

American Foreign Policy Council

FRANCE

QUICK FACTS

Population: 64,057,792

Area: 643,427 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Celtic and Latin with Teutonic, Slavic, North African, Indochinese, Basque minorities

Religions: Roman Catholic 83-88%, Protestant 2%, Jewish 1%, Muslim 5-10%, unaffiliated 4%

Government Types: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate):
\$2.666 trillion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)

France houses a large Muslim minority, primarily of North African provenance. While many immigrants are non-observant (in line with a general French tendency toward secularism and a de-emphasis of religious affiliation), Islamist organizations actively promote a resurgence of a politicized and ideological Muslim identity. Target groups include youth, especially in the ethnic ghettos of cities where immigrant populations are concentrated. There is considerable tension within the Muslim leadership between advocates of secular French identity and proponents of the Islamist goal of a communitarian cultural separatism. In addition, the trans-Mediterranean immigration patterns and historical French colonial ties to North Africa contribute to a spill-over of Islamist terrorist activity

from Algeria into France. Jihadist activists with links to al-Qaeda move between Algeria and France, as well as other European countries. French Islamism, in turn, has become part of global jihadist networks.

The response of the French state has evolved from earlier efforts to portray itself as the bridge between the Arab world and Europe to a more recent insistence on the value of French identity and the importance of secularism, exemplified in regulations such as the 2004 prohibition on the wearing of headscarves in public schools. Furthermore, in contrast to the weak French response to terrorism in the 1980s, France more recently has developed an effective and robust set of counter-terrorism practices.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Union des organizations Islamiques de France (UOIF)

Founded in 1983 as a small circle of foreign student activists with Islamist leanings, the Union of Islamic Organizations in France has grown into an umbrella organization claiming to represent between one to two hundred Muslim groupings in France. It plays a role in coordinating activities among its member associations, and is the owner of some mosques in the major cities of France.¹ The UOIF is the French member of the London-based Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, active in promoting the study of Islam through its European Institute for the Human Sciences, dedicated to Islamic theology and related studies, with two campuses in France.² The UOIF has also established several specialized organizations, including the Young Muslims of France (JMF), the Muslim Students of France (EMF), and the French League of the Muslim Woman (LFFM).³ These organizations contribute to the dissemination of Islamist positions and the construction of separatist communitarian identity politics. While the UOIF presents itself simply as an advocate of Muslim interests, critics point out that it engages in a “double discourse,” paying lip service in public to the priority of tolerance for secular French values, while at the same time promoting Islamist content (replete with intolerance, misogyny, homophobia and anti-Semitism) to its target populations.⁴

The UOIF has attained considerable public and political resonance through a disproportionate role within the French Council

of the Muslim Religion (CFCM) which was established in 2003 by then-Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy as the official representation of Muslims in France.⁵ The CFCM's responsibilities pertain to interactions between the French state and the Muslim community, e.g., the construction of mosques, oversight of *halal* food, provision of Muslim spiritual services in the military and in prisons, etc. In contrast to the CFCM's administrative and technical functions, the UOIF has wider cultural and political ambitions. "In France, the extremist UOIF has become the predominant organization within the government's Islamic Council" where it can eclipse moderate or secular Muslim voices, experts have noted.⁶ While the inclusion of the UOIF in the CFCM may have been intended as a strategy of cooptation to move it toward the center, it has allowed the relatively small UOIF to appear as an influential representative of the much more diverse and generally less ideological Muslim population in France.⁷

While the UOIF's explicit goals include the religious, cultural, educational, social and humanitarian needs of the Muslim population of France, with priority given to facilitating religious practice, critics allege that it is close to the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and pursues a goal of communitarian separatism.⁸ This agenda involves two aspects: transforming France into a safe haven for radicals engaged in militant Islamist politics in North Africa or elsewhere, especially in the Arab world, while also exercising political identity pressure on the Muslims in France to conform to increasingly repressive interpretations of Islam: a sort of "reactionary and paternalist populism."⁹ "The UOIF tries to rein in the Muslims of France. Some associations affiliated with the movement claim the right to say who is a good Muslim and who is, therefore, an apostate," observes Islam expert Fiametta Venner. "This is all the more alarming since these people are not theologians—almost none of the directors of the UOIF pursued studies in this area—and they have a very narrow vision of Islam. They are satisfied with instrumentalizing the religion to pursue a reactionary political project of separatism."¹⁰

