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Islamophobia in France: The Conflicting Values and the Way it affects French Society

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Article Title:

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? *To what extent do the French ideals and values affect the emergence of Islamophobia in France?*

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Introduction

Afrightening aspect emerges when looking at this great problem of Islamophobia in France, as it questions the foundations of a multiethnic society. The nation of France which was once hailed for its freedom, equality, and brotherhood, is grappling with bigotry and fear targeted at its Muslim population. The French dedication to secularism, sometimes referred to as "Laïcité" (Hajjat and Mohammed), and its complex interrelationship with cultural relativism and universalism have significantly influenced the dynamics of Islamophobia within the country's boundaries.

\To comprehend the impact of cultural relativism and universalism, it is crucial to establish a comprehensive understanding of Islamophobia. This term encompasses the prejudice, discrimination, and stigmatization faced by Muslims or individuals perceived to be Muslim (Hoffmann and Moe). It manifests in various forms, including social exclusion, hate crimes, institutional biases, and biased media representation (The Muslim Council of Britain).

While Islamophobia is not exclusive to France, the country's historical context and commitment to secularism have influenced the manifestation and public discourse surrounding this issue (Wolfreys).

This Islamophobia question get even bigger when considering the scale of approximately 5.7 million Muslims living in France alone, and over 25 million within the Eurozone that constitute a considerable part of its citizens who go through marginalization every day (News Wires). This prejudice has fueled increases in Islamophobic incidents, ranging from hate speech to assaults, highlighting the need to explore its origin. Statistics reveal a disturbing trend: showing that over the past few years hate crimes against Muslims in France grew by 53% (Daily sabah).

Islamophobia, while particularly prominent in France, cannot be analyzed without considering its connection to a broader worldwide phenomenon. The global trend of right-wing conservatism and anti-Muslim sentiment in the West can be traced back to political events that occurred decades ago, and thousands of miles away igniting a chain of complex developments across various regions such as Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and North America leading to the rise of Islamic

Radicalism on one hand and Anti-Muslim Right-Wing on the other.

France stands out as a nation with extremely high rates of Islamophobia against its large and relatively old Muslim community. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), France has about 3 million Muslims, most of whom are of African (mostly from former French colonies) origin, which constitutes one of the three largest Muslim minorities in Western Europe, the others being Germany and the UK (Central Intelligence Agency). It is not possible to give exact numbers due to France's secular traditions that avoid collecting data on religious affiliation.

Yet, having a quick comparison between the statistics of the Islamophobic acts and practices in these three countries can prove that the existence of a large Muslim community is not a primary factor behind the rise of Islamophobia since the high numbers of Muslims in the neighboring countries did not show the same statistics regarding violence against muslims, although it could be thought of as a secondary factor. Multiple researchers have attributed this difference concerning

Muslim communities to the difference between German "Constitutional Patriotism," British "Liberalism," and French "Laïcité" (Prades).

This essay investigates the extent to which French values influence the way non-Muslim French citizens and the French government perceive Muslims by comparing France to other Western societies facing similar trends in Muslim immigration. The essay will also discuss how France approaches the matter of integrating Muslim communities in order to assess the significance of these factors in the context of French Islamophobia.

Methodology

The essay will use different qualitative approaches to analyze islamophobia in France. Primarily, the essay will look into trends of xenophobic behavior and how they correlate to French culture and the French values. Given the highly specific context in France, it is important to discuss all trends, events, and factors within the sociological, cultural, political, and economic specifications of the French context. So, the groundwork of the paper will be laid over the concept of French secularism, absolute universalism, and cultural relativity.

The methodology will follow analytical and comparative methods between France and other western European countries of the same size and Muslims percentage (namely, the UK and Germany) to discern whether Islamophobia is becoming more prominent as a political practice and how it translates into French policymaking. Tracing processes that took place in France will clarify whether or not Islamophobia is correlated with contemporary events and show how a democratic country can transform social sentiments into targeted policies that generalize people. The essay considers the French case as an example of

the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, and more generally, globally.

Overall, the essay will use France as a case study for the increasing support of right-wing populism in European countries and analyze the factors leading to this situation. It aims to contextualize a specific case into a broader trend by using an approach that analyzes the French political dynamics and its evolution to understand how a social trend affects policymaking in the broader democratic context.

