

The Mutations of Terrorism

Alain Bauer

TERRORISM—AN UNIDENTIFIED FIGHTING OBJECT

Criminologists are neither police nor magistrates. They must view criminals, no matter how violent they are, clinically. They must understand their functioning and analyze their activities. A criminologist must first establish a diagnosis to give an idea of the nature of the problem, then consider the means of curbing criminal activity, and finally engage in a therapeutic debate to determine what type of remedy it is better to prescribe—homeopathic (chamomile), chemical (pharmaceutical), or surgical (the route to the operating theater). In a normal medical system, these three steps are generally followed and the same should be true in criminology.

But here we run into a technical problem—the practice of criminology requires a clinical tool to formulate a diagnosis. Now, in general, we have only “therapists,” each of whom has an extremely precise idea of the best way to cure the problem, but none of whom has any idea of its nature. Nonetheless, a good diagnosis remains a vital prerequisite if we wish to adopt a good therapy. We need to understand as well as possible the nature of the problem in order to be able to respond in an adequate way.

What is the conversation about today? About “terrorism” ... But that is an undefined term, almost a concept without stable content. Nobody has ever succeeded in defining what terrorism is. A consensual definition cannot be found either in the Penal Code or in the entirety of the judicial mechanisms of the world. There is a very simple reason for this—nothing more resembles a terrorist than a resistance fighter. Those who we call the “Resistance,” who assassinated Nazis in the occupied Paris of the 1940s, were for the Nazis “Terroristen.” Their actions engendered reprisals, generally the execution of civilian hostages, and this led us in turn to treat the German soldiers as “terrorists” because they were murdering civilians. This same phenomenon can be found throughout the world—for every act of terrorism, there can be found justifications that present it as an act of resistance or of national liberation. And, when one has no direct interest, it is often difficult to pass judgment on these justifications.

One simple example illustrates these difficulties. In 1973, the ETA political-military ambushed and killed Admiral Luis Carrero-Bland, president of the government and right hand of General Franco. Despite some collateral damage, this act was greeted with a round of applause. Democrats were very pleased that the dictator’s likely successor had thus been eliminated. We all expressed a sort of compassion or even moral support for this definitive act. Some years later, after

the return of democracy to Spain, the very same ETA blew up a barracks of the Guardia Civil. Reactions were more embarrassed. It was indeed the same organization and the same type of act, but the fact that Spain was democratic changed everything. Certainly, one could admit that the Basque Country is “occupied” by Spain and that its people, who have their own culture and language, had reasons for “resisting,” but general feeling regarding this attack on the forces of order remained very mixed.

Then, in 1987, ETA detonated a bomb in a supermarket in Barcelona. This time, the condemnation was widespread. Nothing can justify attacking ordinary civilians with no connection to the cause that is supposedly being defended. In truth, these judgments have a certain validity—common sense is sometimes useful in determining the meaning of the word terrorism. In effect, what is important in defining a terrorist act is not its signature, nor the means of attack, but rather the objective. There are objectives with more or less legitimacy. The criminologist defines terrorism not according to political or diplomatic considerations but from a practical point of view. What makes it possible to define an act as “terrorist” is its objective and therefore its victim. From this, criminologists establish a rule. It does not suit everybody, but it is the rule that appears to be closest to the truth.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF TERRORISM

I will give a quick overview of the history of terrorism. First, we must remember that it was the French who invented the concept of terrorism during the Revolution to describe what were initially political operations. Terrorism was understood at the time as the use of terror by the state in the struggle against its opponents. Terrorism was the action of the state against its own citizens. Political opponents, who were themselves French citizens, were executed by means of ... beheading. “Barbarism” has existed amongst us, too.

Then, terrorism became a matter of state versus state—terror was another means of waging war. Between 1945 and 1989, however, terrorism was essentially managed, monitored, and “authorized” by two principals: the USSR and the United States. In order to obtain arms, documents, munitions, means of transport, training camps, or propaganda tools, it was necessary to have the approval of either Moscow or Washington. Terrorism functioned according to rules that were commonly recognized, and intelligence centers managed their contractors and subcontractors in conditions that were completely standardized.

After 1989 and the collapse of the USSR, one might have thought for a moment that it was the end of terrorism. There was only one surviving superpower, the United States. The secret services of the West began to reorganize in accordance with a new paradigm, and it was naturally expected that the spy of the future would from then on be “yellow” rather than “red.” But this was not what happened

at all. What emerged was a plurality of terrorisms, and this mutation has in general been poorly understood. Our warning systems work like rear-view mirrors, in that we see only what we already know and have great difficulty in anticipating the appearance of an enemy that is unfamiliar to us.

