

“Banlieues” - The Other France: Are the suburbs of Paris incubators of terrorism?

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Fouad Ben Ahmed never paid much attention to *Charlie Hebdo*. He found the satirical magazine to be vulgar and not funny, and to him it seemed fixated on Islam, but he didn't think that its contributors did real harm. One of its cartoonists, Stéphane Charbonnier, also drew for *Le Petit Quotidien*, a children's paper to which Ben Ahmed subscribed for his two kids. On January 7th, upon hearing that two French brothers with Algerian names, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, had executed twelve people at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices—including Charbonnier—in revenge for covers caricaturing Muhammad, Ben Ahmed wrote on Facebook, “My French heart bleeds, my Muslim soul weeps. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can justify these barbaric acts. Don't talk to me about media or politicians who would play such-and-such a game, because there's no excuse for barbarism. #JeSuisCharlie.”

That night, Ben Ahmed left his house, in the suburbs outside Paris, and went into the city to join tens of thousands of people at a vigil. He is of Algerian and Tunisian descent, with dark skin, and a few white extremists spat threats at him, but Ben Ahmed ignored them—France was his country, too. On January 11th, he joined the one and a half million citizens who marched in unity from the Place de la République.

Ben Ahmed's Facebook page became a forum for others, mostly French Muslims, to discuss the attacks. Many expressed simple grief and outrage; a few aired conspiracy theories, suggesting a plot to stigmatize Muslims. “Let the investigators shed light on this massacre,” Ben Ahmed advised. One woman wrote, “I fear for the Muslims of France. The narrow-minded or frightened are going to dig in their heels and make an amalgame”—conflate terrorists with all Muslims. Ben Ahmed agreed: “Our country is going to be more divided.” He defended his use of #JeSuisCharlie, arguing that critiques of *Charlie's* content, however legitimate before the attack, had no place afterward. “If we have a debate on the editorial line, it's like saying, ‘Yes—but,’ ” he later told me. “In these conditions, that is unthinkable.”

Ben Ahmed, who is thirty-nine, works as a liaison between residents and the local government in Bondy—a suburb, northeast of Paris, in an area called Department 93. For decades a bastion of the old working class and the Communist Party, the 93 is now known for its residents of Arab and African origin. To many Parisians, the 93 signifies decayed housing projects, crime, unemployment, and Muslims. France has all kinds of suburbs, but the word for them, *banlieues*, has become pejorative, meaning slums dominated by immigrants. Inside the *banlieues* are the *cités*: colossal concrete housing projects built during the postwar decades, in the Brutalist style of Le Corbusier. Conceived as utopias for workers, they have become concentrations of poverty and social isolation. The *cités* and their occupants are the subject of anxious and angry discussion in France. Two recent books by the eminent political scientist Gilles Kepel, “Banlieue de la République” and “Quatre-vingt-treize” (“Ninety-three”), are studies in industrial decline and growing segregation by group identity. There's a French pejorative for that, too: *communautarisme*.

After the *Charlie* massacre—and after a third terrorist, Amedy Coulibaly, gunned down a black

policewoman outside a Jewish school and four Jews at a kosher supermarket—there was a widespread feeling, in France and elsewhere, that the killings were somehow related to the *banlieues*. But an exact connection is not easy to establish. Although these alienated communities are increasingly prone to anti-Semitism, the profiles of French jihadists don't track closely with class; many have come from bourgeois families. The sense of exclusion in the *banlieues* is an acute problem that the republic has neglected for decades, but more jobs and better housing won't put an end to French jihadism.

Ben Ahmed has lived in the 93 his entire life. A few years ago, he and his wife, Carolina, and their two children moved into a small house near Charles de Gaulle Airport. They wanted to be near a private school that the children attend, because most public schools in the 93 are overcrowded and chaotic, and staffed by younger, less qualified teachers. Ben Ahmed spent his teens in one of the toughest suburbs, Bobigny, in a notorious cité called *l'Abreuvoir*. During his twenties and early thirties, Ben Ahmed was employed by the Bobigny government as a community organizer, working with troubled youth—some of them his friends and neighbors, many just out of prison or headed there. His authority on life in the cités exceeds that of any scholar.

After the attacks, Ben Ahmed wrote an open letter to President François Hollande titled “All Partly Responsible, but Not Guilty.” He identified himself as a *banlieue* resident who had often “seen death a few metres from me.” He wrote about the problems of joblessness, discrimination, and collective withdrawal from society. He recalled that, in October, 2001, a soccer game in Paris between France and Algeria—the first such match since Algerian independence, in 1962—had to be called off when thousands of French youths of North African origin booed the “Marseillaise” and invaded the field, some chanting, “Bin Laden, bin Laden!” The French public responded with righteous revulsion. “The problem was before our eyes,” Ben Ahmed wrote. “But instead of asking good questions, we chose stigmatization, refusal of the other.” He went on, “The split was born on that day, the feeling of rejection expressed by the political class, when we could have asked other questions: What's wrong? What's the problem?”

Ben Ahmed wears sharp dark suits, even on weekends, as if such formality were the only way for an Arab from the 93 to be taken seriously. When I met him, soon after the attacks, he told me, “In French, we say, ‘Clothes don't make the monk’—but they do, unfortunately.” For the same reason, he always speaks proper French, not the accented slang of the *banlieues*. He shaves his head close, the black stubble of his hairline descending to a widow's peak. He has a broad, boyish face and a disarming smile; as he shuttles around the 93, with quick, lock-kneed strides, he seems to know everyone by name. But as a youth in *l'Abreuvoir* he had to learn to fight—he trained at *boxe française*, a form of kickboxing—and his eyes can turn hooded and flat under stress. Two years ago, upon entering a cinema with his children, Ben Ahmed noticed that a patron was carrying a shotgun. (The man was out to settle scores with his wife and her lover.) Ben Ahmed told his children to lie down, stalked the gunman for thirty feet, then grabbed him from behind and took him to the floor in a Brazilian-jujitsu chokehold. After security guards arrived, Ben Ahmed escorted his children into a screening of “Man of Steel.”

Ben Ahmed had been nurturing political ambitions, and the incident made him a neighborhood hero. He decided to run for local office. “I have an ability to talk with everyone, because I respect the other,” he told me. “I think there's always some good at the bottom of everyone.” Ben Ahmed's wife and friends consider him a little naïve, but naïveté is almost a requirement for a *banlieue* Muslim entering French politics during a national-identity crisis.

The highway that encircles Paris is known as the *Périphérique*. Entering or leaving the suburbs is often called “crossing the *Périphérique*,” as if it were a frontier. *Banlieue* residents joke that going into Paris requires a visa and a vaccination card. Mehdi Meklat, a young writer at Bondy Blog, which

reports on the banlieues, told me, “There are two parallel worlds.” He called the dynamic between Paris and the suburbs “schizophrenic.”

The R.E.R., the rail network linking Paris to its suburbs, takes you from the Gare du Nord to Ben Ahmed’s station in just nineteen minutes. The trip begins in a tunnel, and when the train emerges the boulevards lined with bistro awnings are gone. Even the weather seems different—damp and murky, with a wind blowing from the southwest. (The suburbs of the 93 grew around factories that had been situated northeast of Paris in order to allow industrial smells to drift away from the City of Light.) The rail tracks cut through a disordered landscape of graffiti-covered walls, glass office buildings, soccer fields, trash fires, abandoned industrial lots, modest houses with red tile roofs, and clusters of twenty-story monoliths—the *cités*.

