

France's Kurds Are in Revolt Because of Years of Unpunished Racist Attacks

Tuesday 27 December 2022, by [ONGUN Emre](#) (Date first published: 26 December 2022).

Scenes of burning cars in Parisian streets have been used to paint France's Kurds as a riotous minority. Yet their angry protests are fueled by a string of racist killings — and French authorities' refusal to reveal the full facts of the cases.

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On Friday, December 23, the Kurdish community in Paris fell victim to a fresh racist attack. Armed with a pistol, sixty-nine-year-old William M. launched his offensive against the Ahmet-Kaya Kurdish Cultural Center in the capital's Strasbourg-Saint-Denis district. Entering weapon in hand, he killed Emine Kara, who was a leader of the Kurdish women's movement in France; the musician Mîr Perwer; and Abdurrahman Kizil, an ordinary citizen. The killer was eventually neutralized by the customers of the (Kurdish) hairdresser's salon facing the cultural center. The police did not intervene until after he had already been subdued by civilians. The killing also came ten years after a previous assassination of three activists from the same Paris cultural center — that time, by an agent of the Turkish secret services.

There were early clues of what lay behind this atrocity. Already in late 2021, armed with a sword, William M. had attacked and injured migrants living in tents. This is the first element of this case: the perpetrator is a radicalized racist who had had already previously "taken action." Yet there are also wider political factors that prepared the ground for this attack: the trivialization of public discourse dehumanizing immigrants and minority populations; their use as a convenient scapegoat in times of social crisis; the constant Islamophobic targeting of "enemies within"; the racist discourse of the "[great replacement](#)"; and the spread of street actions by violent fascist groups, which face little or no state repression. To take just one example: the French government is proposing a new, even more restrictive law for immigrants in 2023, giving all possible help to the right-wing groups who are today outbidding each other in their xenophobic provocations.

Lone Individual?

Those who prepare the ground for such attacks may well distance themselves from the "lone gesture of an unbalanced individual." But they surely have created the target for this kind of radicalized fanatic. The Macronites and their right-wing partners surf the wave of artificial moral panics — for instance, in recent months, a wave of transphobia — while remaining much more discreet about far-right street violence. There is no similar focus on recent attacks on France Insoumise rallies, or the assaults on left-wing activists in the streets of Lyon — a city where fascists were able to hold a (banned) demonstration unperturbed.

Yet, racist hatred seems insufficient to fully explaining this event. There are, at least, legitimate questions and strong suspicions about other factors at play, especially after the elements revealed by the French left paper *L'Humanité*. It turns out that William M. planned his act for a moment when about sixty Kurdish activists had been scheduled to gather (fortunately, their meeting was postponed by an hour at the last minute). He was driven directly to the cultural center. If his motivation was blind racist hatred, why didn't he attack the many businesses frequented by people of immigrant background in the same neighborhood, which are much more easily accessible than the cultural center? How should we interpret the fact that he acted in such a targeted manner only one week after his release from detention (jailed for the sword attack)? The shadow of the Turkish regime, or at least some of its services, inevitably hangs over this case.

Impunity

This was the context in which France's hard-right interior minister Gérald Darmanin went to the cultural center after the attack and refused to meet the leaders of Kurdish associations.

Speaking there, he insisted that his services did not know the individual who had been arrested (even though he had attacked migrants with a sword in 2021!). Darmanin tried to present this attack as the act of an isolated, unbalanced individual, not specifically targeting Kurds — while also promising to “shed all possible light” on the matter.

This message sounded like a sinister repetition of the words of another similarly despicable interior minister, Manuel Valls, who made the same promises after the previous such attack in 2013. But, if the man who killed the three activists Fidan Doğan, Sakine Cansız, and Leyla Söylemez a decade ago was arrested and died in custody, there are still many gray areas in the case. It remains cloaked in secrecy on grounds of “defense matters,” in particular regarding the involvement of the Turkish secret services.

Throughout the last decade, the non-lifting of this “defense secret” has driven strong and understandable mistrust toward the French authorities among the country's Kurds. In this context, Darmanin's visit and his contempt for Kurdish leaders, as well as the actual content of his speech, lit the powder keg of anger and triggered a revolt among the many young Kurds present, who clashed with police throughout the evening. Darmanin's police have unlearned any other form of maintaining order (as seen even with the [beating of fans](#) at this year's Champions League final) and were thus content to gas and assault protestors. There were similar scenes in Marseille, where a peaceful demonstration was charged by the police.

The next day, December 24, the unitary demonstration to demand justice was, once again, subjected to the massive use of tear gas. Thus, the only intervention by Darmanin's department was to repress those who had gathered after the murderous attack against three of their own people. Official incompetence and racism complemented each other perfectly.

In the end, two things stand out after this attack. First, there is an urgent need for a united, and really active, anti-fascist offensive to stop France's headlong rush toward the trivialization of racist discourse and fascist violence. This is a structural problem: there is no doubt that if France continues along its current course, radicalized individuals or groups will commit fresh murderous attacks.

In this case, there is a second, more specifically Kurdish aspect. At the rally held on December 24, before the massive use of tear gas, the pro-Macron MP Sylvain Maillard pledged that the French government would “shed all possible light” on this attack. To have an ounce of credibility, the

French authorities could start by lifting the secret on the triple murder that took place ten years ago.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 12.26.2022:
<https://jacobin.com/2022/12/paris-attacks-kurds-racism-far-right-french-government-fascism/>
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