



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Report

After the Paris Attacks: Islam in France

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28 December 2015



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10,000 troops were deployed across France following Paris attacks [Reuters]

Abstract

The attacks that hit the city of Paris on 13 November 2015 stirred up the entire French population. One hundred and thirty people died in a wave of terrorism that constitutes the worst attack experienced by the country since the Second World War's end. The Islamic State (Daesh) claimed responsibility for the attacks, which also wounded more than three hundred people.

Introduction

Beginning with a terrorist act that targeted the offices of Charlie Hebdo newspaper and a Jewish store, in France the year 2015 ended with a vast operation that mobilised a dozen activists including several suicide bombers. Such operation, in nature and extent, is unique in the country's contemporary history. In the aftermath of the attacks, French society has questioned the causes of this hyper-terrorism that struck the country, which included nationals as part of those who performed the attacks. Among these questions, apart from that of the conditions of radicalisation in the Middle East that gave birth to the Islamic State (Daesh), arises the issue of the Muslim presence in the country as well as in Europe. This is the challenge that we will analyse in this report while studying the relevance of the security response adopted by the authorities to fight against 'radical Islam'. We conclude that the exploitation of identity has become an electoral issue in a France where populist parties solidify in each election.

'Islam in France' or the difficult emergence of an endogenous representation

France has the largest Muslim minority on the European continent (excluding Russia). With an estimated six million followers, Islam is not only the country's second-largest religion, but it is also characterised by a predominantly young and dynamic population.

The presence of Islam is mainly due to successive waves of migration during the Second World War when hundreds of thousands of workers from the Maghreb, Turkey and Sub-Saharan Africa were welcomed to France to help rebuild the country. First conceived as a transitional phase, this immigration became finalised, and afterwards, new generations were born in France and became citizens of the country. Thus 'Islam in France' now very much depends on this generation of newcomers, which is still responsible for the two thousand five hundred mosques spread over the national territory.⁽¹⁾ Despite the twenty-year ambition of authorities to set up an 'Islam of France', it is clear that the vast majority of elements representing Islam are tools with close foreign links. Symbolic of this tutelage, the Grand Mosque of Paris is directly related to the Embassy of Algeria. As for the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), established by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2003 when he was the Interior Minister, its current president comes from an arrangement dependent on the Moroccan authorities.

This question of the institutionalisation of French Islam is the central public debate at the moment, and, as evidence of this focus, many politicians and the media have prioritised this issue in public debate. The problem is that, while France is experiencing a tragic situation that requires the presence of credible and responsible authorities, the current Muslim representation not only lacks credibility among the Muslim base, but it is also out of step with the authorities' aspiration to set up an 'Islam of France'. This dichotomy between the state and its relationship with the Muslim presence was detected well before the attacks by the researcher Olivier Roy who declared in June 2015 that 'to date, the French power has been negotiating the organisation of Islam in France under the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) with the Algerian, Moroccan and Turkish authorities. This is contradictory, because if the goal is to create a "French Islam", one cannot pass through foreign countries who send us conservatives and national imams, as we wish for the presence of French imams who are open to the society.'⁽²⁾ One of the major problems of Islam in France is therefore in this equation, for the moment, unsolvable. Yet there is a sense of urgency, because the absence of a representative voice is a handicap both in reassuring the public and also in organising the practice of a strongly growing religion. To accompany this development, the government decided in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks earlier this year, to establish a 'forum for dialogue'. Although normally in a secular context the organisation of worship should not be supported by the state, this platform of reflection seems to be a positive step because it allows, for the first time, a frank and calm discussion between many actors in the Muslim community and the authorities. This forum, which meets twice a year and is sponsored by the Prime Minister, is working on several projects (such as, training imams, building mosques, sanitation of halal meat or organisation of the pilgrimage). Its next meeting will take place in January.