Ten years earlier, in 1979, three major events occurred that were not properly understood: in January, the United States abandoned the Shah of Iran to the benefit of Ayatollah Khomeini; in November, the Grand Mosque in Mecca was attacked by a group of several hundred radicals, comprising Saudi Arabian and Egyptian students from the University of Medinah led by Juhayman ibn Muhammad ibn Saif al-Otyabi, a retired corporal of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and the scion of a powerful Sunni family from Najd; finally, in December, the Soviet Union began its intervention in Afghanistan, to put an end to an internal conflict in the Afghan Communist Party that had degenerated into civil war after the assassination in September of the pro-Russian president Taraki by his prime minister Amin. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, leftist terrorism disappeared almost in the blink of an eye. Action Directe, NAPAP (“Armed Cores for Popular Autonomy”), CCC (“Communist Combatant Cells”), the Red Army Faction, and the Red Brigades, already severely weakened by the activities of police and intelligence services, simply disappeared.

There then appeared a bizarre nebula, which in 1996 emitted a communiqué that nobody read and that was entitled “Declaration of War on America.”¹ For, strange as it may seem, the terrorists always announce what they are going to do. They say it, write it, proclaim it, sing it, and post it on YouTube.

But we have demonstrated a singular talent for never listening to them. This declaration of war on America, published only in Arabic, was thus not read, and was not even translated into English for some time. It took a translation by the Muslim Students’ Association in the United States for the document to be recognized by anyone. Even then, nobody was overly concerned. It should be mentioned that the West were the co-creators of this peculiar structure that we call Al-Qaeda. I say “we call,” because we certainly have big problems in identifying and naming things in the field of terrorism. If I were to say that there is an organization, which is called Al-Qaeda, and the leader of this organization was Bin Laden, you may think that I am merely stating the obvious ... But in fact these three statements are false. This structure is not called Al-Qaeda, but rather the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders. It is not an “organization” in that it is not a pyramid, but rather a coordination center, a franchise, or a “mutual” of crime. Finally, Bin Laden was never its leader, he was merely its spokesperson and face.

In fact, this structure was the product of Abdullah Azzam’s Services Office and brought together all those opposed to the Russian occupiers of Afghanistan. It helped to beat the Soviet forces, but once victory was achieved, Bin Laden then felt that the time had come to rid Saudi Arabia of the Americans. He therefore turned

1 “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places” (23/08/1996)

against the West. This is what we call a Golem.

Little by little, Al-Qaeda developed, committing attacks that were more and more sophisticated and more and more murderous. The phenomenon began to be taken seriously when this structure, which is not statal but infra-statal, managed to measure up to the greatest power in the world by attacking the centers of its political command, its economy, and its military. This event took us into the age of hyper-terrorism and led to a general awakening. In France, we had already experienced, without really recognizing it, an intermediate but foundational episode in the wave of attacks in 1995.² This was an utterly unfamiliar and invisible phenomenon that surprised the whole world. Khaled Kelkal, a juvenile delinquent who had never (officially) set foot in a mosque, nor ever been a political leader, became the terrorist engineer of the attacks of 1995–1996 on the Paris public transport network, before being shot by the police in Vaulx-en-Velin. This was something completely new—not state terrorism, nor Al-Qaeda, but something hybrid and unexpected.

This innovation was fully perceived at the time by a magistrate, Jean-François Ricard, who wrote a note to that effect. As he emphasized, it was the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which fought in Algeria to win the elections and above all to achieve the restoration of the electoral process, which was then transformed into the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) ... And the GIA was in the process of becoming the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC)³. For Ricard, this changed completely the initially purely political nature of the organization. Something new was being formed, and it would be necessary to pay attention. This note, however, elicited no response, even though Ricard had perfectly understood one of the most important cultural evolutions of terrorism. He warned of the transition to the hybridization of criminality, religious fanaticism, and terrorism.

THE HYBRIDIZATION OF THE TERRORIST THREAT

De facto, this hybridization occurred. Not in the weeks or months after the 1995 attacks, but a few years later.⁴ It would take form with the appearance of Mohammed Merah. This case deserves closer attention, because it illustrates very clearly the problems that our anti-terrorism system encounters

2 I leave aside the attacks of 1986. They were managed by a state for principally financial motives. The Iranian state was in fact demanding the repayment of the billion dollars loaned by Shah Reza Pahlavi for the construction of the Eurodif factory.

