ISLAMOPHOBIA IN FRANCE, FROM RACISM TO "NEO-POPULISM"

FRANSA'DA İSLAMOFOBİ: IRKÇILIKTAN YENİ POPÜLİZME

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Abstract: Even though there is no consensus among scholars about the concept of "Islamophobia," it is important to acknowledge that this phenomenon is spreading all over the world. In the case of France, Islamophobia is mainly a process linked to racism, which to a degree is the consequence of the French colonial past in the Maghreb. In this sense, meanwhile the ideological framework of the "French civilizing mission" was driven, Islam was also considered the ultimate obstacle for the assimilation of Algerian and Tunisian peoples. Currently, the debate around the "French communitarianism" and the integration of more Muslim population to the French society has worsened due to the efforts empowered by the French government against the Islam's visibility. Nowadays, although ideologies based on racial arguments which justified the inferiority of "the others" are condemned; negative arguments and dispositions referring to the Muslim population have become "uncensored" and are an essential part on the discourse of right-wing populist parties. In France, like in other countries, the visibility of Islam has become a fundamental issue in a political scene where Islamophobia has assumed the form of a new populism.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Racism, Identity, New populism, France

Öz: İslamafobinin sınırlarının nerede başlayıp nerede bittiği konusunda her ne kadar akademisyenler arasında görüş birliği sağlanamamış ise de kavramın tüm dünyada yaygınlaştığı ve genel olarak benimsendiği bir gerçektir. Fransa örneğinde İslamofobi, bu ülkenin Magrip ülkelerindeki sömürgecilik geçmişi nedeniyle ırkçılıkla bağlantılı bir süreç olarak algılanmaktadır. İslam Fransa'da aynı zamanda yönetim tarafından uygarlaşmayı engelleyen faktör olarak değerlendirilmiş, Cezayir ve Tunus kökenlilerin asimilasyonuna engel olduğu iddia edilmiştir. Fransa hükümetinin, toplum içerisinde İslamın görünürlüğü ile mücadele programı yürütmesi, bu ülkede yaşayan Müslümanların Fransızlarla entegrasyonunu zora sokmuştur. Günümüzde Avrupa genelinde ırkçı argümanlar genel olarak kınanmaktadır, buna karşılık Müslümanlar aleyhine sağ siyasi eğilimdekilerin ileri sürdüğü görüşler aleni olarak ifade edilmektedir. Bu çalışmada Fransa'da İslamofobinin mevcut durumu ve yeni bir popülizm haline gelmesi ana hatlarıyla analiz edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslamofobi, Irkçılık, Kimlik, Yeni Popülizm, Fransa

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the phenomenon of Islamophobia in France and its transformation into a new populism. In this respect, although the French case is very specific, Islamophobia acts in Western countries include common experiences, which go from phenomena such as intolerance, distrust, prejudice; destruction of Islamic symbols and spaces used for the practice of this religion; physical or verbal attacks against Muslims or their properties; as well as discrimination against Muslims in the labor, educational and other public fields.

In France, as in other European countries, Islam has become a warm topic of debate, that is the reason why it is common for politicians to make statements denouncing Muslims as incapable of adaptation to the national values. However, after September 11, Islam and the integration of Muslims have become in a national security issue because of the proliferation of radical groups, due to the "endemic tendency" of Islam towards violence.

In this sense, this essay will regard in the first place all the different approaches concerning the concept of Islamophobia, including, in brief, the antecedents of Islam in the European History. Then it will analyze the French colonial process over Algeria, emphasizing ideas around the assimilation of local people. Finally, this essay will also address the challenges facing the process of Muslim integration in France and the ways in which Islamophobia has become a neo-populist discourse.

1. THE CONCEPT OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

As a word, "Islamophobia," started to be popular in Great Britain as noun used to appoint the forms in which the Muslim population was marginalized and discriminated. *The Runnymede Trust* titled "Islamophobia: a Challenge for Us All," points out that "Islamophobic assumptions are based on Islam as single monolithic system, without internal development, diversity and dialogue" (1997:1). In this manner, Islamophobia is a perspective that regards Islam from an essentialist approach. Therefore, Islam is a religion that has not changed in time and an hermetic faith, given the fact that it lacks of common values in relation to other religions. Besides, Islamophobia conceives Islam as inferior, a manipulative ideology which invites people to violence. This is the reason why Muslims are often described as uncivilized and irrational.

In December of 2004, The United Nations developed a seminar called "Entrenched Stereotypes, Widespread Habit of Xenophobia" in which Professor Nasr said that the Islam is seen as a religion in which followers are strongly attached to the tradition, in which they reject democracy and are profoundly sexist. Professor Nasr denounced that "disparaging remarks about Muslims are allowed to pass without censure, with the result that prejudice acquires a veneer of acceptability" (Nasr, 2004).

