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On: 20 April 2015, At: 10:32

Publisher: Routledge

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## Terrorism and Political Violence

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ftpv20>

### France and middle eastern terrorism

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Published online: 21 Dec 2007.

To cite this article: Martin Kramer & Dayan Center (1990) France and middle eastern terrorism, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2:4, 574-580, DOI: [10.1080/09546559008427084](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546559008427084)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546559008427084>

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## France and Middle Eastern Terrorism

Martin Kramer

Pierre Péan, *La Menace*. Paris: Fayard, 1987. Pp.306. 95 FF (paperback).

Yves Loiseau, *Le Grand Troc: Le labyrinthe des otages françaises au Liban*. Paris: Hachette, 1988. Pp.332.

Marie Seurat, *Les Corbeaux d'Alep*. Paris: Gallimard/Lieu Commun, 1988. Pp.191. 89 FF (paperback).

Roger Auque (in collaboration with Patrick Forestier), *Un otage à Beyrouth*. Paris: Filipacchi, 1988. Pp.303. 89 FF (paperback).

Gilles Delafon, *Beyrouth: Les soldats de l'Islam*. Paris: Stock, 1989. Pp.254. 98 FF (paperback).

In 1978, the Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini arrived in the Parisian suburb of Neauphle-le-Château, following his expulsion from Iraq. The Shah of Shahs was threatened by a rising tide of dissent, and prevailed upon Iraq to eject the still obscure and aged cleric from his place of exile in the shrine city of Najaf. The Shah wished to distance Khomeini from Iran's borders, and France seemed sufficiently removed from the eye of the storm.

But Parisian exiles actually made Khomeini's appeal for revolution far more effective and audible. He and his disciples now had easy access to the international media, and could direct-dial their supporters in Iran, carefully setting the cadence of escalation. Ultimately the Shah left for his own exile, and Khomeini returned to Tehran on a triumphant direct flight from Paris. He descended to the tarmac on the supporting arm of an Air France pilot.

French policy-makers had every cause to believe that their political hospitality had sowed the seeds of a privileged relationship with Iran. But the plant yielded bitter fruit. In the course of the subsequent decade, France and the Islamic Republic of Iran collided in spectacular and deadly ways. French aircraft and arms, sold in massive quantities to Iraq, took a daily toll in Iranian lives following the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1980. Iranian bombs, planted by Shi'ite operatives, claimed French lives in the rubble-strewn alleyways of Beirut and on the best shopping streets of Paris. And both sides took prisoners. Iran's agents in France were arrested, imprisoned, and expelled. Frenchmen in Lebanon – journalists, diplomats, bystanders – were abducted and held hostage by Iran's Shi'ite clients. By 1986, the hostage-holders in Lebanon had driven the French government into a corner, while bomb-makers sent by Iran succeeded in placing the populace of Paris under virtual siege.

Each of these five books bears witness to an aspect of the undeclared but dirty little war which raged between France and Iran in the 1980s. Two of the books describe the frustration and growing desperation of the French official classes as they suffered blow after blow in a war they had failed to anticipate. Two other

books are personal testimonies by two victimized bystanders, one a hostage, the other the wife of a hostage. The last, on the Lebanese Hizballah, is an attempt to define an adversary whose power to elude definition was its greatest asset. While all of these books were written for a general audience (four of them by journalists), they are also bound to serve as grist for the busy mills of scholarship.

Pierre Péan is an investigative journalist well known for his ability to ferret out information on the inner workings of the *Élysée*, government ministries, and intelligence agencies. Most of *La Menace* is a painstaking reconstruction of French policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran from the outbreak of the Gulf War until the so-called 'war of the embassies' in 1987.

Péan maps the principal corridors of policy, which he follows meticulously to a single conclusion: a powerful pro-Iraqi lobby compromised France's neutrality in the Gulf conflict. This lobby assured that the government approved massive arms sales and high technology transfers to Iraq (including nuclear reactor technology), largely on credit extended by France. An official embargo on sales to Iran accentuated the imbalance. Thus France unwittingly became a co-belligerent in the Gulf War – unwittingly, because the architects of French policy assumed that such sales did not constitute acts of aggression. For Iran, however, the distinction between the sale and use of arms appeared arbitrary, despite its roots in the common law of western nations. And Péan himself seems to postulate a moral equivalence between Iran's spawning of deadly terror and France's dealing in deadly arms. It is an argument not without philosophical merit.