The banlieues are far more diverse than the ghettos of American cities. On the R.E.R., I saw a man speaking Tamil on his cell phone; an Asian woman watching her two boys; North African women in every variety of hijab, or in none; an elderly white man; a black man in a blazer reading the sports section; an Arab begging in the aisle with a child in his arms. Wealthy neighborhoods stand next door to poor ones, privately owned houses are interspersed with housing projects, and people of every color and religion shop in the commercial centers. In a dingy little restaurant in Montreuil, on an empty street near a *cité*, Arab men were served by a white waitress. The banlieues have housed generations of immigrants, and the older tide of Portuguese, Italians, and Poles hasn’t completely gone out with the more recent waves of Arabs, Africans, and Chinese. The suburbs are thought to remain majority white, though no one knows for sure because, in France, collecting statistics by ethnicity or religion is illegal. (A precise count isn’t necessary for the *cités*: they are overwhelmingly Arab and black.)

For all their vitality, the *banlieues* feel isolated from the city, and from France itself. Parisians and tourists rarely visit them, and residents complain that journalists drop in only to report on car burnings and drug shootings. The suburb Clichy-sous-Bois—the scene, in 2005, of youth riots that spread across the country—has tried to raise revenue by offering a tour de banlieue for curious outsiders. Many suburban residents, meanwhile, never even think of going to Paris. Compared with American slums, the banlieues have relatively decent standards of housing and safety, but the psychological distance between the 93 and the Champs-Élysées can feel insuperable—much greater than that between the Bronx and Times Square. The apartment blocks in the *cités*, often arranged around a pharmacy, a convenience store, and a fast-food joint, look inward. Many have no street addresses, obvious points of entry, or places to park. The sense of separation is heightened by the names of the surrounding streets and schools, preserved from a historical France that has little connection to residents’ lives. The roads around Gros Saule—a drug-ridden *cité* where the police dare not enter—include Rue Henri Matisse and Rue Claude Debussy.

“It’s a social frontier,” Badrouine Abdallah, Mehdi Meklat’s colleague at Bondy Blog, said. “It’s not just about being black or Arab. It’s also about having relationships at your disposal, a network.” Meklat and Abdallah, who are in their twenties, told me about weeklong internships required of French ninth graders. Most of their classmates ended up in lousy little bakeries or pharmacies, or with nothing, because corporations wouldn’t answer queries from the children of immigrants in the 93.

Being from the banlieues is a serious impediment to employability, and nearly every resident I met had a story about discrimination. Fanta Ba, the daughter of Senegalese immigrants, has taken to sending out job applications using her middle name, France, and Frenchifying her last name to Bas, but she remains out of work. Whenever she hears of a terrorist attack in France, she prays, “Don’t let it be an Arab, a black, a Muslim.” On January 7th, she turned off the TV and avoided Facebook for two days. She couldn’t bear to rewatch the violent images or hear that all Muslims bore some

responsibility. “To have to say, ‘I am *Charlie*’ or ‘I am a Muslim and I condemn this’—it’s too much,” she said. “It wasn’t me. I asked myself, ‘How will this end? Are they going to put crosses on the apartment doors of Muslims or Arabs?’ ”

Ben Ahmed has a friend from Bobigny named Brahim Aniba, an accountant who, like many banlieue residents, once endured a period of unemployment. To receive state benefits, he had to meet with a job counsellor. Aniba told me that the counsellor, wanting to help, said, “You don’t have an aunt who lives in Paris or somewhere else? Because Bobigny—really? *Cité Grémillon*?” This was the French equivalent of Shitsville. The counsellor advised, “If you have an address in Paris, a post-office box, just to receive mail, it’s better. And then the family name, Aniba—it’s O.K., but the first name, Brahim, use ‘B.’ ”

“Madame, why don’t I just drop my pants instead?” Aniba said.

Simply defining who is French can make small talk tricky. When people ask Widad Ketfi, a thirty-year-old journalist, where she’s from, she replies, “Bondy,” but that never ends the conversation. “Of what origin?” “French.” “Where are your parents from?” “France!” Even citizens of immigrant descent often identify whites with the term *Français de souche*—“French from the roots.” The implication is that people with darker skin are not fully French.

Fanta Ba said, “You do everything for France, to be accepted, but you feel you’re not welcome.” This is especially true for Muslims. In a poll taken by *Le Monde* after the attacks, a majority of respondents agreed that Islam is incompatible with French values. In a *cité* like Trappes, where Ba grew up, some Muslims have separated from French society: women are disappearing under the black abaya; men are dropping out of school to sell Islamic clothing online. Ba doesn’t cover her hair, but she has become more observant as she struggles with being jobless and alone. Withdrawal, she said, was often a reaction to exclusion.

In the 2012 elections, nine of the five hundred and seventy-seven seats in France’s National Assembly were won by nonwhite candidates—an increase of eight seats. France remains a caste society where social capital is king. It’s ruled by les énarques—graduates of the prestigious *École Nationale d’Administration*, in Strasbourg. According to Laurent Bouvet, a political scientist, an *élite* degree is the only guarantee of finding a good job in a country that’s mired in economic torpor. This is increasingly true in America, too, but the U.S. absorbs immigrants far more easily than France. What the two countries have in common—and what makes them unique—is a national identity based not just on history, blood, soil, and culture but on the idea of popular sovereignty. In France, this is called republicanism, and in theory the idea is universal. In practice, being part of the French republic has to do not just with democracy and secularism but also with what you wear, what you eat, and what you name your children.

In 2007, a national immigration museum opened in the Porte Dorée, an Art Deco palace in eastern Paris which was built for a colonial exposition in 1931. Tradition requires French Presidents to inaugurate national museums, but Nicolas Sarkozy, who had used immigration as a wedge issue in his election campaign, refused to attend. The *Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration* opened without official ceremony. (Last December, after seven years, Hollande, a Socialist, finally inaugurated it.) When I went to the museum, in February, there were few visitors, and many Parisians remain unaware of its existence.

That struck me as a missed opportunity, for the exhibitions tell a rich story, going back to the mid-nineteenth century, when France was receiving new immigrants while the rest of Europe was creating them. As recently as the nineteen-thirties, France had the world’s highest number of immigrants per capita. The museum’s placards offer historical reassurance: “The figure of the

unassimilable foreigner accompanies every wave of immigrants. From the Italians at the end of the nineteenth century to the Africans of today, the stereotypes hardly change: immigrants are too numerous, carriers of disease, potential criminals, aliens in the body of the nation. This xenophobia, recurring in times of crisis, is often paired with anti-Semitism and fed by racism.”

The least digestible aspect of France’s colonial past is Algeria. When Algeria was settled by Europeans, in the early nineteenth century, it became part of greater France, and remained so until 1962, when independence was achieved, after an eight-year war in which seven hundred thousand people died. It’s hard to overstate how heavily this intimate, sad history has been repressed. “The Battle of Algiers,” the filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo’s neo-realist masterpiece about insurgency, counterinsurgency, terrorism, and torture in Algiers, was banned in France for five years after its release, in 1966, and it remains taboo there. On October 17, 1961, during demonstrations by pro-independence Algerians in Paris and its suburbs, the French police killed some two hundred people, throwing many bodies off bridges into the Seine. It took forty years for France to acknowledge that this massacre had occurred, and the incident remains barely mentioned in schools. Young people in the *banlieues* told me that colonial history is cursorily taught, and literature from former colonies hardly read.

