

Islam and Immigration in French Society

Written by Marcela Schaefer

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MARCELA SCHAEFER, JAN 28 2012

As a country that experienced mass immigration for the last several decades, the French melting pot is constantly diversifying and developing. From the mid-century when Jews were being deported from France under the Vichy regime to the 1960s when immigrants were welcomed into the country out of demand for a foreign workforce, the population of France has steadily changed over the years. During the several waves of immigrants in the last century, people from a variety of countries, religions, and cultures have chosen to seek opportunity and work in France. "France is now home to an estimated 5 million persons of Muslim origin, in a total population of 61 million...While France has integrated numerous waves of immigrants in the past, this new segment of the population, which traces its direct or indirect origins to former French colonies and North African and sub-Saharan Africa and to Turkey, poses new and daunting challenges..." (Laurence and Vaisse 2006b, 1) One of the biggest challenges immigrants of Muslim or North African descent face is integration into French society. Because they are fairly easy to identify due to their physical appearance or dress, many Muslims in France frequently face discrimination and injustice. "...Numerous are the French Muslims who are victims of discrimination and of racist violence...The discrimination that Muslims are subjected to is daily." (Laurence and Vaisse 2006b, 81)

In addition, current events over the years in the Middle East and North Africa have shaped the way French people view Islam. "One cannot overemphasize the searing effects of the Algerian War of Independence on the psyches of both ethnic European and ethnic Arab or Berber residents of France and Algeria." (Fetzer and Soper 2005, 63-64) Similarly, as a result of the Iranian Revolution, Gulf War, Arab-Israeli conflict and more recently terrorist attacks in Europe and the USA, many French people today have a skewed perception of what the Muslim faith is truly about. Thinking that Islam causes extremism and breeds terrorists, many people in France believe that Muslims will bring about radical changes within French society completely altering the status quo. One way in which Islam may be considered a threat is the belief that Muslims in France want to change the society in which they live by imposing Sharia law or the mandatory wearing of the headscarf. Finally, if Islam were a threat this should manifest itself with an increase in religious violence. Despite the rising attention from politicians and the media, Islam is not a threat to French society. Rather, Islam is but one of several prominent religions in France and one that is contributing to the ever-changing French culture.

A claim frequently made by those who see Islam as a threat to French society is that the values of Muslims are incompatible with those of secular France. The first sign of this, some people maintain, is Muslims' alleged unwillingness to acculturate and their tendency to disassociate themselves from the rest of society. Attention is often drawn to Muslim girls who insist on wearing the Islamic headscarf in public. For example, the headscarf affair, which started in 1989, was immediately politicized and covered by the media. At the time, the headscarf was viewed by many as a symbol of an increasingly threatening and radical form of Islam that was oppressive to women. "Many French feminists oppose the *hijab* in public schools not only on *laïcité* [secularism] grounds but perhaps even more because these opponents see it as a form of the oppression of women." (Fetzer and Soper 2005, 82) When the headscarf was banned in 2004, it was under the pretense that it was in order to protect freedom of conscience. However, the actual number of Muslim girls wearing the headscarf is small and the number of girls forced to do so by their family is even smaller. According to an article for *USA Today* by Noelle Knox in 2004, "Of France's 250,000 Muslim pupils, 1,256 school girls have insisted on wearing headscarves," which means that roughly only 1 in 200 Muslim school girls wore headscarves.