Currently, there is no consensus about the concept of Islamophobia and its opposite "Islamophilia," understood as the senseless admiration to Islam and Muslims. Mohammad Tamdggidi denounces that both "Islamophobia and Islamophilia are two

sides of the West's orientalist attitude towards Islam. Both signify and serve, based on false and manipulative premises, to eruct misrepresentative views of the reality of Islam" (Tamdigidi, 2012: 68).

The origin of Islamophobia is also being debated. According to Matt Bunzl, "Islamophobia is a current phenomenon aimed to safeguard the future of European civilization" (2005: 506). Indeed, Grosfoguel (2006) and Nasr (2004) agreed on the fact that even though Islamophobia is a new topic, it is a "phenomenon dated back centuries." Grosfoguel (2013) explained that Islamophobia is related to a "cultural racism," which is a result of colonial frameworks that legitimize the White-European supremacy over inferior cultures such as Jews, Arabs, or everyone who was described as "people from the wrong religion" (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006: 2).

In France, Islam is considered a polemic topic, considering that those who manifest for Muslim rights are hardly criticized because of their Islamophilia, meanwhile those who criticize Islam claim to be victims of censorship, accused of Islamophobia. French journalists like Ilya U. Topper (2015) and Alvin H. Rosenfeld claim that Islamophobia is nothing but a strategy to condemn criticism towards Islam. Rosenfeld explains that Islamophobia conveys an argument against those Muslims who look for legal reforms, those who denounce fundamentalism and demand their right of not following religious lines (2015: 9). In this sense, according to Rosenfeld, Islam has acquired "an exemption status" (2015: 18) a privilege that currently no other religion has. On the other hand, Michel Hollubecq (2015), a famous French scholar, has insisted on the fact that, in France, to talk about Islam exposes people to severe criticism because Islam is a topic which in fact is a "no discussion topic." Michele Tribalat (2011) adds up that "even the Islam is a minority religion, it has changed the lives of French people in a key issue for democracy: freedom of speech, because now a fear emerges from being accused of racist or Islamophobic."

Many specialists consider that the word Islamophobia is inappropriate due to the fact that it refers to acts induced by xenophobia and racism, or what some experts have called neo-racism or cultural racism (Grosfoguel, 2013). Meanwhile, others criticize the word "phobia," because it refers to an intense irrational fear towards situations or objects considered external. Therefore, some experts have pointed out that there are words such as religious intolerance or anti-Islamism, which are more convenient.

Steve Salaita (2006) avoids the concept of Islamophobia due to its lack of specificity, given that many times discrimination is explicitly directed towards Arabs. According to Salaita, there is an anti-Arab racism, which derives from an exaggerated association between Arabs and Islam despite the fact that the majority of Muslims are not ethnically Arabs because they live in Indonesia, Pakistan or India.

Fred Halliday (1999) in his article "Islamophobia Reconsidered" affirms that Islamophobia is an inconsistent word; because Islam hasn't been recognized yet as a menace and that is why the basic religious principles of Islam haven't been attacked. According to Halliday, what have been attacked though are immigrants who worship that religion. Thus, Halliday proposes the word "anti-Muslim," which respects the

diversity of Muslim practices and opens "the possibility of dialogue based on universal principles" (1999: 899).

Roland Imhoff and Julia Recker, proposed "Islamoprejudice" rather than Islamophobia, because "it is a suitable concept to make very specific predictions about political standard points on Islam-related issues, like the building of mosques" (2012: 822).

Esra Özyürek suggested that Islamophobia as term is "indicative of the exclusionary place envisioned for Muslims in the new Europe" (2005: 510). Besides, Özyürek adds that the terms are reductionist, because "homogenize and disguise the complexity of the conflict, discrimination, and violence that exits among the multiply configured minorities and majorities in Europe" (2005: 511).

Finally, some authors consider that the prejudice is directed towards both Islam (and its symbols) and Muslims. Fernando Bravo, analyzed the history of Islamophobia and explains that it is "a hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims based on an image that depicts Islam as the enemy" (2010: 206). Bravo adds that Islamophobia occurs in the context of the emancipation of Muslims and it tends to be associated with other phenomena according to the place. That is the reason why Islamophobia is sometimes expressed as religious intolerance, other times it is mixed with forms of racism and some others with xenophobic tendencies.

