REPRESENT

Can Islam and French Republican Values Coexist?

APRIL 2021

Hadeil Ali

Represent *is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. In this article, Hadeil Ali explores the structural racism and discrimination against Muslims in France, and how French leaders must reexamine the Republican values rhetoric to create a community of belonging.*

"Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today." Those were the words of French President Emmanuel Macron on October 2, 2020 as he unveiled the anti-radicalism bill that would strengthen oversight of mosques, schools, and sports clubs to protect France from radical Islamists. Two weeks after Macron's controversial speech, school teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded in a terrorist attack after displaying the controversial Charlie Hebdo cartoons of the Prophet to his students. In the same month, another terrorist murdered three worshippers at a church in Nice in the name of Islam. Thousands in France marched to denounce the killing of the schoolteacher. Protestors held signs stating, "I am Samuel," echoing the "I am Charlie" slogan after the 2015 attacks on the offices of the French satirical weekly newspaper, Charlie Hebdo.

"Samuel Paty on Friday became the face of the Republic, of our desire to break the will of the terrorists… and to live as a community of free citizens in our country." Those were the words of President Macron to the nation after Paty's murder. The recent terrorist attacks on French soil have reignited a debate about France's Republican values. Islam is seen as a challenge to France's motto, "nation one and indivisible." France's narrative to "reform" Islam is rooted in French society's main principles of republicanism, "communautarisme," and secularism dating back to the French Revolution. According to French Republicanism, assimilation to a singular culture is key to maintain its ideology. French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues that the French state can welcome immigrants, but they must adhere to its institutions, conform to its existing cultural norms, and shed any ethnic, religious, cultural, or other characteristics that might harm French Republican principles. The very existence of Islam has thus been viewed as a national security threat.

This threat has been framed as Islamist separatism and has united the French population across the political spectrum from right to left. "It's a conscious, theorized, politico-religious project that materializes through repeated deviations from the values of the Republic and which often result in the creation of a counter-society," Macron stated. In the presidential and the larger dominant French narrative, Muslims have created a counter-society by choice against "French values." However, the structural racism and discrimination absent from the conversation in France are the real issues behind the creation of a "counter-society." Discrimination against Muslims in France is prevalent in all facets of their lived experiences. A study by the Observatory for the Defense of Rights found that young Arab and Black men are 20 times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police. According to the French government,

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[42](#) percent of Muslims (that number reaches [58](#) percent in other studies) have experienced discrimination due to their religion. The discrimination against women who wear the veil reaches [60](#) percent. The immigrant population in France often lives in the "banlieues" or housing projects experiencing multi-generational poverty, inequities, and lack of economic and social mobility. France must examine the root causes at play that have led to a largely alienated and disenfranchised Muslim "counter-society." It must also reckon with its multicultural society and find space to center the conversation around these structural issues.

The idea that a large segment of the Muslim community is in conflict with French Republican values is a myth – contrary to the media and government [discourse](#). In the largest quantitative study of the relationship between terrorism and discrimination in France, researchers from the Center for the Study of Conflict in Paris [found](#) that Muslims deeply trust the institutions of the Republic. In fact, trust in these institutions only diminished with one factor: experiences of discrimination. The previously stated core values are at the foundation of the French identity. French Republican values have been weaponized to alienate almost 6 million Muslims living in France, the [largest](#) Muslim community in Europe. The French state deemed Muslims' religion and culture as different from French culture—and more importantly—dangerous. "This anti-radicalism bill above all has a political rather than legal motive. It's stigmatising Muslims," [said](#) Ouadie Elhamamouchi, a lawyer for the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) civil rights group.

The mainstream conversation has focused on "reforming" Islam, preventing the radicalization of young Muslims, and upholding French values at risk. Olivier Roy, a leading French political scientist, [labeled](#) the wave of terrorist attacks in 2015 as the "Islamization of radicalization" rather than the "radicalization of Islam." The majority of radicals come from second generation Muslims born in Europe. In France specifically, the geographic distribution corresponds to neighborhoods with a strong representation from the migrant community. Many have had a past of petty delinquency and drug dealing and were not practicing Muslims in many cases. Therefore, Islam provided an outlet for these individuals [to share their frustration, resentment for their social outcome, and a need for recognition](#). Advocating for further oversight on schools, mosques, and predominately Muslim neighborhoods does not help because radicalization does not occur in Muslim religious spaces. More importantly, it alienates millions of peaceful Muslims in Europe, in the West, and almost 2 billion worldwide by perpetuating a culture of stereotypes and exclusion. France must cease to constantly frame the Muslim population through a security lens. Islam can no longer be the "other" to help France uphold its values. France must include French Muslims and the larger immigrant community in the conversation and the decision-making process, which would help bridge the gap, perceived or real, between the Muslim communities and the larger French society.

Are French Republican values compatible with an inclusive and equitable society? Will the conversation about structural racism become more accepted and normalized? These questions rest in the hands of government officials, political pundits, and media experts, who have historically benefited from weaponizing a religion. The reality is that France will no longer be a homogenous society, and the "Clash of Civilization" narrative is an irrational fear that has been supported without any evidence. France must shift from a position of "othering" the Muslim community to a structure of economic, social, religious, and cultural belonging.

Author

Hadeil Ali is a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) manager with the Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project. She is responsible for supporting all DEI initiatives at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). She previously served as a program manager with the Abshire-Inamori Leadership Academy at CSIS where she developed training opportunities for interns, staff, and external stakeholders. Prior to joining CSIS, she worked for World Learning, where she led youth educational development initiatives in the Middle East. Ms. Ali holds an M.A. in Contemporary Arab studies with highest honors from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a B.A. in international relations and communications summa cum Laude from Drury University. She speaks French, Arabic, and Spanish. Read more publications. Connect on LinkedIn.

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