

Policing Social Housing in Paris: The Role of GPIS

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Social landlords in France recently obtained the right to organize surveillance and security operations themselves within their properties. Virginie Malochet studies the case of GPIS, a social-housing security force founded in 2004 in Paris, and explores the rationale and nature of this kind of policing, which reflects both the rise of security concerns and the increased involvement of social-housing organizations in the process of ensuring urban security.

In social-housing neighborhoods in Paris, the work of social landlords, the surveillance of their properties, and ensuring the security of the people who live there do not come to a halt when local housing offices close and superintendents go home. Since 2004, in addition to designated on-call staff, another group of personnel patrols and intervenes throughout the night in the communal areas of some 500 apartment buildings across the French capital. Equipped with bulletproof vests and dark blue uniforms (jacket, fatigues, combat boots), and armed with a defense baton and a tear-gas canister, their mission is to “prevent delinquency, guarantee residents’ peaceful enjoyment of the premises, reinforce tenants’ sense of security, and assert the authority of social landlords within the housing projects they run.”¹ These uniformed employees make up the Groupement Parisien Inter-Bailleurs de Surveillance (Paris Inter-Landlord Surveillance Group), or GPIS, which in 2015 had a total staff of around 200.

Based on an empirical study (Malochet 2015),² this article seeks to shed light on what is a peculiarly Parisian structure, and one that reflects and reveals an increasing plurality of urban-security providers and, in particular, the growing involvement of social landlords in this domain. It highlights the paradoxical positioning of a service that has no coercive power but is nevertheless responsible for “policing” social-housing stock, with an explicitly security-oriented objective that pushes the traditional boundaries of social landlords’ activities. Against a backdrop of changing or disappearing roles for concierges and superintendents (Marchal 2006) and the outsourcing of cleaning and security tasks, GPIS speaks to a new division of labor with regard to security work in the city, at a time when traditional police forces are refocusing their activities on a supposed “core profession” that increasingly distances them from responsibilities involving the maintenance of public order.

¹ These are the aims stated on the official GPIS website: <https://gie-gpis.com> (in French).

² This study was conducted as part of the work of the Institut d’Aménagement et d’Urbanisme d’Île-de-France (Institute of Urban Planning and Development for the Paris–Île-de-France Region), which in 2019 was renamed the Institut Paris Région. The study involved a survey conducted between March and July 2014, including 35 interviews with key actors (e.g. social landlords that are GPIS members, the City of Paris, the regional police administration) and within GPIS itself (senior management team and middle managers), as well as 11 observation sessions (half of which were conducted by Camille Gosselin, an urban planner at the Institut Paris Région), representing a total of some 100 hours of observation.

When social landlords enter the field of day-to-day security

GPIS—a unique body in France—was, until very recently, the only concrete application of a legal provision that gives landlords the right to form a legal entity whose purpose is to carry out, on behalf of its members, surveillance activities in and around residential buildings.³ In its own way, this reflects the exceptional status that Paris enjoys as the national capital, particularly with respect to public order and security—where extensive powers are invested in the key role of the Prefect of Police of Paris,⁴ and relatively few powers are granted to the mayor of Paris, despite the gradual transfer of certain responsibilities since 1986.⁵ Furthermore, Paris is, to date, one of very few cities in France not to have its own municipal police force responsible for maintaining public order, ensuring public health and safety, and enforcing traffic and parking regulations.⁶ (Malochet 2018).

It is in this institutional context that GPIS was created in 2004, at the impetus of the director general of the powerful Office Public d'Aménagement et de Construction (Public Office for Development and Construction; OPAC) of Paris, renamed Paris Habitat in 2007. In 2004, GPIS's membership comprised seven social landlords; today, there are 11.⁷ Paris City Hall, to which three of these members (Paris Habitat, RIVP, and Élogie-Siemp) are directly affiliated, supported the initiative from the outset, both politically and financially—support without which the project would not have been successful. Nevertheless, the management of GPIS remains in the hands of all 11 member landlords: they are the ones who administer it, under the leadership of Paris Habitat, which alone accounts for 70% of the 75,000 housing units covered by GPIS at the time of the survey.⁸

