

# The voices of the victims/survivors of terrorism and their role in preventing radicalization

by Guillaume Denoix de Saint Marc

In general, the victims of terrorism have not been personally targeted by terrorist acts. Through a dehumanizing phenomenon, they suddenly become the tool that allows, through the generated terror, to strike a social group, a state or a society as a whole. They are thus involved in the conflict between the terrorists and their real target. The support offered by the target to the victims is often insufficient, which can lead to a feeling of victimhood, and anger. The anger of the victims of terrorism can then be turned against the target, thus increasing the effectiveness of the attack by isolating the victims and weakening the coherence of the social group. It also happens that victims of terrorism get involved themselves later in terrorist activities.

**My personal experience has shown me that another path is possible: a path of resilience through action and testimony.** I was 26 years old when I lost my father in the attack perpetrated by the Libyan secret services on 19 September 1989, against a civilian plane, the UTA DC10. This bombing killed the 170 passengers and crewmembers of the flight UT772 Brazzaville - N'Djamena - Paris, over the Sahara Desert (Niger). What followed for me was an erratic and complex personal journey. At the age of 38, in February 2002 - almost 13 years after the bombing. The negotiations took two years. Other relatives of the victims of the attack have joined me in the process; the French Government has supported us. On 9 January 2004, we obtained that Libya recog-

**This bombing killed the 170 passengers and crewmembers of the flight UT772**



nize its responsibility in this heinous attack and compensate the 170 families up to 1\$170 million dollars.<sup>1</sup> This was the beginning of my personal reconstruction, which is still going on today.

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**I began negotiations with Saïf al Islam Kadhafi, the son of my father's assassin**

My experience showed me two main things. One, is the power of storytelling when used in a constructive way, purged of elements of distress or hatred. The other, is the importance of getting out of the victim position - necessarily passive - and starting to build your own future instead of letting, or expecting, the others to decide for you. Thus, within the framework of the French Association of Victims of Terrorism that I created in 2009,<sup>2</sup> I have set up a support process for victims of terrorism based on action. In this framework, we have created events, for various audiences, focusing on the victims' narrative: "Terrorism: and if we listened to the victims...".

## The role of victims in the fight against radicalisation

In a working group on the voice of victims of terrorism, that I co-directed within the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) from 2010 to 2014, we have drafted best-practice guidelines on the use of victim testimonies in the fight against radicalization.

We have also produced video testimonies of victims in several languages. Knowing that it may be quite difficult for victims to repeat their stories often, in front of different audiences, the videos allow a much larger-scale use of the testimonies. They also allow complementing face-to-face testimonies of volunteers with testimonies of other victims, especially from other countries. The videos were produced with the financial support of the United Nations, the European Commission, the French "Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalisation" (CIPDR), the French Ministry of Justice, and in partnership with the International Federation of associations of victims of terrorism (IFAVT).

In 2015 and 2016, the first scientific study on the prevention



of radicalization in prison was conducted by a multidisciplinary team that I have led. In the frame of this study, carried out in two French prisons, we have tested the effectiveness of the testimonies of victims of terrorism on radicalized prisoners. Only three types of actors have a certain credibility on with the target audience: experts (religious leaders, sociologists, historians, etc.), former radicalized people (it was not possible to verify the de-

gree of disengagement), and victims. Our method consisted on involving these three types of actors in a multidisciplinary approach, with each type of intervention having its own objective and being part of a more comprehensive process.

**Victims are “legitimate to testify because of what they have undergone, but the main interest of their testimony lies in their journey towards resilience”**

The effectiveness of victims' testimonies is based on a status of 'otherness' and requires a real interaction with the target audience. **Victims who take part in the process must have progressed on their own path of resilience far enough to be able to speak without hatred or a spirit of vengeance.** What is expected from the victims is not that they position themselves as experts, but that they bring the human factor. They should tell, in their own words and in all sincerity, their complex and singular journey: the moment of the attack, the difficult return to a "normal" life, their reintegration into society, their current life and vision of the future. The victims may also tell how this painful experience has raised their interest



<sup>1</sup> « Mon père était dans le DC10 ...19 septembre 1989 : un attentat attribué à la Libye frappe un avion français. Histoire secrète d'une négociation », Guillaume Denoix de Saint Marc avec la collaboration de Candice Bal, éditions Privé, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The author founded the French Association of the Victims of Terrorism (Association française des Victimes du Terrorism) and was the Director General of the Association from 2009 to 2022.

in the complexity of the world and of human relationships.

