

Reaction to the French hostage crisis

Antoine Lerougetel
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The reaction of the French population—non-Muslim and Muslim alike—to the abduction of French journalists Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot by an Islamic fundamentalist group in Iraq highlights the deep gulf that exists between the social and democratic aspirations of the masses and the perspective of terrorist groups who, in the name of “defending Islam,” use reactionary means to further their own agenda.

Malbrunot and Chesnot were taken hostage on August 20 by the Islamic Army in Iraq. This shadowy group gave the French government a 48-hour deadline to repeal its law against girls wearing the Muslim veil in school. The ultimatum was delivered by means of video broadcast on the Arab TV channel Al-Jazeera at 6.30 p.m. GMT on August 26. Implicit, but not stated, was the threat that if the French government did not comply, the hostages would be executed by their captors. A second video broadcast on the evening of August 30 made explicit the death threat against the two journalists.

The two journalists taken hostage have a long relationship with the Middle East, have produced books on Iraq and Palestine, and are respected for their reporting of the problems of these peoples. They bear absolutely no responsibility for the French government’s law on the veil. As journalists, they are informing people of events and represent the democratic right to be informed and to inform. As one leader of the Iraqi resistance put it, the departure of the foreign media from Iraq “can only play into the hands of the occupier and further isolate the resistance.”

The reaction in France was one of outright revulsion. People supporting and opposing the highly contested law on the veil participated in demonstrations, demanding the immediate release of the two journalists. At the same time, the discredited French government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, as well as other members of the French establishment, used the opportunity provided by the reactionary methods of the Islamic Army to present themselves as the embodiment of the popular revulsion against the hostage takers and as defenders of democratic rights.

In the late afternoon on Monday, August 30, some 3,000 people rallied at the Trocadéro Square in Paris in response to a joint appeal by the chairmen of the National Assembly and the Senate. Representatives of all the parliamentary parties were there, as well as government ministers, leaders of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, Muslim leaders, the Roman Catholic cardinal of Paris, Jewish leaders, fellow journalists and ordinary people, including Muslim women wearing the veil.

A little girl carried a placard reading: “In the name of God, in the name of all the girls in France wearing the veil, in the name of all French Muslims, intercede to free the journalists, our innocent compatriots.” Hela was there with a delegation from Lille of women wearing the veil, members of the Islamic League of the North. She

said: “Some think that our presence here is a provocation. It’s quite the opposite. We are suffering, and it’s a double suffering. There’s the suffering that we share with everyone because two French people are threatened and the suffering we feel because our cause is being manipulated.”

The widely expressed sentiment—“I don’t want the blood of innocent people on my veil”—is a powerful indication of the hostility felt in the French Muslim community to the gangster methods of the Islamic Army in Iraq.

The statement in *Le Monde* (31 August) of the collective “A School for All, Boys and Girls,” an umbrella group for secular, Muslim and feminist associations opposing the law on religious signs at school, well represents these views, “denouncing most energetically the hostage taking and the threat to kill French journalists, carried out in the name of opposition to this law.” The collective does this “especially in the name of freedom of information, particularly essential in a war of occupation.” The statement goes on to say that the abduction and death threat only serve “to encourage an Islamophobic climate already fomented by the law.”

A woman Muslim journalist is quoted in *Le Figaro* (31 August): “In the name of what Islam are they acting like this? If they do not like democracy, they should at least leave ours alone.”

Abdullah Thomas Millicent, a Strasbourg doctor, known for his defence of the right of girls to wear the veil at school and member of the board of the official state body the French Council of the Muslim Religion, made known his opinion that “the French journalists abducted in Iraq cannot be made responsible” for the law and that “their execution would be a crime in the view of international law and Islam.” In a communiqué issued August 29, he “demanded that the kidnappers release forthwith their hostages unharmed.”

In another demonstration of about 300 earlier in the afternoon of August 30 in front of the Radio House, organized by Arab intellectuals, Thami Brèze of the Union of Islamic organisations of France, close to the Muslim Brotherhood, called on all French people to mobilise. “The abductors serve neither the Iraqi cause nor the Muslim cause,” Brèze said. “We have come to express our solidarity and our unity. We have intervened at all levels to prevent a tragedy taking place. We reject the distorted interpretation of the law on the veil given by the abductors. There is a lack of understanding in the Arab world about the veil.” He said that discussions on the veil are only possible, in his opinion, within the framework of a “dialogue.”

The reaction of the French population to the hostage-taking sheds a revealing light on the dispute on banning the veil at schools, which has polarised the public debate in France over recent months.

The law is officially named “the March 15 law banning the wearing of signs or dress making a conspicuous show of religious affiliation in primary schools, *collèges* and *lycées*,” but is universally known as “the law on the veil.” It came into effect September 2, shortly after the

two journalists were taken hostage, to coincide with the new school year.

