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COUNTERING HOMEGROWN COGNITIVE AND BEHAVIORAL EXTREMISM IN
FRANCE: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A CRITICAL TURNING POINT

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ABSTRACT

France is at a turning point. With the election of President Macron, there is hope for an opening in French consciousness toward challenging the more conventional and exclusive forces of nationalism grounded in security. This policy brief examines several variables contributing to an ecosystem of intransigent conflict in France, and will propose a strategic response using [systems dynamics](#). A systems-level analysis of political, social, and economic factors reveals why current French counter-radicalization policies toward French immigrant youth have not proven successful, and serves to craft counter-radicalization strategies. These account for the complex landscape as framed within the corresponding Radicalization Systems Dynamics Map (see [Figure A](#)).

French identity presents a particularly distinct impact within the radicalization landscape of France. For example, the principle of “laïcité,” the French term for the separation of church and state, treats religion as a completely private matter, but also regulates religious activities in an attempt to protect order and citizen rights. For many young Muslims living in underserved areas of France, militancy and headscarves are ways of expressing anger at their economic situation and forging an identity. For the majority of first-generation French immigrants who came in search of new opportunity and to escape political violence—and who adopted more private, moderate religious practices—it is shocking to see their second or third-generation offspring adopt such conservative practices.

Issues of physical security, social recognition, and integration also contribute to the challenges associated with homegrown extremism. Further exacerbating the challenge, systemic social changes take time. Entrenched systems of social behavior and national identity do not shift easily; for this reason, more tangible security measures promoting “immediate results” often take precedence.

LEVERAGING A SYSTEMS DYNAMIC APPROACH

A systems-thinking approach grounded in deeper psychological underpinnings of identity development and socialization mechanisms suggests that a more sustainable solution is within reach - provided a longer-term approach is palatable to the government and citizenry. A systems analysis ([Figure A](#)) accounts for the interplay of factors within the current political and security climate in France, revealing viable leverage points for mitigating radicalization. In assessing the confluence of these variables, the map delineates four core themes that are currently ill-conceived within the present national security apparatus:

1. **Perceived deprivation and lack of integration/participation/opportunity:** The impact of the emergency decree (largely targeting the Muslim community) and high educational dropout rates within Muslim communities foster reduced opportunity. Subsequent unemployment and criminal rates, relative geographic segregation, negative media portrayals of the Muslim community, and disproportionate incarceration rates among Muslims compound the issue. These factors present the perfect breeding ground for widescale despair and solidarity among an increasingly malcontent French Muslim community.
2. **Solution-seeking with an emphasis on religious/identity tenets:** For those facing a lack of integration/opportunity, promises of fulfilling a higher purpose present a powerful frame. Perceived deprivation is often met with active solution seeking among like-minded individuals; solutions are often found in ideologies that confer meaning around identity tenets. Without strong critical thinking skills and a high degree of religious literacy, seekers are exponentially more likely to be influenced by strong (sometimes extremist) identity-based ideologies.
3. **Social psychological processes of radicalization:** Once individuals perceive deprivation and isolation, they become more susceptible to self-selection into a group that will meet their social needs; this decision may be influenced by social media forces appealing to individuals through resonant messaging, evocative imagery, and perceived belonging. The risk of group polarization and extremism grows as individuals distance themselves from mainstream society and associated norms.

4. **Issues of assimilation:** Once individuals self-select into isolated ideological groups, assimilation within mainstream society becomes less likely. With reduced efforts toward societal integration and a complete commitment to ideologies, individuals withdraw from society and may turn to criminal activity for a livelihood; in effect, they further reduce their participation in the limited educational/employment opportunities available. Moreover, by adopting highly divergent cultural values in the midst of physical retraction from the community, they further isolate themselves, enhancing their perceived deprivation.

These factors create a [vicious feedback loop](#) strengthened by overlapping constructs and cyclical processes. To address these factors, bright spots were identified as potential leverage points, while considering the impact on the system. What follows are associated policy prescriptions addressing these four overarching mechanisms that represent the “[deep structure](#)” of the map.

EDUCATIONAL/EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS AND REFORMS

Access to education is key to not only positioning individuals for equal employment opportunities, but also engendering the necessary critical thinking to scrutinize mindsets triggering emotional reactions to a shared grievance. Similarly, diminished employment opportunity results in a lack of livelihood—and pressures to seek alternate sources of income—and can pose a severe detriment to one’s sense of purpose or identity.

