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France

# France's Demonization of Muslims Is Getting Worse

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**On Friday, an Islamist extremist murdered a schoolteacher in a suburb northwest of Paris. In response, the French interior minister has called for a ban on an anti-Islamophobia legal association wholly unconnected to the atrocity. We need to resist this turn against democracy and justice.**

On Friday 16 October, France was shocked by the appalling murder of middle-school teacher Samuel Paty, decapitated by a young Chechen Islamic fundamentalist. The author of this sordid act had already, several months previously, posted on social media about his intention to turn to violent action; the teacher whom he killed had recently been at the center of a controversy when one of his pupils' parents made an online accusation of Islamophobic behavior. This followed a class in which Mr Paty had shown cartoons mocking the Islamic prophet Mohammed as part of a lesson on "freedom of expression" — though he had sought to avoid upsetting his Muslim students' sensibilities. According to some of his former students, the well-liked teacher apologized to pupils who may have been offended. Yet the controversy took on a life of its own on the internet; the murderer himself had no direct relationship with those involved, living some 100 kilometers away and choosing his target by following discussions on social media.

Mr Paty's death sparked an outpouring of emotion, especially among public schoolteachers. But there was also an immediate rush to mobilize the killing politically, as the government and various right-wing and far-right forces sought to draw its Islamophobic and anti-democratic "lessons." The interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, announced a proposal for the government to break up various associations, including the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF), the main body in France offering legal support to victims of Islamophobia. Frequently attacked by various Islamophobic figures, the CCIF was targeted by Darmanin because the parent who had earlier criticized Mr Paty had sought this association's help. But the CCIF had said nothing on this subject — and this highly legally focused organization simply had nothing to do with the online harassment campaign. But this appalling murder — or, more particularly, the political bid to exploit it — also make up part of a wider story about how terrorist outrages are used to attack Muslims in general.

## Fighting "Separatism"?

Indeed, already on 1 October, president Emmanuel Macron had announced an "anti-separatism" bill targeting France's Muslims. A few days later, he changed his wording slightly, saying that the legislation was in fact aimed at "strengthening secularism and republican principles." But the accusation of Muslim "separatism" had already firmly established itself in public debate.

The president's intervention was not so surprising — indeed, it came not even a year after he granted a long interview to far-right weekly [Valeurs Actuelles](#). While in international media Macron is usually hailed as a liberal, this interview, like his recent comments, paints a more complex picture, in which the president has strongly boosted the legitimacy of all kind of obsessive Islamophobes.

That isn't to say that Macron's moves were altogether new. For some two decades now, ruling-class politicians have continually denounced the "communalism" of France's minorities, in the name of defending "secularism." In so doing, they have impoverished this term, making it little but a slogan for those pushing racism and, in particular, Islamophobia.

The bill Macron announced on 1 October will, among other things, impose new controls on associations as well as people working for public services (whether or not they are state employees), all in the name of ensuring their “secularism.” But, most important, this initiative fuels a putrid climate of stigmatization against Muslims, daily fed by far-right forces indulged by most French media.

The way this works is very simple. Far-right figures make absurd, violently racist statements and contrive polemics against any Muslim who happens to have the slightest media visibility. This allows politicians with the same Islamophobic stock-in-trade to appear as “reasonable” purely because they refrain from the far right's worst excesses. The effect? That public debate moves ever further onto such forces' own preferred terrain.

## Far-Right Media Presence

Who is pushing this far-right agenda? Paradoxically, it isn't mainly the Rassemblement National led by Marine Le Pen — Macron's rival in the second round of the 2017 presidential election, and a Steve Bannon ally. Le Pen and her party certainly do push racist polemics. But now, they can increasingly rely on “pundits,” “journalists,” and press outlets to push the most bile-flecked Islamophobia — and racism in general.

This includes personalities like columnist Éric Zemmour, who has repeatedly been convicted of incitement to racial hatred; figures from reactionary outlets like Elisabeth Lévy's *Causeur*; and, most important, *Valeurs Actuelles*. Its editors (who are also younger than their predecessors on the far right) have “colonized” large swaths of the media, in particular the twenty-four-hour TV news stations. These include BFM TV and LCI, but especially CNews, where Zemmour holds court, outdoing even these others in promoting outrageous racism.

