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TERRORISM IN FRANCE IN 2021 – OVERVIEW OF THE FRENCH EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

The year 2021 saw the continuation of the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting the organization and functioning of the French society. The implementation of strict sanitary measures such as lockdowns, curfews and the sanitary pass have helped to slow down the spread of the virus and the number of deaths caused by it. Nevertheless, the magnitude and unprecedented nature of this crisis has had an impact on public safety. Some violent crimes, especially domestic violence, have increased. Thus, at the beginning of June, the Minister of the Interior had noted in a telegram sent to the prefects and the internal security forces that "*since the beginning of the year, we have witnessed the development of extremely violent acts*" and that these were "*probably linked to the consequences of the health crisis from which our country is emerging*". He had also specified that "*the analysis made by the central services of the Ministry of the Interior highlights in particular a progression of 20 % of the facts of domestic violence (first five months of the year 2021 compared to the same period in 2020)*", as well as a "*multiplication of serious facts of domestic violence (homicides and attempts of homicides)*"¹. The number of operations carried out by the RAID and the GIGN (French law-enforcement elite intervention teams) against entrenched suspects had also increased significantly (+137 % compared to the same period the previous year) during the first five months of the year. Among the threats affected by the health crisis, the terrorist threat must be taken into account. Indeed, each of the extremist movements active in France has reacted to the situation through a different ideological prism, as was already observed in spring 2020². The uncertainty, the unprecedented measures and the rapid changes that characterize the period have allowed them to develop specific propaganda and arguments in order to take advantage of the prevailing disorder. On the national territory, the jihadist movement remains the main threat, due to its prevalence, sophistication and lethality (I). The ultra-left, because of its significant operational activity, constitutes a serious security problem (II), as does the ultra-right, whose supporters have been arrested in large numbers this year (III). A detailed analysis of their activities and of the trends that have been observed over the last twelve months can help to prevent and anticipate the terrorist threat for 2022.

I) Jihadism : confirmation of trends and atmospheric jihad

The year 2020 had been a pivotal year for the French jihadist movement, confirming a number of trends observed in past years, associated with a sharp increase in the number of attacks³. While the average number of attacks over the 2018-2019 period was three per year, seven jihadist attacks had occurred in France last year, an increase linked to the impact of the health crisis on the movement and the republication of the Mohammed cartoons on September 2, 2020 during the trial of the January 2015 attacks. In 2021, only one jihadist attack has been qualified as terrorist by the National Anti-Terrorist Prosecutor's Office (PNAT). On April 23, Jamel Gorchane attacked Stéphanie Montfermé, an administrative officer in the

1 "La note d'alerte de Gerald Darmanin aux préfets". *LCI*, June 2021. URL : <https://www.lci.fr/societe/video-insecurite-femicides-forcenes-la-note-d-alerte-de-gerald-darmanin-sur-une-explosion-des-violences-post-confinement-en-france-2188072.html>

2 RODDE, Alexandre. "Covid-19 et terrorisme : Analyse de la menace dans un contexte de pandémie". *The CREOGN Research Notes*, Issue 48, April 2019. URL : <https://www.gendarmerie.interieur.gouv.fr/crgn/publications/les-notes-du-creogn/covid-19-et-terrorisme-analyse-de-la-menace-dans-un-contexte-de-pandemie>

3 "Terrorisme en France en 2020: Analyse de la menace dans un contexte de crise" - Alexandre RODDE, Jeunes IHEDN.

National Police, in the entrance hall of the Rambouillet police station in the Yvelines department⁴. He was then neutralized by the police officers present on scene. Stabbed twice, including a fatal wound in the throat, the victim died despite a quick intervention of the fire department. A number of elements of this attack have become typical of the current jihadist movement. It was committed by an isolated individual, without any link to terrorist groups abroad, radicalized in France where he had been living for ten years, and who chose to use a bladed weapon, a modus operandi easy to obtain and use. His chosen target, law enforcement, represents nearly 30 % of the jihadist attacks since 2015, which constitutes a French exception⁵. The phenomenon of endogenization of the jihadist threat is confirmed and amplified with a majority of attacks carried out in the city where terrorists are living, emphasizing the need for field intelligence-gathering by local units. The autonomy of jihadists, who organize and carry out their attacks alone, makes it impossible to intercept their communications during the planning phase of the attack. The atmospheric jihad described by Gilles Keppel⁶ allows jihadist militants to take violent action through propaganda actions, in the absence of an organized group capable of projecting or remotely monitoring terrorists in France. It is relevant to note that beyond the Rambouillet attack, there were three violent events sharing characteristics of jihadist attacks⁷, in La Chapelle sur Erdre (May 28th⁸), in Colombes (October 22nd) and in Cannes (November 8th⁹). Although the attacks weren't legally qualified as terrorist, a number of elements in each of them may suggest that a jihadist ideological motive existed, which has been stated by some magistrates¹⁰. Beyond the attacks, many arrests have taken place within the jihadist movement this year, almost every month, with a significant number of cases outside the Paris area, particularly in the Bas-Rhin and Bouches du Rhône departments. Among these, the recent arrest of two 23 year-old men, suspected of an "imminent and serious" attack¹¹ during the end-of-year celebrations is an interesting case. Indeed, one of them had already been sentenced in 2019, as a minor, to four years of detention for a terrorist offense. This is therefore the first terrorist attempt by a released jihadist on the French soil. By the end of 2022, nearly 250 detainees convicted of "terrorist conspiracy" will have been released, which could lead to an evolution of operational capacity within the jihadist movement. At the beginning of September, circumstances could have led to fears of a revival of the movement : the beginning of the trial of November 13 attacks, the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of 9/11 attacks, the commemoration of the 6th anniversary of Paris terror attacks during the trial, etc. While no major attacks took place, there was a resurgence of activity in the immediate periphery of France in early fall. A series of terrorist attacks in Torre Pacheco¹² (Spain), Kongsberg¹³ (Norway), Leigh-on-Sea¹⁴ and Liverpool¹⁵ (UK), combined with arrests in the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, Spain and Greece, illustrates a renewed threat on the European continent.

