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► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Geisser. French Muslims: A Silent Community?. Facing Terrorism in France, Springer International Publishing, pp.69-80, 2022, 10.1007/978-3-030-94163-5\_7. halshs-03906535

**HAL Id: halshs-03906535**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03906535v1>**

Submitted on 26 Dec 2022

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## French Muslims: A Silent Community?

Vincent Geisser

The reactions of French Muslims to the attacks that have struck France since 2015 constitute a blind spot for many commentators. Indeed, editorial writers and politicians conveyed the image of a ‘silent community’, and sometimes invited the Muslims in France to publicly condemn terrorist acts, as if they were incapable of doing so by themselves. Apart from the fact that this image is based on normative presuppositions - Muslims are deemed to be not sufficiently attached to the principles and values of the nation – such assertions have never been supported by precise facts. In a way, the Muslims of France have been rendered invisible as citizens in the demonstrations of mourning and the mobilizations that followed the attacks; and this is connected to the double-bind injunction addressed to them : to explicitly dissociate themselves from the terrorists as ‘Muslims’ (in a particularist register) while, at the same time, “blending in” with French society (in a universalist register).

The aim of this chapter is to deconstruct this idea of a ‘silence’ in the face of Islamist terrorism. To do so, I analyse the different positions, actions and mobilizations of Muslim organizations and personalities in France between January 2015 and October 2020 (the murder of the high-school teacher Samuel Paty and the attack on a church in Nice). I take these attacks as moments that reveal the ways in which ‘Islamicness’<sup>1</sup> and French citizenship are linked in the public space. In a sense, the terrorist crisis creates an opportunity for the sociologist to observe ‘French Muslim scenes’, unfolding in many different places, registers and temporalities. The ‘commemorative polysemy’ (Mauger, 2015, p. 88) that appears then is a characteristic shared by French citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims. There is no such thing as a ‘Muslim way’ (Roy, 2015) of mourning or of mobilizing against Islamist terrorism, but different mechanisms and modes of doing so that depend on local, even micro-local contexts (cities, neighbourhoods, municipalities, etc.) and on the social, educational and religious trajectories of individuals and groups.

A terrorist attack is a social ordeal. It revives ‘one of the founding questions of sociology, that of the relationship between individuals and groups, and of the mechanisms of solidarity in modern societies’ (Truc, 2018, p.4). If the attacks that France has experienced

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<sup>1</sup> We use this notion of ‘Islamicness’ (*islamité*) drawing on the term ‘Jewishness’ (*judéité*), referring to the different ways of being, living as and feeling oneself to be Jewish, outside of any religious belief or practice (Schnapper, Bordes-Benayoun and Raphaël, 2009).

since 2015 have not called into question the cultural, socioeconomic and political integration of Muslims into French society, this integration has nevertheless been debated in the public sphere, thereby maintaining doubts about their loyalty to the national community. Muslims have constantly been called upon to express their opinion on the depth of their adherence to the principles and values of ‘secular and republican France.’ Although they have rarely been accused by politicians or by the media of being guilty of terrorist attacks or accomplices of the terrorists, Muslim organizations and leaders have sometimes been presented as morally responsible for the radical excesses of certain members of ‘their’ community, or have been suspected of separatist tendencies that may lead to jihadist violence (Geisser, 2020).

The analysis presented here is based on a series of semi-structured interviews carried out between September 2015 and April 2017 with forty Muslim leaders and spokespersons in France, but also with some thirty ‘ordinary Muslims,’ most of them living in Ile-de-France, Normandy and the South of France. Community websites (Oumma.com, Saphirnews, Al Kanz.org, Halalbook.fr, Ajib.fr, islamophobie.net, etc.), blogs, personal and community pages on Facebook and forums and press releases published in the regional and national press by prominent or anonymous Muslims were also monitored and analysed. A qualitative survey on the way young French Muslims relate to the Prophet Muhammad was administered in 2018-2019, as part of a research program (ANR-DFG *Prophet*). Questions focused on their reactions to the publications of cartoons and on the terrorist acts carried out explicitly in ‘revenge for the honour of the Prophet.’ Finally, we attended and observed many local and national events organized by Muslim associations and mosques relating to the themes of ‘radicalization’, ‘terrorism’, ‘solidarity with the victims’ and ‘interreligious dialogue’ (Geisser et al., 2016).

