

Anti-Islam campaign in France: the background to the Redeker affair

Stefan Steinberg
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A political campaign to whip up anti-Islamic sentiments in France has found a new highpoint in the fierce debate surrounding an article written by philosophy teacher Robert Redeker.

Much of the French media and a number of prominent politicians have been quick to depict the polemic following Redeker's vitriolic attack on Islam as a dispute about free speech, freedom of the press, a defence of the democratic principles of the French Republic and human rights. In fact, Redeker's article was a deliberate provocation aimed at mobilising the most right-wing forces in France and abroad.

On September 19, a few days before Ramadan, Redeker published an article in *Le Figaro*, entitled, "In the face of Islamist intimidation, what must the free world do?"

In it he called the prophet Mohammed "a merciless warlord, a looter, a mass-murderer of Jews and a polygamist." He described the Koran as "a book of extraordinary violence" and Islam as a religion that "exalts violence." Comparing Islam to Christianity, Redeker wrote, "Jesus is a master of love, Muhammad is a master of hatred."

Redeker went on to claim that Islam was trying "to impose its rules on Europe," for example, by demanding swimming pools adopt special hours for women only and forbidding caricatures of Mohammed.

"Islam is trying to force Europe to bend to its vision of mankind. As in the past with communism, the West finds itself under ideological surveillance," he wrote.

Following publication of his article Redeker was subject to death threats to himself and his family, in the form of emails and postings on Islamist web sites, which have forced him to leave his home and go into hiding.

Such threats by Islamic fundamentalists must be sharply condemned as an attack on free speech.

Redeker has the right to publish his views, however noxious they may be. And those who seek to suppress them by threats of violence do so in furtherance of a reactionary ideology that is irreconcilably hostile to essential democratic rights. Islamic fundamentalism does not articulate the interests of the oppressed workers and peasants, but a layer of capitalists and petty bourgeois who seek to exploit religious illusions and promote communalism in order to win popular backing for their efforts to secure power and its attendant privileges in various countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

The vast majority of Muslims are opposed to such threats against Redeker and Dalil Boubakeur, head of the French Muslim Council, has denounced the death threats, declaring, "Nobody can take the law into his own hands." They only play into the hands of Redeker and his co-thinkers in fuelling anti-Muslim sentiment.

Redeker's diatribe against the Islamic faith comes on the heels of a

series of deliberate attempts by politicians in a series of European countries to whip up anti-Islamic sentiments while proclaiming the superiority of Western Christian culture. This campaign is used to justify claims that military action in the Middle East and elsewhere to bring about regime change—and with it Western control of oil and gas reserves—is a struggle for democracy against clerical reaction. It also provides a rationale for the attacks on democratic rights associated with the "war on terror," which target Muslims in particular but which can then be used against the entire working class.

Redeker is a contributing editor to the right-wing magazine *Les Temps Modernes* (originally founded by the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre), who has previously denounced opposition to the Iraq war in France.

His article in *Le Figaro*, France's leading conservative newspaper, was framed as a defence of the recent lecture given in Germany by Pope Benedict XVI, which also sought to portray Islam as violent and irrational as opposed to Christianity.

Ratzinger's speech in Regensburg, Germany was itself only one of a series of deliberately provocative actions, speeches and articles directed against Muslims, which began with the cartoons published by the Jyllands-Posten newspaper in Denmark one year ago depicting Mohammed as a suicide bomber. More recently, the former British home secretary Jack Straw launched a fresh provocation in his constituency of Blackburn (with a large Muslim community) by declaring that the Muslim veil "made relations between the two communities more difficult." In Germany right-wing politicians have sought to create an atmosphere of hysteria surrounding the recent cancellation of a performance of a Mozart opera in Berlin last month based on claims that the performance would offend Turks and lead to violence by Islamic groups.

A number of leading French politicians and intellectuals have come to the defence of Redeker. Some will have done so based on a commitment to preserving free speech, but others see his plight as a useful cause celebre with which to stir up anti-Muslim and racist sentiment.

The French far-right leader, Philippe de Villiers, head of the anti-European and anti-immigrant Movement for France (MPF), called on the French president to immediately grant Redeker asylum in the presidential Elysee Palace. A number of the slurs raised by Redeker in his article were first voiced by the man who already in 2004 called for a stop to the construction of mosques in Paris and declared, "I am the only politician who tells the French the truth about the Islamization of France."

De Villiers returned to the theme earlier this year and as part of his preparations for the 2007 presidential race, repeating his demand for

an end to the building of mosques. On Europe 1 radio he decried what he called “the progressive Islamisation of French society,” and stated, “It’s not up to France to adapt to Islam but to Islam to adapt to France.” France’s 5 million Muslims make up the largest Islamic minority in Europe.