In a survey carried out in Paris in 2013, 74% of the people who was questioned perceived Islam as intolerant, contrary to the values of French society. Besides, the participants perceived that Muslims were intolerant and seek to impose their way of life upon a society that welcomes them. In this manner, despite the specificity that may rely on the phenomenon of Islamophobia in a given territory, so to speak France, there are common experiences regardless of the country. For this reason, veiled women, mosques, Arabic speakers, shops selling *halal* products, as well as beard men wearing turbans are commonly attacked because they are perceived as "Muslims."

2. HISTORICAL ROOTS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, about 476 A.D., Europe was deeply divided in terms of linguistics, politics and economy as a result of social crisis and frequent barbarian invasions. In this sense, since the conquer of the Iberian Peninsula and The Poitiers battle in 732, Islam was presented as a menace for Europe due to the rapid expansion of their military forces. In that context, according to Alain Gresh (2001), the legend that told that Islam sought expansion through war all over the world was rather popular. Thus, "Islam played a cohesion role at the interior of a thoroughly divided Christian Europe, impoverished by wars between kingdoms and their dynasties. The fear towards Islam favored with no doubt the existence of the Western Christianity as political, cultural and religious entity" (Geisser, 2012: 62).

In the European history there are some notions which regard Muslims as the "others," those who represent a menace to the "civilized and modern" world. Scholars

had a tendency to highlight the bad memories of the Muslim conflict; moreover, the abundant cultural, economic, but mostly any scientific exchange between East and West was deprecated. Grosfoguel (2013) describes this process as "epistemic racism" because it favors philosophic and scientific thinking over any other contribution by a region considered peripheral.

Some scholar texts about Crusades call Muslims "the Saracen" and criticize practices such as ablution, circumcision and Friday prayings. Christians from that period condemned the Saracen diet because they avoid pork and wine, rejecting their most visible religious symbols like the veil and the half moon. This vision of "the others" imposed over Muslims would continue during the Spanish Reconquest in 1492. After all, "the moors" occupied the Southern part of Spain, and were conceived as an evil force from which they had to be aware of and eventually clear away. Since then, Al-Andalus was a rejected heritage which depicted the darkest period of the Hispanic identity, which was the reason why Spain was excluded by a thoroughly Christian Europe (Perceval, 1997: 49).

In opposition, during the French Enlightenment, Islam assumed a second hand topic because the most important debates were centered on the emancipation of Jews and their peculiar criticism against the Church, which was considered a medieval burden. In this sense, according to Vincent Geisser (2012), the image that prevailed towards Muslims in France was rather exotic. Furthermore, many liberal scholars used to refer to Muslims in a non-biased manner, describing Muslims just as they would describe any other common ordinary people.

3. ISLAM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FRENCH COLONIAL PROJECT

In the age of prosperity of "The Sublime Porte," Turks represented a major geopolitical and military threat to Europeans, for that sake Islamophobia was linked to the Ottoman Empire expansion in Europe. However, between XXI and XX centuries, Islamophobia came out as result of the Empire crisis and the resistance of oppressed peoples against their colonizers. Thus, while European powers were occupying those regions that once were linked to the Ottoman Empire, Islam became an inspiration for resistance for those oppressed peoples and conveyed a major obstacle for colonial administrations. In this context, Modern France established the framework of the "Civilizing Mission" to justify their expansion on many territories in the North of Africa and Asia. France was driving the idea that they had a commitment with all primitive and inferior peoples which needed instruction and lack of experience on self-government. In this manner, those opinions which were to some extent progressive were replaced for monolithic perspectives towards Islam. These prejudgments described Muslims as non-civilized barbarians who needed French mentorship.

France began the Algerian occupation in 1830, for that reason they began a resettlement and a land confiscation process in favor of the colonists. Meanwhile the local population was resettled, France began a strategy of assimilation which consisted

allowing colonized populations to access the French education system, just as long as they renounced to any other identity. Meanwhile, France, at least in theory, offered citizenship to those peoples with equity of rights. Nevertheless, in practice, the French government considered Algerian "second hand" French citizens, and they kept on dispossessing them from their lands in order to grant tremendous opportunities for French settlers in Algeria. Thus, parallel to the French Empire expansion process, the original characteristics of conquered societies were reduced to a religious phenomenon, that is why Islam was considered the source of every Maghreb people behavior and the cause of their reluctance to the modernization schemes brought up by France.