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Islamophobia in France

The historical context significantly influences how Europeans view Islam and Muslims. Mutual mistrust and misunderstanding have been an outcome of centuries of interaction. European colonization of majority-Muslim regions has had a lasting effect on attitudes and interpersonal interactions, influencing narratives of cultural superiority and "otherness" (Sage journals).

Cultural tensions and socioeconomic inequalities have also fueled an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment. To begin with, Muslim immigrants, especially from North Africa and Turkey in the case of France, have greatly influenced the European workforce, in which they often filled jobs that are in demand, such as low-skilled and labor-intensive positions. Thus, as years passed by, Muslim immigrants obtained experience in many industrial positins and by supporting each other they became a powerhouse of skilled labor contributing to fields like engineering, academia, and technology (Hajjat and Mohammed). Muslim immigrants also assisted the country by addressing labor shortages in several industries, which led to economic development.

However, the increase in Muslim immigrants in Europe led to the rise of negative stereotypes and xenophobic or even anti-immigrant sentiments, which would in some cases manifest as hate speech and discrimination.

Economic difficulties like unemployment and social inequality on one hand led to victimization, where Muslims were held responsible for societal issues, which was used in the electoral campaigning of right-wing parties. On the other hand, the Muslims' economic situation and the jobs occupied by many of them resulted in impoverished living conditions in cities, where usually, worse education, fewer work opportunities and high crime rates persist, thus leading to generalizing these stereotypes among the entirety of the Muslim community.

> "An influx of North African immigrants materialized slums, plagued with crime, poverty, and unemployment. More than 4.4 million people of Arab or African heritage live in slums where they and Jews face extreme discrimination. From the beginning, Muslims have been placed on the fringes of French society by the government and natives."

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Furthermore, cultural clashes caused by differences in dress, religious practices, and norms can amplify pre-existing biases. Therefore, political rhetoric has played a critical role in instilling Islamophobia.

Some political parties and leaders have used terrorism and security threats to advance their agendas, frequently associating Islam with violence and portraying Muslims as a single entity prone to radicalization. This has resulted in the securitization of Islam and the portrayal of Muslim immigrants as a "problem" that must be strictly monitored and controlled. For example, one of the most famous advocates of this ideology was Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter Marine Le Pen, the former and incumbent presidents of the National Front right-wing party. In one of his famous electoral speeches, Le Pen the father said:

> "When Joan D' Arc was asked by her judges why as a Christian she did not love the British, she answered that she did love them, but she loved the British in their country. In the same way, we do not hate the Turks, we love them, but in their country."

Marine continued her father's journey and took the leadership of the anti-immigrants National Front said in a speech in Marseille in her electoral campaign of 2017,

> "We are being submerged by a flood of immigrants … where women get threatening looks if they wear a skirt. I will say when I become president that this is not the French way. … If we carry on like this, the whole of France will become a gigantic no-go zone. … A multicultural society is a society that has multiple conflicts" (Marseilles).

Islamophobia has been exacerbated by recent global events, particularly acts of terrorism committed by people or organizations claiming to be inspired by Islamic ideologies. For instance, the Nice truck attack in 2016, which occurred in July where a truck drove into a crowd that was celebrating Bastille Day in the city of Nice. This terrorist attacker was linked to Islamist ideologies and has caused the death of 86 lives ("Nice: Eight Guilty over the Deadly Bastille Day Lorry Attack").

Moreover, an earlier incident in January 2015, the Charlie Hebdo shooting, had already played a great role in igniting clashes between immigrants and right-wing forces. The shooting that was a result of the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo publishing cartoons about Prophet Mohammad, which resulted in twelve deaths, was conducted by two Muslim brothers that belonged to Al-Qaeda (BBC News). These incidents had ignited the debates about whose rights are more important, the cartoonists' freedom of expression or the Muslims' right to not to be offended.

Media also promoted Islamophobia. Sensationalistic reporting, prejudicial narratives, and extremist voices distort Muslims' image, which shapes public opinion and prejudices (Wolfreys). Despite awareness-raising campaigns, interreligious dialogue, and legal actions to combat Islamophobia in Europe, progress is still slow, and combating Islamophobia necessitates an all-encompassing strategy that addresses its underlying causes, including combatting misconceptions, encouraging cultural understanding, and opposing discriminatory laws. Recognizing Islamophobia's manifestations is not enough to combat it, but also actively working to dismantle prejudiced narratives, advance intercultural understanding, and advance inclusive policies that uphold the values of equality and diversity.

