



Getting to the Root of the French Problem

France has for long had a difficult relationship with Islam and its adherents. The republication by French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo of a controversial series of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed (saw) to mark the beginning of a trial over the attack on its office in 2015 once again brought to attention the tensions between France and Islam. The death of a French primary school teacher in October 2020 made the French President Emmanuel Macron put the blame squarely on Islam stating 'Islam is in crisis all over the world.'¹ But France faces far deeper problems than its 6.5 million immigrants.'

In 1789, France established a strong nation in the centre of Europe through the French Revolution. The French executed their King and became the first people to embrace individual freedom and secularism in Europe as values to build their socio-political system upon. The French were leading change in Europe and pioneering new systems; this is why many thinkers and philosophers of the era were French, such as Voltaire. The French have ever since taken great pride in this era of history citing it as a core part of the French identity.

Soon after, they turned their attention to Europe and beyond. France's military hard power conquered with brutal efficiency, whilst spreading its soft power via its secular liberal culture. Napoleon swept across Europe through conquest, forging alliances and through rewarding supporters, he even attempted to conquer Russia, which he achieved, but at the cost of his army. Whenever France established a colony, it would impose its culture - the French language, European secularism, individualism and the French lifestyle upon the people. The French saw the creation of a Francophone Empire as their enlightenment mission.

The most important colony for France was the North African Territory of Algeria. But France struggled to control and maintain Algeria. Within the first three decades (1830-1860) of the conquest, up to 1 million Algerians, out of a total population of 3 million, were killed by the French due to war, massacres, disease and famine. The whole French occupation of Algeria consumed significant resources and there was one single cause for this which Charles-André Julien outlined in *Foreign Affairs* in 1940: "*The capture of Algiers in 1830 marked a significant departure in the expansionist policy of France, for North Africa was quite unlike older French colonial possessions in the Caribbean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The French soon discovered that North Africa did not produce tropical goods and that the native population could neither be destroyed to make way for European colonists nor enslaved to work for them. They also found that Islam provided the natives with a religious and a cultural ideal which they would stubbornly defend. France had not been fitted by experience to understand and govern an Islamic people*"²

By the middle of the 20th century, the global balance of power was changing. For France, who was devastated after WW2, it needed to maintain its colonies as it needed the wealth and resources to kick start its economy and it now desperately needed workers to come to France in order to rebuild the nation. France has had a hard time in the post-WW2 world. As the 20th century wore on, France's place and influence on the world has only declined. Following independence, a number of its former colonies drifted closer to the USA.

France's dwindling influence in the world has had an adverse effect on the French society. Successive surveys of the French people continue to reveal a population frustrated with the new status quo. At the turn of the century, Time magazine declared French culture was 'dying'.³ France, once famous for its joie de vivre (joy of living), is suffering from existential gloom; Claudia Senik, a professor at the famous Sorbonne University concluded the French were now *culturally miserable*. In her studies of the French malaise, she believes dates back to the 1970s: "*It's linked to the way the French view the world and their place in it. They have high expectations about the quality of life, freedoms and many values driven by the French Revolution and this sets a high benchmark for satisfaction,*" Senik says. "*They*

look back at a golden age when France made the rules of the game, and now we are just another smallish country forced to accept and adapt to rules."⁴

Whilst the French believe they have superior values, these values are failing to solve the myriad of problems the country is facing. On the economic front the French Social Democratic model, where the government plays a large role in the economy, hides the country's huge inequality. The richest 10% of the country own 55% of the nation's wealth and income inequality is far worse. France is now regularly found in the top ranks of European consumers of tranquilizers and alcohol. The French have been found in polls to be one of the most unhappy people in the world.⁵ *Liberty, equality and fraternity* may be the French motto but they have done little to deal with inequality, divisions and abuse of power in France.

When President Jacques Chirac set up the Stasi commission in 2003 to look at the state of secularism in France, the commission blamed religious symbols, especially the Muslim Hijab as the threat to the French republic. A piece of cloth worn by an extremely small segment of the country became the central threat to secularism! Banning the Hijab in education, and the Muslim veil in public was seen as reversing the decline of Secularism in France. The Muslim veil is still illegal in public, despite face masks being mandatory! Immigration is being blamed as the cause of the problems France is facing, but despite France having the largest percentage of immigrants as a percentage of population in Europe, there are just 6.5 million immigrants in France out of a total population of 67 million. The French view all immigration through the lens of French values. As discontent in the state of the country has increased, so too has the aggressive stance towards those new arrivals who fail to live by the French ideals.

France regularly tops surveys on the level of misery and the lack of hope in the future. The Yellow Vest protests that brought France to a standstill prove it is not its Muslim minority who are the cause of the country's problems but the failure of the political class and systems, which is a wider problem across the developed world. Freedom has become synonymous with social problems such as family breakdowns, depression and loneliness. Secularism separated church and state, but money and politics have poisoned the political systems across the West - systems that have failed to deliver for the people. French politicians constantly deflect discussions around this by blaming immigrants and Muslims and that is why today the muscular, state-imposed liberalism resembles a rigid new age conservatism confronting its 6.5 million minority immigrants - immigrants who came to France seeking a better life, but arrived at a time when the French people themselves were losing hope in their values, state and nation.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
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¹ Islam in 'Crisis All Over the World' France's Macron Says, VOA news, 2 October 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/islam-crisis-all-over-world-frances-macron-says>

² Charles-André Julien, France and Islam, Foreign Affairs, July 1940, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/algeria/1940-07-01/france-and-islam>

³ See, <https://www.laurelzuckerman.com/2011/12/can-french-culture-survive-interview-with-don-morrison.html>

⁴ The French Unhappiness Puzzle: the Cultural Dimension of Happiness, Claudia Senik, Paris School of Economics and University Paris-Sorbonne, October 3, 2011 <http://www.cepremap.fr/depot/docweb/docweb1113.pdf>

⁵ Poll: The French are the World's Most Pessimistic People, Time, 4 January 2011, <https://newsfeed.time.com/2011/01/04/poll-the-french-are-the-worlds-most-pessimistic-people/>