

## **Integrating Islam: Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France**

By Jonathan Laurence – Justin Vaisse. Washington, D.C.:  
Brookings Institution Press, 2006.

The past few years have been fertile in bleak news about Islam in France. New waves of poor immigrants, zealous street rallies featuring Palestinian flags, the trial of the French citizen Zacarias Moussaoui for charges linked to the 9/11 attacks, the violent riots in the French suburbs, and perhaps the most publicized of all, the ‘headscarf affairs’. Such news lead to the rise of a highly negative view of Muslims’ capacity to integrate with the French (and European) society. In the foreword to the reviewed book, the leading expert on French Muslims identifies four ‘infernal couples’ regarding the French Islam in the mainstream domestic (French) and international media: Islam and immigrants, Islam and the conflicts in the Middle East, Islam and terrorism, Islam and social exclusion, and Islam and ‘Islamic values’.

In what follows, Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse’s *Integrating Islam* aims to ultimately undermine the image of French Muslims as a group alienated from French society and the Republic. An American political science professor at Boston College and a French historian at the Paris-based Science Po published together an eye-opening account of the situation

of the French Muslims. Contrary to the conventional wisdom beyond France’s borders, “the process of integration of Muslims in France is under way,” they claim (5).

They reveal the mythic character of French Islam’s current image. First, immigrants, indeed, constitute part of the community, but linking Islam and immigration overlooks that a majority of France’s Muslims are French citizens by birth. Second, Laurence and Vaisse show that the French Muslims’ political views are much more detached from the events in the Middle East and much more determined by their socio-economic situation than supposed. Third, they convincingly defy the notion that a disaffected French Muslim can easily become an Islamist terrorist; the road to extremism is more likely to lead through individual alienation, isolation, and generational crisis rather than solely through a religious awakening. Fourth, linking social exclusion and Islam neglects the emergence of the Muslim middle class. And last, contrary the outside observers’ opinion, the French Muslims’ beliefs are not in opposition to the French Republican ideals, such as democracy, *laïcité*, and gender equality.

The authors' optimistic account of French Islam is categorized in three parts: a complex sociological portrayal of the minority, a critical assessment of the French state's *politiques* towards it, and a comprehensive review of the *politiques* of Islam in France. The authors draw on a wide range of sources – from official statistics to research papers to personal interviews with French politicians, bureaucrats, and Muslim leaders.

Part I titled *Being Muslim in France* deals with the basic data available. France is home to the highest number of Muslims in Europe – around five million. Laurence and Vaisse emphasize that the Muslim community is divided along ethnic and other lines to the extent that it becomes controversial to talk of a 'community'. In France, Muslims demonstrate a certain degree of cultural integration. However, they remain marginalized when it comes to socio-economic indicators of integration (unemployment, the ghetto phenomenon, school gap, and crime gap). As for the acculturation, most Muslims identify with democracy and the French Republican ideals, and they express a desire to further integrate with the non-Muslim society.

Although various layers of stereotypes about Muslims continue to survive, the French majority's view of them has been steadily improving since the mid-1990s. The positive development was, however, interrupted by the November 2005 unrest in the *banlieues* (suburbs). In

addition, the majority continues to discriminate against Muslims in their daily lives and the atmosphere remains increasingly unfavorable for allowing new immigration for Muslims.

The authors observed that more and more French Muslims of a young age feel 'Muslim' first and only then 'French'. The re-Islamization does not, however, necessarily lead to radicalization, which remains a rather isolated phenomenon.

Part I delivers detailed information also about the institutional aspects of French Islam and a critical and comprehensive account of the competing visions of French Islam, most importantly, by France's Muslim leaders.

Part II, *From Muslims into French Citizens: Muslims and Public Policy*, is mostly a praise of the French Republic's integration policies toward Islam and Muslims. "Criticism of French integration policies ... has sometimes been unfair: the state is portrayed either as a phobic in regard to religion or as overly accommodating," the authors announce in the introduction. "But we argue that (such assumptions are) misplaced" (8).

The establishment of the French Council of Muslim Religion, Laurence and Vaisse claim, led to the institutionalization of Islam that was much needed. The inclusion of Islamists in government-sponsored forums does not pose a political threat, since the Council's limited role is to voice the regular religious, not political needs of

French Muslims (such as conditions of prayer spaces).

Part II of the book comes up with an explanation of the smallest nuances of the heavily publicized headscarf affair. Laurence and Vaisse reveal that the French schools have historically been a political battleground, since they are considered the force giving rise to the French citizen. There is, indeed, more to be said about the 2004 affair that started with 1,254 Muslim girls (one percent of all) attending schools with a veil and ended with a ban on the wearing of conspicuous symbols in public schools and a heated discussion across the West and the Arab world. The ban is a result of the French state's choice to battle the perceived threat to national sovereignty and way of life. The authors note that whereas non-Muslims can view the veil as a symbol of re-Islamization of women of North African origin, the actual 'perpetrators' can consider it a sign of personal self-assertion. But because French Muslims eventually rejected the importation of the international discussion and respected the new law, the affair actually revealed the depth of their integration and nationalization within French society.