3 In the local elections of 12 June 1990, the first free elections held in Algeria, the FIS won 953 districts out of 1539 and 32 wilayas (provinces) out of 481. They obtained overall 54 % of votes cast. On 26 December 1991, in the first round of legislative elections, the FIS won 188 seats of the 231 declared, with 199 undecided, making up nearly 82% in total. The FFS won 25 seats and the FLN 15 seats, with three seats going to independents. Noting the situation, the army decided on 11 January 1992 to force the head of state, President Chadli, to resign and to break off the electoral process.

4 Leaving aside the Roubaix group, made up of lost soldiers of the Republic.

in adapting to the evolution of the threat. The Central Directorate of Interior Intelligence (DCRI) in Toulouse was well aware of Mohammed Merah—the local DCRI agent had previously noted that this was an extremely dangerous person. But then some “suits” from Paris, whose competence in anti-terrorism matters can be questioned, arrived and challenged the assessment. This is one of the difficulties that we have faced in France and throughout the West—there are no real anti-terrorism services to speak of. There are services that engage in counterespionage, and others that specialize in organized crime. These services are also united in the same structures, even though there is a key “cultural” difference that separates them.

In the struggle against organized crime, the tradition is to work backward along the chain. Time is an ally, because it permits the mapping of criminal networks, which must not be made aware that they are under investigation. In anti-terrorism, exactly the opposite is true. Urgency dictates that everything must be shared. Time is the enemy. It is thus that the agents working in anti-terrorism within these services become somewhat schizophrenic: on the one hand, we cannot work with the Russians or the Chinese, because they are constantly spying on us for economic reasons, not even to mention our American allies; but nonetheless, we have to work with them because we are facing the same enemies when it comes to terrorism.

There does therefore exist a genuine difficulty in really identifying what is terrorism and what is anti-terrorism. This is also not new. In the 1970s, minister of the interior Raymond Marcellin summoned the head of the Directorate of Territorial Surveillance (DST) and instructed him to take responsibility for leftist terrorists. The head of the DST, however, thought that this was a distraction from his main mission—Soviet espionage. This was an altogether logical position for a counterespionage service. The management of the DST therefore resisted. On Marcellin’s insistence, they eventually and unwillingly created an anti-terrorism service, without committing manpower or resources to it. This was until the DST became aware of the fact that leftist agitators were in fact being manipulated by Soviet agents. From then on, putting them under surveillance fitted much better into the counterespionage mission. Thus, they took responsibility for leftist terrorism, but only because it constituted a branch of counterespionage. But once terrorism was no longer related to counterespionage, we no longer knew what it was. It would not fit anymore into predefined boxes.

This is exactly what happened with Mohammed Merah. The officials from the DCRI in Paris happily accepted his totally fanciful explanations concerning his stay in Afghanistan because they did not understand the nature of who Merah was. It should also be noted that Merah was not planning to attack a Jewish school. He wanted only to kill French soldiers. It was only because he had failed in his latest attempt that, by awful coincidence, the Jewish school became his target. Then the intelligence services, and more importantly the intervention force, stepped in.

Their delay was tragic—he had been identified, located, and listened to, but not understood.

After Merah, we were faced with a series of cases of the same type—the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly. It is nonetheless necessary to distinguish between them. The Kouachi brothers were located, followed, and intercepted by the police, but they succeeded in totally fooling them. In this case there is nothing to say. The police did their job, but the Kouachis were extremely effective. The Coulibaly case is very different and much more problematic. Not only was he known to the police services, he was famous. He was the authority in La Grande Borne in Grigny, a place that was, to say the least, renowned in the criminal world. He was also an authority in the prison at Fresnes. He was the one who welcomed journalists, made documentaries, and was in charge of his wing of the prison. He had also been the armorer for the Belkacem group, and in a terrorist group the armorer is normally at the head of operations. But Coulibaly left prison without being marked as a terrorist. He was placed under mobile electronic surveillance for a month, but nobody was concerned about him. He was not followed or checked on. He disappeared. Coulibaly is the biggest disaster of French internal security since the Algerian War.

