Precarious multiplicity: France, ‘foreign fighters’ and the containment of difference

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Abstract
This article investigates the portrayal by French policy-makers of the so-called Islamic State ‘foreign fighters’. I provide an in-depth analysis of the discursive construction of these ‘foreign fighters’ as different and detached from the (French) Self. I do so through a questioning of the notion of multiplicity, revealing how it exists precariously and the consequences this precariousness has on the notion itself. First, multiplicity emerges in ‘strange’ places as identities are being remodelled through new combinations. Second, the coexistence implied by multiplicity needs to be complexified to account for the way it helps preserve but also sometimes erase difference (and thus multiplicity itself). Finally, because of the precariousness of multiplicity, unexpected outcomes can be produced by the encounter with difference (such as the policy of non-repatriation of the ‘foreign fighters’). Overall, multiplicity can be usefully questioned by looking at these instances of instability and doubt. As such, this article shares the concerns expressed by critical scholars that multiplicity recreates problematic distinctions between inside and outside. As a response, my analysis contributes to an understanding of multiplicity as always in the making, revealing how various discursive strategies are used to temporarily and imperfectly stabilise boundaries.

Keywords
difference, fighters, France, ISIS, multiplicity, terrorism

Introduction
While ‘societal multiplicity’ is now used by a large number of scholars, one difficulty keeps resurfacing: as noticed in the introduction to this Special Issue, the term ‘society’ is imperfect. Although ‘empty of particular historical content’ (and as such adapted to the wide variations in societies that have historically existed), an uneasiness persists about the term and its implications. Indeed, the idea of diverse and interacting societies still relies on a separation between inside and outside – a separation that critical IR scholars have long rejected. In fact, the notion of ‘societal multiplicity’ is not guilty of returning...
us to a world of reified discrete units that are always and already separated; for Rosenberg and Tallis, societies are always entangled. But the notion of ‘separation’ is still essential to the idea of multiplicity, making its adoption by critical scholars difficult (see the critiques of Drieschová (2019) and Koddenbrock (2020)).

In this article, the notion of ‘societal multiplicity’ is used in a way that fully embraces these entanglements and avoids the risk of reifying the societies that constitute multiplicity. I argue that multiplicity can be a critical tool when (1) it is fully open to the precarity or vulnerability of becoming ‘with others’ (Kurki, 2020) and when (2) the inside–outside distinction is problematised as the result (and not as the starting point) of the analysis. As such, this article addresses the challenge of using multiplicity while avoiding reification. In other words, and if multiplicity always exists, it never pre-exists the (dis)entanglements of various ‘societies’ and should not be understood as a starting point but rather as an always precarious and temporary result.

To develop this contribution, I focus on the phenomenon of ‘foreign fighters’. While not new, the ‘foreign fighters’ have recently come to occupy an important place in the security discourses of a number of Western states. Yet the very definition of ‘foreign fighter’ reveals how a critical approach to multiplicity is necessary. Defining the concept of ‘foreign fighters’ is a complex task, and even the actual ‘fighting’ done by the ‘foreign fighters’ has been an object of debate – with some scholars preferring to use terms such as ‘activists’, ‘volunteers’ or ‘insurgents’ (Malet, 2013: 9) as they enable considering the activities of the ‘foreign fighters’ beyond an exclusive focus on fighting (Moore and Tumelty, 2008). More importantly for multiplicity, the second element of the concept – ‘foreign’ – is equally elusive, with these individuals being citizens of the countries which nevertheless label them as ‘foreign’. Some scholars insist on the kinship ties or community links between the supposed ‘foreign’ fighters and the groups they join. This accounts for their newly gained ‘foreignness’. For most, the only solution is to refer to the difference in nationality or citizenship between the ‘foreign’ and ‘local’ fighters (Hegghammer, 2010: 57–58; Malet, 2013: 9; Moore, 2015: 396), and to take these elements as stable or undisputable. At times, the qualifying ‘foreign’ refers to ‘non-indigenous’ (Moore and Tumelty, 2008: 412) or to those who have left their ‘country of origin’ or ‘home country’ (Bakke, 2014: 150; Bílková, 2018: 5; Byman, 2019: 7; Kraehennann, 2010), which in turn creates new issues around the definition of these terms (‘indigenous’, ‘origin’ and ‘home’). Overall, this confusion points to the need to explore how multiplicity functions in situations where the us-them distinction is particularly unstable.

This is all the more important insofar as the bulk of the academic research on ‘foreign fighters’ has only considered the questions of identity and difference indirectly. For Moore (2015: 396), ‘The overwhelming body of work on foreign fighters and contemporary activist movements has focused on recruitment or mobilisation and occasionally the converse, disengagement from militant movements more generally’. As such, the existing research concentrates on the reasons why ‘foreign fighters’ join insurgencies and terrorist organisations, focusing on the lives and experiences of the ‘foreign fighters’ themselves (Lindemann, 2018; Rostami et al., 2020; Verwimp, 2016), on the way they are recruited and mobilised (Holman, 2016a; Malet, 2013; Orozobekova, 2016; Wignell et al., 2017), on the origins of the phenomenon of the ‘Muslim foreign fighters’ (Hegghammer, 2010), and the impact of ‘foreign fighters’ on the conflicts in which they are involved (Bakke, 2014). Alternatively,
scholars have examined the challenges posed by ‘foreign fighters’ returning to their country of origin (Jawaid, 2017; Pokalova, 2019) and the response of states and organisations such as the European Union to the phenomenon of the ‘foreign fighters’ (Bures, 2020; Holman, 2016b; Weill, 2019). Yet, as summarised by Moore (2015: 396) ‘conceptual issues have received relatively little attention’. In particular, questions of identity and identification have been less salient. Some have analysed the construction of a shared sense of solidarity and kin among ‘foreign fighters’ themselves (Moore, 2015), while others have studied the way ‘foreign fighters’ experience their return and have to negotiate their place in society (Greenwood, 2019). Specific attention has been paid to women and their portrayal, both by the so-called ‘Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’ (ISIS) (Lehane et al., 2018) and by the Western media (Martini, 2018), as well as to the everyday perception of ‘foreign fighters’ by the general public (da Silva and Crilley, 2017). Finally, Baker-Beall (2019) has also shown how the securitisation of these ‘foreign fighters’ has been tied to the discourse on migration to justify strict(er) border controls. Overall, therefore, little has been written about the way these ‘foreign fighters’ are identified by their home country (beyond their representation as threats).

