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Mosul 2014 – the rise of ISIS

Daech ne sort pas du néant [...] Nos services de renseignement n'ont pas vu la menace venir. Sont-ils désormais mieux coordonnés ?

French Senator Aymeri de Montesquiou questioning General Didier Castres

December 2014[1]

What was known about the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS[2]) prior to the establishment of its so-called Caliphate? This chapter delves into this question, evaluating France's ability to anticipate the ascent of ISIS to power. It reconstructs the knowledge of this threat within the French intelligence and broader foreign policy community, when such knowledge was obtained, and how this affected the French policy position. In doing so it offers an assessment of the effectiveness of the French strategic and tactical warning mechanisms concerning this threat. Additionally, it identifies potential lessons that can be learned from this case.

The core argument made in this chapter is that the recent and impactful *Affaire Merah* episode, a series of terrorist attacks killing seven people among which four children in the south of France in 2012, led the French intelligence and foreign policy community to prioritize counterterrorism efforts over the geopolitical implications of ISIS's rise in Iraq and Syria. After the Merah affair, French security services had been criticized for not having done more to prevent the attacks. The subsequent brutality of the January and November 2015 terrorist attacks as discussed in Chapter 9, and the wounds they inflicted on French society, further fed a narrative of shortcomings in the intelligence community's performance and focus, exacerbating their emphasis on counterterrorism. It is argued here that the subsequent focus of the French intelligence and foreign policy community on the threats of terrorist attacks on

[1] Sénat, "Rapport D'information: Opération "Chammal" En Irak. Contribution Au Débat Sur Les Opérations Extérieures," https://www.senat.fr/rap/r14-200/r14-2001.pdf.
[2] Despite having gone through various name changes, the group will anachronistically be referred to as "ISIS" throughout for reasons of readability.

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French soil resulted in an underestimation of how the rise of ISIS would affect France and the French foreign policy priorities more strategically in the region. The French intelligence and foreign policy community thereby insufficiently addressed the potentially debilitating impact that ISIS could, and would, have on Iraq and Syria, and on the wider Middle East. This chapter concludes that such forms of strategic warning remain an overlooked area in the French intelligence and foreign policy community, despite previous efforts to promote foresight and strategic thinking. This emphasis on the tactical rather than the strategic has had an impact on their ability to anticipate the emergence of ISIS.

The time frame covered spans from the emergence and violent consolidation of ISIS as a power in Iraq and Syria from mid-2013, until the November 2015 terrorist attacks in France. It explores France's awareness of and response to the threat of ISIS utilizing a "strategic inferencing" methodology. This combines an analysis of expert claims, open-source data, expert statements and formal reviews and inquiries into the rise of ISIS conducted by the French Parliament and Senate – which also draw on public as well as closed-door conversations with leading figures in the French intelligence community[3] – and finally a review of selected French media from the period under scrutiny. By observing policy adaptation and any shifting foreign policy priorities—considered indicators of new intelligence inputs—and scrutinizing changing decision-maker knowledge claims[4], this chapter expounds was known at the time within the French foreign policy and intelligence community regarding the rise and potential impact of ISIS.

[3]Assemblée Nationale, "Audition Du Général Christophe Gomart, Directeur Du Renseignement Militaire, Sur Le Projet De Loi Relatif Au Renseignement," https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr-cdef/14-15/c1415049.asp; "Rapport Relative Aux Moyens Mis En Œuvre Par L'état Pour Lutter Contre Le Terrorisme Depuis Le 7 Janvier 2015"; "Rapport Sur La Surveillance Des Filières Et Des Individus Djihadistes," assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-enq/r2828.asp; "Sur Le Fonctionnement Des Services De Renseignement Français Dans Le Suivi Et La Surveillance Des Mouvements Radicaux Armés," https://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/documents/notice/14/rap-enq/r1056/(index)/depots/(archives)/index-depots.

[4] These are analytical statements, providing insight into what is likely to occur and when. See Meyer, De Franco, and Otto, *Warning About War: Conflict, Persuasion and Foreign Policy*, 28.

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Intelligence preceding the rise of ISIS

The following examines the knowledge available to the French intelligence prior to and during the early phases of ISIS' emergence, both in Iraq and Syria. It expounds how whilst other countries and regions were initially prioritised at the expense of ISIS, its significant territorial gains over the course of 2014 shifted the French government's attention towards this threat. The capturing of Mosul and its proclamation of a caliphate constituted a particularly important turning point.

