

Hollande's choice Middle East battle over war on homefront

JOHN VINOCCUR, The Wall Street Journal, December 2, 2015 12:00AM



French President Francois Hollande 'has recast himself as a war president battling Islamic State in the Middle East'.

On January 17, 10 days after the attacks by home-grown Islamic terrorists against Charlie Hebdo and a kosher market, Francois Hollande went to Tulle in central France to talk to the folks. He told them, "Life goes on. The sales are on now, so go and buy. Nothing has to change."

The President chose the no-news-today approach because he saw no gain in addressing the question of Islam in France, an area where frankness and willingness to act have been virtual taboos for him and others for a decade.

Hollande did ask parliamentary leaders to look into "forms of engagement and the reinforcement of affiliation with the Republic". That grotesque convulsion was meant to mask an attempt at measuring where the country's Muslims stood in terms of respect for the supremacy of French law, and the national ethos of liberty, equality and brotherhood.

"Nobody knew what to do," Françoise Fressoz of Le Monde later wrote in describing the circumstances. "Habits and conformity take over. It's a historic opportunity, but the country missed it."

The same situation pertains now. After the 130 murders in Paris last month, by jihadists mostly with French backgrounds, Hollande was able to declare war on Islamic State, send an aircraft carrier to the Middle East to fight it, and order a three-month state of emergency in France, which accounted for 1233 searches and 266 assignments to house arrest during its first 10 days — while ignoring polling over the past three months that shows a clear majority of voters want to send French ground troops to Syria.

Strikingly, the President has turned away from another kind of determination at home. He is showing no signs of listening to the large segments of French society — 60 per cent to 70 per cent at intervals over the past five years — that see French Islam as unwilling to commit to the rule of law and French Muslims as responsible for their own failed integration.

The circumstances are more tortured now than ever. The intelligent notion of a potential trade-off between France and its largely Arab Muslim population of five-plus million died with the November 13 attacks.

The idea was that France could offer an affirmative-action program of jobs, educational advantages and antidiscrimination measures to the Muslim community in exchange for its acceptance of an official charter for Islamic assimilation. Former president Nicolas Sarkozy had once argued in that direction, but abandoned the issue. Hollande has never touched it.

Challenged as a wrong-minded giveaway, recommending a trade-off would be poison in the coming elections for the democratic right and left, and pure delight for Marine Le Pen's rightwing extremists of the National Front.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls now says Islam must “stand up” and “cut out all excuses” for jihadism and terror, but the President hasn't endorsed the statement.

Hollande's silence also met Valls's remark, coming well before the recent terrorist attacks, that France faced “a war of civilisation”.

With a considerable slice of Muslim voters having backed him in the past, the President may be trying to avoid accusations of Islamophobia. His approach certainly isn't one that deals with what Alain Minc, a French intellectual of stature, writes is an “Islam that resembles a subterranean territory within French society”.

How can Hollande and France deal with the problem at the lowest level of possible confrontation or conflict? Minc and others (notably a high-level French civil servant writing, under the pen-name of Camille Desmoulins, about French Islam's lack of responsible governance) have talked of the state consulting representative Muslims about granting Islam the unique status of a consistory or religious council.

That would give Islam a binding, official role equal to that of French Roman Catholics, Protestants and Jews while requiring its allegiance to the primacy of French law. For Islam in everyday French life, that signifies the Civil Code superseding the Koran.

En route, in the manner of Napoleon in 1806 when he began a process extending official status to the Jews, the Muslims would likely be asked to affirm an obligation to defend France ahead of any other consideration.

Importantly, Islam's French representatives could be required to take responsibility for those misusing its name. The obstacles are more than vast, but Minc says “the results of a delicate truth-operation are predictable”: firm adherence among Muslims to the principles of the republic.

Then there's reality.

Accused throughout his years in office of coming up short on authority, a newly hang-out-more-flags Hollande, aiming at re-election in 2017, has recast himself as a war president battling Islamic State in the Middle East.

And as a President of deconfliction at home? On that front, Hollande has given no indication about when — or how hard — he is willing to fight.

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