

# Salafist Impregnation of Muslim Youth in France: a Challenge to the Republic?\*

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**Abstract:** Based on qualitative research, this article aims to shed some light on the criticism of the functioning of French society by youths of North African origin influenced by a Salafist reading of Islam. The arguments put forward, which draw largely on a religious theme, must be taken seriously. However, the references to a “Salafised” world of meaning are not exclusive and they coexist with an attachment to other, more liberal values. We will therefore endeavour to determine whether the criticism expressed generates separatist attitudes or whether it leads to individual and collective strategies founded on a dual cultural allegiance. Without denying the ambivalences or weaknesses, it is necessary to accurately clarify the identity constructs and social trajectories of the working-class youths studied here.

**Keywords:** strict Islam, assertion of identity, young Muslims, protest.

## INTRODUCTION

In France, since the end of the 1980s, new religious assertions and demands have clashed with the Republican tradition of *laïcité* (secularism) and its interpretation. In 1989, the “headscarf affair” in Creil<sup>1</sup> (the exclusion of a number of girls from a junior high school for refusing to remove their headscarves on school premises and the ensuing debate) marked a turning point. Over the next two decades, some new demands about the organisation of non-mixed spaces in public amenities have been made by practitioners of other religions (notably on the wearing of religious symbols by civil servants or compliance with food laws). However, the debate has principally focused on Islam and on the visibility of some of its practices, notably women’s clothing.

Due to growing tensions, in 2003 the French President, Jacques Chirac set up a commission to reflect on the application of the principle of *laïcité* within the Republic.

\* This article was translated from French by Hancock Hutton Langues Services.

1 A small town North East of Paris

The Stasi Commission (named after its chairman, Bernard Stasi) considered issues linked to the application of *laïcité* in the workplace, public services and schools. After holding a series of hearings, its members arrived at the conclusion that contesting ideas over history and life sciences curriculums in schools, the refusal of mixed-sex delivery of care in hospitals, and the pressure exerted in some neighbourhoods to demand compliance with certain religious requirements, especially those placing restrictions on women, were growing phenomena.<sup>2</sup> In its report, the Commission condemned these failures to maintain *laïcité*, but nevertheless called for “reasonable accommodation”, in particular with regard to the construction of new places of worship, to taking account of dietary prohibitions in institutional food services and to better provision for religious holidays. In the aftermath of the Commission’s work, the Law of 15 March 2004 only introduced a ban on the wearing of ostentatious religious symbols by pupils in schools, a point on which there is a relative consensus within the French political class. The Law of 11 October 2010 went a step further and banned the wearing of full-face veils in public places.

In 2016, a new controversy broke out concerning women’s clothing: the “burkini” affair, which arose when a number of municipalities in the South of France banned the wearing of the so-called Islamic swimsuit on their beaches. The guardians of Republican secularism and the defenders of individual liberties squared off once again.

For Jean Baubérot, a historian and sociologist of religions and member of the Stasi commission, the interpretation of *laïcité* that prevails today has departed from the original liberal concept, essentially because it is guided by the fears aroused by political Islam. In Raphaël Liogier’s view, the fantasy of the islamisation of Europe borders on “a collective obsession” (Liogier, 2012, p. 177). *Laïcité* would seem to have lost its meaning as the right to indifference and turned into a system that forms a yardstick for a desirable identity, imposed as the major criterion of integration for immigrants (N. Göle, 2015).

Others, on the contrary, see this recrudescence of *laïcité* as a necessity in the face of the rise in religious extremism, the challenge to the “republican pact” and the threat to “harmonious coexistence” in society. In a country marked by a tradition of anti-clericalism, reeling from the irruption of international jihadism, there are many who believe that the preservation of individual liberties takes lower priority than the defence of gender equality and the fight against religious fanaticism. Historian Georges Bensoussan adheres to this school of thought and paints a particularly alarmist picture of “territories lost to the Republic”. He points directly to young people with a North African immigrant background as espousing a new anti-Semitism, while also considering that racism and sexism characterise this group (Bensoussan 2002). The way that he essentialises these features can be seen as shocking, but nonetheless, certain intellectuals and politicians subscribe to the analysis that depicts a fringe element of the population as being at odds with the nation.

Against this already tense background, another controversy echoes previous ones: that of “islamophobia”. For some, fear and rejection of Islam is growing in France, the fruit of the colonial past, a result of the anxiety generated by Islamic terrorism worldwide and the culmination of numerous stereotypes about the descendants of

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2 For a critical analysis of the work of the Stasi Commission see Françoise Lorcerie’s 2008 article on the genesis of the “law on the veil”.