

# POLICY BRIEF

May 2007

Policy Brief # 20

## Muslims in France: French or Muslim, What Is the Choice?

Moushumi Khan  
ISPU Research Associate

**The world watched as cars burned in the Paris suburbs, puzzled as to how such spontaneous bursts of violence could continue night after night while the French government appeared unable to control them.**



43151 Dalcoma Road, Suite 6 ♦  
Clinton Township ♦ Michigan 48038  
586-416-1150 ♦ www.ispu.us

On October 27, 2005, two French Muslim boys, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore, were rushing to make it home before sunset in order to break their Ramadan fast in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. They raised the suspicion of some French policemen, who began to chase them. Although it is not quite clear what they had done wrong, they knew that getting caught by the police could only mean trouble. Unfortunately, they tried to avoid the police by running into an electrical shed, where they were both electrocuted. Their deaths unleashed the simmering resentment of French immigrants and exposed France's inability to deal with its changing demographics.

The world watched as cars burned in the Paris suburbs, puzzled as to how such spontaneous bursts of violence could continue night after night while the French government appeared unable to control them. There were the media's usual cries of "angry, young Muslim men" and questions of Islam's compatibility with the West along with the government's call for order. Was there something peculiar about French Muslim youth that would lead them to burn cars without any seemingly organized demand for redress? It was as if the deaths of these two boys had ignited a sudden combustion of anger.

In fact, the riots were a symptom of the French Muslims' limited integration into the country's political and economic mainstream. They symbolized the French government's perception of Muslims as a "law and order" problem and as immigrants who did not wish to integrate. For French Muslims, the riots were the result of

their frustrations with not being able to find adequate employment or receive other rights associated with equal citizenship.

The numbers behind the images are as follows: During the twenty days of rioting in the French *banlieues*, the suburbs where most French Muslims live, some 10,000 cars were torched, 233 public buildings were burned, and 3,200 people (mostly teenagers) were arrested. These statistics reflect a situation that French society is only just now confronting. The riots had little to do with Islam or even with acting out against French society; the youths only burned cars in their own neighborhoods, while cars are often burned during the country's New Year's celebrations or sometimes as a cheap method of disposal. It was also clear that French law enforcement had only a limited ability to control the escalating crisis, as it has few contacts with the Muslim community, and that it had even less understanding of the causes or of possible solutions. This latter statement is proven by their request to Muslim leaders to calm the youths down.

Each of these points illustrates the problem's complexity. Muslims have been in France for generations, but it is not their religion that alienates them from mainstream French society. "Equality" and not "integration" is the main issue for them. The degree of misinformation and prejudice about Muslims in Europe clouds any examination of the underlying reasons for social unrest. While the French viewed the initial car burning as

simple hooliganism, in the absence of any organized statements by the rioters or even groups representing their interests, the world watched the violent uprising of angry young Muslim men with horror. The French state and its various agents appeared to have been taken by surprise and were ill-prepared to deal with these acts. Nicolas Sarkozy, the former interior minister and presidential candidate, had recently dismantled neighborhood policing, one of the few links between the police and local communities. In addition, there is little scope to check abusive policing when the state sees law enforcement as an extension of itself to enforce its policies.

In February 2007, the French courts finally charged the policemen who had chased the two boys and were originally only interrogated as witnesses for not assisting a person in danger. Some people feel that things are just as bad, if not worse, than they were before the riots. Sarkozy remarked that the *banlieues* are less integrated one year after the riots than at the time of the rioters' grandparents.

While the situation for Muslims in the United States is vastly different from that of their co-religionists in France, it is instructive to study the French experience so that American policymakers and the public can better analyze what works in our own system and the implications of failed policies. The situation of French Muslims is shaped by France's political identity and history, which informs the government's policy on immigrants in general and on Muslims in particular. The history of this community, its strengths and weaknesses, and how the French public and private sector relate to its members help to complete the picture.

### French Political History

France is a nation predicated on the concept of *laïcité*, the absolute separation of church and state. Its 1905 secularism law mandated that the French government not fund or explicitly support any religious institution or enterprise. This did not mean that the state must be "anti-religious," as demonstrated by the French government's building of the Grand Mosque in Paris in 1926 to

commemorate the Algerians' support during World War I, or the fact that the majority of France's twenty-one public holidays have a basis in Catholicism. It has, however, resulted in a political culture in which any religious identity, particularly Islam, can be suspected as being *communitarian* and, therefore, a threat to the state.

The mere term *French Muslim* is anathema to French political identity. The concept of a community organized along ethnic or religious lines, as exists in the United States, is in itself abhorrent due to the French belief that everyone is equally and foremost *French*. Not only is there no French counterpart to the National Italian-American Foundation, there is also no equivalent to the Council on American-Islamic Relations. In fact, any attempt to organize along such lines for either professional affiliations (e.g., a Muslim lawyers' organization) or to pursue a specific issue (e.g., getting *halal* food served in the public schools) would be prohibited as being *communitarian*.

