

Financing for the 'de-radicalisation' of 'anti-sect' movements called into question

HRWF (02.03.2016) – Two prominent figures of de-radicalisation in France have put down their arms: one having not had her accreditation renewed and the other renouncing her mission for political reasons. They have left the scene, but it is difficult to assess whether they have in fact succeeded in their mission.

It is equally unclear whether these 'anti-sect' movements, whose objectives, mission and methodology have been frequently criticised for years, have simply lost credibility, provoking a gradual reduction of support coming from public funds. These have been practically their sole source of financial income (95% of their budget).

Transparency and efficiency of de-radicalisation in question

Dounia Bouzar and Sonia Imloul, two high priestesses of de-radicalisation, have left the key under the door, although it was their own organisations, the Centre for the Prevention of Abuse by Sects linked to Islam (the CPDSI in French) for the former and the House of Prevention for Families (or the MPF) for the latter, which used to sound the alarm to the Interior Ministry whenever a family member was potentially being radicalised.

Did these two structures have a really adequate response to the phenomenon of radicalisation, or did they just benefit from the theoretical and practical gap that existed on the subject? In any case, their methods, radically different from one another, have left many observers sceptical. Sonia Imloul, partisan of a 'cultural' (religious) approach, made an appeal to Salafists, whom she called 'quietists,' to direct their youth on the right path. As for Dounia Bouzar, she framed radicalisation as being in the grip of a cultish influence, which operated more than 90% on the internet, and instructed families to remind their youth of childhood memories.

Natalie Goulet, the senator of Orne and president of the Commission of enquiry on jihadist networks, expressed surprise at the lack of evaluation of these missions: 'There is nothing, no numbers, no names. When Mme Bouzar, against whom I have nothing personally, announced that she had prevented 400 departures, what was the tool she used to confirm such a statement? With the 600 000 euro budget she had allocated to her organisation, it would have been logical that she could provide some proof.'

The affair has been closed for Sonia Imboul since last November: created in September 2014, the MPF did not have its support renewed. In the absence of tangible results that the organisation had claimed without sufficient documentation, the government decided not to renew its contract. Imboul had been subsidised for her activities to the tune of 35 000 euros and received families in an apartment in Aulnay-sous-Bois.

Dounia Bouzar announced that she would renounce her mission as a 'protest against the deprivation of nationality.'

Nathalie Goulet requested the security service of the Senate Finance Commission to lead an audit of the usage of funds that have been attributed to various structures that fight against radicalisation.

Anti-sect movements: the need and the interest

One could wonder whether anti-sect movements are actually needed and what is the interest of the state to finance organisations that are forever kept on life support by

state institutions. Such questions are doubtless more and more shared by public officials, since government funding is slowly but surely drying up and not only in France.

In the last fifteen years, FECRIS (European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Sectarianism) has been financed almost entirely by the French State in the form of special funding by the Prime Minister. Its ratio of public funding by the French State compared to its private memberships/ donations has averaged 90%. Last year, public funding to FECRIS and its affiliates in France continued to decrease: 25,000 EUR in 2015 compared to 32,200 EUR in 2014.

FECRIS has three member associations in France, which are also almost entirely funded by the French State or public institutions: UNADFI (National Union of Associations of Defence of the Family and the Individual) has averaged 96% public funding compared to its private memberships/ donations – GEMPPPI (Study Group of Movements of Thought for the Protection of the Individual) 94% - CCMM 98% (Center Against Mental Manipulations). In 2015, UNADFI received 42,000 EUR against 45,000 EUR in 2014 and 46,000 EUR in 2013. CCMM got 17,500 EUR in 2015 against 18,400 EUR in 2014.

The purpose and activities of FECRIS affiliates and the founding association in France pose serious problems regarding freedom of religion or belief. Their writings and positions provide evidence that they lead an ideological crusade with public financing which cannot be reconciled either with the French Constitution or the international human rights instruments signed and ratified by France. The very mode of operation of FECRIS and its affiliates in France based on collecting and spreading one-sided reports and refusing dialogue with groups they label as 'sectarian' infringes upon the recommendations of tolerance and dialogue expressed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief. Their readiness to make accusations and value judgments and to stigmatize religious or belief minorities can only instil prejudice and result in discrimination and violence. A number of leaders or spokespersons of FECRIS and its affiliates have been found guilty of defamation and hate speech.

The French State has better things to do than finance front organisations whose leaders and membership are motivated for personal or ideological reasons. There are weightier matters to consider in the face of international and French terrorism which threatens the security of tens of millions of French and protection of youth against jihadists who spread hatred, violence and bloodshed in the name of Islam.

(* See "Freedom of Religion or Belief: Anti-sect Movements and State Neutrality. A Case Study: FECRIS" (394 pages) published by the Journal for the Study of Beliefs and Worldviews (Technische Universität Dresden, Germany) - <http://www.hrwf.net/images/reports/2012/2012fecrisbook.pdf>