According to Fernando Bravo (2010), French scholars were the first ones to develop studies in which Islam was interpreted as the antithesis of modernity. In this sense, authors like Joules-Hypolyte Percer, in his book *À la conquête du Tchad* (1891) described Muslims as a menace against Christians. At the same time, Ernest Renan, in his lecture "Islamic and Science" (1883: 7) pointed out that:

> *"Anyone with even the slightest education in matters of our time sees clearly the current inferiority of Muslim countries, the decadence of states governed by Islam, the intellectual sterility of races that derive their culture and education from that religion alone. All who have been to the Orient or to Africa are struck by what is the inevitable narrow-mindedness of a true believer, of what kind of iron ring around his head, making it absolutely closed to science, incapable of learning anything or of opening itself up to any new idea"*

French colonizers had a strong interest on Islamic studies. The purpose of this research was to institutionalized some religious beliefs and prohibit those which, by the means of the Pan-Islamism discourse, would promote independence uprisings over the Maghreb. Examples of this Islam-nationalism were the movements led by Abdelkader (1840-1846) and Muhammad al-Hayy Muqrani (1871), as well as the foundation of "Maghrebi Star" in 1926 in France, led by Messali al-Hajj. The resistance towards colonization and the Pan-Islamist discourse that convened to a *jihad* against French colonists reinforced the idea that Islam was a threat to French interests in that region. In that line, according to Silverstein (2008), the colonial France understood that Islam was the main obstacle to their assimilation project over local population. For this reason, the French administration classified Maghreb people according to their possibilities of assimilation. In this way, Muslim-Arabs were classified as "inassimilable" and Jews and Berbers were encouraged to learn French and attend to Mission Schools. Thus, those Maghreb individuals who aspired to attain a French citizenship were obliged to renounce to their personal, religious or tribal identity for the sake of the French culture, which was considered superior.

In colonial discourse, Islam served as the primary trope for explaining two opposed characteristics of a supposed Arab personality: on the one hand, its bellicose, hostile nature, attributable to a religious fanatism; and on the other its inveterate laziness, resulting from a reverent fatalism placed the in a permanent state war with the infidel, a duty of eternal war that cannot be suspended (*André Servier L' Islam et la psychologie du musulman* 1923, cited on Silverstein, 2008: 7).

The process of colonization developed by France over Algeria, the resettlement policy, and the paramount strategic importance of the region, provoked the Algerian Independence, one of the bloodiest and most terrible conflicts of the post-war period. Though the dissatisfaction with the colonial administration was evident, the French government sought to remain in Algeria because this territory was considered an extension of France. In this context, *Le Front de Liberation Nationale* emerged as a capable force attracting groups with diverse interests, from woman to communist and Islamists. In 1954, *Le Front de Liberation Nationale* began its fight against the French government in order to attain the independence of Algeria. France was reluctant to accept the loss of Algeria and in response the French Army set the OAS (*Organisation de l'Armee Secrete)* in Algeria. OAS was a military command which tried to refrain uprisings using torture against rebels and civilians as well. The conflict between France and Algeria finished with *los Accords d'Evian* (1962), which guaranteed a ceasefire and, eventually, the independence of Algeria was recognized. In this way, after the Algeria war of independence the "harkis" local forces which supported the colonial ruling received asylum in France starting the first wave of Maghreb immigration (Taras, 2012: 140).

4. A CONFLICT OF IDENTITY

Vincent Geisser(2012), Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) and Alain Gresh (2015) agreed on Islamophobia, in the French context, is clearly linked to a renewed form of racism. On this subject, Geisser affirms that it is necessary distinguish between the "old Islamophobia," related to the colonial past of France and the "new Islamophobia" featured by the mistrust towards Islam, immigrants and arabs (cited on Ramirez and Mijares, 2008: 125). Rachel Bloul (cited on Taras, 2012: 149) proposed that there is a process of ethnicisation of religion in France. When applied to Muslims it signifies that Islam is now treated as ethnic identity regardless of where they originated." In this regard, this ethniticisation process does not seem to be unique to France. Other scholars like Ronald Imhoff and Julia Recker pointed out that in Europe, there is a prejudice against Muslims in general but also to ethnic groups like Turks specifically (2012: 822).

However, Vincent Geisser (2012) explains that even the tensions among the French society are undeniable, it's not possible to speak about a "State Islamophobia." Alain Gresh (2015) on the other hand is convinced that "we can even qualify it: it is a state of racism, even if, of course, it is not declared as such."

To Vincent Geisser (2012), the duality racism-Islam has been built on the French imaginary as the experience of the Algerian civil war. The involvement of France in the Algerian Civil War (1991-2002) shocked the French citizens because of its amount of death and the brutality of war crimes. The Algerian Civil War confronted the Islamist *Front Islamique du Salut* with the government forces in a conflict that stroke with terror a vast Algerian population in France. In addition, many women who wore no veil were attacked and some of them ended up murdered in Algeria; These incidents reinforced the idea that Islam was the ultimate enemy of the rights and liberties of women. According

to Geisser (2012), the Algerian trauma had the same impact on the French society as September 11 attacks on the American sensibility. In this manner, the radical religious discourse was considered a severe warning.