Andrew Hussey, a British scholar at the University of London School of Advanced Study in Paris, believes that the turmoil in the *banlieues*—periodic riots, car burnings, brawls with cops—is one more front in the long war between France and its Arabs, especially Algerians. The aim of the violence isn’t reform or revolution but revenge. “The kids in the *banlieues* live in this perpetual present of weed, girls, gangsters, Islam,” he said. “They have no sense of history, no sense of where they come from in North Africa, other than localized bits of Arabic that they don’t understand, bits of Islam that don’t really make sense.”

Hussey’s recent book, “The French Intifada,” describes the conflict in such dire terms that his French publisher refused to release a translation. His *banlieue* research is less nuanced than that of Kepel (the phrase “French intifada” drew laughs of disbelief when I mentioned it to some *banlieue* residents), but it’s vivid and firsthand. The book opens with an eyewitness account of an eight-hour battle, in the Gare du Nord in 2007, between cops and *banlieue* kids who shout, in Arabic, “Fuck France!” Hussey writes, “This slogan—it is in fact more of a curse—has nothing to do with any French tradition of revolt.” But his portrait leaves out all the *banlieue* residents who are trying to be both Muslim and French—people like Fouad Ben Ahmed.

One night, at a Thai restaurant in the suburb of Aulnay-sous-Bois, Ben Ahmed said, “I barely know my history. It’s not taught, and because it’s painful my mother and my grandfather never told me.” Still, he knew the basics of the French-Algerian War, and he spoke about the *pieds-noirs*—French settlers in Algeria who, after independence, fled what they considered their homeland—and the Harkis, Algerian Muslims who supported French rule and were demonized by other Algerians. At the end of the war, neither country made a place for citizens with conflicting allegiances and identities: Algeria became an Arab state, and France cauterized its wounds by pretending that the conflict hadn’t happened. Among the *pieds-noirs*, Harkis, and Algerians who immigrated to France for economic reasons, guilt and recrimination have impeded a candid reckoning with their shared pasts. Ben Ahmed said, “And since neither our parents nor the state tells us this history, other people come along to tell us lies in order to justify things that are unjustifiable.” He meant jihadists.

Ben Ahmed’s grandfather was an Algerian who enlisted in the French Army and immigrated to the Paris *banlieues* in 1958. Most immigrants of that period entered France as laborers—factory hands, street-cleaners—and lived in shantytowns. Their presence was expected to be temporary. When it became clear that most of the immigrants weren’t returning home, the shantytowns were cleared and the workers were moved into the *cités*. Ben Ahmed’s grandfather, with his military pay, was able

to afford a small house in the 93. Ben Ahmed's mother was a secretary in a metallurgical factory; his father disappeared when Fouad was two. He grew up in relative ease in his grandparents' house until 1989, when they sold it. Ben Ahmed was thirteen.

At the time, his mother was unemployed, and she and Fouad had to move to *l'Abreuvoir*, the *cité* in Bobigny. *L'Abreuvoir* had been considered innovative when it was built, in the sixties, with undulating rows of four-story low-rises and green circular towers. But by the nineties it had become a center of heroin trafficking. Once, Ben Ahmed walked into the lobby of his building and saw a man holding a bag of drugs and a wad of cash. "Get out of here, or I'll take care of you," the man said. Ben Ahmed fled.

He was an indifferent student, forced to repeat several grades, but his mother made him stick with it, because her welfare benefits would drop if he quit school. He helped support her and his little brother by delivering washing machines to Paris apartments. Some of his friends were drug dealers, and Ben Ahmed might have become a criminal, too, had he not met Carolina, the daughter of political refugees from Chile. When they were eighteen, she told Ben Ahmed to choose between his crowd and her. With Carolina's help, he finished high school, got a college degree in social management, and became a youth organizer.

One youth Ben Ahmed tried to help was J.-P., a wild kid from Salvador Allende, another *cité* in Bobigny. Ben Ahmed, twelve years older, had known J.-P. almost since birth. ("Bobigny is like a village," J.-P. said.) J.-P. was a *métis*: Arab father, white mother. His grandfather had emigrated from Algeria in 1954, and became a street-cleaner. His father belonged to what J.-P. called "an uprooted generation, with their ass on two chairs"—unwanted by both the old country and the new. J.-P.'s father is still alive, but most of his father's friends died young, from violence, drugs, or aids. J.-P. grew up a tattooed devotee of "Scarface" and Tupac Shakur. At fourteen, he was expelled from school and began selling drugs and stealing. "When people lay down the law with violence, to get the last word you have to be the most violent," J.-P. said. He didn't see himself as a victim. "I was a little asshole. I chose to get into it. I should've tried not to go down that path. The problem is why the path's there at all."

We drove around the 93 in Ben Ahmed's Citroën. J.-P.—light-skinned, ripped jeans, bad teeth—sat in back. He never took out his earphones, and he often withdrew into a haze, only to emerge with full powers of focus and articulation. He had been imprisoned three times since 2010. His first conviction, he said, had involved "a little of everything—weapons possession, violence, buying drugs."

Ben Ahmed recalled that he and J.-P. knew a teen-age girl whose boyfriend was a thug. Ben Ahmed advised the girl to be careful, and, when word got back to the boyfriend, he confronted Ben Ahmed: "What the fuck do you want?" The next night, Ben Ahmed asked a friend in the boyfriend's *cité* to go with a few others to calm the guy down. When the boyfriend saw the group approaching, he pulled out a pistol and fired warning shots.

"Sometimes it's hard—wanting to try to help certain people and finding yourself in a situation that's difficult," Ben Ahmed told me.

"Two years later, I slept with the girl," J.-P. said, laughing. "The same guy shot me in the leg."

"What's also hard is for someone like me who wants to help J.-P.," Ben Ahmed said. "Sometimes you feel people aren't ready to be helped."

"Hey, you're starting to annoy me," J.-P. said. "Give me a hundred thousand euros. That would help!"

He complained that his stomach was growling. We dropped him off at a Senegalese cafeteria.

"You're very intelligent but wrong in the head," Ben Ahmed said to him.

"I like my life," J.-P. said. "It's never too late to change." He walked away, with a slight limp.

"I'm afraid he'll end badly," Ben Ahmed said.

In 2004, the French parliament passed a law forbidding religious symbols in public schools. The law emerged in response to Muslim girls coming to class with their hair covered. The legislation affirmed the century-old French concept of *laïcité*, or secularism, which enshrines state neutrality toward religion and prevents religion from intruding into the civic space. (In America, the intent of secularism was nearly the reverse, prohibiting state interference in religion.) But many French Muslims interpreted the ban as an act of gratuitous hostility. Some of them told me, inaccurately, that the law had made an exception for the Jewish kippah.

