The challenging significance of the category “Muslim” in France: A socio-historic overview from the national press (1980-2020)

El significado desafiante de la categoría “musulmán” en Francia: Panorama sociohistórico de la prensa nacional (1980-2020)

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Received 28/04/2023. Accepted 18/04/2024


Para acceder a este artículo: https://doi.org/10.15366/reim2024.36.004
Abstract

This article aims to examine the narrative of the presence of Muslim populations in France over the last four decades (1980-2020) through the use of the category “Muslim” in two national newspapers. On the basis of selected events that have marked this period, this work intends to highlight several regimes of visibility or “topos” that challenge both the interpretations of the French Republican Principles and representations of the diversity of Muslims and of the French population as a whole. Over the period studied, the so-called “Muslim populations” gained a degree of exclusivity in the conception of otherness in France that carry several proxies along creating a rigidified (inextricable) intertwining of social, ethnic and religious dimensions.

Keywords: Islam, France, Muslims, Press, Citizenship

Resumen

Este artículo examina la narrativa de la presencia de población musulmana en Francia durante las últimas cuatro décadas a través del uso de la categoría “musulmán” en dos periódicos nacionales. A partir de una selección de acontecimientos, delinea varios regímenes de visibilidad o “topos” que desafían tanto la interpretación de los principios republicanos franceses como las representaciones de la diversidad de los musulmanes y de la población francesa en su conjunto. La categoría ha tendido a la exclusividad en la concepción de la alteridad y a un entrelazamiento rigidizado (inextricable) de las dimensiones social, étnica y religiosa.

Palabras clave: Islam, Francia, Musulmanes, Prensa, Ciudadanía

Introduction

Islam in France has undergone a significant evolution characterized by the emergence of multiple actors, factors and events, contributing to the installation of an atmosphere that has taught us a great deal about the very notion of otherness. “Muslim”, as a category of self-identification (Barth, 1969) is ill-defined and highly controversial, leading to uncertainty about the reliability of statistical data. The absence of official statistical output from the census since the ban in 1905 on recording the religious denomination of the population means that any estimates of numbers, which rarely tally with each other, are based on an arbitrary assignation (Kateb, 2004). Whether it be a question of studies by researchers (Boyer, 2006; Fregosi, 2009; Dargent, 2010) or the studies carried out by Opinion Polls, the figures are estimated to be in the range of 3 to 10 million Muslims, depending on the sources and the periods (Simon, 2019). The findings of the INED/INSEE inquiry “Trajectoires et Origines” do qualify this figure when they estimate that in 2008, 4.1 million people in metropolitan France declared themselves to be Muslim, regardless of their degree of religiosity (Simon and Tiberj, 2013: 6).
Given the frequent association of Islam with behavioral traits, attitudes, ideologies and forms of difference that are marginal in French society, revisiting the construction of the debate on Islam in France since the 1980s means confronting at least three intersecting issues. These relate to: first, the historicity of the “Muslim” category; second, the demands of the national Republican narrative; third, the process of sedimentation of a number of wide-ranging public debates on Islam resulting in the relatively negative (Babès, 1997), or at least suspect (Cesari, 1997), image of the religion in France, reaching a climax during the 2010’s due to numerous terrorist attacks and the paradigm of radicalization (Khosrokhavar, 2014). Particularly over the course of the last decade, this religion has given rise to an increasing number of major debates which challenge the contours of a radical avatar that have contributed toward linking Islam with security issues and, more broadly, with a wide range of threats.

The deployment of a research program on the evolution of the socio-religious identities of Muslim populations against this backdrop has led us to question the uses of the Muslim category, which from the outset appears to be loaded, even saturated, with a meaning that is always debatable. Are we talking about individuals as Muslims in the right area of their lives? Are we not participating in a generalization of sections of the population by concentrating on their link with Islam, whereas individuals wish to be perceived, defined and examined as citizens, and in any case not in terms of this one social attribute? While these issues are often studied from the subjectivities of actors, it seemed important to us to take a parallel interest in the historicity of this category (Willems, 2023). Our objective is to consider the narratives of the presence of Muslim populations over a relatively long period of time in order to grasp the trajectory (or itinerary) of the category over several decades. After exploring ways of following said trajectory, we decided to base our work on primary sources, namely the press, not with a view to analyzing how the latter covered Islam and Muslims (Deltombe, 2007), or to producing a new historical fresco on Islam in France from a new angle (Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013), but to use a press corpus as a support for experiences so as to traverse the debates of the last four decades. This work is driven not only by the objective to test the comparability of the term Muslim in the European contexts studied as part of the QUEST program\(^1\), but also to give a second wind to the analysis by allowing ourselves the opportunity to understand how the media’s use of the Muslim category has evolved.

Alongside the work mobilizing linguistic analysis and big data processing tools, we developed an inductive work similar to archive ethnography, which involved going through different stages of filtering in order to identify some of the narrative configurations and moral conventions that shape the public attention of Muslim populations in France. Our approach consisted of building a corpus in an attempt to find the “threads of relevance” (Cefaï, 1996: 47) that we were able to identify from the study of two French newspapers, Le Monde and Le Figaro, over the last four decades. Without neglecting the specificity or limits of these archives, this choice fell within an approach of experimenting with a certain representation of social issues that is very often similar to that of the social sciences, while nevertheless in many respects remaining distinct (Hayat and Perdoncin, 2012). Our strategy was to face the test of atmospheres over

\(^1\) See the introduction of this special issue.
different periods of time, not so much with the idea of “reporting on reality” as “allowing us to feel the complexity of reality” (Lascoumes, 2022). In giving ourselves the keys to historical investigation, we sought to immerse ourselves in the mindset of different moments that would make it possible to identify narratives specific to the presence of Muslim populations in France.

We treat the press corpus as an archive, so as to observe the evolution in uses of the Muslim category from a diachronic perspective. As both an echo and producer of the debates taking place in the public space, newspapers operate as a social actor (Neveu, 2009; Parini et al., 2012). In developing the criteria on which to base this press corpus, we faced a major challenge, namely that of coping with a large mass of data, essentially due to our decision to work on a relatively long temporality using a set of intersections between very broad occurrences: “Islam”, “Muslim” and “France”. Forced to “make choices that prove to be totally subjective” (Pinon, in Comby et al., 2016: 37), but which allow us to guarantee the coherence and homogeneity (Comby et al., 2016: 14) of the corpus, we limited ourselves to two newspapers, *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, which were chosen on the basis of two criteria: the ideological-political tendency of the newspaper in order to consider a certain number of political divisions, and the extent of its circulation, as both are among the most sold papers in France.

Following the thread of national press articles revealed the fragmentation or, conversely, the continuity of information. Some events and debates are reported in snippets, while others receive regular attention that might depend on their own specific calendar, and yet others are covered over a long period of time, depending for the most part on the spectacular or controversial dimension that develops. There is also a range of contributors whose discourse create a polyphonic character (Krieg, 2000). In addition to the *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* journalists who specialized to varying extents in Islamic issues in France, there were several expert figures, who integrated or rubbed shoulders with the opinions of various political, religious or academic personalities or of ordinary individuals. Our approach consisted in trying to extricate an overall vision, per decade, by noting the events and the debates relayed in the articles we examined.