This unique organization is symptomatic of a more widely observable trend in the world of social housing. In the face of rising security concerns, GPIS illustrates the growing involvement of social landlords in ensuring “residential tranquility” (Gosselin and Malochet 2016, 2017). Under pressure from their staff, their tenants, and public authorities, they are investing in this field of action in order not to meet only their legal obligations (ensuring tenants' peaceful enjoyment of the dwellings they rent, and ensuring the protection of their employees) but also to fulfill the requirements of their commercial policy (reinforcing the “quality of service” they provide and the attractiveness of their housing projects), to make up for what they perceive to be deficiencies on the part of public forces of law and order. “If GPIS didn't do it, who would?” asks the deputy mayor of Paris in charge of

³ In September 2018, a similar body was launched in Toulouse, in southwestern France: the Groupement Interquartiers de Tranquillité et de Sécurité (Inter-Neighborhood Group for Tranquility and Security), or GITEs. Created at the initiative of two social landlords, Les Chalets and Patrimoine SA Languedocienne, this body differs from GPIS, however, in its approach (which is more focused on contact with tenants) and in its operating hours (in the afternoon and evening, until 2 a.m. at the latest).

⁴ Translator's note: there are only two prefects of police in France: the Prefect of Police of Paris (who is responsible for policing, public order, and security in the city of Paris and the three inner-suburban *départements* (counties) of Hauts-de-Seine, Seine-Saint-Denis, and Val-de-Marne, and is also head of the defense and security zone covering the whole Paris region, i.e. with the addition of the outer-suburban *départements* of Seine-et-Marne, Yvelines, Essonne, and Val-d'Oise); and the Prefect of Police of Bouches-du-Rhône (who is responsible for policing, public order, and security in the city of Marseille and the surrounding Bouches-du-Rhône *département*).

⁵ Between the passing of the law of December 29, 1986 relating to the administrative and financial regime of the city of Paris and the passing of the law of February 18, 2017 relating to the status of Paris and metropolitan planning, certain police powers have been progressively transferred to the mayor of Paris (public health, fairs and markets, maintenance of the public domain, dealing with neighborhood disturbances, common-law jurisdiction over traffic and parking, dealing with substandard housing, etc.), thus enabling the city to reinforce its action in these domains.

⁶ This situation is set to change, however, as the current mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, announced her desire to create a municipal police force in January 2019. The necessary legislation was enacted in May 2020, and the creation of the Paris municipal police is due to be voted at the next Paris city council meeting in early June 2021.

⁷ The current members of GPIS are: Paris Habitat, RIVP, Groupe 3F, CDC Habitat, Élogie-Siemp, 1001 Vies Habitat, ICF Habitat La Sablière, Seqens, Réseau Batigère, Emmaüs Habitat, and RATP Habitat (listed in descending order of the number of housing units covered by GPIS).

⁸ These 75,000 dwellings then represented 35% of all social housing in Paris. The number of dwellings covered has since increased to 150,000.

security, for whom this nighttime surveillance work meets “particular needs that were not covered and would not [otherwise] have been covered.”

In social-housing neighborhoods, GPIS does indeed play a role that no one else seems able to play—or, at least, that is what all the officials we met, including those from the Prefecture of Police, said. In this respect, GPIS reflects an increasing plurality of policing⁹ (O’Neill and Fyfe 2017) to which neither France (Bonnet *et al.* 2015) nor even Paris (de Maillard and Zagrodzki 2017) is immune. This movement involves a diversification of the actors in charge of urban security, as well as a certain permeability of institutional and professional boundaries among those who, in one capacity or another, are responsible for surveillance and security.

