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After the Brussels attacks

# On “Jihadist” terror: The radical Left after the Brussels attacks - The silence of the sectarian English-language blogosphere and equivocation of the radical Left in France - What’s the right approach?

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- Debate - Paris, Brussels, responding to the attacks -

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*The following piece was written in the days following the March 22nd Jihadist terror attacks in Brussels. While it may require updating to take account of changes in some organizations' thinking and public statements, its main arguments remain valid.*

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Since January 2015, the scale and momentum of “Jihadist” terror attacks in Europe have been without precedent. In spite of this, a large section of the English-speaking radical Left refuses to grasp the significance of what has happened. In France, much remains to be done to consider the implications of this new situation. What’s the right approach?

There has been a succession of murderous “Jihadist” terror attacks in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. They have to be grasped as an international phenomenon – but also in relation to each specific national and regional context.

My remarks here concern only Europe since the January 2015 Paris attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and the Hyper-Cacher Jewish supermarket and look at two matters in particular: commentary in the English-language blogosphere and within the radical Left in France.

## After the storm, the silence of a significant part of the English-language blogosphere

Following the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, the English-language blogosphere went into overdrive, churning out thousands of e-mails and hundreds of terse articles, furious broadsides and vicious polemics. However, the attacks that occurred shortly thereafter in Denmark (in February 2015) were greeted with silence, as were the full-blown massacres that took place in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016. Odd, don't you think?

Some organizations like the ISO in the US have published a range of articles and eyewitness accounts on the recent massacres [\[1\]](#), and progressive websites such as Open Democracy have provided consistent coverage of events. But other organizations, though while closely following developments in the Middle East, apparently don't see what all the fuss is about.

As for the blogosphere, it has remained indifferent, for the simple reason that it no longer finds the matter stimulating. The big question that gripped it back in January 2015 was not the Islamic State's policy of terror but rather the guilt of its victims – with *Charlie Hebdo* accused of Islamophobia, and of course “the” French and “the” French Left taken to task for their apparently world-famous racism.

In the wake of the recent massacres, can people now recognize that this “approach” was parochial, navel-gazing and obsessed with questions of identity? *Charlie Hebdo* was in no way “responsible” for the January 2015 attacks; it was just a convenient target. There would have been attacks even if the journal had never existed, just as there had been attacks before and there have been attacks since. For some parts of the radical Left, the *Charlie Hebdo* tree was used to hide the Jihadist forest.

This isn't an after-the-fact rationalization. It was already clear at the time. The analysis that François Sabado and I

provided in the wake of the January attacks barely mentioned *Charlie Hebdo* because the journal as such didn't "explain" anything. [2] I subsequently also responded to accusations levied against the journal [3], but whatever one may think of its history and editorial line the real problem lay elsewhere.

A section of the radical Left argued that the Islamic State (and other Jihadist movements) only attacked "understandable symbols", such as *Charlie Hebdo*, Jews (meant to embody the state of Israel) and churches (symbols of the West's "crusades"). This was not only a complacent but also an utterly illusory reading of the IS's aims (see the article I co-wrote with François Sabado following the November 2015 attacks [4]). The entire, undifferentiated (and even non-European, in an international airport) civilian population is a "legitimate target" in its eyes. [5] The IS approach is indeed to kill, wound and traumatize the largest number of people to stir up tensions among ordinary people.

In Europe, we now live under the constant threat of large-scale terrorist attacks, as was already the case in other regions of the world. No doubt, we must understand the root causes there (wars without end, neoliberalism, dictatorship, to name a few) and here (the growing precariousness of living conditions, the dictatorship of "markets", discrimination, to name a few) – but we also have to take stock of the consequences. How can we prevent the establishment of regimes based on an extended state of emergency, as we have seen in France, when there is a succession of such terror attacks? How can we secure a decent welcome for refugees when fear of "terrorists dressed up as Syrian refugees" becomes the norm? How to roll back far-Right forces across Europe when the Islamist far-Right is such a wonderful foil for them (and vice-versa)?

IS policies and its "war aims" now weigh heavily upon the course of events in Europe – for the worse. To avoid becoming hostages of the law-and-order, militarized and repressive response of our rulers, we have to counterpose other methods for fighting Jihadism – and not just in words, but *in deeds* as well.

