

France announces major military deployment on presidential election day

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Before the first round of the French presidential election on Sunday, thousands of heavily armed soldiers and security personnel deployed to election meetings and rallies yesterday, amid preparations for a major military deployment on Sunday, for the first round of the elections. In the face of rising popular antiwar and antipolice sentiment, the ruling elite is moving to prolong and intensify the militarization of the country under France's state of emergency.

On Tuesday, the interior minister of France's Socialist Party (PS) government, Matthias Fekl, said 50,000 policemen supported by military units will be mobilized at polling stations across France on Sunday. "Everything has been put in place to ensure the security of this big event for our democracy and our republic. The security forces are mobilized everywhere across France to ensure the security of French people and to ensure the presidential campaign goes smoothly," he said.

A concerted offensive by the interior ministry, acting in concert with all the leading presidential candidates, is underway to justify holding the elections at gunpoint, terrorizing the population and shifting the political atmosphere far to the right. This offensive centers on the announcement of the arrest Tuesday, under circumstances that remain unclear, of two alleged Islamist operatives.

Police arrested the two suspects and alleged they were preparing an attack before election day. Police claim to be in possession of evidence showing that their targets may have included right-wing The Republicans (LR) candidate François Fillon. Police also claimed the two suspects were seeking to "have an impact in this [electoral] period" and had gathered weapons and three kilos of homemade explosives in a flat in Marseille.

According to Fekl, the two men, both French citizens,

allegedly "intended to commit an attack on French soil in the very short term, which is to say in coming days."

On Wednesday, it emerged that Paris's antiterror court had opened preliminary investigations into suspect Mahiedine Merabet, 29, on April 5, after British intelligence reported that he had tried to contact the Islamic State (IS) group. According to prosecutor François Molins, he and the second suspect, Clément Baur, were known to security services since 2016 and 2015, respectively. French intelligence opened "S" files on the two men, identifying them as threats to state security, at that time. They had shared a prison cell in 2013 after drug trafficking convictions, and again in 2015.

Remarkably, the two men were identified by police and their identity discussed with the leading presidential candidates nearly a week before their arrest.

The interior ministry reportedly informed Fillon of the threat they allegedly posed to him on Thursday April 13 and presented Fillon's staff with police files on the two men. A Fillon advisor told the right-wing daily *Le Figaro*, "It was files from the Sarbacane police database that were distributed. One dated from April 10, another from April 13. The news that the two men were working together came to us on April 14."

Le Figaro reported that PS security officials contacted all of the leading presidential candidates about the two men last week. Neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen confirmed to *Le Figaro* that she had been notified about the two men at the same time as Fillon. "Their photos had already been sent to my security services on Thursday," she said.

Yesterday, French media unleashed a propaganda offensive around the arrests, demanding that the danger of Islamist terrorism, which has been the focus of

endless discussion during the election campaign, be placed at the center of the election debate. BFMTV held a round table discussion on how the arrests would raise the profile of the terror issue in the elections.

In its lead editorial, *Le Figaro* wrote that these events “will no doubt place the issue of the struggle against jihadism at the center of the end of the election campaign. It is a critical issue, but one that has been too little dealt with.”

The handling of this incident points to the extraordinary and undemocratic intervention of the security services in the presidential elections. Based simply on the say-so of the interior ministry and of unidentified intelligence operatives, the media are demanding that the entire content of the election debate be shifted onto the need for stepped-up police powers.

The media are posing none of the questions raised by this remarkable sequence of events. Why were these men not arrested immediately last week, when police allegedly had information that they were threatening to kill leading contenders for the French presidency? Why do the media insist that the intelligence services have the right, without so much as presenting any real evidence for their claims about alleged terror attacks, to set the agenda of the election?

In the final analysis, the hysterical reaction of the media and the ruling elite to the arrests of Merabet and Baur can only be understood in the context of the crisis of the presidential campaign in France and of the war danger internationally.

Following Donald Trump’s unprovoked missile attack on Syria on April 7, a wave of antiwar sentiment spread across France and Europe, particularly among youth. Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Unsubmissive France movement benefited in the polls and established himself as a fourth election contender, further destabilizing the campaign and provoking a wave of concern in the media in France and internationally.

Only days after the missile attack, as Mélenchon’s poll ratings rose, the intelligence services were focusing on Merabet and Baur and discussing them with all the major candidates.

The media and the French presidential candidates are united in support for the buildup of the military and of police-state powers. Once the intelligence services decided to arrest the men and publicize the case, they all joined in the law-and-order propaganda sweeping

over the media. This includes Mélenchon, whose nationalistic reaction to these events underscores that he offers no real alternative to the rest of the political establishment.

In a written statement Tuesday, Le Pen pointed to “a devastating multiplication of attacks and threats of attacks” in France that she said was the result of “Islamic fundamentalism” that “has expanded exponentially” in the last decade. “It’s time to put France back in order,” she threatened.

Emmanuel Macron of the PS-backed On the March movement struck a similar tone. He called the arrests a reminder that “the terrorist threat remains very high,” especially during the election campaign, and called for stepped-up Internet censorship by technology companies.

Both Macron and Fillon have, like Le Pen, pledged tougher security measures beyond the current state of emergency if they are elected. “Democracy must not get on its knees in front of the threats and intimidations from terrorists,” Fillon declared in a written statement. “The campaign must continue until the end.”

Mélenchon said Fillon, Le Pen and Macron could have been targets of the two men in Marseille and expressed his solidarity with the candidates he is ostensibly running against. “We will never make the gift to criminals to divide in front of them. We are not afraid,” Mélenchon said during a rally in Dijon.

“I want to formally tell M. Fillon, Mme Le Pen at M. Macron that I send them the deepest expression of my personal solidarity”, he wrote on Twitter.



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