The emergence of a cycle of hostility, initially sparked in France and subsequently in various Western societies, has resulted in the proliferation of Islamophobia and Islamist extremism over time. These two phenomena have mutually reinforced each other as Muslims who dealt with Islamophobic people have looked toward extremism as a solution, which in turn was convincing enough to many people to develop anti-Muslim sentiments, leading to their global manifestation rather than remaining isolated incidents.

Secularism in France (Laïcité)

The concept of Laïcité was developed after the French Revolution ("Byjus") with its roots coming from the revolution's struggle against the symbols of the old monarchy, which the Church and its clergy were part of andhad provided the religious cover for. On the other hand, the monarchy had provided the support for the catholic church as the official church in its struggle against the reformation movements (Prades).

Therefore, the revolutionary factions believed that the most effective means of preventing the return of the old regime was to socially undermine its institutions, with the Church being the most formidable among them. This was finalized in a 1905 law that emphasized strict separation between state and religion and full support of voices criticizing religion and its presence in the society (Hajjat and Mohammed).

However, Laïcité was supported by the belief of absolute universalism of the French Revolution's ideals, which are equality, liberty and fraternity. These values were one of the most important reasons behind much of France's wars and interventions in other European countries,

as they believed that they are responsible of spreading the "Enlightened" universal values of the revolution to enlighten and civilize a continent that suffered for centuries from the authoritarianism of Monarchies and the Church. This became the basis of the French National narrative and doctrine. It was implanted in laws, education, arts, literature, and media in a way that ensures that every French citizen is heavily exposed to these values no matter where they live.

Absolute universalism is the most dominant theory in France, since universalism is connected to French values, particularly when it comes to France's history and the French commitment to different principles, for instance, the state's commitment to French secularism (Laïcité), which is a core aspect of universalism. This would ensure that all individuals have equal rights without any discrimination regardless of religious or non-religious beliefs. Another important principle that universalism is rooted into is "liberty, equality, and fraternity." These values are significant principles in France, which also assist universalism in emphasizing these values on the citizens regardless of religion or ethnicity.

Furthermore, France had put huge investments in the shape of effort, money and sometimes war, such as the Napoleonic wars, to spread this doctrine outside of its borders. In contemporary politics and modern France, Laïcité is strictly followed in the French constitution, as it neutralizes the state from religious matters and prohibits religious symbols whether Christian, Muslim, or any other religion (Jamal).

This has triggered numerous Muslims in France who believe in cultural relativism and argue against the absolute universalism of the French revolution's values, (Law, Xiaofei Xu, Joseph Ataman; Davies), where the adoption of cultural relativism is often used as a strategy by Muslim immigrants to protect their own identity. Thus, Muslims tend to be culturally relative through religious practices, likeadapting prayer times, within the framework of French secularism.

We can also find the mention of Laïcité and the importance of Muslim's integration into French society and even having an Islam that is "free from foreign influences" in the speeches and interviews of Emmanuel Macron, the President of the French Republic.

Marcon stated in an interview with Al-Jazeera on October 31, 2020, that France should focus on combating those "separatists" that try to establish their own law on French soil and to end the training of Imams overseas because they should be trained to respect the values of the French republic and to separate religion from civil laws and civil life of French citizens. (Interview Du Président Emmanuel Macron À Al Jazeera; Sandford).

The rise of the right-wing conservatives

The rise of right-wing conservative movements in Europe, particularly France, has shaped and exacerbated Islamophobia across the continent. These movements, which emphasize nationalism, traditional values, and strict immigration policies, have frequently used anti-Muslim rhetoric to gain support and advance their agendas (Wolfreys). As they gained traction, they helped to normalize Islamophobic sentiments in mainstream discourse.

Conservative right-wing parties and leaders have frequently exploited public concerns about immigration, cultural identity, and national security. They have framed Muslims as a threat to traditional European values and societal cohesion. By portraying Muslims as outsiders who pose potential security risks and by framing Islam as incompatible with European culture, these parties have created an environment conducive to discrimination and prejudice.