## Different positions in France

ESSF posted four batches of press releases and statements following the Brussels attacks. [6] I'll refer to them by "batch" number. But let's begin with a plea from Belgium (batch 1):

*"Why aren't Muslims condemning terrorist attacks en masse?"*

*Because we're driving the taxis that have been taking the population home for free since yesterday...*

*Because we're caring for the wounded in hospitals...*

*Because we're driving the ambulances that are racing through the streets like shooting stars to try to save what life remains in us...*

*Because we're at the reception desks of the hotels that have been welcoming onlookers for free since yesterday...*

*Because we're driving the buses, the trams, and the subway cars so that life can continue, though wounded...*

*Because we're still looking for criminals in our police, investigator, and magistrate outfits...*

*Because we're crying for our dead, too...*

*Because we are no more spared than anyone else...*

*Because we are doubly, triply bruised...*

*Because the same faith produced the executioner and the victim...*

*Because we're groggy, lost, and we're trying to understand...*

*Because we spent the night on our doorstep waiting for a person who won't come back again...*

*Because we're counting our dead...*

*Because we're in mourning...*

*The rest is only silence...*"

Ismaïl Saidi, Belgian-Moroccan film and theatre director, author of the play *Djihad* [7].

Back to France. As a general rule, trade unions (batch 2), movements and parties have clearly condemned the massacre, its perpetrators and the repressive and discriminatory measures our governments have taken in response. Some haven't said anything yet (Solidaires, for example), while others have dug themselves into a rigid and tersely defensive position. First prize goes to Alternative Libertaire (AL) which felt it was enough to publish a statement from AL Brussels asserting that it would continue to fight (batch 4, as with the following references). That's pretty meagre in the circumstances!

Other organizations, such as the NPA, strongly condemn the "revolting terror attacks", declare their solidarity with victims and denounce the terrorists' goals ("to create an irreversible spiral of terror and violence by spreading hatred and fear"). After this first paragraph, though, the following six are completely arrayed against our rulers' domestic and Middle East policies and against "the servants of the banks and multinationals who run the world." Is our only possible line of action to demand that our governments radically change course?

As for Ensemble! (member organization of the Left Front), it sticks to very general considerations: "It is necessary to provide all the necessary means to ensure public safety and prevent new attacks, and this means providing all the necessary resources to public services and waging a determined fight against inequality and all forms of discrimination – and not rejecting migrants or entrenching a state of emergency that has led to the stigmatization of Muslims and criminalization of social movements."

For its part, the Left Party (PG) focuses its press release solely on Syria, restating its "pro-Putin" position: "Military support for those countries and forces currently fighting IS on the ground must be provided by an international coalition under the aegis of the UN. For it is in this region of the world, and in accordance with international law, that the IS threat must be eliminated."

To be fair, these are just short press releases drafted in the heat of the moment. We'll need to wait for more in-depth articles to have a proper discussion. For example, the Belgian LCR-SAP's statement (batch 1) has now been fleshed out with analysis from Daniel Tanuro (one of the organization's leaders). [8] In the meantime, we can observe that *political* condemnation of the Islamic State (and not only of its murderous methods) is now more widespread and better substantiated than before, but that the question of "how to fight Jihadism" is dodged or dealt with in far too general terms.

## Between a dreadful present and the glorious future, how do we keep up the fight?

In large measure, the struggles we are already waging are part of the solution. They hit at the social roots of the democratic crisis, aim to build a truly left-wing alternative based on solidarity that breaks us out of the deadly choice between neoliberal hegemony and ideologies of hate, raise the question of peace and security from the point of view of the world's peoples and not of its governments, and much else beyond. Still, aside from the relationship of forces, we run up against real difficulties, such as:

**Credibility in the dreadful present.** The "people" is currently unable to banish extreme-Right forces (whether non-denominational or religious) from its midst by means of collective anger and stigmatization, and this is

particularly true in relation to the Jihadist extreme-Right. The police, army and secret services are therefore seen in a positive light or at least as a necessary evil. Recall the heartfelt cry of a victim of the Brussels airport explosions: “Where are those fucking soldiers?!” Fine words are no use in such circumstances, and we would do better to hone in on those instances where our governments’ manipulation of fear can be clearly demonstrated.

**Talk of a glorious future is not credible.** Of course, resistance needs hopeful future horizons, and we have to put a name on the alternative we propose, but no one believes (least of all ourselves) that we are making large strides toward reaching this hopeful future any time soon.

