Islam and French Identity Politics: The Evolution of Political Discourses
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Abstract
The French state’s response to demands from segments of the population descended from North African and West African immigrants has increasingly been framed by the discourse of the twenty-first century’s global war on terrorism. However, the exclusion of certain segments of French society viewed (solely) as “Muslim” is the result of various failed projects of the French state itself. This commentary, which follows a previous study by this author into laicité (secularism) and the French Muslims of colonial Algeria, will first briefly discuss the evolution of the French state’s relationship to immigrants from North Africa following the end of the Algerian War of Independence in 1962; then it will explore some of the monumental shifts in discussions, categories and frameworks – primarily political and scholarly frameworks – related to the descendants of Muslim immigrants and their place in greater French society from the 1980s through to the present-day in France under President Emmanuel Macron. The commentary tracks the evolution of the political establishment’s use of a French form of identity politics in public political discussion, and notes how these changes continue to obfuscate the socioeconomic disenfranchisement of North Africans and their descendants in France due to racialized understandings of immigrant laborers from that region.
Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, the French state’s response to demands (for citizenship, employment, religious liberty, freedom of expression, et cetera) from the descendants of North African and West African immigrants in France has increasingly been framed by the discourse of the twenty-first century’s global war on terrorism. As a consequence, the political establishment has continued to stoke the flames of identity politics rather than address the demands of those segments of the population and integrate them into society. However, the exclusion – both physical (in suburbs or banlieues on the outskirts of the cities) and social – of groups viewed (solely) as “Muslim” is the result of failed projects of the state itself. In focusing on geopolitics and Islamism, and by failing to address the policies that have led to exclusion, the French state is perpetuating the very problems it claims to be facing.

Discussions surrounding “the Muslim question” in France, particularly by politicians, have largely been framed by the concept of laicite (secularism) since the turn of the twenty-first century. In administrative understanding of the French state, laicite is a legal principle ensuring the separation of the church and state. However, this has not always been the case in practice. A discussion of the French and Catholic origins of laicite in a previous commentary by this author highlighted that the concept was not applied to the millions of French Muslims in colonial Algeria. This commentary continues that discussion, looking first at the evolution of the French state’s relationship to immigrants from North Africa following the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), then reviewing monumental changes in frameworks, categories, and discussions, primarily scholarly and political frameworks, from the 1980s through to the present period of Emmanuel Macron’s presidency. The commentary tracks the evolution in public political discussion of the political establishment’s use of a French form of identity politics, and notes that these changes continually obfuscate the socioeconomic disenfranchisement of North Africans and their descendants in France due to racialized understandings of immigrant laborers from that region.
Nationals, not Citizens: Maintaining Social Order in Colonial Algeria

There has been significant research into the ways in which the French state governs religions – particularly Islam – and the subsequent fostering of new ways of thinking about religious issues in French society.\(^{(1)}\) Studies into the top-down re-enforcement of Muslim identity in state institutions such as hospitals, schools, and the armed forces have revealed the persistence of colonial models in the state’s relations with Muslim citizens.\(^{(2)}\) Just as the French state in colonial Algeria ensured Muslim difference through legal means, the contemporary state continues to distinguish between “French” and “Muslim” at the level of public and popular discourse. The research calls attention to the persistence of colonial-era strategies in maintaining the social order of Muslims, that is to say as the “… de-territorialized administration of a group of persons based on a perceived sense of common origins.”\(^{(3)}\) These studies form the core of our understanding of the overall influences of identity.

France’s administration of many Muslims as dependents of the state began with its conquest of the Algiers Regency in 1830 and subsequent annexation of what would become known as Algeria. As a consequence, the conquered territory’s indigenous majority-Muslim population became legally French.\(^{(4)}\) During the nineteenth century, a distinction emerged between “citizenship” and “nationality” in academic, cultural, social and legal discourses alongside metropolitan France’s own changing understanding of citizenship: all French citizens, by default of birth or naturalization, possessed French nationality; however, not all French nationals were admitted to the citizenship of the Republic.\(^{(5)}\) The non-citizen indigenous Arabs and Berbers of French Algeria, legally categorized as “French Muslims,” were foremost among those groups excluded from citizenship. The French Muslims were categorized as “French subjects” from the time of

conquest in 1830 until the Senatus-Consulte of 1865. This affirmed the French nationality — but not citizenship — of “French Muslims of Algeria”, provided that procedures for accessing citizenship were based on a rejection of recourse to legal Muslim personal status. (6) This had the effect of creating for French Algerians a juxtaposition between “being” a French citizen, and “being” a (French) Muslim, which has continued until the present day.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a group of Berbers attempted to claim that they were no longer Muslims as they had converted to Catholicism and should therefore be considered French citizens. By that time, however, the term “Muslim” within the internal administration of the French state had taken on a “not…solely…confessional meaning.” The 1903 ruling on their case from a French appellate court in Algiers states:

The term Muslim does not have a solely confessional meaning; on the contrary, it designates the entirety of individuals of Muslim origin who, having not been admitted to citizenship, have necessarily conserved their personal status of Muslim, without there being need to distinguish whether or not they belong to the Mohammedan religion. (7)

The period shortly before, and during, the Algerian War of Independence saw the creation of the legal category of “French of North African origin” (distinguishable from “French of European origin”) as part of a last-minute attempt to maintain French rule in Algeria. However, following Algerian independence, the Muslim Algerians who had fought for France and migrated there after the war were categorized as “Repatriates of North African Origin” upon arrival. (8)

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The Arab Question: Immigrants in France 1962–1983

Prior to the contemporary obsession in French media and politics with the “Muslim question,” and the supposed concerns about religiosity and outward or inward faith or practices of Muslims, there existed an “Arab question.”