Front Islamique Français armé (FIFA)

The Armed French Islamic Front is a violent organization

that claimed responsibility for the October 2004 bombing of the Indonesian embassy in Paris. In that incident, it demanded the release of two members of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a terrorist organization considered close to al-Qaeda which has as its goal an Islamist transformation of Algeria.¹¹ The FIFA also called for French support for the admission of Turkey into the European Union and a rollback of France's stance on secularization.¹² In addition, it demanded the censorship of all anti-Muslim publications, singling out in particular the novel *Platform* by the French author Michel Houellebecq, which addresses questions of immigration and global terrorism.¹³ (In 2002 Houellebecq was brought to court for statements critical of Islam, but he was acquitted of the hate speech charge.) There is no up-to-date information readily available on FIFA, however, and the organization appears to be dormant and/or inactive.

Al-Qaeda au pays du Maghreb Islamique (AQIM)

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is a terrorist group based primarily in Algeria. Over time, however, it has transformed from an organization committed to a local Islamist insurgency into a wider network pursuing a program of global *jihad*. As a result, AQIM has begun to be recognized as a threat in Europe, especially (but not exclusively) in France. As the State Department's *2008 Country Reports on Terrorism* noted, "France remained a target for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which posed a considerable threat to French interests, underscored in statements made by al-Qaeda (AQ) senior leadership or AQIM itself."¹⁴ Similarly, Europol's *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* for that year asserts that "France, Italy, Spain and Portugal consider that the increasing activities of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) aiming at international targets have an impact on the threat level in their member states."¹⁵

Given the long history of French colonialism in Algeria, the large North African population in France, and trans-Mediterranean cultural contacts, politics in Algeria have often spilled over into France. Yet the recent emergence of AQIM as a threat in Europe derives from important shifts in the character of Islamist radicalism in Algeria itself. In 1992, the Algerian military government can-

celled elections in which an Islamist coalition, the Islamic Salvation Front, was likely to come to power. A violent civil war erupted, during which the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) became notorious for its brutality against civilians in Algeria. However, the GIA also carried out attacks in France, most notoriously a 1995 bombing in Paris at the Saint-Michel underground station, causing eight deaths and wounding more than 100.¹⁶

Fearing that the GIA strategy was undermining the Islamist cause, a splinter group known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) was formed. The GSPC was similarly dedicated to Islamist militancy, but embraced alternative tactics that would not endanger civilians. While this tactical moderation led initially to a surge in popular support and a growth in the GSPC's membership (peaking at around 28,000 in the late 1990s), a successful counter-terrorism campaign by Algerian forces eroded the group's numbers significantly.¹⁷ However, in 2004, GSPC leader Abdelmalek Droukdal reached out to al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia leader Abu Musaf al-Zarqawi, and the GSPC, with its Algeria focus, was reinvented as AQIM. Just as Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia was compelled to relocate into marginal territories (in their case, the mountainous tribal areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan), so too did AQIM develop operational skills in desert regions, especially Chad, as well as the Algerian hills outside of Algiers. Its aspirations grew from local insurgency to a pan-Maghreb transformation and finally to global *jihadism*, leading to a series of attacks, kidnappings and murder, targeting Europeans in North Africa and international organizations, including a UN site in Algiers.

AQIM has also turned its sights on Europe. In September 2005, Droukdal designated France as "our No. 1 enemy, the enemy of our religion and of our community."¹⁸ While the threat has not yet resulted in major attacks in France on the scale of Madrid (2004) or London (2005), this may be due to the success of French counterterrorism efforts; over the years since, a number of Algerians and French-Algerians plotting terrorist attacks have been arrested in France.¹⁹ AQIM, meanwhile, remains active outside of Europe. In the words of EUROPOL, "In 2007, AQIM further adapted its tactics and propaganda to the model of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, Iraq. It committed several suicide attacks with high numbers of