In this article, I focus on the specific example of the French ‘foreign fighters’ travelling to Syria and Iraq and their portrayal by French policy-makers. Official sources estimate that, in 2019, 1300 French nationals had travelled to Syria and Iraq, 271 had come back and 314 had died there, making France one of the Western countries with the highest number of ‘foreign fighters’ in this region. Most scholars differentiate between two or three ‘waves’ of ‘foreign fighters’ joining the Islamic State (Tezcür and Besaw, 2020). For Bergema and San (2019), for instance, three periods can be identified: the first peak in 2011–2012 and early 2013 (mostly composed of the ‘inner circles’ of the jihadist networks); the second wave at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 (more diverse, less likely to have been historically involved and smaller); and the third wave in June 2014 (with the proclamation of the ‘Caliphate’). Since the beginning of 2016, the ‘flow’ of ‘foreign fighters’ is in decline, yet the issue has repeatedly resurfaced, both in France and in other Western countries. As this article is concerned with the representation of these individuals in policy-making discourses (and not with the motivations or individual profiles of the ‘foreign fighters’), the analysis is not divided according to these waves. In fact, no difference is made by politicians between these different ‘foreign fighters’ who are usually essentialised as broadly similar to one another.

My analysis of the case of these ‘foreign fighters’ reveals some interesting insights that help further explain how the notion of multiplicity can be used in – and can help us understand – unstable and unsettled situations. First, I reveal how the notion of ‘society’ (‘us’) needs to be understood as particularly fluid and malleable. The discursive construction of the ‘foreign fighters’ by French policy-makers shows that multiplicity can emerge in ‘strange’ or unexpected places – here, for instance, between nationals of the same country. This serves to complicate the multiplicity picture and to further reinforce the argument that societal multiplicity is not a synonym for (already established and ‘fixed’) states interacting with one another. I then discuss two consequences of this unstable multiplicity. First, this precarious situation can lead to a difficult coexistence between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and some discourses can both reinforce and lead to the eradication of multiplicity. Faced with what they perceive as a threat, French policy-makers
come to accept or advocate for the death of the ‘foreign fighters’. In doing so, they both strengthen the sense of difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and contribute to the eventual disappearance of these others. When coexistence is not possible (for instance, because the other is a threat), then multiplicity can be both constructed and erased in the same process. Second, the construction of the ‘foreign fighters’ as threatening others leads to the adoption of a new policy that goes against usual practice: the accepted and acknowledged non-repatriation of (and non-assistance to) French nationals. Responding to perceived security and political pressures, French policy-makers sought to further ‘stabilise’ the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ by clearly expressing their opposition to the return of the ‘foreign fighters’. Overall, this analysis contributes to an understanding of multiplicity as always in flux and in the making, revealing how (discursive) strategies are used to stabilise these blurred boundaries. This means that the five ‘consequences’ of multiplicity might be better understood as processes in the never-completed making of multiplicity rather than consequences of an already present societal multiplicity.

To explore the way these ‘foreign fighters’ are represented, this article uses an original set of texts collected primarily via the repository of official declarations by members of the French government and the president (https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours). Keywords were used to gather a comprehensive set of discourses over the period 2011–2020, with most texts from 2019 as this was an intense period of debate. Media sources were also searched to cross-check the collected discourses and to identify additional sources. As some important discourses are pronounced in the main legislative chamber (Assemblée Nationale) but not always referenced by the government website, an additional search was conducted on http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/recherche/questions for the current and previous legislatures. This resulted in 156 items. Taking inspiration from seminal post-structuralist approaches to discourse, I adopt what Shepherd (2008) called a ‘discourse-theoretical analysis’ that differs from other forms of discourse analysis (in particular from Critical Discourse Analysis) by refusing to posit a distinction between discursive and non-discursive (see also Hansen (2006) and Aydin-Düzgit (2014)). I first read these texts to identify ‘forms of thought’ or structuring sub-discourses providing a sense of order in the texts (Shepherd, 2008: 30). This resulted in six structuring sub-discourses: the number of ‘foreign fighters’; their nationality; their death; their repatriation to France; their responsibility; and the judicial and security response for those coming back. A second reading strategy involved identifying relations (or what Laffey and Weldes (2004) call ‘interpellations’), that is, the way ‘subject-positions’ are created in relation to others. As such, my approach to these discourses reflects the way the very idea of ‘foreign fighters’ has no established meaning or essence, thus also highlighting the slippages and contestations of the term. As ‘discursive practices are practices of power’ (Shepherd, 2008: 23), my analysis focuses on policy-makers as the actors most likely to possess and be recognised a high level of authority to re-present and (temporarily) fix meanings.