This is the focus of recent work by Todd Shepard, a historian of the French empire, on the period following Algerian independence – which does not appear in the more recent histories and sociological work on the integration of Muslim North Africans in metropolitan France. Shepard describes how, prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, North African immigrants were discussed (albeit indirectly) by the French state, press, and wider society as Arabs – and not Muslims. They could be framed as revolutionary Arab male workers contributing to the cause by the left wing of metropolitan politics, or characterized as Arab male aggressors posing a threat to white, French women by those on the right.

In the 1970s, immigrant laborer organizations such as the Movement of Arab Laborers participated in campaigning against anti-labor policies of various right-wing and center-right governments prior to the election of the socialist Francois Mitterand as President in 1981.

The discussion on Arabs in France at this time focused mainly on the postwar, predominantly male, population of North African laborers in metropolitan areas. Laws in 1970, 1977, and in later years began to allow for “family unification.” This allowed male workers from North Africa and elsewhere to bring their families to France to live with them. By this time, however, there also existed generations of French-born children of North African workers, whose arrival in France dates from before the Second World War. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, in the context of the Iranian Revolution and general economic downturn of the early 1980s, the debate around North African immigrant labor began to shift to the religiosity of immigrant workers and their French-born children. At the same time, organizations began to emerge that sought French nationality and equal civil rights for young adults brought up predominantly in France, but denied citizenship and access to the same rights as others born in the country.

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(10) Shepard, *Sex, France*.

Muslim Identities and Citizenship Struggles, 1983–2015

In their landmark 2000 study *La Beurgoisie*, French sociologists Catherine Wihtol de Wenden and Remy Leveau analyzed the trajectories of French-born descendants of North African immigrant Muslims during the mid-twentieth century, focusing in particular on Muslim civic associations and community organizations which sought equal rights for excluded groups. The research identified three epochs in the evolution of the strategies of civic organizers: the years before the *Marche des Beurs* (March of the Arabs) in 1983; the decade of the Beur Movement from 1983–1993; and the ten years from 1990 to 2000, when moral, and social community organizations were born. (12)

In the early 1980s, the French-born descendants of labor migrants from the Maghreb began to organize and demand equal access to citizenship. In the context of the economic recession of the early 1980s, the 1983 March of the Beurs (then a popular slang term for people born to North Africans in France) sparked polemical debates on French nationality law. (13) At the time, some concluded that Muslim French youth must decide whether to identify as a population group implanted in French society with a communitarian, non-individual identity, or as an integrated group. The latter implies the dissolution of relativizing communitarian allegiances to a “Muslim” identity. (14) The charge of communitarianism – that Muslim French citizens of North African or Sub-Saharan origin, through religion and social isolation, are reluctant to integrate into mainstream society – is paradoxical, given that it is state policies which have led to the current situation it now opposes. The juxtaposition between an identity based on French citizenship or an adherence to Muslim identity echoed the colonial-era juxtaposition of Muslims who adhere to Muslim personal status having a “denatured nationality.” (15)

The second (1983–1993) and third (1993–2000) epochs identified by Wihtol de Wenden and Leveau were defined by the Beur Movement. Organizers shifted the focus of the debate from their parents’ country of origin to France and focused on fighting for citizenship. The authors noted

that the practices of citizenship of many Muslim Frenchmen and women to French citizenship during the 1990s and early 2000s began to take on new character, a collective one, as they organized into moral, social, and community legal associations. For those who did not fit the “Black, Blanc, Beur” (Black, White, Arab) ideal, which the state also promoted throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, these legally-recognized yet private associations provided a different sphere, albeit one with legal recognition.\(^\text{(16)}\)

It is important to note, however, that what is here casually referred to as the Black, Blanc, Beur moment (in reference to a popular label given to the ethnically diverse French national football team that won the world cup in 1998) was actually a failed attempt by the state to embrace a multicultural understanding of “Frenchness” (as opposed to a universalist one) through various associations and movements. While it is accepted across the majority of left- and right-wing political parties in France today that laicite and universalism, not multiculturalism, are unquestionably the French model, this understanding ignores the attempts by state and grassroots actors in the 1990s to gain acceptance for plural expressions of French identity, particularly among second and third-generation French citizens whose ancestors had immigrated from North Africa.