Instability and Sectarianism in Post-Invasion Iraq

Because Iraq and Syria are not considered as a "natural zone of presence" in France in recent history, its intelligence collection in the region is limited in comparison to its collection efforts in other areas such as the African continent, and also compared to some of its counterparts. [5] The French intelligence community and experts were, however, well aware of the profound instability and sectarianism in Iraq, which was no surprise given the post-Saddam Hussein landscape that followed the American invasion in 2003. The longstanding sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shiite factions, as well as those between Kurdish groups and the government in Baghdad, plagued stability. After the withdrawal of the US Army between 2009 and 2011 and the institutional void this created, Iraq became a place where a variety of insurgent groups could thrive, including al-Qaida and the Front al-Nusra. [6] The French intelligence community struggled finding the right leads and counterparts amidst this chaos. [7] In 2011, the number of casualties in Iraq sharply increased. According to experts at the time, the most significant threat to Iraq remained al-Qaida, to which the newly established armed forces were unable to respond effectively due to their own entrapment in partisan rivalries.[8] But any doubts that may have existed within the French intelligence community at the time on the capabilities of the Iraqi army to defend the country were not shared widely, and the French media generally painted a picture of the Iraqi army being in development, but progressing.[9] It is

[5] "Audition Du Général Christophe Gomart, Directeur Du Renseignement Militaire, Sur Le Projet De Loi Relatif Au Renseignement".
[6] Le Monde Diplomatique, "Bagdad, Dix Ans Après.
Citations Et Extraits," https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2013/03/A/48846.
[7] Assemblée Nationale, "Sur Le Fonctionnement Des Services De Renseignement Français Dans Le Suivi Et La Surveillance Des Mouvements Radicaux Armés" 106.
[8] Myriam Benraad, "La Crise Irakienne Et La Question Des Minorités : Entre Persécution, Récupération Et Instrument De Gouvernance," https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/art_mb.pdf.
[9] Le Point, "Irak: Premier Défilé De L'armée Depuis Le Retrait Des Troupes Américaines," https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/irak-premier-defile-de-l-armee-depuis-le-retrait-des-troupes-americaines-06-01-2012-1416013_24.php.

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unclear what was known within French intelligence at the time, and whether the American inflationary view of the Iraqi army capabilities were shared by it.[10]

Insurgent factions in Syria

The Arab Spring and its aftermath had worsened the already volatile situation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), especially in Syria. By the summer of 2012, United Nations observers had declared that Syria had descended into civil war, and it was apparent that the Syrian opposition was increasingly composed of Sunni fighter groups with links to the Front al Nusra and al Qaida.

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) forecasting unit, the *Direction de la prospective*, had been alerted to the growing threat of Islamist groups in Syria since the fall of 2012.[11] A diplomat told journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot – once held hostage by Islamist militants – that DGSE agents were deeply concerned about financing that Gulf nations were providing to the Islamist opposition groups to Assad, which far exceeded what the French MFA was offering at the time. There was a fear at DGSE that moderate opposition groups would be tempted to join Islamist counterparts to secure funding. However, this information did not reach the Ministry of Defense, and requests for information made to DSGE to the Defense Ministry were supposedly met with "vague intelligence reports", presumably due to a reluctance to share intelligence with other services. [12]

MENA journalists Peletier and Dubois claim that since 2012, a notable division occurred between the French external and internal intelligence agencies, the DGSE and the DGSI, on the issue of Syria. Whereas the former wanted a formal rupture with the Assad regime – also extending to any intelligence contacts it had there – the DGSI was of the more pragmatic line that the real enemy was ISIS, and that if intelligence sources within the Assad regime or its entourage had to be used for it, that was what had to be done.[13] This rift was highlighted in the fall of 2012 when an alert entitled "*Opposition Syrienne de l'intérieur: le piège islamiste vient du Golfe en nous risquons d'y tomber*" was issued by the DGSE.[14] It warned about the proliferation of extremist groups in Syria and the way the lines between them and the Syrian opposition had begun to blur, complicating efforts to support anti-Assad forces. It is claimed that Laurent Fabius, however, was quite resistant to this information, together with his

[10] Kam, "The Islamic State Surprise: The Intelligence Perspective."
[11] Marc Endeweld, *L'emprise: La France Sous Influence* (Paris: Seuil, 2022).
[12] Chesnot, Christian, and Georges Malbrunot. *Nos Très Chers Émirs*. Paris: Michel Lafon, 2016.
[13] Le Figaro, "«Pour Éviter De Nouveaux Drames, Il Faut Poser La Question Des Failles Du Renseignement»," https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2017/01/11/01016-20170111ARTFIG00044-pour-eviter-de-nouveaux-drames-il-faut-poser-la-question-des-failles-du-renseignement.php.
[14] Endeweld, *L'emprise: La France Sous Influence*.