THE TRUE NATURE OF ISLAMIC STATE

Alas, we now arrive at November 13, 2015 in Paris. We find exactly the same pattern: the strong criminal past of the authors of these attacks, who were moreover well known and identified. Of course, anti-terrorism that is 100% effective does not exist, even if we must acknowledge that 90% of attacks are foiled in their preparation. The difficulty, however, is to understand the nature even of what we must tackle. First, we must call a spade a spade. We must have the courage to name the threat. I call it Islamic State and not Daesh, which is exactly the same thing only in Arabic, and I do not see what benefit there is in using the Arabic term in the Francophone world, unless by so doing we could avoid difficulties.

When we do not have the courage to name our enemy clearly, there is no chance that we can beat them. What, then, are the characteristics of Islamic State? Is it really a state? It has territory, roughly half the size of France. It has any army of 50,000 men, with more tanks than the French army, modern and delivered turnkey by the American army. It has even created a currency, the gold dinar. It issues publications and controls a radio and TV station. It practices a sort of “justice” ... What are the conditions for the constitution of a state according to classical constitutional law? Those that I have just listed. So we are dealing with a state, and one that calls itself Islamic. Certainly, we are not dealing with Islam as it is practiced by the majority of believers. This is a Takfirist version of Islam. Nonetheless, it was

not until the debate in congress that the president of the French Republic finally recognized the fact that the Islamic State exists and is at the head of a terrorist army. This vagabond group that was laughed at two years ago has since become a mercenary army that strikes fear into the whole world.

How was this event even possible? The role of the criminologist consists of asking who benefits from the crime. At first glance, the answer is fairly simple—a holy alliance of Sunnis decided to put an end to the Shiite domination of Iraq and American efforts to reintegrate Iran in international affairs. Along with the remnants of Saddam Hussein's army, which today make up almost all of the military leadership, the Islamic State has undoubtedly benefited from aid from the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf. However, this story has much more ancient roots. It is the product of a very specific event, one that has provoked all of this. To understand it properly, we must return to 1979. At the time, the United States had three allies in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia for oil; Iran, which played the role of “Guardian of the Gulf”; and Turkey for the Europe/East/Russia game. Three accords with three empires: Saudi Arabia is the Wahhabist Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Two Mosques, Arab and Sunni; Shiite Iran is the Persian Empire; and Turkey comes from the Ottoman Empire, which is different again. These three empires had fault zones and tensions between them, but the United States had managed to reach an accord with all three.

Then, in 1979, they abandoned the Shah of Iran and turned to the Saudis, offering them the role of guardians of the Gulf in place of Iran. Saudi Arabia could not but rejoice at this new role, which for the Kingdom was a historic victory over the Persian Shiites. As for the Turks, they could continue to fight against the Kurds with the discreet and distant approval of the West. Then, suddenly, the Saudis learned that the Iranians were going to be reintegrated in the diplomatic game and that they could even in time develop a nuclear weapon. It was as if everything was thus going back to the status quo ante.

For the Sunnis, this was not remotely acceptable. It was obviously not possible for them to turn directly against the Americans. Instead, they did what is normally done in such cases in the Middle East—they created a local disturbance in Northern Iraq. This could not be easier—the area was full of Sunnis, with the Kurds to the north, who could manage their territory without difficulty. Thus, the Sunni Triangle was going to rebel against the Shiites, making it possible simultaneously to upset an area controlled by the Americans and to attack the Shiites. There was also the possibility of bothering the Ottomans with the economic expansion of the increasingly autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan.

But when one creates a Golem, it may end up escaping. The Islamic State became so efficient in its destabilization activities that it even managed to seize Mosul, hundreds of millions of dollars in cash, and immense oil reserves, which has allowed it to survive indefinitely. There was therefore no longer any reason to settle for being the armed wing of what they consider to be the Saudi usurpers and

genuine apostates (Bin Laden had begun his career in the same way, by questioning the legitimacy of the Saudi regime in 1990).

The Islamic State has developed in roughly the same manner as the Mexican Zetas after they took power against the Colombians. They have transitioned from being poorly paid for hired guns to become an autonomous force, wielding considerable power and wealth. The Saudis have thus found themselves in a fair amount of trouble, stigmatized and facing an insurgency by Shiite Houthis on their doorstep in Yemen, where Iran is replicating the situation that is playing out in Iraq. Moreover, the Houthis are not only Yemeni, they also make up almost all of the real leadership of the Saudi army (they are roughly the equivalent of the Gurkhas in the British colonial army). Many of the middle-ranking officers of the Saudi army are Houthis, and so they fight with great restraint against their Yemeni comrades. Only the Bedouin units of the Saudi army, the National Guard, are efficient. But they are not used to controlling simultaneously a country of 30 million inhabitants (of which 15% are Shiite), the Houthis in Yemen, and disturbances at (at least) two key points on their borders.