Our challenge was more precisely to isolate and trace the use of the term “Muslim” by trying to identify its trajectory of meanings. The range of expressions used to designate them developed through reference i) to relatively generic terms (“Muslims”, “French Muslims”, “Mohammedans”), ii) to movements (Sufis, Mourids, Tabligh, etc.), iii) to interpretations of the religion perceived to be extreme (“fundamentalists”, “Islamists”, “radicalized”, etc.), iv) or to forms of extrapolation associated with immigrant populations and their descendants (immigrants, second-generation youth, “beurs”2, Arabs, North Africans, etc.). These different terms, which have accumulated over the decades, give an unprecedented depth to the question: Muslim by virtue of what? The increasing use of this category inexorably leads to a range of related current events. For each decade we have striven to recreate the general atmosphere that was part of the growing importance attached to this aspect of identity.

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2 Originally, the term “beur” (feminine “beurette”), is the “verlan” (slang spoken in the “banlieues”) of the word “Arabe”: reversed, the term is transformed into “-be-a-ra”, which gives the contraction “beur”. This term refers to the first and second generations of children of populations of the former colonies of the Maghreb who came to France.
A presentation by decade allows us to rethink certain turning points, which are no less important or indelible, and at the same time forces us to place them within a broader picture, as long as the latter is first and foremost a past-in-the-present (Dewey, 1993: 313, quoted by Quéré, 2023: 99). This division into decades is not a periodization. Each decade constitutes an archival pool in its own right, making it possible “mediation via the researcher’s point of view and through his/her feelings” (Abbott, 2007 cited by Lemercier, 2016: 5). This seeks to recreate “an experience of social discovery” leading to a kind of “lyrical sociology of the past” (ibid.).

The snippets of chrono-thematic analysis that we reproduce in this article, in support of a necessarily reduced selection of events used as illustrations, allow us to establish an overall movement designed to problematize the use of this term and to contribute toward an examination of its construction, or even reification.

Choosing to begin our exploration in the 1980s meant jumping on the bandwagon of current events and debates while at the same time taking that period as the point of entry into a perennial phase during which references to “Muslims” or “Muslim populations” gained increasing visibility both in public discussion and in academic work, at a time when the temporary aspect of immigration from the Maghreb was giving way to a new permanent establishment. This set of elements asks the reader to understand that the analysis that follows has nothing to do with any narrative positivism, but is instead part of a retrospective press-reading experience in order to use the two selected newspapers to revisit the weight of the meanings surrounding the “Muslim” category.

The 1980s: France searching for “its” Muslims

Throughout the 1980s, the issue of Islam and of the presence of Muslim populations in France received increasing coverage in the national press. What is striking is the growing curiosity concerning the expression and place of this religion on French soil, and its links with a range of major societal issues that gave a relatively eclectic vision of Muslim populations in France. The 1980s were absolutely the decade during which the categorization processes and typologies of Muslims skyrocketed, referring to several differentiation rationales that seemed to have crystalized over that period. We should immediately underline the fact that the overwhelming majority of articles dealing with Islam or Muslims in the national press related to international events. It is certain fragments of the latter that draw attention to its extensions, consequences and manifestations in French society.

Muslims in the colonial maze

One logic of differentiation relates to France’s colonial history. In the early part of the decade, the term “Muslim” was used to refer very broadly to any individual of Muslim background, presumed or proven, living in France, but also, and more specifically, to
French Muslims, relating to Algerians who had joined the French army during the Algerian War and their descendants, sometimes referred to as “Harkis”. The constant shifts between the adjectives “Muslim”, “Islamic” (there are frequent mentions of “Islamic fact” or “world”), and/or “Arab-Muslim” nevertheless tended to homogenize Muslim populations in France.

The distinction made between French Muslims and immigrant Muslims, regularly mentioned at the start of the decade, directly questions the recognition of forms of injustice: those proper to the former and those common to the Muslim population as a whole. We are especially reminded of this dual prism, bringing Algeria to the fore, through the voice of the rector of the Paris Mosque, Hamza Boubakeur. In June 1980, extracts from his speech, appearing in an article in *Le Monde* of June 29-30, 1980, on the occasion of a dinner given at the Paris mosque to various political and religious figures, criticized the many inequalities, such as racism and stigmatization, experienced both by French Muslims (the “Harkis”), while emphasizing that these phenomena do not spare them, and Muslims (as a whole) to set out a series of expectations advocating new forms of recognition of Islam within institutions. These included the teaching of the Arabic language in elementary schools, the recognition of religious holidays, the creation of “services” in hospitals and prisons, and Muslim sections in cemeteries.

A few years later, on June 20, 1983, *Le Monde* published an article about two sons of Harkis who were elected to the municipal council of Grand-Couronne in Normandy. Such focus on their experience underlines the merit of this successful integration, while at the same time highlighting the intentions of one of the newly elected councilors to push ahead with Muslim community projects such as a mosque and a cultural center. The contrast is clear with the presentation of the “competing” project, driven by “another section of the Muslim community, mainly immigrants”, and guided by the community’s imam, chargé d’affaires at the Tunisian consulate. Facing the “sincerely cultural and open fiber” of the “young Harkis”, was “an immigrant project”, “more religiously charged”, against a shared backdrop of ghettoization, discrimination in the job market and the displacement of a youth abandoned to a “self-service of values” in the face of which “nothing can any longer be taken for granted”. However, while this dividing line between French Muslims and Muslims was to gradually fade over the decade in *Le Monde*, it remained of primary importance in the columns of *Le Figaro*, whose collection of articles specific to this decade was focused on the issues of recognition and reparation of French Muslims and of the “repatriated community” from Algeria as a whole. It is nevertheless interesting to note that the specific legitimacy granted to French Muslims simultaneously fueled the rationales of knowledge and recognition of Islam, combining the Muslim religious fact with the register of protection and repair (*Le Monde*, September 24, 1981). It is also important to note that within the framework of the debate on Islam in France in the 1980s, the mention of the French Muslim population constitutes one of the rare residual traces of the country’s colonial past.
Immigration as a kaleidoscope of Islam

The 1980s witnessed the rise of the issue of immigration which largely dominated the public debate, particularly in the pages of Le Figaro through the idea of “critical threshold” (Le Figaro, March 28, 1983) or presented as a “major problem” (Le Figaro, December 11, 1985). A contrasted tone appears between the two dailies concerning the use of the term Muslim and, more broadly, the subject of Islam in France. While it is much less present in the pages of Le Figaro, where it is addressed in an allusive manner when immigration is mentioned, the articles in Le Monde depict a certain pluralization of the Muslim world in France through an explosion of categories and expressions.

During the 1980s, it was first of all the national communities of immigrants that were highlighted in the way Islam was understood. As early as July 1983, Le Monde published a series of articles entitled “Muslims in France”, starting with an article on July 12 about the “mosaic” that characterized this population. Compared to previous articles that focused on the overall number of Muslims, the estimates in this article set out details of the number of “believers” by nationality, creating a dividing line between foreigners (Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, “black Africans”, Turks and Yugoslavs), “French Muslims (ex-Harkis)”, and French converts to Islam. The article also reviewed the ten or so Islamic movements associated with these nationalities, such as “popular Maghrebian Islam”, conceived as a mixture of ancient traditions and practices influenced by the maraboutic brotherhoods or by the Ulemas. The latter must not be confused with the French Muslim movement and that of Black Africa, which is based on nature or animism cults, or with that of the Turks, among whom we identify “fundamentalist Muslims”, i.e. “who advocate a return to the foundations of the faith: Koran, tradition, Law”.

From the debates on the Muslim presence in France arose a multiplication of the arguments featuring the composite character of the immigrant populations. There was a fluctuation between two major conceptions of the place of Islam in France: The first saw a process of erosion of religion through exile and the emergence of a “secularized Islam”, of a relative decline of Islam due to the decreasing observance of religious practices, especially among the younger generations; conversely, the second referred to a religious awakening and to the idea of an Islamization of society that was tending to take over at the end of the decade.