"School is a sacred space in republican theory—it's the church of the republic," Vincent Martigny, a political scientist at the *École Polytechnique*, outside Paris, said. "School is the place where an individual, especially a child, becomes a citizen, which is a superior form of the individual." Martigny noted that rigid republicanism coexists in France with public support for cultural diversity—in cinema, in local festivals. But in an era of insecurity France is undergoing what he called "moral panic attacks." In a recent poll in *Le Monde*, forty-two per cent of respondents said that they no longer felt at home in France.

After the *Charlie* killings, dozens of mosques around France were defaced, and in a few cases fired upon. Veiled girls and women were harassed. Some French Muslims complained that, while the government sent armed soldiers to guard Jewish sites, Muslim sites were initially left unprotected. The complaint, though accurate, obscured key differences of degree and kind: Jews, who represent less than one per cent of the French population, are the victims of half the country's hate crimes, and in recent years they've been the repeated targets of murderous violence.

On January 8th, there was a nationwide minute of silence for the *Charlie* victims. At least a hundred incidents were reported of students in banlieue schools refusing to observe it. People in the 93 explained that some rebellious kids were just acting out. But the public was outraged. Sarkozy, eying another shot at the Presidency in 2017, demanded that schools stop serving halal food—if Muslim kids didn't want to eat pork, they could forgo eating.

Hélène Kuhn munch teaches history in a vocational high school in Colombes, a *banlieue* northwest of Paris. The vocational schools are despised, she said, as tools of "exclusion from the system," and they have few resources. Kuhn munch is a fifteen-year veteran who teaches banlieue youths because she loves their humor and energy. In 2008, she and a group of immigrant kids made a documentary film about the Franco-Algerian history that lay buried in the children's families. One boy discovered that his father had been among the Algerians thrown by police into the Seine. (He survived.)

Kuhn munch said that her students responded to the *Charlie* attacks with defensiveness, adding, "This wasn't new, this feeling of always being pushed back on their origins, their religion, of being insulted." Kuhn munch, who lives in Paris, did not attend the unity march at the Place de la République, because she knew "that the *banlieues* would not be there." She spent that day gathering material for a class on the attacks.

In school on Monday, a Muslim student raised his hand. "Madame, the cartoons—I was against them," he said. "But you don't kill for that." It saddened Kuhn munch that he felt compelled to

reassure her. Others echoed the conspiracy theories on social media, including one dreamy, funny boy who was among her favorites, but who had closed up in anger. Kuhn munch turned the discussion to the history of secularism. In the *banlieues*, *laïcité* has become synonymous with atheism and Islamophobia. Kuhn munch told her students about the Edict of Nantes, in 1598, when King Henry IV granted rights to French Protestants for the first time. The class discussed laws, passed in the eighteen-eighties, which eliminated religious education in public schools. She showed her students anti-clerical cartoons from that time, and they analyzed *Charlie's* drawings (though not ones of Muhammad) in their political context.

"They realized that the same arguments were made then on the subject of the Catholic religion and in 2004 on this story of the veil," she said. "And that moved them—that this wasn't just something against Islam, that it comes out of a tradition."

J.-P. offered to take me to a mosque in Bobigny. He rarely went there himself; his attachment to Islam had less to do with faith than with cultural identity. One Friday afternoon, he showed up at the concrete shopping mall in the town center wearing a glossy black hooded coat, a long black skirt over gray sweatpants, green-and-yellow sneakers, and earphones—religious gangster attire. We followed a footpath away from the projects, under railroad tracks, up to a scrubby clearing beside a junk yard of decaying freight containers. A double trailer stood next to a white tent. This was the central mosque of Bobigny, a town of fifty thousand people. (A new mosque, planned for years, remained unbuilt.) There was a bottleneck where men streamed through the door of one of the trailers. Women, out of view, were presumably in the other trailer. In the entryway, shoes were piled waist high. We squeezed inside the sanctuary, which had barely eight feet of headroom, and found places at the back.

At least two hundred men were kneeling, heads bowed to the carpet. On the coming Sunday, a few miles away, the magnificent, cavernous churches of Paris would be nearly empty. The imam, an elderly Tunisian who spoke little French, gave the closing prayer. J.-P. kept his earphones in.

Afterward, in the crush at the exit—old North African men, young blacks in street clothes, fundamentalists with long beards in ankle-length skirts—J.-P. introduced me to some of his friends. "*Allahu akbar!*" they exclaimed in surprised welcome, but they seemed even more surprised to see J.-P. He said to me, "Not everyone has to be a Muslim in the same way. There are sixty-two approaches to Islam."

I mentioned a few I knew about, including Sufism and Salafism.

"We're all Salafists," J.-P. said. "We all want to live like the companions of the Prophet in the seventh century."

The Salafists I knew were extreme ascetics—they didn't drink, smoke, or sleep around. J.-P. enjoyed his "glass of wine," and had plans to get wasted that very night. His idea of Salafism seemed little more than an aspiration to be a more observant Muslim.

He had hesitated to take me inside a *cité*—he had too many enemies. Instead of showing me around his own housing project, he led me across the street to a larger block of towers called *Chemin Vert*. J.-P. knew everyone there, too. "This guy is a big rapper," he said of a loiterer, who nodded warily. Two young Arabs were hanging out in front of a tower, and J.-P. identified one as a dealer. The other, learning that I had come from America, cried, "Is it true that Tupac is dead?" A group of bearded men from the mosque greeted us. J.-P. introduced me to one of them, joking that the man might be heading off to Syria. The man smiled uneasily.

In the deserted center of Chemin Vert, on a plaza surrounded by eight twenty-story towers, J.-P. stopped walking. "See?" he said. "It closes you off." The *cit  * felt like the perimeter walls of a prison. Even Brutalist Bobigny had disappeared. J.-P. was gazing at nothing I could discern. The air was dense with rain that wouldn't fall. "There's nothing at all for kids," he said. "I've never seen the 'Mona Lisa.' I want to see it before I die."

In the middle of the *cit  *, at a fast-food counter, we ordered lunch: a pile of fried meat covered in processed cheese. J.-P., still wearing earphones, asked the cook what he thought of the Islamic State. The cook said that it was bad. J.-P. agreed, but his politics were heavily inflected with a sense of Muslim oppression. If Muslims wanted to go fight in Syria or Iraq, that was their business. France was different. If someone hurt France, he hurt J.-P., too.

"France is our mother," J.-P. said as he ate. His own mother was a white Frenchwoman. "Your father, he gives you more—Islam. But your mother is still your mother. And, whatever happens, you'll love her your whole life. Even if she didn't cherish you."

Other Muslims had described themselves as unloved children of the republic. Widad Ketfi, the journalist, said, "If you have children you don't take care of, a day will come when you tell them, 'Do this,' and they'll say, 'I don't give a damn. You're not my father.'" Sometimes French Muslims compete for their father's love with his other, more favored children—the Jews. Or else they search for another father.

"Islam sometimes brings the radiance and love and affection that the republic doesn't give," J.-P. said. He laughed at his own words. "Because me—I'm rotten."

When I met J.-P., he was looking for work. Eventually, Ben Ahmed helped him find a job as a housepainter, with the city of Bondy. But J.-P.'s life was hardly stable. He had a court date pending—he had been charged with armed assault. He told me that he wasn't too worried about returning to jail, because he was "four hundred per cent innocent." The first of his prison terms, he told me, had been in Villepinte, near the airport. Among the inmates was Amedy Coulibaly.

