



France has a problem with Islamism

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- › The current discussion on France's "problem with Islamism" fails to consider the advancing polarization of the larger societal context, as well as its facilitating effects on the radicalization of individuals and groups.
- › This polarized context not only complicates an appeased reflection and critical discussion on how to tackle France's problem with Islamism, but further feeds potential escalation dynamics.
- › The polarization of the French society is the result of the sustained interactions between two diametrically opposed and exclusionary identity conceptions and narratives (an ethno-nationalist identity opposed to an Islamic identity), which emerged from France's systematic failure to properly address the issues that emerged as long-term consequences of the demographic changes accompanying the 1960s–1970s immigration waves.
- › These interactions not only produce the dominant narrative framework, in which current debates about national identity, integration and the place of religion in a secular society are still articulate, but also enable the radicalization of the larger societal context. The later benefitting the emergence of new agitprop-type movements.

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On October 16th 2020, Samuel Paty, a teacher in the Parisian suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, was beheaded by an assumed Islamist terrorist. Two weeks prior to his murder and in the context of a discussion on the freedom of expression in class, Paty had shown satirical drawings of Prophet Mohammad. The Sunday following Paty's murder, two hijab wearing women were stabbed during a racist altercation in the center of Paris. Two weeks later, on October 29th, another presumed Islamist attack occurred in the basilica Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption in Nice, killing three people. The same day in Avignon, a man self-identifying as a member of the far-right movement *Génération Identitaire* was shot by the police after threatening a shopkeeper with a gun because of his north-African origin. Even though these different episodes of violence seem to be neither directly linked, nor comparable in their motives, they are a possible indication of a worrisome development within the French society. In fact, this paper argues that the current discussion on France's "problem with Islamism", in light of the unprecedented cycle of jihadi violence it has been witnessing since 2012, fails to consider the advancing polarization of the larger societal context and its facilitating effect on the radicalization of individuals and groups that accompanies it. These consequences are what the paper coins as France's other problem with Islamism.

Advancing polarization of the larger societal context

This trend is also visible in the reactions in the aftermath of these events, as best illustrated by some of the discussions on several 24/7 news channels; among the topics were the questions if children should be named after the saints in the French calendar to warrant their "integrability" and if human rights standards should be applied to the enemies of the Republic.¹ Some of the immediate reactions of the French government seemed to fall into a similar polarizing dynamic, with the Minister of Interior criticizing for instance the existence of 'communitarian' food aisles in French supermarkets.² These types of polemics might be considered as singularities, resulting from the shock of the attacks or the immediacy of the comments. Their systematic recurrence indicates, however, that they are part of the larger (dominant) narrative framework in which the current debates take place. This particular polarized framework not only complicates an appeased reflection and critical discussion on how to tackle France's problem with Islamism, but further feeds potential escalation dynamics.

Recurring escalation dynamics complicate an appeased reflection and critical discussion.

Indeed, France's "problem with Islamism" goes beyond the explanation of growing and increasingly active Islamist milieus, enabling and supporting the emergence of violent clandestine networks and trajectories. Instead, it is important to look at the larger societal context with which these milieus interact, from and in which they emerge and are able to evolve in. It is therefore this paper's goal to highlight these interactions, by looking into the progressive polarization of the narrative frameworks on political and cultural identities in France, as well as its consequences in terms of radicalization dynamics.

These processes are the result of three interdependent developments, along which this analysis is structured: 1) France's systematic failure to properly address the issues that emerged as long-term consequences of the demographic changes accompanying the

1960s–1970s immigration waves created the opportunity structures for the politico-religious entrepreneurship of well-organized actors. These opportunity structures were not only used to establish networks and control local structures, but also to promote their particular conception of Islamic identity; 2) The gain in visibility of this particular conception, reinforced in the eye of the broader public by the exponential growth of (jihadi-)salafism in the 2000s, is accompanied by the emergence of counter-movements and narratives, defending a diametrically opposed and exclusionary identity conception; 3) The polarization that results from the confrontation of these identity narratives, not only produced the dominant narrative framework, in which current debates about national identity, integration and the place of religion in a secular society are still articulate, but also enabled the radicalization of both movements.