### **Tribute, Voice and Loyalty: reassuring the national community**

Faced with the Islamist attacks, French Muslims, both as individuals and as collectives, are regularly confronted with the paradoxical injunction to condemn violence in a universalist register, attesting to their mastery of the republican political lexicon, while also accepting as their own a particularist discourse that rejects Islamist terrorism ‘in the name of Islam’. This twofold constraint favours a form of discursive alchemy where the proclaimed adherence to republican and secular values is combined with doctrinal and theological references aimed at religiously delegitimizing any recourse to violence.

Despite their quarrel with the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo* over the regular publication of cartoons deemed offensive to the Prophet Muhammad, almost all Muslim institutions and organizations in France unambiguously condemned the attack on the paper's editorial staff on 7 January 2015 and clearly called on 'citizens of Muslim faith to join the national and republican demonstration of Sunday 11 January 2015 in large numbers so as to affirm their desire to live together in peace and show respect for the values of the Republic.'<sup>2</sup> A few days later, the French Council for Muslim Worship (CFCM), joined with independent Muslim federations and the main mosques in France, invited 'the imams of France, on the occasion of next Friday's sermon, to recall in unity the essence of the Qur'anic message and its universal and humanist values.'<sup>3</sup> These calls were widely relayed at the local level by Muslim associations, religious figures and mosques, so as to reach ordinary believers and practitioners. The sociologist Warda Hadjab, who carried out a participant observation during the great 'Republican March' of 11 January 2015, noted that many anonymous Muslims, not affiliated with organizations or mosques, attended this march, thus contradicting the thesis that there was a Muslim boycott of it (Hadjab, 2015).

However, the attacks of 13 November 2015 caused a profound shock to people's sense of citizenship and spiritual identity, prompting Muslims in France to mobilize more against terrorism and to make their participation in the mourning community visible. The magnitude of the event (130 dead and 413 wounded), the diversity of the social origins of the victims, and the multicultural character of the places targeted by the terrorists (an auditorium, cafes, the Stade de France, etc.) led Muslims in France to identify more intensely with the victims and to publicly state their participation in the mourning community. From 14 November, the main Muslim federations launched a call for unity and national mourning: 'Muslim federations call on all mosques in France and all the faithful to raise prayers for peace in our country and the safety of our fellow citizens. May Allah protect our country France from all misfortune.'<sup>4</sup> A fortnight days later, the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris organized an event that brought together more than 300 national and local Islamic leaders from France. The staging, the bodily postures of those who attended, and the content of the speeches evoked the great patriotic 'masses' (in the sense of Catholic services) of the Third

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<sup>2</sup> CFCM (French Council for Muslim Worship), press release of 8 January 2015. This text was signed by all the Muslim federations of France, including the Union of Islamic Organizations of France (UOIF), though the latter has withdrawn from the CFCM.

<sup>3</sup> CFCM, press release dated 14 January 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Call for unity and national mourning by Muslim federations, Saphirnews, 11/14/2015 [https://www.saphirnews.com/L-appel-al-unite-et-au-deuil-national-des-federations-muslim\\_a21538.html](https://www.saphirnews.com/L-appel-al-unite-et-au-deuil-national-des-federations-muslim_a21538.html). Accessed on 12/05/2015.

Republic, when the sacred was expressed in a twofold register, both profane and religious. There were also explicit references to a civic Islam (Sèze, 2015):

We, Muslims of France, affirm our deep attachment to the republican pact and to the universal values which found our Republic as well as our attachment to the principle of secularism, which guarantees freedom of conscience and respect for the diversity of religious convictions and practices. [...] In the name of the Muslims of France, we raise our prayers so that France may live happy and prosperous, and may be strong and great through union and harmony; may the Most Merciful help and protect France and the French people' (Citizen Manifesto of Muslims in France, adopted on 29 November 2015).