A few ethnic organizations formed by first-generation immigrants do exist at the local level; however, they are extremely fragmented. Even when the French are aware of ethnic differences, they seem to be unaware of religious affiliations. This point is underscored by the fact that they did not know that the star player on their World Cup Soccer team, Zinedine Zidane, was in fact not only a *beur* (Arab) but also a Muslim. Zidane himself has never raised this, although the French Muslim community considers him a special hero. The far Right politician Jean Marie Le Pen did remark that he was not supporting the team because, due to its racial diversity, it did not truly represent France. It appears that many French Muslims have also internalized the idea that French identity has no room for religion or ethnicity, for even when there are no direct barriers to formally organizing along religious lines, they avoid doing so out of the fear of being perceived as *communitarian*.

### Religious Accommodation of Islamic Practices in France

Not surprisingly, there is very little direct accommodation of Islamic practices in

France. Even such companies as the international bank HSBC, which offers Islamic banking services in other countries, does not offer this service in France. There is some religious accommodation in the non-governmental sector, such as non-profits organizing *iftars* rather than soup kitchens in communities with large poor Muslim populations.

The French government has also found ways to work around the restriction on state involvement in religious enterprises in certain areas, if not in theory at least in practice, such as burials, helping to train imams, and repairing or subsidizing (but not building) mosques. In some cases, it has attempted to fund the renovation of mosques by setting up a foundation to circumvent the law restricting the direct financing of religious institutions. French cemeteries, all of which are owned by the municipality, allow Muslims and other religious groups to be buried close together or to put a religious symbol on their tombs. Funding religious schools that employ government-accredited teachers is also allowed, as long as they have been in existence for at least five years. No such Muslim schools currently exist, although there is growing demand for them.

### French Political Identity

Despite the stress on a unifying *French* identity, not all French are considered equally *French*. Being *French* is not an ethnic or cultural identity, but a political identity based on the French Republican political values of secularism, equality, and law. In reality, it is a cultural identity that has failed to integrate both Islamic culture and practices. In spite of this, France's elite and Muslim populations are pleased to note that "The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other," a Pew Research Global Attitudes Project survey released in June 2006, revealed that large numbers of French Muslims and the general French public felt that there was no conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society. These numbers were the higher than those for other European countries with Muslim minority populations.

Yet many Muslims in France complain that although the majority of French Muslims consider themselves *French*, most French people still think of them as *foreigners*, *Muslim*, or at best *immigrants*, no matter how long they have lived in France or how *French* they perceive themselves to be. One of the few positive outcomes of the 2005 riots was that it brought out the fact that the youths identified themselves as *French* and were protesting that the French *republican* principle of equality was not being applied to them. Many of them followed the advice of the few existing French-Arab role models, who encouraged them to participate in the French political system, by registering to vote for the first time.

Beyond this political identity, France's colonial history has had a profound effect on its relationship with Islam and Muslims. In some of its former colonies, Islam had played a particular role. Unlike other Algerians, Algerian Muslims were not given the option of becoming French citizens and thus had special Islamic legal codes applied to them in civil matters. Therefore, it is no surprise that Islam itself became a tool of resistance to French colonial rule. When the French government selected a group of Algerian Muslim women to bring to France for higher education in the 1950s, its members were shocked to find that these women showed up for the graduation ceremony on July 14, the French National Day, wearing the traditional Islamic headscarf.

Algeria's harsher colonial experience still influences the actions of French Algerians today. At a soccer match between France and Algeria, many French people were angry that the French Algerians rooted for the Algerians and whistled during the French national anthem. While this reaction occurred within the context of a period of difficult relations between France and Algeria, it strengthened the already negative perception of French Algerians. However, perhaps the reverse causal relationship is more important to note: French colonial practices are still very relevant when explaining the French

government and public's conscious and subconscious attitudes and policies toward people from the former colonies.

Marseille, France's most populous Muslim city, was not affected by the recent riots. Although it is soccer star Zidane's hometown and considered a multicultural success story, it is also quite segregated by race and class. One of its emerging Muslim activists, Youcef Mammeri, a member of the National Islamic Committee, pointed out that while 9/11 marked a shift in the lives of American Muslims, the lives of French Muslims were similarly affected by the Algerian uprisings of 1994. This was the first time the idea of *good Islam/bad Islam* appeared in the French media. It also became commonplace for the media to say that "a Muslim man has done X criminal act" without presenting any convincing evidence or actual convictions. At the same time, the interior minister arrested one hundred leaders of Muslim organizations looking for Algerian terrorists. Finding none, he released all of them, except those who lacked legal immigration status; they were subsequently deported.

The arrests of Arabs and Muslims in the United States shortly after 9/11 paralleled this tactic. Mammeri remarked on the irony of the French going to Algeria, thinking that they would make it a Christian nation, and yet leaving it with a more politicized Islam and making its own country more Muslim. He also pointed out Marseille's beautiful and large (but empty) churches as well as its storefront mosques, where worshippers spill out into the streets during Friday prayers. Despite lamenting some of the humiliations faced by French Muslims, he remains optimistic.