A hybrid measure steeped in military and police references

In its own specific way, GPIS embodies this permeability. It is neither truly public nor fully private, and as such is something of a hybrid system (Malochet 2017a). Its legal status is an economic interest grouping (in French: *groupement d’intérêt économique*, GIE), whose majority member is a public housing office—Paris Habitat, more or less the equivalent of NYCHA in New York City—and whose other members are either social-housing enterprises (i.e. private companies) or public–private companies. GPIS is supported by Paris City Hall¹⁰ through a subsidy to the member landlords amounting to nearly a third of GPIS’s total budget, but its activities fall within the legal framework of private security activities (in accordance with Book VI of the French Internal Security Code). However, as GPIS is free from commercial pressures, it exists outside the market of security businesses. Its quasi-public dimension gives it a special status, distinct from private security services. This special status is particularly evident in terms of weaponry: since late 2011,¹¹ GPIS officers have benefited from an exemption that gives them the right to carry defensive batons and tear-gas canisters, whereas in France, until recently, other private-security employees, with very few exceptions, were not authorized to carry weapons in the exercise of their duties.¹²

Since GPIS’s creation, its managers have sought to promote and portray their service as a model to be emulated. In terms of its recruitment procedures, its training systems, and its levels of supervision, remuneration and equipment provision, GPIS is indeed different from the private security sector. In order to project an image of a serious, professional and well-managed organization, it borrows a lot from the culture and organizational methods of both the military and the police. Indeed, it should be noted that many of the people come to GPIS after careers in the army or the police (at the time of the survey, for example, this was the case for both the director—a former police commissioner—and his deputy—a former army officer). The remainder mostly come from the conventional private-security sector. In other words, almost everyone in the organization is familiar with law enforcement, having had previous experience in this field before joining GPIS.

The way work is organized and the vocabulary used are also reminiscent of military and police environments. With the exception of the management team and administrative staff, officers are split into two “sessions” and work nights, in shifts, at an average rate of 15 shifts per month. Each session includes:

⁹ Here, the term “policing” is used in its broadest sense, including all surveillance and security activities aimed at maintaining public order and respect for the law.

¹⁰ Paris City Hall’s logo appears on GPIS vehicles, which suggests it is a quasi-municipal service.

¹¹ French decree no. 2011-2018 relating to the arming of persons responsible for the guarding and surveillance of certain multifamily residential buildings.

¹² This situation changed following the passing of the law on public security of February 28, 2017, and decree no. 2017-1844 of December 29, 2017, relating to the carrying of weapons while exercising certain private security activities (Ocqueteau 2018), and this, again, reflects an increased pluralization of security work, which has been further reinforced in a context of counterterrorism measures.

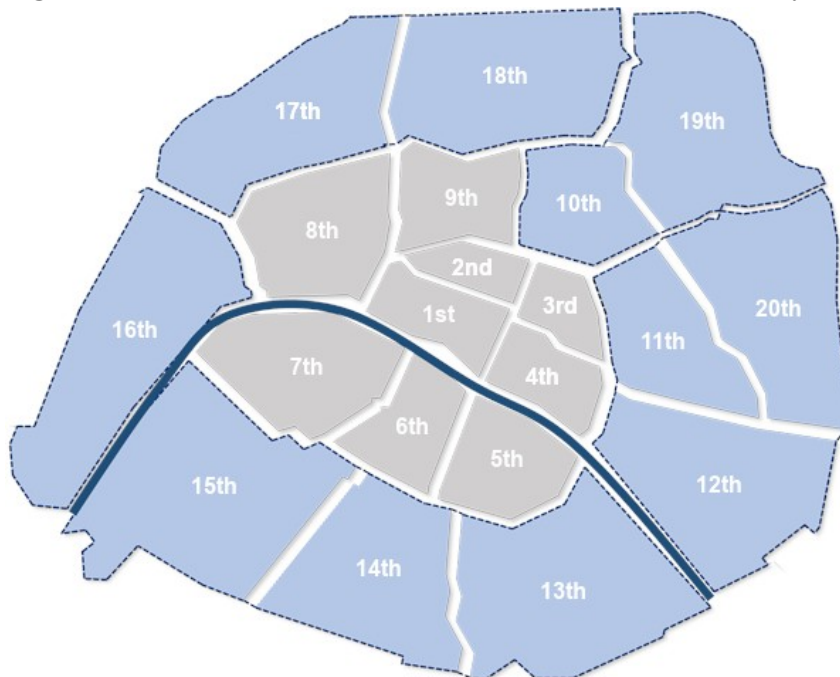
- operators who work solely in the operations control room and are in charge of radio communications, the telephone switchboard, and the coordination of interventions on the ground;
- four patrol groups, each made up of five to six patrols of three officers, who are assigned each evening to a specific area;
- a support and protection group, which can be mobilized to provide reinforcement when necessary or on interventions deemed particularly sensitive, including canine units.

