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THE INFLUENCE OF LAÏCITÉ
ON THE RISE OF RADICAL ISLAM
IN FRANCE

Abstract

2015 was particularly difficult and tragic in the history of France. The brutal terrorist attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, which was followed by other attacks, was especially dramatic. One of the latest terrorist attacks happened near the school when a student beheaded a teacher on the grounds of offending religious sentiments. Over the past twenty years, France has seen a sharp rise in radical Islam and the number of terrorist attacks committed by Muslims living inside the country. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2020 report, France ranks first among the EU member states in terms of Islamic terrorism (The Global Terrorism Index, 2020). After these brutal and frequent attacks, France faced the main question: why is it the number one target for Islamist terrorists in Europe, and how should it respond to this problem?

The strengthening of radical Islam can be explained by various reasons. However, in the case of France, the problem of integration is often discussed, which may be caused by the strict model of French secularism, laïcité. Interestingly, this model is perceived completely differently by the proponents and opponents of the laïcité. For France, it is the most important achievement of the republic, which at the same time contributes to the integration process, although according to its opponents, this model, on the contrary, hinders the process of integration of the Muslim population. The result is an identity crisis and a sense of disillusionment, which plays a major role in the radicalization process.

Based on the existing security problem, it is necessary to analyze this model and determine its impact on the rise of radical Islam. Along with this, determine how compatible or incompatible the republican and Islamic values are.

Keywords: Laïcité, universalism, Islamist terrorism, radicalization, integration.

The 1905 law established laïcité, a unique French model of secularism based on republican values. It refers to the separation of religion and state, which, in contrast to the general definition of secularism, has gained institutional definition over time. Laïcité, as a constitutional principle, requires the state to be neutral toward religious groups and, on the contrary, does not permit religious organizations to control and influence state institutions. Its structure also includes a guarantee of "freedom of religious practice" provided that religion is kept private and not expressed in public (Alouane 2021).

According to one viewpoint, laïcité promotes the integration of people of different beliefs because it is illegal to wear any religious symbol in public, so people do not distinguish themselves by external signs. Following the terrorist attacks, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that "We will aim to *strengthen* laïcité and *consolidate republican principles"* in the fight against "separatism" (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2020). This statement once again demonstrates that the role of laïcité is viewed positively in the context of the fight against radicalization.

Muslims, on the other hand, believe it is used as a tool to try to erase Muslims' identities while also excluding them from French identities. They believe and fear that this fundamentally liberal principle is increasingly becoming the foundation of anti-Muslim racism, which blames Muslims for integration failures and other social problems (Alouane 2021).

The French Ideal: Laïcité and Universalism

The challenge for Europe is to find the best way to integrate Muslims. This issue is especially important for France because the Muslim community constitutes a large portion of the French population, and France is Europe's top target for terrorist acts. It is a significant challenge for France to uphold republican values while also respecting the rights and religious practices of Muslim minorities. In many cases, these two contradict each other.

To comprehend the French integration model or the concept of laïcité, we must first comprehend the universalism principle, which has historically been important in French society. Universalism is based on the belief that all rational people, regardless of historical, cultural, or other differences, share certain values and principles. These ideas were influenced by the Enlightenment period and the revolutionary values of 1789, which established the foundations of French universalism of "universal human freedom, equality, and reason" that supersedes "particular languages, ethnicities, and distinct cultures" (Bader 1997, 793).

The neutrality of public space is required for the proper functioning of this model, in which citizens of all countries, ethnicities, and religions are allowed, even required, to unite as equals to establish secular rituals and common values of social order (Observatoire de la Laïcité 2017).

This term was especially relevant during the colonial period when France attempted to establish universal values in the colonized countries of the Middle East. Even though these values were not identical to Islamic culture, France attempted to establish universal ideas through assimilation. Access to the universal is still a key phrase in the discourse of national self-representation and identity today (Hennette-Vauchez 2019).

The French integration process is fundamentally different from other Western models, focusing primarily on the principle of universalism. France welcomes all migrants who share the republic's core values. As a result, immigrants are encouraged to become citizens if they accept the dominant French cultural and political values. This approach emphasizes that universally shared values, not racial or ethnic characteristics, are what unite people (Schor 2001, 46).

This model is fundamentally different from, for instance, the British model, which emphasizes multiculturalism and diversity while protecting individual identity (Bawer 2006). In this context, the concept of universalism appears paradoxical because the construction of a universal French identity necessitates the rejection of a specific individual identity, which, in the case of Muslims, is their religious practice and outward expression, which remains only in the place of personal space. The French model is frequently criticized for rejecting tolerance because logically, if everyone is the same in public and differences only exist at the individual level in private, then there are no differences to be tolerated, in the sense that citizens will never have the opportunity to exchange opposing/divergent views (Schor 2001, 50).