Coulibaly, the French son of Malian parents, grew up in a *cit  * south of Paris. At fifteen, he began a career in armed robbery, and during one of his imprisonments, in 2006, he met a newly converted Islamist named Ch  rif Kouachi. Both twenty-three, they found a mentor in a veteran jihadist named Djamel Beghal, who had been born in Algeria and had brought radical Islamist views with him when he moved to France, in 1987. Beghal visited Afghanistan and became an Al Qaeda operative in 2000; the following year, he was charged in France with plotting to bomb the U.S. Embassy in Paris. From an isolation cell in prison, he managed to communicate with Coulibaly and Kouachi. At one point, Coulibaly used a smuggled camera to shoot video of the prison's dismal conditions. The footage aired on French TV.

The leading authority on jihadism in French prisons is an Iranian sociologist in Paris named Farhad Khosrokhavar. For his book "Radicalisation," published just before the January attacks, he spent three days a week in French prisons for three years, developing a theory of inmate conversion. It happens in stages. Most of the recruits grow up without fathers and without any religious knowledge—only anger and alienation in the *banlieues*. They fall into crime and end up in prison. J.-P. described the mind-set of some of his fellow-inmates: "I'm in prison, the state is to blame—it pushed me to live this life." Prisoners watch a lot of TV news, and see war and death in Muslim countries. Someone like Coulibaly, J.-P. said, starts to "mix all this together" and create his own ideology, then "runs across a bad person who influences him." One former prisoner I met in the 93 explained that Islamists target the fragiles, psychologically weak inmates who never receive visits. They are offered solace, a new identity, and a political vision inverting the social order that places

them at the bottom.

As Khosrokhavar analyzes it, prisoners are “born again”: “Through jihadism, they transform the contempt of the others. . . . Once they become jihadists, people fear them. One of them told me, ‘Once they fear you, they cannot be contemptuous toward you anymore.’ ” After converts are released, they go on an “initiation journey” to the Middle East or North Africa, where they become capable of extreme violence. They come to think “that they belong elsewhere, to the Islamic community, and not to the French society.”

Khosrokhavar estimates that, of France’s sixty-four thousand prisoners, up to sixty per cent are Muslim. (Muslims are thought to compose only eight per cent of the population.) These inmates are served by fewer than two hundred prison imams, many of whom are older immigrants and unable to understand life in the *banlieues*. France once had many Islamist mosques, but its internal intelligence service rooted out radical imams, and the country’s mosques are now pointedly apolitical. Recruitment, therefore, happens outside the mosque, in prisons or on the Internet. The conversion process rarely involves more than three people, to thwart infiltration. French intelligence estimates the number of suspected jihadists to be three thousand, in a country of sixty-five million people.

Radicalization, then, is not a mass phenomenon in the *banlieues*. “There are no jihadi pools,” Jean-Pierre Filiu, an Arabist at the *élite* Paris Institute of Political Studies, said. Becoming a jihadist is a quantum leap requiring self-isolation, a break with one’s upbringing, and dehumanization of non-Muslims.

In 2007, after Coulibaly was released, he appeared to go straight. He got a short-term job at a Coca-Cola bottling plant, married his girlfriend, Hayat Boumeddiene, in an Islamic ceremony, and met President Sarkozy, at a 2009 event promoting youth employment. But Coulibaly led a double life. He cut himself off from his parents, whom he considered infidels. He stayed in touch with Beghal and Kouachi after their release, meeting in the South of France and supplying them with weapons and money. “When jihadis go on the run, they don’t go to the *banlieues*,” Filiu said. “They go to the countryside, to a place where you don’t have a Muslim for ten kilometres.”

In 2010, French police arrested Coulibaly again, finding a stash of ammunition in his apartment. He was convicted of plotting to spring from prison an Islamist who had organized bombings around France in 1995, killing eight people. Coulibaly was sent to Villepinte prison, where J.-P. was serving time. They watched TV and competed on a PlayStation. “He was nice, smiling, pleasant,” J.-P. recalled. “I never saw him bother anyone. He never preached. If someone told me this person was capable of doing what happened, I wouldn’t have bet on that horse.” Coulibaly was released early, in March, 2014. He slipped off the police radar, before surfacing just after the Charlie massacre as the Kouachis’ accomplice and a self-proclaimed soldier of the Islamic State.

More than the Kouachi brothers, Coulibaly, who was killed by French police during the standoff at the kosher market, became a subject of fascination in the *banlieues*. The Kouachis were raised as orphans in a provincial institution, and were radicalized in their early twenties, after the invasion of Iraq, by recruiters in the northeast corner of Paris. For the Kouachis, a jihadist destiny seemed overdetermined. Coulibaly was the son of a factory worker, and was raised by both parents in a *cité* south of Paris. And he was black. France’s high-profile jihadists had been Arabs, from Zacarias Moussaoui, the thwarted “twentieth hijacker” of September 11th, to Mohammed Merah, who murdered three Jewish schoolchildren, a rabbi, and three paratroopers in the Toulouse area, in 2012. A young man of Malian origin told me that, when Coulibaly’s face appeared on French TV, in front of a homemade Islamic State banner, a friend of his mother’s cried out, “Oh, no—now they’ll accuse us. That’s why I tell you not to hang out with Arabs!”

Mehdi Meklat and Badroutine Abdallah, of Bondy Blog, found Coulibaly such an enigma that they considered writing a novel about him. “He could be someone we know,” Meklat said. And yet Coulibaly had cast himself in the role of a great man. At the kosher supermarket, after killing three customers and an employee, he calmly introduced himself to his fifteen hostages, saying, “Je suis Amedy Coulibaly. I am Malian and Muslim. I belong to the Islamic State.” (Abdallah noted the eerie echo of “*Je suis Charlie*.”)

In videos made just before the attack and posted after his death, Coulibaly keeps changing costume, as if to emphasize his transformation. He wears a gangbanger’s leather jacket in one, a military flak vest in another, a turban and the white robe of a martyr in a third. Always, an automatic is at his side. “It was as if, for him, he didn’t exist enough,” Abdallah said. “It wasn’t enough to be a normal guy.”

From the supermarket, Coulibaly contacted the media, asking to speak with the police and pledging allegiance to the Islamic State. During the siege, he angrily justified his actions to his hostages, citing the incarceration of Muslims, hostility toward women wearing the hijab, Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, and French military action in Mali and Syria. He demanded to know why, if French citizens could rally together after the *Charlie* massacre, they had never demonstrated on behalf of persecuted Muslims. “I was born in France,” he declared.

Abdallah and Meklat noted that, in 2000, during an armed robbery, the police had shot and killed a close friend of Coulibaly’s right in front of him. Coulibaly, in other words, was a fragile. It wasn’t hard to get him to “go against French society,” Abdallah said, because France had already rejected him. In this explanation, a fairly direct line could be drawn between Coulibaly’s life in the Paris suburbs and terrorism. But this didn’t account for why almost no other *banlieusards*—including criminals who had been subject to worse indignities—had committed mass murder against schoolchildren, Jews, and cartoonists. The social explanation, used commonly on the left in France and the U.S., oddly mirrors the right’s tendency to make an amalgame—to mix up terrorists with all Muslims. Both views suggest that an evil deed can be attributed largely to a perpetrator’s social or religious identity. In addition to insulting the vast majority of French Muslims, this analysis fails to treat Coulibaly as an individual. And it ignores the fact that he had adopted a set of beliefs. In one of Coulibaly’s videos, he describes his motives in the stark terms of ideology: “What we’re doing is totally legitimate given what you’re doing. It’s vengeance. You attack the caliphate, you attack the Islamic State? We attack you. You’re the ones killing. Why—because we uphold Sharia? Even in our own land we can’t uphold Sharia. You get to decide what happens on earth?”