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government keen to keep the pressure on Assad. A senior policy official at the DGSE quit his post early 2014 out of frustration with this process.[15] From the summer of 2012, President Hollande had indeed stated that his policy on Assad was "simple – Bashar a l-Assad has to go".[16] His departure, Hollande had claimed earlier, was a "prerequisite for any political transition".[17] Late 2013, the French pressure on Assad increased, with Hollande declaring France was willing to take part in US-led military strikes against the country. It underscores the challenges posed by varying political pressures on the intelligence process.

Threat evolution: ISIS' rise amidst broader concerns

In the spring of 2013, the rise of ISIS gained velocity when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the integration of Front al-Nosra into his ISIS movement. The French inability to foresee this move and the subsequent expansion of ISIS in the Levant drew criticism. The French intelligence community regarded the developments as very concerning, as a number of French citizens had already traveled to join the insurgent groups. The looming prospect of their potential return to French soil to commit terrorist attacks was a major source of worry.[18] In April 2013, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) became the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant ISIL, under commandment of al-Baghdadi. The French Senate later detailed how the exact relationship between ISIS and the various other insurgent factions operating in Iraq and Syria was then still unknown to the intelligence and foreign policy community.[19] Around the same time, the French media started to pick up on the rise and internal struggles of radical Islamist factions in Iraq and Syria.[20]

Despite a mounting awareness, a scrutiny of the French government's foreign policy priorities in 2013 reveals that these were still primarily focused on the crisis in Mali and the wider instability in the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, the violent repression of opposition forces by Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the potential use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, the "Iranian threat," and related negotiations involving the E3+3 countries.[21] While Laurent Fabius,

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[15] Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot, *Nos Très Chers Émirs* (Paris: Michel Lafon, 2016).
[16] François Hollande, "Déclaration De M. François Hollande, Président De La République, Sur Les Défis Et Priorités De La Politique Étrangère De La France, À Paris Le 27 Août 2012.," https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/185772-declaration-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-la-republique-sur-les.
[17] France24, "Paris Et Moscou S'opposent Sur Le Départ De Bachar Al-Assad," https://www.france24.com/fr/20120601-syrie-berlin-paris-france-allemagne-vladimir-poutine-solution-pacifique-francois-hollande-angela-merkel.
[18] Assemblée Nationale, "Sur Le Fonctionnement Des Services De Renseignement Français Dans Le Suivi Et La Surveillance Des Mouvements Radicaux Armés" 14.
[19] Sénat, "Report Sénat, Commission D'enquête Sur L'organisation Et Les Moyens De La Lutte Contre Les Réseaux Djihadistes En France Et En Europe," http://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2014/r14-388-notice.html.
[20] Le Figaro, "Syrie: Un Chef Rebelle Tué Par Al-Qaida," https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-eco/2013/07/11/97002-20130711FILWWW00611-syrie-un-chef-rebelle-tue-par-al-qaida.php.
[21] Laurent Fabius, "Déclaration De M. Laurent Fabius, Ministre Des Affaires Étrangères, Sur Les Défis Et Priorités De La Politique Étrangère De La France, À Paris Le 27 Mars 2013.," https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/187552-laurent-fabius-27032013-politique-etrangere-de-la-france.

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the Minister of Foreign Affairs, does specifically mention the terrorist threat posed by groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Front of Al-Nusra in March 2013, it is not a policy priority at the time. The main focus in Syria was on the potential use of chemical weapons by the government, as confirmed by a declassified French intelligence note.[22] Revealing a focus on the risk of terrorism, the French National Assembly's 2013 report[23] also acknowledged the growing risk of terrorist attacks both domestically and abroad, while highlighting the limitations of intelligence services in dealing with this threat. In other words, the ascendancy of these Islamist factions in Iraq and Syria was not a priority focus in 2013, still overshadowed by concerns and interests elsewhere.