Other personalities feed this ecosystem even while brandishing their own past left-wing credentials. Take charlatan philosopher Michel Onfray, a man of antisemitic hues for whom the doors to the TV studios are constantly flung open. Or the “Printemps Républicain” group, well rooted in certain pro-Macron circles and the Parti Socialiste.

For a sense of these circles' unhinged outlook, we need only look at a recent tweet by Laurent Bouvet, driving force behind *Printemps Républicain*. He posted the caption [“I got the masks”](#) with a photo of slices of bacon molded into the shape of a mask, thus mocking Muslims' rejection of pork. And this, from a political science professor whom education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer appointed to the “Council of the Elders of Secularism” (yes, this public body does exist in France).

It is worth mentioning these media platforms. For if it weren't for the help from big capitalist corporations — daily providing a loudspeaker for far-right discourse and nauseating far-right polemics — these figures certainly wouldn't have the same effect. After all, *Valeurs Actuelles* lost one-third of its individual subscribers between 2016 and 2019.

At the cutting edge of this ruling-class racist media offensive is the billionaire Vincent Bolloré, a scion of the old Catholic bourgeoisie in Brittany, a personal friend of former president Nicolas Sarkozy, and the owner of colossal industrial, transport, and media interests. He personally reformatted the CNews channel to make it into a far-right platform where racism is the main draw; indeed, it was him who pushed Zemmour's hiring.

Or take Arnaud Lagardère, the billionaire playboy whose main achievement has been to sink the corporate empire he inherited. He wanted to impose an individual from *Valeurs Actuelles* as head of mainstream radio station Europe 1's politics coverage — despite the near-unanimous opposition of its staff.

Convention of the Right

But what concrete form does this Islamophobia take? Let's look at a few examples. The first was the near-two-hour live broadcast of the "Convention of the Right" on twenty-four-hour news station LCI. This meeting was in fact spearheaded by Le Pen's niece Marion Maréchal — herself a former MP, who has led a small far-right institute since falling out with *Rassemblement National*. The convention included no center-right political leader and very few elected representatives — but many of the aforementioned racist "pundits."

There was nothing compelling a news network to provide this kind of coverage to such a meeting. Yet it broadcast live and without any counterpoint speeches, like one by Zemmour insisting, "All our problems aggravated by immigration are aggravated by Islam . . . Will young French people accept living as a minority on the land of their ancestors? If yes, then they deserve to be colonized; if not, they should fight for their liberation."

Zemmour moreover went unchallenged as he compared djellabas (North African-style robes) to the "uniforms of the army of occupation" and declared his admiration for Renaud Camus, inventor of the far-right theory of the "great replacement" of white populations by immigrants. The white supremacist Christchurch terrorist in New Zealand identified with this same notion.

Another remarkable instance of this onslaught came this September 11, when BFM TV published a [short online video](#) that highlighted the work of Imane, a young woman who runs a page with cheap recipes for her fellow students. But Imane wears a hijab, and this triggered not just insults by an army of far-right trolls on social media, but also the sharing of this video (about cooking!) by Judith Waintraub, a columnist for conservative daily *Le Figaro*. She posted the link with the words "September 11."

In so doing, Waintraub equated this young woman explaining how to make meals on a budget . . . with fundamentalist mass murder. Mainstream press widely called Waintraub's comments "polemical" — failing to mention that this was, more precisely, "unhinged Islamophobia." When some (anonymous) Twitter accounts issued threats against her, the entire right and far right hurried to express their "solidarity" with her, as did Macron's interior minister, Gérald Darmanin. Yet they had not a word for Imane, who quit social media faced with the racist backlash.

Similarly unforgettable was [Valeurs Actuelles' scandalous depiction](#), last month, of *France Insoumise* MP [Danièle Obono](#) — choosing to portray this Afro-French woman as a slave in shackles. If it attempted to justify itself by insisting that these drawings were illustrations for a "fictional" piece, numerous racist and sexist clichés therein were all too real. This illustration did, however, spark real commotion in the political world — the leaders of the pro-Macron parties, some on the Right and even certain *Rassemblement National* figures repudiated it (though often with some qualification).

