France

Quick Facts

Population: 67,848,156 (July 2020 est.)
Area: 643,801 sq km; 551,500 sq km (metropolitan France)
Ethnic Groups: Celtic and Latin with Teutonic, Slavic, North African, Indochinese, Basque minorities
GDP (official exchange rate): $2.588 trillion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)

Introduction

Muslims remain a distinct minority in France, accounting for less than 10 percent of the overall national population. However, French Muslims are significantly represented among the country's young – and politically active – cohort. While the state has created several institutions with the (at least declared) intention to invest in and engage with the Muslim community, issues surrounding inclusiveness, economic opportunity, and public dress have nonetheless fostered societal tension. This has contributed to the radicalization of a small minority of French Muslims, with the result that in recent years France has ranked as one of the most significant sources of the Islamic State's foreign fighters.

Domestically, several notable terrorist attacks, including the Charlie Hebdo shooting and Bastille Day truck massacre, have claimed over 250 lives since 2015, and in the process accentuated and accelerated a national conversation about the Islamic faith.[1] Over the years, the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (French Council of the Muslim Faith, or CFCM), which France created to represent the Muslim community, has experienced internal divisions among the constituent organizations that represent the many subgroups of France's Muslim population. As France cracks down on Islamic extremism and continues to debate the wearing of traditional Islamic clothing in public, communication and consensus with the Muslim community have emerged as critical elements of public policy. Insufficient official engagement by French authorities with the country's Muslims, however, have to date generated feelings of exclusion among that cohort and contributed to large scale protests and even riots.

Islamist Activity

Musulmans de France (Muslims of France, or MF)

The Musulmans de France (MF) was originally founded, in the form of the Union des Organisations

Islamiques en France (Union of Islamic Organizations in France, or UOIF), in 1983 by political refugees from the Middle East and North Africa and Islamist students sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.[2] After three girls in Creil, France, were barred from wearing *hijab* while attending their secondary school in October 1989, the UOIF took a leadership role in defending their right to do so, raising its own profile within the French Islamic community.[3] At group's 1989 annual meeting, Sheikh Rashid al-Ghannouchi declared that France should be considered part of the *Dar al-Islam* (House of Islam) to that French Muslims would properly see the country as their home. In 1990, UOIF solidified this by changing its name to the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (meaning "of France" rather than "in France").[4] The organization officially changed its name again in 2017 to MF, an action some theorize was a response to its designation as a terrorist organization by the United Arab Emirates in 2014.[5] MF currently claims to include 280 member associations and to be active in 120 towns in France.[6] MF also runs two training institutes in order to "form the future *imams* of France.[7]

MF's popularity is due, in part, to a public imaged designed to demonstrate that its objectives are compatible with the norms of the French republic. For example, the official goals of MF include, "To present and make known Islam, its values of openness and tolerance, its ethics and its morality while basing itself on an understanding of the right environment and an authentic practice," and to "Promote dialogue with the various religious families in France, and the institutions of civil society, with a view to strengthening social cohesion." MF also seeks to encourage French citizenship among Muslims.[8]

MF has come under scrutiny in the last decade. Several speakers who were invited by MF to speak at the 2012 Rancontre Annuelle des Musulmans de France (Annual Meeting of the Muslims of France, or RAMF), a high-profile annual conference of activists and representatives, were prevented from entering the country by French authorities, among them Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, the unofficial chief ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood."[9] As previously mentioned, the United Arab Emirates classified the then-UOIF as a terrorist group in 2014.

MF estimates that its annual conference – the Rencontre Annuelle des Musulmans de France – sees at least 150,000 attendees each year.[10] (In 2020, this conference was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the French government's ban on gatherings of over 5,000 people, but MF previously had expected turnout to exceed 160,000 people.[11]) At the same time, more traditional French Muslims accuse MF of abandoning core traditional principles in search of broader notoriety.[12]

Since boycotting the 2013 elections for the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (French Council of the Muslim Faith, or CFCM), which was established in 2002 by the French government as the official body to represent the French Muslim community, MF has lost some of its influence.[13] In the most recent elections of representatives to the CFCM by practicing French Muslims in November 2019, MF won only one elected seat, though the group retains a spot on the CFCM's board of directors.[14] Overall, though, the organization's ideas have spread throughout the French Muslim community and MF maintains links to global Islamic institutions and scholars.[15]

