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After Paris Attacks, a Darker Mood Toward Islam Emerges in France

By ADAM NOSSITER and LIZ ALDERMAN

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November is not January. That thought has been filtering through the statements of most French politicians and the news media, and most people seem to understand.

Unlike the response in January after attacks at the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo and elsewhere left 17 dead, there were no grand public appeals for solidarity with Muslims after the Friday attacks that left 129 dead in Paris. There were no marches, few pleas not to confuse practitioners of Islam with those who preach jihad.

Instead, there was a palpable fear, even anger, as President François Hollande asked Parliament to extend a state of emergency and called for changing the Constitution to deal with terrorism. It was largely unspoken but nevertheless clear: Secular France always had a complicated relationship with its Muslim community, but now it was tipping toward outright distrust, even hostility.

The shift could be all the more tempting because the government is struggling to find its footing politically as it is threatened on its far right by the anti-immigrant National Front party.

Muslims in the French capital condemned the terrorists that attacked their city, saying they tarnished Islam.

Already, tough talk from officials in the government shows them shifting rightward, calling for new scrutiny of mosques, extending the state of emergency and possibly placing restrictions on the 10,000 or more people loosely indexed as possible threats to the state. France needs to "expel all these radicalized imams," Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared Saturday.

France had already been expelling handfuls of imams in recent years. But the attacks have not ceased, and experts point out that the paths to radicalization more typically run through the prisons or the war in Syria, not the mosques. At the same time, there are whiffs of hardening feelings — mosque desecrations over the weekend, and harsh words between non-Muslims and Muslims in the crowds mourning.

The concern among Muslims in France is palpable. "We're already feeling the backlash. It started right away," said Latetia Syed, 17, whose family gathered on Sunday near the Bataclan concert hall, where 89 people were killed on Friday, to pay respect to the victims. "There was a flood of violent language on Facebook to kill Muslims."

France's imams "are all worried," said Hassen Farsadou, the head of a group of Muslim associations in the Paris suburbs. "We are trying to figure out how to handle this."

Fear and suspicion are pervasive. "Today, I went to the gym, and I was wearing my helmet," said Aykut Kasaroglu, a shop worker in the immigrant-rich Montreuil district. "The policeman stopped me and told me to take it off so they could see me. Everyone is suspicious."

The grim public mood, with hardened jaws and frowns on the emptied streets, is bubbling up. Deep shades of distinction that previously separated France's political groupings — left, right and far right — on how to handle the terrorist threat, or even how to deal with France's large Muslim community, are blurring.

"We know, and it is cruel to say it, that on Friday it was French who killed other French," Mr. Hollande told a rare joint emergency session of Parliament on Monday. "There are, living on our soil, individuals who from delinquency go on to radicalization and then to terrorist criminality."

Similar words, references to France's "enemy within," recently have provoked an uproar, particularly on the left. But this time Mr. Hollande's speech was met with universal applause, a singing of the national anthem and some rare praise from the far-right National Front leader, Marine Le Pen.

As for the audience newly receptive to Ms. Le Pen, "certainly it will grow," said Bernard Godard, a leading French expert on Franco-Muslim relations and former Interior Ministry official.

Anti-Muslim feelings that had been kept under wraps may no longer be so discreet, Mr. Godard suggested. On Sunday, tensions flared when a Frenchman, approaching a group of Muslim women in head scarves who were paying homage to the Bataclan victims at a makeshift shrine, began inveighing against the Quran as a source of inspiration for extremists.

“The Quran says that nobody can take a life,” said one of the women, Abiba Trabacke, who was wearing a blue head scarf. She likened the killers to Nazis, adding: “They have nothing to do with us.”

But the man persisted, and several women in the entourage burst into tears. “We are calling for peace and love,” one said.

“Shut up!” a bystander yelled at them. “This is not the time to get into this.”

Mrs. Trabacke turned to the growing crowd. “You see this head scarf that I’m wearing?” she asked. “This is my conviction; it comes from God.”

How this might play out in coming weeks is hinted at in rapidly evolving propositions for how best to use the notorious “S files,” an index of thousands of people considered possible threats to the state — on the basis of dubious associations, for instance, or even online threats. At least one of the attackers at the Bataclan, Ismaël Omar Mostefaï, was on the S list; so were the two brothers who shot up Charlie Hebdo in January and a train attacker thwarted by three Americans in August.

Each time, there has been an outcry in France over why a dangerous individual known to the state was not stopped beforehand. Each time officials have explained that a place in the S files is not the basis for an arrest.

Since Friday, there have been the customary calls from the right and far right for crackdowns on the lists’s members, with a top National Front functionary on television Monday seeming to call for imprisoning all of them. The former President Nicolas Sarkozy suggested electronic monitoring. But this time the left-wing government was careful not to dismiss a heightened role for the S files.

“You can’t dismiss any tool,” Mr. Valls, the prime minister, said on radio about the files. “We are not setting aside any solutions.” As his boss, Mr. Hollande, put it to lawmakers on Monday, “With the acts of war of Nov. 13, the enemy has crossed a new line.”

The question, rights advocates say, is how far the government can go in restricting the rights of a mostly law-abiding minority without further alienating its more marginal members and driving them to the militants.

The Socialist government, with its intensified bombing campaign in Syria and its promises of an internal crackdown, is trying to stay ahead of a deeply uneasy public. But experts say its efforts may not be enough.

Ms. Le Pen's criticism of Mr. Hollande on Monday may be more significant than her unusual praise. The president had failed to mention the "fight against Islamism" or the "indispensable cleaning out of the cellars and suburbs gangrened by criminality," she said. In the National Front lexicon, Ms. Le Pen's words — "suburbs" and "criminality" — are often code for Islam and Muslims.

"There is a serious risk, in public opinion, that people will become more radical," Mr. Godard said. "Maybe people will now say, 'No, no, no Islam in the public space, not anymore.'"