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To continue, the perception among some French that wearing the headscarf is an act of intimidation, aggression, and silent proselytism is generally misguided. This may be so in some countries but in the French context, however, the headscarf is merely another religious insignia like the Catholic crucifix or Jewish yarmulke. To most French Muslims, it is a sign of religious expression and not of proselytism. Evidence shows that only a small minority of Muslims actually supported girls who wore the headscarf in the 1980s and 1990s (Hargreaves 1995, 130). Another claim some French people make against Islam is that the loyalty of Muslims is displaced and that they think first about their religion and second about the country in which they live. However, public opinion surveys have routinely shown otherwise. In their book, the authors of *Integrating Islam* discuss a study conducted among French people of African and Turkish origin in general. According to the survey conducted by Brouaj and Tiberj in 2005, results showed that feelings of closeness with other French people were significantly higher (85%) than feelings of closeness with other Europeans (56%), people from the same religious group (71%), or people of the same national origin (77%). Even if there is disagreement about whether or not Muslims are truly integrated into French society, through studies like these there can be no denying the fact that Muslims feel loyalty first to France and its secular beliefs and second to their religion. As pointed out in an article by the newspaper *Le Monde*, does French society need to be reminded that 98% of Muslims live their faith peacefully in France and cause no public problems? (Bobineau 2011)

Another argument made by those who perceive Islam as a threat to French society is that most Muslims want to change France and the way in which it is governed. Although it is true that there are radical Muslims who would like to make societal and political changes in France, that does not necessarily mean they pose a threat. Muslims who felt this way would only pose a threat if there were large numbers of them or if they were active in attempting to make radical changes. "Etienne, who conducted extensive fieldwork among Muslims in southern France, estimated that less than 1 per cent could be reasonably described as 'fundamentalists.'" (Hargreaves 2007, 108) Even so, many of those who perceive Islam as a threat to French society maintain that even if there is not a high number of radical Muslims in France, the Qur'an instructs Muslims in essentially every area of life, including the public and political spheres. To some, this would imply that because there is no clear separation of church and state, Islam conflicts with French secular principles. However, most Muslims are not interested in changing France's legal order. If they were, a sign of their discontent might be riots or protests of some kind endorsing the imposition of Sharia law. Yet when there were riots led by youth of North African and Arab descent, "The [French] intelligence services blamed the 2005 riots on 'social exclusion' and found that Islamic organizations, whether moderate or militant, had played no role in the violence." (Hargreaves 2007, 108-109) In addition to this, if Muslims in France were attempting to overthrow the government or change laws drastically, Muslim associations in France would be disseminating radical, militant Islamic propaganda. Instead, imams and leaders of Muslim organizations in France condemn such behavior. "Imam Khalil Merroun (2001) likewise notes that 'Muslims in France are the most important defenders of *laïcité* [secularism] on the condition that *laïcité* doesn't violate people's human rights."

While jihadists exist, according to Laurence and Vaisse, "The phenomenon [Islamist terrorism in France] is marginal, numbering just a few dozen cases a year out of a population of around 5 million Muslims." (Laurence and Vaisse 2006b, 140) In recent years, the topic of Islam and immigration has been a major issue of contention within the French political arena and media inducing fear among a large portion of the population. "[the 1990s] was a period in which public discourse and media coverage worked to ethnicize delinquency, to stigmatize cultural difference...Coverage of the suburban projects centered on the Islamic veil, urban riots...and radical imams." (Ossman 2007, 27) It is for this reason that many people believe that Muslims are a threat to French social stability, but these fears are not founded in studies, statistics, nor evidence. The reality is that the majority of Muslims wish to be considered foremost as French citizens and secondly as Muslims as they struggle to integrate into a society that fears them and frequently rejects them.

To continue, if Islam were truly a threat, the most evident sign would be terrorist acts committed against French citizens or the government. Though radical Muslims have been responsible for several politically-based acts of terrorism on French soil, the last terrorist act by a Muslim living in France was in December 1995. During the 1990s, an armed struggle between Algerian government security forces and guerrilla groups was being waged. In an attempt to put pressure on the French government, which was supporting the Algerian one, one of the guerrilla groups called the Groupe Islamique Armé recruited French youth of Algerian descent in order to carry out deadly bombings (Hargreaves 2007, 109). Ten people were killed and more than 100 were injured, but the bombing