A shifting approach amidst ISIS rapid advances

This began to shift critically in the early months of 2014. In January, ISIS took control of both the Syrian cities of Raqqa and Fallujah. This was the first of ISIS' significant territorial gains in Iraq in 2014, highlighting the group's growing power. Yet expert analyses across the French media do not yet anticipate the horrific potential of ISIS. Their assessment was the group could not "win" the struggle between the factions in Iraq but could "make life difficult" for the rebels fighting against Assad. [24]

Francois Hollande, in his speech on January 17th, 2014, still opens with statements the crisis in Mali. He however also acknowledged that France's "greatest occupation" in the Middle East was now Syria, specifically mentioning the dilemma between keeping Assad's dictatorial regime and the cruelties it engages in or risking creating a vacuum that could become a breeding ground for further Islamic extremism.[25] For long, the key priority was the removal of Assad. French politics was indeed stuck in an "insurmountable contradiction" between Assad and ISIS in the words of Hubert Védrine, former French MFA in an interview with the Senate. In taking on ISIS in Syria, it would "de facto consolidate Assad's regime."[26]

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[22] "Synthèse Nationale De Renseignement Déclassifié Programme Chimique Syrien Cas D'emploi Passés D'agents Chimiques Par Le Régime," https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Syrie_Synthese_nationale_de_renseignement_declassifie_le_02_09_2013_cle01b7e8.pdf.

[23] Assemblée Nationale, "Sur Le Fonctionnement Des Services De Renseignement Français Dans Le Suivi Et La Surveillance Des Mouvements Radicaux Armés" 2.

[24] Yannick van der Schueren, "Les Combattants De L'etat Islamique En Irak Et Au Levant Reculent En Syrie," *La Tribune de Geneve*, 10 January 2014 2014.

[25] François Hollande, "Déclaration De M. François Hollande, Président De La République, Sur Les Défis Et Priorités De La Politique Étrangère De La France, À Paris Le 17 Janvier 2014.," https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/190144-declaration-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-la-republique-sur-les.

[26] Sénat, "Rapport D'information: Fait Au Nom De La Commission Des Affaires ÉTrangèRes, De La DéFense Et Des Forces ArméEs (1) En Vue Du DéBat Sur L'autorisation De Prolongation De L'opéRation Chammal En Irak, En Application De L'article 35 De La Constitution" 26.

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At the same time, Laurent Fabius suggested that the Syrian rebels needed to be supplied with arms. Although he claimed to be held back by American pressure at the time[27], interviews and statements by Fabius and Hollande in the French media at the time clearly signal a shift in the French approach to Syria. While initially focused on Assad's removal, there now was a growing recognition of the significant threat posed by Islamic groups that could fill resulting vacuum. These statements also demonstrated that ISIS was clearly rising as a foreign policy priority, indicating a modicum of Bayesian belief updating. This may have been a result of French intelligence warnings, possibly obtained from allies abroad, who shared a sense of urgency on ISIS' steep rise to power in Iraq and Syria. For example, John Kerry stated at the time that it was the "biggest threat to the US" in that moment. [28]

In June of 2014, its rapid rise culminates in ISIS capturing Mosul. As a result, approximately five divisions of the Iraqi army failed to function as military units and collapsed within 48 hours. [29] The movement declares the establishment of a caliphate in Iraq and Syria, calling itself "Islamic State" from now on. This rapid expansion, as a Senate report later concludes[30], marks a true turning point in its rise. Some French journalists noted that France was caught off guard by the announcement of the Islamic caliphate, which they assert was "discovered by intelligence officials when it was televised".[31] By June, French prime minister Manuel Valls states "we have never been faced by such a challenge". He specifically mentions the worry over French citizens leaving for Syria to join the fight of ISIS, and the terrorist threat of them returning to commit attacks. [32] In August of 2014, ISIS had gained control over key oil fields Ain Zalah and Batma, as well as the Mosul Dam in Iraq, thereby bolstering their revenue stream substantially. After the killing of James Foley on August 19, 2014, the French media increasingly discus the threat posed by the Islamic State. Around this same time, French President Francois Hollande announced that France was now indeed providing arms to Syrian rebels fighting against Assad, and proposed hosting an international conference to address the issue of the Islamic State, which he described as the "most serious threat since 2001".[33] He underscores the need for a