II) Ultra-Left : Decrease in operational activity and specialization

The French ultra-left focuses its activity on "sabotage", i.e. the destruction by arson or the disabling of infrastructures and buildings. The absence of violence against people, with the exception of law enforcement, allows the movement to benefit

- 4 "Attaque terroriste au commissariat de Rambouillet". *L'Express*, April 2021. URL : https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/attaque-terroriste-au-commissariat-de-rambouillet-une-fonctionnaire-de-police-tuee_2149510.html
- 5 The only other Western countries where law enforcement is also targeted by jihadi terrorists are, to a lesser extent, Belgium (Liege, Charleroi, Schaerbeek) and the United States.
- 6 "Qu'est ce que le djihadisme d'atmosphère? Les explications de Gilles Keppel". *Europe 1*, February 2021. URL : <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/quest-ce-que-le-djihadisme-datmosphere-les-explications-de-gilles-kepel-4024277>
- 7 These characteristics include : known assailant to the FSPRT, attack by deception on law enforcement, religious prayer or statement during the attack, stabbing, among others.
- 8 "Le témoignage des gendarmes de la Chappelle sur Erdre". *Ouest France*, November 2021. URL : <https://www.ouest-france.fr/pays-de-la-loire/nantes-44000/video-attaque-au-couteau-le-temoignage-des-gendarmes-de-la-chappelle-sur-erdre-d0795a14-237a-4d29-ae81-d0fd9cc43240>
- 9 "Policiers attaqués au couteau à Cannes, ce que l'on sait". *Le Point*, November 2021, URL : https://www.lepoint.fr/faits-divers/cannes-un-policier-attaque-au-couteau-au-nom-du-prophete-08-11-2021-2451046_2627.php
- 10 "L'attaque de la Chappelle sur Erdre relance le débat entre coup de folie et acte délibéré". *France Inter*, May 2021, URL : <https://www.franceinter.fr/societe/l-attaque-de-la-chappelle-sur-erdre-relance-le-debat-entre-coup-de-folie-et-acte-delibere>
- 11 "Deux hommes écroués pour un projet d'attaque au couteau d'inspiration jihadiste pendant Noël". *Libération*, December 2021, URL : https://www.liberation.fr/societe/police-justice/deux-hommes-ecroues-pour-un-projet-dattaque-au-couteau-dinspiration-jihadiste-pendant-noel-20211208_YULWAMXPA5GC7PLHEIY5JVWQJM/
- 12 EL KANABI, Mohamed Jaouad. "Murcia: The singular journey of Abdellah Gmara, the deceased terrorist apprentice". *Hespress*, October 2021. URL : <https://fr.hespress.com/226990-murcie-le-parcours-singulier-dabdellah-gmara-lapprenti-terroriste-decede.html>
- 13 "Attaque en Norvège: les cinq victimes n'ont pas été tuées à l'arc mais à l'arme blanche". *Libération*, October 2021. URL : https://www.liberation.fr/international/europe/attaque-en-norvege-les-cinq-victimes-nont-pas-ete-tuees-a-larc-mais-a-larme-blanche-20211018_MJSPI6NJZ5DGHJXCOSDGEYHKCE/
- 14 "Longtime U.K. Lawmaker Stabbed to Death in Attack Labeled Terrorism". *The New York Times*, October 2021. URL : <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/world/europe/conservative-mp-david-amess-stabbing.html>
- 15 "Liverpool bomber had been planning attack since April". *BBC*, November 2021. URL : <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-59317136>

from a smaller media footprint than jihadism or the ultra-right. Nevertheless, the record of operational activity of ultra-left militants is substantial: 153 actions were claimed this year in France. Most of them were cases of arson¹⁶. The figures are down compared to those related to the previous year, with 220 actions claimed in 2020, but the number of acts has fluctuated greatly over the year. Indeed, the reduction in the number of attacks observed in the second quarter of 2020 was only reversed in the summer of 2021. While ultra-left militants have reduced their illegal activities this year, they have also specialized in a specific target. While the record of previous years showed a wide array of targets, the current one are now telecommunications-related (relay antennas and fiber optic cabinets), accounting for more than 30 % of attacks.