“The polarization of identity narratives enabled the radicalization of opposing movements.”

The late perception of a new French reality as an opportunity structure for Islamist entrepreneurs

Like other European countries, and in the context of considerable economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s, French authorities actively encouraged the immigration of labor from its (former) colonies. As a result of the ensuing immigration waves and family reunification laws, the French demographic landscape changed durably, confronting French political elites with the question of how to deal with the social and faith-related demands of its Muslim populations. Although this question was first raised at the end of the 1960s,³ French authorities still struggle with the issue five decades later. Macron’s announcements to reinforce the “Foundation for an Islam of France”, as presented during his speech on the “fight against Islamist separatism”,⁴ will be the sixth attempt since 1989 to foster the emergence of an ‘Islam of France’ (*Islam de France*).⁵ France’s late perception of Islam as a French reality might be at fault in the failure of these efforts, as the power vacuum it created allowed Islamist entrepreneurs to fill the gap.

Many attempts to foster the emergence of an “Islam de France”

Until the end of the 1980s, Islam in France was perceived as an “immigrated religion” that was not bound to stay, similar to the workforce who imported it. The religious practice and its organizations were therefore considered a diplomatic question and left to the care of the countries of origin or the practicing Muslims themselves. With the progressive settlement of the immigrated populations, the religious practice moved out of the worker hostels or fabrics, to which it was initially confined, into the suburbs. This relocation resulted in a greater autonomy in the religious practice, which translated into the creation of local Islamic organizations in charge of an ever-growing number of places of worship. These Islamic organizations, next to individual (non-affiliated) initiatives, mainly emerged from three types of “organizations”: the national federations, under control of the countries of origin, the *Tabligh*⁶ and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). While the ‘national’ federations were mostly a way for the countries of origin to exert their (political) influence on their migrated population, the *Tabligh* and the MB followed a different strategy – imposing their conception of Islam, either through proselytism in the case of the *Tabligh*, or through active lobbyism and negotiations at the local level in the case of the MB. Once the French government came to the realization that the complete absence of control could pose a threat in terms of national security, especially in the context of the rise of Islamism in Algeria during the 1990s, its centralistic approach to create a unified “Islam of France” (in the form of a national coordination organism) collided with the reality of a well embedded, large mosaic of actors, representing different foreign influences and interests, each pursuing their own goals and competing with one another for the monopoly of representation.

Islam for long perceived as an “immigrated religion”

The centralistic approach to create an “Islam of France” collided with the reality of a large mosaic of Islamic actors.

The polarization of identity narratives and the radicalization of the fringes

Dominated for a long time by the national federations (in particular the Algerian federation), composed of the first generation of immigrants, these organisms further suffered an increasing disconnection from the issues and debates brought forward by the second (and later third) generation, born and raised in France. A disconnection of which the MB affiliated Union of Islamic Organizations of France (UOIF) took advantage in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, in promoting a distinct Islamic identity. The emergence of the “*hijab* affairs” in public schools in the 1990s⁷ builds a critical turn in the affirmation of the UOIF’s influence, as it allowed them to formulate a strong mobilization narrative: the need to defend “the” Islamic identity in the face of secularism and islamophobia. Their strong local implementation and the multiplication of affiliated (youth) organizations and structures (among others private Islamic schools), combined with a strong media presence and political agitations both at the local and national level, allowed them not only to ascertain their influence at the institutional level,⁸ but also to insert their frame on the way Islam is perceived collectively within the French society.

