

The Paradoxes of Institutionalizing Islam in France

By Amin El-Yousfi

Summary

On February 18, 2020, a few weeks before COVID-19 became the number one concern for politicians and the public, Emmanuel Macron delivered a long-awaited speech in Mulhouse in which he emphasized the importance of fighting what he called “Islamist separatism”. Many analysts were surprised by this declaration which differed from previous statements he’d made, following his election, about the need to institutionalize Islam. This policy brief explores the background to the institutionalization of Islam in France, and presents the obstacles to its Organization.

Introduction

On February 18, 2020, a few weeks before COVID-19 became the number one concern for politicians and the public, Emmanuel Macron delivered a long-awaited speech in Mulhouse in which he emphasized the importance of fighting what he called “Islamist separatism”. Many analysts were surprised by this declaration which differed from previous statements he’d made, following his election, about the need to institutionalize Islam. Macron announced the end of teaching of the languages and cultures of origin (called ELCO) in schools, starting from September 2020, the

progressive diminution of foreign imams working for mosque congregants’ countries of origin (imams détachés), and political support for the Centre français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) in order to help to track Islamist Separatism. But no proposition was clearly formulated in relation to the institutionalization of Islam, either regarding mosques or imams beyond the standard topic of the training of imams. France’s position on the institutionalization of Islam is therefore unclear, and obstacles to developing an Islam de France (Islam of France, as opposed to Islam in France) remain. What are these obstacles? And what is the background to this institutionalization?

Background to the Institutionalization of Islam in France

Since the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, many papers have studied the need to organize and institutionalize an Islam de France (French Islam)—as opposed to an Islam en France (Islam in France) which implies it is imported from elsewhere. This idea is not new, and has in fact been a point of political tension since the ‘Veil Affair’ in 1989—when three female students in middle school (in the commune of Creil) were suspended for refusing to remove their headscarves in class. Several European governments have tried to set up institutions to serve as a Muslim interlocutor with the state, and thereby create a centralized discourse to facilitate the governance of Islam.

In 1989, Pierre Joxe was the first to try to end the Algerian dominance (through the Grand Mosque of Paris) of Islam in France. He founded the Conseil de Reflexion sur l’Islam en France (CORIF) in 1990, an institution tasked with making recommendations to the government on Muslim issues. Interestingly, invited to give his opinion, Jacques Berque advised the minister that the objective of this institution should not be to represent Islam but to symbolize it. In fact, the CORIF was more a council of reflection than a representative council, it served as a “surveillance mechanism” (Bosco 2014, 77). It was a response to the Veil Affair and the increasing visibility of ‘Muslimness’, which made it necessary to understand the Muslim dynamic at the local level beyond the question of immigration.

Charles Pasqua chose to go back to the ‘old way’ by giving full control of institutionalization to the Grand Mosque of Paris, led by Dalil Boubakeur, at the time of the Algerian civil war. This ‘externalization’ was in line with the minister’s choices about the process of gaining French citizenship. The Pasqua law, approved in 1993, made it not only much harder to obtain permanent residency, but implemented new restrictions on the right of people born in France to foreign parents to claim citizenship. In other terms, persons born on French soil to legal residents could gain French citizenship automatically at the age of 18, while those born on French soil to foreign parents must apply for citizenship at the same age. The Pasqua law symbolized the ‘Muslim problem’ as an ‘immigration problem’ that needs to be externalized when it comes to its religious aspect. The fact that the law considerably

limited the right of those who could have been eligible for naturalization demonstrated that Islam was also not welcome to be naturalized. Pasqua asked Dalil Boubakeur to create federations to represent mosques and religious associations. He also encouraged the creation of a theological seminary attached to the Grand Mosque of Paris and granted the latter the monopoly over halal certification. This monopoly ended in the time of Jean-Louis Debré, who granted the accreditation rights to the mosques of Lyon and Evry as well.