### Muslims in France and in the United States

One key difference between France and the United States is the type of immigrant who settled there. Not only is each country's view of multiculturalism and history different, but they also had an almost opposing rationale for immigration.

The French began bringing immigrants from its former colonies shortly after World War II to close its increasing unskilled labor gap. The United States, besides being founded by immigrants, had long sought out educated elites from around the world to drive its economy and blended these new immigrants into its *melting pot* identity. Although today America's melting pot has started to become a *boiling pot*, spilling over with the challenges of a changing society, France apparently had no plans for its immigrants beyond the use of their labor. The fact that many of them stayed on or had families and have lived there for three generations did not change their unstable reality. Some still live in the outer suburbs in "temporary housing" constructed by the French government to house the emerging French working class.

Although many have made it out of the cycle of dead-end jobs and a growing number of second- and third-generation Muslims are entering the middle class, existing barriers to labor market entry remains the key issue. Most French Muslims maintain an Islamic cultural identity while their children feel French, even without admission into mainstream French society. Add to this a mixture of a tightening economy with higher overall unemployment and global tensions with Islam, and it is not difficult to see why French Muslims are in a precarious situation. In an article in *Le Monde*, a leading French newspaper, French economist Daniel Cohen argued that if discrimination against Muslims was not opposed, they would have no choice but to rely more on their own communities, which others may misperceive as being communitarian.

### The French Government's Relations with Islam

The French government has had two major public interactions with Islam in recent years: President Jacques Chirac's 2003 decision to convene a commission to look at, among other things, the issue of wearing headscarves in public schools, and the government's (particularly the

Ministry of the Interior) decision to establish Muslim institutions similar to those of the country's Jewish and Christian communities. Both of these cases illustrate the difficulties of balancing France's political identity with its changing society and expose a lack of understanding between the French establishment and the country's Muslims.

The questions of national security (including terrorism and the control of mosques) and of the Muslims' integration are really seen as one issue, as demonstrated by the fact that the Ministry of the Interior, which is responsible for the nation's security, is also in charge of integrating the country's immigrants. The real issue for the French government is security, not civil rights; the real issue for French Muslims is equality, not integration. Thus it is not strange to hear French Muslims complain that the French government's tactics for dealing with them consist of "provocation, repression, and control."

#### *The Headscarf Ban: The Stasi Commission and French Perceptions*

In the minds of many French Muslims, the Stasi Commission's conclusions legitimized discrimination against Muslims in other arenas. Among its twenty-one findings, including the ban on the wearing of any religious symbol (e.g., a large Christian cross, a Jewish yarmulke, or a Sikh turban), the major focus was on banning the headscarf in public schools. At the very least, it showed that the French seem unable to think outside the box when it comes to reconciling a French identity with Islamic religious practice. Although the official rationale was to preserve *laïcité*, there was a strong emphasis on protecting the *public order*.

The commission expressed the dual concern of protecting young Muslim girls from Muslim boys who would demand that they wear the headscarf, and of giving French school teachers a way to enforce the ruling. When Patrick Weill, a French immigration expert, was asked why the commission did not consider alternatives

to the ban such as addressing the boys' pressure by communicating with their parents that this was unacceptable, he rejected this argument.

French structures seem unable to evolve when faced with changing social realities. This resistance expresses a deeper feeling: French Muslims and their behavior somehow have to be *controlled*, rather than dealt with or accommodated. One procedural criticism of the commission was that it did not consult Muslim women until almost the very end of its proceedings, and amidst heavy criticism for not having done so earlier. Muslim students are allowed to wear the headscarf in Islamic schools, which the state does not currently recognize, and in private schools and in the universities. But in practice, even in those places it is not welcome.

The ban has had a spillover effect on Muslim women who choose to wear the headscarf in public places and in the labor market. As a result of the ban, over fifty Muslim public school students were expelled. Once public order had been restored, the French state did not seem to be concerned with their integration or schooling, thinking that they would just complete their studies through correspondence courses. In stark contrast, a young sixteen-year-old girl in the United States who decided to wear the full burqa and withdraw from her high school in favor of home-schooling, was initially investigated for possible truancy violations when her computer use raised suspicions of alleged terrorist activities. While a Sikh student unsuccessfully sued the French state for the right to wear a turban, not one single case in the French administrative courts or the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg was initiated before the ruling in order to protest the headscarf ban.

French women are the most opposed to wearing the headscarf, as they see it as a fight for liberty. However, both the Right and Left are united in their opposition to it. The average French citizen cannot comprehend that a rational, emancipated woman could freely choose to wear the

headscarf. One young French Muslim college student commented that a high school classmate had told her that "a girl wearing the headscarf took away her right as a woman." This is mixed with the idea that in France, religion and liberty are incompatible, and so the headscarf, as an outward sign of religion, cannot be accepted.

