

Conference

The French Law of 9 September 1986: forty years on. History, practices and representations of the fight against terrorism and victims' rights defense

Paris, 9–10 September 2026

Call for papers

Passed at the height of the wave of terrorist attacks by Hezbollah that struck the French capital, the law of 9 September 1986, known as the ‘law on the fight against terrorism’, constitutes a major institutional, legal and cultural break in the history of contemporary terrorism in France. By providing the judicial authorities with a new procedural tool for conducting investigations, it introduced into French criminal law a legal classification corresponding to an offence that had previously not existed in the law. Terrorism is defined as ‘an individual or collective undertaking aimed at seriously disrupting public order through intimidation and terror’. As such, it calls into question the fragile balance between individual freedom and repressive action by the state. Beyond the levers of public action in the fight against terrorism, the law of 9 September 1986 also represents a break from the past from the point of view of victims of terrorist attacks, as it provided compensation for terror victims for the first time through a specific compensation fund.

Organised to mark the 40th anniversary of this law, this conference will aim to trace its origins and genealogy, as well as to identify its short- and long-term political, cultural and social effects. Resolutely multidisciplinary (history, law, political science, sociology, anthropology, information and communication, civilisation, etc.), it is aimed at researchers working on both public and judicial action in the field of terrorism and social reactions to terrorist attacks, with a particular emphasis on the role of victims and the media.

THEMES

1. A law within its institutional framework: genealogies & context

Adopted urgently during a period of cohabitation at the height of a wave of attacks by Hezbollah, the French law of 9 September 1986 is primarily the product of a long history, reflecting not only political and legal dynamics, but also distant social and cultural rationales. A first set of contributions will aim to shed light on the structural and circumstantial factors that motivated the law and accompanied its drafting and implementation. Within what existing legal framework was this law enacted, and how was it voted on? How can it be seen as a reflection of a society increasingly sensitive to the intensification and diversification of the terrorist threat on its territory since the 1970s? What debates did the vote on this law provoke? What representations of the state, the judicial authority and society did the public and media debate surrounding this law convey? How did contemporaries perceive this

legal innovation and its political dimension? Finally, once the law was passed, how was its scope periodically reformulated and its limits questioned, leading the legislature to extend the text with new laws and complementary measures that today form a complex legal framework?

2. Institutions, practices and figures in the fight against terrorism

The 1986 Act reorganised the judicial system by centralising the prosecution, investigation and adjudication of terrorism cases. In terms of procedure, it introduced a series of technical and legal provisions aimed at clarifying areas of jurisdiction and strengthening cooperation between the services responsible for combating terrorism (extension of police custody to 96 hours instead of the 48 hours provided for in ordinary law, right to search and seize evidence without the consent of the person residing at the premises, tougher criminal and financial penalties, etc.).

The 1986 law also led to the creation of a centralised anti-terrorism court within the Paris Court of Appeal, the 'Central Anti-Terrorism Unit' (SCLAT), under the authority of investigating judge Alain Marsaud. Responsible for the sensitive cases of the day (the Gordji affair, FLNC, ETA, Iparretarak, Action Directe, "State terrorism", etc.), certain 'judges of the Saint-Éloi gallery' (Jean-Louis Bruguière, Gilbert Thiel, Laurence Le Vert, Jean-François Ricard, Marc Trévidic, etc.) became media figures in the fight against terrorism. Police and judicial actors involved in counter-terrorism in the 1980s and 1990s have also sometimes left oral or written testimonies¹: what stories have they (more rarely 'she') passed on about their experiences? And how do these accounts contribute to the construction of an institutional and judicial memory of terrorism?

This second theme will therefore aim not only at shedding light on the evolution of the judicial means for fighting terrorism before and since the 1986 law (procedures, personnel, organisation of services, etc.), but also to reintegrate its challenges into a social history of representations and sensibilities, by questioning institutional actors and practices in the light of public and media discourse (press, radio, television, digital media, etc.) that shape perceptions of the fight against terrorism.

3. Victims, between social acknowledgement and the conquest of new rights

The compensation section of the law of 9 September 1986 marks a major step forward in the recognition of victims of terrorism by providing for the creation of a Guarantee Fund (FGTI), financed by a levy on insurance contracts. By combining an insurance mechanism with the principle of national solidarity, the FGTI contributed to the advent of insurance technology as a means of governing societies, as described the same year by François Ewald (Ewald, 1986).