Energy-related targets and businesses come next, but to a lesser extent. Illegal action against telecommunication infrastructures has been catalyzed by the introduction of 5G technology, which the movement has designated as a legitimate target. In a recent article, activists explain the need to oppose, through violent action, the "*digital society that in reality only increases exploitation, surveillance and ecological disaster*". Documents which detail the manufacture of incendiary devices and the functioning of the targeted infrastructures are also widely disseminated on the Internet. The other evolution linked to the ultra-left movement is the geographical change of their actions. If the South-East of the country, and particularly the départements of Isère and Drôme were the most affected areas in 2020, it is the Haute Garonne and the Seine Saint Denis which are now the most impacted. In fact, several departments of the Parisian region are now those in which the movement is most active.

The health crisis, and particularly the lockdown periods last year, have reinvigorated the movement, which has seen it as a means of recruiting and rallying its activists, as evidenced by the attack on some health targets (3) during the summer. The sanitary measures became a new pretext for opposition to the government in all its forms. Ultra-left activists also reacted strongly to the arrests that took place as a result of the actions against infrastructure that took place this summer¹⁷. In Europe, the movement remains active in Italy, Germany, Greece and France. The Europol report "*European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021*" lists 24 attacks in Italy, and notes the predominance of ultra-left attacks against 3G/4G and 5G sites in several EU countries. While the media impact of these attacks remains low, to the point that the movement considers itself to be "*silenced*" by the "*mainstream media*", the impact in terms of service, with the risk of losing access to emergency numbers, is significant. The argument put forward by the ultra-left remains the same, claiming that the absence of human victims legitimizes the attack, despite the danger to engineers, local residents and emergency services personnel.

III) Ultra-right: opposition to the government and arrests

The operational activity of the ultra-right remains limited in France. Their actions includes the burning of a mosque door in Nantes and the degradation of another mosque ,in Rennes, in April. Nevertheless, there is a willingness among the militants of the movement to set up cells to organize violent actions. In April, the arrest of four men and a woman for the kidnapping of Mia Montemaggi, all linked to the ultra-right movement¹⁸ and the conspiracy group of Rémy Daillet-Wiedemann, marked the beginning of a series of arrests in ultra-right circles. In early May, three people were arrested in the Bas-Rhin département. They are suspected of being part of the neo-Nazi group "Honor and Nation" and of planning to strike the Masonic lodge in Thionville¹⁹. Links between the perpetrators in case with Rémy Daillet-Wiedemann were established by investigators. In July, the co-founder of the "White Wolves Klan", Jérémy Mourain, was arrested after wounding four people with a firearm, following a dispute without ideological connotations²⁰. In August, Christian Maillaud, a former gendarme already known for his attempt at the "Chocolate Revolution", was arrested for various count of conspiracies to commit kidnapping, linked to Eric Fiorile's National Transition Council²¹. Convinced that he was "saving" child victims of pedophiles, he had planned several abductions, in France and abroad. At the end of the summer,

16 Report based on the compilation of data from various open source sites, as of 12/23/2021.

17 "Creuse: une directrice d'école parmi les six interpellés d'"ultra-gauche" pour l'incendie d'une tour-relais TDF ". *Le Figaro*, June 2021. URL : <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/creuse-une-directrice-d-ecole-parmi-les-six-interpelles-d-ultra-gauche-pour-l-incendie-d-une-tour-relais-tdf-20210616>

18 DÉCUGIS J.-M., PHAM-LÊ J., BOUTRY T., GAUTRONNEAU V. "Enlèvement de Mia, les failles dans la surveillance de la DGSI". *Le Parisien*, April 2021 : <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/enlevement-de-mia-les-failles-dans-la-surveillance-de-la-dgsi-27-04-2021-AESPJTBNIVHYPMVF42JG3KOND4.php>

19 LAIR, Noémie. "Attentat déjoué contre une loge maçonnique: ce que l'on sait". *France Bleu*, May 2021. URL : <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/faits-divers-justice/attentat-dejoue-contre-une-loge-maconnique-ce-que-l-sait-1620492679>