Motivated by the ‘security question’ following the 9/11 attacks, Nicolas Sarkozy announced the creation of the Centre français du Culte Musulman (CFCM) in 2003, following Jean Pierre Chevènement’s long *istishāra* (consultation) with various Muslim representatives (see Terrel 2004; Zeghal 2005). In opposition to Pasqua, Chevènement attempted to take into consideration the diversity of Muslim discourses and associations by inviting six great mosques and six federations to the “table of the republic”. They were asked to sign a document which confirmed the compatibility of Islam with the republic. This led to the creation of the CFCM with the objective not only to centralize Muslim discourse, but also stop Morocco and Algeria’s ‘embassy Islam’ (Laurence, 2012). Addressing the members of the newly created body, Sarkozy said: “I appreciate both our excellent discussions and your desire to build a French Islam and not Islam in France” (Bosco 2014, 79).

However, it is often forgotten that the intrusion of Morocco and Algeria into so-called ‘French Muslim matters’ had only happened because France had originally established a Central Ministry for Religious Affairs in its former colonies to control and centralize the *awqāf* (pious endowments) (see Burke III 2014). In fact, after the creation of CFCM, the intrusion of these countries was federated and delegated through the main organizations which constitute the CFCM, including the Grand Mosque of Paris for Algeria and the Fédération Nationale des Musulmans de France (FNMF), and later the Union des Mosquées de France (UMF) for Morocco. In addition, Turkish interests were defended by the Comité de Coordination des Musulmans Turcs de France (CCMTF), and to a certain extent by the Milli Görüs.

The French diplomatic conundrum of aiming to build the so-called Islam de France and at the same time relying on foreign countries to help articulate and shape a moderate Islam through the post-War on Terror ‘good Islam/bad Islam’ duality (see Mamdani 2004) continues to exist.

This is not a failure in stopping the ‘embassy Islam’ but rather in understanding the non-churchified nature of Islam as a religion. It is also the result of imposing the Christian-based dichotomies ‘sacred/profane’ and ‘religious/secular’ on the Islamic tradition. The concept of religion itself is rooted in the protestant idea of inner belief as Talal Asad famously demonstrated in his work *Formations of the Secular* (2003). It is therefore itself historically constructed, rendering its usage (at the political level) in the context of Islam highly problematic. For this reason, a quid pro quo is often encountered in the national debates on Muslim questions of visibility, which are tightly linked to the creation of national councils and Muslim representation.

According to Silvestri’s categorization of “national Muslim councils” in Europe, the state was always present in the creation of institutions representing Islam and regulating Muslim matters. CORIF was part of the first category of “councils that came into being thanks to a hard top-down approach of the state”, while Nicolas Sarkozy’s creation of the CFCM preceded by Pierre Chevenement’s *Istishāra* was part of the second category of “Councils that were the outcome of a mixed approach, that is where the state openly encouraged the formation of a representative Muslim body and even offered some logistical structures” (Silvestri 2010, 47). It is what Frégosi describes as the passage from regulation of the religious landscape to the “preacher state” (Frégosi 2010).

Obviously, in the context of *laïcité* (secularism), where there is separation between the state and religion, this state intervention was regarded suspiciously by both non-Muslims and Muslims who cherish the secular model. The tactic of delegation or indirect appointment of Muslim interlocutors to regulate Muslim concerns, such as mosques, madrassahs, and the Halal and Hajj industries, was often regarded as an attack on the French republic’s values. Moreover, all previously mentioned initiatives failed because of the non-secular political basis upon which they had been founded. The CFCM, still in operation today, has a low level of legitimacy among the Muslim public. A study conducted by Hakim El Karoui for the Montaigne Institute reported that more than two thirds of respondents had never heard of the CFCM (El Karoui 2016, 25).