The mobilization of Muslims against terrorism reached new levels in the summer of 2016, following the attack in Nice on 14 July 2016 – a national holiday – which left 86 dead and 458 wounded. The event triggered an outpour of anti-terrorist language: community leaders, and some ordinary Muslims, expressed their shock more publicly and explicitly than after previous attacks. At the local level, an increased number of Muslim representatives of all persuasions, from the most liberal to the most conservative, called their brethren to demonstrate, to pay tribute to the victims and to provide assistance to the wounded. They asked for blood donations – a powerful symbolic act. On 17 July 2016, a delegation of imams from the Nice region visited families who had lost loved ones in the 14 July attack.<sup>5</sup> The large number of Muslims among the victims of the Nice attack (a third, according to some figures) may have contributed to a process of identification with the mourning community and may have naturalised demands for a civil and patriotic Islam, rejecting all forms of political and religious violence. (Bastié, 2016 ; Charrihi, 2017)

A few days later, on 26 July, two young French jihadists assassinated an 86-year-old Catholic priest, Jacques Hamel, who was leading a service in the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray (Seine-Maritime). On this occasion, the French Council for Muslim Worship and local associations (such as the Rouen Union of Muslims) solemnly called on Muslims to attend mass on Sunday in order to express their solidarity with members of the Catholic community. This initiative, unprecedented in the history of Islam in France, also mobilized ordinary Muslims, although there are no precise figures on the extent of their participation. Our survey, carried out in several churches in France, confirmed the presence of imams and community elites (presidents of associations, notables and local elected officials of Muslim

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<sup>5</sup> Source <http://www.umam06.com/actualites/2016/17-06-2016-visite-des-familles-endeuillees.html>. Accessed on 05/05/2021.

faith) at Sunday Mass on 31 July 2016 as well as of ordinary Muslim believers who had come to testify to their solidarity with the Catholics of France and their rejection of terrorism committed ‘in the name of Islam.’

In October 2020, after the murder of Samuel Paty, a history and geography school teacher in the Paris region, national federations and local associations, and anonymous Muslims expressed their dismay at the atrocity of the modus operandi (decapitation of the victim). They expressed shock about an attack on a teacher, a symbol of state education, freedom of expression and ‘living together’. The majority of Muslim federations and personalities participated in demonstrations of republican homage to Samuel Paty despite the polemical comments made by the Minister of the Interior. In effect, Gérald Darmanin attributed the moral responsibility for the terrorist act to a number of Muslim organizations who had denounced Islamophobia. He accused them of inciting radical Muslims to commit vengeful acts and called for their dissolution<sup>6</sup>. However, there were a number of out of the ordinary initiatives: non-Muslim pupils (atheists, Catholics or Jews) enrolled in state schools were invited to dialogue with others, enrolled in Muslim denominational establishments: ‘When an attack affects Catholics, we are all Catholics. When an attack affects a teacher, we are all teachers. We are united to fight this scourge which ultimately affects us all.’<sup>7</sup>

The very many condemnations of terrorist acts committed in the ‘name of Islam’ or ‘to avenge the honour of the Prophet’ and the wide array of expression of sensitivities and of ‘mourning’ confirm the hypothesis of a commemorative polysemy.

### **Being ‘Charlie’ in one’s own way**

Whilst the institutions representative of Islam in France (the French Council for Muslim Worship and the Regional Councils for Muslim Worship), the large mosques and the main Muslim federations of France condemned the January attacks, discrete criticism were also expressed at the local level (associations and prayer rooms) and especially in the ‘muslimosphere’ (community networks on the Internet). On the fringes of institutional Islam, there was even an adversarial debate on the question of whether or not to display ‘Je suis

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Darmanin annonce la dissolution officielle du CCIF [Collectif contre l’islamophobie en France] en conseil des ministres’, *L’Obs*, 2 December 2020: <https://www.nouvelobs.com/mort-de-samuel-paty/20201202.OBS36912/darmanin-annonce-la-dissolution-officielle-du-ccif-en-conseil-des-ministres.html>. Accessed on 07/06/2021.