There was a dividing line between the reference a Muslim community, described as a relatively unified, homogeneous entity (“the Arab and Islamic world”), and the increasingly differentiated profiles of Muslims. There were regular reminders of a tension between the older generation, fixated on knowledge, practices and principles that do not meet the new generation’s expectations and questions, especially regarding moral and religious education. We focus on the lack of dialogue, and even the misunderstanding between the generations that place secrets and rifts at the very heart of families. The issues surrounding the lack of knowledge of Islam and its teaching were frequently raised to the point of raising the notion of a “religious illiteracy” (Le Monde, November 10, 1988). The malaise of the young generations is reflected in this triple rift, simultaneously familial, religious, and societal.
The series of articles that reviewed the individual experiences of people considered to be Muslim offered a wide representation of women’s profiles and voices, often highlighting their specific condition in the face of Islamic traditions, and always embodying the more general malaise, linked to the in-between situation of the descendants of immigrant parents. The gender framing is reinforced by the debate on mixed marriages which were the object of recurrent attention and drove a series of reflections on cultural differences, placing interfaith gender relations at the heart of debates on the (im)possibility of reconciling Islam with French society. In 1983, an article underlined the failure to which “Islamic-Christian marriages” would be doomed, based on research on mixed marriages carried out by the Jean-Bart Centre (Le Monde, July 12, 1983).

Articles in Le Monde also echoed a major change in the way Muslim populations were perceived. After a period marked by the centrality of sources emanating from Christian organizations, firmly placing Islam on the religious side, the references mobilized from the middle of the decade onwards show the advent of studies conducted in the academic field, which gives a more reflexive tone to some of the questions covered by Le Monde on the links between Islam and French society. Many expressions abound to locate the place and nature of this religion in the French context: “Folkloric knowledge of Islam”, “sociological Islam”, “private Islam”, “radical Islam”, “secularized Islam”. Muslim populations in France became an object of knowledge in their own right, especially from the middle of the decade onwards. The turning point came in 1987, with the publication of several works that highlighted a contrasting picture of forms of piety and practices. The diverse perspectives that emerged from the studies brought two types of interpretation into tension with one another: on the one hand, the idea of a splintering of Islam in France that would be worrisome and hard to control; on the other hand its “extreme plasticity”, “that is to say its capacity to adapt to countries of residence” as Rémi Leveau underlined in an article in Le Monde of March 6, 1987, or the rise of a “quiet” Islam and a “private” Islam highlighted by Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, while Bruno Etienne emphasizes “the complete reversal of the situation” stating that “young North Africans are seeking assimilation”. Gilles Kepel’s book, Les Banlieues de l’Islam (The Suburbs of Islam), published in 1987, reveals the significance of a new infatuation for this religion among young people living in said suburban areas. In 1989, the beginnings of the headscarf affair, which put schools at the heart of the debate, were seen as proof of the incongruity of the logic of integration. Finding compositions between “right to difference” and secularism replaced the issues of racism and discrimination.

As from the mid-1980s, the more or less detailed typologies that revolved around the term “Muslim”, mostly found in Le Monde, began to depict and document the dynamism of the Muslim world in France, bringing to light not only several ways of living this religion, but also different types of instance and forms of mobilization.

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3 “Recherches sur les mariages mixtes musulmans-chrétiens” quoted by Alain Woodrow. The Jean-Bart Centre is a Catholic organization located in Paris. At the very beginning of the 1980s, much of the knowledge about Islam emanated either from Islamologists or from Christian organizations in the context of a reflection on inter-religious dialogue.
A federating Islam?

As the decade progressed, the forms of belonging to Islam gradually developed through the highlighting of an increasingly active and diversified world of associations. This diversity of the “Muslim community”, regularly documented in the national press, was shaped by the visibility of different repertoires of action that were embedded in the national space on several scales, driving the idea of a movement, sometimes described through the notion of Islamization, the nature and scope of which were constantly being reexamined.

Two perspectives were constantly intertwined with the way people viewed this movement: “integrism” and integration. The first of these related to the political dimension imputed to Islam, addressed in a relatively head-on fashion in the articles, to the point of fueling confusion between religion and political militancy, mainly in relation to the Iranian revolution and the fears of its consequences in France: “The commandos of Allah”, and the risk of a “fifth column” which would settle in France (Le Figaro, July 19, 1980), “The sergeants recruiters of Imam Khomeiny” (Le Monde, March 19, 1984). 1983 marked a major step in this respect, following the interpretation of the workers’ strikes in the automobile sector as being the result of the political and religious unrest of immigrant workers (Le Monde, January 29, 1983). The strikers were criticized just as much for their integration into the consumerist society as for their “Islamism”, associated to “an untenable cultural and religious reality, in this case Islamic, which transcends the struggles of North African workers” (Le Monde, February 3, 1983).

The way in which Le Monde covered this controversy is evidence of the dual register of threat that Islam aroused in France in the first half of the 1980s: a worrying religious fervor based on “sclerotic” religious dogmas (Le Monde, June 2, 1980), and a political ideology colored by the Iranian context (Le Monde, June 12-13, 1983). Islam was regularly assessed or justified through the prism of a denunciation of fundamentalism, which could be seen in the headlines and in the declarations of numerous speakers. The second, integration, focused on the more or less marked gap between the values and norms specific to the culture in which Islam was immersed, sometimes embedding them in ancestral traditions, sometimes in a dogma which this time drew the debate towards the issue of fundamentalism. The justification rationales that operated between these two major questions were regularly mirrored.

Another central theme that gives new visibility to Muslim populations in France is the question of their representativeness.

One of the movements taking up space in the media in the 1980s was that of the attempts to federate the “Muslims of France”. This movement began in 1980 with a declaration by the rector of the Paris Mosque, Hamza Boubakeur, who presented

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4 “Intégrisme” in French. We witnessed in these years the deployment of a relatively extensive terminology to describe forms of extremism associated with Islam: Islamism, fundamentalism, “integrism” which all resonate with Islamic and more generally, Muslim, giving rise to all sorts of confusion. Discussions became tense and engendered a very broad conception of radical Islam which was to extend into the stigmatisation of all forms of self-expression deviating from the Republican norm (Khosrokhavar, 1997).
himself as the spokesperson for a situation that had “become untenable” due to the “growing hostility” to which the Muslim community living in France was exposed and who made an appeal to “all Muslims wishing to affirm the national, economic, cultural and social historical importance of their community”. This declaration was made following a meeting to prepare the first congress of the Muslims of France on February 24 (Le Monde, February 26, 1980), which brought together “almost 500 representatives of the Muslim community”: “two million people, North Africans (including 800,000 French Muslims), Malians, Senegalese, Ivorians, Cameroonian, Turks, Comorians, and Togolese”. The rector’s speech, which positioned him as the promoter of this large-scale movement, linked two dimensions: that of a mobilization against racism, and that of “making heard the voice of Muslims” who “cannot be likened to simple migrants” due to the place they occupied in French history and society. Within this decade, 1985 offered another important example in terms of mobilization, with the “Islamic gatherings of France”, presented as the expression of a consensus project guided by the Paris Mosque. The final gathering, in Lyon, focused on the fight against all forms of racism and xenophobia, and alerted people to “the difficulties encountered in satisfying the cultural and religious aspirations of the 2.5 million Muslims in France” (Le Monde, December 17, 1985). The political differences on which the emphasis is placed, however, cast far away any idea of creating a Higher Islamic Council, subject to the condition of unity. Attention was drawn to the diversity of origins and to the arrival of leading religious figures from abroad.