Obstacles to the Organization of Islam

Today, there are calls for direct state involvement to resolve this situation. Some have requested the appointment of a Grand Imam in France, similar to the Chief Rabbi, the head of France’s Israelite Central Consistory, a position created by Napoleon in 1808 to administer the Jewish community which represented the ‘Other’ at the time. Others have taken inspiration from the language of the market to find ways to manage Muslim affairs. Calculating assets and ratios, El Karoui calls for centralizing and redistributing revenue from the Halal and Hajj sectors. His objective would be to fund mosques and training for imams with money from French Muslims, as opposed to support from foreign countries. This cannot happen without a central institution to collect revenue, whilst also certifying Halal slaughterers and travel agencies.

This proposal is regarded as unrealistic by many specialists because the state is not allowed to grant a monopoly to any association. In response to this criticism, El Karoui calls on the state to play a mediation role, particularly in terms of convincing the Saudi government to deal with this central institution alone when issuing visas for pilgrimage. What is undeniable is that this would lead to high levels of bureaucratization, similar to the ministry of religious affairs in Morocco or the Diyanet in Turkey. Clearly the problem facing France in its attempt to regulate Islam is not a Muslim problem inherent to French Muslims alone. Although Muslim diversity is one major reason for the lack of organization, the main cause is the paradox of secular discourse, i.e. the state’s claim to be neutral vis-à-vis religion whilst constantly intervening to regulate religious matters (see Asad 2003; Mahmood 2016).

Another obstacle in this attempted organization is the constant marginalization of *ulama* (scholars) who have credibility at grassroots level. All previous French Presidents and Ministers of Interior have emphasized the need to train imams in France, as opposed to importing them from abroad. At the same time, any grassroots attempt by imams to self-organize and create a syndicate is hijacked by local and national authorities. Moreover, imams have often been absent from decision making, both regarding mosque management and national organization attempts in which lay people (mainly engineers) are constantly co-opted by the state.

This situation needs to change to allow a representative grassroots institution to emerge. Before accusing the Union des Musulmans de France of Moroccanism, the Grande Mosquée de Paris of Algerianism, and Musulmans de France of Islamism, the status of an imam should be given legal recognition beyond the Christian notion of a ‘minister of religion’ (ministre de culte). In order to fight separatism, imams should be able to organize themselves. They should not constantly remain under the control of the mosque committee members driven by economic and political interests and constantly co-opted by various Muslim umbrella state-related organizations. This is not only the way to build a respected Islamic discourse against radicalization, but also to respect the neutrality of the French secular state.

The final obstacle is the lack of political understanding concerning the increasing numbers of young people ‘returning’ to the madhāhib, i.e. the four traditional schools of jurisprudence. After years of Salafi infiltration and rising individualization of young French Muslims through their access to Internet (Peter 2006), many recent studies show a growing interest in returning to taqlid (conformity with) for a particular madhhab (school of jurisprudence) in both the ‘ibādāt (worship practices) and the mu‘āmalāt (social relations) (Bruinessen 2010; Groeninck 2017). Given the North African origins of the majority of Muslims in France, the Mālikī madhhab is the main madhhab followed by many young people. In order to grasp the fiqh (jurisprudence) of the madhhab, these Muslims either come to Morocco and Algeria to study, or follow online classes run by Moroccan and Algerian ‘ulama (traditional scholars) and visit these countries several times a year (particularly Morocco) (Van Praet 2018; 2019). Hence, despite all attempts to move from ‘embassy Islam’ or ‘consular Islam’ and overcome the diplomatic conundrum of mutual political and economic interests between France and her former colonies, the sanad (chain of transmission) of the tradition continues to strengthen between young Muslims and mālikī ‘ulama both in France and also - primarily - outside France.

Conclusion

To conclude, the organization of Islam in France requires not only the involvement and independence of imams at local level, but also an understanding of the relationship between Muslims and Islam as a discursive tradition that crosses national borders. The continuous co-opting of actors with no legitimacy at grassroots level will always

produce limited representation. A number of studies have demonstrated young Muslims’ strong connections with France. At the same time, these studies have also shown the desire many have to create an Islam de France that respects knowledge handed down from generation to generation. For them, it is only through the usūl (principles) of this knowledge that one can respond to the new questions of the secular context in which they live—which is paradoxical in the first place.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



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