<sup>7</sup> Younès Yousfi, deputy head of the Muslim lycée Ibn Khaldoun in Marseille: ‘Hommage à Samuel Paty: des élèves musulmans et catholiques se rassemblent à Marseille pour prôner le “vivre ensemble”’, France 3, 02/11/2020: <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo>. Accessed on 07/06/2021.

Charlie', the logo created by Joachim Roncin. (Calabrese, 2020) Many Muslim organizations and personalities joined the 'national mourning', taking part in marches and vigils. As they did so, they emphasized their reluctance to accept the slogan 'Je suis Charlie' or to appreciate the publication by the weekly magazine of new cartoons representing the prophet Muhammad wearing a turban vaguely evoking the shape of a penis and carrying a sign reading 'Je suis Charlie. Everything is forgiven.' Even the Office of the French Council for Muslim Worship, expressed reservations 'as to the latest issue of *Charlie Hebdo* which offends the sensibilities of Muslims'<sup>8</sup> in spite of its eagerness to present the image of a law abiding 'respectable Islam' and its keenness to maintain good relations with the political authorities.

Ordinary Muslims, not affiliated with religious associations or federations, were reluctant to adopt the slogan 'Je suis Charlie'. They considered that it obscured the 'other victims' of terrorism, and appealed to the combination of a republican homage with respect for the 'sensitivity' of Muslim believers. (Badouard, 2019) In general, these ordinary Muslims preferred self-censoring their own feelings for fear of being accused of boycotting national mourning and of being perceived as complacent towards terrorists

'On Facebook, everyone was saying "I'm Charlie", and there was kind of a pressure if you didn't. (...) Of course I condemned the terrorists' acts. It's horrible what they did. But that doesn't make me Charlie, because I don't support the publications of this journal and being Charlie is a bit reductive'.

Other Muslims, who conveyed an identity-based conception of Islam, also expressed a clear desire to hijack Joachim Roncin's slogan and turned it into a slogan to the glory of the Prophet Muhammad. After January 2015, alternative slogans circulated on social networks, for example 'I am a Muslim with Muhammad', 'I am Muhammad', 'I am a Muslim and I love my Prophet', etc. In the strongly emotional context after the attacks, Muslims in France often adjusted their identities: the affirmation of a religious allegiance and an emotional attachment to the prophetic figure (Muhammad) were combined with more classic expressions of citizenship, patriotism and participation in national mourning.

### **A reinvention of republican and religious rituals**

More than being the expression of an antinomy between citizenship and religiosity, the reactions of Muslims in France to the Islamist attacks showed a symbiotic relationship

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<sup>8</sup> Office of the French Council for Muslim Worship, press release dated 14 January 2015.

between the ‘religious sacred’ and the ‘profane sacred’, with individuals simultaneously invoking Allah and the Republic. On and around the sites hit by the attacks of 13 November 2015, for example, many Muslims came to deposit bouquets of flowers and short messages. Written in Arabic or French, these were a mixture of Muslim prayers, the expression of their solidarity with the victims, and a way of voicing their attachment to the idea of living together (Truc, 2020; Frouard, 2020).