**Multiplicity in ‘strange’ places: the ‘foreign fighters’ as others**

In this section, I look at the first ‘form of thought’ that dominates the discourse on the ‘French’ ‘foreign fighters’: the question of their nationality. I discuss how the ‘foreign
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fighters’ are represented as different and opposed to a (‘normal’) French group that is both created and reinforced through this opposition – thus confirming the importance of combinations in the international but also pointing at surprising ways in which these combinations can be built. The process of othering the ‘foreign fighters’ is particularly visible when their trajectory – the way they became Other – is discussed by French policy-makers. As with all processes of othering, this creation of difference is problematic. On the one hand, the ‘foreign fighters’ are ‘feminised’ as vulnerable individuals and victims of propaganda. This helps explain why French citizens have joined a terrorist group to fight against France. On the other hand, however, if the othering of the (still technically French) ‘foreign fighters’ is to be seen as acceptable, they must be assumed to be rational individuals responsible for their acts, not helpless victims. Their othering is thus ambiguous, and the very existence of the ‘foreign fighters’ as others shows that multiplicity transcends the lines of the nation-state – that is, the boundaries of the societies that compose multiplicity are continuously re-configured.

The discursive construction of the ‘foreign fighters’ starts with their portrayal as victims and vulnerable individuals. For Interior Minister Cazeneuve, the French ‘recruits’ are compared to the victims of a sect, as ‘estranged’ young people who could benefit from the help of psychologists or social workers.8 Mental problems and addictions are also mentioned,9 and the ‘foreign fighters’ are portrayed as victims of ‘propaganda’.10 Defence Minister Le Drian refers to the French ‘foreign fighters’ as ‘unstable’ or ‘disturbed’ people, victims of a ‘deadly ideology’ that can then ‘contaminate’ others.11 In fact, their treatment when they come back also indicates how essentially vulnerable and dangerous they are perceived to be: as indicated by Justice Minister Belloubet,12 those who come back are considered suspects well beyond the time they serve in prison, and they remain under close watch thereafter.13 Portraying the ‘foreign fighters’ in this light serves to establish a distance from ‘normal’ French citizens who are understood as rational individuals able to resist propaganda. Hence, and through the idea of combination, multiplicity aligns with critical approaches to identity which also look at the co-constitution of Self and Other: constructing the ‘foreign fighters’ as others can only be done by constructing a contrasting French identity.

Yet, the ‘foreign fighters’ cannot be simply portrayed as victims. Doing so would reveal the fragility of the French ‘national community’ and would also make their subsequent treatment by the French authorities difficult to justify; vulnerable people are indeed in need of protection and should not be attacked. This helps explain why the ‘foreign fighters’ are also considered as responsible individuals,14 rational because French but deviant. For the Justice Minister, these ‘French adults’ went to the combat zones ‘knowingly’ and are ‘responsible for their acts’. Referring to the fact that these French ‘foreign fighters’ will face a trial in Iraq, she adds,

We really consider that we have to deal with responsible adults who made a choice of leaving to go there to be in combat areas. And so, it’s really, I think, taking this responsibility to its logical conclusion.15

This is contrasted to the children of the ‘foreign fighters’ who are usually discussed separately as their responsibility is not engaged. As stated by Le Drian, ‘we consider that children are innocent’ insofar as they have not chosen to join ISIS.16
These ‘deviant’ individuals are thus not irrational: in other words, their frequent portrayal as barbaric or savage does not mean that they are absolved of responsibility. For the French authorities, these ‘foreign fighters’ took the decision to join ISIS and to fight for a terrorist organisation,17 and they did so ‘knowingly’.18 One of the tropes used to reinforce the idea of conscious choice is that the ‘foreign fighters’ did not travel to Iraq or Syria for tourism.19 Hence, their presentation as ‘unstable’ and ‘fragile’ does not absolve them of their responsibility: as stated by Prime Minister Valls, ‘to analyse the mechanisms [of this fragility] does not mean to absolve these individuals, to find them some sort of extenuating circumstances (. . .) These are free women and men, who choose to join the ranks of a terrorist organisation’.20 Here, the idea of victimhood is combined with the idea that the ‘foreign fighters’ are fully responsible individuals.

In this othering, therefore, two elements seem to collide, with the ‘foreign fighters’ being both rational and irrational at the same time. A partial solution to this tension is found in the relation (or interpellation) established between ‘foreign fighters’ and France: French policy-makers remove the ‘foreign fighters’ from the community of (normal) French citizens and insist on their individual deviance. By contrast, they build a ‘normal’ French community of respectable and respectful citizens. For Ayrault, for instance, ‘it is not the nationality of these people that is involved, these are people who are personally targeted because they have responsibilities’.21 In 2016, Valls will also declare that ‘This ideology declared war on us and corrupts minds in the very heart of our societies. It transforms individuals who grew up here, went to our schools, into enemies ready to strike us’.22 Turning difference into an individual process makes it intelligible: one becomes a ‘deviant’ French by being ‘corrupted’. The ‘problem’ with ‘foreign fighters’ is a problem with individuals,23 and this enables a partial solution to the dilemma explained above: only individually ‘deviant’ French citizens join ISIS, which serves both to make the fight against them acceptable (or even necessary) and reinforces the idea that ‘normal’ French citizens behave in ‘normal’ ways.

In this context, can these ‘foreign fighters’ still be French? While technically the ‘foreign fighters’ have not been stripped of their nationality, their characterisation as ‘French’ is problematic. In most speeches and answers to journalists’ or MPs’ questions, these two signs – French and ‘foreign fighters’ – are opposed and portrayed as contradictory or mutually exclusive. For the majority of political actors, the ‘foreign fighters’ are ‘foreign’ or ‘fighters’ first, and their nationality is often used well after other characterisations. Particularly present in the French discourses are the labels ‘enemies’ and ‘terrorists’. For Hollande, ‘there are French jihadists in Mosul. There are also some in Raqqa and we fight them as we fight all the other jihadists, regardless of their nationality’.24 In a similar vein, Prime Minister Philippe affirms that ‘it is to protect the security of the French that a number of [military] operations have been conducted against terrorists who, regardless of the nationality that they could boast, were enemies. And they were treated as such’.25 Here, relegating nationality to a secondary concern is justified by mentions of the ‘security of the French’, that is, of the normal citizens protected by their state.