Grande Mosquée de Paris

Founded in 1926, the Grand Mosque of Paris (GMP) is France's oldest Muslim institution. The French government funded its creation to show gratitude to Muslim soldiers from French colonies who had died fighting in the first World War.[16] Algeria took over funding for the GMP in the early 1980s, and Algerian *imams* have been imported under the supervision of the GMP since that time.[17] The French government selected the GMP as its preferred representative of the Muslim community with which it would engage and encouraged the Mosque's rector, Sheikh Abbas el Hocine, and, by extension, the Algerian state, to organize French Muslims and *imams* around the GMP in the 1980s.[18] After el Hocine died in 1989, the French government continued to attempt to center French Islam around the GMP. This met greater pushback following the 1995 Paris Subway Bombings, a series of terrorist attacks by the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria that killed eight people and injured at least 150.[19]

In 2003, the French government selected Dalil Boubakeur, who had served as the Rector of the GMP between 1992 and 2020, to lead the CFCM.[20] Boubakeur fit what the French government wanted in a leader of the Islamic community due to his support for Muslim assimilation into French culture. During a 2006 address, Boubakeur said, "I am not in favor of multiculturalism… there is only one culture: French culture," thereby articulating an idea that was and remains far from universally accepted by French Muslims.[21] Boubakeur also returned as temporary president of the CFCM in October 2019, until the body could complete its latest round of elections.[22] That allowed French-Moroccan Mohamed Moussaoui to win the January 2020 election unopposed.[23] Like MF, the GMP now holds nine seats in the CFCM, filled by seven elected as well as nine unelected representatives.[24] Throughout France, the GMP was estimated in 2016 to have authority over about 250 prayer spaces and 10 percent (150) of *imams*, most of whom are from Algeria.[25] An additional poll done by French Muslim sociologist Marwan Muhammad that included 27,000 respondents concluded that just seven percent identified with the CFCM, and almost two-thirds of French Muslims wanted a new, better structure to represent them at the national level.[26] Following the body's November 2019 elections, Moussaoui criticized the CFCM's lack of credibility. He attributed this to the CFCM's decision to maintain the system of selecting half of its body through unelected means, which disadvantaged his faction, the Union of Mosques of France (UMF), and, according to Moussaoui, alienated the body from the will of the French Muslim population.[27]

Fédération Nationale des Musulmans de France (FNMF) and related groups

The FNMF was founded in 1985 by Daniel Youssof Leclerc, a French convert to Islam, as an alternative to rising Algerian influence over the French Muslim community.[28] The FNMF is closest with the French Moroccan community but also has received Saudi funding, and leadership positions have been held by Muslims of many nationalities.[29]

While the GMP was awarded the presidency of the CFCM, the FNMF technically won the most seats in the first elections in 2003. The organization won 16 seats out of a total of 41, three more than the second-place UOIF and 10 more than the third-place GMP. This advantage grew in 2005, when the FNMF won 19 seats out of 43.[30] The Moroccan government responded by actively organizing French Muslims of Moroccan origins under the umbrella of the Rassemblement des Marocains de France (Gathering of the Moroccans of France, or RMF).[31] This helped to make the French-Moroccan Muslim community more influential. After Boubakeur's term as President of the CFCM ended in 2008, he was replaced by French-Moroccan Mohammed Moussaoui, then Vice President of the RMF, and in 2011, the RMF won 62 percent of the vote in CFCM elections without real opposition.[32]

However, the RMF became less relevant after the UMF split off in 2013, led by Moussaoui. The UMF boycotted a General Assembly to craft reforms to the CFCM in April 2019, and Moussaoui criticized the CFCM reforms for being insufficient. In November 2019, Moussaoui also criticized the CFCM's stance that wearing a veil is a religious necessity for French Muslim women.[33]

The Islamic State (IS)

French nationals have been a prominent target of the Islamic State's recruitment efforts since shortly after the group's emergence in Iraq and Syria in 2013-2014. As a result, France has been estimated to be the largest Western European source of foreign fighters to the Islamic State, and the sixth largest source worldwide.[34] As of 2017 (the most up to date information available), an estimated 1,910 foreign fighters who joined the Islamic State came from France, the most updated data available.[35] Furthermore, authorities have found that returning French foreign fighters have been significantly more likely to engage in terrorist acts than returnees of other nationalities. On average, three percent of foreign fighters returning to the West have been found to be involved with terrorist attacks, but 10.6 percent of French returnees from the Syria-Iraqi context were involved in attacks between 2013 and 2016.[36]