Since the early 1980s, victims of terrorist acts had been constantly calling on the authorities for compensation and support, sometimes denouncing political inaction, as after the attack on Rue Marbeuf on 22 April 1982. One victim in particular played a key role in championing this cause and enshrining compensation and reparation in law: Françoise Rudetzki, victim of the Grand Véfour attack on 23 December 1983 and founder of the association 'SOS Attentats'. Far from being an ending point, the compensation aspect of the 1986 law paved the way for a quest for reparation proper, in which the law of 23 January 1990 granting victims of terrorism the status of civilian war victims played a central role by connecting the new legal framework to the history of world wars and decolonisation. A few months later, the law of 6 July 1990 authorising associations to bring civil action in terrorist trials reinforced a criminal justice system that was more attentive to the victims' point of view.

¹ Some examples: Alain MARSAUD, *Avant de tout oublier (Before Forgetting Everything)*, Paris, Denoël, 2002; Jean-Louis BRUGUIÈRE and Jean-Marie PONTAUT, *Ce que je n'ai pas pu dire : trente ans de lutte contre le terrorisme (What I Could Not Say: Thirty Years of Fighting Terrorism)*, Paris, Éditions Robert Laffont, 2009; Gilbert THIEL, *Solitudes et servitudes judiciaires: Le juge antiterroriste: juge ou partie? (Judicial Solitudes and Servitudes: The Anti-Terrorism Judge: Judge or Party?)*, Paris, Fayard, 2008; Irène STOLLER, *Procureur à la 14ème section. From petty crime to international terrorism*, Paris, Michel Lafon, 2002; Bruno COTTE, 'Being director of criminal affairs at the time of the terrorist attacks of the 1980s. Testimony of Bruno Cotte,' *Les Cahiers de la justice*, Dalloz, Paris, no. 1, 2016; etc.

This third theme will involve taking a critical look back at this turning point in the 1980s. How can this be seen as a key moment in the construction of a new status for victims in French society? How did this social, legal and symbolic status influence the adoption of innovations in the field of care (e.g. the creation of medical and psychological emergency units in 1995)? We will focus in particular on highlighting the wide variety of professional profiles involved in this new cause of 'victims of terrorism' (doctors, psychiatrists, lawyers, journalists, filmmakers²) and the diversification of the associative world itself.

4. National models and international judicial cooperation

Following the 1970s, which were marked by the internationalisation of terrorist methods and networks of influence, states also found ways to coordinate their responses internationally. Beyond national doctrines, the judicial treatment of terrorist violence began to be conceived and organised within a European, even globalised, framework through agreements and shared practices between different judicial and police systems (e.g. the adoption of the European arrest warrant in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks) while at the same time the victims of terrorism are attempting to unite and organise on a transnational scale (the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, created in 2017 by the United Nations General Assembly, launched the first Network of Victims of Terrorism Associations - VoTAN in April 2025).

In this fourth and final section, we will examine the specificity of the French law of 1986 by bringing the discussion to a comparative or regional level. How have other countries affected by terrorism and seeking to curb its threat through the law (Italy, Germany, Spain, UK, USA, etc.) developed their own national legal frameworks (training, procedures, discourse, practices, public debate, etc.)? How do these foreign cases shed light on the specificities or, conversely, on the elements of continuity in the French case? Ultimately, our aim will be to shed light on several conceptions of the same complex balance between the fight against terrorism, the recognition of victims and the need to protect civil liberties.

Proposals for papers (maximum 2,000 characters, including title, qualifications and speaker's email address) should be sent to Gérôme Truc (gerome.truc@cnrs.fr) and Claire Sécail (csecail@gmail.com) by Friday 9 January 2026 at the latest.

Notifications of acceptance will be sent out at the end of January 2026.

KEY DATES

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| ● 15 October 2025 | Call for proposal Opens |
| ● 9 January 2026 | Deadline for submitting proposals |
| ● End of January 2026 | Proposal acceptance / rejection notification |
| ● Spring 2026 | Program announcement |
| ● 9–10 September 2026 | Conference |

ORGANISING COMMITTEE

Élisabeth PELSEZ (The Museum and Memorial of Terrorism), Pauline PICCO (George Washington University, The Museum and Memorial of Terrorism), Hélène QUINIOU (Max Planck Institute), Henry

² Examples include the documentary films by Jean-Bernard ANDRO (*L'Effroi des hommes*, Time Code Productions, 1990, 49 minutes) and Bertrand TAVERNIER (*La Guerre sans nom*, GTM Productions / Little Bear Productions, 1991, 235 minutes).

ROUSSO (The Museum and Memorial of Terrorism), Claire SÉCAIL (CNRS, CERLIS / The Museum and Memorial of Terrorism), Gêrôme TRUC (CNRS, Institute for Social Sciences of Politics).

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