It is interesting to consider how Christian or Islamic practices are compatible with secularism, as well as why there is a conflict between Islam and secularism, whereas this model is acceptable for the Christian religion.

Although religious practice in Europe has declined significantly in the modern era, there is still a sizable Christian population. Many believers are passive, implying a lack of religious practice. However, there is no requirement for public expression of faith in the European Christian tradition, which is why the Christian population has not had a conflict with the principles of laïcité. Thus this model is compatible with Christianity because this religion does not require the public expression of faith (Klausen 2005, 155).

Unlike Christianity, Islam requires public rituals and outward symbols of faith, and it is here that the main conflict and incompatibility with secularism arises. On the other hand, France protects religious freedom and practice, but only in private. However, four of Islam's five pillars – the *Shahadah* (recognition of Allah's Oneness and Muhammad as His Messenger), *Salah* (ritual prayer), *Sawm* (fasting during Ramadan), and *Hajj* (ritual pilgrimage to Mecca), among other public rites, such as the sacrifice of animals on *Eid al-Adha* – require unity and public celebration (Hooker 2019).

This is the main contradiction between the French secular model and Islam. The French, on the other hand, with their traditions and republican values, are no less sensitive to public religious expression, and they strongly react when Muslims insist on publicly asserting a different religious identity (Bowen 2007).

Ni Arabe Ni Francais: French Muslims and the Evolution of Identity

Anti-immigrant sentiment has grown in Europe, both in society and among the political elite. Muslims are frequently chastised for being incompatible with Western values and incapable of assimilation.

As in the colonial era, the terms "backward" and "religious fanatics" are frequently used today (Bowen 2007).

Terrorism is motivated by a variety of factors. However, the issue of integration is frequently discussed in France, where the number of Islamist terrorist attacks is particularly high. In this context, France is frequently criticized for its strict model of secularism, laïcité, in which Muslims are unable to express their religious identity and thus feel excluded. They are unable to fully integrate into French society, but their original identity is also destroyed as a result of the French universalism policy. It is worth noting that, in the face of opposition, Muslims are working even harder to establish their own religious identity. They want to be recognized as French as well as Muslim.

Ferhad Khosrokhavar's paper, which examines the profiles of those arrested on suspicion of Islamist terrorism, describes Muslims' situation as a double personality (Khosrokhavar 2006, 41). These emotions are evident in the interviews he conducted with the prisoners. Those convicted of terrorism describe a French society devoid of respect and loyalty to Islam in interviews (Khosrokhavar 2006, 130).

Based on Khosrokhavar's research, we can conclude that in the face of opposition and restrictions, Muslims strive to strengthen their religious identity and gain the desired recognition. However, due to historical values and republican ideals, France is not receptive to religious expressions. Furthermore, based on the principle of universalism, it seeks to suppress other identities and unite society around republican values. The conflict between French and Islamic identities causes Muslims to lose respect and dignity, leading to disillusionment, which they attempt to overcome by joining terrorist organizations. These organizations understand the needs and give them the recognition and respect they are looking for.

Conclusion

France has seen a dramatic increase in radical Islam and terrorist attacks carried out by Muslims living within the country over the last two decades. Islamist terrorism poses a significant challenge for France, as evidenced by the highest number of attacks and fatalities among EU member states.

The rise of radical Islam can be explained by a variety of factors, but the personal profiles of terrorists show that its root is the difficulty of integration. The main obstacle for French Muslims in this context is the laïcité model of French secularism, which suppresses Muslim religious identity in public spaces.

As a result, there is a sense of duality, in which Muslims are unable to fully accept republican ideas while also having their original identity broken. Muslims are attempting to establish themselves in the face of opposition at the expense of strengthening their religious identity, which is unacceptable under the republican framework. At this point, terrorist organizations, through careful rhetoric, give the much-needed recognition.

In France, a large number of terrorists go through the radicalization process. The strict French integration model, which, unlike other European models, attempts to suppress free expression in public spaces, is one of the main causes of this. According to republican thinking, this contributes to national unity because, in public spaces, everyone is united only around republican values and cannot be distinguished by different signs. However, as the paper demonstrates, this model in practice contributes to the exclusion of Muslims from French society.

Despite the problem, it is difficult for France to revise this model and, in particular, give up the principle of laïcité because it has historically played an important role in the republic's general consciousness and is an emotional component of French identity. As a result, when critics argue that this principle should be revised because it suppresses Muslim identity, it means that abandoning or compromising this principle in any way means suppressing one of the most important markers of French identity. This is the primary contradiction in the conflict between Islamic and French identities.

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