That ‘foreign fighters’ have forfeited their nationality and their citizenship is also clear in another exchange involving the Defence Minister: asked about the fate of those (French?) children who grew up in ISIS and about whether they have become child soldiers or child terrorists, she explains that ‘what is at stake for us is to succeed in
changing them back into citizens’. Participation in or being associated with the actions of ISIS is thus stripping individuals of their French nationality and citizenship, their belonging to the sphere of the ‘us’. As outlined by Tayler (2016: 468–471), revoking citizenship is not an uncommon policy for states faced with ‘foreign fighters’ (see also Bílková, 2018: 21–22). What makes this proposal ‘logical’ (even though it was eventually abandoned in the French case) is the dissociation of ‘foreign fighters’ with their state of origin: in a solemn discourse before the Congress, Hollande explained that ‘we should be able to strip of their nationality an individual who has been condemned for infringing on the fundamental interests of the Nation or for an act of terrorism, even if they are born French’.

The dichotomy between being French and being a ‘foreign fighter’ is thus strongly emphasised yet also disproved by the very existence of the ‘foreign fighters’ (who are both French and foreign). This shows the fluidity of the notion of ‘society’ on which multiplicity relies. In other words, multiplicity can (and does) emerge in ‘strange’ places and where it would not be expected (such as between citizens of the same country). As a result, multiplicity can also be fragile and precarious insofar as it does not rely on easily made differentiations. In the case of the French ‘foreign fighters’, two specific discursive choices further highlight the instability of multiplicity: the way it can be reinforced and erased at the same time (as explored in the next section) and the search for stability (as explored in the last section).

Reinforcing and/or eradicating multiplicity? Killing ‘them’ to save ‘us’

The precariousness of multiplicity is sometimes reinforced by the potentially difficult coexistence between ‘us’ and ‘them’: indeed, when the Other is perceived as threatening the Self, a policy of eradication becomes the only solution. This is expressed in one of the forms of thought that structures the French discourse: that of the death of the ‘foreign fighters’. In practice, French policy-makers come to accept or even promote the death of the ‘foreign fighters’ in Syria and Iraq. In doing so, they both reinforce yet also seek to eradicate a threatening multiplicity. The death of the ‘foreign fighters’ is presented in terms reminiscent of the ‘liberal way of war’ (Dillon and Reid, 2001): death is expressed in terms of life (where killing them becomes a way of curing or saving us). Here, this difficult coexistence between the self-described French and the ‘foreign fighters’ indicates the ever-present quest of taming difference and thus multiplicity. As difference is perceived as a danger (to the Self), it should be eradicated.

Hence, the multiplicity toolbox does not only point at the way difference comes to exist and how societies co-constitute one another: it also underlines how multiplicity is constantly transformed as political actors seek to avoid what they perceive as a dangerous coexistence with ‘otherised’ groups. In the case of the ‘foreign fighters’, co-existence and interactions lead to strong reactions: faced with the possibility of having ‘dangerous’ others coming back to France, French policy-makers promote – or at the very least show a lack of concern for – the death of the ‘foreign fighters’.

This policy is expressed in several ways. First, the (technically French) ‘foreign fighters’ are made invisible by being blended and associated with other ‘foreign
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fighters’ and terrorists. For the Defence Minister, for instance, ‘we do not “sort out”
between the different jihadists with whom we are fighting. We fight ISIS globally’.30 In
a different interview the following year, she explains that France has not been targeting
specifically French ‘foreign fighters’, and that for those who died as a result of military
actions by France ‘their nationality does not matter a great deal’.31 This is of course
striking: French citizens have become enemies that can be legitimately and directly
killed by the French military. This is assumed by Parly in 2017: asked whether France
is sub-contracting the killing of its own ‘foreign fighters’ to the Iraqi forces, she declares
that ‘we are not sub-contracting anything; with the international coalition, we are in the
process of eradicating ISIS’.32 By blending the ‘foreign fighters’ into the well-known
evil figure of ISIS, their death in battle is thus envisaged as a normal process, vaguely
lamented or seen as a (fortunate) by-product of the fight against ISIS. The importance
of their life is dismissed by the same minister in 2017 (at the time of the fall of Raqqa
and the ensuing fights): Syrian forces will be in charge of these ‘foreign fighters’, says
Parly, ‘if they remain alive, which the story does not tell us yet’.33 This casual comment
about death clearly inscribes the ‘foreign fighters’ as actors whose death is a normal part
of a story still unfolding. Co-existence is thus not a possibility: the existence of the Self
requires the disappearance of the Other. In a statement that quickly became controver-
sial (thus revealing how the killing of these ‘foreign fighters’ is raising important
issues), Parly estimates that ‘if there are some [French] jihadists who die in these fights,
well, then so much the better’.34

Considerations about the death of the ‘foreign fighters’ due to the military actions of
France against ISIS are also revealing about the lack of value attributed to their life, that
is, the lack of importance of a human rights perspective when ‘foreign fighters’ are dis-
cussed (Limbada and Davies, 2016). Talking about the consequences of the French
strikes on a training camp for ‘foreign fighters’, then Defence Minister Le Drian acknowl-
edges that the human losses are significant.35 Even more explicit is the Defence Minister
who in 2017 answered a question on the return of ‘foreign fighters’ by arguing that

we cannot prevent them from returning because [sic] what we can do is to continue the fight to
neutralise the maximum of jihadists, something that we have been doing for months, and so we
need to carry on until the end.36

The question of the death of the ‘foreign fighters’ also emerges in another situation: their
judgement in Iraq where the death penalty can be applied to those convicted of terrorism.
French nationals are thus at risk, when judged in Iraq, of being condemned to capital
punishment. Again, the possibility of co-existing with them is curtailed, this time through
the introduction of an external element: the jurisdiction of Iraq and its desire to judge the
‘foreign fighters’. Indeed, the French ‘foreign fighters’ currently tried in Iraq are, ‘first
and foremost’, Iraqi prisoners (rather than French citizens).37 It is thus for the Iraqi jus-
tice system to deal with them.38 When questioned by journalists, French officials reiter-
ate both their opposition to the death penalty in principle (thus reinforcing their ‘liberal’
identity) but also their refusal to repatriate the French ‘foreign fighters’ who risk it in
Iraq. As such, the French authorities can claim to be tied by international law to respect
the verdict of the Iraqi courts. For Macron, for instance, ‘If Iraq were to condemn one of
our nationals to the death penalty, then we would have some exchanges in order to commute this sentence to something that is acceptable in French law'. Le Drian will also state that ‘at the end of the day, it’s the trial [of the Iraqi court]’, i.e. there is nothing that ‘we’ can do for ‘them’, a clearly fatalist reading of the situation.