That being said, the rector was regularly positioned at the center of the debate, something that tended to make him the representative of Muslims on French soil (Le Figaro, July 13, 1980). The image of a division, generally presented from above, through the various conflicts involving the rector of the Paris Mosque and certain other leading figures of Islam in France regarding issues of representativeness, went hand in hand with a vision, from below, of an Islam in France that was increasingly “fragmented” (Le Monde, November 20, 1987).

In May 1989, an article in Le Monde (May 11, 1989) dealing with the end of Ramadan and the death of the rector of the Paris Mosque, Sheikh El Hocine Abbas, took stock of “a crisis of growth” in French Islam and described a “multiform community”, which, it was noted, was still without a council that represented all its members. Several places and Islamic figures in France stand alongside and gives a scattered picture of Muslims in France: the article starts with the “missionary Islam” of the Tabligh through the purposes of a Tablighi worshiper of the Parisian Omar mosque located in Jean-Pierre Timbaud Street, and continues by mentioning the “third generation of self-affirmation” (hesitating between “tradition and modernity, between France and abroad” and succeeding the “Islam of the pioneers”); the French Muslims and immigrants; “the Islam of the suburbs”; “the sociological Islam” which refers to a privatization of the relationship with Islam, or “traditional Islam”, meaning those who “pray at the mosque on Fridays or at their workplace, observe the Ramadan fast and the main dietary rules, and teach the rudiments of Islam to their children”; and at least “fundamentalist Islam”. The idea of a new fervor seemed to catalyze all the failures of the ways in which decolonization and immigration were covered. The “Islamic awakening” was put across as the prime example of failed integration policies, leading to a reversal of the role of
exogenous and endogenous logics to explain the importance of Islam as a societal phenomenon.

The 1990s: Islam entrenched in a value conflict

At the dawn of this decade, *Le Monde* raised the curtain on a narrative of the trials of the terrorists responsible for the attacks that took place in Paris in 1986 – in the name of the Shia Lebanese branch of the Hezbollah – with a headline announcing the onward clash of civilizations paradigm: “The trial of Fouad Saleh’s terrorist network ‘My name is Death to the West’” (*Le Monde*, January 31, 1990). While the 1980s had demonstrated the existence of a “mosaic” of traditions, cultures, and modes of adherence to Islam, in the 1990s new identity markers were revealed that restructured the overall perception of the Muslim fact in France.

The idea of a conflict of values between Islam and the West gradually emerged and brought into play a form of polarization that helped to mask the heterogeneous and plural character of the forms of relationship with Islam in France. However, we note the permanence of the category of French Muslims – increasingly distanced from a religious relationship – whose expectations of recognition and reparation are particularly relayed by *Le Figaro*.

This fringe of the Muslim population, estimated at 250,000 individuals (*Le Figaro*, May 6, 1994), seems to occupy a special place in this categorical deployment of the Muslim populations living in France. They are portrayed as “the forgotten people of history” to whom the nation is indebted (*Le Figaro*, April 21, 1994). The vague use of the category French Muslims seems to be gradually giving way to the term *Harkis* and descendants of *Harkis*. Thus, the reference to the category of repatriated French Muslims embodies, alongside the *pieds-noirs* 5, a central element in the narration of memorial issues associated with the colonial period.

The impact of international crisis on Muslims in France

The 1990s have been deeply marked by crises in the Muslim world and have contributed to give a dual dimension (transnational and national) to strategic, political and civilizational issues increasingly associated with Islam. In addition, they have broadened or intensified the classification of Muslim populations along a categorical spectrum of ethnicity, nationality, place of residence and supposed religious affiliation. This is on this backdrop that a form of naturalisation of populations is taking place using multiple expressions: “*beurs*” and “*beurettes*”, “Muslim immigrants”, “young people from the projects”, “young people from the suburbs” or “young people of Muslim origin”. Thus, the growing influence of adjectives attached to Islam or Muslims is gradually taking hold.

5 The name “*pieds-noirs*” refers to descendants of European settlers in Algeria, Christians and Jews, naturalized French, who were massively repatriated following the country’s independence in 1962.
in the articles consulted. The use of the terms “moderates”, “liberals”, “fundamentalists”, “extremists”, “Islamists” participate in a binary categorisation of the figures of Muslim otherness, notably in Le Monde’s treatment of the first Gulf War. This conflict is presented as a new contemporary form of convergence of the struggles between Arab nationalism and Islamism (Le Monde, October 26, 1990), in which young “beurs” were sometimes accused of being a “fifth column” (Le Monde, January 23, 1991), and sometimes presented as the potential target of discriminations. “Fundamentalists” and “Islamists” are, meanwhile, considered as “internal enemy” wishing to harm the host country.

During the Gulf War, the general idea that prevails in the series of articles devoted to it, is that the beurs believe that Saddam represents “revenge against the humiliation and exclusion” of which the Arab-Muslim world would be the object. An effort was made to speak to different categories of individuals, but the latter were nevertheless considered in terms of a common belonging. Most of the articles dealing with the Iraqi crisis gave voice to “Arab communities”. The word “Arab” translates here an ethnic attachment and as a community membership that marks a break away from the national community. Le Monde of March 21, 1990, provides an illustration with the headline: “Dirty linen should be washed at home”. Young women, associative actors, actors of Islam in France are invited in turn to react on this conflict, embodying three currents of thought.

On the one hand, “Arabs” or “ordinary Muslims”, living in suburban areas or working-class neighborhoods, interviewed in these areas or in the mosque, answer without ambiguity that Saddam embodies a form of bulwark against the humiliation of populations oppressed by the West (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict being clearly and regularly evoked). On the other hand, the religious authorities call for vigilance and peace, like the rector of the Paris Mosque, who believes that “no war is holy, even though holy wars can take place, for example, to defend against outside aggression” (Le Monde, September 21, 1990).

Finally, secular associations, such as France Plus (an association from the anti-racist sphere), mobilize yet another register through the idea that this war confront beurs “with an ultimate test, serious and decisive, the test of dual allegiance, present in a state of fantasy in the minds of many of our fellow citizens”.

A second international crisis, the civil war in Algeria, affects particularly France. The rise of violence in the former, covered almost daily by Le Monde and Le Figaro, gives a particular depth to the debate on Islam in France. Even if the floor was first given to experts, the “Algerian community in France” is regularly invited to contribute to the debate. The presentation by the press of members of the “Algerian community in Paris” highlights a duality of viewpoints suggesting the non-univocal nature of the community in question: While some seem to consider, not without hope, the victory of the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) as potentially salutary for a country presented from a perspective of corruption, others are worried about the repercussions of this victory on freedoms, particularly that of women (Le Monde, June 14, 1990). Leading Muslim figures spoke out in turn to condemn the use of any form of violence in the name of their faith and to raise awareness about the fight against conflation. Yet there was no opposition to the expulsion of imams accused of preaching an Islamist ideology. As is often the case when faced with this type of event, the rector of the Paris Mosque was given the floor.
Referring to the crisis in Algeria, he called for “current events to lead to an in-depth reflection on the situation of the Muslim community in France, and for lessons to be learned from recent cases that implicated reprehensible actions of certain imams” (*Le Monde*, August 10, 1994). The summer of 1995 having been the peak of the GIA offensive on French territory, the denunciation of the terrorist attacks was reported as a unanimous stance. As had been the case with the Iraqi crisis, the fear of reprisals and of increased stigmatization was a major concern for young people from working-class neighborhoods.