It is supported by all the major parties—from Chirac’s UMP to the opposition Socialist Party and Lutte Ouvrière on the far left. They all argue that by banning religious signs in school, the law is defending democratic rights by strengthening secularism and defending the rights of women. In fact, the law does exactly the opposite. By curtailing religious freedom, it discriminates against Muslim youth at school and thus fosters divisions within the youth and working people in France.

That those opposed to the law came out almost unanimously in defence of the two journalists demonstrates the fundamentally democratic nature of that opposition. They reject the intervention of the Islamic Army, whose profoundly undemocratic and barbaric methods are playing into the hands of reaction both in France and the Middle East.

The liberties and rights for all citizens, whatever their origins or beliefs, that have been won in France and have had to be defended over years of struggle, and which are increasingly under threat as the government seeks to impose its reactionary program of attacks on the welfare state and civil rights, are cherished as much by immigrants as by the French people. Many immigrants are from countries, such as Algeria, with extremely repressive regimes. Many pupils who may otherwise have wanted to wear a veil have preferred to remove it rather than jeopardise their access to public education.

The WWSWS has always opposed the law on the veil. It must be said, however, that democratic rights cannot be defended on the single issue of the right to wear the Muslim headscarf in school. Indeed, the furore whipped up on this issue has tended to mask the government offensive against the right to a decent education for all—the main feature of the new school year is a sharp decrease in teaching, supervisory and technical staff and general educational provision. Rather than division over ethnic and religious questions, the working class needs to develop perspectives for a unified struggle to defend and extend all social and democratic rights.

The reactionary nature of the methods of the Islamic Army are also highlighted by the fact that President Jacques Chirac is seeking to make the most of the event to bolster the sagging popularity of his right-wing government.

The right-wing Gaullist chairman of the National Assembly, Jean-Louis Debré, said he had called for the August 30 demonstration to “show that when it is a question of liberty the French are capable of overcoming partisan differences and uniting to defend their convictions.” Those present joined in repeated singing of the Marseillaise, the French national anthem.

In its diplomatic drive to secure the hostages’ release the Chirac government is also strengthening the ties of the official Muslim organizations to the French state and has sent a delegation of three leaders of the main organizations of the French Council of the Muslim Religion to Jordan and Iraq.

The drive is also designed to develop France’s relationship with the Arab bourgeoisie in the Middle East. The Arab media have dropped criticism of the law prohibiting the veil in schools and have rallied to the French diplomatic offensive for the release of their captive nationals—Al-Jazeera condemned the kidnapping of the journalists. The Qatari TV station had frequently made critical broadcasts against France on the question of the law on the veil. According to commentators, the Arab media now prefer to highlight the opposition of Paris to the war and its position in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Lebanese Shiite leader Sheik Fadlallah, the Hezbollah chief, has exhorted the kidnappers to release their hostages. Arab leaders such as Youssef al-Qardwi, a fundamentalist preacher opposed to the law on the veil, on meeting Michel Barnier, the French minister of foreign Affairs, have called for their release. The supreme guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, Mohammed Mehdi Akef, called for the release of the journalists who “have nothing to do with the law on the veil in France.”

Ahmed Abul Gheith, the Egyptian foreign minister, and Amr Moussa, secretary general of the Arab League, assured Paris of their support. Yasser Arafat, president of the Palestinian Authority, called for “the immediate release” of the hostages. Arafat’s communiqué stated that “these journalists help the Iraqi cause and the Palestinian cause.”

In Iraq, Muslim leaders opposing the US occupation of their country—including Moqtada al-Sadr, leader of the armed Shiite resistance to the forces of occupation—have also called for the release of the French hostages.

The only notable exception to this universal rejection of the hostage-takers was the US-stooge prime minister of Iraq, Iyad Allawi, whose newspaper blamed the French government for the event. On September 2, it published a vitriolic editorial against Jacques Chirac’s policies, accusing the French president of “bearing part of the blame” in the kidnapping of Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot. The editorial blamed Chirac for having “opposed all the international resolutions aiming to bring security to the Iraqis.” This is in fact not true, since the French government has voted for UN resolutions supporting the continued occupation of Iraq. The editorial then implied that the French were only getting their just desserts, as “those who do not fight with us will soon find the terrorists at home.”

The initial high-profile diplomatic drive of the French government in Iraq and the Arab and Muslim world to press for the release of the hostages has become subdued, as has its optimism. The government is now relying on secret negotiations, and though officials believe, at the time of writing, that Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot are alive and well, the affair is dragging on as the captivity of the hostages goes into its fourth week.



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