Macron called Obono in order to express his sympathy — and the magazine's chief editor made an empty apology for the "mistakes" that had been made. Yet even this widespread criticism did not halt the wave of Islamophobia and smears against anti-racist public figures. Just a few days later, Obono was interviewed on one of France's most popular morning politics talk shows: the first part consisted of an aggressive interrogation as the presenter sought to "verify" whether she condemned the murderous 2015 attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*, prodding her to say "Vive la France." About a tenth of the interview was devoted to the appalling racist abuse she had confronted only a few days previously.

This last episode illustrates perfectly what far-right pundits' function really is. Constantly handed the microphone, they set the tone with some outrageous claim . . . and then right-wingers, but also liberals, can pull back a little from what they said while maintaining the core of its racist conception of society.

Some media personalities now make it their specialty to serve as a doormat for such polemicists — politely indicating

their disagreements with them, but never making the same harsh comments they do against anti-racists who actually mobilize. This, too, helps legitimize far-right speech. So, when Zemmour says on his CNews program that lone migrant children are future rapists and murderers, his interlocutor — a former member of the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel — has nothing stronger to say than that they'll only "potentially" turn out like that and may not all do so.

## Centrist Chauvinism

But this posture is most destructive not in media commentary, but in the political sphere itself. In the United States, it is common to paint Macron as the French equivalent of the Democratic establishment. This is true in a lot of ways, but not when it comes to racial questions. France's capitalists have not embraced liberal identity politics, except in a very watered-down form. A weak-tea centrist like Kirsten Gillibrand would appear radical, in France, simply because she uses terms like "systemic racism" or "white privilege." In this context, Macron's policy is a mix of opportunism, conservative convictions, and illusions about how political battle is really waged.

The opportunist part owes to his electoral tactics. France's national political institutions are shaped by the presidential contest, which each five years sees a multi-candidate first round and then a runoff among the top two candidates. Macron is counting on facing Le Pen in the second round in 2022, as in 2017. To get there — a contest he will likely win — he doesn't actually need majority support: the opinion polls rate him between 25 and 35 percent, which will easily suffice to put him into the runoff. In the absence of any strong and united left-wing candidacy, he can stay in power with just a quarter of the electorate behind him. And since the legislative election held shortly after the presidential contest systematically grants the newly elected president the bulk of seats in parliament, on a low turnout, he can count on winning a second term despite majority disapproval.

With this in mind, Macron and his governments have striven to build up Le Pen and her Rassemblement National as their main or even only real opposition. The mass media totally adopt this same perspective — now even portraying Le Pen as rather a "responsible" figure, contrary to the left-wing opposition cast as a mere rabble of extremists more or less allied to Islamist fundamentalism. To focus the public debate on supposed Muslim "separatism" allows Macronie to meet the Rassemblement National on its own terrain — and turn the agenda away from issues like the [French government's feeble response to the pandemic](#), its multiple U-turns on its environmental commitments, and its policies to serve the very richest.

But this isn't only instrumental: its tactical aspect fits with deeper reactionary convictions shared by Macron and his ministers. This is widely underestimated outside of France. But the president has repeatedly made [nebulous speeches](#) about France being "orphaned" after the loss of its monarchs, who ought to be somehow replaced. This is a well-worn cliché in French reactionary thinking, with all that it entails in terms of colonial nostalgia. Macron does not hide his sympathies with pseudo-intellectuals from the reactionary right, and himself granted an interview to *Valeurs Actuelles* in October 2019. He also placed representatives of the reactionary right in key governmental jobs, like Blanquer — education minister since 2017, who shortly before his appointment granted an interview to anti-gay marriage organization *Sens Commun*, who received representatives of the Islamophobic *Printemps Républicain* in his ministry, and who ridiculously insisted that schoolgirls should wear suitably "republican" clothing.