In terms virtually identical to those now used by Redeker, de Villiers continued, “We have to impose our concept of freedom, and not that of others,” and rejected concessions such as serving halal food to meet Muslim dietary requirements in canteens, allowing “women only” hours in public swimming pools or rewriting history books.

French Interior Minister Nicholas Sarkozy has also been quick to rush to the defence of Redeker. He declared that the criticism and threats made against Redeker were “absolutely scandalous” and that “those threatening this philosophy teacher are doing so in contempt of the rules of democracy and the Republic.... They will be held accountable.”

Sarkozy was one of the first leading French politicians to provoke an open public discussion over Islamism and the role of the Muslim headscarf. In April 2003, he was loudly booed at a meeting in Le Bourget, Paris, after insisting that Muslim women pose for identity photographs without wearing their headscarves. Sarkozy’s initiative was then taken forward in a political offensive by right-wing parties supported by the Socialist Party and various left organisations, which resulted in a discriminatory law passed by the French National Assembly in March 2004 banning the Muslim headscarf in public schools across France.

The web site of the Socialist Party condemns the threats made to Redeker as an attack on the right to free speech, but makes no mention of the content of his article and no attempt to distance itself from his views. The main French teachers union, Fédération de Syndicats Unitaires (FSU), has taken the same stance.

The campaign in defence of Redeker is being led by Redeker’s co-thinkers in “*Les Temps Modernes*”, who published an open letter in *Le Monde* declaring their support for him.

While some of the signatories to the open letter gave their support on the basis of defending free speech and may have their differences with Redeker, its principal movers—the “New Philosophers” André Glucksmann, Bernard-Henry Lévy and Alain Finkielkraut—follow the same right-wing agenda as their colleague.

Glucksmann and Bernard-Henry Lévy have become unabashed supporters of imperialist war and leading figures in a campaign warning of the dangers of alleged “Islamofacism” or “fascislamism,” according to Lévy. Glucksmann has written recently in *Le Figaro* condemning “universal Jihad,” the Iranian “lust for power” and radical Islam’s strategy of “green subversion.” In March 2006 Lévy co-signed a manifesto, “Together facing the new totalitarianism,” in solidarity with the *Jyllands-Posten*.

Finkielkraut provoked a controversy when he vehemently denied that social factors were responsible for the widespread rioting by French and immigrant youth in housing estates and cities across France last autumn: “In France, they would like very much to reduce these riots to their social dimension, to see them as a revolt of youths from the suburbs against their situation, against the discrimination they suffer, against the unemployment. The problem is that most of these youths are blacks or Arabs, with a Muslim identity ... this is a revolt with an ethno-religious character.”

While many thought that the answer to racism was a multiracial society, he added, a multiracial society could also become a “multiracist” society.

There is no ruling elite with a greater interest in whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment than that of France. The political response in France to Redeker’s speech must be seen in relation to fresh efforts by the government in Paris to increase its political influence in the Middle East following the loss of US influence in the region as a result of the disastrous Iraq war. After initial hesitation France has agreed to play a leading role in the recently agreed UN intervention force in Lebanon.

Just as importantly the Redeker affair is being used to pursue a very definite agenda within France.

It is exactly one year since riots and protests in French cities rocked the Republic and none of the outstanding social issues that led to these riots has been addressed. The response of Sarkozy and the Interior Ministry has been to intensify his authoritarian police interventions in working class estates.

French police mount daily operations into estates with large immigrant populations, using the most brutal tactics to “reclaim” what they dub “no-go” areas. Heavily armed Anti-Crime Brigade (Bac) teams are used.

A measure of the scale of police action is provided by statistics showing that whereas the number of incidents registered by the police doubled between 1974 and 2004, the number of those arrested for drug-related offences increased thirty-nine times and immigration offences eight-and-a-half times. The rate of detection compared with reported crime dropped from 43.3 percent to 31.8 percent in the same period.

This offensive has continued unabated since the death of two teenagers trying to evade police last October, leading to pitched battles with local youth. The head of the hard-line Action Police trade union, Michel Thoomis, recently wrote to Sarkozy claiming, “We are in a state of civil war, orchestrated by radical Islamists. This is not a question of urban violence any more. It is an intifada, with stones and Molotov cocktails...”

The current attempt by leading politicians and ideologues to create a mood of hysteria around the “dangers of Islamofacism” in France—highlighted by Redeker’s recent article—provides an ideal cover for such intensified police action against both the immigrant and the entire French working class.



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