Emphasis on the quality of education and policies to increase student engagement in school are critical to bolstering integration within the social educational and employment systems. Including social media lessons in schools on the positive and negative nuances of online platforms is vital as the majority of Facebook users in France are [between 18-24](#). This presents an opportunity to shape student thinking before students are most susceptible to social media forces and to provide platforms for anonymous support – thus countering incendiary sites that heighten grievances and preach destructive solutions. Social media companies’ and the government’s ability to direct individuals to such informational resources can further reduce exposure to extremist content.

In close concert with social media lessons are nationally instituted critical thinking curricula, which can present a first line of defense to extremist ideology as students learn to question and analyze the veracity of ideological claims. To promote religious literacy, providing Arabic language programs at well-established Mosques in the community will enable students to critically assess religious texts on their own, providing an additional defense to extremist ideology as students will be less inclined to forge opinions based on false translations.

Employment opportunities are also critical for impressionable adolescents transitioning out of the school system. Lack of opportunity risks cultivating enhanced grievances on an economic, political, and social basis. Given France’s dedication to equality, one immediate policy to improve access to employment would be to mandate blind hiring practices that preclude access to the candidate’s name or geographic data, thus curtailing predominant discriminatory practices. Programs focused on trades that offer self-employment, such as technology functions, may further diminish unequal hiring practices. Finally, as the Macron government has actively facilitated enhanced diversity in the administration, that theme should be carried into French society, with greater emphasis on hiring practices that promote equality and highlight diversity of thought as a real advantage to organizational learning and success - for example by offering tax breaks or other incentives to companies that institute more diverse employment practices.

YOUTH SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Given the immigrant divide within France, many second or third generation migrants in particular suffer from cognitive dissonance pertaining to identity expression as they seek to reconcile the chasm between their family’s former cultural ties and a lack of belonging in a culturally distinct new country with little room for a religious identity. Yet the primary factors contributing to youth immigrant radicalization may

actually be economic and social, rather than religious. The French are so attached to the idea of equality before law that collecting statistics about ethnic minorities, even to counter discrimination, is forbidden. Despite this prohibition, France Strategie, the French government's economic strategy component, examined French census data on national origin and found that youth unemployment of French-born citizens of North African immigrants is 32%, which is twice as high as those with no immigrant background. [30% of youth with immigrant backgrounds](#) leave high school with no credential, compared to 16% without an immigrant background.

Youth require a safe place to gain a sense of belonging – a place to find mentorship, employment training and assistance, educational opportunities, and mental health services. Alienation of immigrant communities in slums with limited employment opportunities, isolation from mainstream society, and discrimination based on ethnic and religious backgrounds create anger, frustration, and hopelessness. Hamed Ouanoufi, a social worker at a youth center in Strasbourg, France, said there is no single reason why youth radicalize. “Mental frailty, social exclusion. The recruiters are looking for unstable youths and they begin by weaving their web on social media,” [Ouanoufi explained](#). “They slowly pull them in, indoctrinate them and turn them into soldiers.”

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND GOVERNMENT REFORMS

While there has been much hope in the potentially progressive and unifying force of Macron, his actions have produced mixed reactions. Since the Paris terrorist attacks on November 13, 2015, France has been in a perpetual state of emergency, where certain civil liberties are restricted and the executive government's powers are expanded. Under Macron, France lifted the state of emergency at the start of November 2017. Though there are also plans to enact new anti-terrorism legislation, drawing several exceptional policing powers from the state of emergency into common law. If unifying the country, integrating Muslim immigrants, and reducing stress and the potential for mass panic are the goals of the administration, cementing exceptional anti-terrorism practices is not the best option. Instead of widening the divide between law enforcement and the Muslim community, and increasing fear through expanded policing practices, law enforcement must work with Muslim communities and build rapport. One way to build rapport is through law enforcement hiring practices - hiring more police officers of immigrant and Muslim backgrounds.