**So how best to fight?** Of course, I don’t claim to have a turnkey solution here. I do, however, believe there are important topics for debate, starting with two considerations:

Jihadism – as well as the network of ideologically similar political-religious currents – is not only an imported product or some kind of overhang from the crisis in Iraq and Syria, but also an *internal reality*. This means it has to be fought here and not just over there.

This fight here and over there has to be waged by progressive forces *on their own terms*, in tandem with their resistance to imperialism and dictatorship. This applies to us. It’s not enough to fight Jihadism and other fundamentalist movements *indirectly*, for example by denouncing our own country’s imperialism. We have to fight them *directly*, because they are now part of *our own reality*.

I’ll try to show what I think this might mean.

### ***Tous ensemble* â€” United we stand**

We have one major asset, especially in France: the brutality and all-encompassing character of neoliberal attacks on democratic freedoms, labour laws, and so forth. That provides a solid objective basis for mounting united resistance.

Of course, this *Tous ensemble* approach can drown out the specific demands of those facing the greatest exploitation and discrimination, those with neither voice nor power. We have to consciously guard against this danger – but we also have to foster the *Tous ensemble*, as much in struggle as in the day-to-day. As the Union of Progressive Jews (Belgium) has pointed out (batch 3), “We wouldn’t want for city residents hereafter to retreat into their respective corners, distrustfully staring at one another in stony silence. The terror attacks killed indiscriminately. More than ever, we have to develop an approach that creates spaces to meet, dialogue and mix â€” with the focus on creating awareness of the different narratives that shape our urban adventure in order to turn them into a shared story.”

*Tous ensemble* requires that our activism include all the demands of the really existing workforce (which increasingly includes the “precariat”) and of all residents in working-class areas, even when this means a break from our usual trade-union and political routines. It’s not enough, for example, to fight police violence in these areas. We also have to take gang violence into account.

*Tous ensemble* means we have to defend all victims. There can be a tendency to rank solidarity, which in practice means abandoning those victims seen as “non-priority” or who are on the receiving end of attacks from an “oppressed oppressor”. Specifically, we have to defend Jews facing death threats and not only Muslims (or those presumed to be Muslim) facing Islamophobia. We also have to defend “Arab-Muslim” women who refuse to wear the headscarf that conservative Islamists seek to impose on them, and not just covered women physically attacked,

insulted and humiliated by “homegrown” racists. We have to fight homophobia wherever it rears its head.

*Tous ensemble* requires that we fight against all forms of racism, against all forms of xenophobia, against hatred for the Other. Different forms of racism have different histories and moorings, and we should be mindful of this, but no racism is benign. Racism and xenophobia are deadly poisons which ultimately make struggle in common impossible and provide a wonderful helping hand to the ruling order, which survives thanks only to our divisions.

*Tous ensemble* requires not only fraternal recognition of the Other and appreciation of “mixing”, but also common struggles for shared rights – the right to a life without precariousness, to education and culture, to employment, to safety, to healthcare and much else besides.

## An ideological struggle

There is no standard profile for the person from Europe who goes off to join the Islamic State. Social, geographic and religious (or non-religious) background varies – proving that the phenomenon is the result of a multi-faceted crisis. Of course, the profile of perpetrators of Jihadist violence here in Europe is much narrower. They’ve often been members of gangs and spent time in prison; having already been involved in armed operations, they have the connections required to carry out this kind of action.

Still, we shouldn’t underestimate the ideological factors at play in these processes described by some as a “radicalization of Islam” and by others as an “Islamicization of radicalism” (I find these uses of the word “radical” rather objectionable!). For example, while Salafist currents don’t necessarily lead people to Jihadism, they are extremely reactionary all the same. [\[9\]](#) Generally speaking, we’re seeing the powerful growth of conservative currents (and Muslims don’t have a monopoly on this). All told, this creates fertile ideological ground for the growth of political religious fundamentalism.

We fight Catholic fundamentalism and Evangelical Protestant fundamentalism – both of which are on the extreme Right of the political spectrum – with a rights-based approach: the right to abortion, marriage rights for all, and the right to education based on science (against creationism) and gender equality. The same should go for the fight against Muslim fundamentalism, which is also politically on the extreme Right.

Conservative thought, and Jihadism in particular, lays special emphasis on the subordination of women. Clearly, the defense of women’s rights (as well as gay and lesbian rights) is therefore a battleground of paramount importance for us.