Initially, members of the Catholic hierarchy strongly opposed the ban because they felt that their religious freedom might be threatened. But when the government assured its members that the ban would not affect them specifically, they came out in favor of it. Some Catholics supported the ban because they did not want to be seen as a threat to *laïcité*. Jacques Chirac himself has said that the French are offended by the headscarf.

The headscarf issue even caused rifts in the anti-racism groups. SOS Racisme, the main French anti-racism organization, supported the ban, whereas the MRAP (the Movement Against Racism and for Friendship among Peoples), a French Muslim anti-racism group, opposed it, as did the Institut Montaigne, a think tank. Sarkozy was the first political figure to speak publicly about the headscarf when he remarked on a televised meeting of Muslims, to which he had been invited to speak, that "I am warning you as your friend, that you cannot wear your headscarf in your identity cards." He was booed by the audience, including by many women who were wearing the headscarf. Although the organizer tried to defuse the tension, France's Muslim community saw this incident as a public provocation.

The issue of the headscarf has different meanings in France and the United States. For those who oppose it in France, the headscarf is seen as a woman's rights issue; in the United States, it is feared as a political statement of militancy. For French Muslims, the headscarf symbolizes other rights related to practicing their religion; American Muslims see it as a freedom of choice issue.



*The Islamic Council in France*

Although Islam is the second largest religion in France, there were no official - and very few unofficial - interlocutors between the French Muslim community and the state for a long time. There is a prevalent concern that the French state feels obliged to protect its Muslims from the Islamists, that it has to "restrict them in order to free them." At first, the community considered Sarkozy as its supporter and invited him to community meetings in order to build better relations. However, some now consider him to be someone out to "control" them.

Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a political alternative in the Socialist party, which, in the minds of French Muslims, just talks, whereas at least Sarkozy appeared to be doing something for them. For example, he proposed that the government modify the secularism law so that it could fund new mosques in order to combat the current foreign funding of building new mosques in some French Muslim areas that could not afford to do so on their own. In addition, he was the first politician to raise affirmative-action type methods to address some of the society's economic inequities.

But Sarkozy has also been a loud critic of the community. During the 2005 riots, he retorted that crime-ridden neighborhoods should be "cleaned with a power hose" and described the rioters as "gangrene and rabble." When he proposed establishing the Islamic Council in France in December 2005 and appointed the director of the Paris Mosque, Dalil Boubaker, as its head, he further alienated the average French Muslim from the government, who felt that they are being "held hostage" by having Boubaker represent their interests.

The Islamic Council in France was formed with the three major Muslim bodies, namely, the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF), the National Federation of Muslims in France (FNMF), and the Paris Mosque, to serve as a counterpart to similar councils set up for the Jewish and Christian communities. Its express

purpose is to meet the Muslims' needs; unofficially, however, its purpose is to "encourage a homegrown and liberal form of Islam free from foreign influences." The Muslims often perceived that the state manipulates them for its own interests. For example, when the mayor of Marseille offered local Muslims a piece of land on which to build a mosque, he blamed them for not being unified enough to finance its construction. Yet the Muslims felt that this was a political stunt and that he himself was exacerbating existing ethnic divisions within the community through his attempts to divide and rule them.

**The Capacity of the French Muslim Community**

Among the community's problems is a lack of organization and the capacity to deal with social change effectively. In France, the absence of Muslim political leaders or even other role models results in a limited religious accommodation of Islamic practices and an overall climate of "Islamophobia." During the Danish cartoon controversy, some French Muslims wanted to sue the magazine to protest the publication of the cartoons caricaturing the prophet Muhammad. The lawyer they hired proved incompetent and unable to file their complaint timely, furthering fueling their sense of impotence. "Earlier this year the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF) and the Paris Mosque sued the French satirical newspaper Charlie-Hebdo and its director, Philippe Val, for publishing caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad accusing them of "publicly abusing a group of people because of their religion." The trial had been presented as an issue of "freedom of speech" against "fundamentalist Islam." This past March the French court ruled that the newspaper and its director showed no intention of insulting the Muslim community with the caricatures, several of which had appeared first in a Danish paper. Ironically the presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy who as the former Interior Minister was instrumental in establishing and supporting these two French Muslim organizations had come

out publicly in support of the newspaper, stating in a letter that was submitted by the defense during the trial that he preferred "an excess of caricatures to an absence of caricatures." While French Muslims, like the French population as a whole, generally do not favor using the courts to bring about social change, there does appear to be an increase in litigation regarding religious accommodation in civil and administrative courts. However, even when discrimination cases are filed successfully, they are not taken seriously and the resulting enforcement and penalties are inadequate. Those who might be most qualified to raise complaints, such as French civil servants, are restricted from criticizing government policy.