The terror group's singular appeal in France can be attributed to its battlefield successes, combined

with French Muslims' disproportionately poor living conditions – features that have conspired to make French Islamic communities a fertile recruiting ground for the group.[37] The French-language magazine *Dar al-Islam* was active between December 2014 and October 2016, and was one of the group's first efforts to expand recruitment beyond Arabic- and English-speakers.[38] This early initiative, which sought largely to justify the group's existence,[39] was succeeded by a more ambitious one, known as *Rumiyah*, which was published in several languages (including English, French, German, Russian, and others).[40] French Muslims, however, were not simply enlisted by these methods to engage in *jihad* abroad, however; IS recruitment videos and other promotional material called upon *jihadists* to execute attacks in France itself.[41]

These recruitment efforts, in turn, led to a number of terrorist plots and attacks on French soil. In November 2015, for instance, Islamic State operatives killed 130 civilians and injured 100 more in Paris and the city's northern suburb of Saint Denis; evidence indicated that these attacks had been planned in Syria and organized in Belgium.[42] Other IS propaganda videos also specifically targeted French teenage girls, and in 2016, French authorities arrested an all-female Islamic State cell that had planned to attack the Eiffel Tower and attempted a car bomb attack near the Notre Dame Cathedral.[43] Several attacks, both successful and foiled, were also believed to be coordinated virtually from Islamic State-territory by Rashid Kassim, an amateur rapper born in Roanne, France, who became an Islamic State operative.[44] Two prominent 2016 attacks linked to Kassim were a murder of an 86-year-old priest in Saint-Etienne du Rouvray and the murders of two French police officers.[45] Kassim was reportedly killed in Iraq by a coalition drone strike in February 2017.[46]

As the Islamic State steadily lost territory in recent years, the group's activism in Europe had declined. Nevertheless, a number of notable incidents have taken place over the past two years, among them the December 2018 killing spree in Strasbourg of French national Chérif Chekatt[47] (which the Islamic State praised[48]) and the February 2020 knife attack by a trainee soldier on police officers in a barracks in Dieuze, France.[49]

A disproportionate percentage (about 20 percent) of French IS affiliates of French origin are women. While the proportion of all female IS affiliates is approximately 13 percent, up to 20 percent of those of French origin are estimated to be women.[50] In addition, France is the source of the largest number of IS affiliates who are minors—between 460 and 700.[51] About a third of these minors were born in IS territory.[52]

Salafi elements

In the past 15 years, France has experienced a marked rise in Salafism. As of 2018, French security forces were estimating that the number of French Salafists had risen from 5,000 in 2004 to somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000.[53] (More recent figures are not available.) However, this group is still very much a minority among French Muslims when considering estimates of the total population.[54] While Salafism encourages Muslims who are minorities in their respective countries to move to a Muslim land as a "migration of salvation," only about 20 percent of French Salafists have tried to leave France for a Muslim society at some point in their lives.[55] Instead, French Salafists have conducted a sort of internal migration and isolation within France, with this ideology leading many to engage in entrepreneurship independent from the rest of the French economy.[56]

Some French politicians, including former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, have advocated in favor of a ban on Salafism, and a 2018 Odaxa poll found that 88 percent of French people would favor this action.[57] Tensions have continued to rise, and in February 2020 President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech in which he declared that "political Islam has no place in the Republic" and pledged to fight "separatism."[58]

Islam and Society

One of the pillars of French policy for many years has been *laïcité*, or French secularism. This aims to separate church and state, but interpretations of this differ between whether it should mean that the state should protect the exercise of every religion or that French people should not outwardly display their religion in public.[59]

The most recent Interior Ministry estimate of mosques in France is from 2012, because laws from 1872 and 1905 bar the regular collection of religious and ethnic data.[60] At that time, the total number of mosques in the country was estimated at about 2,500, although a 2016 report by the French Senate posited that the number may have increased to roughly 3,000.[61] A July 2016 report from the French Senate found that, while foreign funding of mosques does exist in France—mostly from Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia—this amount is relatively low compared to what is provided indigenously by the French Muslim community.[62]