[27] Isabelle Lasserre, "La Diplomatie Française a-T-Elle Tenu Son Rang En 2013 ?," *Le Figaro*, 13 January 2014 2014.
[28] Paré, Caroline. "Alain Rodier: «L'etat Islamique En Irak Et Au Levant Est Extrêmement Dangereux»." RFI, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/moyen-orient/20140107-alain-rodier-etat-islamique-irak-levant-eiil-extremement-dangereux-jihadisme-terrorisme.
[29] Kam, "The Islamic State Surprise: The Intelligence Perspective."
[30] Sénat, "Report Sénat, Commission D'enquête Sur L'organisation Et Les Moyens De La Lutte Contre Les Réseaux Djihadistes En France Et En Europe" 34.
[31] RFI, "«Où Sont Passés Nos Espions ?», De Christophe Dubois Et Eric Pelletier," https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20170205-espions-renseignement-jihadistes-livre-christophe-dubois-eric-pelletier.
[32] Les Echos, "Français En Syrie: "Nous N'avons Jamais Été Confrontés À Un Tel Défi", Estime Valls," lesechos.fr/2014/06/francais-en-syrie-nous-navons-jamais-ete-confrontes-a-un-tel-defi-estime-valls-304094.
[33] France24, "Hollande : "La Situation Internationale Est La Plus Grave Depuis 2001," https://www.france24.com/fr/20140820-francois-hollande-france-entretien-economie-monde-terrorisme-jihad-

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political, humanitarian and potentially even a military response to ISIS.[34] France joins the US-led international coalition bombing ISIS targets in Iraq in August and in September also in Syria. Opération Chammal, the French mission to support the Iraqi army and fight ISIS, takes off. ISIS was now seen as the key danger facing France.[35]

Counter Terrorism as French priority

From April 2014, Minister of the Interior Bernard Cazeneuve had led a campaign to combat jihadist networks in France that have ties to Syria. [36] Within French public opinion, the most significant threat arising from ISIS's rise is seen as returning fighters with intentions of carrying out attacks. On September 22, an audio message from ISIS threatening to retaliate against France for its military involvement in Operation Chammal had a significant impact on French society. This is the first time France is specifically called out as a target for terrorist attacks [37] The emphasis on terrorism, in the public debate and in speeches from politicians, exemplifies the focus on the domestic terrorist threat of ISIS fighters, with comparatively much less attention to the geopolitical aspect of ISIS' rise in Iraq and Syria, what it meant for the region and for the French foreign policy priorities. This is particularly noticeable when compared to other countries like the US or Germany.[38] In that same month, French Rafales conducted their first strikes against ISIS targets, beginning in Iraq and later in Syria. While ISIS's rise and potential countermeasures become an increasing policy priority for France on the international stage, the focus within the country remains on the terrorist threat posed by ISIS. The media largely covers the danger of French jihadists returning to carry out attacks within the country.

According to expert journalists like RFI's David Thomson, the government's efforts to foreground and combat the phenomenon of returning fighters were merely "window dressing" to conceal their failure to anticipate the rise of ISIS in Syria. Thomson even alleges that the French government initially had no issue with its citizens joining the fight of ISIS, as they were

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ukraine; Les Echos, "François Hollande Confirme La Livraison D'armes Aux Rebelles Syriens," https://www.lesechos.fr/2014/08/francois-hollande-confirme-la-livraison-darmes-aux-rebelles-syriens-308282.
[34] Reuters, "La France Envisage Une Réponse Militaire Contre L'etat Islamique," https://www.reuters.com/article/ofrtp-france-irak-idFRKBN0GY1ZV20140903.
[35] Sénat, "Rapport D'information: Fait Au Nom De La Commission Des Affaires ÉTrangèRes, De La DéFense Et Des Forces ArméEs (1) En Vue Du DéBat Sur L'autorisation De Prolongation De L'opéRation Chammal En Irak, En Application De L'article 35 De La Constitution," https://www.senat.fr/rap/r14-200/r14-2001.pdf.
[36] France24, "Djihadistes Français En Syrie : Le Réveil Tardif De La France," https://www.france24.com/fr/20140423-djihad-france-plan-lutte-syrie-communication-david-thomson.
[37] Le Figaro, "La Menace De L'etat Islamique Est À Prendre «Très Au Sérieux»," https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/09/22/01003-20140922ARTFIG00173-la-menace-de-l-etat-islamique-est-a-prendre-tres-au-serieux.php.
[38] BBC News. "Kerry: 'Isis Is a Threat to Entire Region'." https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-27966221.