The journalistic emphasis on how these cases were treated, despite the space allowed to Muslims to have their say, continued to underline the permeability of theories of an Islamic resurgence, and thereafter of fundamentalism in the suburbs, with the highlighting of a sort of judicial chronicle that revealed the use of “dragnets”, particularly in the Paris region (*Le Monde*, November 10, 1994). The singular media coverage of the figure of Khaled Kelkal, a young man from Algeria living in the suburbs of Lyon, who had been involved in a series of terrorist attacks, epitomized the link between youth identity malaise and terrorism.

This series of events tinged with extreme violence marked a change of dialectic when it came to talking about Islam. The link between Islam and threat become quasi-inextricable. It was initially a category of Muslims whose practice, actions and mobilizations fell within the register of deviance that tends to take shape in line with several scales of appreciation. First and foremost, a security issue driven by the terms “Islamism” and “Islamist”, which were gradually replacing “fundamentalism” and “fundamentalist”. Secondly, the emphasis on “a clash of values” between the West and Islam. Finally, the categories placed in opposition to one another when certain minorities were brought into the dialogue: moderate Muslims versus fundamentalist Muslims; Muslims advocating an Islam of reason versus an authentic Islam; or the Islam of enlightenment versus the Islamist, the fanatic or the obscurantist.

**Institutionalisation of the Muslim Cult in France: the impossible federation**

Over the course of this decade, the press regularly echoed State projects, depicted as a cooptation process, which aimed to legitimate leading figures, supposed to embody diverse sensibilities (schools of thought, national origins, professional and social categories, etc.) (*Le Monde*, March 21, 1990). When reading the articles published over time on the subject, we can see that the voices of three categories of actors were regularly referred to: those of French public institutions, those of representatives of Muslim associations and those of intellectuals attached to a Muslim obedience. A reference to “foreign funders” and to the Maghrebian affiliations of associations (*Le Monde*, December 17, 1992) appeared between the lines, like a shadow hanging

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6 The Armed Islamic Group became known in Algeria following the interruption of the electoral process that saw the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria. This group was involved in deadly attacks in France and Algeria throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s.

7 The interview conducted by a Dietmar Loch, a German sociologist, relayed by the press, gives particular substance to these issues (*Le Monde*, 7 October 1995).
over the reality of an Islam à la française (Le Monde, June 24, 1993). The press highlighted three distinct governmental attempts to institutionalize the Muslim faith: Islam of France’s Council of Reflection (CORIF), the Muslims of France Coordination Committee (CCMF), which led to the drafting of a Charter under the aegis of the Paris Mosque, and the Consultation (Istichâra).

In the spirit of the various “Islamic gatherings” that took place during the 1980s, in 1990 the political authorities implemented a new approach with a view to creating a consultative body (CORIF) that would be representative of “the Muslim community in France”. The issue of representativity set off a chain reaction of competing claims and demands. Indeed, “the growing diversity of its needs (especially in places of worship), the rise of fundamentalism and the fragile nature of the integration process (the Islamic headscarf affair) emphasized the need for recognized representatives of the Islam of France” (Le Monde, February 2, 1991). Very quickly, the state of grace that had until then surrounded the CORIF, whose concrete achievements (Le Monde, July 14, 1991 and January 11, 1992) had been regularly reported (struggles for Muslim sections in cemeteries, halal food trays for Muslim soldiers in the army, a toll-free telephone for Ramadan), came to an abrupt halt in 1992. As from February 1992, the respective competitive positions of actors in “the French Islamic landscape” were described in a tone that indicated a return to leadership struggles. The perspective of the internal conflicts within the French Islamic landscape was thus regularly discussed (Le Monde, January 13, 1995). The creation of a dissident representative body (CCMF), under the impetus of the Paris Mosque, led almost indirectly to a regular coverage of struggles for influence among Muslim associations, whose multiple leanings and foreign influences determined mobilizations and orientations.

Over the course of the articles that were written, the Muslim community was presented as “fragmented” and an implicit link was created between these “more militant” associations which were ignorant of the rivalries at the top, and which took advantage of these power struggles to “walk around the suburbs” and respond to the concrete needs of Muslims on a more local scale (Le Monde, October 13, 1994). Reading between the lines, the use of the word “Muslim community” is misleading, as it is linked to the federative forces involved in the regulatory process. When the phrase “rivalry at the top” is used, it refers to the establishment of a top-down mode of governance of Islam at the national level, with few links to the Muslims they are supposed to represent, while nevertheless acting on their behalf. One series of articles illustrated a particularly noteworthy event involving the mobilization of associations in the field against the big mosques that were awarded the halal certification market and accused of embezzlement: “Since August 4, the large mosque in Evry has been occupied – ‘liberated’ as those responsible put it – by some thirty activists from a collective of associations in the Essonne region, including French Muslim veterans. Blue-white-red flags are flying at the entrance of this place of worship. Banners in protest against those who wish ‘to use Islam for personal profit’ demand that the mosque be ‘cleaned up’” (Le Monde, August 11, 1996).

It wasn’t until the end of 1997 that in fits and starts a process designed to bring “Muslims to the table of the Republic” (Le Monde, November 5, 1997) was progressively revealed. The idea was to initiate a consultation with representatives approved by, but in no way imposed by, the State. At the same time, Muslim intellectuals worked together to launch
an appeal to the government, deploring the “institutional anomaly” that in their opinion was due to the absence of any “official representation” of Muslims in France (Le Monde, April 8, 1998). The consultation process which had begun in 1999, foreshadowed a new initiative of regulation: the French Council of Muslim faith.

The 2000s: French identity mirroring Islam

During the noughties, the question of the compatibility of Islam within the scale of republican values was very much confirmed, through events regularly that were analyzed from the perspective of identity, secularism, and citizenship. The spotlight was thrown onto various Islam-related processes and debates, urging the observer to try to grasp information as diverse as the creation of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the polemics inherent to freedom of expression, the parliamentary commission on conspicuous religious symbols in schools, the Stasi commission which led to the law of March 15, 2004, or the introduction of a so-called “open” or “positive” secularism regarding religions at the turn of 2007, and its review two years later through the debate on national identity. All of these elements questioned the different ways in which Islam was increasingly being referred to in public debate.

The noughties saw a more obvious polarization both between Islam and the French nation, and between Muslim identity and French identity. A head-on opposition between Muslims and “native French” people began to unfold over this period. From the beginning of the decade onwards, the terms “jihadist” and “radicalized” were added to the range of expressions used to designate the extremist aspects of Islam (such as “Islamist” and “fundamentalist”) the contours of which appeared to be shifting but which were also more closely scrutinized.

The post-9/11 culturalist turn

The shock wave caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks reignited the debates initiated in the 1980s. The press seized upon this murderous event as a major historical turning point and echoed political debates and intellectuals’ and polemics’ analyses of the Islamic fact and the representation of the Muslim faith. On several occasions it also mentioned the security watershed relating to the fight against terrorism (Le Figaro, September 20, 2001). A series of articles in Le Figaro raised concerns about the world at large and the progress of “Islamist fanaticism”, for which the aggiornamento of Islam constituted the only reliable response (Le Figaro, October 19, 2000). The wave of indignation following the Taliban’s destruction of pre-Islamic masterpieces in

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8 Created in 2003, the French Council for the Muslim Faith (CFCM) was established, as an association under private law (1901), to serve as an official French State interlocutor in the framework of its dialogue with religious representatives.
Afghanistan (Le Monde, March 5, 2001), and the growing momentum of transnational Islamism, contributed toward a widening of the categorical lexical field linked to Islamic radicalism – as in the use of the word “Jihad”, for example.