GPIS has a pyramid organizational structure, and hierarchy is very important. The activity of GPIS officers is keenly regulated, in particular by group leaders, who are very present in the system. Personnel management is based on hierarchical control and disciplinary firmness, following a paramilitary model that the senior leadership team justify from a managerial perspective: it is this, they say, that enables them to ensure the smooth running of the structure and avoid any abuse of powers on the ground.

Policing in action and under tension

GPIS officers occupy an intermediate space: they are not police officers, nor are they mediators, or superintendents, or even security guards in the traditional sense of the term. They operate in an interstitial sector that is currently specific to GPIS: maintaining calm and order among residents in social-housing neighborhoods at night. They undertake rounds in a given sector and respond to calls from tenants concerning the communal areas of buildings covered by GPIS, which are all located in the outer (10th to 20th) *arrondissements* (city districts) of Paris,¹³ where “priority neighborhoods” (*quartiers prioritaires*) undergoing regeneration and most of the city’s social housing tend to be concentrated (with the notable exception of the upscale 16th *arrondissement*, which has less social housing than other *arrondissements* and indeed, until recently, was not covered at all by GPIS). At the time of the survey, their intervention window extended from 7:30 p.m. to 4:30 a.m.¹⁴

Figure 1. The 20 *arrondissements* of Paris, with those covered by GPIS in blue



¹³ Translator’s note: the city of Paris proper is subdivided into 20 city districts called *arrondissements*, which are arranged in a clockwise spiral pattern and numbered from the center outwards. Each *arrondissement* has a mayor with limited powers.

¹⁴ Since the summer of 2019, patrols have started at 5:30 p.m.

Bearing in mind all the above, the work of GPIS is based on a territorial approach and on compliance with established rules. Action is directed towards a clearly identified operational objective: the “eviction”—to cite the term used within the organization—of people who occupy communal spaces (halls, stairwells, basements, parking lots, gardens) at night.¹⁵ This objective is not tied to any quantitative targets; however, the number of people moved on by GPIS is the sole indicator taken into account by the software used to calculate the daily classification of the 500 apartment buildings covered by the organization. Buildings are categorized on a five-point scale ranging from “quiet sites” to “very difficult sites.” These categories correspond in turn to five different intervention methods, which range from single weekly visits to reinforced daily operations.

Legally speaking, though, GPIS agents cannot force people present in communal areas to leave the premises. They only have dissuasive powers at their disposal to chase away “undesirables.” That said, they do not generally rely on dialogue. During an intervention, they speak as little as possible and rely instead on the demonstration of force and signs of authority (stature, posture, numbers present, uniform). Although they have no powers to issue sanctions, they project an image of punitive force: specifically, an image of being the “armed wing” of social landlords, and a force in charge of maintaining ordinary social order in social-housing neighborhoods. While it is true that they are not police officers, and indeed are challenged on this subject by the individuals they seek to move on (“you’re not real cops”), they manage on the whole to show authority without resorting to the use of force,¹⁶ especially as their *modus operandi* (the use of triangulation techniques), their stature (generally “well-built” individuals), and the tools and equipment at their disposal (uniforms, weapons, dogs) are designed to impress and impose their authority.

This continual work of reclaiming communal spaces fosters a relationship of opposition between GPIS and its “clients”—specifically, those who are identified as troublemakers (“young people” who “hang around outside” and “squat” apartment-building lobby areas). Relations are therefore in a state of tension. GPIS officers, who are constantly the object of provocation and regularly the target of violent acts (in particular the throwing of projectiles), are tested by these clashes, which sometimes even put them in physical danger. Officers keep their distance from such individuals in these circumstances, and remain on the defensive, as if locked into a relationship of adversity induced by the very nature of their work—which has the paradoxical effect of further fueling the climate of mutual distrust.

