

France begins shutting down far-right group

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Paris, February 22 (RHC)-- France is beginning the process of shutting down the far-right Generation Identity (GI) group, a move that comes after Al Jazeera's undercover investigation exposed the group's racism, violence, and connections with Marine Le Pen's National Rally party.

Over the weekend, dozens in Paris rallied against the move -- which began Monday -- some of whom wore blue vests emblazoned with the words "Génération Identitaire," the French name of the group which advocates for "defending the identity and culture of white Europeans" and decries what it calls the "great

replacement” by immigration and “Islamisation.”

According to a letter dated February 11 from the French Ministry of Interior to GI’s president, the Al Jazeera investigation Generation Hate “revealed the reality of this organisation” where members “rejoiced at the assault of a woman of North African origin.”

The letter cites a number of cases that highlight the group’s racism, violence, and the basis on which it is considered a “private militia” and goes on to say that “the comments made and the Nazi-inspired gestures ... as well as the threats of further attacks, demonstrate the true face of this organisation and its activists”.

The letter accuses GI of “openly hateful rhetoric” which “contributes to heightening tensions within the national community” and “provokes violent attacks”. The far-right group had 10 days from receiving the letter to respond to the accusations before the ministry formally begins closing the group.

In 2017, GI was behind the “Defend Europe” stunt that saw far-right activists set sail on the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to block refugee rescue operations.

In a video response to the letter, GI spokesperson Thaïs d’Escufon said she was “very at ease” with Al Jazeera’s investigation. She admitted that the actions and comments reported were “certainly to be condemned”, but falsely claimed the people who made them were “neither GI activists nor GI members.”

Al Jazeera’s investigation focused on key members of the group’s Lille branch, one of the most active GI chapters in France, and implicated its powerful leader Aurélien Verhassel.

In December 2020, three far-right activists, including one GI member, were convicted of offences including incitement to “terrorism,” incitement to religious hatred, and assault, based on evidence gathered during Al Jazeera’s Generation Hate investigation.

Remi Falize, a former leading member of GI, was convicted of incitement to “terrorism” and assault. He received an eight-month suspended prison sentence. In her video response, D’Escufon did not address the GI activist’s recent conviction for “incitement to terrorism.”

Al Jazeera caught Falize on camera declaring his “dying wish” to drive a car into an area packed with Muslims. He was also filmed punching a 13-year-old girl four times on the head, outside a bar in Lille. A week later, he was filmed inside the Lille GI headquarters celebrating the assault.

GI’s Etienne “Le Roux” Vanhalwyn, who was filmed pushing a teenager in the same incident and making Nazi toasts, was given a five-month jail sentence, suspended for 18 months. Guillaume Dumont St Priest, who pepper-sprayed the teenager struck by Falize, was given a three-month suspended jail sentence.

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