causalities. AQIM demonstrated the threat it poses to Europe by specifically targeting European citizens and international bodies in Algeria. In April 2007, AQIM claimed an attack, which ... targeted the Interpol office in Algiers."²⁰ While the preponderance of AQIM activity remains in North Africa, its victims increasingly include Europeans, as well as North Africans, and there are strong indications that it is trying to develop the capacity to carry out attacks in France and possibly other European countries as well.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The French tradition of secularism derives from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the revolution of 1789, and the firm establishment of the separation of religion and state through the conflicts between the French state and the Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century. A core value of the French republic is *laïcité*, meaning a commitment to the non-confessional character of public life. Historically, the French population was, in terms of religious affiliation, extensively Catholic, with small Protestant and Jewish minorities. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the processes of secularization took root in earnest, contributing to a widespread decline in the importance of religious affiliation as a feature of cultural modernity.

Since 1872, French law has prohibited any census of religious affiliation. According to one recent poll, 64 percent of French citizens described themselves as Catholic in 2009 (in contrast to 81 percent in 1965). However only 4.5 percent of those same respondents reported attending Mass on a weekly basis.²¹ In contrast, the 2003 *CIA World Factbook* counts 88 percent of the French as Catholic, 2 percent as Protestant, and 1 percent as Jewish.

Islam, barely present in France before 1945, arrived along with a wave of immigrant labor, primarily from North Africa, and has become the second largest religious affiliation in France. It now claims 5-10 percent of the population, and is the religion of two-thirds of all immigrants. According to an Interior Ministry report in the year 2000, there are approximately four million Muslims in France, of which 1,550,000 have an Algerian background and

1,000,000 are Moroccan. The report likewise estimates that 40,000 French citizens have become converts to Islam.²²

Of the French Muslim population, about a third describes itself as “observant.” An extensive secularization of the Muslim population is consistent with the decline of observant practices in other religious traditions. The rise of a minority Islamism within the Muslim community can therefore be viewed in part as a reaction against the modernization of lifestyles within immigrant communities. The mobilization of Islamist identity frequently involves younger generations rebelling against the aspirations for integration harbored by older generations of immigrants.²³

Islamist recruitment in France has multiple dimensions. Of the estimated 1,500 mosques or prayer halls in France, about 80 are considered to be at risk of radicalization and 20 are under close government surveillance.²⁴ In some cases, the mosque imam provides the radical ideology, but in others *jihadist* recruiters may be active without the knowledge of the imam. Significant recruitment, including proselytization, likewise takes place in prisons; French prison populations are often more than 50 percent Muslim, at times reaching 80 percent in certain areas.²⁵ Activists reach out both to non-observant Muslim inmates, as well as to non-Muslims who are prospects for conversion. A third avenue of recruitment involves contact with French *jihadis*, i.e., veterans of the conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and Iraq, who have returned to France and who may form *ad hoc* groups to support or carry out terrorist attacks.²⁶

The conflict between modernizing pressure and Muslim identity underlies the controversy regarding the headscarf, or *hijab*. Islamist pressure to establish separatist communitarian identity focuses on symbols and practices to separate Muslims from secular French society. In 2004, facing a growing Muslim population in public schools with increasing numbers of women wearing the headscarf, the French government promulgated a law banning ostentatious religious symbols in the schools, in the spirit of *laïcité*.²⁷ While the law also pertains to Christian and Jewish symbols, the key issue was the Muslim headscarf or veil. The controversy underscored the

gap between French norms of secular modernity and the neo-traditionalism of Islamist behavior. (It should be noted, as a point of comparison, that until recently headscarves were similarly banned in Turkish universities, a legacy of the secularist foundations of the modern Turkish state.²⁸) A primary goal of Islamism involves the assertion of patriarchal norms and the resistance to the spread of equal rights to Muslim women.²⁹

Muslim immigrant populations are frequently concentrated in the ethnic ghettos of the *banlieues*, the working-class suburbs surrounding French urban centers, where they remain marginalized, facing discrimination and weathering high unemployment rates. This concentration of social problems has led repeatedly to outbreaks of mass violence. In 2005, in response to the deaths of two teenagers in Clichy-sous-Bois, near Paris, local rioting erupted, spreading rapidly across the country. A state of emergency was declared, resulting in three thousand arrests. Damage to property totaled 200 million Euros.³⁰ Another series of riots broke out in 2009.³¹ Such unrest has contributed to a profound social anxiety about *sécurité*, a term which has implications stretching from crime-in-the-streets to terrorism.