Péan thus claims to have uncovered what might be called an 'Iraqgate'. Private interests subverted France's declared policy of neutrality in the Gulf War, at the very moment when White House zealots subverted American neutrality by trading arms for hostages. (Péan is aware of the parallels, and a chapter is devoted to the arms-for-hostages escapades of the Americans.) Iran reacted by gradually escalating a campaign of intimidation, first in Lebanon, then in France itself. Péan does not excuse Iranian hostage-taking and terror bombing, which he clearly labels political extortion. But French policy emerges from his narrative with scarcely more credit: the seemingly principled slogan that France would not become 'hostage to the hostages' simply masked callous calculations made in favor of a blatantly pro-Iraqi policy.

In the end, of course, France did become 'hostage to the hostages' who were taken at Iran's behest in Lebanon. Each night, the network news programme of Antenne 2 reminded viewers of the French hostages' plight. Committees were organized on behalf of the journalists who had been seized, and they used their influence to keep the issue on front pages and television screens. The French government now had to take into account more than the demands of the pro-Iraqi lobbyists; it began a series of desultory negotiations with a bewildering array of intermediaries, both Iranian and Lebanese. Péan uses his unmatched sources to trace French diplomacy through the murkiest back channels to Iran's divided leadership.

During this trip through the looking glass, the French encountered a bizarre array of mediation impresarios as wondrous as the Americans' famous 'Gorba' and as egotistical as Anglican super-dealer Terry Waite. The most extraordinary of them all was Razah Raad, a Lebanese Shi'ite physician and naturalized Frenchman, formerly of Bidnayil in the Bekaa Valley, latterly of Argentan in Normandy, where he owned and inhabited a seventeenth-century chateau built by a duke. As the French hostages came to dominate the television news, it occurred to Dr Raad that he might render his adopted country a service by mobilizing the

extensive Raad clan to mediate among France, Iran, and the Shi'ite hostage-holders in Lebanon. Raad did have 'fabulous contacts' in Shi'ite Lebanon, and disappeared for days into Beirut's southern suburbs, where he parleyed with representatives of the hostage-holders. Then he would reappear in West Beirut or Damascus, to deliver the latest terms. The mysterious missions of Raad clarified the demands of the hostage-holders, but produced no real progress. Neither did various French missions to Tehran and the mediation of several dubious Syrians – sometimes documented by Péan with leaked official documents.

When the holding of hostages failed to break French resolve, Iran finally moved to break the deadlock by inspiring an indiscriminate bombing campaign in Paris itself. There can be no doubt that these bombings, which killed 11 persons and wounded 275, finally broke the resolve of the French. It was one thing to suffer the embarrassment of impotence in the face of Shi'ite hostage-holders in Beirut, quite another to stand helpless before terror in Paris itself. The French government did not rush to surrender, as the 'war of the embassies' demonstrated. (On that occasion, the French government launched a virtual siege of Iran's embassy in Paris, in order to force the surrender of an embassy employee suspected of involvement in the bombings. The effort failed when Iran retaliated in kind against the French embassy in Tehran.) But in the final analysis, France lost the battle of wills, because it remained vulnerable to terror in its very capital. Faced with terror at home, Jacques Chirac opted for concessions to Iran. Iran, in turn, ordered an end to the bombing campaign and the release of French hostages in Lebanon.

Péan published his book shortly before this understanding was reached. Former Beirut correspondent Yves Loiseau has followed the story to its conclusion in *Le Grand Troc*, an extended chronology of the French hostage affair. In a series of dated entries from 1985 to 1988, Loiseau follows the complex thread of statements, rumours, mediations, and negotiations which culminated in the 'deal'. While there are no startling revelations here, the presentation of the record could not be more systematic – and sobering.