There is also a lack of organization on the issue of social promotion. In general, French lawyers are organized at the local level and play no role in shaping public policy, unlike in the United States, where national bar associations play a powerful role in commenting on laws and policies. Many French Muslims want to be involved in French politics, and some are active on the local level in almost every region and party, but they are generally ignored at the national level. In addition, they appear frustrated by the fact that there are no French Muslim Members of Parliament, even though Muslims account for around 10 percent of the French population.

*French Muslim Identity*

The issue of identity starts very early for French Muslims. Abdel Hak, a suburban high school vocational teacher of Moroccan descent, explained the absence of organization among French Muslims as being due to their lack of consciousness that they are being threatened as a group. He stated that when something goes wrong, the young react while the older generation remains silent, because they have so little power in French society. He did say that he was hopeful, because he sees his students asserting their French identity more, rather than being defensive about their Arab identity. Hak has advised his students to "meet the French half way"

and “show them that you accept them and their culture.”

Hak also explained that Islam, for most of his students, was more of a group identity than any spiritual sentiment. Many of the boys were involved with drugs or had older brothers who were in prison; thus, they had few positive role models. When they did try something different, like one young man who had gone to an elite French school and expressed an interest in politics, they were often discouraged. (His parents told him that “politics is not for someone like you.”) There did seem to be differences between the boys and the girls, because the girls managed to avoid some of the boy’s troubles and performed better academically. Most took their studies more seriously as a way to escape from their daily lives. On another positive note, there are increasing numbers of French Muslim teachers in the suburbs.

The community’s lack of a collective consciousness is mirrored by the lack of any public discourse about what it means to have a “hyphenated identity.” There is no Muslim daily or weekly publication, although two on-line journals ([www.oummah.com](http://www.oummah.com) and [www.saphirnews.com](http://www.saphirnews.com)) seek to provide a space in which to nurture civic engagement by facilitating discussion among French Muslims. Existing French Muslim institutions sometimes consciously ignore the community’s present reality and deal with issues like the headscarf only as they relate to such topics as French political identity. While this might have been an adaptive mechanism, it is an intellectual luxury in the absence of a vital discourse and action designed to protect the rights of French Muslims.

Dialogue among second- and third-generation French Muslims is energizing discussions about identity and the need for political action. French Muslims sometimes complain that the Muslims working in the government to oversee the community’s needs do not always engage effectively with them. Regional Muslim organizations are more representative and more effective than the national government-

sanctioned ones.

### *Islamophobia*

The term *Islamophobia* is used to describe the general French antipathy toward Islam. Initially, mainstream intellectuals refused to recognize the existence of specific Islamophobic acts. Many Muslims complained of the media’s equating Islam with terrorism, of discussing Islam and Muslims as a “national security” issue. Others wondered why violence directed against Muslim women is seen as a problem with Islam, whereas violence against non-Muslim women is seen as a social problem. One French intellectual observed that although things are changing and that there is now a growing Muslim middle class, the French perception and media are fifteen years behind current reality.

An emerging trend is for French Muslims to de-emphasize their ethnic differences and focus on their dual French-Muslim identity. Older French Muslims wonder what this will mean for their children whom they had hoped would marry Muslims from their own ethnic background. While first and second generation French Muslims focused on public assimilation, in private they expressed their ethnic background. The third generation wants to be able to make its religious practice public. This puts its members in conflict with both a French political secular identity and the current geopolitical fear of Islam. Some French suspect that no matter how “moderate or progressive” French Muslims may seem, they are all secret fundamentalists and will impose their practices on everyone else. The increased visibility of Islam and Muslims in the French public space appears to have led to a greater contempt for Islam. The extent of this ideology involves resisting Islamic political culture as well as engaging in such deliberate anti-Muslim practices as serving pork in the public school cafeteria, where students have no alternative choices, or serving pork soup in soup kitchens that feed the poor.

Olivier Roy, a professor at the School for

Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris and author of *Globalized Islam* (Columbia University Press: 2004), points out that there is growing misconception regarding Islam in Europe and that there is a large gap between what people, including those on the Left, think about Muslims and the actual reality. At the time of the Danish cartoon protests, the average French person assumed that many Muslims were protesting against the freedom of speech on the streets of Europe and could not be persuaded otherwise, despite the lack of evidence for such an assertion. His solution, shared by French Muslims themselves, is that they unite, speak up, and wait. Roy is optimistic that there is a greater gentrification of French Muslims outside Paris, along with a greater political and professional representation of their overall integration through social promotion. He believes that the real tension is not about religion but about class, and that this is currently manifesting itself vis-à-vis Islam because Islam is tied to most of the current geopolitical conflicts.