The middle part also points out that despite a certain progress during both the left-wing and the center-right governments, the French citizens of North African origin remain largely underrepresented in French politics. The book examines the less recent attempts for integration through the

education system, as well as the more recent affirmative action initiatives.

*The Politics of Islam in France and Europe* is the title of Part III. It begins with the deconstruction of the myth that there is something such as the 'Muslim vote'. Only about 1.2 to 1.5 million of the five million French Muslims have the right to vote, there is no relevant Muslim political party or representative organization, and, in addition, the 'community' is divided along ethnic and many other various lines. Although Muslims tend to vote more for the left than the right, the discrepancy is not so big, Laurence and Vaisse claim. They call the traditional political parties' attempt to attract the 'Muslim vote' a hunt for the white whale.

Similarly, they prove wrong the notion of Muslims' impact on foreign policy.

Part III reflects also on the subject of anti-Semitism and the rise of identity politics among Muslims. France is home to the third largest Jewish Diaspora, just after Israel and the United States. The striking statistics that most anti-Semitic crimes are committed by young men of Muslim origin and that the attacks against Jews have been on steep rise since 2000, surpassing those against Muslims, question the perspectives for coexistence of the two minorities.

Laurence and Vaisse claim that in the correlation of resurgence of the Muslim community identity and simultaneously anti-Semitic violence, Islam does play a role, albeit only

limited. The identity-building is not fuelled by religious awakening but rather by the issues related to the Muslims' socio-political status. Besides, anti-Semitism in France is nurtured by numerous factors, including France's own history.

The threat of Islamist terrorism is another subject which is treated in this part of the book. The authors acknowledge that the *banlieues* have given the world a number of world-class terrorists, but recognize the phenomenon as rather marginal. In a great detail, the book maps out the radicalization of Zacarias Moussaoui, a French citizen of Moroccan origin, currently serving a life sentence in Colorado for failing to report preparations of the 9/11 bombing. It shows that there has to be interplay of many factors for a resident of a disaffected neighborhood to become a jihadist. The end of Part III is dedicated to the comparison in the European perspective and initiatives for better integration on the European Union level.

Besides an overt optimism about the current and future perspectives, the book has another feature that draws skepticism. Laurence and Vaisse associate Nicolas Sarkozy, the former interior minister and the newly-elected president of France, mostly with the positive developments. The authors, undoubtedly, have good arguments to praise him for launching the institutionalization of Islam in France, increased participation of

Muslim citizens in French politics, the minority-favoring affirmative action, and abolishing one extremely strict deportation policy. This, combined with the claim that a big part (albeit a minority) of Muslims regularly prefers to vote for the center-right, encourages the reader to believe that in the recent election, Sarkozy was many Muslims' preferred presidential candidate.

However, according to the exit poll by the well-established CSA-Cisco, only one percent of French Muslims voted for Nicolas Sarkozy in the first round of the election. Possible reasons for Sarkozy's failure to attract Muslim voters can be his rhetoric related to the November 2005 urban riots (the use of expressions such as 'scums' and 'clean up'), his proposals to toughen immigration procedures, and, undoubtedly, his right-wing economic position.

One percent of Muslims in favor of the candidate that otherwise gained most French votes indicates a deep political rupture between Muslims and the rest of French society. That 'something happened' between 2002 and 2007, and is illustrated by the sheer fact that the center-right candidate Jacques Chirac fared much better in the first round of the 2002 presidential election. According to a poll quoted by the authors, Chirac gained 11 percent of the Muslim vote.

The optimistic conclusions of the book, however, doesn't allow for anticipation of such an electoral shift, of such a deep political rupture. The explanation of the reason for this is

one important feature of the book, which in the light of this criticism, can be recognized as a flaw: When they identify the determinants of integration, they downplay the role of political discourse and favor socio-economic factors instead. A factor that caused the decline of political discourse can possibly be the events of Fall 2005. The authors interpret them mostly as an indicator of a lagging socio-economic integration, but less so as an important milestone that sparked mutually negative feelings between Muslims and non-Muslims.

In any case, the book remains a pool of powerful arguments against those who would like to see a clash-of-civilizations scenario evolve in France

and Europe. Laurence and Vaisse undermine them with a carefully calibrated assessment of the situation backed by serious in-depth research. *Everyone* interested in immigration, European Islam, terrorism, or French politics should read their book. But, at the same time, during the five upcoming years of Sarkozy's presidency, when trying to figure out the current situation, I recommend to use most of the instruments Laurence and Vaisse provide, but spare some of their optimism.

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