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campaign only ended when the prime suspect of the attacks, Khaled Kelkal, himself was killed in a shoot-out with the French police. More recently, Zacarias Moussaoui, a French citizen of Moroccan descent was sentenced to life in prison in 2006 for taking part in the 9/11 plot. What these two cases have in common is the fact that before becoming radicalized Islamists and turning to terrorism, both Kelkal and Moussaoui themselves said they felt marginalized from French society, experienced discrimination, and struggled with finding a sense of identity, which explains why they turned towards Islam (Hargreaves 2007, 109-110). "Islam thus appears to be a valuable refuge for the immigrants victim to social exclusion and to unemployment, in search of a lost community." (Bernard 2002, 54) Along those same lines, "What Kelkal valued in Islam was above all a sense of community that had hitherto been denied to him. He now felt part of a universal Islamic brotherhood united by mutual respect and shared a religious faith." (Hargreaves 2007, 110)

While Islamist radicalization and acts of terrorism are deeply disturbing, even more troubling is the fact that they are a direct result of many Muslims in France feeling disadvantaged, discriminated against, and rejected from French society (Hargreaves 2007, 110). Furthermore, the association of Islam and terrorism has generated Islamophobia within French society, making it even more difficult for Muslims of North African or Arab origin to integrate and be accepted in France. This view was made clear when in July 2005, politician Philippe de Villiers declared on the French television show *Grand Rendez-Vous*, "We cannot be passive witnesses to the growing Islamization of France...I believe that Islam is a breeding ground for Islamism and Islamism is a breeding ground for terrorism, so we should beware." In the rare cases in which French citizens of immigrant origin commit acts of terrorism, one should not only see these acts as atrocious crimes, but also one should see the individuals responsible for them as victims of racism and discrimination who become so disillusioned with French society that in desperation turned to violence and radical forms of Islam.

To conclude, Islam is not a threat to French society. Instead, as a result of colonization and the conditions in which many North African countries such as Algeria were decolonized, French people have inherited Arabophobia, which has subsequently developed into Islamophobia (Bernard 2002, 37). Because of these irrational fears that have been fueled by the media or political parties like the extreme right-wing Front National, many people in France have been led to question their national identity and security as well as feel apprehension towards most incoming immigrants of Muslim faith or North African origin. As difficult as it is even to determine the number of Muslims in France or categorize who should be considered Muslim and who should not, many French people have nevertheless created arguments against Islam. One of the main arguments made by those who fear Muslims is that Islam makes no clear distinction between church and state, making it completely incompatible with French secular values and *laïcité* (secularism) at a fundamental level. Because of this, Muslims not only refuse to integrate themselves into French society, but also they allegedly want to reform the French government and force everyone to adhere to Sharia law. Furthermore, many people in France believe that Islam leads to radicalization and terrorism, providing another reason to forbid immigrants of North African or Arab descent from living in France. In reality, however, the arguments against Islam and Muslims in France are inconsistent and unfounded. Studies and facts have shown that Muslims in France embrace French values, wish to be accepted into society, and the large majority of them condemn acts of terrorism against the Western world.

Now is the time for the French people and government to take action and address the social marginalization of Muslims in France rather than continue to ignore the issue and cause young, disaffected youth to perform acts of terror like Khaled Kelkal or to protest violently like the frustrated rioters of 2005. As the demographics of France continues to change over time, French society must reevaluate how to embrace new cultures and religions while maintaining the old and to consider what French Islam should consist of. Furthermore, the French government and population should gain a wider perspective and realize that Islamophobia and the struggles that Muslims in France combat are part of a larger issue at hand. As mentioned in the article from *Le Monde*, "...the problem isn't primarily religious. It is foremost social, economic, cultural. Because if the scrutiny, despite everything, falls on Muslims and becomes fantastical, it's because a confusion is taking place in the hearts of Muslims and the problems faced in the working class neighborhoods." (Bobineau 2011)

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