Overall, this results in a problematic situation: how can French officials call for the death of individuals who are still (at least officially) French? Some like Foreign Affairs Minister Ayrault try to deny the deadly ambiguity of the situation in which France finds itself; in an answer to a journalist asking whether French operations are responsible for the killing of French ‘foreign fighters’, he argues that ‘we should not enter into this type of considerations. What are we talking about? As I said, these are overseas operations, so let’s not go into incomprehensible subtleties’. Placing the problem ‘overseas’ – away from ‘us’ – is thus a way to reduce the ethical tensions produced by this refusal to co-exist with those that are only partially (and imperfectly) othered. A partial solution to this difficulty is found in blaming the ‘foreign fighters’ themselves for their potential death: we are not killing them: they have placed themselves in a situation where they can be killed by us. In other words, the burden of this ethical choice – are ‘we’ killing those who are like ‘us’? – is reduced by blaming ‘foreign fighters’ themselves for their death.

This reading of the discourse on the ‘foreign fighters’ reveals two aspects: the difficulty of co-existence when the others are seen as a threat, and the possibility that multiplicity will be both reinforced and erased in the same discursive breath: accepting the death of the ‘foreign fighters’ reinforces their otherness while also contributing to eradicate them. This shows that multiplicity can sometimes be confirmed and reproduced at the same time as it is reduced.

**The dialectical effect of precarious multiplicity: non-repatriation of the ‘foreign fighters’**

The second consequence of this precarious multiplicity can be seen in the creation of a new policy that goes against accepted standards: the non-repatriation of French nationals. In a dialectical way, the pressures to maintain the Other on the outside and to secure the Self leads to the creation of a new policy that seems at odds with the usual practice of states: the non-repatriation of French citizens. This is all the more interesting as non-repatriation is not a policy that is common to all countries faced with ‘foreign fighters’ (Bílková, 2018). Should these ‘foreign fighters’ come back and, more importantly, should the French authorities assist them in doing so? A clear programme of repatriation would indicate a recognition of the ‘likeness’ of these ‘foreign fighters’ and their belonging to the national community. On the contrary, a refusal or reluctance for them to come back points in the opposite direction: that of a clear difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Up until 2019, repatriation had been intensely debated in France. It had been considered as the potential general policy for ‘foreign fighters’, as confirmed by media reports and some members of the government. Justice Minister Belloubet, for instance, stated in January 2019 that having the ‘foreign fighters’ face trial in Syria and Iraq was not the only option, adding: ‘I believe that, collectively, we should make sure that we know what they [the ‘foreign fighters’] become’. Yet others were less inclined to help
the ‘foreign fighters’ return: in 2015, the then Interior Minister indicated that while it is not possible to forbid French nationals from coming back, ‘those who have committed crimes on the Iraqi territory will be judged there’, with no indication that they will be repatriated or receive assistance to travel back to France.43 President Macron also considered that there should be no general programme of repatriation, instead considering that a case-by-case approach was more suitable.44 Early 2019, the official policy became one of non-repatriation of the ‘foreign fighters’.

This is undeniably linked to wider political and public opinion pressures – it appeared particularly controversial to bring back those considered as a threat and as having ‘betrayed’ the country – but, ultimately, this position is also a way to stabilise the precarious boundaries between us and them. Faced with the conundrum of not being able to deny the nationality of these ‘foreign fighters’ (and thus their similarity) and the concomitant desire to secure the country against ‘external’ threats, French policy-makers adopt the problematic position of advocating and openly recognising that these individuals should not come back. To do so, they refer to seemingly undeniable realities that make the return of these ‘foreign fighters’ supposedly difficult, such as the assumed desire by Iraqi authorities to judge those that have attacked them. This enables the portrayal of the repatriation of French nationals as impossible because of the understandable desire of Iraq to exercise its judicial powers. Yet, what also emerges behind these realities is the importance of security considerations.

For Interior Minister Castaner, ‘we need to recognise that Iraq is legitimate to judge those who have committed terrorist acts on its territory. They have an independent judiciary and Iraq has been wounded, has been attacked by these women and men, so they are legitimate (. . .) We have to respect their legal system as well’.45 Legal and emotional arguments are combined to support the view that, despite their nationality, the French ‘foreign fighters’ should not be repatriated. This is confirmed by Le Drian for whom France ‘respects the sovereignty of the Iraqi state, including its judicial institutions that have declared themselves competent to judge the French members of ISIS, and without any financial compensation at all’.46 Hence, it is for Iraq to ‘decide in a sovereign manner’47 if the captured ‘foreign fighters’ should be judged there insofar as the Iraqi justice is ‘recognised’ by France.48 The appeal to the ideas of sovereignty and independence helps put a distance between France and its ‘foreign fighters’. As put by the Justice Minister in a particularly fatalistic way,

the Iraqi authorities want to judge those who might have committed crimes on their territory and they have no intention of extraditing the foreign nationals accused of these crimes. We cannot change their minds, naturally, and it is out of the question to go to Iraq to bring back French nationals; we have no reason to do it.49

