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France

# Islamophobia on the beach - a new stage in the racist offensive

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**France is currently going through a new stage in the Islamophobic offensive that has plagued the country for so many years. And once again, it is the ruling class that is manoeuvring, as the political class claims that it is responding to a pre-existing popular “expectation” or even “exasperation”.**

## A moral panic

In truth, hardly anyone cared a few weeks ago that some women (or men), in France and elsewhere, bathe with outfits covering most of their bodies. But elected politicians from the right and extreme right, especially the Mayor of Cannes, started this controversy by taking draconian measures against Muslim women wearing the “burkini”, while other elected officials - and the mainstream media - obligingly relayed their message.

For thirty years there has been an accumulation of moral panics around everything related closely or (very) distantly to Islam: headscarves in schools, burqas in public places, halal meat, dietary laws, long skirts (again in school), and now the henceforth famous burkini. This indefinitely recreates parodies of “national debate”, inevitably leading to the question asked by the mainstream media, the “compatibility of Islam with the Republic”. The answer is always the same: not only do Muslims constitute a “threat”, but even more seriously they are made to seem a completely foreign body to French society. This is the now well-known racist mechanism which was again employed in August, and we have to deconstruct it.

## How the burkini became a national concern

Earlier this month, several senators - especially the Front National politician Stéphane Ravier, who as well as being a senator is also a local mayor in Marseille - denounced a private event at a swimming pool, the Speed Water Park, for women and their children who wanted to swim covered. The director of the aquatic centre was frightened enough to cancel the reservation of its facilities by the association that had requested it, but this was not enough to put the question of burkinis on the beaches on the political and media agenda.

The issue came up again a few days later with the anti-burkini cause taken up by the Mayor of Cannes, who prevented access to the beaches of that city to “any person not properly dressed, respectful of morality and secularism”. Under the pretext of secularism, the Nice Administrative Court ruled in favour of the Mayor of Cannes, saying: “in the context of the state of emergency and recent Islamist attacks in particular in Nice a month ago (...), wearing a distinctive dress, other than a usual swimwear, can indeed be interpreted as not being only, in this context, a simple sign of religiosity”.

It was then no longer “religiosity” of which women wearing the burkini were accused (as in the Cannes ruling, which invoked “morality and secularism”), but improbable security considerations. The Director General of services for Cannes, Thierry Migoule, says that “it is not a ban on the wearing of religious signs at the beach [...] but ostentatious outfits that show allegiance to terrorist movements that make war on us”.

It doesn't take a particularly subtle interpretation of political language to understand that, as during the 2003-2004

debate around “religious symbols” in schools, it is specifically Muslims that are targeted, since neither the cassock or the kippa, nor any other religious symbol, are being treated as “ostentatious outfits that show allegiance to terrorist movements that make war on us”. Conversely, any outfit or any sign associated with Muslim culture - or imagined to do so - becomes capable of signifying such an “allegiance”.

The function of this criticism of these Muslim women and their alleged allegiance to the murderous ideology of Daesh, is to portray them as the representatives (if not proselytes) of this “movement”. Such Islamophobic amalgams between Muslims and terrorists are now put forward in a clear and explicit way, after fifteen years of an Islamophobic offensive! At least we can be sure of not mistaking the ugly merchandise that these elected representatives seek to sell to the population, in defiance moreover of basic facts which it should not even be necessary to recall, for example the significant presence of Muslims - an estimated thirty people - among the victims of the attack in Nice.

At the rate things are going, there is no doubt that it will become politically acceptable in a few months to demand - and obtain - a ban on the wearing on the streets of the jilbab, hijab or beard (if indeed it is worn by a Muslim, or at least by a person of “Muslim appearance”, to use an expression of Sarkozy). This is done in the name of a quite “falsified” secularism (as the historian of religions and secularism Jean Baubérot has said). Does the law of 1905 [\[1\]](#). not guarantee freedom of conscience (in article 1) and the possibility of expressing religious beliefs, including in the so-called “public” space?