However, foreign influence does obtain. Approximately 70 percent of *imams* in France are not French.[63] One possible explanation for this, posed by Islam expert Oliver Roy, is monetary: "Young, observant French Muslims with advanced degrees won't become *imams*—they won't settle for 500 euros a month."[64] Another theory comes from Kamel Daoud, an Algerian writer and journalist: that France might prefer foreign *imams* for security reasons. To wit: "It seems less risky to rely on an official *imam* from Algeria than to let a self-proclaimed *imam* emerge in a Paris banlieue, or suburb."[65]

In 2015, then-French President François Hollande signed a deal with the Moroccan monarchy that would send French *imams* to a training center located in Rabat, Morocco.[66] However, in February 2020, President Macron announced the end of a 1977 policy that allows a total of nine countries—Algeria, Croatia, Spain, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Serbia, Tunisia and Turkey—to send *imams* to preach in French mosques.[67] This is part of a broader national strategy to combat foreign influence on French Islamic culture.[68] Instead, Macron said his administration was asking the CFCM to train *imams* in France as a way to limit the spread of radical ideology.[69]

However, some French politicians argue that, in order to stop radicalization of French Muslims, authorities need to focus their energy on addressing extremism in prisons rather than at mosques.[70] It has long been recognized that Muslims are vastly overrepresented in French prisons.[71] Like in other countries, prisons in France can also serve as venues for radicalization. The French Co-ordination Unit of the Fight against Terrorism found in a 2017 study that, of 265 French *jihadists* who were killed in Iraq and Syria, nearly half had criminal backgrounds.[72] Additionally, a 2019 UN report estimated that 1,200 French Muslims have been radicalized in prison, and an additional 500 detainees who have been convicted of terrorism also are in prison. Of these 1,700 individuals, about 90 percent are scheduled for release by 2025.[73]

Religiously motivated attacks have also been a major problem in France. The French Interior Ministry reported 100 anti-Muslim acts in 2018, 17 percent less than the previous year.[74] However, this increased to 154 anti-Muslim acts in 2019. This is part of a broader, disturbing trend, as racist or xenophobic incidents in France increased from 496 in 2018 to 1,142 in 2019.[75] The majority of anti-Muslim acts occur in public institutions, such as town halls and schools.[76] Notably, more than three-quarters are committed against Muslim women, and fully 80 percent of women who wear a headscarf say they have experienced Islamophobic acts.[77] In all, according to a 2019 survey of about 1,000 French Muslims, 42 percent reported that they have suffered at least one act of discrimination based on their religion in their lifetime.[78] Grievances like these are what has led to public protests and rallies, such as the one that brought together more than 10,000 people in Paris in November 2019.[79]

Such incidents appear to be propelled by a significant cultural divide; an October 2019 poll by the French Institute of Public Opinion (IFOP) found that 61 percent of respondents believed Islam to be incompatible with the values of the French republic.[80] In turn, French Muslims appear increasingly disaffected and

disconnected from French society. Many French Muslims are not citizens due to administrative barriers in the naturalization process, and therefore the number of French Muslims who vote is much smaller than the group's total population.[81] Only 50 percent of Muslims are registered to vote, accounting for about three percent of the national electorate, and just a fraction of those has turned out to vote in recent electoral contests. [82] This lackluster showing has helped to empower right-wing parties, which have surged to victory in more and more French cities in recent years.[83]

Islam and the State

France has a particular historical involvement in the Sahel, where many countries are former colonies and remain trading partners.[84] Both as an ally of the United States and independently, France is actively engaged in many Muslim-majority countries, such as Mali, Iraq, and Syria. This, in turn, has resulted in grievances expressed by *jihadist* groups, especially in former colonies such as Algeria.[85] Similarly, French political and economic involvement in African countries has been used as a justification by *jihadist* groups across the continent. France's deep history and enduring interests in North Africa has led observers to describe it "as America in other regions of the world."[86] Indeed, France intervened militarily a total of 19 times in the region between 1962 and 1995.[87] Propaganda from al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri also cited French imperialism when calling for violence.[88]

Over time, the French presence in Africa has become less unilateral in nature, and Paris has begun to cooperate more with African regional bodies and international forces since its intervention during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Nevertheless, Paris has at times acted assertively to protect its interests in the region, for instance in Mali, where *jihadist* groups took control of parts of the country beginning in 2012.[89] In response, France launched Operation Barkhane in 2014, expanding its involvement and coordinating security with Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.[90] Although France is also working with international partners, including the United States, there are now more than 5,000 French troops in the region.