Meanwhile the narrative on the place of Islam within the French society was not left solely to Islamist entrepreneurs. The emergence of “an” Islamic identity and the affairs surrounding the *hijab* in schools were also taken on by the conservative right, making it a central element of its national-security discourse and associating it with the potential threat of an “Islamization” of France. As such, these “affairs” constitute an important step in the long-term process that is the gradual polarization of the French society, which culminates, in the particularly tense post 9/11 context, with the law banning ostensible religious signs from public schools in 2004. Indeed, what might have been partisan positions in the 1990s, became mainstream within political discourses and media representations by 2004. On one side stand the proponents – mostly conservatives and hard-liner secularist left forces – of a ‘new *laïcité*’,⁹ which is conceived as a tool to protect French republicanism against the growing ‘communitarian withdrawal’. On the other stand the advocates of a more culturalist approach, denouncing an institutionalized islamophobia, among Islamist organizations, civil society (among others antiracist and feminist) organizations the UOIF and the internationalist left could be found. This opposition between hard secularism and islamophobia, crystalizing around the *hijab*, constitutes in essence the dominant narrative framework, in which debates about national identity, integration and the place of religion in a secular society are still articulated. The latest discussion around the Observatory of *Laïcité* (Observatoire de la *laïcité*) and whether or not it is too conciliant towards Islamism illustrates the preeminence of the framework.¹⁰

On top of these internal developments, the appearance of the threat of international Islamist terrorism, first as an exogeneous, then – with the emergence of homegrown terrorism – as an endogenous phenomenon, and the gradual hardening of positions and official discourses, reinforced, as a result, the resonance of the already existing frames on the threat posed by Islam/Islamophobia (depending on the recipient).

The increased resonance of narratives in turn facilitated the emergence, in a sort-of mirroring effect, of highly visible “agitprop” groups, such as the ethno-nationalist movements *Riposte Laïque* or *Bloc Identitaire* (now *Génération Identitaire*) and the jihadi movement *Forsane Alizza*.¹¹ While their interposed actions, remained for the visible part in the realm of legality, these movements illustrate the radicalization of certain positions in their absolute rejection (and willingness to defend it, if necessary with violence) of a certain conception of the French model (the multicultural or the secular). These evolutions are particularly worrisome as they coincide with the coming-of-age of a new generation that does not recognize itself

The “hijab affairs” as a critical turning point

The conservative right made Islam identity a central element of its national security discourse

Opposition between hard secularism and islamophobia constitutes the dominant narrative framework

Highly visible ‘agitprop’ groups illustrate the radicalization of certain positions

in institutionalized movements or party systems and is particularly receptive for the well-orchestrated and strong online presence of these types of movements.¹² The unprecedented jihadi-salafist mobilization in France in the context of the declaration of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, as well as the increasing occurrence of far-right violence,¹³ has demonstrated the mobilization potential of these movements and their narratives.

Conclusions

For almost a decade now, France has been going through a crisis, facing an unprecedented wave of political violence. If this suggests that France is facing a growing radicalization within parts of its population, supported by well-established both national and transnational networks, it also highlights the identity crisis the country is experiencing. As shown above, this crisis needs to be understood as rooted in the damages caused by the growing polarization of discourses over the last decades, where the nature of the French identity is concerned. If there is one lesson to learn from this, then it is not to fall into the trap of further feeding already polarized and radicalized identities. In this sense, embracing a full-on belligerent “them against us” rhetoric and falling into stigmatizing generalizations and off-topic polemics should be avoided. At the end, these dynamics play well into the hands of both far-right actors and jihadists, since both seek to realize further societal polarization and a hardening of positions and discourses.

France’s problem with Islamism should be a cautionary tale for Germany, as similar trends can be observed here as well. Germany should take advantage of its soft secularism and start to transform its own institutional landscape allowing for the development of a practice of Islam that is an integrative part of the German society. This should be done for instance by supporting the education of Imams in Germany and through that controlling the influence of foreign institutions. With the launch of educational programs for Imams at a German university this summer, France’s neighbor has taken a promising step towards a solution. These steps should, however, also take care to foster the ownership of these transformations within their Muslim population, by including them in the decisional processes. Furthermore, the prerogative of interpretation in the ‘integration debate’ should be left neither to far-right nor Islamist groups. Parties from the German political center should therefore develop their own critical narrative and propose an appeased discussion framework. Finally, the German government should continue to provide the means to strengthen counter-terrorism measures, but also to strengthen the resilience of its population to prevent its radicalization within both the Islamist and the right-extremist spectrum. This kind of prevention work is something that France has unfortunately neglected in the past.

The crisis needs to be understood as rooted in the damages caused by the growing polarization of discourses.