The research of Vincent Geisser, a French expert on Islamophobia and a researcher at the government think tank Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), seems to support the idea that the French elite is behind Islamophobia as a racist ideology, that its members in fact deny that Islamophobia exists, and that this “phenomenon” is “a mystification made by the mullahs of Iraq.” Ironically, Claude Imbert, former head of the Haut Conseil à l’Intégration, established to combat Islamophobia, had declared that he himself is an “Islamophobe.” French politicians often cite “immigrant” concerns to speak about or against Muslims in order to constantly reinforce the perception of Muslims as aliens to French society, despite the fact that the majority of them are French citizens. There is very little public information about Muslims in France, including the fact that the rate of conversion to Islam is almost as high as it is in the United States. Islamophobia is one area around which the French Muslim population appears to be organizing. For example, a Muslim lawyers group, Collectif

Contre l'Islamophobie en France, has been established to fight instances of Islamophobia.

One day, there will have to be a national debate in France on whether the French are willing to accept Muslims having real power in decision making and politics. Mohamed Mestiri, one of France's leading Muslim intellectuals and director of the International Institute for Islamic Thought's French office, suggested that the only solution to the dual identity crisis of France and its Muslims is for more French Muslims from various fields to write and speak on, as well as become engaged with, the meaning of citizenship and their claims to equal citizenship. Many French Muslims feel that the government is trying to enforce a form of "French government Islam" that, in fact, penalizes actual Islamic practice. They argue that the country's Muslims are already practicing a "French Islam," but that the government seems to want an Islam that is on its own terms and without some of the more "conservative" or orthodox religious rituals.

This perception is borne out by the recent expulsion of seasonal Muslim workers from the Charles de Gaulle airport for "security concerns." They lost their security clearance when France's Anti-Terrorist Coordination Unit alleged that they posed a "risk to the airport's security" or were simply deemed "dangerous." Lila Charef, an attorney with the Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France representing the workers explained that they were questioned about their religious practices, including whether they were comfortable shaking hands with the opposite sex, having a beard, and other matters that had no relevance to their actual jobs. She argued that these questions were proxies to determine whether they were Salafis or one of the more orthodox or (in the French government's mind) more militant forms of Islam.

During the 2002-03 United States' National Security Entry/Exit Registration System call-in "Special Registration" process, where Muslim men had to register with the United States Immigration authorities,

similar questions were also asked about their religious practices, including prayers and mosque attendance. French authorities have claimed that they were under intense pressure from the United States and Britain to fire these employees, despite positive reviews by their bosses.

### Different French Muslim Ethnicities

Differences among the various ethnic groups within the French Muslim and immigrant communities exist, making it harder for French Muslims to organize in some cases. Many South Asian immigrants claim that they have not faced the same discrimination as other groups. Their different background and limited numbers might be a factor, but even they complained about the glass ceiling for workplace advancement. Others remarked that black West Africans, including those from Senegal and Mali, faced less religious discrimination but more racial discrimination than North Africans from Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, that is to say, the Maghrebis or Arabs. Among this group and of all the immigrant groups, Algerians face the greatest discrimination at every level of society. Some Muslims feel that the police go after the blacks or West Africans for immigration checks and after the Arabs or Maghrebis for vandalism. Although there is some disagreement on the causes, there seems to be a consensus by Muslims and non-Muslims alike that the Algerians are the most harassed by the French police. While this has a lot to do with Algeria's particular colonial history and subsequent terrorist acts in France following unrest in Algeria, the French government's racist practices toward the Algerians also carried over toward French Algerians.

This different treatment might also be explained by the demographic differences between the more recent sub-Saharan African immigrants, who are fewer in number and less visible than the North African immigrants, who have been there for generations. For some Muslim immigrants, Islam is almost a badge of identity with its required practices, and any deviation from it is seen as a betrayal of

their honor or group identity. Suburban high schools teachers complain that some of their male students harass those Muslim classmates who do not fast during Ramadan. French social institutions will have to become more elastic in dealing with such perennial issues as peer pressure in the face of its changing society so that freedom of religion is preserved for everyone.

### Post-9/11 Issues for French Muslims

Some post-9/11 issues facing Muslims in France include the greater scrutiny and monitoring of their actions. There is more security in front of public buildings, and more identity checks of those who look like Muslims. Many complain about the increased surveillance of their mosques. Others state that overt signs of an Islamic identity, such as having the name "Muhammad" or growing a beard, have caused some discrimination. One French Tunisian cab driver recalled that shortly after 9/11 he shaved his beard off because he was losing so much business. A few individuals with obvious Muslim names have had problems with international money transfers. Interestingly, even those South Asian immigrants who did not complain of any integration problems cautioned against mentioning Islam directly while enquiring about the issues facing immigrants in a mixed Muslim and non-Muslim group. Mestiri pointed out one positive effect: 9/11 brought Islam and Muslims into the public arena and increased non-formal networks among Muslims.

### The French Education System

While the country's free universal access to a basic level of education has been lauded, vast inequities remain in the type of education that one may receive. Some asylum seekers praise France's education system, particularly the language courses offered to them, even when they cannot take advantage of it because of their need to work. Entry into the elite universities (the *grandes ecoles*), which leads to the top jobs, is determined by how well one does on the two-year preparatory *concours*

entrance exams. Many French Muslims, especially those who live in the suburbs, are unprepared for or even unaware of these exams.