With bombs going off on the Champs-Élysées and the Boulevard Saint-Michel, French officials concluded that victorious war could not be waged against terrorism, at least not by France. Moral posturing might suit the Americans, but the preservation of the very rhythm of life in France depended upon some compromise with the sponsors of terror. And did not France have a moral duty to negotiate for its citizens, held against their will simply because they were Frenchmen? In one of the more striking examples of Franco-American cultural divergence, the French public supported precisely the kind of dealing for hostages which absolutely scandalized the American public. Even the tough-minded Loiseau, in a last section provocatively entitled 'Lebanongate', indulges in the second thought that perhaps the freeing of the French hostages did justify 'the means'.

Yet only now is it becoming clear just how extraordinary those means were, involving direct negotiations with hostage-holders and the release of terrorists jailed in France for outrages. Mist still obscures the secret missions to Beirut of the famous 'Stephani' – the false name of Jean-Charles Marchiani, former French intelligence operative and confidant of fellow Corsican Charles Pasqua, Chirac's interior minister. It was Marchiani who publicly delivered the French hostages from captivity. Was he a conduit for ransom to the hostage-holders? And just how far did the concessions to Iran go? In 1990, President François Mitterrand met a decade-old Iranian demand for the pardon of four men convicted for their botched assassination attempt against Iranian opposition leader Shapour Bakhtiar in Paris. A bystander and a policeman were killed in that attempt; another policeman was

paralyzed for life. Will that release ultimately serve as a precedent for Fouad Ali Saleh, the Tunisian recruit to Iran's cause, whom a French court sentenced to life in 1990 for masterminding the fatal bombings in Paris? There are still loose ends to the 'deal' – and room for a sequel to these two books.

For one French hostage, the 'deal' came too late. Michel Seurat, a young sociologist of Islam, had done original work on Sunni fundamentalism in Tripoli, and had begun researching Shi'ite fundamentalism in Beirut. In May 1985, he flew back to Beirut from Morocco, where he had attended an academic conference on 'Terrorism, Violence, and the City'. En route from airport to city, Seurat (and French journalist Jean-Paul Kauffmann) were dragged from their taxi and taken hostage by Islamic Jihad.

In Tripoli, Seurat had moved with ease among Sunni fundamentalists, then locked in a struggle with Syria. His work on their movement combined sociological insight with an understanding gained through direct experience. But the Shi'ite neighbourhoods of Beirut were not the quarter of Bab Tebbané in Tripoli. Both were societies under siege, but Seurat's Shi'ite captors played on a global stage, in a struggle that did not admit the neutrality of a sociologist of Islam. The 'brethren' of Seurat's abductors had been condemned in Kuwait for a series of bombings, including an attack on the French embassy there. Seurat was seized in order to force France to press for release of their 'brethren'.

*Les Corbeaux d'Alep* is a brief but fascinating memoir written by Seurat's Syrian wife, Marie. It is really two books. One is an account of her fruitless efforts on behalf of her husband – efforts which took her to the chambers of Hizballah's spiritual mentor, to the bases of Hizballah in the Bekaa Valley, and through the labyrinth of French officialdom. Marie Seurat's insights cut to the bone: the dissembling Shi'ite clerics and militiamen, the ponderous French diplomats, the drama-mongers of the media, are all portrayed with the blackest cynicism. This is a faithful guide to the terrors of the purgatory inhabited by all families of hostages.

Yet this is also a book about personal transformation. Marie Seurat began her ordeal as a self-obsessed woman from a prosperous Syrian Christian family – a lady most at home in the world of Alfa Romeos, doting servants, and male suitors. Even her marriage to a leftist French sociologist with Palestinian sympathies was a kind of self-indulgence, not a true rebellion. But with her husband's abduction, she was suddenly thrust into a violent labyrinth, without the compass of political savvy and without the rosary of religious faith carried by the wives of so many hostages. The absence of faith cost her dearly. When she reached the depths of her own despair, she turned to clairvoyants and astrologers, who promised to divine the fate of her husband. Ultimately she became so emotionally strung out that she required some hospitalization. Yet for most of her ordeal, she not only kept her wits about her, but succeeded in penetrating the ritual posturing which surrounds every hostage affair.

