climate.