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battling the Assad regime that France wanted overthrown.[39] Although there is little evidence to support Thomson's claims, it is evident that the prevailing discourse in France was heavily focused on counterterrorism and thwarting the return of jihadi radicals from Iraq and Syria, rather than on the broader implications of ISIS's expansion. One explanation for this is the "*Affaire Merah*," a series of terrorist attacks committed by Islamist extremist Mohamed Merah in Toulouse and Montauban from March 11 to March 19, 2012. The attacks resulted in the deaths of seven individuals, including three soldiers and three children from a Jewish school. Merah was ultimately shot by police forces on March 22, 2012. The affair and its aftermath left deep scars in French society. It put an end to the "sixteen-year illusion" that France was immune to jihadist terrorism, according to Gilles Kepel.[40] The affair also sparked a heated media discussion about the inadequate performance of French intelligence services. Despite being under surveillance, Merah had traveled twice to Pakistan and Afghanistan for operational training in 2010 and 2011, raising questions about the intelligence service's ability to accurately assess the threat he posed. The incident was dubbed an intelligence failure[41] and was heavily investigated in multiple Senate and Assemblée reports. One report noted that "*French intelligence did not see anything coming during the Arab Spring, regardless of the country, and could not prevent the Merah case"*[42]

During the years of 2014-2015, the sharp ascent of ISIS and the destructive impact of terrorist attacks in France intensified the national focus on counter-terrorism efforts. As a result, the debate in France was predominantly centered on how the threat posed by ISIS would evolve, how the group's capabilities would expand over time, and how this could potentially impact their ability to carry out terrorist attacks within France. This emphasis on tactical intelligence on ISIS' near-future development is evident in both the reporting on and investigations carried out by the French parliament and Senate during this period.[43] Interviewed leading figures from French intelligence and the foreign policy and defence machinery, in Senate and parliament inquiries, predominantly focus on the future development of the ISIS threat, particularly in relation to terrorism. However, there is little reflection or attempts at lesson-learning from the French foreign policy and intelligence community regarding their performance in anticipating and responding to the rise of ISIS, as evidenced by an analysis of the reporting. This is in contrast to countries such as the UK, US, and to a lesser extent Germany, where greater reflection on

[39] France24, "Djihadistes Français En Syrie : Le Réveil Tardif De La France".
[40] Gilles Kepel, "The Merah Affair in Context," in *Terror in France* (2017), 64.

[41] Assemblée Nationale, "Sur Le Fonctionnement Des Services De Renseignement Français Dans Le Suivi Et La Surveillance Des Mouvements Radicaux Armés" 102.
[42] Ibid., 125.
[43] Assemblée Nationale, "Rapport Relative Aux Moyens Mis En Œuvre Par L'état Pour Lutter Contre Le Terrorisme Depuis Le 7 Janvier 2015"; Sénat, "Report Sénat, Commission D'enquête Sur L'organisation Et Les Moyens De La Lutte Contre Les Réseaux Djihadistes En France Et En Europe".

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the efforts of intelligence services was taking place during the same period.[44] In addition, while US scholars have characterized the rise of ISIS as an intelligence failure, there has been comparatively less attention to this issue in French academia.

The complicated growth of strategic warning

Warning authorities and politicians were thus mainly focused on the immediate threat of terrorist attacks by ISIS, spurred by the Merah Affair and especially after the vicious attacks in 2015. This focus was intensified by the political climate at the time, which prioritized internal security, energy access, and halting migration over other strategic considerations in French and European relations with the MENA region.[45] One possible explanation for this is that long-term, strategic analysis has a smaller place in French intelligence and in French foreign policy more broadly.

The "*Livre blanc sur la politique étrangère et européenne de la France 2008-2020*," published in 2008, emphasized the importance of "*connaisance-anticipation*" (knowledge-anticipation) in France's foreign and European policy strategy. The whitepaper identified a need for "strengthened anticipation and foresight capabilities, better coordinated with other public forecasting sources, and in particular our intelligence capabilities."[46] To achieve this, the document proposed doubling spending on intelligence.[47] Over the years that followed, increasing foresight capacity became a priority and received more attention[48], particularly in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), although there were some challenges along the way.