Here appears all the ambiguity of this position: presented as unavoidable because a result of the independent will of an external actor,50 the decision to not repatriate French ‘foreign fighters’ also reveals how distance has been constructed between these ‘foreign fighters’ and the national community, and how this distance brings about its logical conclusion: there is ‘no reason’ to try to bring them back. Using a rather dubious logic, the Defence Minister defends the same perspective; asked whether it would not be the
practice of a good democracy to bring back its citizens to judge them and understand their history better, she answers that ‘a lot of these detained people in these areas continue to express their desire to come back and to continue the fight in France. As such [sic], the legitimate wish of the local authorities to judge them for the crimes they committed on their territory cannot be overlooked’. The danger that these ‘foreign fighters’ are seen to represent is here hidden behind the assumed ‘desire’ of the Iraqi authorities to keep them, making the non-repatriation of these citizens independent of the will of French policy-makers.

The same logic appears behind the ‘common-sense’ idea that crimes should be judged as close as possible to where they have been perpetrated – a concern that in this case seems to override the importance of a ‘fair trial’ (Bílková, 2018: 20). Thus, for Le Drian, those who joined ISIS ‘must be judged as close as possible to where they committed their crimes’. Maintaining a certain ambiguity, he adds that ‘this is a question of both justice and security’, thus highlighting how the non-return of the ‘foreign fighters’ is also considered through the angle of the threat they could pose if they were to come back. A specific difficulty arises, however: what should be done when the territory in question is not a recognised sovereign state and/or does not possess a working judiciary system? In some cases, this is discarded and silenced: for the government spokesman, the female ‘foreign fighters’ held in Kurdish territory should face trial there as long as the conditions for a fair trial can be ensured. Others will not go as far as recommending for French nationals to be judged by a territory that has no international legal existence and/or is not able to ensure a fair trial: Le Drian, for instance, notes that ‘the difficulty [in the French strategy of not bringing back its ‘foreign fighters’] is that Syria is a war zone. We cannot determine who holds judicial authority’. As a way out of this, the Justice Minister refers to non-governmental organisations when she indicates that where ‘the situation is more complex, we will work with all the organisations that we know to ensure a fair trial’. Overall, therefore, the ‘encounter’ of the French polity with the now externalised and othered ‘foreign fighters’ creates the condition for a new (and particularly controversial) policy to emerge: the non-repatriation of citizens to their national territory. This policy aligns with the political and security pressures placed on French politicians, but it also serves to reinforce the precarious boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the presence of an unstable form of difference, non-repatriation serves as a symbolic and physical expression of the distance that French policy-makers seek to establish between them and the ‘foreign fighters’.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the discursive representation of the ‘foreign fighters’ by French policy-makers. In doing so, it has explored the way multiplicity functions in (and can help us understand) situations where difference is only precariously established. The ‘foreign fighters’ might be an extreme case of precarious multiplicity, but all social situations which rely on difference being established involve some instability and uncertainty. As such, the conclusions of this analysis can be applied more broadly. First, to further de-essentialise the concept of ‘society’, I argued that multiplicity can emerge in ‘strange’ places, that is, where difference might not be expected and would
not align with the usual national boundaries. In the case of the ‘foreign fighters’, their nationality becomes an object of debate and is re-presented as invalid or different through discursive strategies. In the context of this precarious existence of multiplicity, two main consequences emerge. The first one is visible in the way the death of the ‘foreign fighters’ is discussed: in this instance, multiplicity can be both reinforced and diminished at the same time. With the death of the ‘foreign fighters’ accepted or advocated, it is both their existence as others and their disappearance that is simultaneously (re)affirmed. In addition, the pressure to maintain clear boundaries leads to a new policy of non-repatriation to be adopted. This goes against accepted practices but is vital in a context of precarious multiplicity.

Overall, this analysis reveals various important insights about multiplicity while also showing how it can be applied by critical scholars. First, the inside–outside boundary is constantly (re)negotiated. Multiplicity is highly unstable and can emerge in the most unexpected places. Only a careful analysis of these processes of differentiation can shed light on where and how multiplicity (and thus the ‘international’) emerges. As such, the five consequences of multiplicity might be better understood as constituting elements (rather than consequences of a multiplicity already established). As seen in this article, this fluidity is a source of concerns, with repeated attempts at establishing clear boundaries and identities. Multiplicity thus becomes the temporal and always unfinished result of the struggles to establish boundaries between Self and Other. Second, multiplicity can also be resisted or, at the very least, actors can seek to limit what they perceived as a threatening coexistence with others. This drive to ‘tame’ or control multiplicity is likely to be stronger in situations of precarious and unstable coexistence. Ironically, it also leads to limiting (the impact of) multiplicity itself: by seeking to control the Other, it is her very existence as different that is reduced. This means that multiplicity can be established and erased at the same time. Finally, and building upon these two observations, it seems clear that multiplicity can generate problematic outcomes that should not be eluded or overlooked. Indeed, defending the usefulness of the concept of multiplicity can lead to presenting it as an attractive reality. Looking at precarious instances of multiplicity can usefully rebalance this perspective towards the negative and harmful consequences that emerge as multiple ‘societies’ interact with one another.

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Notes
1. ‘Critical scholars’ is used here as a broad umbrella bringing together those scholars who reject the traditional inside–outside assumption of traditional IR scholarship.
2. See the brief historical introduction in Moore and Tumelty (2008) as well as Jung’s insightful comparison between the ‘foreign fighters’ of the Spanish Civil War and Syria (Jung, 2016).
3. More specifically, Moore (2015) identifies ‘three phases of academic work’. The first one inscribes the ‘foreign fighters’ into the longer history of transnational activism and insurgencies. The second cluster of works explored ‘conceptual issues, mobilisation, and the impact of foreign fighters on conflict’. A final cluster (composed of scholars but also think tanks and journalists) has focused more specifically ‘on the country of origin of foreign fighters engaged in contemporary conflicts, notably Iraq and Syria’.