In this respect, the experience of GPIS officers is quite similar to that of the police (Malochet 2017b), with whom they also develop strong cooperative relationships. By contrast, when it comes to other local actors, such as building superintendents or City Hall “night mediators,” coordination is minimal and links on the ground are almost nonexistent. In any event, GPIS belongs to and identifies with the world of security professionals, as part of the “extended policing family” (Crawford and Lister 2004). There is no ambiguity about its positioning, which lies in the day-to-day maintenance of order; GPIS is unapologetically, explicitly security-oriented.

A relatively effective system?

In creating GPIS in Paris in 2004, the social-housing organizations concerned invented a brand-new instrument in France, at the intersection of social housing, territorial administration, and urban security. 17 years on, this system is still quite atypical, but it has become part of the institutional landscape of the French capital, and its members highlight its benefits in terms of regulatory

¹⁵ It should be noted that GPIS does not have the right to enter private spaces, i.e. people’s dwellings; only the (national) police can be called upon to intervene in people’s homes.

¹⁶ Unlike City Hall’s “night mediators” (*correspondants de nuit*), studied by Jacques de Maillard, from whom we borrow the idea of demonstrating authority without restraint by force (de Maillard 2013).

presence, technical monitoring, and continuity of service at night. However, the dissuasive effectiveness of GPIS is limited. Between its officers and their “target audience,” it is a constant game of cat-and-mouse: as soon as crews leave to patrol another site, there’s nothing stopping individuals from returning to the building entrance or stairwell from which they have just been moved on. At best, GPIS’s mode of action—which most of the time takes the form of *ad hoc* interventions—makes it possible to “displace the problem,” but not, fundamentally, to solve it.

Its impact on the residential environment therefore remains limited, especially in those buildings and neighborhoods most exposed to public nuisance and petty crime. However, GPIS’s usefulness should not be measured in these terms; rather, it should be assessed with regard to its stated objectives of making neighborhoods more peaceful and improving tenants’ living environment. But which indicators should be used to do this? How can we assess what patrols do or do not prevent, what disturbances they do or do not prevent—in other words, what does *not* happen? How can feedback from residents, and their lived experiences, be taken into consideration in a more substantial way than simplistic questions as part of satisfaction surveys? And how can the effects of GPIS’s work be isolated when it comes to the changing “climate” of each individual apartment building? Evaluating this kind of instrument raises thorny methodological issues that it is nevertheless crucial to address in order to determine its effectiveness.

Despite these significant limitations and unresolved questions, GPIS has generated interest far beyond Paris, as evidenced by visits by delegations from other cities in France and from other countries. In the Greater Paris metropolitan area, and in the inner suburbs in particular, the question has been raised of extending such a service beyond Paris’s tight city limits (more than four fifths of the population of the metropolitan area live outside the city proper). For some social landlords and local elected officials, this is simply a matter of ensuring equitable treatment for social-housing residents on both sides of the city boundary when it comes to tackling security-related problems. In practice, however, numerous obstacles stand in the way, both in terms of political and financial arrangements and in terms of the difficulties of implementing such a service in areas that are far more sensitive and geographically more extensive.

Notwithstanding the service recently created in Toulouse (albeit with a substantially different blueprint; see footnote 3 above), it is therefore difficult to say at present whether the GPIS model is likely to spread beyond Paris in the future. As to whether the spread of this model is desirable, this is a question that is still being debated within the social-housing sector. For some, GPIS is a model to be promoted, while for others it is an example that should absolutely not be followed, given that such systems extend far beyond social landlords’ duties, encourages the disengagement of the state, and contributes to the privatization of security. In this respect, GPIS does not just illustrate social landlords’ increased involvement in security matters. It also gives substance to their doubts and questions about the nature of their role in this domain.

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