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The Terror Attack in Toulouse: Aberration or Symptom?

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The events in Toulouse shone a spotlight on the threat posed by global jihadism to Europe and on several problems that for some time have been on the French and European Union agenda, first and foremost the difficulties of integrating the Muslim immigrant community and the issue of anti-Semitism. From an analysis of the events in Toulouse – both the practical aspect, manifested in the cold-blooded murder of French soldiers and Jewish citizens, including children, and the ideological aspect, which the murderer took pains to expound during the siege on his place of refuge – it is clear that Mohamed Merah was a classic product of the global jihad industry, similar to many other young men around the world trained by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. As such, the reason for his acts was ostensibly his desire to take revenge on the French for France's military involvement in Muslim countries, for France's ban on Muslim women wearing full-face veils in public, and for the suffering of Palestinian children as a result of the Israeli occupation.

The case of Merah, a second generation member of an immigrant family of Algerian origin who failed to adapt to French society and together with his brother was exposed to extremist jihadist Salafist indoctrination, is not one of a kind. The ideas espoused by al-Qaeda and its affiliates threatened to explode in Europe long before 9/11, when France, the Netherlands, and Belgium uncovered terrorist cells whose members had trained in Afghanistan and were sent back to their native countries to murder and wreak havoc in the name of the same worldview presented by the murderer in Toulouse. After the attack on the United States in 2001 it became clear that many European nations are home to networks actively supporting the spread of global jihadist ideology, while recruiting new supporters and activists via extremist preachers who work out of mosques, through the internet, and through recruiters working on behalf of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. They induce new volunteers to visit arenas of conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in order to experience firsthand an active jihad against the enemies of Islam. When they

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arrive at the training camps they receive not only training in terrorist techniques and guerilla fighting but also intensive, aggressive indoctrination that results in many of them returning to Europe and pursuing terrorism in order to avenge the citizens of the nations that support what they consider to be aggression against Muslims.

Even if the number of those turning to terrorism is not large, the story of Merah and the general phenomenon throughout Europe demonstrate the failure of the immigrants' host countries to persuade Merah and others like him that a better future awaits them if they adapt to their new society. While there are Muslim immigrants who have integrated successfully in West European society in various professions and in the academic world, a considerable portion have failed to adjust to their new societies. A study published in 2011 by the Council on Foreign Relations on the issue of Muslim integration in Europe points to a number of challenges – poverty, self-segregation, religious difference related to questions of identity, cultural differences, and more – as the primary causes making the process of integration (and adaptation) of the Muslim community on the continent so difficult. According to the study, the discussion of the integration of Muslims focuses on the fears of Islamic radicalism, with an emphasis on terrorist activity. In addition, according to the Pew Research Center, the number of Muslim immigrants is expected to rise from 44.1 million in 2010 to approximately 58 million in 2030, an increase from 6 percent to 8 percent of the general population on the continent. This increase should force EU nations to confront the various challenges, though the process can be expected to be long and full of pitfalls, and one of its results is liable to be a change in what constitutes European identity. Along with the radicalization in portions of the Muslim population, radicalization in EU nations has begun to emerge in recent years: the rise in the power of political parties promoting a xenophobic, anti-immigrant (and anti-Semitic) agenda and placing limits on immigration, especially of Muslims. In addition to this trend, one should consider statements made by leaders such as Cameron, Sarkozy, and Merkel about the failure of the multicultural model.

It may be that the investigation of Merah's brother, currently in French police custody, will show that the murderer from Toulouse acted as a lone wolf (even if he received help or emotional support from his brother) rather than on behalf of a terrorist organization, but the act may still inspire copycat crimes, as it is clear that many European nations are ripe for violence on the part of young people from similar backgrounds who seek revenge via a range of horrific acts against anyone seen as an enemy of Islam. Learning the right lessons in France in particular and in Europe in general for immediately confronting the phenomenon in terms of legislation, security, and intelligence gathering is relatively easy compared to the long term challenges involved in integrating Muslim immigrants on the one hand and dulling the motivation of the minority that chooses terrorism on the other. At the same time, it is precisely the demographic forecasts and the various economic and social constraints involved in immigrant absorption that obligate the European political

leadership to view the most recent terrorist acts as another wake-up call for taking long term steps with significant and extensive social implications, before the next disaster.

For Israel, the Merah case may contain future ramifications for Diaspora Jews liable to result from Israeli government decisions and actions. However, even if Merah is to be believed that the Jewish school was not at the top of his list of targets, by attacking the pupils at the Otzar Hatorah school he expressed an entire worldview that sees Jews and Israel as one seamless entity, a mortal enemy of Islam that must be destroyed everywhere and by every means. In this case, it is doubtful that the call by an official Israeli figure to the Jews of France to “come home” is useful to the Jewish community.