Sciences Po, one of France's most prestigious *grandes écoles*, has initiated a plan to work with the French government to create programs that address the system's inequities. For example, it will waive the entrance exam requirement in order to admit some of the top disadvantaged suburban high school students and will offer mentoring and other programs to disadvantaged suburban high schools students to help place under-represented students in the *grandes écoles*. Many second-generation French Muslims who do well in school find it hard to secure appropriate jobs upon graduation.

### The Economic Integration of Immigrants

France has made plans to provide social services to its immigrants, but not to ease or encourage their social integration. Social inequality, unemployment, failure at school, and delinquency are the major issues facing French Muslims, not the lack of cultural integration.

One impediment to fighting workplace discrimination is the lack of ethnic statistics. This ban was implemented after World War II, during which French Jews had been sent to their deaths, to prevent further discrimination based on ethnic or religious statistics. However, their current absence makes it more difficult to assess the diversity of French society. One argument against having such statistics is that it "ethnicizes" a problem that is not based on ethnicity. However, all of the evidence shows that ethnicity is one of the clearest barriers to entering the French workplace. While knowing the language is enough for some immigrants, like Asians, to gain entry into the private sector, mobility within a company is restricted if you are not white French. Certain French institutions, among them the army and the civil service, have been more successful than the private sector in treating all

French citizens equally. In contrast, the American private sector has more consistently recognized merit, despite other differences.

Entrepreneurship does not appear to be encouraged or facilitated in France, as it is in the United States. For a French employee, it is considered a step down to start his/her own business; for a French Muslim, it is often a step up on the economic ladder. While business volatility is a universal concern, risk is generally not as well rewarded as it is in the United States. Some French Muslim men have gone into business for themselves because they could not move up the French corporate structure. While they have faced many obstacles, including limited access to capital and difficulties attracting business, they prefer having their own business.

Saber Ben Dhiem, the owner of a small telecommunications company, said that he started his own business to serve as a role model for his children as someone who was his own boss and had standing in the larger community. He spoke about the lack of diversity in the French business sector and saw this as an impediment to competing in the global marketplace. In addition, he pointed out that unlike French companies, some British companies had partnered with British Arab or Muslim businessmen in order to attract business in the Middle East. As a result, their contract bids had been accepted, while those of France had not.

In the United States, many companies that bid for government work maintain a 51 percent minority ownership in order to win contracts that give preference to minority-owned businesses. In contrast, Ben Dhiem stated that he had to keep white French employees as the public face of his company when he submitted a tender offer if he hoped to get any business. In his opinion, not only were French businesses making bad business decisions by not partnering with French Muslim businessmen like himself, it seems that they do not want to give French Muslims this type of stature or recognition as

individuals or as a community. Ben Dhiem hopes that American businesses, in particular those owned by Muslims, will invest with European Muslim-owned companies for "synergy."

While there is a growing awareness of the need to address the private sector's lack of diversity, there is little concerted effort to remedy it. Affirmative action, as understood in the United States, would be illegal in France and difficult to implement due to the current lack of relevant ethnic data. The Institut Montaigne, a business think tank, has taken a leading role in addressing workplace discrimination. The institute's strongest supporters include Yazid Sabeg, one of the country's few top CEOs of Algerian descent and among the most important advocates of affirmative action in France. Sabeg, who consistently reiterates the demand for economic equality (not integration) for French Muslims, stresses that to achieve equality, a form of affirmative action needs to be established in order to address barriers to entering the job market. He has spearheaded the concept of using "blind CVs" in job applications as a remedy to the first point of discrimination: applicants with non-traditional French names are not invited in for interviews. Although this suggestion was recently codified into French law, the business sector's strong opposition to it has prevented its implementation. Sabeg speaks of his desire to create a French equivalent to the Small Business Administration in the United States that would help Muslim entrepreneurs gain access to the needed start-up capital.

Many middle-class French university students have protested against the new labor law initiative known as CPE (the *contrat premiere embauche*, loosely translated as "first contract hiring"), which seeks to facilitate the hiring of young employees by allowing companies to fire new employees during the first two years. Although this measure was meant to encourage companies to hire more employees, they fear that this will actually lead to greater job insecurity as it will be easier to be let go."



Others, however, have a different reaction. Those *grandes ecoles* students who are positioned to join the top of the economic ladder and would have little difficulty in getting jobs were ambivalent, whereas those at the bottom, including French Muslims who faced great difficulties in getting a job, welcome it as a positive step to help them enter the job market.

## Conclusion

People have speculated that France will need another generation to integrate its Muslims successfully. But neither the country nor the community can afford to wait so long. While the French greatly value citizenship and are protective of their social welfare state, and therefore cautious about whom they allow in, they must figure out what to do with the diverse population that already lives among them. France will have to negotiate how to maintain its non-communitarian identity without taking measures that can be perceived as, or in effect are, anti-Muslim.

