

Fake News on Islamist Extremism in France

by Michael Curtis



History is full of fakes masquerading as real and the Trojan Horse, the trickery used by the Greeks to enter and conquer Troy, may be seen as the archetype of deception. The world today is familiar with the false claims and false news exhibited in the attempts to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign and in appraisal of the Covid-19 pandemic with deliberate attempts to disseminate misinformation or deliberate falsehoods for political advantage. The Trojan Horse symbolically links the ancient past to contemporary issues in a world dominated by media replete with fabrications. The vital difference today is the unprecedented quantity of disinformation or fake news, their rapid speed and dissemination, and the assumption that the unrelenting repetition of them guarantees accuracy. Truth has always been hailed as the first casualty of war, and it is still lost as the result of political warfare.

Surprisingly, the latest victim of inaccurate information, deliberate or otherwise, is French President Emmanuel Macron. He had been aware during French election campaigns of the spread of falsehoods, especially on social media, by political opponents and by Russia. However, the comments on his attitude to Islamist terrorism him in January 2018 to speak of the need for a law to combat fake news on the internet during election campaigns and to counter deliberate attempts to blur the lines between truth and lies. Such a law would enforce more media transparency and intercept offending sites. If we want to protect liberal democracies, he said, we must have strong legislation.

Two years later, Macron has made the issue of fake news about his opinions on Islam and Islamists a central issue. He has asserted that the English language media, which he consistently reads, has distorted his views on the subject as well as misunderstanding the French concept of laicite, generally translated as secularism, basic to French policy and society. He reprimands his critics, who may be acting with or without harmful intent, by reminding them that his policy does not reflect conflict between Christians and Muslims, but between civilization and barbarism.

Macron accuses the U.S. and UK media of legitimizing terrorist violence by false information, that France is racist and Islamophobic, that he is not respecting religion and that he should integrate the Muslim population in France, now numbering six million, eight percent of the population. Even worse has been the mixture of policy differences and deliberate misinformation in the attacks on Macron by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who has ignited flames of religious discord, criticized Macron's defense of secularism, and called for a boycott of French goods such as cheese and cosmetics. In addition to accusing Macron of Islamophobia, he has proclaimed that Macron needs mental treatment. Noticeably, Erdogan's mental clarity has led him to interfere, unduly, in

the internal affairs of religious communities, and restriction in Turkey of the rights of freedom of religion and belief.

In a remarkable action, revealed publicly on November 8, 2020, Macron from his office in the Elysee Palace called the New York Times media correspondent, Ben Smith, to criticize the English language media coverage of France's attitude on terrorist Islamist extremism. His criticism was caustic, and deserves repeating, "When I see several newspapers from countries that share our values, when I see them legitimizing this violence, and saying that the heart of the problem is that France is racist and Islamophobic, then I say the founding principles have been lost."

Macron was bewildered by this misunderstanding of his criticism of Islamist extremism, especially because this was a change in the opinions of those newspapers. Alluding to the terrorist attacks across Paris in November 2015 when 130 people were killed, Macron said "When France was attacked five years ago, every nation in the world supported us." The problem now is that the foreign media did not understand the French concept of *laicite* or secularism. France should be considered a universalist rather than a multiculturalist country, and its people considered first and foremost as citizens, not whether they are Catholic or Muslim, black, yellow, or white.

At the core of the problem is *laicite*, stemming from the 1905 law that officially separated religion from public life, and established state neutrality in religious affairs. The law permits people to belong to any faith they choose, and thus religion is protected, but displays of religious affiliation, symbols or dress, are not allowed in schools or in the public service. Headscarves must be removed before entrance to school. Macron has defended both religious freedom and also the right to blaspheme, the right to express opinions or views that may be perceived as offending religious beliefs.

On October 2, 2020 he proclaimed his policy to fight terrorism: he again denounced *Islamist* separatism and he declared plans for controls on religious and cultural associations to impose French secular, Republican values. Macron acknowledged French fault in building separation of Muslim communities, concentrations of poverty and problems, and created areas where the promises of the Republic have not been fulfilled. There was a need to build a Republican presence in these areas. The colonial past, especially regarding Algeria, has "left scars" on a society struggling to integrate immigrants. France, Macron said, has "not unpacked our past." At the same time, Macron warned of the danger of communitarianism, communities governing themselves. Indeed, some French districts have become terrorist breeding grounds.

Yet again Macron had to deal with disinformation in an article, "The dangerous French religion of secularism", published on *Politico Europe*, written by a French sociologist, a Muslim academic, which in effect blamed secularism and its adherence to blasphemy for the terror in France. French authorities accused the author of an "unthinkable reversal of roles between the attackers and attacked."

Macron is fighting not only against misunderstanding of laicite but also against inaccurate presentation of or fake news about French policy towards Muslims.

Specifically, Macron was annoyed by an article in the *Financial Times* on November 3, 2020, stating that his war on *Islamic* separatism only divides France further. But the important mistake, deliberate or not, was that Macron had spoken of *Islamist*, not Islamic separatism. His objective is a double one: to combat violent extremism of Islamist terrorists; and to heal the social divisions between Muslims and the rest of society.

The *FT*, he said, had not distinguished between the religion of Islam, which he defended, and the extremist Islamism. There is

a fundamental difference between Islam and Islamism. As a result of his criticism the *FT* confessed it had made factual errors and removed the article.

The *Financial Times* and others should not have published its fake news. On February 18, 2020 Macron in the city of Mulhouse announced plans to combat Islamist extremism, to end foreign interference in how Islam is practiced in France and to change the way religious institutions are organized. This meant ending the program established in 1977 by which nine countries could send imams and teachers to France to provide foreign language and culture classes. Algeria finances the Grand Mosque of Paris. Turkey controls a network of mosques inside France and abroad, under the diyanet, a body used for foreign policy. The French government would henceforth have more oversight over schooling, the financing of mosques, and the training of imams. Macron expounds this in oracular fashion; the aim is to encourage an Islam of the Enlightenment, one that is compatible with the values of the Republic.

The reality is that more than 250 people have been killed in France by Islamist terrorists in the last five years. Most glaring in recent months have been three gross obscene brutal incidents. One was the beheading, by an 18 year old Chechen refugee on October 16, 2020 of Samuel Paty, a school teacher, in the street near his school. This attack can be regarded as an assault on the Republic itself because of the prominence of teachers in French life. In a second attack on October 29, a Tunisian man beheaded one woman and killed two others in the Notre Dame Church in Nice. The assassin had come from Tunis, to the Italian island of Lampedusa, to Italy, and then by train to France. This incident strengthened Macron's argument for border controls in the EU since the Schengen zone agreement allows terrorists, like others, to be able to move freely between the Schengen states, 22 of the 27 EU member states. The link between illegal immigration and terrorism,

tighter security, strict border controls, needs examination.

In a third incident on November 11, 2002 an explosion that hurt three occurred during a ceremony organized by the French Consulate to commemorate Remembrance Day at a ceremony in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

The debate in France is only partly about abstract principles of secularism and the correct understanding of *laïcité*, but mainly on the situation on the ground and the reality of terrorist attacks. Fake news prevents understanding and control of Islamist terrorism. As an example *The New York Times* op-ed of October 31, 2020 asking, "Is France fueling Muslim terrorism by trying to prevent it?", misstates the reality by confusing Muslim citizens with Islamist extremists. One can understand President Macron's concern about the English language media.