



## WikiLeaks Project - France's War on terrorism through the WikiLeaks prism\*

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### Introduction

France's war on terrorism spans through several decades. It started abroad, firstly in its ex-department in Algeria in 1954. Cables revealed by WikiLeaks between the United States (US) Department of State and the US Embassy in Paris, have exposed several details in France's situations vis-à-vis Islamic fundamentalism and the methods employed in its domestic counter-terrorism efforts. Nonetheless, before dwelling into the US diplomatic cables exposed by WikiLeaks, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the current situation in France.

According to cables from 2005 between the US Department of State and the US Embassy in Paris, the French Ministry of Interior, Police Intelligence Service (RG), estimates that 6 million Muslims live in France, and account for approximately 10% of the entire population. Of these 6 million, 70% are originally of North African decent (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). Other sizable communities include Turks and Pakistanis. The RG also estimates that roughly 9,000 could be considered extremists<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the RG estimates that of the 1,500 mosques and prayer halls in France, fewer than 40 are considered extremists. The US Country Report on Terrorism argues that the French governmental officials routinely claim that 90% French Muslims are non-practicing. Nonetheless, among the "practicing" community, a small but distinct current of fundamental Salafist thought exists<sup>2</sup>. One of France's main problems resides in its alienated minorities in the suburbs of major cities. These relatively poor suburbs are located outside of major French cities, especially Paris, Lyon, Strasbourg and Marseilles. Nonetheless, pockets of low-income housing are spread throughout France, and recent arrests in Grenoble, a medium-sized university town in the southeast, and Lorraine, a region near the French-German border, illustrate the fact that Islamic extremism is not confined to the suburbs of France's largest cities. French residents and citizens of North African are spread throughout France. The Turkish community is based largely in Paris and in Eastern France, and the Pakistani community is based almost exclusively in the Paris area<sup>3</sup>.

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\* Disclaimer: Although we do not condone the actions of WikiLeaks, its staff and its sources, the information is now in the public domain and therefore it is important for a research institute to analyze the contents of the materials.

<sup>1</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 08 17). *Putting out bushfires: France and Islamic Extremism*.

<sup>2</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2004, 12 06). *France: 2005 Annual Terrorism Report*

<sup>3</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2006, 12 14). *France 2006: Country report on terrorism*



## The Threat

A leaked US Embassy in Paris cable from 2006, reports the French Ministry of Interior's Counter-Terrorism Coordinating Chief Christophe Chaboud clearly stating that radical Islam remains the principal threat to France and its interests around the world, particularly in the Middle-East<sup>4</sup>. While intelligence analysis suggested there were no active known networks operating in France, Chaboud said the French security services were taking aggressive preventative measures to ensure that authorities are not caught off guard.

Since 9/11, France has been able to prevent several terrorist attacks on its soil. Nonetheless, several plots have been uncovered. In 2006, 25 militants tied to a Chechen Jihadi network were sentenced to 10 years for planning to bomb a commercial center in Paris and the Eiffel Tower<sup>5</sup>. Karim Mehdi, a Moroccan national, was sentenced to nine years for terrorism related activities. In 2006, three individuals were detained in France after being expelled from Syria. These individuals were suspected of attempting to transit through Syria in order to join insurgents fighting against Coalition Forces in Iraq. Another nine individuals were deported to Egypt in 2006 under similar charges. However, they were all released after a brief period of detention.

One of the main problems stated in the leaked cabled from the US Embassy in Paris, was the recruitment of French Jihadists to join Iraqi insurgencies<sup>6</sup>. Several potential recruits were discovered and convicted between 2003 and 2006; and this became one of the top priorities of French counter-terrorism efforts<sup>7</sup>. Networks of recruiters were especially active in the Marseille and Paris areas, drawing young disenchanting Muslims to join the insurgency in Iraq. Another deep concern for France's Security is the spillover from the Maghreb based

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<sup>4</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2006, 11 26). *GOF C\T coordinator's overview of terrorism Threat*

<sup>5</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 08 17). *Putting out bushfires: France and Islamic Extremism*

<sup>6</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 01 26). *French Arrest Eleven in 'Jihadist to Iraq'*.

<sup>7</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 05 09). *French Judge Says C\T focus is on "Jihadist to Iraq"*.



Islamic extremists to France's mainland and is considered a big danger to France's security. The Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) and the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) are both covertly present on French soil. French intelligence believed that the GSPC has increasingly taken on the goals of Global Jihadism and is seeking a position complementary to Al-Qaeda<sup>8</sup>. In fact, Chaboud remarked to US officials that in 2006 the Algerian based GSPC's announcement of its joining with al-Qaeda and highlighting France as its number one enemy, was considered extremely worrisome<sup>9</sup>. US officials argue that recently the GSPC has increasingly expanded its reach in France, and is working to take advantage of the old connections within the well organized Algerian community<sup>10</sup>. In regard to the GICM, meetings between US and French counter-terrorism officials revealed that GICM members arrested in 2004 were extremely professional and maintained a strict discipline when interrogated.