France’s problem with Islamism as a cautionary tale

- 1 See Gontier, Samuel, "Après le meurtre de Samuel Paty, le concours Lépine des idées d'extrême droite", *Telerama*, 20.10.2020, URL: <https://www.telerama.fr/ecrans/apres-le-meurtre-de-samuel-paty-le-concours-lepine-des-idees-dextreme-droite-6717846.php> [11.11.2020].
- 2 Lepelletier, Pierre, "Darmanin se dit contre les rayons de 'cuisine communautaire' dans les supermarchés: 'Ça m'a toujours choqué'", *Le Figaro*, 21.10.2020, URL: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/darmanin-se-dit-contre-les-rayons-de-cuisine-communautaire-dans-les-supermarches-ca-m-a-toujours-choque-20201021> [11.11.2020].
- 3 The question was first raised in the context of social upheaval and strikes for better working conditions, including the right to places of prayer in the fabrics.
- 4 For a discussion of Macron's plan see Junk, Julian/Süß, Clara-Auguste, "Macron's plan for fighting Islamist radicalization – and what Germany and other European countries should and shouldn't learn from it", *Prif Blog*, 12.10.2020, URL: <https://blog.prif.org/2020/10/12/macrons-plan-for-fighting-islamist-radicalization-and-what-germany-and-other-european-countries-should-and-shouldnt-learn-from-it/> [17.11.2020].
- 5 The idea to create a unified "French Islam" or, as it came to be known, "Islam of France" was inherited from France's colonial past, as a means to control and enlighten the population under its rule.
- 6 Tabligh or Tablighi Jamaat translates into "society of preachers" and is a transnational revivalist missionary movement, that preaches a rigorist understanding of Islam.
- 7 Starting with the first case of an exclusion from school for refusing to take off a hijab in Creil in 1989, the so called "veil affairs" multiplied during the 1990s.
- 8 A strategy that paid off, as the UOIF became the second strongest force within the Council For Muslim Faith (CFCM) at the moment of its creation in 2003. The CFCM is still in place today.
- 9 The new *Laïcité* framework, builds the ideological foundation of the 2004 law and is the result of the report "For a new *laïcité*" commissioned by the then Prime Minister in 2003. In its essence it shifts the principle of neutrality, as described in the 1905 law on the separation of State and Church, from its application from public services to public spaces. It is conceived as a tool to protect French republicanism against the growing 'communitarian withdrawal', but excludes in its last consequence the de facto ostensible expression of any religious affiliation (such as hijab wearing women) – which is not without problem.
- 10 The Observatory is a consultative organ, commissioned with supporting the government in respecting and promoting the principle of *laïcité*. After the murder of Samuel Paty, the Observatory is accused of being too lenient towards or even supporting Islamist movements: See Pétreault, Clément, "Changement en vue à la tête de l'Observatoire de la *laïcité*", *Le Point*, 19.10.2020, URL: https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/info-le-point-changement-en-vue-a-la-tete-de-l-observatoire-de-la-laicite-19-10-2020-2397125_20.php [01.12.2020]. The polemic underlines the different conceptions of *laïcité* in the French society, as well as the difficulty that go with defending it: on the one hand, those being accused of islamophobia, on the other, those accusing of complacency.
- 11 See also Kepel, Gilles: "Passion française. "Les voix des cités.", Gallimard.
- 12 For instance, as the UOIF grow into an institutionalized force, by integrating the CFCM, the organization loses its contestation legitimacy. Movements presenting a stronger subversive or countercultural dimension then possibly become more attractive.
- 13 These occurrences culminated with the attack on a Mosque in Bayonne on 29.10.2019, by a former member of the ring-wing party *Rassemblement National* (former *Front National*).

Imprint

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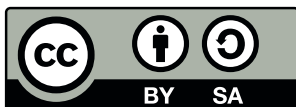
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Postal address: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 10907 Berlin

Publisher: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2021, Berlin
Design and typesetting: yellow too, Pasiek Horntrich GbR
Produced with financial support from the German Federal Government.

ISBN 978-3-95721-860-5



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