But the shock trooper of the reactionary right at the heights of state is interior minister Gérald Darmanin — the strongman in the government, given that prime minister Jean Castex is so little known. A longtime homophobic militant, accused of rape — having admitted to asking for a blowjob in exchange for providing social housing when he was a local representative in Tourcoing — this faithful disciple of Nicolas Sarkozy has made many statements the far right could sign up to every word of, for instance speaking of "part of society becoming savages." He received Le Pen in an official capacity on 7 October under a week after the announcement of the anti-"separatism" bill, for an evidently very cordial meeting that could only boost her image. This was just twenty-four hours after his intervention in the

National Assembly accusing *La France Insoumise* of being “bound to an Islamo-Leftism that destroys the Republic.” Like his mentor Sarkozy, Darmanin isn't a fan of subtlety.

Last, this mix of sincere conviction and calculation is backed up by the illusion, apparently widespread in pro-Macron circles, that they should “not play Le Pen's game” — that is, not give her anything to criticize. Again, this means granting credibility to the logic of Rassemblement National claims, the effect of which can only be to strengthen this party. That said, such an illusion is, in a sense, “necessary” for Macron and his allies, given how little they have to say about social, democratic, or ecological questions apart from total submission to multinationals and neoliberal dogmas that have long since been exposed as failures.

## Separatism?

The bill against “separatism” is thus Macron's latest contribution to the Islamophobic swamp into which France has sunk. He has announced that it will contain:

- The obligation of “neutrality” among public service operatives will be extended to the employees of private firms to which public services are outsourced — which especially means public transport. This relates to stories widely shared by media in which drivers and ticket checkers supposedly refused to allow women onto a bus because of their immodest clothing — proven fake news. It wasn't clear at first if this would apply to private charter schools, the huge majority of which are Catholic, though a few days later, unsurprisingly, the interior minister made clear that Catholics would be unaffected.
- Associations seeking public funds will have to sign “secularism contracts.” The reasons why they can be broken up will be “extended” to include “attacks on the dignity of the human person,” a vague and thus wholly arbitrary formulation.
- Strict limits on home schooling (which concerns only 0.5 percent of all pupils in France).
- A very vague construction, referring to an “enlightenment Islam.” This, above all, looks like a bid for government control and co-optation. This formulation follows the bid launched two years ago to identify “legitimate” Muslim representatives who could be interlocutors for prefects (government-appointed functionaries, under the interior ministry) in each département.

This bill is fully part of the Islamophobic mechanism described above. While far-right pundits characterize Muslims as “colonizers” who have to be defended against and expelled, Macron can distinguish himself from them while also digging an Islamophobic furrow. In his discourse, France's Muslims are not necessarily a foreign body to expel or, automatically, potential terrorists — but they do have to drop their defenses, stop organizing, and stop criticizing French society, whether individually or collectively. In a word: stop existing politically.

While France's nonwhite population suffers multiple forms of systemic racism, often in the form of Islamophobia, and as public services abandon the neighborhoods where they are concentrated, any demand or attempt at organization (among minorities alone or in alliance with the wider social-political Left) is ruled out as a display of “separatism.” All this in a country — remember — where making a cooking video while wearing a hijab is enough to have you treated like a terrorist and forced to suffer a massive campaign of hatred without consequence for its perpetrators.

Faced with this rebranding of Islamophobia as a “fight against separatism,” the first major reaction came from the left

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wing of the unions (CGT, FSU, Solidaires, and the student organization UNEF, as well as high-schoolers' union UNL). They issued a strong statement insisting:

Our organizations want to say it together and say it clearly: we will not allow French society and more particularly the popular classes to be divided by another Islamophobic campaign stigmatizing Muslim or Muslim-identified populations, who are systematically targeted by ministers' claims and the very highest offices in the state.

Promising to scrutinize and fight the bill, they called on the population to resist all forms of racism and join together in favor of concrete responses to the current social emergency.

This welcome stance comes almost a year after the first big demonstration against Islamophobia in France — and a united campaign against both the bill and the suggested banning of CCIF is now in the works. Such a mobilization is absolutely vital to changing the toxic political atmosphere in France — and finally making it a little more possible to breathe.

Source [Jacobin](#).

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