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17 months: How much more can France (...)**

Nice - After the third mass killing in 17 months: How much more can France take before it spirals into hatred?

Sunday 17 July 2016, by [LICHFIELD John](#) (Date first published: 16 July 2016).

The existence of a powerful, xenophobic far right, and racist elements on the centre-right, is building tension across France.

Why has France become such a persistent target for jihadist assault?

There is a temptation, both inside and outside the country to suggest that France, and successive French governments, may be partly to blame. This hides a darker reality.

The truck attack which slaughtered 84 people in Nice was the third mass killing in France in 17 months. There have also been a cluster of other, “smaller” incidents which were broadly jihadist in nature.

A senior police officer and his wife were murdered in their home in a western Paris suburb last month. A truck driver beheaded his boss and rammed a chemical plant near Lyon 13 months ago.

There was also a man who tried to attack a police station near Tours with a long knife; a man who was shot dead when he approached a Paris police station wearing a fake explosives belt; another incident in which a motorist rammed and injured pedestrians; a man who shot himself in the foot after kidnapping and murdering a young woman. He was planning, it is believed, to attack a church south of Paris.

In several incidents – including the attack in Nice – there are reasons to question the sanity and doubt the coherent political motives of the attackers. Were they sincere jihadists or depressive psychotics?

This distinction is misleading.

There are plausible reasons to “explain” why France is under persistent attack. France has the largest Muslim population in Europe, about 4,700,000 people, many of whom are non-practising.

France is the biggest single foreign recruiting ground for Isis. About 2,000 young French men and women have travelled to join the “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, some of them rising to senior positions.

France has a violent and complex history of entanglement and colonisation in North Africa and the Middle East. Since the 2005 suburban riots, little has been done to make second and third generation Muslim youths feel French.

France's ostentatiously secular state has generated conflicts with even moderate Muslim opinion: the ban on head-scarves in schools; the public ban on burkas; the aggressive anti-clericalism of *Charlie Hebdo*.

The existence of a powerful, xenophobic far-right, and racist elements on the centre-right, builds tensions with their anti-Muslim, not just anti-Islamist, rhetoric.

There are also grave doubts about the quality of France's security and intelligence services. A damning parliamentary report last week pointed out that France has four internal security services (including one for Paris alone) but no central anti-terrorism agency.

A botched attempt by former President Nicolas Sarkozy to rationalise this mess made things worse by scrapping much of the plodding, grass-roots, internal intelligence-gathering which Britain boasts that it has perfected.

None of this entirely explains or encompasses the nature of the threat now facing France – and not just France. It would be foolish for any western country to believe that they are sheltered from “another Nice”. The best internal intelligence in the world could not have foretold that Mohamed Bouhlel would flip from minor crime, domestic violence and road rage to callous mass slaughter.

One of France's foremost experts on the Arab world and jihadism, Gilles Kepel, warns that the western world faces a new and unpredictable form of jihadist offensive. He traces a decision made by Islamic State two years ago to turn away from well-organised and well-funded attacks such as 9/11, or even the 13 November assault on Paris.

This new “jihadist software”, he says, centres on random attacks by disturbed or floundering individuals who are influenced – often outside direct Isis control – to make sense of their failed lives by killing “miscreants”. The preferred means, specifically listed by Isis propaganda, are not guns or explosives but banal, everyday weapons such as stones or knives or cars or trucks.

France, Mr Kepel suggests, has been picked as the softest initial target for this strategy. The aim is to create widespread panic and racial suspicion – the conditions for a non-Muslim v Muslim civil war, and not just in France.

Beyond a few fanatics, France, both Muslim and non-Muslim, has resisted the *engrenage* (spiral) of hatred which Isis seeks.

For how long?

John Lichfield

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<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/how-much-more-can-france-take-before-it-spirals-into-hatred-a-7140686.html>