The Syrian conflict further complicates the situation. We pretended to believe that the Sunni insurgency was going to drive out the Alawites, judged by them as heretics. This ignored the fact that the Alawite regime in Syria, which counts among its allies Shiite Iran, has been assimilated into this branch of Islam, even if it is for “reasons more political than religious” (Olivier Roy). Russia also has decided not to abandon the Alawite regime in Syria, as it is its only anchor in the Middle East, having lost all its other ones since 1989. Vladimir Putin is going to give a remarkable demonstration of force, which is going to facilitate the gathering in one place of a holy alliance of Shiites, with Hezbollah and Iran, to make the United States understand that it is time to stop their “little games.”

The Islamic State is therefore in essence a barbarous mercenary army that acts for its own reasons, but which is manipulated by a superior power and which will cease its activities should that superior power demand it. But the game of chess is based on multiple combinations of moves. Let us be quite clear, nobody has ordered the Islamic State to commit these attacks. They obey an autonomous logic that plays out in two cycles simultaneously: an international cycle (attacks in Istanbul against the Kurds, the destruction of the Russian airliner over Sharm el Sheik, the attacks against Shiite Hezbollah in Beirut, the attacks against the French in Paris, and the announcement of an upcoming attack on Washington); and a French cycle, with Francophone operatives who have been in place for a very long time—the assassins of Ahmad Shah Massoud came from Verviers.

Bruxellistan is as effective as Londonistan. It has been designated and denounced for ten years now. There exists a general process of disintegration in the Belgian state system, and this has been the subject of permanent concern, particularly in the area of Molenbeek. It is from here that nearly all the operations carried out against France and Belgian in the last year have emanated: Charlie Hebdo,

the Hypercacher supermarket, the Jewish Museum in Brussels, Villejuif, Joué-les-Tours, Saint-Martin Fallavier, the Thalys train, the operations of 13 November, and the attacks in Brussels. We are thus dealing with two cycles at the same time, a situation that is quite rare in terrorism. And we must also face in addition a process of pluralization among terrorist operators.

Let us lump together in particular all the cases of “common terrorists,” known generally (but not exclusively) for their minor psychological problems and constituting a homegrown terrorism that is very difficult to control. They go out with their knives, their axes, or their cars, and they attack soldiers, a bus stop, or a metro station. They are quite ready to die immediately, even outside the police station. They are all known and recorded, and the majority have undergone psychiatric treatment.

To these common terrorists we must now add a new type which is very surprising in nature as terrorism is primarily a business of communication and advocacy—the “shamefaced terrorist.” This concerns in particular Yassin Sahli, Ghلام, and EL Khazzani. When arrested, they invent the most far-fetched stories to explain their actions, while denying any element of terrorism. This is a very new situation because normally not only do terrorists claim their acts, but they are proud of them. The only case we had previously of a supposed (in so far as convicted) terrorist operative who was not proud and who denied the act was the convicted assassin of prefect Erignac.

When a member of the IRA was arrested, even if he was located far away from the place of the attack, he would immediately claim responsibility for the act of terrorism, even if it could be proved that he was 10,000 kilometers from the site of the attack at the time, because he was a representative of a cause and he was proud to have been arrested. The idea of saying that it was not him and of finding an alibi would never even have crossed his mind. Here then is a process of change in the very nature of the relationship of the terrorist with communication which upsets all preexisting historical models.

FACED WITH PLURAL TERRORISMS, AN INSTRUMENT SPECIFICALLY DEDICATED TO ANTI-TERRORISM IS ESSENTIAL

This plurality of terrorisms poses a serious problem, because we have designed a “prêt-à-porter” anti-terrorism system to fight against “bespoke” terrorism. It is the compatibility of these two systems that is the most pressing matter to be dealt with today. It is not the competence, efficiency, or experience of the agents which is in question, but rather the necessity of altering the method of apprehending threats. We need to stop operating according to a retrospective model and to admit the ruptures that have appeared in these rhythms, the mutations that have not been understood, and the major changes on which we

must concentrate. There is no specific criticism to be addressed at anti-terrorism. It is, in any case, always very easy to give lessons in hindsight. On the other hand, the real issue is that it is now months and even years since we have been circling the same problem—the necessity of developing a special instrument dedicated to anti-terrorism.

