

# Macron's Rhetoric on Internal Security, Republican Values and Radical Islam

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Since Macron's accession to the French Presidency in 2017, internal security, Republican values and radical Islam have joined immigration at the top of the French public debate. Under Macron, a more spontaneous, less detectable but more ubiquitous form of Islamist terrorism has succeeded the massive terrorist attacks of Charlie Hebdo, the Bataclan and Nice in 2015-16. Common crimes against people rose to unprecedented levels, especially against women and representatives of state authority such as police, firefighters, teachers, nurses and locally elected officials. Even political crises such as the "Gilets Jaunes" in 2019 and pension reform in 2023 fuelled increasing violence. Meanwhile, Republican values, especially *laïcité* – France's strict version of secularism protecting freedom of religion and of conscience, as well as state neutrality vis-à-vis religion – have been increasingly challenged by the rise of radical Islam.

Macron spoke repeatedly about these issues, whether to promote new legislation, position himself and his party in the public debate or at victims' funerals. Yet, as a centrist, he has been criticized from both ends of an increasingly polarized political spectrum: the centre and far right have called terrorism, crime, *laïcité* and radical Islam Macron's "blind spot," and the leading failures of his Presidency. Conversely, the far left has painted him as security obsessed, his rhetoric as mimicking that of the far right and his policies as an assault on individual and political freedoms. Macron's ambivalent rhetoric, as well as his overall lack of clarity, coherence and continuity on these issues, has reflected his divided majority (now a minority since his reelection) between the right and

the left, as well as his own penchant for political flexibility and opportunism.

Having campaigned under the state of emergency that followed the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks, Macron made the fight against terrorism an early priority. As promised, he created the National Counter-Terrorism Agency at the Elysée before setting up a new anti-terror division within the Ministry of Justice and boosting territorial as well as penitentiary intelligence. He took pride in the enactment of the "seminal piece of legislation which in 2017 ended the state of emergency while reinforcing the legislative arsenal (to combat terrorism)." He made sure to remind people of the absence of massive terrorist attacks during his Presidency, thanks to the early detection by his reinforced intelligence services of "35 planned attacks between 2017 and 2021" and "70 in the 10 years leading up to 2023." Despite insisting that "external security is often part of internal security" and that terrorists need to be "hunted down wherever their bases are," Macron admitted that "the threat had changed and is rising... It is more endogenous and linked to other sources of risk," referring to the multiplication of knife attacks and their close connections with "daily insecurity largely caused by drug trafficking": "Drugs feed some separatist networks alongside common crime... Over the last 30 years, some neighbourhoods have become unlivable, especially for the most modest and fragile citizens." This is why his goal has been for "the police to go everywhere, so that the Republic can reconquer areas of chronic crime."

Acknowledging a strong rise in crimes against persons in 2021, Macron predicted that security would turn into a key issue in the upcoming presidential election, and he did not want to let these issues be the preserve of the right and far right alone. For him, "security is a major challenge for the country" and "the prerequisite for the fight for freedom is security."

He pledged to finish recruiting the promised 10,000 policemen and better train and equip them, as well as build 15,000 prison spaces before the end of his first term, despite the scepticism of the police and political parties on the right.

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But Macron weakened his tough message on security by including in a bill on “Global Security” the issues of “police brutality” and “ethnic checks,” revealed by a few widely publicized episodes of police violence against minorities. Macron backed a controversial requirement for policemen on the ground to wear cameras, siding with the media against the police. Despite vowing “never to accept attacks on those whose mission it is to protect us” and insisting that “there is no systemic police or state violence or racism whatsoever, this is not true,” he lost the support of the police unions and the rank and file.

Another criticism of Macron from the right focused on “laxist judges” accused of releasing criminals as soon as they were arrested by the police, pronouncing lenient sentences and consistently seeking alternatives to imprisonment. In addition, despite once saying that “half of criminals in Paris are foreigners,” Macron has consistently reflected the dominant view on the left and within his own party by stating: “I will never establish an existential link between immigration and insecurity.” Aware of the strong polarization between the right and left inside and outside his party, and reluctant to challenge the EU’s core policies on immigration, he pretended to ignore immigration’s relevance on security. He fell well short of his stated goal of expelling 100% of illegal refugees from French territory, even though many terrorists were found to be among them. Macron’s rhetoric and policies on Republican values have taken shape more slowly than on security; they have also been more ambivalent and subject to successive shifts. During his campaign and early Presidency, Macron shocked public opinion by challenging France’s universalist ideal: “There is no French culture; there is a culture in France and it is diverse.”