4. ‘Christophe Castaner: La France souhaite une gestion coordonnée des djihadistes (Reuters), 4 April 2019’, https://www.boursorama.com/actualite-economique/actualites/la-france-souhaite-une-gestion-coordonnee-des-djihadistes-014b67e3c3dd6c8d50f0f1a16751b83 (accessed 8 November 2021). All the quotes used in this article are translated from French by the author.

5. See the recent court hearing at the European Court of Human Rights on 29 September 2021 on the issue of repatriation of French nationals: https://echr.coe.int/Pages/home.aspx?p=hearings&w=2438419_29092021&language=fr&c=fre&py=2021 (accessed 5 November 2021).

6. Such as Butler (1993), Campbell (1992) and Doty (1996).

7. This corresponds broadly to the key human rights that are discussed when ‘foreign fighters’ are considered (Limbada and Davies, 2016).

8. ‘Interview de M. Bernard Cazeneuve, 22 April 2014’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/191000-interview-de-m-bernard-cazeneuve-ministre-de-linterieur-france-2-l (accessed 29 July 2020).

9. ‘Déclaration de M. Bernard Cazeneuve, 15 January 2015’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/193631-declaration-de-m-bernard-cazeneuve-ministre-de-linterieur-en-reponse (accessed 29 July 2020).

10. ‘Conférence de presse de M. François Hollande, 5 September 2016’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/200286-conference-de-presse-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-lareppubliqu (accessed 29 July 2020).

11. ‘Interview de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 19 July 2016’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/199911-interview-de-m-jean-yves-le-drian-ministre-de-la-defence-avec-france (accessed 29 July 2020).

12. ‘Déclaration de Mme Nicole Belloubet, 13 December 2017’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/204486-declaration-de-mme-nicole-belloubet-garde-des-sceaux-ministre-de-la-ju (accessed 29 July 2020).

13. ‘Déclaration de Mme Florence Parly, 13 June 2019’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/270116-florence-parly-13062019-terrorisme (accessed 29 July 2020).

14. ‘Entretien de M. Jean-Marc Ayrault, 5 January 2017’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/201722-entretien-de-m-jean-marc-ayrault-ministre-des-affaires-etrangeres-et (accessed 29 July 2020).

15. ‘Interview de Mme Nicole Belloubet, 27 February 2019’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/269981-nicole-belloubet-27022019-jihadistes-gilets-jaunes-benalla-hijab (accessed 29 July 2020).

16. ‘Déclaration de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 14 January 2020’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/272809-jean-yves-le-drian-14012020-terrorisme (accessed 29 July 2020); ‘Déclaration de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 15 January 2020’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/272901-jean-yves-le-drian-15012020-politique-etrangere (accessed 29 July 2020). In the discussion on ‘foreign fighters’, children are also not othered in the same way as adults when repatriation is discussed. See, for instance, ‘Jean-Yves Le Drian face à Jean-Jacques Bourdin, 7 February 2018’, https://www.bfmtv.com/mediaplayer/video/jean-yves-le-drian-face-a-jean-jacques-bourdin-en-direct-1033047.html (accessed 29 July 2020).

17. ‘Déclaration de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 14 January 2020’.
18. ‘Interview de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 16 October 2019’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/271332-jean-yves-le-drian-16102019-france-syrie (accessed 29 July 2020); ‘Déclaration à la presse de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 14 November 2019’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/271950-jean-yves-le-drian-14112019-terrorisme (accessed 29 July 2020).

19. See, for instance, ‘Déclaration de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 15 January 2020’.

20. ‘Déclaration de M. Manuel Valls, 9 May 2016’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/198927-declaration-de-m-manuel-valls-premier-ministre-sur-la-presentation-d (accessed 29 July 2020).

21. ‘Entretien de M. Jean-Marc Ayrault, 5 January 2017’ (an emphasis added), https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/201722-entretien-de-m-jean-marc-ayrault-ministre-des-affaires-eetrangeres-et-d (accessed 29 July 2020).

22. ‘Déclaration de M. Manuel Valls, 9 May 2016’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/198927-declaration-de-m-manuel-valls-premier-ministre-sur-la-presentation-d (accessed 7 October 2020).

23. ‘Déclaration de M. Manuel Valls, 3 October 2014’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/192646-declaration-de-m-manuel-valls-premier-ministre-sur-la-lutte-contre-le (accessed 29 July 2020).

24. ‘Déclaration à la presse de M. François Hollande, 2 January 2017’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/201698-declaration-la-presse-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-la-republique (accessed 2 October 2020).

25. ‘Déclaration de M. Edouard Philippe, 31 January 2019’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/268023-declaration-edouard-philippe-premier-ministre-senat-31-janvier-2019 (accessed 2 October 2020). See also: ‘Édouard Philippe face à Ruth Elkrief, 6 March 2019’, https://www.bfmtv.com/mediaplayer/video/edouard-philippe-face-a-ruth-elkrief-1144732.html (accessed 2 October 2020) and ‘Sibeth Ndiaye: Le Grand Rendez-Vous, 2 June 2019’, https://www.europe1.fr/emissions/Le-grand-rendez-vous/le-grand-rendez-vous-avec-sibeth-ndiaye-020619-3902293 (accessed 2 October 2020).

26. ‘Interview de Mme Florence Parly, 6 October 2017’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/203781-interview-de-mme-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees-avec-france-inter (accessed 2 October 2020).

27. As expressed by one Member of Parliament: ‘we should only worry about the French people’ (‘Question n°2705, M. Meyer Habib, 19 February 2020’ http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/questions/detail/15/QG/2705 (accessed 2 October 2020). This clearly shows how the ‘foreign fighters’ have forfeited their right to being French. For another Member of Parliament, they are the ‘anti-France’ (‘Question n° 2593, M. Claude de Ganay, 15 January 2020’, http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/questions/detail/15/QG/2593 (accessed 2 October 2020).