The issue of radicalisation and the need to classify the causes of sectarianism

The question of representation has been accompanied by a situation where in order to strike jihadist channels, the French authorities have opted for a safe solution, which many observers think carry risks. Indeed, the day after the attacks, the police made vast sweeps in an environment of 'radical Islam' resulting in hundreds of raids and house arrests over the course of a few days. Put in place the evening of the attacks, the state of emergency was extended by a nearly unanimous vote of both chambers of the French parliament. This state of emergency – now in force for a period of three months – gives the executive special powers, particularly in matters of security and police. If we understand the need to respond vigorously to the attack that targeted France, the state of emergency should not be implemented outside of the rule of law guaranteeing respect for fundamental freedoms.

However, it is emphasised that if some of the searches conducted are justified, they also quickly caused an uproar in the Muslim community in France as a result of their abusive nature.⁽³⁾ From mosques raided on the basis of false accusations to unjustly besieged restaurants, numerous testimonials have flourished in the wake of the attacks denouncing what many Muslim leaders regard as 'electioneering searches'.⁽⁴⁾ Concerning the mosques, their targeting is reported to be absurd because, firstly, none of the terrorists involved in the 13 November attacks attended them, and also experts agree that radicalisation does not occur in mosques but rather in prisons and on the Internet. This reality is particularly highlighted by the specialist in jihadist movements, David Thomson, who also recalls that radical imams were expelled from France in the late 1990s and 2000s.⁽⁵⁾ So targeting the mosques had no consistency for many actors in the Muslim community, who interpreted this as an expression of general suspicion that these mosques are often ideological ramparts for the radical discourse of the Islamic State (Daesh), which is all the more unfounded. The images of raids on places of worship (including the mosques of Aubervilliers or Mureaux) went viral on the social networks and have caused turmoil in a community that does not understand the logic of this amalgam between mosques and radicalism. On this subject, it must be added that surveillance of mosques in France by the authorities is not a new development. Since the attacks in Paris by the Algerian GIA (Armed Islamic Group) in 1995, and even more since the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, mosques and imams are subject to strict control either by the French authorities or by the authorities of their country of origin.⁽⁶⁾

The emotion aroused by these searches hinted at a shift in the rise of new Muslim figures in France. An AFP article particularly emphasised that, facing the discrediting of traditional representatives of Islam, new voices were emerging within the Muslim community in France. Among them, there are bloggers who have a strong audience on

the Internet (such as the site Al-Kanz), humanitarian associations with hundreds of thousands of followers on social networks (like Baraka City) and civil rights associations (such as the Collective Against Islamophobia in France, CFIC), which is working on legal monitoring of Islamophobic acts, which have risen sharply since the last attacks.(7) These new structures have a strong youth audience and have started to receive recognition from both the government and the media, who seem obligated to give a voice to these new actors, whose ideology and militant practices (including online) are distant from the current representatives' traditional speeches and smoothness. As Olivier Roy recalled, 'whenever the government thinks "moderate imam", it gets us a poorly attired stammering French Algerian who repeats "Islam, religion of peace". This is catastrophic because the youth consider these folk imams ridiculous. When they see Hassen Chalghoumi, the imam of Drancy, speaking on the television, they are ashamed to be identified with him. It's the same for Dalil Boubakeur, president of the CFCM: no young French graduate can for a moment recognise himself in him.'(8)

The election issues related to Islam and immigration

Another key factor in the evolution of the political situation in France and the rest of Europe concerns the election issue. It is now established that the place of Islam in European societies and the immigration issue have become important to the public debate. In France, as recalled by the researcher Jean Baubérot, these subjects manifest in the concept of secularism, which has often been exploited as an ideological tool to foster a form of Islamophobia(9), which is racism, as institutions such as the CNCDH (National Consultative Commission on Human Rights) now fully recognise. In this regard, today it is the National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen that sets the tone, and often other political parties follow the pace decided by the National Front leader. However, since the events of 13 November, the proposals of nationality deprivation, mosque control or stopping refugee reception dominate the discussions. This creates a climate of distrust with the proliferation of security theories and feeds a logical connection that reflects the image that a practicing Muslim is a potential terrorist. France's identity crisis risks being illustrated in the regional elections next 6 and 13 December, where for the first time in its history the FN is set to win two regions.(10) This would signal a decisive entrenchment of the formation, which may become the first party of France. Faced with these developments, the discourse of the other government parties, including Republicans, would be tempted to follow the logic of the rightward shift, which, again, would strengthen the atmosphere of anxiety in France, which is threatened by both terrorism abroad and also by uncontrolled immigration.