Generally speaking, extreme-Right forces are on the offensive in Europe and wear different identity masks. These are old and new “homegrown” extreme-Right forces, some more clearly fascist than others, and they are in a position to challenge for power – and already influence government – in a range of European countries. This is a huge threat!

But this threat shouldn’t make us turn a blind eye to the consequences of the growth of Islamist far-Right forces. They have taken root in working-class areas where a far-Right party such as the Front National (in the case of France) gets no traction. As such, these forces complement each other and represent formidable obstacles to any truly left-wing project of solidarity and emancipation.

# No sacrificing their rights (or lives) for our security

We always denounce the way our governments use fear to justify repressive measures at home and war abroad. The problem is that some on the Left take positions that display a lot of cynicism and precious little solidarity. I'll look at two examples.

## Buttressing Salafism?

In a *Libération* op-ed piece, the philosopher and sociologist Raphaël Liogier suggests a way to combine (our) freedom with (our) security. [10] In the name of fighting armed Jihadism more effectively, he proposes that we turn to Salafist mosques for support – rather than targeting them as the government has been doing. Salafist circles threatened by IS could offer authorities “an extensive information network in the heart of the Muslim community”.

“Unlike Jihadists,” Liogier says, “these fundamentalists are focused on daily life and customs and are completely apolitical.” So, no problem then? Our academic takes the imam from the city of Brest, Abou Houdeyfa, as an example of the Salafist mosque representatives with whom we should be working. *Libération* editors remind readers that Abou Houdeyfa preaches that “music gives rise to evil”.

It's no accident that, in order to dispel any possible ambiguity, Liogier cites Abou Houdeyfa as an example of whom we could turn to for “support”. This imam was at the centre of a scandal when a video excerpt of one of his classes was publicly circulated last September. He is shown telling children that listening to music is forbidden and that “those who enjoy it” risk being “turned into monkeys and pigs” in the hereafter. And that those who listen to music are walking down the devil's path [11].

Can we remain indifferent when such things are being taught to young children? Isn't the criminalization of music an extremely harsh form of social violence “in whatever part of the world one might be? How can it be possible to ignore the wealth of musical cultures in Muslim countries? And what about the status of women? Liogier readily admits the practise of an “extreme fundamentalism of mores, with women wearing the full-length veil, for example,” but, never mind, it's just a lifestyle choice. [12] End of story.

Liogier claims to have found a way to combine effective security with democracy. In fact, though, he has a narrow police-type vision of the fight against IS, in whose name the emancipation struggles of an entire segment of our society have to be sacrificed without hesitation. [13] Democracy for whom? Security for whom?

## Support Putin and Assad in Syria?

Let's return to the position of the Left Party (PG) in France. In the wake of the Brussels attacks, the party repeated its basic position on the Syrian conflict (which Jean-Luc Mélenchon has asserted on numerous occasions): support for the Russian intervention and for the Assad regime. The Communist Party of Belgium has aligned itself even more closely with Moscow (batch 3). As mentioned above, the party uses the stilted language of diplomatic communiqués to explain that an international coalition under the aegis of the UN should provide support “to the countries and forces who are currently fighting IS *on the ground*” (batch 4) – with “on the ground” primarily meaning Russia and Syrian government forces.

The Assad regime is largely responsible for the Syrian crisis and for the advances of the Islamic State in Syria. It has tortured, starved and killed more Syrians than any other protagonist in this merciless war. It's true, though, that Assad

hasn't dispatched kamikaze commandos to shed blood in Europe. So too bad for victims "over there" of one of the bloodiest dictatorships in the world and of particularly murderous Russian bombing. In the eyes of the PG, upholding (French) statesmanship, France's international stature and the security of our citizens "over here" are well worth a heavy dose of Realpolitik!

## Over here and over there

For any approach based on (internationalist) solidarity, active ties between "over here" and "over there" are essential. Here are three ideas to strengthen these ties:

**1. Cooperate more closely with immigrant organizations** – and especially, in France, with independent organizations of immigrants from North Africa. Between the Paris attacks of January and November 2015, there was the Bardo Museum terrorist attack in Tunis. Though there was a common response of French-Tunisian movements and migrant-support groups on both shores of the Mediterranean [\[14\]](#), human-rights and radical-Left organizations in France were all over the map. Every terror attack on one side of the Mediterranean or the other could be an occasion for common statements and actions going beyond mere symbolism.