Appropriating a tradition initiated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, several Muslim associations and federations decided, after the attacks of January 2015, to institutionalize the practice of a Muslim prayer for France, on the model of the prayer for the Republic uttered on Shabbat in French synagogues. (Barbouch, 2015)

From November 2015, local and national Muslim officials, from the most conservative to the most liberal, elected to hoist the French red-white-and-blue flag on mosques and the headquarters of Muslim associations (around a hundred throughout France). This symbolic act, unprecedented in the recent history of Islam in France, followed the French President’s call for the flag to be flown (Boussaguet & Faucher, 2016). It was accompanied by a patriotic discourse reminiscent of those produced under the Third Republic by Jewish notables in favour of a total assimilation of the Jews of France to the Nation. For instance, Dalil Boubakeur, the Rector of the Great Mosque of Paris addressed the Citizens’ Rally of the Muslims of France, convened at Institut du Monde Arabe on 29 November 2015 and declared: ‘We are proud of and attached to this homeland which welcomed us and our parents. [...] Let us be proud to be French and to belong to the land of human rights and the Enlightenment, of freedom of thought and tolerance. [...] Let us work with our children as citizens for the defence of Peace in our country and in our families.’

Since the 2015 attacks, large Muslim gatherings in France have mobilized a patriotic symbolism that was more discreet previously. Although renowned for its conservatism and its proximity to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Union of Islamic Organizations of France (‘Muslims of France’ since 2017) adorns the main stage of its meetings in red-white-and-blue. The symbiosis between secular rituals and religious rituals works: the tricolour and the national anthem combine with religious songs (*anashid*) to the glory of the Prophet Muhammad, giving this community gathering the atmosphere of a patriotic gathering.

Finally, after the November 2015 attacks, many Muslim Internet users updated their profile photos on Facebook with a tricolour filter, as a sign of solidarity with the victims of the terrorist attacks. This decision to display the national emblem, while common to many Internet users, also reflected a change of attitude in the way the new generations of Muslims



who had been socialized and educated in France related to national identity. Although ‘French on paper’, many had felt a sort of uneasiness in publicly asserting their attachment to the French nation, because of the colonial dispute and because of their experience of everyday racism. For that matter, the terrorist attacks produced a disinhibiting effect and incited a number of young Muslims, practising or not, to express their patriotism in the public sphere.

## **Conclusion**

Since the 2015 attacks the Muslims of France have been confronted with contradictory injunctions. Far from pushing them into paralysis and silence, this situation has actually led them to develop original responses that have helped them both reverse the stigma they felt and reject the implicit suspicion of complicity with radical jihadism, passivity and silence.

The reaction to the attacks of representatives of institutional Islam were largely framed by their close relations with local and national public authorities, by routine cooperation with security authorities (the Ministry of the Interior and the prefectures) and by regular dialogues with French opinion leaders and intellectuals and with the dignitaries of other religions. In the circumstances, their main concern was to consolidate the image of a ‘respectable Islam’ (Dazey, 2019) consistent with secular and republican values. Beyond responses guided by their position within the institutional framework, their initiatives also aimed at developing a Muslim counter-narrative to the religious rhetoric of terrorist organizations. (Bajrafil, 2018 ; Oubrou, 2019 ; Mamoun, 2017).

In the same context, ordinary Muslims drew on very diverse registers, usually less formal and ‘official’ in their format. Their participation in post-attack marches and vigils was strongly linked not only to the local context, their socio-professional status, their age and their educational background, but also to their integration into Muslim or non-Muslim associations. The most active and visible individuals in the post-terrorist mobilizations were the new middle and upper-class Muslims in France, often strongly involved in the public debate and very involved in the civic community. One can thus apply to the French population of Muslim culture and/or religion the classic sociological analyses linking levels of mobilization to social characteristics. It appears that the intensity and the frequency of mobilization against terrorist violence and the propensity to publicly express adherence to the

mourning community simply reflects the unequal distribution of social and political resources amongst individuals and groups (Mayer & Tiberj, 2015).

However, the attacks also had a specific effect: the double-bind constraint we have discussed (demonstrating as an ordinary citizen while displaying one's Islamicness) was also a vector of politicization for a number of French Muslims who experienced as a burden their 'invisibility' within ones of the Republic. They used their participation in collective mobilizations to distance themselves from the disparaging view of a 'Muslim silence' in the face of Islamist attacks.

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