Youth in the ghettos are viewed as susceptible to the radical ideologies purveyed by Islamist organizations. Particular violence has erupted toward Jewish communities—the French Jewish community is the largest in Europe, and includes significant numbers of immigrants from North Africa. However, some Muslim leaders (among them the *imam* of the Mosque of Drancy) have been vocal critics of anti-Semitic words and deeds, in turn facing attacks themselves.³² An especially grisly crime involved the kidnapping of Ilan Halimi, the son of Moroccan Jewish immigrants, in Bagneux, a suburb south of Paris, by a group of Muslim delinquents that dubbed itself the “gang of barbarians.” The group held Halimi for ransom because he was Jewish, subjecting him to torture before abandoning him outdoors in the winter; he succumbed to his wounds.³³ The ensuing 2009 trial attracted widespread attention. While the perpetrators were not directly involved in political Islamist ideological movements, they operated in a milieu in which Islamist pre-

dispositions, including a cult of violence and anti-Semitism, were commonplace. However, within the larger Muslim population in France—including the two-thirds which is not observant—such radicalism is rare. There are vocal criticisms of Islamism articulated by Muslims who advocate the ideal of the modern, tolerant republic.³⁴ However, the alienated fringe of the ghettos provides fertile ground for the spread of Islamist beliefs and organizations.

The circulation of Islamist ideas in parts of the Muslim community in France results from multiple sources: the connection to foreign organs of global *jihadism* (such as AQIM), the domestic advocacy of proponents of Islamist identity (like UOIF) as well as certain aspects of the larger context of French politics. In the wake of the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks, including the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, then-President of France Jacques Chirac became a vocal opponent of U.S. foreign policy. The resulting trans-Atlantic tension between France and the United States amplified some long-standing differences, and contributed to a wave of anti-Americanism. Suspicion toward American culture and foreign policy became widespread in the French public, and that milieu in turn contributed to the incubation of anti-modern and anti-American Islamist sentiments in the Muslim subculture. For example, Thierry Meyssan's 2002 book *9/11-The Big Lie*—with its fringe allegation that the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington were the result of a U.S. government conspiracy—became quite popular. Meyssan himself is hardly mainstream, and his positions have been denounced in the country's centrist press, yet his volume won wide distribution—a telling indicator of the anti-American currents in French culture. Islamist radicalization in France, therefore, can represent simultaneously a rejection of French secular modernism and an imitation of some widely held French animosities toward the U.S. The anti-Americanism of the Chirac presidency has subsided only comparatively recently, with the election of Nicolas Sarkozy in France in 2007 and Barack Obama in the U.S. in 2008.³⁵

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

A modern liberal democracy with a tradition of secularism dating back to the eighteenth century, France is also a key ally of the United

States, despite occasional foreign policy differences. French troops have played an important role in the war in Afghanistan, while the French state opposes Islamist developments and is actively engaged in resisting Islamism, both domestically and internationally.

Nonetheless, some policies of the French state have contributed to the growth of Islamism in France—most notably the official encouragement of Muslim immigration, especially from North Africa, into France. As noted earlier, Islamists represent only a small minority within the French Muslim population; yet it is also the case that Islamism in France is inseparable from the history of immigration and the associated policies that have failed to integrate the immigrant communities into French society. Pro-immigration policies to attract low-wage labor without effective integration have created the social problems of the *banlieues*, where Islamism has been able to fester.

Building on its history of colonialism, France, especially under Charles de Gaulle, aspired to become the European gateway to the Arab world through a systematic courting of the post-colonial regimes of North Africa. Public discourse in France, therefore, tended to be more pro-Arab than elsewhere in the West. However the rise of an emphatically religious Islamism ran counter to French commitments to *laïcité*, generating policy shifts under Sarkozy, in particular an open promotion of French national identity. In October 2009, Eric Besson, the Minister of Immigration, called for public debate over “the theme of what it is to be French, what are the values we share, what are the relations that make us French and of which we should be proud.” He insisted on a particular valorization of Frenchness: “We must reaffirm the values of French national identity and the pride in being French.”³⁶ This effort by the state to mobilize a focus on nationality was intended as an effort to overcome immigrant (and especially Islamist) separatism, and in the years since, this discussion has shifted increasingly toward secularism. To question the role of religion in the public sphere in France is, above all, a vehicle to inquire about the status of politicized Islam.