Another youth whom Ben Ahmed tried to help was named Stéphane. He came from a Catholic Haitian family and grew up near his friend J.-P., in a cité in Bobigny. When Stéphane was thirteen, his father died and he became so disruptive at school that he was expelled. He turned to petty crime, and he and his friends regularly drank themselves into a stupor.

At sixteen, Stéphane heard someone reciting a verse of the Koran and felt tears come to his eyes. He didn’t understand the words, but the sounds moved him. Most of his friends were Muslims, and he decided to convert. He stopped drinking, and quit a restaurant training program that required him to prepare pork. But he wasn’t ready to go completely straight, and at nineteen he was arrested and sentenced to eighteen months in prison. Inside, he began praying five times a day, and when he got out he vowed to reform his life. He started a business that rented inflatable castles and other equipment for children’s parties, and made a point of hiring unemployed locals. He formed a group that organized excursions for youths in the cités. He married J.-P.’s cousin, and with his earnings he moved to a small house not far from Ben Ahmed’s.

I met Stéphane there one day in February. We sat at the kitchen table while his wife, who was

pregnant, watched TV. Stéphane was lightly bearded and wore pajama bottoms and a T-shirt that clung to his muscular torso. His answers were terse until I asked him what role life in the banlieues had played in the January attacks.

"The neighborhoods and the environment don't create it—it's the people themselves," he said. Men like Coulibaly "think everything here in this lower world is useless, it's just a passage. And this ideology that they have—it's not the fact that you live in a *banlieue* that gives it to you. It's your faith." Stéphane could see that Coulibaly was "fed up" with "the injustice we have here in France." But even if Coulibaly's milieu was the context for his actions, it wasn't the cause. "He reacted—and a lot of people react, you know. But most don't have such a strong faith to do those acts that he did."

What stops them? I asked.

"Fear."

Stéphane leaned forward, his eyes fixed on mine. He hadn't said that he admired Coulibaly's actions, but he hadn't issued the immediate condemnation made by nearly everyone else I'd met in the 93. Stéphane seemed to be saying that what separated Coulibaly from all the other pissed-off Muslims in the banlieues was the intensity of his convictions.

Andrew Hussey, the British scholar in Paris, described the intoxicating, mystical quality of jihadism. "It's not an ideology of social conditions," he said. "This is not about poverty, this is not about improving people's conditions. It's about hatred, to some extent. Purification." He likened it to the Fascism of the nineteen-thirties. Jihadism doesn't have the contours of ordinary politics. "This will turn you from 'I am nothing' to 'I should be everything,' " Hussey said. Jihadism attracted both wealthy insiders like bin Laden and poor outsiders like Coulibaly. It was "a floating ideology, like the cloud—you've just got to lock onto it."

I asked Stéphane to describe the injustice that Coulibaly was reacting to.

"Injustice toward Muslims."

Injustice toward Muslims led Stéphane straight to the Jews. They were, he believed, a privileged community in France. They exploited their historical tragedy and French guilt to acquire power. He pointed out that in Drancy, another banlieue in the 93, a memorial museum stands across from the cité that had been France's main transit center for Jews destined for concentration camps. "But they don't recognize the slavery that there was in Haiti, in Africa, everywhere," he said. The Shoah was a crime. "But why recognize one and not another? You have to be equal. We say '*égalité, fraternité*.' "

The crime of slavery couldn't be acknowledged, because of the vast fortunes made from it. France had given money to Israel as compensation for the French role in the Holocaust—imagine what it would cost to make reparations for slavery! Coulibaly had chosen his target carefully, Stéphane said: "It's a symbol, to say that, with all the injustice here, stop focussing on the threats to one religion."

I asked why Coulibaly hadn't directed his anger at a church, given that most of France's citizens are Catholic. "Because France isn't controlled by the Christians," Stéphane said. He claimed that France's tiny population of Jews controls the National Assembly, the media, and the banks. The Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, is married to a Jew, and, according to Stéphane, that was why he went on TV after the attacks and said, "France without Jews is not France." Valls didn't say, "France isn't France without Muslims."

Stéphane had only praise for Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Front. "The real French, *Français de souche*, they see that France is now controlled by the Jews," he said. I asked if

Le Pen, who is known for having anti-immigrant views, posed a threat to French Muslims. “When I see Valls, I think Islamophobe,” Stéphane said. “Marine Le Pen, I think pure French who wants to give everything to the French. Understand?”

“Does that include you?”

“Me? I’m French.” Stéphane showed me his identity card. “Lots of Muslims are going to vote for Marine Le Pen.” I had heard this from others, and some political data bore it out. “You know what they say—the enemies of my enemies are my friends.”

Ben Ahmed had known Stéphane for years, and had admired that he cared enough about kids in the *cités* to volunteer his time and help. His successful business also offered inspiration to banlieue residents. But after the January attacks they argued. Stéphane insisted that *Charlie Hebdo* was Islamophobic, and Ben Ahmed thought that he was implying that the staffers might have deserved their fate. The argument upset Ben Ahmed deeply.

Last summer’s war in Gaza provoked widespread demonstrations in France, and some turned violent and explicitly anti-Semitic, with attacks on synagogues and kosher shops. One day in August, Ben Ahmed was driving home from Bondy’s city hall when he heard someone shout, “Dirty Jew!” He stopped. A man in a kippah was walking away from another man.

“Dirty asshole!” Ben Ahmed yelled at the man who had hurled the insult. It was someone he knew, and the man, seeing him, looked surprised, saying, “Hey, why are you talking like that?”

“When you respect him, I’ll respect you,” Ben Ahmed said.

The anti-Semite walked away. The Jew thanked Ben Ahmed. “People are making an amalgame,” he said. In the *banlieues*, French Jews were commonly conflated with Israelis.

“Do you often get insulted?” Ben Ahmed asked.

“No, it’s the first time. It’s the war.”

“No, it’s just an asshole,” Ben Ahmed said. “A visible minority, that’s all.”

Ben Ahmed was being too sanguine. If there were only around three thousand potential jihadists in France, there were far more anti-Semites—many of them *Français de souche*. A generation ago, Muslims and Jews lived together in the banlieues with the sociability of immigrant neighbors. Today, few Jews remain in the *banlieues*, and those who do downplay their identity. A friend of Ben Ahmed’s said that her Jewish friends tell their children not to wear the kippah outside.

The old anti-Semitism of the French right and the newer immigrant strain were united in 2008, when Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the National Front, became godfather to the third child of Dieudonné M’bala M’bala, the French-Cameroonian comedian, who turns Jew-baiting into lucrative entertainment. Dieudonné has an avid following in the *banlieues*—Stéphane’s views about Jews could have been lifted from a Dieudonné monologue. Unless you’re already on his team, Dieudonné is distinctly unfunny. His 2012 film, “The Anti-Semite,” begins with a mock silent movie, with jaunty piano accompaniment, in which Dieudonné plays an American soldier who’s just liberated Auschwitz. (If only historical ignorance were the movie’s main failing.) A grovelling prisoner shows him around the camp. Inside a gas chamber, Dieudonné dabs his neck with Zyklon B, as if it were cologne; in the crematorium, he mistakes children’s remains for chicken bones. When he sits in a leather armchair, the prisoner tells him, “Careful, you’re sitting on my grandma!”