He also called former Prime Minister and rival Manuel Valls’ strict version of *laïcité*, “revengeful.” At a conference of bishops in 2018, he seemingly questioned the seminal 1905 law on *laïcité*, by stressing the “need to repair relations between the Church and the State,” mobilizing both secular and religious groups against the prospect of amending the law. When the media pressed him to deliver a major speech on *laïcité*, Macron answered: “I have been asked 20 times to talk about *laïcité*, but I did it 40 times already!” However, Macron was finally pushed against the wall in October 2019 when a far-right politician demanded that a woman attending the proceedings of a regional council remove her veil. That episode provoked not just another public controversy but clear divisions within Macron’s own cabinet and parliamentary majority. While Macron was deploring the public humiliation inflicted on the veiled woman, his Minister of Education offered the opinion that: “the veil is undesirable in society.” This is when Macron finally agreed to deliver a series of speeches on the topics of Islamic institutions, *laïcité*, security, communitarianism and radical Islam. At first, he thought that addressing these topics one by one would reduce the risk of stigmatizing Muslims, but he later changed his mind, realizing how closely intertwined they were.

For Macron, the overall question has been “How can a monotheistic religion that has exploded globally and arrived in France after 1905 take its place in the Republic?” He recognized that “the global radicalization of Islam has exploited memorial fractures and national failures.” But he also asserted that “nobody can possibly believe that Islam is incompatible with the values of the Republic;” the “Islam of the Enlightenment,” as envisioned by Macron, could only result from its convergence with French Republican values. Macron was keen to reform the dysfunctional dialogue between Islamic institutions and the State by shifting the supervision of Islam from the liberal 1901 law on freedom of association to the stricter 1905 *laïcité* law. But he realized how difficult a challenge he faced when four out of nine Islamic federations refused to sign a charter pledging to respect Republican values as well as stay away from political Islam and foreign influences.

Like most French citizens, Macron believes *laïcité* to be “the iron rule of our national life that allows no compromise.” But his view of *laïcité* is that it should not extend beyond the letter of the revered 1905 law

ensuring religious freedom, freedom of conscience and state neutrality. For him, “*Laïcité* is not the disappearance of religious visibility... We mistakenly want to ascribe the roles of public order or gender equality to *laïcité*, but the problem is not one of *laïcité*... The veil is about civility, gender equality and culture as much as religion... it shocks us because it is contrary to French civility.” He added: “*laïcité* needs to be enforced firmly but fairly, without stigmatizing our Muslim compatriots, otherwise, we are helping those trying to indoctrinate them.”

Of course, these views put Macron at odds with the right as well as the secular centre-left, for whom *laïcité* is not only a legal principle but a pillar of the political culture... According to their leaders, “Macron’s mistake is to dissociate the fight against radical Islam from the question of *laïcité*, even though Islamism is *laïcité*’s main challenge.” For the rest of the left, which has largely abandoned *laïcité* to embrace multiculturalism, *laïcité* is merely a screen for concealing racism, Islamophobia and discrimination.

Regarding other Republican values, Macron is just as ambivalent as he is on *laïcité*, refusing to alienate one wing of his party or the other. He clearly rejects blasphemy in the name of freedom of expression. After the 2020 beheading of a schoolteacher who had shown caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in a class on freedom of expression, Macron “understood that such caricatures can shock, but they do not justify violence.” He also confessed to “not feeling comfortable with the (pejorative) term of communitarianism... All of us have different allegiances that can be complementary and compatible with the Republic.” Yet, he also said: “Multiculturalism is not the model I believe in... In the Republic, the national community is the only one.” To France’s tradition of assimilating immigrants, Macron prefers “the noble principle of integration... France has a problem with recognizing differences.” Early in his Presidency, Macron had hoped that the radicalization of Islam in the “banlieues” could be mitigated by economic policies favouring individual choices and opportunities: “Each citizen, wherever he lives and comes from, must be able to build his life through his hard work and merit; we are still too far from that ideal.” “The Republic failed to integrate Muslims, especially economically... We created neighbourhoods where the promise of the Republic was never kept, and the most radical forms of Islamism became a source of hope.”

By the time Macron delivered his Mulhouse, Pantheon and Les Mureaux speeches in 2020, he had put the concept of separatism at the centre of his analysis: the roots of violence and terrorism are “radical Islamism and communitarianism, which feed separatism from the Republic.” This is the overall argument he chose to justify policies that make it easier to expel radical imams, close radical mosques, dissolve radical militant associations and inspect religious schools. “After populism, a second menace threatens our Republican values, political Islam.” “Terrorism is the worst means for radical Islamism to reach its goals, but it is not the only one. Either through violence or in more insidious ways, fundamentalism challenges another key value in our society, *laïcité*. The first stage of radicalization is often the rejection of *laïcité*.” He added: “The problem is Islamist geographical, social and cultural separatism, it is not *laïcité*... We must never accept that religious law be above the other laws of the Republic, or that home schooling be justified by religious belief.” For Macron, “France will never be a space for those who, often in the name of a God or the support of a foreign power, try to impose the law of a specific group. Because the Republic is indivisible, it cannot accept any form of separatism.”