Conclusion

The post-13 November situation has prompted significant repositioning within the Muslim community. From our point of view, this evolution is likely to increase. The Muslim community will continue its slow and gradual restructuring outside traditional patterns

with an inexorable rise of new actors with an assertive activist and contributory practice. This shift, from our point of view, marks of the final entrenchment of new Muslim generations whose allegiance is no longer to foreign countries but to the French nation. One of the major issues for France's future is whether terrorism that claims to belong (falsely) to Islam will hinder this development or not.

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References

- (1) Political scientist Gilles Kepel describes this first generation as the 'darons'. It is distinguished among three generations that have historically structured the organisation of the Muslim faith. The first one, the 'darons', consists of first-generation immigrants who implemented the first mosques in the 1970s. The second generation, the 'blédars', were students from the Arab world in the 1980s who conceptualised an Islam engaged in giving birth to large federations, such as the Union of Islamic Organisations of France (UOIF). Finally, the 'young generation of Islam', which comprises the new figures of Muslim associations that are active on social networks and have developed a more assertive and contributory speech. See Kepel, Gilles (2012). *Quatre-vingt-treize (Ninety three)*. Paris: Gallimard.
- (2) See the Olivier Roy interview by Lemonnier, Marie (2015). 'Olivier Roy: "Il faut cesser d'importer des imams immigrés" (Olivier Roy: We must stop importing immigrant imams)', *L'Obs*, 21 June. < <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/societe/20150619.OBS1157/olivier-roy-il-faut-cesser-d-importer-des-imams-immigres.html> >.
- (3) For a partial list of these unreasonable searches, see (2015). 'Perquisitions musclées, arrestations injustifiées: les abus de l'état d'urgence (Muscléd searches, false arrests: the abuse of the state of emergency)', *Le Monde*, 23 November. < http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/11/23/les-petites-bavures-de-l-etat-d-urgence_4815803_4355770.html#YBDDTI2rII6geaY.99 >.
- (4) The expression is from the influential blogger Al Kanz. See (2015). 'Elections régionales: 2000 perquisitions, 549 garde-à-vue pour Valls (Regional elections: 2000 searches, 549 arrests to Valls)', Al Kanz, 1 December. < <https://www.al-kanz.org/2015/12/01/perquisitions-valls/> >.
- (5) The investigative journalist David Thomson is one of the best French specialists on jihadist questions. See (2014) 'Le phénomène du jihad échappe totalement aux imams en France (The phenomenon of jihad escapes totally from the imams in France)', *BFM*, 19 June. See also his essay (2014). *Les Français jihadistes (The French Jihadists)*. Paris: Les Arènes.
- (6) It has to be added that nothing incriminating was found in all of the raided mosques. This is a proof for Muslim civil society actors of the inconsistency of the security policy being implemented.
- (7) See (2015). 'Face à des institutions faibles, l'émergence de nouvelles figures de l'islam (Faced with weak institutions, the emergence of the new figures of Islam)', *AFP Dispatch*, 26 November.
- (8) Interview with Olivier Roy, *Ibid*.
- (9) See Baubérot, Jean (2014). *La laïcité falsifiée (Falsified Secularism)*. Paris: La Découverte.
- (10) Evidence of the polarisation of the debate on Muslims, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, head of the FN list in the Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur region said that the Muslims of France 'can be French only under

certain conditions'. This statement has deeply touched the political class, with the former minister Jack Lang even calling for sanctions on these remarks. See (2015). 'Pour Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, les musulmans ne peuvent être français que sous conditions (To Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, Muslims can be French only under conditions)', MetroNews, 2 December. < <http://www.metronews.fr/elections/pour-marion-marechal-le-pen-les-musulmans-ne-peuvent-etre-francais-que-sous-conditions/molb!HwDAOAoa3FHSQ/> >.

