

French parliamentary report on terror attacks calls for new police powers

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8 July 2016

On July 5, the French National Assembly voted to accept the bipartisan investigative committee's report on last year's terror attacks in Paris.

As of this writing, the report still has not been published by the National Assembly. However, press analyses and public comments by the lead investigators, Sébastien Pietrasanta of the ruling Socialist Party (PS) and Georges Fenech of the right-wing The Republicans (LR), make clear that the report is awash in a mass of contradictions and absurd evasions.

The 40 propositions issued by the investigative committee and published on the Assembly web site call for a massive reinforcement of police powers. These include integrating France's competing intelligence agencies and domestic Special Forces units; centralizing security databases and electronic spying operations inside France and across Europe; recruiting at least 2,000 more people into the security forces; and more heavily arming soldiers deployed inside France.

Nonetheless, the inescapable conclusion of the report is that police-state measures will do little or nothing to guard against future terror attacks. While they will allow the police to escalate spying and repression against the population—such as in the ongoing bloody crackdown on social protests against the PS government austerity measures—they will not prevent terror attacks. To a large extent, these attacks are only possible because of the security agencies' refusal to arrest well-known Islamist fighters serving as key “assets” in French and NATO wars for regime change in the Middle East.

The French state passed a draconian police spying bill after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks on January 7, 2015, allowing for mass police spying on the entire French population. Nevertheless, men known as top associates

or leaders of Islamist terror groups in Syria and Yemen—for example, the Kouachi brothers, who led the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, and Abdelhamid Abaaoud, centrally involved in the November 13, 2015 attack in Paris—freely traveled around Europe, preparing attacks undisturbed.

Georges Fenech himself stated that the investigation's goal was “to understand how the perpetrators of the worst terrorist attacks in France since World War II were free to come and go as they please, when they were virtually all known to the security services, closely watched, and condemned to prison or facing arrest warrants.”

Speaking to *Le Monde*, he added “There were serious breaches in our intelligence services, the three attackers at the Bataclan theater [on November 13] were extremely well known to the security services, as were the Kouachi brothers [who carried out the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting].”

Pietrasanta added, “Judicial monitoring of [November 13] attacker Samy Amimour should have been much more strict, and we still do not understand why surveillance of him stopped once he was put under investigation in 2012 as he prepared to leave for Yemen. In the same way, Abdelhamid Abaaoud should have been arrested in Greece in January 2015.”

One cannot understand how, in the middle of a so-called war on terror, known Islamist terrorists are allowed to prepare terror attacks in Europe without placing these events in their international context. Amid a five-year war for regime change in Syria, a network of Islamist terror groups was formed to recruit and transport foreign fighters to the Middle East to wage war in Syria. Last year's report by the Soufan Group estimated the total number at around 30,000, including 5,000 from Europe and 1,700 from France

alone.

This large flow of fighters could not escape the NATO powers' intelligence services, especially insofar as these agencies—above all, the CIA—were closely involved in financing, arming and training them on the ground in the Middle East. This network of fighters apparently began to overwhelm the ability of intelligence services to closely monitor the individuals involved, particularly under conditions where the latter were part of covert operations that were protected as critical elements of French or NATO foreign policy.

The vast build-up of police surveillance agencies proved powerless to stop the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the November 13 attacks, the March 22 attacks in Brussels, or whatever new attack these networks are now planning in Europe. Even Pietrasanta and Fenech admit that the military deployments imposed under state of emergency after the November 13 attacks play no real role in making the country safer.

“Eighteen months after the beginning of Operation Sentinel, when up to 10,000 men were deployed and the number is down to six to 7,000, I wonder about what real value this has in terms of making the national territory safer,” Pietrasanta said.

Rather, the state of emergency and the escalation of police and surveillance powers were aimed, above all, at political opposition in the working class and the youth. They created the basis for mass surveillance and violent assaults on protests, and preventive detention and the consignment to house arrest of hundreds of protesters.

To the extent that Pietrasanta and Fenech tried in their presentations to maintain the fiction that the terror attacks are the results of mere deficiencies and lack of coordination between spy agencies, they descended into absurdity.

Thus, they tried to explain why it was impossible to stop the November 13 attacks even though—as was the case in the March 22 attacks in Brussels—the targets, such as the Bataclan theater, had been identified by Islamist detainees to the intelligence services. They insisted the fact that the targets had been identified did not make it any easier to protect them. “Stopping the attacks would have required investigators and intelligence agents to personally remember all the targets mentioned by the terrorists during their interrogations,” Pietrasanta declared.

Is one expected to take such claims seriously? If the only problem was that police could not memorize the list of targets they had to protect, could they perhaps have tried writing it down?

Particularly astonishing, given that many of the Islamist networks involved in the terror attacks developed when their members were in prison, is their account of the specialized intelligence agencies that work inside the French prison system.

Pietrasanta and Fenech declared, “In May 2016, we interviewed Jean-Jacques Urvoas who told us that, since he became justice minister, he had received no reports on penitentiary intelligence, though it has 380 employees. He even deplored the fact that this system is 'perennially out of order, inactive, and failing to send information about the radicalization of inmates back up the chain of command.'”

Considering that France is supposedly on high alert in a war against Islamist jihadism, one must ask: what are these 380 people doing, if it is not issuing reports about such detainees? If they are not helping provide higher authorities with this information, is it perhaps because they have concluded that it is better to look the other way, as “problem” prisoners are sent overseas to fight and be killed in wars that enjoy the support of the intelligence agencies?



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