The press’s coverage of the terrorist attacks revealed the emergence of a form of dialectic that linked Islam to the threat by renewing the arguments surrounding cultural antagonisms. Unlike the previous decade, the articles wanted to define Islamism from all angles, inviting experts one after the other to give their definitions of this acceptation. One increasingly recurrent notion was that Islamism was “one of the ideological offshoots of jihadist terrorism” is increasingly recurrent. The 9/11 terrorist attacks inexorably heightened the feeling of a magnifying effect on the link between Islamist terrorism and Muslim totalitarianism, or green totalitarianism (Le Figaro, October 16, 2002). “The members of the Muslim community” who were interviewed, condemned “the fixed stares” in their direction, “the inappropriate reflections” and “the media’s anti-Islam partiality” (Le Monde, September 11, 2002). This major event set the figure of Muslim terrorism in stone.

Following these attacks, it was also the idea of a global dimension of Islamism that emerged more clearly, through the example of French people invested with a jihad mission against the West, joining certain front lines or training camps in Afghanistan, the Maghreb or Chechnya.

Coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks revealed the existence of a culturalist or even civilizational turning point and reactivated a rationale of confrontation between two blocks: “the free Western world” against “the Islamic enemy”. In Le Figaro of September 14, 2001, “the enemy is clearly identified, namely Islam, a religion of a ‘violent’ and ‘belligerent’ nature, whose incompatibility with Western civilization cannot be denied”, and “[...] it is the entire democratic West that is threatened in the name of a belligerent religion, determined to impose a system of values that are incompatible with ours” (Le Figaro, September 14, 2001). Hence the polarization of two post-September 11 visions: while one related to a form of alienation of cultural and religious identities, the other urged people not to fall into the trap of conflation that was contributing toward a Muslims sentiment of “being the object of condemnation” (Le Monde, September 14, 2001) and of “deep malaise” (Le Monde, September 21, 2001).

The term “integration” was regularly used by the press and highlighted a nagging question: can one be French and Muslim? On this point the empathetic framing of an article in Le Figaro on November 29, 2001 was quite revealing: “It seems to me that the situation of being a French Muslim must be a difficult one to assume, especially in these times. In the eyes of the native French, Muslims are not yet fully considered to be ‘like us’. So are they really Muslims? A French Muslim only needs to go back to Algeria or Morocco to see how little he is a Muslim in the eyes of his distant cousins”. From North to South, this distinction would appear to duplicate a disconnect between an “us” and a “them”, placing at the heart of the analysis an identity-based malaise that is steadily increasing, while at the same time reducing the growing phenomenon of hybridization that concerns the populations to which it is attached.
Emergence of French Muslim activism

At the beginning of the decade and following the “crusade” led by the American president G. W. Bush against the countries of “the axis of evil”, the French press examined the situation in Afghanistan with considerable intensity, particularly regarding the status of women under the Taliban regime. In a register of the nationalization of international issues, the Afghan situation directly affected debates in France, as the fear generated by the forced wearing of headscarves challenged the free will of women who chose to wear them in France. In this respect, according to one of the members of the High Council for Integration, the headscarf was “a trap that isolates and marginalizes” (Le Monde, December 15, 2001). A singular correlation was established between the headscarf and the ghetto (Le Monde, April 4, 2002), as if to remind everyone that the former is the preserve of the working classes. Le Figaro condemned the Islamization of France as the perverse effect of the “right to difference”, echoing the recent deployment of the institutionalization of the fight against discrimination, which would serve as an ideological camouflage for Islamism: “I am a North African and, by virtue of the right to difference, I cannot be prevented from being for the headscarf” (Le Figaro, October 16, 2002). In Le Figaro of December 5, 2003, one contributor considered that “the headscarf in schools represents a public assertion that one can live in France under Koranic law, while flouting that of the Republic”, and adds in substance that headscarves are “a conspicuous submission”, in keeping with an offensive of the “most aggressive currents of Islam” which would manipulate consciences, as an article in Le Monde of December 22, 2003, seems to suggest. It mentions a demonstration of 3,000 people in Paris (mostly young women), to defend their choice to wear “the Islamic headscarf” as Muslim citizens and “call for tolerance”. This article questions the potential manipulation of the women demonstrators considering the presence of men, perceived as “Salafists”, at the demonstration front. The controversy surrounding the veil tends to oppose laïcité and Islam and shapes a debate staging a fracture between “Communitarians” and “Republicans”, “Islamists” and “Islamophobics” (Le Monde, February 9, 2004).

Facing multiple polemics that have given rise to recriminations by Muslim authorities in France, the birth of movements advocating the legal defence of Muslim victims of Islamophobia is emerging, while this term has been the subject of some developments in Le Monde and Le Figaro. The Citizen Forum of Muslim Cultures called for the creation of “a representative body” that could collect and record, attacks against Muslims (Le Monde, May 3, 2002). Thus, the birth of a collective against Islamophobia was acted following the declarations of an editorialist of the weekly magazine Le Point who declared: “We must be honest. I am a bit of an Islamophobe. I don’t mind saying it. […] I say Islam – I’m not even talking about the Islamists – as a religion, brings a debility of various archaisms” (Le Monde, October 29, 2003). This activist group aims to create a secular centre for the defence of Muslims and to embody “a school for all, against laws of exclusion” (Le Monde, January 19, 2004). Its actions aim at counting the incidents of which the Muslims would have been victim because of their religious convictions and to question the public authorities on this form of discrimination (Le Monde, October 21, 2004).
Questioning French identity in the light of Islam

In the continuity of the debate on headscarves, an enveloping outer garment, variously referred to as a “niqab”, “burqa” or “full veil”, was the subject of considerable media attention in 2009, and was gradually establishing itself as the antithesis of national identity, as suggested by the Minister of National Identity, Éric Besson: “We can debate the appropriateness of the law [...] there is no debate to be had on the principles: the burqa is unacceptable and contrary to the values of national identity” (Le Monde, October 25, 2009).

A major debate on national identity, with citizen participation, was announced by the government in November 2009. But this initiative soon became a discussion linking national identity and immigration (Le Monde, December 16, 2009) and questioning the place of Islam and Muslims in France. The debate on integration turned to the question of the invisibilization of Islam “for the full integration of its faithful into the national community”. In this respect, the words of President Sarkozy, reported by Le Monde on December 9, 2009, are an illustration of the egalitarian conditioning register that was being deployed in relation to Muslims. While specifying that he would use all his power to ensure equal treatment for Muslims, he added the warning that: “Anything that might appear to be a challenge to France’s Christian heritage would condemn the much-needed establishment of a French Islam to failure”. This interpretation underlines the fact that Islam was still perceived as an imported, exogenous religion, subject to the prerequisite of finding a place in the national identity, the Christian heritage of which was firmly stated. We can see from articles in Le Monde that this debate was gradually becoming bogged down, giving way to all-out rhetoric and wordy speeches essentially targeting immigrants, suburban youth, and Muslims. Thus, we are seeing an interlacing of categorical uses that constantly refer to different forms of otherness. This was eloquently echoed by Nadine Morano, Secretary of State for the Family: “What I want”, she declared, “is for him [a young Muslim] to feel French when he is French, for him to love France, when he lives in this country, for him to find a job, for him not to speak back slang and not to wear his cap the wrong way around” (Le Monde, December 16, 2009).

The image of Muslims had become a major issue in the debate on national identity.