## From Morano to Valls, an Islamophobic consensus

But returning to the racist mechanics, following the ruling in Cannes, the controversy was finally launched, to the delight of a desperate political class and a media deprived of “hot topics”. From there it was only a step to tweeting “Nacht und Nebel [\[2\]](#) to the trash bag” as a representative from Meurthe-et-Moselle, Jean-Pierre Arbey, did in relation to a woman wearing a full veil on a beach, thus demanding the type of deportation that the Nazi regime reserved for its opponents and “enemies” during the Second World war.

Former minister Nadine Morano came to the aid of her comrade Arbey. No wonder: we know how she is nostalgic for that white Christian France which General de Gaulle claimed in his time to have saved [\[3\]](#). To legitimize Arbey’s words, Morano argued that Muslim women wearing headscarves are “comparable with the Nazis who exterminated people” (sic). A double blow then, or rather double jeopardy: threatened with deportation and accused of Nazism!

But what about the government? While the right and the extreme right accused Hollande and Valls of not reacting, the latter has just declared in Provence that he “understands” and “supports” these mayors: “I understand the mayors who, in this moment of tension, have the reflex of looking for solutions to avoid disturbances of public order. [...] I support those who issued rulings, if they are motivated by the desire to encourage living together without ulterior political motives”. And also beaches must be “preserved from religious demands” and swimwear supporting a political project: “The beaches, like any public space must be preserved from religious demands. The burkini is not a new range of swimwear, a fashion. It is the translation of a political project against society, based in particular on the subjection of women”.

As his name was invoked to lead a “Foundation for Islam in France”, in the purest colonial tradition, former Interior Minister Chevènement made a comment that speaks volumes about what can be expected from such a body and a government planning to offer him its leadership, recommending that Muslims exercise “discretion” in the “public space”. The advice sounds more like a threat [\[4\]](#). But it was too little noticed how Chevènement [\[5\]](#) justified this advice: “Muslims, like all French citizens should be able to worship freely. But they must also understand that in the

public space where the public interest is defined, all citizens should make the effort to use “natural reason”. It is then not only “discretion” that Muslims must show, but an effort to use “natural reason” to take their place in the “public space” and contribute to “defining the general interest”.

# Islamophobia and its practical consequences

We can make fun of these rhetorical strategies seeking to pass off injunctions or orders addressed to Muslims in France as kind advice, but the affair is serious. Because the Islamophobia that ministers, elected officials, political leaders and editorialists spread or reinforce has a real impact on millions of people living in France - by legitimizing systematic discrimination against Muslims in France, attacks against veiled women, the amalgams which corrupt life, and the imperial wars that the French state leads claiming to liberate peoples from “barbarism”.

In Corsica, according to press reports, there were confrontations in Bastia after an altercation which began when young people of North African origin reproached a group of beachgoers for taking photos of women bathing in burkinis. An account instantly echoed by the media, based in fact on one (obviously very biased) testimony. Mediapart published an investigation that told a very different story, including in particular this testimony: “We were sitting on the beach for a picnic. Everything was going well, when young people started calling us “dirty Arabs” and shouting “Allahu akbar” while taking pictures ... I went to them to explain but they would not listen. So we decided to go so as to not make waves. Arriving in the parking lot were four cars with men armed with baseball bats, they started beating us... We spent five hours in the same place, people were throwing stones at us. They burned our cars before the gendarmes who did nothing to stop them. “Such are the consequences of these Islamophobic controversies that inhabit the political agenda. These racist reactions were in no way spontaneous: they almost directly derive from the climate aroused by political leaders, elected officials and the mainstream media.

## Why such controversy?

At a very immediate level, these controversies almost always represent a more or less conscious attempt to restore the prestige of a government or a party in decline. The two faces of the right in France - the PS and LR - both being in this situation, they can only compete on this terrain of Islamophobia, which they feel will benefit them electorally. Not to mention many statements by Manuel Valls, we also remember the PS minister Laurence Rossignol comparing veiled women to “black Americans who supported slavery”. The incentive to use Islamophobia increases as the FN progresses electorally, yet it is the latter which ultimately benefits from this game.