As a general principle, any testimony of a victim of terrorism emphasizes three complementary notions: otherness, victim position, and free will. The testimonies are adapted to the different audiences and are especially intended to initiate discussions with them. When they target teenagers or the general public, they allow addressing the anxiogenic and taboo subject of terrorism. In prison, these testimonies allow for very strong exchanges, full of humanity and sincerity – in this frame however, each party involved keeps his or her place as victim or perpetrator.

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We have noted during the exchanges with radicalized inmates (or those in the process of being radicalized) that they almost always see themselves as victims – often they even tell us: “I am a victim too”. Indeed, it is their feeling of (real or supposed) injustice that has made them vulnerable to extremist ideologies, and can lead them to join a terrorist cause. Face

to the victims’ sincerity in talking about their life path, and through a totally counterintuitive process, the extremists get to identify themselves with the victims of terrorism. They get to think that they are like us: “wounded by life”. At that moment, their question is: “How did you manage not to hate?” This is a key moment, when they are open to listen to the victims’ testimony about his or her choice and life path after the terrorist act. Listen and compare with their own choices, which led them to being in prison.

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Indeed, there are two possible reactions to experiencing injustice. The first, instinctive and primal, leads to anger, revenge and violence. This is the one that was taken by the prisoners, and it is a dead end. The second is much more complex, involving introspection – without denying reality -, intellectualization, explanation, justice and dialogue. This is the one chosen by the victims of terrorism who are in-

involved in the fight against radicalization, and it is the only one that has a future. For each victim, leaving the victim position and taking back the control of his or her life was a very personal choice, generally followed by a chaotic and complex journey. The new life of the victim, totally different from the one before the attack, integrates the traumatic experience.

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**The testimony of the victims can be the trigger for a new roadmap for the radicalized inmate, if other actors involved in detention or probation accompany the process.** “

In prison, among radicalized inmates (convicted of common law offences or terrorism), it often happens that the detainees tell us in turn about their journey through a collective “we” narrative, which then returns to the “I”. Even in front of their fellow inmates, they take off their shell and present themselves with sincerity, encouraged by the way the victim has done the same exercise. They, too, have chosen action, or to embrace a cause, in an attempt to escape their position of failure, but this choice was guided by a sense of re-

sentment and hatred. They have become radical losers.<sup>3</sup>

In all cases, at the very least, the testimonies of the victims cast doubt on the simplistic vision of the world of radicalized inmates. The approach of a benevolent, listening, non-hateful, non-judgmental victim who has made peace with himself or herself, and wishes to meet them in prison, is incompatible with their binary vision of the world. We bring the grey area and the shades of colour into an intellectual structuring of the world in black and white. Our action opens a fissure in their ideological construction. This doubt opens the way for other actors to widen the breach, to deconstruct the ideology, and to accompany them towards an exit from radicalism.

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**In recent years, the testimonies of victims of terrorism have been increasingly used by the French Government in the counter violent extremism process.** “

Our approach and hope is that the interaction with a victim of terrorism will inspire people,

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as it did with the survivors of the Shoah.

In high schools and colleges, these testimonies can support preventing or stopping the radicalization processes. This is primary prevention. In the frame of the French national education system, victims of terrorism intervene very regularly in French schools, at the

request of teachers. A structured educational process is jointly defined and continuously adapted by teachers and victims’ associations. In France, as in Spain, the study of terrorism is nowadays a mandatory subject of the national educational program.

The French administration of prisons also employs more

3 « Le perdant radical : Essai sur les hommes de la terreur » Broché, 19 octobre 2006, de Hans Magnus Enzensberger (Auteur), Daniel Mirsky.

and more often the testimonies of victims of terrorism, either face-to-face or on video, as part of the work conducted by the evaluation or counter-radicalization units.

Only resilient victims can effectively participate in the prevention of radicalization.

A prerequisite for any involvement of the victims in the prevention of radicalization is multidisciplinary support for them in the short, medium and long term (provided by the State, associations and civil society) to obtain their rights: access to justice, compensation,

physical and psychological care, recognition, and memory. This approach was developed in France by the Government and the associations after the 2015 attacks. But this is another subject, just as important and interesting.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** **Guillaume Denoix de Saint Marc:** Founder and President of the International Federation of Associations of Victims of Terrorism (IFAVT) since 2011. Ambassador of the RAN (Radicalisation Awareness Network). Vice-President of V-Europe. Founder of the French association for victims of terrorism (AFVT); Executive Director from April 2009 to May 2022.

Son of Jean-Henri Denoix de Saint Marc, killed in the terrorist attack against the flight UT772, DC10-UTA, perpetrated by Libya: 170 dead victims from 18 nationalities, 19 September 1989. Negotiated directly with the son of the murderer of his father (Mouamar Kadhafi) from 2002 to 2004 and obtained the recognition of responsibility from Libya. Created a Memorial on the crash site (Sahara Desert).



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