While some are skeptical of Macron's new anti-terrorism legislation, his administration has made some positive steps in diversifying parliamentary leadership. Macron took a risk when he recruited candidates with little to no political experience, but in the June 2017 elections French voters gave Macron's En Marche party an absolute majority. Members of Macron's cabinet include Mounir Mahjoubi, a junior minister of digital affairs whose parents are Moroccan immigrants. Mahjoubi is one of the few political representatives of an immigrant or minority background. As [the Guardian](#) reported, Mahjoubi comes from a world often invisible to white upper-class French citizens who have dominated parliament. As a child, Mahjoubi traveled across Paris to use free computers in museum foyers, and, as an adult, he entered the startup industry after realizing that his Arab-sounding name was turning employers away from his resume. Overall, an [increased number of leaders of minority and immigrant backgrounds](#) will be a critical step for France to make minorities feel represented and heard.

HOUSING POLICIES/GEOGRAPHIC INTEGRATION

To many locals, Department 93, an area northeast of Paris, signifies deteriorating housing projects, crime, unemployment – and Muslims. France has many suburbs, but the word for these particular suburbs, *banlieues*, is derogatory, meaning slums dominated by immigrants. To the residents of these *banlieues*, isolation from mainstream France is not only emotional but also physical. Not all Muslim immigrants reside in *banlieues*, however. Amira Bouziri, a 23-year-old journalism student, whose parents emigrated to Paris from Tunisia, told NPR that she never has faced discrimination, but admits things might be different if she wore a headscarf or lived in the public housing projects. “I do think I'm lucky to be raised and educated here in Paris,” [Bouziri said](#). “I thank my father for that. He worked for the post office and was offered a

bigger place on the outskirts of town, but he wanted to stay in the center of the city — even in a smaller apartment — for our education and for the city's cultural life.” A hard-working, born-and-bred Parisian, Bouziri says she's always assumed she'll have the same chances as other French citizens.

Physical integration is an important aspect of fully integrating the immigrant population with the greater French society. The French must create stronger initiatives to integrate the city and suburbs, including better urban planning and public transportation systems. “Access to just about everything associated with upward mobility and economic progress—jobs, quality food, and goods (at reasonable prices), healthcare and schooling—relies on the ability to get around in an efficient way, and for an affordable price,” wrote Gillian B. White in a piece in [The Atlantic](#) about how lack of transport affects poor communities. For example, [Nawufal Mohamed](#) is a French urban planning student who lives and studies in the 93, which is notoriously underserved by public transport. Although his school and home are located in the 93, on a good day he spends about three and a half hours traveling to school and back. This illustrates the great need for reliable transportation to connect poor neighborhoods to urban cores. Additionally, suburbs require reliable transportation to bring in economic and cultural diversity to their neighborhoods.

RELIGIOUS LITERACY

[Tareq Oubrou](#), rector of the grand mosque of Bordeaux, stated that given the stigma surrounding Islam in France, youth are choosing to convert to Islam as a way to rebel. [Foreign Policy magazine](#) reported around 40 percent of known radicals in France are converts to Islam without prior family connections to the religion. “There are some people who choose communism, some who choose Maoism, some kind of ism. Now, it’s Islam. It’s against French society,” Oubrou said in the interview. “There are some cases among these converts where they have a score to settle with society.” Islam, in some cases, may serve as their prevailing identity.