On a larger historical scale, the issue is much more important: on the backs of millions of French Muslims, but also others potentially considered as alien elements - particularly migrants, Roma and black people – it is to promote national unity based on a renewed racial pact, to unify the white population around an enemy, to crush dissent and any form of social conflict. It is not just the movement of this spring but the “prolonged crisis of hegemony” (Stathis Kouvélakis), i.e. the inability of the French ruling class to build a majority social bloc around the neoliberal project, which makes an Islamophobic and authoritarian response necessary.

## Need for anti-racist response

In such a situation, one can easily succumb to despair. Yet anti-racist or anti-imperialist mobilizations in recent times have shown that people “issuing from colonization” (as Sayad puts it) have an autonomous political ability and

willingness to confront the state: from the March of Dignity to the recent protests against racist crimes by the police (following the killing of Adama Traoré), as well as the events of summer 2014 in solidarity with Palestine and the movement of the “sans-papiers”. Similarly, the audience gained by the CCIF - (Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France), primarily among Muslims but not entirely, reflects a widely shared willingness to take the fight against Islamophobia and its roots seriously.

The radical left and the labour movement still too often treat these mobilizations with paternalism, if not with contempt. Yet they are a crucial component of any emancipatory politics in our historical period. It is not just about supporting them from outside but developing a political approach to the racial issue, building alliances with organizations and groups already present and active, seeking to formulate with them unifying demands and proposals, to intervene on the ground.

In the fight against Islamophobia, the minimum would be to demand the repeal of all anti-Islamic laws, particularly the law of March 15, 2004 on religious symbols in public schools, and advancing a systematic plan of struggle against discrimination against Muslim people. The Islamophobic episode this summer shows once again that racism is a central component of the political situation in France and cannot be circumvented by simple economic struggle (for wages, jobs and so on) that would magically unify the various fringes of the popular classes. It is not clear how the social bloc that the ruling class seeks to build around a national/racial pact (of which Islamophobia is the touchstone) can be broken without a political anti-racist movement, radical and autonomous, led by those most affected. In the months and years to come, it is also what an anti-capitalist party should contribute.

*August 17*

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[1] The 1905 French law on the Separation of the Churches and State was based on three principles: the neutrality of the state, the freedom of religious exercise, and public powers related to the church

[2] Nacht und Nebel is German for "Night and Fog") and was a directive from Adolf Hitler on 7 December 1941 targeting political activists and resistance "helpers" that was originally intended to winnow out "anyone endangering German security" throughout Nazi Germany's occupied territories. Its name was a direct reference to a Tarnhelm spell, from Wagner's Das Rheingold.

[3] "It's great that there are yellow, black and brown French people. They show that France is open to all races and has a universal vocation. But provided they remain a small minority. Otherwise, France would not be France. We are still primarily a European people, Caucasian, Greek and Latin culture and Christian by religion. We should not tell ourselves stories! Muslims, you have seen them? You see them with their turbans and their djellabas? You see very well that these are not French! Those who advocate integration have a hummingbird brains, even if they are very learned. Try to incorporate oil and vinegar. Shake the bottle. After a while, they will separate again. The Arabs are Arabs, the French are French. You believe that the French body can absorb ten million Muslims, who tomorrow will be twenty million and forty the day after tomorrow? If we practiced integration, if all Arabs and Berbers of Algeria were considered French, how do we stop them from coming to settle in France, where the standard of living is so much higher? My village will no longer be called Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises, but Colombey-les-Deux-Mosques!"

[4] This threatening rhetoric recalls the words of Valls few weeks ago: "If Islam does not help the Republic to fight against those who undermine public freedoms, it will be increasingly hard for the Republic to guarantee this freedom of worship".

[5] Chevènement was previously a member of the Socialist Party (PS) who subsequently stood against the PS and founded the Citizen and Republican Movement (Mouvement républicain et citoyen or MRC in 2003)