Despite the irony of a secular state being involved in creating a state religion, France is eager to play a leading role in creating a French-adapted version of Islam, an *Islam des Lumieres* (an "enlightened Islam"). Its Muslims, however, wonder if such an Islam can tolerate Islamic practices and Muslim free will. Right now, the most organized Islamic organizations in France are often the most conservative and perceived as the most fundamentalist, such as the Union of Islamic Organizations, which is a member of the Islamic Council in France. Thus, public figures like Bernard Henri Levy in France and others throughout Europe can generalize that Islam is a threat to the state. Vincent Geisser, a researcher on Islam in France, warns that these elites do not understand that although the majority of French Muslims are orthodox or conservative in their religious practice, this does not mean that

they are against the French state.

While the establishment wants to control something that it does not understand or accept, French Muslims favor the original conception of *laïcité* and see no contradiction between this and their practice of Islam. The French government wants to sanction mosques, train and place imams, or use an extreme concept of *laïcité* to ban headscarves. In a society where French Muslims do not have their own independent capable institutions, this could be a recipe for further alienating them. Unfortunately, this seems to be the pattern rather than the exception throughout Europe, where countries are attempting to "integrate" Muslims by enforcing their own view of an acceptable Islam. While the United States might also wish to limit Islam in this manner, existing and increasing indigenous Islamic institutions serve as a check on such attempts. Certain uniquely French characteristics have a specific negative effect on French Muslims. An anti-entrepreneurial culture limits economic mobility, while a weak civil society inhibits coalitions around shared interests among different groups.

France must find a way to adapt its political identity with its social reality. While it may not "celebrate" diversity as the United States purports to do, it must at least accommodate it. Allowing Muslims in France to be French Muslims is the first step. The upcoming presidential election may show whether France is ready to take this step. Sadly, the campaign so far has not been promising. Each of the major candidates, Nicolas Sarkozy of the right wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party and Ségolène Royal of the French Socialist party, as well as the new comer Francois Bayrou of the centrist Union for French Democracy (UDF) party, appear to have either taken the French Muslim community for granted or ignored them or

taken anti-Muslim stances. Despite the increasing numbers of Muslims in France, their disadvantaged background and lack of political organization prevent them from enjoying a status commensurate with their size. France missed an opportunity after the 2005 riots to acknowledge and begin to remedy this inequity. There is still hope that the Republic can live up to its ideals if its leaders have the courage to face its future.

---

*Moushumi Khan is a Research Associate at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) and an attorney in New York City. She is also a Term Member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Ms. Khan has had extensive experience with cross-cultural issues affecting companies dealing with Muslims and continues to be active in the non-profit, economic development and legal sectors.*

*Ms. Khan has served on Advisory Committees at the Council on Foreign Relations on immigration, national security and public diplomacy, and participated in drafting the Council Special Report "A New Beginning: Strategies for a More Fruitful Dialogue with the Muslim World." She has published many articles on subjects relating to the Muslim American community.*

*Ms. Khan earned her J.D. degree from the University of Michigan Law School in 1996 and received an A.B. degree in Critical Social Thought, cum laude, from Mount Holyoke College in 1993. She was recently selected as a Zuckerman Fellow at Harvard University where she will pursue a Master's degree in Public Administration at the John F. Kennedy School of Government.*

---

This policy brief was supported by a generous grant from an ISPU donor in St. Louis Missouri.

*ISPU normally does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views presented here do not necessarily reflect the views of ISPU, its officers, staff or trustees.*

©2007 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) is an independent and nonprofit organization committed to solving critical social problems in the United States through education, research, training, and policy analysis. ISPU provides cutting-edge analysis and policy solutions through publications, public events, media commentary, and community outreach. Major areas of focus include domestic politics, social policy, the economy, health, education, the environment, and foreign policy. Since our inception in 2002, ISPU's research has worked to increase understanding of key public policy issues and how they impact various communities in the United States.

US society is far from being monolithic, whether culturally, socially or politically. It is therefore imperative that the thoughts and insights of each aspect of this heterogeneity play a contributory role in the discourse and debate of issues that affect all Americans. ISPU was established and premised on this idea – that each community must address, debate, and contribute to the pressing issues facing our nation. It is our hope that this effort will give voice to creative new ideas and provide an alternative perspective to the current policy-making echelons of the political, academic and public-relations arenas of the United States.

ISPU firmly believes that optimal analysis and treatment of social issues mandates a comprehensive study from several different and diverse backgrounds. As social challenges become more complex and interwoven, ISPU is unique in its ability to bring this new approach to the human and social problems facing our country. Through this unique approach, ISPU will produce scholarly publications, incorporating new voices and adding diversity to the realm of ideas. Our multidisciplinary work in partnership with universities and other research institutes serves to build understanding and create programs that effect lasting social change.

Further information about ISPU can be obtained from our website at [www.ispu.org](http://www.ispu.org)



All ISPU Policy Briefs are  
available on our website  
[www.ispu.org](http://www.ispu.org)