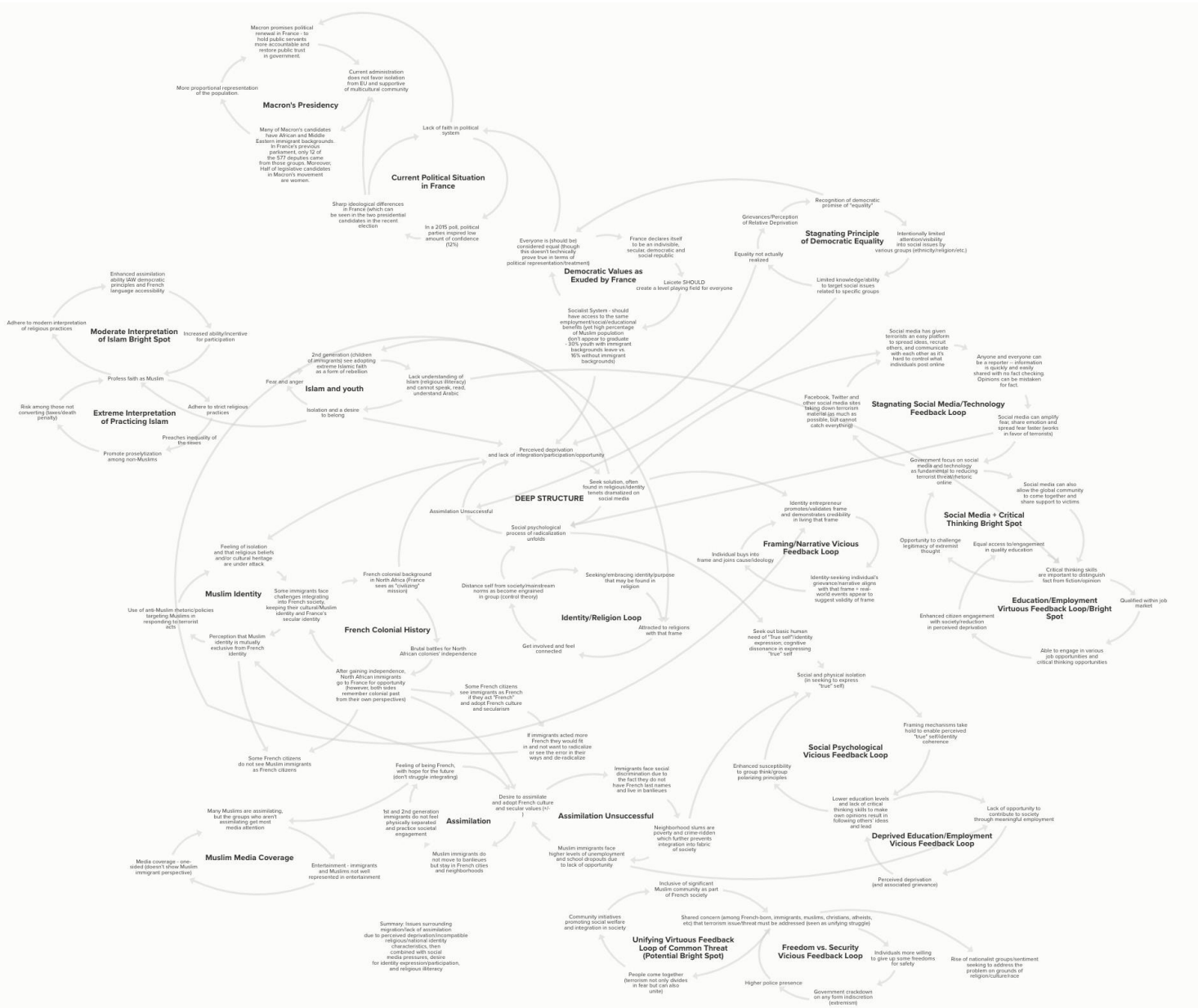
Oubrou delivers sermons in French and Arabic, which is rare to find in French mosques. The majority of Muslim clerics in France are foreign and speak in Arabic, which most young French Muslims don't understand. According to Oubrou, that is one reason why Muslim religious leaders are out of touch with the younger generation of French Muslims. Additionally, he says the interpretation of Islamic scriptures is often out of sync with modern times and should be adapted to modern secular societies. Oubrou says a reformation is long overdue, and he's become a leading force in working for change in France. “Our third and fourth generations dream in French,” [Oubrou said](#). “They should speak to God in French.”

Oubrou shows there is a middle ground and a way to reach out to the younger French Muslim generations through Islamic teaching and moderate imams. French language sermons may foster a greater sense of belonging within local religious communities and create an increased ability and incentive to participate. Such religious literacy may serve to counter radicalization and give youth a trusted Muslim leader to reach out to with questions about their faith, if and when issues arise.

CONCLUSION

Recent displays of offensive, preemptive counter-terror tactics by the Macron administration suggests that short-term, politically-induced policies will continue to surge. Ultimately, however, if the administration seeks to take advantage of its political platform built on engagement with the EU and with its own population, it must advance a longer term strategy that accounts for the structural and systemic ineptitudes that currently promote perceived deprivation and vicious feedback loops creating the conditions for cognitive and behavioral extremism. Through using the systems lens presented in this analysis, France may integrate various programs that truly promote French values of equality and solidarity. Only then will France realize her great strength and potential in upholding her revolutionary call for *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*.

FIGURE A: RADICALIZATION DYNAMICS MAP (FRANCE)



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YOUNG PROFESSIONALS IN FOREIGN POLICY