The press’s focus on Islam as a central factor in the debate on national identity went hand in hand with various attempts by the authorities to patch things up and make amends, and with indignant reactions from Muslim spokespersons. The ambivalence at work during previous decades, between the register of recognition and that of the threat relating to Muslim populations, would appear to have given way to a whole series of paradoxes concerning the recognition of Muslim otherness, causing a line of polarization to emerge and become increasingly accentuated.
The 2010s: crystallization of the threat

The 2010s were deeply marked by terrorist attacks and by young French people leaving to join the Iraqi-Syrian theater of war. The analytical and discursive framework that emerged was that of a war against radical Islam, which gradually went beyond just Jihadists, expanding to include an increasingly broad range of groups, individuals and phenomena relating to a greater or lesser extent to Islam. At the heart of the debates was the figure of the radicalized Muslim, symbol of a threat that was coming closer and closer, as the Minister of the Interior, Manuel Valls, had declared in 2012 after the killing perpetrated in Toulouse by Mohammed Merah, in the first terrorist attack of the decade: “there is a terrorist threat in France […]. It is not a case of terrorist networks that come from outside. It is a case of networks in our neighborhoods. A case of French converts, French Muslims” (Le Figaro, October 7, 2012). The figure of the radicalized Muslim contributed toward linking Islam with security issues and, as the terrorist attacks and departures to Syria followed one after the other, to restricting the press’s use of categories describing other ways of being Muslim. The diversity of Islam in France was therefore given less and less space in a public debate that was increasingly constructed according to a binary framing that opposed “good” with “bad” Muslims, and where the injunction to demonstrate loyalty to the Republic became an inescapable marker of integration, or even of citizenship. In that sense, the analysis of the press reveals a major distinction between Muslims who respect the values of the Republic and the others. The complexity of the Muslim populations tends to fall away in this values-based paradigm of citizenship which leads to a culture of suspicion, spreading to ever larger sections of the French population. In 2019, during a speech in homage to the victims of a terrorist attack, President Emmanuel Macron advocated “listening carefully to others” in order to “learn how to detect any slackening or deviation at school, at work, or in places of worship, any laxity or deviation. These small gestures that are evidence of a separation from the values of the Republic […]; these small things that become major tragedies” (Le Figaro, October 8, 2019). The threat was therefore seen as coming not only from radicalized French Muslims, but also from those accused of being its breeding ground – communitarians, separatists, Islamists or simple militants – in an interchangeability of terms that tended to erase any difference, while at the same time rendering the threat both omnipresent and blurred. During the 2010s, in spite of multiple appeals to avoid conflation and dangerous leaps, in particular in Le Monde, the idea was very much growing that Islam for the most part posed a problem, that “Muslims” were people who do not want to integrate, or who could not because they were too different. According to an IFOP poll quoted by Le Figaro on October 24, 2012, 43% of those polled considered “the presence of a Muslim community in France” to be “a threat to [our] identity”. According to the director of the institute that carried out the survey, the “increased hardening of the French towards this religion” was “linked to the significantly increased ‘visibility’ of Islam on the public and media stage. Over recent years there hasn’t been a single week without Islam making headline news in relation to societal issues, headscarves, halal food, or regarding terrorist attacks and dramatic or geopolitical topicality”. Events and controversies constantly filled the pages of newspapers, feeding the link between “the Muslim question” and the idea of a fragmentation of the society associated to the loss of national security and French identity (Le Figaro, June 16 and
August 29, 2016). We can see a process of constant recasting of the major themes of society through the prism of Islam, where the categories “Muslims” and “Islam” become categories that encompass different aspects of social life, and end up merging together various categories of otherness and threat. We will illustrate these developments by taking two controversies, the forfeiture of nationality for dual nationals, and the burkini, garment designed to allow Muslim women to bathe while at the same time respecting religious modesty. We chose these two controversies because they bring together some of the main themes that marked the decade, and also allow us to sidestep news marked by “monstrous” events, such as the terrorist attacks. Finally, these two controversies put into question the Muslim actors’ capacity of action, torn between the injunction to remain silent, the assertion of their loyalty, and attempts to claim an identity combining faith and citizenship.

Forfeiture of nationality: the paroxysm of the loss of equality

Three days after the November 2015 terrorist attacks, French President François Hollande proposed the forfeiture of nationality “for any person convicted of acts of terrorism even if born French, if he or she has another nationality” (Le Monde, November 17, 2015). The bill, put forward by the far right, was to be definitively buried on March 30, 2016. But in the space of just four months, a lively debate appeared in the press. It initially focused on questions of constitutionality and effectiveness, particularly with a view to highlighting the very limited effects of such a measure. While the proposal did not specifically target Muslims, a link was gradually made between loss of nationality and Islam. For example, on November 28, 2015, an article in Le Figaro reported the words of a deputy who was pleased that, during the ceremony paying homage to the victims of November 13, the head of state had “finally” used the term “Islam”. We can see, in the columns of Le Figaro in particular, an increasing number of articles establishing a link between the loss of nationality and Islamism, Islamist mosques and radical imams. Thus, the notions of Islamism and radical Islam remain blurred and tend to encompass an increasingly large number of individuals and phenomena. Echoing the debate in the National Assembly, during which several deputies reminded everyone that loss of nationality had been applied during one of the darkest periods of French history, that of Vichy, an editorial on December 2, 2015 in Le Monde denounced its “symbolic impact”, “especially [among] French Muslims, as they would obviously be the main target of such a measure […] This means 3.5 million people. These people are now fully French. Tomorrow, if this reform were to be validated and adopted, they would enter the era of suspicion”. The issue at stake in the debate on the forfeiture of nationality was the meaning of citizenship and the problem of a breach of equality between citizens. Our analysis of the press reveals a debate occupied by politicians, academics and experts while Muslims seem to be encouraged to remain silent and invisible, mainly due to a post-terrorist attack context that constantly challenged their loyalty to nation. This stands out as a common thread that continued throughout the decade. According to a view that cut across the political spectrum and to a growing extent in society, as shown in a Le Figaro poll on November 22, 2015, citizenship should be primarily linked to an adherence to “republican” values. As one socialist député (French parliamentary
representative) stated: “being French is not self-evident, it implies the acceptance of a certain number of principles that form the basis of the contract between French people” (Le Figaro, December 3, 2015). This was echoed by a député from a right-wing party, the UMP: “Being French has to be earned. French nationality has to be earned” (Le Monde, December 5, 2015). By linking citizenship to an adherence to often poorly defined and often controversial values, the proponents of this discourse were able to challenge the droit du sol (the right to French nationality when born on French soil), one of the pillars of the French vision of citizenship, and to address a growing requirement that Muslims, and more broadly to anyone closely or remotely connected to Islam, to prove their loyalty through their actions or the stances they take. More specifically, in requiring them to demonstrate that they distanced themselves from terrorists or “Islamists” – a controversial and often highly vague term with the capacity to disqualify anyone designated as such – the debate operated a fracture in the principle of equality, as the Le Monde editorial of December 2, 2015, pointed out: the forfeiture of nationality “assumes that there are two types of French people: those born French, described by the far right as the ‘native-born French’, and the others, who would only be French if they behave properly and prove day after day that they are worthy of remaining French”. The following day, a tribune written by academics in Le Monde highlighted the consequences of such a standard: “the inclusion in the Constitution of a distinction between French people according to their origin would cause deep and lasting violence and social division”.