Yet the conflict between the republican secularism of the state and the politicization of religion inherent in Islamism continues. In 2009, a new debate began over prospective legislation to ban full-length cloaks, the *burqa* and the *niqab* (the latter leaves the eyes uncovered). Taking the longer view, however, it is clear that there has been a profound shift in France from the era of emphatic trans-Mediterranean cooperation to the current state promotion of French national identity and integration over multicultural separatism. The traditional French value of secularism serves as the basis for public criticism and legislative action against symbols of Islamist allegiance.

This cultural-ideological resistance to Islamism on the part of the state accompanies a muscular set of policing and counterterrorism practices that distinguish the current French response to Islamist violence. French counterterrorism has matured over the past three decades. During the 1980s, Middle Eastern terrorist organizations carried out repeated attacks in France, exposing the inadequacy of French intelligence services. France gained the unenviable reputation as a terrorist haven, in part as a corollary to its pro-Arab foreign policy. Nonetheless, counterterrorist capacities grew during the 1990s, and French forces successfully interrupted plots to carry out attacks at the World Cup (1998), the Strasbourg Cathedral (2000) and the American Embassy (2001).³⁷

In 1986, legislation centralized the French counter-terrorism strategy by locating all judicial proceedings in the Trial Court of Paris. This organizational strategy has allowed the development of specialized expertise relevant to terrorism cases. Rather than leaving the sophisticated and security-sensitive cases in the hands of potentially inexperienced provincial magistrates, the 1986 law mandates the priority of the Parisian venue to maximize the utilization of specialist expertise. These judges, the *juges d'instruction*, combine judicial and police functions, insofar as they are charged with conducting inquiries, authorizing searches and overseeing wiretaps and other related matters—all of which in the U.S. would be dependent on independent judicial control. The *juges d'instruction* regularly collaborate with the *Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire* (DST),

the domestic security service that is part of the Ministry of the Interior. This sort of cooperation between judicial and executive powers is less controversial within French political culture than it would be in the U.S.

Nevertheless, French counterterrorism practices have faced criticism on civil rights and human rights grounds. The promulgation of laws criminalizing terrorist conspiracies (rather than simply terrorist attacks themselves) has elicited denunciations on the grounds that it represents an ominous expansion of state power. However, this pursuit of conspiracies has been defended as the only way to prevent catastrophic attacks, such as the successful disruption of the plans for terrorist violence at the World Cup at the *Stade de France*.³⁸ Still, Amnesty International and other watchdogs continue to criticize France for its prosecution of conspiracy charges as a “criminal association in relation to a terrorist undertaking.”³⁹

For civil rights activists, the situation was exacerbated by 2008 legislation that authorized preventive detention in certain cases. After the completion of a sentence, an individual whom a judge deems to be dangerous may face an extended sentence for renewable periods of one year. In addition, the police were granted the authority to develop intelligence files on all individuals over the age of thirteen who are deemed to represent a threat to public order. While criticisms of this counterterrorism regime continue, to date France has been successful in thwarting domestic attacks; there has as yet been no return to the violence of the 1980s, when terrorists seemed able to act in France with impunity and little fear of sanctions.

ENDNOTES

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- [2] The online home of the Institute is <http://www.ieshdeparis.fr/>.
- [3] Venner, *OPA sur l'Islam de France*, 133-153; Michèle Vianès, Silence, on Manipule: les Islamistes en Manoeuvre [Exploiting the Silence: Islamists in Action] (Paris: Editions Hors Commerce, 2004), 58.
- [4] Venner, *OPA sur l'Islam de France*, 158.
- [5] Representation in the CFCM depends on the size of mosque space controlled by an organization. See Vianès, *Silence, on Manipule*, 18-19.
- [6] Lorenzo Vidino, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Conquest of Europe," *Middle East Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 25-34.
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