For a time, many prominent athletes, entertainment and media figures, and new political elites were characterized as Beur.\(^\text{(17)}\) This was not a political or stable identitarian category, however, and did not include the increasingly socioeconomically marginalized. Because of the failure of French multiculturalism to address structural economic disadvantages (which even citizenship cannot address directly), a variety of community Muslim moral associations and religious organizations, such as the Tablighi Jamaat (Society of Preachers), stepped in to fill the void.\(^\text{(18)}\) These groups developed in parallel with France’s multicultural phase in the 1990s and continued after it had ended.


The 1990s also saw geopolitical events, such as the Palestinian Intifadas (uprisings), and the rise of Islamist movements in international media, as well as the civil war in Algeria. Coinciding with the failure of French attempts at multiculturalism under President Mitterand and the arrival of the right-wing President Jacques Chirac in 1995, this contributed to an eventual paradigm shift by the French political establishment to addressing the issue of Muslim integration – and this continues to be the framework and discourse through which issues related to France’s socioeconomically marginalized racial minorities are understood today; and it is yet another attempt by the state to sidestep the issue of marginalization and focus on identitarian politics instead.

In each epoch, the aspirations and the goals of Muslim French civic associations included references to citizenship and integration into mainstream society. Likewise, the discourse of the secluded and excluded population of Muslim French citizens has traditionally included calls for equal treatment and application of republican values within a citizenship frame of reference.

With the expansion of internet and digital media, new discourses have emerged for the socially and economically isolated among France’s Muslim citizenry. These are outside of the republican and universal discourses of citizenship (and identity). The spread of Muslim religious revivalist and puritan groups that rejected citizenship identity in the first decades of the early 2000s, initially as a result of the events surrounding Algeria’s Black Decade, was enabled in part by the internet. (19) Thanks to the digital revolution, those unhappy with the status quo had access, for the first time, to discourses completely outside of the French concept of republican identity. This situation would also be tested by second and third-generation Muslim French men and women who increasingly challenged seclusion, while maintaining a citizenship frame of reference in their demand for republican values to be applied equally to all citizens – regardless of outward appurtenances of a Muslim identity. (20)

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The emergence of a fourth epoch can be observed in the period following the publication of Wihtol de Wenden and Leveau’s book in 2000, dating from the 2005 riots in the banlieues until the January 2015 terrorist attacks on the Ile-de-France region. In March 2004, the French Parliament passed a law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools, which garnered international attention for banning the wearing of headscarves by female Muslim students in public schools. The following year, the impoverished public housing projects that occupy the outskirts of major French cities were the focal point of the well-known 2005 French uprisings, which erupted in response to the deaths of teenagers Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore, who were fatally electrocuted after being chased by police into a powerplant. Since this period, French political discourse appears to be increasingly critical of the exclusion of, and hostility toward, Muslim French citizens accused of communitarianism and undermining republican and secular values.

The early twenty-first century phase more or less corresponds to the creation (in 2002–2003) of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, CFCM). There were various attempts by the state in the previous century to bring into existence a centralized institution that would act as the mouthpiece of Muslim opinion. Based on an understanding of the Roman Catholic Church’s centralized organization, the French state previously used this approach in pushing for the creation of the Protestant Federation of France and the Union of Jewish Communities of France (the successor to the Central Israelite Consistory of France), both of which were created in 1905 following the loss of their publicly-funded status due to the 1905 law establishing the separation of church and state. Unlike its Protestant and Jewish counterparts, however, the CFCM was politicized by the state for managing Muslim populations: the council sought fatwas related to the hijab, the organized slaughter of sheep for Eid al-Kabir, declarations on geopolitical events in the Arab world and violence in the banlieues.

The state views all of these questions as related to Islam, “even though Muslim worship is not directly concerned.”(22) The institution became a tool of the state in the aforementioned deterritorialized administration of a group of persons based on a perceived sense of common origins,(23) representing the French state’s understanding of Islam as an organized religion, rather than a council representing French citizens who practice the religion, and whose needs and demands on the State as citizens are not the same as those of an institutional religious council concerned .(24)

The Islamist “Threat” in Political Discourse: 2015–Present

The latter 2010s further entrenched the now globalized discussion on Islamism within French discussions of marginalized minority communities. The spill over from the Syrian Civil War further changed the discourse. Discourses surrounding national values and Muslims followed in the aftermath of each of the following events: the January 2015 Ile-de-France attacks and subsequent suicide bombings in Paris and Saint-Denis in November of 2015; the vehicular attack in Nice and the Normandy church attack in July 2016; and more recently the beheading of French school teacher Samuel Paty in October 2020.

The social exclusion of certain segments of French society viewed (solely) as Muslim is the result of the failed projects of the French state itself. By continuing to focus on geopolitics and Islamism, and by not addressing the policies that have led to exclusion, the state is perpetuating the problems it claims to be facing. It is not a matter of social separatism on the part of socioeconomically marginalized minorities that threatens national cohesion and stymies the creation of a tolerant society; rather, it is the inability of the political establishment to accept as equal citizens – as French law views all citizens regardless of race, sex, or origin – the descendants of immigrants.

**About the Author**

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