The burkini: new evidence of the compression of scales

The contours of the public debate, along with the issues of categorization and designation, were illustrated by the burkini controversy, which broke out in the summer of 2016, following the decree by the Cannes City Hall, followed by other French cities, banning the wearing of religious clothing on the city’s beaches. These decrees, which targeted the burkini without naming it, would ultimately be annulled by the Council of State on August 26, after an appeal lodged by the Collective against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) and the League of Human Rights. Very shortly however, this controversy, which stemmed from a local event, became a debate with a far broader meaning, as Le Figaro of August 27 pointed out: “Above and beyond this summer’s controversy, it is the issue of Islam’s place in society that is now being raised”. The terms of the debate were also set out in an editorial in Le Monde on August 20: this affair “is the symptom of a society sufficiently disturbed by Islam to be tempted to adopt specific, even discriminatory, regulations for Muslims […] But the controversy is also the symptom of a Muslim community which, at least as far as its radical component is concerned, refuses to admit the conspicuous, even ostentatious, nature of garments such as the burkini, and sees it as nothing other than proof of ostracism”.

More than anything else, the debate was posed in civilizational terms, comparing a world of freedom with a world of oppression, as summarized in a tribune published in Le Monde on August 30: “one must therefore decide which side one is on: not the side of the sectarians against the ‘tolerant’, but the side of those who favor an Islam that respects the laws and values of our country […] as opposed to an Islam that is deviant,
sexist, intolerant, violently proselytizing, and an enemy of freedoms”. Like the headscarf, the burkini was presented on the one hand as a sign of the subjugation of women, as compared to the freedom and equality of Western societies, and on the other, in contrast, as an expression of free choice, reflecting the principle of individual freedom found in modern societies. In a debate where Muslim women’s voices were conspicuous by their absence, even though various Muslim actors have expressed their positions, an article in Le Monde on August 16 relays the perspectives of the international press: “like a theocratic regime, the burkini ban in Cannes forces Muslim women to choose between their religion and their national identity, and perniciously suggests that their choice of clothing is a political statement”.

It was precisely in relation to the political scope of visibility and invisibilization that a second front of the debate unfolded, focusing on political Islam and “Islamic” militancy. According to those defending a strict secularism, the burkini – like the headscarf and any other religious markers – was a sign of proselytism, the symbol of a political Islam, targeting the communautarism9 of French Muslims. For Prime Minister Manuel Valls, the burkini “is the translation of a political project, of counter-society, notably founded on the subjugation of women” (Le Monde, August 17). To varying extents, an entire set of categories such as “Islamism”, “political Islam”, “communitarianism”, “separatism”, and “Salafism” were used to describe the twofold threat to France posed by the demand for difference in the public space: Islamization of Muslim citizens and the fragmentation of French society.

A range of actors were thus calling for a change in the law in order to provide the State with a new legal arsenal that would allow it to deal with this dual threat, first by rendering ineffective bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights or the Consultative Commission on Human Rights, accused to defend the rights of minorities to the detriment of the rights of the nation, and then by limiting the capacity for action of associations such as the CCIF, which were accused of using the law in line with a community approach. Over the course of the decade, this call for a new legal arsenal gradually became a central argument for new forms of State control over the associative and religious world. The controversy around the burkini reveals the shift from a marginal and local event to a national, and even international polemic following a rigidified frame, in which a swimsuit emblematizes a civilizational issue.

In a context of heightened security, the capacity for action of Muslim actors appeared to be increasingly limited, caught between the injunction to remain silent and the pressing requirement to take a stand in order to demonstrate their loyalty. During this decade, the press describes the temptation of a minor part of the Muslims to visibilize distinctive features of Muslim identity in the public space, as an expression of separation from the rest of society. Presented as “Salafists”, “Islamists”, or as an expression of “radical Islam”, this minority has been the subject of particular attention in the press, embodying most often diverse types of threat – in terms of values, security to society.

9 “Communautarisme” is a neologism which appeared in the French language about 30 years ago. Referring to a vision aiming at the organisation of society in the form of communities of people sharing the same identity, religious in the case of Islam, the term “communautarisme” is generally used to designate a kind of threat both to the nation and the principle of human rights. Usually opposed to universalism and individualism, this term remains controversial in the French debate, as stated by Seniguer (2017).
More rarely, it was also interpreted as an expression of fear, of a loss of identity. The Muslim/non-Muslim distinction has been growingly associated to a reversible moral argument about the preservation of identities perceived, on both sides, to be under threat. In a constant game of categorization and designation, where diversity is often reduced to two polarities, our analysis of the press struggles to reveal other rationales for mobilization, such as that of a section of Muslims who have grown up in France and who are committed to denouncing Islamophobia and discrimination, while at the same time claiming an active citizenship combined with a declared and visible adherence to Islam. An illustration of this may be found in the mobilization of the law, by various actors who affirm their Islamic faith (intellectuals, academics, associations, organizations or simple citizens), to denounce the discriminations suffered by Muslims and a break from the principle of equality. Their identification with national identity and history is manifested, among other things, in their defense of the Republican principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. This trend took place, especially in *Le Monde*, with a new and plural generation of Muslim intellectuals who challenged the meaning and modalities of “being Muslim in France”, and the consequences of a debate that tended to crystallize identities and affiliations in a binary perspective.

**Conclusion**

In examining 40 years of press archives from two national daily newspapers, we chose a level of analysis that allowed us to focus on the trajectory of meanings of the “Muslim” category, certain elements of which we have presented using a decennial landscape. As from the 1980s, the term “Muslim” has served as a referent to designate an otherness in terms of national origins, religious observance, migratory trajectory, ideological universe and/or values, and even urban spaces and social environments. During this decade, while the questioning and search for some kind of clarification to help us apprehend the diversity that each of these dimensions brought with it proved to be prolific, over the following decades we observed a shift towards an ever-increasing reification in the way this term was used. The framing based on immigration, which was to prevail for a time – at least until the end of the 1990s – to reflect the dimension of both otherness and diversity specific to French society, brought more or less in its wake the question of the relationship to Islam. The 2000s onwards saw a more complex and rigid network of debates around Islam, gradually becoming one of the central dynamics of society’s polarization. On the one hand, “being Muslim” continued to carry highly diverse forms of identification and belonging, in accordance with modalities and frameworks that were the object of growing attention in the 1980s and made Islam a major factor of individuation for various parts of the French population. What struck us during the retrospective reading of the national press of this period is that the relationship with religion appears to have been far more discussed than in the following decades. It invited us to think of Muslim populations as something other than a minority group, and more as diversified ramifications of French society. On the other hand, this protean visibility would appear to have then faded away, giving way to perennial controversies which catalyzed the debates and the representations of Muslim
populations. Over the decades the tension became narrower and more acute between the emphasis on the diversity of the Muslim population in France and a vision aggregated around canonical and problematic figures primarily envisaged by their rupture with society who seem to cultivate a tutelary relationship to the question of threat. This tendency has produced a monolithic framework of intelligibility of the attachments to Islam emptied of its hybridity. Finally, the acts of terrorism perpetrated on French soil and abroad in the name of Islam have inexorably given rise to debates about this religion with regard to extreme violence and security risks, and reinforced a process of communalization of suspicion. These diverse clashing rationales constantly place the production of knowledge on Muslims under tension between a continue recasting of the profiles of individuals considered Muslims, or of Muslim culture in a very general sense, the erasure of the category Muslim and the approach to Islam and Muslim populations centered on the debate on radicalization. In all cases, these various meanings invite us to discard the category “Muslim” as a marker of a border between majority and minority societies. Taking as our starting point the historicity of this category, something we only sketch in this article, is the opportunity to look back at the construction of this tension and the automatisms that potentially linger with regard to the narration of the presence of Muslim populations.

References