> "They (Algerians) fought very hard to no longer be French, I fought them in hand-to-hand combat: I'll be damned if they get anything from us when they come here."
> – Jean-Marie Le Pen (Fieschi).

Le Pen's daughter, Marine, is also a far-right political figure that has gained significant attention in recent years, in which she influenced the landscape of right-wing politics in France and garnered huge support in 2017 during the presidential election using a rhetoric "against immigration but not against immigrants" (Poole) and resembling elements of Trump and Brexit campaigning propaganda in the way she criticized immigrants and their culture as well as her political opponent, Emmanuel Macron. She has shifted the political party from far-right extremism towards a more mainstream populist agenda.

Right-wing conservative rhetoric frequently conflates Islam with terrorism, capitalizing on acts of violence committed by individuals or groups claiming affiliation with extremist ideologies. This association not only reinforces pre-existing prejudices but also contributes to a climate of fear and mistrust toward Muslim communities. Such rhetoric is exacerbated by media, which tends to sensationalize Muslim-related events and perpetuate negative stereotypes.

The rise of right-wing conservatives has additionally impacted policy decisions that affect Muslims disproportionately. Muslim communities felt targeted by calls for stricter immigration controls and religious attire bans, such as banning girls from wearing hijab in schools and the Islamic call for prayer (adhan) in many localities (Jamal). Under the guise of counterterrorism, these parties' securitization of Islam has led to disproportionate surveillance of Muslim communities.

This series of hostilities pushes Muslims toward a more distinct identity and cultural relativism, which pushes non-Muslims more towards the right. Right-wing conservatives have normalized Islamophobia in mainstream politics, emboldening prejudiced views. (Bayrakli and Hafez).

Immigration

The history of immigration in France is long and complicated, with huge waves of immigrants coming from former colonies, including North Africa. After the Second World War, France used this immigration as an advantage to assist in the post war reconstruction by recruiting labor from these areas (McDonald).

However, in recent years, the rise of the far-right conservatives, including Marine Le Pen's National Rally, have raised concerns about immigration and have pressured the government to enact stricter immigration controls, claiming that the unchecked immigration threatens French identity and values (Poole).

A very important aspect of the anti-immigration discourse in France was wearing religious symbols, especially the hijab, in public spaces, which has raised controversy in the state. This is because religious symbols were banned in public schools during the early 2000s by the French government, which negatively affected Muslim students. This has negatively affected Muslims and has generated a debate on personal freedom and Muslims' right to live life in the way they desire as long as they are not violating the law.

Nonetheless, numerous high-profile terrorist attacks were carried out by individuals claiming allegiance to Islamist extremist ideologies. This led to security concerns, which contributed to a climate of fear and mistrust, which often led to stigmatization of Muslim communities. Right-wing narratives have argued that immigration affects issues relating to national identity,

whether immigrants fully embrace French culture and values (Yerly). These right-wing movements have also challenged multiculturalism in France, raising debates on whether immigrants can maintain their cultural or religious identities while integrating into French society. In addition, several policies were implemented by the French government that address security and immigration concerns, which include efforts to combat radicalization and stricter border control, which prompted Muslim communities to feel a sense of discrimination.

Francophone Policies

When discussing Islamophobia in Western countries, the share of discussion in France is much greater than in other neighboring countries. France frequently headlines news about new laws or actions that the Muslim community finds offensive.

. This goes back to the reason that the French Republic has not been an ordinary state since its foundation, as it has come into existence with its own set of values and philosophies, such as liberty, which led to secularism, equality, which led to a strict policy of standardization, and fraternity, which has pushed towards universalism. The French public has been taught these ideas from an early age, and the ideas have been enforced by a strong central system to create a unified French identity based on revolutionary values. These policies were seen as early as the beginning of the 19th century, with the policies ranging from unifying the measurement system to unifying the language of France to the Parisian dialect to assimilate all French subcultures to a uniform and national French identity (Decottignies). These policies were also evident in the colonies, as the French language, culture, and ideals are still admired today decades after decolonization.

At home, the French government always had its own plans for the integration of immigrants, which was seen in many political speeches that claimed that the immigrants would not pose a cultural challenge and would be integrated into French society in a way they cannot be recognized by other French people. In the case of Muslims, these integration policies resulted in many cases of offending Muslims with legislation banning their

religious garb, calls for prayer, and some of the traditions related in one way or another to Islam. On the other hand, the state's continuous support for the freedom of expression at the expense of Muslims has also resulted in lots of turmoil (McCants and Meserole) as it happened in many instances.