Such a service has only ever once been created, not by a national police force, but by a local one. In 2002, the New York police decided to create the only service completely dedicated to anti-terrorism in the West. And it is now thirteen years in which this service has done nothing but prevent attacks. Of course, one may occur some day, because 100% risk prevention is impossible. However, between 90% and 100% there is room for improvement. These percentage points represent dozens and possibly hundreds of deaths and injuries that can be avoided. After each attack, a commission of inquiry is created which nearly always reaches the same conclusions: (1) in fact, we knew everything, or almost everything; (2) for some mysterious reason, we did not properly understand what we knew (the Americans have the perfect phrase to express this: “We did not connect the dots”); and (3) this must never happen again.

The problem is that it does happen again. Whether because we are surprised (and we have every right to be surprised) as in the Kelkal affair; or because we were tricked (and we have the right to be tricked), as in the case of the Kouachi brothers; or because there is a problem with adapting culturally to the realities of terrorism and the fact of having dozens of services that do the same thing in competition with each other presents a problem. It is here that there is the opportunity to improve the situation. The task of simplification is absolutely vital. We will not prevent all attacks in this way, but if at least we can prevent those that could have been prevented because it turns out fifteen minutes after identifying an attacker that we have a thick file on them, this at least will be a net improvement. Resistance and resilience cannot consist simply of proclaiming after each attack that we are going to resist. We must also remind ourselves that effective anti-terrorism lies not in arresting the perpetrators of attacks, but in preventing the attacks themselves.

This is the essence of the reforms that must be undertaken today. It is not necessary to create a new organization, but rather to take a firm hold of the instruments of anti-terrorism and make of them an operational and functional system. We need to leave counterespionage agencies to get on with counterespionage, which they do very well, and crime fighting agencies to fight organized crime, at which they acquit themselves admirably. But we need now to take genuine anti-terrorism measures, and not to apply counterespionage or crime-fighting measures to anti-terrorism.

Alain Bauer

Professor of Criminology at the Conservatoire Nationale Des Arts Et Métiers

Associate professor at Fudan University (Shanghai), senior research fellow at the Center of Terrorism at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York (United States), and at the China University of Political Science and Law (Beijing)

Director of the chair of police and criminal sciences of the MBA Management of Security—Paris II, HEC, EOGN

President of the Conseil supérieur de la formation et de la recherche stratégiques (CSFRS) to the president of the Republic since 2009

President of the Conseil national des activités privées de sécurité (CNAPS) since 2012

Editor of the International Journal on Criminology, member of the advisory board of PRISM (Center for Complex Operations, National Defense University, Washington, DC)

President of the orientation council for the Observatoire national de la délinquance (ONDRP), 2003–2012

President of the working group and the monitoring group for the archives of the police and the gendarmerie (2006–2012);

Joint president of mission on the White Book of Public Security (2011)

Reporter for the working group on daily policing (2007)

President of the monitoring group for customs archives (2009)

President of the working group for work with judicial archives (2010)

Administrator of the Institut des hautes études de sécurité intérieures (IHESI), from 2004 the Institut national des hautes études de sécurité (INHES), then the Institut national des hautes études de sécurité et de justice (INHES-J), and since 2010 the l'Institut des hautes études de la défense nationale

Auditor of IHESI.

Former vice-president for corporate, administrative and financial affairs at the Université Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne (1982–1989), member of the council of the Chancellerie des Universités de Paris (1983–1988),

Former special advisor to the chief of staff of Prime Minister Michel Rocard (1988–1990),

Lecturer at the Institut de criminologie de Paris (Université Paris II-Panthéon Assas), at the Université Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne and the

Université Paris V-René Descartes, at IHESI, and at the Centre national de formation judiciaire de la gendarmerie nationale

Former lecturer at the Institut d'études politiques (IEP) de Paris and the Centre national de protection et de prévention

Former member of the working group for the prevention of crime by urban planning of the European Committee for Standardization

Member of the Société d'histoire des facultés de droit, and of the International Society for Criminology

Former member of the academy of the Haute autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité (2005–2007), of the departmental commission on video surveillance systems of the Préfecture du Nord (1997–2003), and of the Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'Homme (2000–2003)

Advisor to the New York Police Department (NYPD), to the sûreté du Québec (SQ) (Canada) and to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD), member of the OECD task force on illicit trade, member of the expert group on organized crime (SOCTA) for EUROPOL.

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