The continued reluctance to engage in strategic thinking is exemplified by the struggles within the forecasting department of the MFA, known as the Direction de la prospective. In 2012, reports emerged that diplomats within the department were concerned about the future of long-term analysis. They had leaked information to French newspaper *Le Point*, expressing their fears that the incoming director, Maxime Lefebvre, had been instructed to focus on short-term notes for meetings rather than forward-looking analysis. One diplomat sarcastically remarked, "*Above all, let's not think about the future anymore, it's useless*!" Another diplomat stated that Laurent Fabius, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs, wanted a "foresight department

[44] House of Commons, "Uk Military Operations in Syria and Iraq," (2016).
[45] Nikki Ikani, *Crisis and Change in European Union Foreign Policy: A Framework of Eu Foreign Policy Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 20.
[46] "Livre Blanc Sur La Politique Étrangère Et Européenne De La France 2008 - 2020," https://medias.vie-publique.fr/data_storage_s3/rapport/pdf/084000459.pdf.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Sénat, "Rapport D'information Au Nom De La Commission Des Affaires Étrangères, De La Défense Et Des Forces Armées (1) Sur Le Renforcement De La Fonction D'anticipation Stratégique Depuis Les Livres Blancs De 2008," https://www.senat.fr/rap/r10-585/r10-5851.pdf.

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for the short term."[49] As a result of these concerns, many officials within the department moved to other jobs. The following year, the department was renamed the *Centre d'analyse, de prospective et de stratégie* (CAPS).

In 2011, the French Senate had released a report criticizing France for lacking strategic anticipation and thinking, which it described as a form of "collective blindness." The report highlighted a bias towards short-term thinking over long-term planning. The Senate's findings were based on interviews with 18 high-ranking officials in intelligence, defense, and foreign policy, concluding that there is a bias against forward-looking strategic thinking. This bias may stem from concerns about upsetting intelligence counterparts or career interests that do not incentivize dissenting views.[50] It is contended here that this tendency towards short-term thinking may have led to a neglect of the medium-to long-term development of Iraq and Syria as well as of the strategic consequences of prioritizing the removal of Assad at any cost due to the overwhelming focus on domestic security concerns. The rise of ISIS occurred during a time when the US had pulled its forces back from Iraq, France was engaged in a military operation in Mali (Operation Serval), Europe was recovering from the Eurozone crisis, and Ukraine was embroiled in political and military conflict, which culminated in Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The multiple and sometimes competing foreign policy agendas, exacerbated by the acute urgency in crisis management across these various arenas, further reinforces the focus of decision-makers on short-term issues at the expense of long-term outcomes. This, in turn, can impact the ability of intelligence consumers to consume and act on intelligence related to emerging threats.[51] A tentative finding worthy of more research is that an enduring neglect of long-term strategic thinking in the French intelligence foreign policy machinery at the time may have hindered its ability to effectively address emerging threats in Iraq and Syria.

Lessons

It is clear that the French intelligence community has learned important lessons from the events in Iraq, Syria, and on French soil. These lessons are illustrated by an acceleration of intelligence reforms, already proposed in the 2008 and 2013 defense and foreign policy whitepapers. Bajolet told the French parliament in an inquiry that the "attacks like those of November 13 mark a failure of foreign intelligence (...). They also undoubtedly represent a

[49] Le Point, "Quai D'orsay : Malaise À La Direction De La Prospective," https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/exclusif-quai-d-orsay-malaise-a-la-direction-de-la-prospective-24-10-2012-1520322_20.php.
[50] Sénat, "Rapport D'information Au Nom De La Commission Des Affaires Étrangères, De La Défense Et Des Forces Armées (1) Sur Le Renforcement De La Fonction D'anticipation Stratégique Depuis Les Livres Blancs De 2008" 24.
[51] C. F. Smart and Ilan Vertinsky, "Designs for Crisis Decision Units," *Administrative science quarterly* 22 4 (1977).

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failure for internal intelligence".[52] Their repercussions on the realm of intelligence have been significant.[53] As Louis Gautier, the French Secretary General of Defence and National Security noted in 2015, the most effective way to analyze risks, anticipate threats, and develop appropriate security strategies was considered to be the cooperation and information sharing between services. [54] This has led to increased intelligence sharing between different agencies and a focus on central coordination.