The way the French used to forcefully integrate diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities within its borders and, in colonial times, its colonies was special to France, as other European powers used different methods, such as giving autonomy to minorities. This can be seen when trying to compare the status of the Basque people of Spain and France or the Gallic nations in the UK and France. When doing such a comparison, these communities exist peacefully and have high levels of autonomy, while in France, the very same communities have lost their specificity due to the heavy Francization.

Better examples (and more relevant ones) may actually come from colonial practices in North Africa. While Great Britain was obviously not a positive force in Egypt, the colonization was a lot more hands-off

than, for instance, French colonization in Algeria and Morocco.

Indeed, French colonization in the region continues to cause major economic and political challenges, which often causes people from former French colonies to immigrate to France.

These policies have been proven to be problematic and cause much turmoil and clashes, especially when these people prefer their original cultural norms over the more "universalist" French values. It also can be seen that it had resulted in much more violence among the French Muslim minority than other European countries, as France had the largest number of European ISIS volunteers and the second largest per capita, only second to Belgium, which had the same approach as integrating the Muslim immigrants.

Conclusion

The rise of Islamophobia was due to several major and minor factors, including the rise of right-wing conservatism, the complex debate between cultural relativism and universalism, immigration patterns, French secularism, and global trends. In the context of France, cultural relativism and universalism have been invoked in debates surrounding Islam, secularism, and national identity. France's commitment to Laïcité, aiming to maintain a secular sphere, has sometimes been criticized for disproportionality affecting Muslim religious practices and reinforcing cultural relativism. Universalist principles have been used at the same time to oppose discriminatory laws and promote treating all citizens equally, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Moreover, the philosophical legacy and accumulated subconscious of the French identity that has developed over the course of two and a half centuries might be partially blamed for the rise of Islamophobia in France. The policies declared by the French government to integrate and harmonize the various components of French society lend credence to this assertion. These laws, which have drawn criticism for singling out and stigmatizing Muslims, include the contentious ban on burqas and the prohibition on religious symbols in public schools.

By endorsing anti-immigrant rhetoric, right-wing parties in France have contributed to the growth of Islamophobia. Far-right movements typically target minorities like Muslims, which in this case would increase islamophobia. These movements are characterized by populist feelings, nativist language, and a propensity to exploit insecurities related to cultural identity. The ongoing argument between universalism and cultural relativism contributed significantly to the emergence of Islamophobia in France. This is due to the possibility of conflicts arising from this collision, particularly regarding the message that Muslims are incompatible with Western values.

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Another significant factor is immigration, in which there have been socio-economic consequences, which builds hatred and mistrust toward Muslims, in addition to cultural clashes, which cause victimization toward Muslim communities. France's commitment to its secularism has led to the separation between public life and religion. Some Muslims were upset by these policies because they felt targeted.

Nevertheless, the French propensity to enact controversial laws intended to integrate immigrants and promote cultural homogeneity within French culture has frequently resulted in unfavorable consequences. These consequences manifest as disputes, protests, and sporadic acts of severe violence, which are mostly the reactive product of Muslim and immigrant communities. Finally, it has been observed that the ideals of the French public have influenced Islamophobia in France that experienced an increase over the course of time. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge the necessity of addressing Islamophobia, a phenomenon that requires understanding the underlying factors that have contributed to its emergence and finding a way to reverse its consequences.

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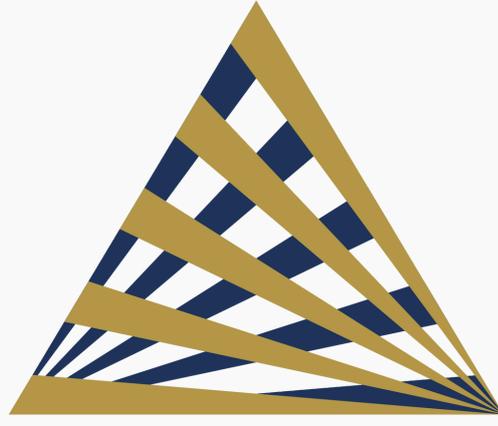
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