28. ‘Déclaration de M. François Hollande, 16 November 2015’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/196856-declaration-de-m-francois-hollande-president-de-la-republique-devant (accessed 2 October 2020).

29. For a juridical analysis of the killing of ‘foreign fighters’ (in the context of Canada), see Forcese and Sherriff (2016).

30. ‘Interview de Mme Florence Parly, 6 October 2017’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/203781-interview-de-mme-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees-avec-france-inter (accessed 29 July 2020).

31. ‘Entretien de Mme Florence Parly, 14 January 2018’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/204840-entretien-de-mme-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees-dans-liberation-d (accessed 29 July 2020).

32. ‘Interview de Mme Florence Parly, 6 October 2017’.
33. ‘Interview de Mme Florence Parly, 15 October 2017’, https://www.europ1.fr/politique/parly-si-des-djihadistes-perissent-a-raqqa-cest-tant-mieux-3464669 (accessed 29 July 2020).
34. ‘Interview de Mme Florence Parly, 15 October 2017’.
35. ‘Entretien de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 25 November 2015’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/197059-entretien-de-m-jean-yves-le-drian-ministre-de-la-defence-dans-Paris (accessed 7 October 2020).
36. ‘Florence Parly: “Si des djihadistes périsson à Raqqa, c’est tant mieux”, 15 October 2017’, https://www.europe1.fr/politique/parly-si-des-djihadistes-perissent-a-raqqa-cest-tant-mieux-3464669 (accessed 7 October 2020).
37. ‘Jean-Yves Le Drian face à Jean-Jacques Bourdin, 7 February 2018’.
38. ‘Entretien de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 1 June 2018’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/205939-entretien-de-m-jean-yves-le-drian-ministre-de-leurope-et-des-affaires (accessed 29 July 2020).
39. ‘Ce qu’il faut retenir de la déclaration d’Emmanuel Macron, 14 February 2018’, https://www.latribune.fr/economie/france/ce-qu-il-faut-retenir-de-la-declaration-d-emmanuel-macron-768481.html (accessed 7 October 2020).
40. ‘Entretien de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 1 June 2018’.
41. ‘Entretien de M. Jean-Marc Ayrault, 5 January 2017’.
42. ‘Interview de Mme Nicole Belloubet, 31 January 2019’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/269502-nicole-belloubet-31012019-terrorisme (accessed 7 October 2020).
43. ‘Interview de M. Bernard Cazeneuve, 20 July 2015’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/195647-interview-de-m-bernard-cazeneuve-ministre-de-linterieur-france-int (accessed 7 October 2020).
44. ‘Macron s’exprime sur le sort des jihadistes français en Syrie et enIrak, 8 November 2017’, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/video-certains-pourront-etre-rapatries-d-autres-juges-sur-place-macron-s-exprime-sur-le-sort-des-jihadistes-francais-en-syrie-et-en-irak_2458278.html (accessed 7 October 2020).
45. ‘Interview de M. Christophe Castaner, 28 May 2019’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/270533-christophe-castaner-28052019-terrorisme-islamiste-election-europeenne (accessed 29 July 2020).
46. ‘Extrait de point presse, 23 August 2019’, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/securite-desarmement-et-non-proliferation/actualites/actualites-et-evenements-lies-a-la-dfense-et-la-securite/2019/article/combattants-terroristes-q-r-extrait-du-point-de-presse-23-08-19 (accessed 29 July 2020).
47. ‘Conférence de presse conjointe d’Emmanuel Macron et Barham Saleh, 25 February 2019’, https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/02/25/conference-de-presse-conjointe-demmanuel-macron-et-barham-saleh-president-de-la-republique-dirak (accessed 29 July 2020).
48. ‘“Certains pourront être rapatriés, d’autres jugés sur place”: Macron s’exprime sur le sort des jihadistes français en Syrie et en Irak, 8 November 2017’, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/video-certains-pourront-etre-rapatries-d-autres-juges-sur-place-macron-s-exprime-sur-le-sort-des-jihadistes-francais-en-syrie-et-en-irak_2458278.html (accessed 29 July 2020). This is all the more striking as it happens while deep concerns were expressed by United Nations officials over the fairness of the trials of ‘foreign fighters’ in Iraq, with explicit calls for states to ‘take responsibility’ for their nationals (Bachelet, 2019; Guterres, 2019).
49. ‘Déclaration de Mme Nicole Belloubet, 13 December 2017’.
50. This is in line with the defence adopted by the French government against judicial recourses, the main argument being that repatriation of the ‘foreign fighters’ is a political act
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(of foreign policy) as these individuals are outside of the control of French authorities. As such, the decision not to bring them back cannot be contested in the domestic courts.

51. ‘Entretien de Mme Florence Parly, 14 January 2018’.

52. ‘Combattants terroristes–Q&R–Extrait du point de presse, 23 August 2019’, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/securite-desarmement-et-non-proliferation/actualites-et-evenements-lies-a-la-securite-au-desarmement-et-a-la-non/2019/article/combattants-terroristes-q-r-extrait-du-point-de-presse-23-08-19 (accessed 7 October 2020).

53. ‘Les Françaises djihadistes détenues en Syrie embarrassent Paris, 4 January 2018’, https://fr.reuters.com/article/topNews/idFRKBN1ET11G-OFRT (accessed 29 July 2020).

54. ‘Déclaration de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, 13 February 2019’, https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/270829-jean-yves-le-drian-13032019-defis-priorites-de-la-politique-etrangere (accessed 29 July 2020).

55. ‘Les Françaises djihadistes détenues en Syrie embarrassent Paris, 4 January 2018’.

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