France has had both successes and setbacks in this conflict. A November 2019 helicopter crash killed 13 French troops during an operation against *jihadists* in Mali, marking the French military's worst single loss of life in over 30 years.[91] However, French forces captured Mohamed Mrabat, a senior ISGS commander, on May 19, 2020. France also reported killing Abdelmalek Droukdel, leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), on June 3rd of that year. As part of his position, Droukdel had commanded all al-Qaeda affiliates in North Africa, including JNIM.[92]

Meanwhile at home, controversy surrounding what Muslim women can wear in public has existed for decades. In 1994, Minister of Education François Bayrou issued a memorandum that banned the veil as well as "ostentatious" religious symbols in public schools, although many female Muslim students continued to wear the veil. In 1999, two girls of Turkish heritage were expelled from their public junior high school after teachers protested the wearing of the veil in school.[93]

The Macron government's immigration policies are criticized by both sides of the political spectrum: too loose according to the right, and too strict according to the left.[94] These tensions are not exclusively about Muslim immigrants, but the French Muslim community feels especially targeted by rhetoric on this issue, which tends to become more inflamed after major terrorist attacks.[95] French Muslim immigrants also feel distanced by popular discrimination that makes it harder to integrate, as well as by instances of police bias and abuses of power.[96] France has the third-most immigrants of any EU country in raw terms and granted issued 276,576 initial residence permits in 2019, a number that has steadily increased every year since 2012, when the figure stood at 200,060.[97]

French authorities have taken steps in recent years to close some mosques due to evidence of radicalization. Between December 2015 and April 2017, 22 mosques and prayer halls found to be preaching

radical Islamic ideology were shut down, according to then-French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve, and, in April 2018, France expelled *imam* El Hadi Doudi to Algeria for similar reasons.[98] This is part of a broader trend, as France has expelled almost 100 Muslim clerics and other figures associated with extremism since 2012.[99] After a series of terrorist attacks, including the Bastille Day truck massacre that killed 84 people in Nice, former French Prime Minister Valls stated in July 2016 that he would consider a temporary ban on foreign financing of mosques and that he wanted *imams* to be trained in France.[100] While this was never implemented, French President Emmanuel Macron said in April 2019 that he would like France to reinforce control over foreign funding for the French Islamic community.[101]

Over the past two decades, the French government has created several institutions aside from the CFCM to try to bring the French Muslim community together. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin created the Foundation for Islamic Works in 2005, meant to finance the construction of mosques and training of *imams* with both foreign and French money.[102] Internal disagreements limited this foundation, but the Fondation pour l'islam de France (Foundation for Islam of France) was launched in 2016 as a "secular foundation" and replacement.[103] The Foundation for Islam of France has similar goals, including to reduce radicalization among French Muslims and to promote secular training of *imams*.[104] However, the foundation was controversial from the outset. With French laws against the burkini being passed around the same time, French civil rights activist Yasser Louati criticized the decision to make non-Muslim French politician Jean-Pierre Chevènement the first head of the organization.[105]

With the collapse of the Islamic State's *caliphate* in Iraq and Syria over the past year-and-a-half, France now faces a different potential problem: that of returnee fighters. The vast majority of French people—89 percent—oppose allowing adult *jihadists* to return, and the percentage is only slightly lower, at 67 percent, when asking about children.[106] In March 2019, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian argued that "There is no return. The position of France is very clear from the beginning. Those who are French and who fought in the ranks of Daesh fought against France. They are enemies."[107] French authorities continue to consider adult women who left France to join ISIS as "fighters," meaning they must stand trial in the countries in which their crimes are committed, Iraq and Syria.[108] France has also been holding trials of foreign fighters in absentia, including for defendants presumed dead.[109] In April 2020, French and German authorities cooperated to prosecute the first French foreign fighter for ISIS on charges of terrorism, genocide, and human rights crimes.[110] However, the repatriation of children is currently decided on a case-by-case basis. As of this writing, France has returned 28 children since the fall of the territory of ISIS, including a group of 10 on June 22, 2020, but about 270 children of French citizens remain in Syria, according to estimates from human rights groups.[111]

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