Dieudonné has spread anti-Semitism beyond extremist circles into popular culture. In Montreuil, I met a restaurant health inspector, Saïd Allam, who is a fan. “Dieudonné is the same as *Charlie Hebdo*—it’s satire,” Allam said. “He does sketches to make people laugh at Jews, *Charlie Hebdo* does cartoons of the Prophet to make people laugh—it’s the same thing.” After the massacres, Dieudonné wrote on his Facebook page, with typical slyness, “I feel I’m Charlie Coulibaly.” In response, the authorities prosecuted him for supporting terrorism, and he’s been convicted several times for inciting racial hatred; this has led his admirers to accuse the government of a double standard. “People say, ‘In killing *Charlie Hebdo* you killed freedom of expression,’ ” Allam said. “But you already killed freedom of expression in sending Dieudonné to court.” Complaints about double standards displaced the horror of the killings with a more comfortable sense of victimization. The argument that *Charlie* attacks religious politics, whereas Dieudonné goes after Jews, was far too subtle for the fraught atmosphere that prevailed after January 7th. So was the notion that hate-speech laws are inherently problematic, not least because they’re bound to inspire charges of selective application.

Ben Ahmed detested Dieudonné. “He’s the only comedian who could gather in one room Islamophobes, anti-Semites, and anti-élites, and make them all laugh,” he said. “Not because it’s funny, but out of hatred.”

In 2006, a multiracial gang led by Youssef Fofana, a criminal of Ivorian descent, kidnapped a Jewish cell-phone salesman named Ilan Halimi and took him to a *cité* south of Paris. The gang wanted ransom money. According to an associate of the gang, Fofana believed that the state considered him a slave, and that “Jews were kings, because they ate the state’s money.” Fofana, assuming that all Jews were rich, demanded four hundred and fifty thousand euros. But Halimi’s family couldn’t afford this, and the kidnappers tortured Halimi—with punches, lit cigarettes, acid, and, finally, knives.

After twenty-four days, Halimi was found, naked and mutilated, tied to a tree in a park south of Paris. He died en route to the hospital. During his long agony, at least fifty people in the *cité*—from gang members to neighbors—knew that something was going on, but no one called the police.

In a sense, the Halimi case was even more troubling than the January attacks. Because so many residents had sanctioned the violence, it suggested that lawlessness and hate had become endemic in the *banlieues*. Marc Weitzmann, a novelist who is writing a book about French anti-Semitism, said that, in the *banlieues*, a hatred of Jews “is in the background of the values they grow up with—it’s ready to be activated as soon as they move from nihilistic delinquency to the search for meaning.” For some residents, anti-Semitism can be the path toward radicalism.

Ben Ahmed said that he had two jobs in the 93: “to correct bad ideas in religion, and to end the stigmatization of that religion.” It was a difficult balancing act. What if correcting bad ideas led to more stigmatization of Islam? For example, what should one call the religious ideas that, according to Stéphane, had given Amedy Coulibaly the courage to act?

Allam, the restaurant health inspector from Montreuil, lamented the fact that the killings were labelled “an Islamist act.” He added, “It’s very, very serious to say that, because it implicates a religion in murderous acts.” If a blond man killed cartoonists for caricaturing blonds, he argued, people would call him crazy. “And a guy who kills people in the name of religion is a crazy man.”

But the words “Islamic” and “Islamist” are not the same, and allow a crucial political distinction to be made between ordinary believers and ideologues—a distinction that protects Muslims from being equated with jihadists. Nevertheless, the wound of exclusion has festered in French Muslims for so long that the subject of Islamist terrorism is almost too sensitive to touch. An honest conversation

about it would require a degree of trust that hardly exists.

One evening, Ben Ahmed prepared dinner at the house of his next-door neighbor, Valérie Tabet, a widowed piano teacher whose daughter attends the same school as Ben Ahmed's kids. The two families are close. Tabet, who has pale skin and short, dark-blond hair, told me that it's no longer safe for young children to be out alone on the streets of the 93, and Ben Ahmed has become a kind of father figure to her daughter. While Ben Ahmed poured *crêpe* batter onto a griddle in the Tabet's dining room, he and Valérie discussed how someone becomes a terrorist.

Ben Ahmed said, "I have the impression in fact that it's rather simple, how these people can flip from one day to the next."

"It isn't from one day to the next," Tabet said.

"For me, it's a question of people who either are psychologically ill, maybe a little crazy," Ben Ahmed said. "These people are very fragile, and at a given moment they're recruited by people—"

"There's too many jihadis for me to agree with you," Tabet interrupted. "The Kouachi brothers were fragile in their makeup—a lack of bearings, a lack of education, a lack of a vision of life, and later that leads to violence—but I don't agree that they were nuts."

Ben Ahmed said that this wasn't what he meant. In addition to the psychiatric cases, there were the psychologically weak, like the Kouachis: "These people would have got in a fight on the street for nothing, for a parking place." He added, "Coulibaly, he scares me a bit, because his family life was more normal." Somehow, Coulibaly was indoctrinated, and then he found it all too easy to find weapons.

"It's very easy to get them," Tabet agreed. "But there's a lot of people who are made fragile by society, because there's not enough work for everyone, because of social problems and all that. But what I see is that there's a point in common among those people—they're Muslims." She added quickly, "And it's not to point a finger, because I mean the potential terrorists. But the problem for me is what they hear in the mosques, in small groups." She spoke of radical imams preaching hate.

Ben Ahmed said that Tabet was simply repeating what she'd heard in the media.

"But someone indoctrinates them."

"The people who do that are in a network, but not in a network you would call Muslim," Ben Ahmed said. "Not in the mosque." He searched for the name of Coulibaly's recruiter in jail. "Djamel Beghal. He isn't an imam."

"You can't say that there aren't people who use religion to attract these youths."

"You say 'people,' sure, but you also said 'imams.' I'm not saying they don't exist, but you're generalizing from the exception."

"I'm saying there are many reasons, and the point in common is these are young Muslims. And that means something—it means that they're using religion."

Ben Ahmed seemed to be afraid that if he accepted Tabet's view he would end up vindicating the Islamophobes. He couldn't cross that line. The two friends were on the verge of an argument that might inflict lasting hurts.

"Your opinion is interesting," Ben Ahmed said. "The thing is, I'm convinced that this doesn't really happen in the mosques. It's in prison."

"Yes, that's certain," Tabet said.

"And there are people who come to the mosques to talk with some of them and succeed in capturing them, on the side."

"Voilà."

They had found just enough common ground to move on.

More than fifteen hundred French citizens have left to join the Islamic State—a quarter of the European total. Around two hundred of them have returned to France. A growing number of these new recruits have no connection to the *banlieues*. According to Farhad Khosrokhavar, the majority of French Muslims going to Syria are now middle-class youths, some of them white converts to Islam, and an increasing percentage of them female. They come from big cities and small towns. "They do not belong to broken families," Khosrokhavar said. Their radicalization can happen in a very short time, a matter of weeks, usually through social media. They go to the Middle East because they're moved by the plight of fellow-Muslims. Once there, some are shocked by the Islamic State's violence and try to return home; others are seduced by it.