The most remarkable passage in this remarkable book concerns the author's visit to her husband during his captivity. The visit was a privilege enjoyed by no other hostage of Islamic Jihad, and Michel Seurat, as a sympathetic student of Islam, did enjoy a privileged standing among the hostages. He received books of his choice and letters. During the visit, he told his wife that he wished to stay in Beirut even after his eventual release. 'I still have many things to do here. My captors and the leader of the group have agreed to allow me to move about the southern suburbs. I could finish my study of the Shi'ite fundamentalists. . . . I must finish what I've started.'

Seurat, alas, overestimated the value of his sympathetic scholarship to his captors. He could not escape categorization as a hostage, valued solely as a bargaining chip in

a game played against the government of France. In his wife's view, media attention only raised the asking price for her husband's release, a view that put her at odds with the spouses of other hostages. (Nor did it help that in years past, Seurat had published a number of anti-Syrian articles under a pseudonym.) Islamic Jihad thus ignored an exceptional appeal on Seurat's behalf made by leading Lebanese Muslim figures, including the spiritual mentor of Hizballah.

It was here that bad luck intervened. Seurat contracted viral hepatitis before Iran had asserted its prior claim to Islamic Jihad's French hostages. The illness reduced him to crawling on all fours, and the unavailability of proper treatment finally finished him. He reportedly lies buried in the cemetery of Rawdat al-Shahidayn, resting place of the martyrs of Hizballah. For Marie Seurat, Islamic Jihad's refusal to release her husband, even as death hovered, was the final irony. Michel Seurat showed the 'Partisans of God' the sympathy of true fascination, and was rewarded with abduction and death. 'The Arabist has been assassinated by the Arabs. The specialist who consults the Quran has been put to death by the fundamentalists. The Orientalist has been killed by his Orient. Even his death has betrayed him.' The courage of this book lies in Marie Seurat's admission that her husband was blinded by his own 'expertise' – that his sympathies conspired with his abductors to kill him.

The gods, in their unfathomable logic, looked down with greater favour upon Roger Auque. This journalist was abducted in January 1987 by the Revolutionary Justice Organization, a group of uncertain composition which enjoyed Iranian sanction. Auque spent over ten months in captivity before he was released as part of the 'deal'.

Published testimonies of former hostages are now quite numerous. The genre is not without literary potential, but no former hostage has effectively worked the experience into narrative. Yet in every such account, there are passages which do convey the overwhelming sense of loss that afflicts every hostage. There are quite a few such passages in Auque's memoir, *Un otage à Beyrouth*. On one memorable page, he recreates his own reaction when the wife of a guard sprays perfume on his hand. 'Anaïs, Cacherel', she confides to the blindfolded Auque. The rekindling of this sensation – a scent of femininity and freedom, introduced into the windowless, narrow space of a Beirut hostage – sets Auque's mind racing in every direction. Moments of fear, anger, despair, anticipation – Auque leaves us with a vivid impression of the intensity of a hostage's emotions. But for any hostage held over months or years, such moments are flashes in a dark expanse of boredom and isolation. No former hostage has yet found a way to convey the tyranny of that boredom without boring readers as well.

But Auque's account, like those of other hostages, does contain a rare kind of evidence. All foreign hostages were kept in the dark about the identity of their captors and their own place in the game. Foreign hostages spent most of their time behind blindfolds, sometimes alone, sometimes with other hostages. Yet the hostages had to be guarded, spinning threads of human contact between guard and hostage. Auque reports several conversations with his guards, and this table talk reveals much about the small cogs in the Revolutionary Justice Organization. Auque soon became convinced that his keepers were not fundamentalists at all. Most were preoccupied with money, women, and films. (According to testimony of other hostages, this was not the case with Islamic Jihad's gaolers, who had found true religion. Seurat reportedly described them as 'neither human nor inhuman, but non-human'.) Auque's reportage is telling evidence that Iran did not rely wholly

upon religious zealots to supply it with French hostages. Iran discreetly created a demand for foreigners of certain nationalities; enterprising Lebanese answered that demand.