**2. Strengthen Syria solidarity work.** While the "Neither War nor State of War" coalition does indeed exist, it is focused on the policies of the French government overseas and in France itself. That's very important, but it doesn't replace the need for a specific solidarity movement, which is beyond its remit. The coalition calls for the withdrawal of French forces from the theatres of operation where they have been deployed. This is essential *for us*. Still, though such a withdrawal would have a *real impact* in parts of Africa it wouldn't in Iraq and Syria where French imperialism plays a minor role. As the coalition itself points out in its press release on the Brussels attacks (batch 3), French jets had "only" carried out 680 of the "Western Coalition's" 11,086 air strikes. So although it would be significant development *here*, French withdrawal wouldn't change a whole lot *over there*.

Solidarity with Syria can't be defined solely in relation to our imperialism and, in vague terms, to the "Western Coalition". It has to factor in the main protagonists on the ground, which include Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Hezbollah, and even Israel and Egypt, to name a few. There are also numerous fronts and "wars within the war". Solidarity can't be organized without knowing to whom support should be provided or refused, and what type of peace package deserves our support. No doubt, the crisis in the Middle East is complicated! But we need basic underlying points of agreement – for example, shared support for the Kurdish resistance and the popular, progressive Arab resistance – and this is just not possible with pro-Assad forces, with those who have a religious-sectarian approach to the conflict, or with those who have a pro-Russian or pro-American position.

This is not an easy matter, but is the present low level of active solidarity with the peoples of the region really acceptable?

**3. Internationalize opposition to terrorist attacks.** We should make each new terror attack an occasion for international condemnation from progressive forces, for the assertion of "people-to-people" solidarity that is independent of governments, through mutual shows of solidarity and joint statements. Yes, state terrorism causes many more victims than Jihadist massacres, but one doesn't justify the other. Decrying imperialist misdeeds is already part of the radical Left's DNA. However, with the exception of countries that have spent long years living with the fundamentalist threat, such as Pakistan, decrying Jihadism is not. [\[15\]](#)

This is not about making Jihadism "the main enemy" and promoting "national unity" against it! But nor can we see Jihadism as a "secondary enemy" in order to justify guilty indifference.

27 March 2016

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[1] For example, see ESSF [“The Brussels Attacks: Our pain and rage are immense, but we need reason and understanding more than ever”](#).

[2] See , [“Charlie Hebdo – And now what? The events, their impact and the issues at play.”](#)

[3] See [“After the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher Jewish supermarket: thinking through the new and rethinking the old.”](#)

[4] See [“The 13 November attacks in Paris: the terror of the Islamic State, the state of emergency in France, our responsibilities.”](#)

[5] I heard one comrade say that the November 13 attacks were aimed at the “Parisian petty bourgeoisie” – forgetting that soccer fans had also been in the line of fire (at the Stade de France north of Paris). What drives activists to disparage victims in this way?

[6] See [“On the Brussels attacks”](#) (1); ESSF [“Communiqués après les attentats terroristes de Bruxelles \(2\)”](#); ESSF [“Communiqués après les attentats terroristes de Bruxelles \(3\)”](#); ESSF [“Communiqués après les attentats de Bruxelles \(4\) – La gauche radicale en France.”](#)

[7] Translation from French: [“Why Aren't Muslims Condemning the Attacks En Masse?” A Belgian Director Has the Perfect Response, Slate Online, March 23, 2016.](#)

[8] See [“The impotence of security policies and the search for a solution.”](#)

[9] Open conflicts can arise between Jihadists and Salafist currents that promote outright separation from French society.

[10] *Libération* [“À«Faire de l'islam l'ennemi absolu, c'est organiser le marketing de Daech»”](#).

[11] See *Nouvel Obs* [“Folie autour de Rachid Abou Houdeyfa, estampillé Â« imam radical Â»”](#).

[12] Full-length veils that are freely chosen according to our sociologist, apparently unaware of the power of peer pressure, and our philosopher, apparently unfamiliar with the difference between consent and free choice

[13] On another level, shutting down places of worship by administrative decree and dissolving community organizations are very serious actions. What's more, they create dangerous emergency jurisprudence and can be used to stand in for political struggle against religious fundamentalism.

[14] See ESSF [“Tunisie : En hommage aux victimes de l'attentat du Bardo, appel d'organisations, syndicats et associations.”](#)

[15] The connection should also be made with the question of forced migration and refugee populations. For example, there is precious little coordination between movements in the North and the migrant-origin countries of the South around providing concrete assistance to victims of climate change.