A few days before the January attacks, Hayat Boumeddiene, Coulibaly's wife, flew from Madrid to Turkey, then crossed into Syria. A security camera at the Istanbul airport captured her entry into Turkey, alongside a young man with a thin beard, his long black hair tied back in a bun. He was a twenty-three-year-old from the 93 named Mehdi Belhoucine. His older brother, Mohamed, had become radicalized through the Internet around 2009, and afterward relayed messages for a network of French jihadists headed for central Asia. Mohamed and Mehdi were now believed to be in Syria. The brothers had been excellent students—Mohamed had done advanced studies in mine engineering, Mehdi in electronic mechanics—and were from a middle-class family who lived in a private house. Ben Ahmed knew their mother, who worked with him at Bondy's city hall. "Very nice lady," he said. "It's too, too sad."

Sylvine Thomassin, the mayor of Bondy, told me, "I had a clear view of jihadism before January—families with educational deficiencies, parents who hadn't done well, kids failing at school." It was, she said, a weirdly "reassuring diagram," because it made the pathway of radicalism seem predictable. Then came the stunning news of the Belhoucine brothers' connection to the authors of the Paris attacks. The mayor, who knew the Belhoucines well, now found it impossible to come up with a profile. "Our Muslim fellow-citizens live overwhelmingly in public housing, and the majority are confronted with the same problems as those who are radicalized, and yet they aren't radicalized," she said. "So the problem definitely isn't the *banlieues*. Perhaps it's the hypersensitivity of a very small number to this discourse around them."

Xavier Nogueras, a defense lawyer in Paris, represents twenty French citizens accused of jihadism. A few of his clients are violent and dangerous, he said, but many went to Syria out of idealism, wanting to defend other Muslims against the Assad regime and build an Islamic state. He argued that such people pose no threat to France and that the state shouldn't permanently embitter them with years of detention. Nogueras resisted tracing his clients' motives to social conditions in the *banlieues*. Few have criminal backgrounds; some had well-paid jobs in large French companies. "The most surprising thing to me is their immense humanity," Nogueras said. He finds jihadists more interesting than the drug dealers and robbers he's represented. "They have more to say—many more ideas. Their sacred book demands the application of Sharia, which tells them to cover their wives,

not to live in secularism. And we are in a country that inevitably stigmatizes them, because it's secular. They don't feel at home here."

I found the lawyer's distinction between jihadism at home and abroad less than reassuring. Coulibaly's faith could have led him to kill people in Paris or in Syria; violence driven by ideology could happen anywhere. The "idealism" of clients motivated to make Sharia universal law is, in some ways, more worrying than simple thuggery: even if France dedicates itself urgently to making its Muslims full-fledged children of the republic, a small minority of them will remain, on principle, irreconcilable.

On a commercial street in the 93, in a sparsely furnished apartment with no name on the buzzer, Sonia Imloul, a social worker of Algerian origin, meets with families of radicalized young people. Cases come to her through police departments or through government agencies that have been contacted by the families, on a hot line. Sitting down at the kitchen table, Imloul lit a cigarette and said, "I've had children of doctors, journalists, generals. I'd say it's almost a national epidemic." She remains "super-vigilant" about her fourteen-year-old son.

Imloul's method is to maintain a young person's ties to his or her family before an "initiation journey" occurs. "The family often has the answer, without knowing it," she said. Radicalization has been a phenomenon in France for thirty years; devising a proper solution may take another thirty. The problem is acute in France, Imloul said, partly because the republic's rigid secularism leaves no room for serious discussions of religious identity. "With a radical, if you don't talk to him about religion, you can't talk about anything," she said. France has taken an entirely punitive approach to the problem. Imloul's "prevention cell" is the only such program in the country.

The January attacks created a genuine sense of crisis, and Prime Minister Valls made passionate speeches condemning the "geographic, social, ethnic apartheid" that denies French citizens in places like the 93 full entry into the republic. Thomassin, the mayor of Bondy (and Ben Ahmed's boss), showed me a map to pinpoint where high-rise *cités* are being torn down and replaced by smaller buildings surrounded by green space. The goal was to encourage a new spirit of neighborliness. The mayor of Le Blanc-Mesnil, another banlieue in the 93, described a similar plan, along New Urbanist lines, that allowed public-housing renters to become homeowners. I got the feeling that, after decades of denial, France was now playing catch-up.

"We're at war, but not against a religion," Valls said. France was "at war to defend our values, which are universal." He urged French Muslims to see it as their struggle, too. "It is a war against terrorism and radical Islamism, against everything that aims to break our solidarity, liberty, fraternity."

For two or three decades, a soft multiculturalism has been the default politics of the governing left, while France's silent majority, more and more culturally insecure, has moved rightward, and the banlieues have been allowed to rot. The National Front voter and the radicalized Muslim feel equally abandoned. According to the political scientist Laurent Bouvet, the January attacks, like an underwater bomb, brought all these trends to the surface. "Secularism is our common good," Bouvet said. "If there is a common French identity, it's not an identity of roots, it's not a Christian identity, it's not cathedrals, it's not the white race. It's a political project." He went on, "If we let the National Front define French identity, it's going to be by race, by blood, by religion."

France has an official "*rapporteur général*" for secularism, and currently it is an earnest young Socialist politician named Nicolas Cadène. He told me that France had failed to create a national story that included all its citizens. The shock of the attacks and the divisive fallout made a new approach imperative, and he sketched a program of reform starting with the schools: explain the

meaning of secularism while teaching “impartial, neutral” facts about different religions as a way to make students more tolerant and critical-minded; integrate more colonial history into the curriculum; encourage the teaching of Arabic in public schools, so that this wasn’t left to madrassas. Some of these changes will be instituted this fall.

Jean-Pierre Filiu, the Arabist, told me that, for more than a decade, Sciences Po—the social-science institution where he teaches—has been admitting a portion of each new class on the basis of slightly different entrance criteria. French law forbids discrimination by ethnicity or religion, so Sciences Po uses geography instead. “We want to bring in students from the 93,” Filiu said. “I’ve been sitting on those juries, and the banlieues are among the best, because you have la niaque”—heart, a fighting instinct. I thought of what such a chance would have meant to Ben Ahmed.

Elections in France’s hundred departments were scheduled for late March. Ben Ahmed decided to run as a Socialist to represent Bobigny. When his campaign posters were defaced with swastikas and racist graffiti—“Dirty Arab”—he ignored it. He spent nights and weekends leafletting and shaking hands in his old hangouts. The residents greeted him as one of them, but many thought that voting was pointless. He told his most resistant neighbors—the old women in full hijab, the jobless men at the corner bar, J.-P. and his gang—that they couldn’t abstain if they wanted to be equal citizens.

Ben Ahmed came in fourth. Even the candidate from the National Front beat him. The Socialists, being the party in power, did badly almost everywhere. The extreme right continued to rise. But Ben Ahmed wasn’t discouraged. He believed in politics, and he believed in France. He would try again.

George Packer

P.S.

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<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/08/31/the-other-france>

* George Packer became a staff writer in 2003.