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Macron was unfairly accused by the left of adopting the rhetoric of the far right. Yet, he kept insisting that “We must act without stigmatizing our Muslim compatriots” and “avoid the fatal confusion between Islam and radicalization.” “It is irresponsible to create confusions between radical Islam and Islam and to stigmatize Muslims,” “Islamists are the enemies of Muslims, who are its victims and must oppose them.” His conviction has indeed been that “The Republic will be stronger in fighting movements intended to destroy it, if it keeps its promise by fighting against discrimination, and injustice and giving everyone a chance.” Macron purposely discarded the term “communitarianism” in favour of “separatism,” fearing he might stigmatize Muslims as a homogeneous community; he

added the plural to suggest that there are other separatist political or religious groups. Despite obviously targeting radical Islam, the “law on separatism” was finally passed with the innocuous title of the “Law comforting the respect of Republican principles.” Macron was chastised by the right for its excessive concern of semantics at the expense of clarity, his emphasis on separatism rather than “conquest,” and his continuing “blind spot” regarding immigration.” During his visit to Mulhouse in February 2020, Macron undermined his own message that “political Islam has no place in France” with a widely circulated photo showing a woman next to him wearing a hijab! Yet, Macron was criticized not only by the French left, but also by the international media, including the *Financial Times*, for allegedly limiting religious freedom and stigmatizing Muslims. He gave a clarifying yet combative response: “France is fighting Islamist separatism, never Islam or Muslims... I will never let anyone say that France or its State cultivate racism against Muslims... The problem is not *laïcité*, it is a counter-society where Republican values are not respected, children are de-schooled, sport and cultural activities serve communitarian purposes, and gender equality and human dignity are rejected... In some neighbourhoods, as well as on the Internet, radical Islamist groups teach French children to hate the Republic and exhort them not to respect our laws. Go and visit neighbourhoods where 3- or 4-year-old girls wear the burka and are raised to hate French values. We are fighting against obscurantism, violent extremism, but never against a religion. Not in our country!”

Macron’s renewed emphasis on *laïcité*, both as a target and necessary remediation, was interpreted as a victory for the pro-*laïcité* camp. One of its most influential lobbies, the “Republican Spring,” unexpectedly decided to support Macron’s candidacy in the 2022 presidential election, expecting him in exchange to endorse their candidates in the subsequent legislative elections. But Macron opted instead to endorse multiculturalist candidates in the hope of attracting support from left-wing voters in his run-off duel with Marine Le Pen. Before the legislative elections, he appointed a multiculturalist academic to replace the pro-*laïcité* Minister of Education, this time to deflect support from the reinvigorated far-left, led by Jean-Luc Melenchon. Macron did not prevent his new Min-

ister of Education from “opening up” his Advisory Council on *laïcité* to a “greater diversity of views.” Overall, Macron has deliberately cultivated ambiguity on *laïcité* and to a lesser extent on security and radical Islam as well, to avoid alienating either wing of his party. He has opportunistically leaned to the left, to the right and then back to the left depending on the political context. However, more than ambiguity, the main reason why the French have become increasingly deaf to Macron’s rhetoric is that it has failed to be matched by actions and results. There is, unfortunately, little hope of this changing in the last three and a half years of his Presidency.

Most of the quotations are from the following speeches and interview given by Macron, listed by date:

- [www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/10/18/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-devant-les-forces-de-securite-interieure](http://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/10/18/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-devant-les-forces-de-securite-interieure).
- [www.opinion-internationale.com/2017/06/23/verbatim-le-discours-du-president-macron-devant-le-conseil-francais-du-culte-musulman\\_51096.html](http://www.opinion-internationale.com/2017/06/23/verbatim-le-discours-du-president-macron-devant-le-conseil-francais-du-culte-musulman_51096.html).
- [www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/04/09/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-a-la-conference-des- eveques-de-france-au-college-des-bernardins](http://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/04/09/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-a-la-conference-des- eveques-de-france-au-college-des-bernardins).
- [www.vie-publique.fr/discours/273505-emmanuel-macron-18022020-lutte-contre-le-separatisme-islamiste](http://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/273505-emmanuel-macron-18022020-lutte-contre-le-separatisme-islamiste).
- [www.vie-publique.fr/discours/276195-emmanuel-macron-04092020-republique](http://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/276195-emmanuel-macron-04092020-republique).
- [www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/10/02/fight-against-separatism-the-republic-in-action-speech-by-emmanuel-macron-president-of-the-republic-on-the-fight-against-separatism](http://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/10/02/fight-against-separatism-the-republic-in-action-speech-by-emmanuel-macron-president-of-the-republic-on-the-fight-against-separatism).
- [www.ft.com/content/8e459097-4b9a-4e04-a344-4262488e7754](http://www.ft.com/content/8e459097-4b9a-4e04-a344-4262488e7754).
- [www.vie-publique.fr/discours/281490-emmanuel-macron-14092021-securite](http://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/281490-emmanuel-macron-14092021-securite).
- [www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/emmanuel-macron-au-figaro-je-me-bats-pour-le-droit-a-la-vie-paisible-20210418](http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/emmanuel-macron-au-figaro-je-me-bats-pour-le-droit-a-la-vie-paisible-20210418).
- [www.vie-publique.fr/discours/281490-emmanuel-macron-14092021-securite](http://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/281490-emmanuel-macron-14092021-securite).