In the post 9/11 period, France has continued to pursue an aggressive counter-terrorism approach. This approach has included the dismantling of several terror networks from its territory. These terrorist networks, according to the US Embassy in Paris, were assisting in the recruitment and financing of terrorists to Iraq. Moreover, French terrorism officials remain on high alert, since the London Subway Bombing in 2005. Classified data shows that from the 9/11 attacks until 2006, more than 400 suspects in connection with Islamic terrorism were apprehended and more than 200 arrested<sup>11</sup>.

Since the 2005 London Bombings, the French government had actively been working on developing new counter-terrorism measures in order to incorporate its practices in the law<sup>12</sup>. Hence, in 2006 France adopted a new counter-terrorism legislation that considerably

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<sup>8</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 04 07). *GWOT Assessment: Embassy Paris Feedback*

<sup>9</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2006, 11 26). *GOF C\T coordinator's overview of terrorism Threat*

<sup>10</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2006, 12 14). *France 2006: Country report on terrorism*

<sup>11</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 08 17). *Putting out bushfires: France and Islamic Extremism*

<sup>12</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2006, 12 14). *France 2005: Country report on terrorism*



strengthened police powers in criminal law<sup>13</sup>. Preliminary detention for terrorism suspects was extended from up to four days to up to six days. The 2006 legislation allows the state to place suspects in pre-trial detention up to four years when evidence is strong or when they present an imminent threat. The law also gives the government additional powers to conduct surveillance and monitoring activities. Therefore, sentences for convicted terrorists were increased from many fold and the new laws also reinforced the ability to the authorities to revoke French Nationality and eventual expulsion if the terrorist became citizen through naturalization in the preceding 15 years.

US Embassy documents from 2007 show that during meetings between US and French Officials, Counter-Terrorism Coordinating Chief Christophe Chaboud argued that “this legislation had gone a long way to codify current practices”<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, Chaboud noted that cooperation with the U.S. and the G-6 was excellent, but indicated there was still a great deal of work to be done with intelligence officials in the Maghreb”. The French has also actively worked in the realm of prevention. In a WikiLeaks cable dated from 2007, Chaboud, states that since 2001, 66 Imams allegedly preaching radical Islamic ideas have been expelled from France. Chaboud noted that while the majority of expelled imams were Algerian, a handful came from Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia and "one or two Gulf countries."<sup>15</sup> He added that France was far ahead of other EU states, in particular the UK, in taking necessary action against foreign nationals who advocated "radical ideologies."

2005-2006 reports from the US Embassy show that US officials praise French counter-terrorism efforts. Several cables argue that France has gone a great length in adapting its national legislation. Moreover, US officials underscore the joint belief that terrorism is a primary threat to France, and that dealing with it is consequentially a central priority<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 08 17). *Putting out bushfires: France and Islamic Extremism*

<sup>14</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2006, 11 26). *GOF C\T coordinator's overview of terrorism Threat*

<sup>15</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2006, 11 26). *GOF C\T coordinator's overview of terrorism Threat*

<sup>16</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2004, 12 06). *France: 2005 Annual Terrorism Report*



Henceforth, France consults and collaborates with the US extensively on matters of terrorism both at the strategic and tactical level. The US Global War On Terrorism report, states that in general Counterterrorism Cooperation between the US and France is “Excellent”<sup>17</sup>. At the political and diplomatic level, France continues to be involved and actively engaged with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Counterterrorism Committee (CTC), the G-8s Counter-Terrorism Action group (CTAG), the UN’s 1267 Sanctions Committee for Taliban and Al-Qaeda the European Council’s Anti-terrorism Strategy action plan<sup>18</sup>.

Nonetheless, the leaked cables also show US officials voicing several concerns on France’s counter-terrorism approach.

First, France often appears to react differently to terrorism and radical Islam depending on its distance from it. Within its borders the French government reacts proactively, with speed and firmness. Elsewhere in world, France’s approach is more equivocal, due to political and diplomatic considerations which carry substantial weight often overriding security considerations. US officials, mention French reluctance to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

US officials, also recommend that France’s reluctance to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization should be countered through international diplomatic pressure and isolation. Pressure should be pursued by convincing France’s intelligence services and governmental officials that evidence undisputedly shows Hezbollah’s role in international terrorism. Hence, US official presented the French government with evidence of Hezbollah’s’ involvement in terrorism in the West Bank and Gaza as an effort to undermine the peace process.