20 "Aisne : le cofondateur d'un clan néo-nazi incarcéré pour "violences volontaires aggravées". *Le Parisien*, July 2021. URL : <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/picardie-le-cofondateur-dun-clan-neo-nazi-incarcere-pour-violences-volontaires-aggravees-20-07-2021-OA2LITE67VDB5L7F2MO27CGCIU.php>

21 D'ADHÉMAR, Margaux. "Arrestation d'un ancien gendarme complotiste membre d'une organisation appelant à renverser le gouvernement". *Le Figaro*, August 2021. URL : <https://www.lefigaro.fr/faits-divers/arrestation-d-un-ancien-gendarme-complotiste-membre-d-une-organisation-appelant-a-renverser-le-gouvernement-20210813>

a series of arrests in ultra-right circles began with the arrest of a 26-year-old man in Colmar who had built four incendiary devices, complete with "pieces of uranium" purchased online²². If the radioactivity level of the material was too low for a real "dirty bomb" effect, this modus operandi slows the law enforcement response and can lead to contamination of first responders and victims. In September, five people were arrested in the departments of Hauts-de-Seine, Nièvre and Charente-Maritime, two of them in connection with the neo-Nazi group "Honor and Nation"²³ and the others with the kidnapping of Mia Montemaggi in the spring. They had considered a number of potential targets among them politicians, including the Minister of Health, as well as 5G installations and vaccination centers. In late October, Rémi Daillet-Wiedemann, arrested in Malaysia in June and extradited to France, was indicted for association of terrorist criminals for his "Projet Azur", in which he called on social networks to overthrow the French government, via a massive demonstration aimed at certain ministries and decision-making places, including the Élysée Palace²⁴. In November, arrests continued in Montauban, then among the "Recolonisation France" group in Marseille, Saint Didier and Pibrac, then in the Eure, after the discovery of 130 weapons and numerous neo-Nazi objects. Following the customs investigation, two men were taken into custody, including a soldier from the 35th Infantry Regiment of Belfort, already known for this type of offenses²⁵. Beyond a very limited operational activity and a series of arrests of inexperienced groups, there is a strong mobilization of ultra-right militants for actions at the low end spectrum: organized brawls between French and European ultra supporters clubs, brawls and "raids" of antifa premises, participation in violence during demonstrations, and this on the whole territory. In addition, the ultra-right quickly positioned itself among the ranks of the protesters of the governmental sanitary measures and supported the actions of the different extremist groups participating (anti-vax, violent conspiracy-theorist, etc.). Ultra-right supporters also turned to a number of targets previously reserved for the ultra left, such as those related to telecommunications, confirming a growing accelerationist trend. On a European scale, no notable attack committed by any ultra-right militant took place in 2021, despite a series of arrests in Germany, the United Kingdom and Scandinavian countries.

This brief analysis of the activity of terrorist movements in France illustrates their ability to adapt to the national context but also to their own internal dynamics in order to multiply their actions. The jihadist threat remains the main threat, due to its lethality and scale. The ultra-left and the ultra-right, each in their own way, are reorganizing to increase their capacity to strike on the French soil. The hazards and uncertainty created by the pandemic have allowed the three movements to recruit, spread their propaganda and motivate violent acts. Increased vigilance on the part of the domestic security forces, but also on the part of the French population, is required to limit the capacity of these movements to organize themselves and strike in France.

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- 22 MARIE, Anne-Laure. "Haut-Rhin: arrestation à Colmar d'un jeune homme soupçonné d'avoir confectionné des engins explosifs". *France 3 Régions*, September 2021. URL : <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/grand-est/haut-rhin/colmar/haut-rhin-arrestation-a-colmar-d-un-jeune-homme-soupconne-d-avoir-confectionne-des-engins-explosifs-2241814.html>
- 23 "Ce que l'on sait de l'arrestation de cinq membres de l'ultradroite qui planifiaient un attentat". *France Info*, September 2021. URL : https://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/terrorisme/ce-que-l-on-sait-de-l-arrestation-de-cinq-membres-de-l-ultradroite-qui-planifiaient-un-attentat_4782677.html
- 24 PAOLINI, Esther. "Operation Azur": le gourou Rémy Daillet aurait projeté une action violente contre l'Élysée". *Le Figaro*, October 2021. URL : <https://www.lefigaro.fr/faits-divers/operation-azur-le-gourou-remy-gaillet-aurait-projete-une-action-violente-contre-l-elysee-20211028>
- 25 PONROY, Xavier. "Un militaire de Belfort déjà sanctionné pour néonazisme en garde à vue après la découverte d'armes". *France Bleu*, November 2021. URL : <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/faits-divers-justice/un-militaire-de-belfort-deja-sanctionne-pour-neonazisme-en-garde-a-vue-apres-la-decouverte-d-armes-1637685833>