While much of the national narrative still centers on countering the terrorist threat from Islamic radicalism, there has also been a learning process when it comes to intelligence collection in the Levant itself, exemplified by the "Levant Plateau" for surveillance and intelligence acquisition in the region. Interagency cooperation is now a top priority, and the French government has recognized the importance of sharing information and resources across different agencies to better anticipate and address emerging threats. [55]

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that ISIS' rise as well as its possible geopolitical and strategic implications for the Middle East were not a priority for the French intelligence and foreign policy community prior to 2014. Laurent Fabius, it is claimed, long resisted information about these developments, keen as his government was oust Assad. In 2012 the Affaire Merah had triggered a public debate as well as extensive investigations about the shortcomings of the French intelligence services, with some dubbing it an intelligence failure for France. It was in this context that the rise of ISIS became a focal point following the occupation of Fallujah and Mosul in 2014, which marked a true turning point in the French perception of ISIS. ISIS landed firmly on the French radar, but still mostly as a threat to its domestic security, through terrorist attacks, rather than as strategic actor with the ability to profoundly destabilize the Middle East. This was exacerbated by the 2015 terrorist attacks. Counterterrorism efforts, this chapter discussed, took significant precedence over other, more strategic aspects of ISIS' rise to power in Iraq and Syria.

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[52] Assemblée Nationale, "Rapport Relative Aux Moyens Mis En Œuvre Par L'état Pour Lutter Contre Le Terrorisme Depuis Le 7 Janvier 2015" 137.
[53] "Loi Du 24 Juillet 2015 Relative Au Renseignement," https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/20737-securite-loi-relative-au-renseignement#:~:text=La%20loi%20vise%20%C3%A0%20donner,d'une%20autorit%C3%A9%20administrative%20ind%C3%A9pendante.
[54] Louis Gautier, "Renseignement Et Terrorisme. Discours Inaugural Prononcé Par M. Louis Gautier Le 9 Décembre 2016 Devant Les Sessions Ihedn-Inhesj. Paris," http://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/discours/renseignement-et-terrorisme/.
[55] Assemblée Nationale, "Rapport Relative Aux Moyens Mis En Œuvre Par L'état Pour Lutter Contre Le Terrorisme Depuis Le 7 Janvier 2015".

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The public debate in France overwhelmingly concentrated their analyses from 2014 onwards on tactical intelligence, on how the immediate terrorist threat posed by ISIS would develop in the near future. This chapter indeed showed how the discourse in France primarily revolved around predicting the trajectory of the ISIS terrorist threat to France, the potential growth of its capabilities, and the implications for executing terrorist acts on French soil. Despite it being dubbed an "intelligence failure" by Bernard Bajolet, DGSE Director from 2013 to 2017[56], the performance of the French intelligence and foreign policy community in anticipating the rise of ISIS and its potential threats in the lead-up to its rise, including which if any lessons may have been learnt to mitigate such failures in the future, received scant attention. Although it is likely that within the intelligence community itself internal reviews will have taken place, the lack of attention in the public debate to any process of lesson-learning from this potential intelligence failure in both the media and by the political authorities investigating ISIS at the time is striking.

This chapter attributes this prioritization of the short-term concerns regarding terrorism over long-term strategic thinking to the historical comparative neglect of strategic warning in the French intelligence and foreign policy community. Despite efforts made to improve the strategic foresight capacity, there has been a longstanding reluctance to engage in long-term strategic thinking, exemplified by the bias towards short term considerations of the French MFA. This has been previously criticized by amongst others the Senate, but it is a strategic culture that is slow to change.

However, in 2015, reforms were implemented, some of which had been on the policy agenda since 2008. The reforms provide an indication that lessons were learned from the events under scrutiny, particularly concerning the French approach to counterterrorism. Although the threat of Islamic radicalism continues to be prioritized over strategic foresight on the geopolitical development in the Levant, there is some evidence of a lesson-learning process regarding intelligence collection and sharing in the region.

Recommendations based on this case

- France prioritized tactical intelligence of ISIS's immediate threat over understanding its broader geopolitical consequence. Align intelligence capabilities on tactical, near-term events with strategic warning mechanisms fostering a culture that values an integration of both short- and long-term perspectives
- France's perception of ISIS emphasized domestic security, heavily influenced by the Affaire Merah and subsequent attacks. Ensure a balanced approach to threat

[56] Assemblée Nationale, "Rapport Relative Aux Moyens Mis En Œuvre Par L'état Pour Lutter Contre Le Terrorisme Depuis Le 7 Janvier 2015," https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/rap-enq/r3922-t1.asp.

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perception, capturing both immediate domestic security concerns and broader, strategic geopolitical developments, also in 'non-priority regions'. Interlink analyses of immediate threats with underlying root causes.

- Refine intelligence sharing and collaborative mechanisms among different intelligence and security agencies.

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