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<sup>17</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 04 07). *GWOT Assessment: Embassy Paris Feedbac*

<sup>18</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2006, 12 14). *France 2006: Country report on terrorism*



Moreover, the cables show US attempted to isolate France within the EU Clearinghouse<sup>19</sup>. US diplomats argue that “A number of EU countries hide behind France’s strong opposition, but if they are peeled away, France maybe more amenable”<sup>20</sup>. Which countries in particular is not stated, nonetheless, in the EU only the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

The second main criticism towards France Counter-terrorism planning is its gap in the development of mass casualty emergency response. US officials note that the French government has adapted its procedures and made improvements in their emergency response capabilities. However, France could benefit from observing the US crisis simulation exercises. Henceforth, the cable recommends Washington to invite French officials to “professional exchanges” and invite them to observe US organized emergency response simulations and allow them to translate best practices to the French system.

The third main criticism that transpires from the US GWOT assessment cable is that US-French counter-terrorism cooperation is largely removed from daily political and diplomatic pressures<sup>21</sup>. One reason for this is that French counter-terrorism is itself separated from the rest of the government. The main counter-terrorism bodies work outside of the normal governmental institutions and rarely share information with it. Hence, terrorism investigating judges operate outside the rest of the judiciary. This has led to the counter-terrorism community to become highly professionalized, but insular and centralized in Paris. The cables argue that because of this, judiciary and policy services not directly involved in counter-terrorism (but may play an indirect supporting role) have a largely insufficient

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<sup>19</sup> The EU clearinghouse is a working group in the European Union established after the September 11, 2001 attacks. It is composed of national security services under the Common Foreign and Security Policy and its primary roles are to agree which groups go on the EU's black list of terrorist groups and have their financial assets in the EU frozen.

<sup>20</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 04 07). *GWOT Assessment: Embassy Paris Feedback*

<sup>21</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 04 07). *GWOT Assessment: Embassy Paris Feedback*



understanding of US counter-terrorism policy and the judicial\investigative procedures that frame this policy.

Meetings between French and US diplomats reveal that there is strong concern about the integration of Muslim minorities in the suburbs of France's major cities. These areas have become a potential center for recruitment and radicalization<sup>22</sup>. As a result of this inattention, the suburbs with high immigrant populations have lost their French identity and have built up an identity based on the "cities" (similar to the "projects")<sup>23</sup>. French symbols of authority, like the fireman and policeman, are considered to be "assassins" and worthy of being targeted. In addition, gangs and radical Islamic groups have an interest in keeping cities free of governmental influence to maintain their freedom of operation<sup>24</sup>. In 2005 US diplomats argue that the French government has stepped up its efforts to tackle the problems. However, the same diplomats voice strong concerns that if the underlying socio-economic problems are not tackled, no long-term solution can be developed<sup>25</sup>.

Nonetheless, US officials, argue that France has done an outstanding job at tackling Islamic terrorism at both the short and medium term due to an effective proactive counter-terrorism policy. However, in the long term several problems of immigration and integration have not been successfully tackled and therefore a dangerously high risk exists that the disenchanting Muslim youth may easily fall prey of Islamist extremist ideology.

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<sup>22</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2007, 01 05). *Engagment with muslim communities - France*

<sup>23</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 11 09). *The French Integration model: going up in smoke?*

<sup>24</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2005, 11 17). *Analyzing the civil unrest - the islamic factor*

<sup>25</sup> Wikileaks, Paris US Embassy. (2004, 12 06). *France: 2005 Annual Terrorism Report*



## Conclusion

The leaked Cables between the US Embassy in Paris and the State Department have highlighted France's efforts to combat Islamic terrorism. These cables date to the 2004-2007 periods, nonetheless, remain relevant to this day.

France has clearly stated that terrorism remains its main enemy domestically and abroad. According to US officials, France has taken a very strong approach based on several legislative and executive tools. Since 2006, France has expanded its surveillance and detention laws in order to better and more effectively combat terrorism. The approach taken by the French Counter-terrorism community has been aggressive and pro-active.

Moreover, the leaked cables reveal the state of US- French Counter-terrorism relations, which according to these documents are "excellent". Nonetheless, several problems have been highlighted by the US diplomatic cables. France's two-faced approach to terrorism depends on its distance from it. This approach, according to US officials, influences France's reluctance to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Second, France lacks an effective plan to develop mass-casualties response. Third, the fact that US-French collaboration is limited to the main Paris based Counter-Terrorism bodies. According to US officials these bodies are insular and centralized in Paris. Fourth, US diplomats, underscore the necessity of the French government to tackle the poor suburbs outside of major cities. According to US officials these suburbs are a breeding ground for radicalization. Overall, US officials claim that in the short and medium term, French counter-terrorism efforts are very effective. However, in the long-term, the integration of its Muslim minorities is fundamental for France's Counter-Terrorism efforts.



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