But captivity is hardly the ideal vantage-point from which to view Iran's Lebanese involvement as a whole. One journalist who played the game carefully, got his information, and got out, has written the best single account of Hizballah in French. Gilles Delafon arrived in Beirut in 1985, as a young journalist working for Europe 1 and the weekly magazine *Le Point*. The big story, of course, was the French hostages, and Delafon pursued it by making connections in the Shi'ite community. Delafon is a talented journalist, even if his style tends to the dramatic, and he has drawn a lively portrait of Hizballah, entitled *Beyrouth: Les soldats de l'Islam*. While the book tells the usual story of hostage-taking and hijacking, it also goes a step further in seeking to uncover the social foundations of Hizballah.

In this respect, the chapter entitled 'Les dollars de l'Iran' is the most valuable in the book. Elaborate rumours always circulated about Iranian financing of Hizballah, especially regarding the sum total of the assistance. The oft-repeated figures were simple guesses. It is unlikely that even the Iranians knew how much they were spending in Lebanon, since the disbursements were made by different and often competing agencies. Delafon is not concerned with putting an arbitrary price-tag on the value of Iranian aid, but instead seeks to illustrate the many ways in which this money reached and affected the Shi'ite community of Lebanon. Readers will wonder at the details in this chapter, for Delafon credits no sources. There is no need for bafflement. Delafon has gone through Hizballah's own weekly newspaper, *al-Ahd*, which is brimming with information about Iranian aid to university students and the activities of the Reconstruction Jihad and the Martyrs' Foundation.

The other chapters are rather less well grounded, if only because so many of Hizballah's doings remain shrouded in secrecy and disinformation. Lots of livelihoods have been made over the years by providing 'inside information' on the identities of clandestine operatives and the whereabouts of hostages. Yet Delafon shows discretion in sifting through what he hears, and he has avoided the usual traps laid by disinformants. His principal advantage seems to be that while other journalists often have relied on (Christian) East Beirut sources for information on Hizballah, Delafon had lots of leads in the Shi'ite Amal movement. Many of these leads had family members and acquaintances in Hizballah, and so could provide Delafon with useful details and quotable opinions. These voices do not come from within Hizballah, but they very much evoke the voices of Amal members who have crossed the line time and again into Hizballah.

Still, much of this book relies on published sources, and it is unfortunate that Delafon does not cite them. No doubt this reflects the widespread aversion of French journalists to footnotes. (Péan has no use for them either.) But a work of high journalism should show its respect for serious readers – and acknowledge the author's own debts – by making explicit reference to sources. An example of the proper journalistic mode of citation was provided by Robin Wright in *Sacred Rage* – an example certainly known to Delafon, who relies extensively upon Wright at several points in his book (and particularly in the chapter entitled 'L'appel au martyre'). Since Delafon avers that it is impossible to thank his live informants by name, it is all the more regrettable that he did not make reference his many published sources.

As it is, one never quite knows whether Delafon is reporting something he has seen, heard, or read. In one typical instance, he tells the story of the ceremony for laying the cornerstone of a new mosque in the obscure village of Zabbud, north-east

of Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley (pp.123–4). The vivid details given by Delafon leave the strong impression that he personally witnessed this (minor) event deep within Hizballah's space, which would have been remarkable indeed. In fact his account is drawn completely from issue no.173 of Hizballah's weekly newspaper, which incorporates precisely the same details. (Another account also appeared in the Lebanese daily *al-Nahar* on 12 October 1987.) There is a minor deception at work here – one that detracts from the documentary value of Delafon's own personal testimony. For it is never clear where that testimony ends and reliance on others begins.

When these books were written, Iran still loomed in Western imaginations as an outlaw state, defiant of all international norms and supportive of terrorism. Since then, Khomeini has died, the Iran–Iraq war has ended in a cease-fire, and Iran has dropped terrorism from its basic political repertoire. France's relationship with Iran has been 'normalized'.

What, then, is the enduring significance of the outcome of Iran's unconventional war against France? Precedents were set which may embolden other Middle Eastern states to collect French hostages or bomb Paris shops. In the Gulf conflict of the 1980s, the occasional resort to terrorism became routinized; so, too, did the occasional capitulation to terrorism. The 1990s now have ushered in yet another Gulf conflict. France, having sown the wind, may yet reap the whirlwind.

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