This antecedent could induce anyone to think that, in effect, the French society has a historic tendency against Islam. However, there are also other processes to consider. During its administration in Algeria, France promoted an exception to the principle of *laïcité,* established in the State-Church separation law in 1905. This law conveys in its first article that the State guarantees freedom of cult, and in its second article claims that the government do not recognizes, or supports by the means of subsidies or payments, any given form of cult. In this sense, even when Algeria was considered one of its *departments d'outre-mer,* which means that it has to be ruled by the same laws in France, during the colonizing process it had an "excepcionalité" process that allowed people to continue practicing Islam (Silverstein, 2008: 8).

In accordance to this, among all European countries France has taken more radical measures in regards to the institutionalization of Islam through *Le Conseil Français du Culte Musulman.* According to the website Euro-Islam info (12.12.2015), the French government recognizes some Muslim religious celebrations and it is flexible with them in terms of taxation. Therefore, France has also been tolerant in the disposition of the principle of *laïcité* on the educational field, given that the State subsidies private religious schools and pay the salaries for courses about religion in laic schools.

Le Conseil Français du Culte Musulman in 2002 was created by the Interior Ministry, which had in mind organizing Muslim people throughout an official interlocutor to discuss religious issues for the whole community. However, from the beginning Islam´s institutionalization in France only depicted the efforts of a government creating a republican Islam. The French model is not only interventionist, but it has been proved to be inefficient, partly because of the lack of cohesion within the Muslim community.

Even though there are no official numbers about how many Muslims live in France, it is estimated that around 5 million live there. In the same manner, it is thought that about 60 percent have the French Nationality, and that is the reason why France has the biggest Muslim community in Europe (Taras, 2012: 140). The absence of Muslim integration is especially visible in the unemployment among young people. In this regard, there are major differences among the first, the second and the third generation of immigrants who live in France. Taras remarks that "the self-identification of Muslim residents in France changed over the time, too. The first generation of the 1960's and 1979's was largely secular oriented focus on improving its material well-being. The next generation was to become more civic minded and self-confident, many joined to the *Beur* movement. By contrast, the third generation was susceptible to the re-Islamisation" (2012: 148).

The third generation of Maghreb immigrants in France has a strong feeling of not belonging and an inner conflict of having no identity. According to Farhad Khosrokhavar, (cited by Vincent, 2015) "Young people feel hated by society, and thus

they respond hating back and throughout Islam, they believe they can turn that hate into a sacred and legitimate one. Within their radicalism, young Muslim people recover their dignity.

In this regard, according to Taras, in France there are young people with Maghreb roots, that "have been re-Islamicised by fundamentalist movements. Some have links with *Le Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) in Algeria. In this way, the threats against France by this Islamist group, as well as by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Heighten Maghrebi-Phobia" (2012: 150). On this subject, there are many events which increased the concern of French government about radical Islam, the rise of Salafi movements like Boko Haram and ISIL and the fact that former leader of the FIS like Abdelfatah Hamadache and Madani Merzag still been tolerated by Algerian government. These former leaders organized new salafist groups such as *Le front du la Sahwa Islamique* and *Le Front for the Reconciliation et la Salut*.

French authorities insist that the most important element for integration is "will," and consequently, those who live in marginality have chosen to do so, and that is mainly due to the stubborn nature of their religion. According to Geisser, "in the name of a supposed superiority and universality of the French republican model, the elites are strongly convinced that they have, in fact, the ultimate mission of emancipating Muslims and the moral duty of regenerating the country" (2012: 68). For that reason, France intends to create reformed Muslims, free of the religious tradition that according to their judgment is incompatible with the French identity for "being inferior." Thus, as Mathieu Rigouste (2015) affirmed, assimilation has become an indispensable condition for naturalization. In his article "Immigrant plus succès" published in 2005, Rigouste describes that the immigrant who is accepted in France is the one who reserves his "differences" to his private life and in return he can achieve a better life. Likewise, the ideal Muslim immigrant is one who does not demonstrate his religion, the one whose identity has been emancipated from the authority of his community in the public space and is in harmony with the principle of French individualism.

5. ISLAMOPHOBIA: A NEO-POPULIST STRATEGY

Politicians such as Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy and Jean-Pierre Chevenement made statements that favored the negative perception of Muslims saying that they were inclined to polygamy and idleness. Besides, he accused them of performing brutal practices like ablation and underground lamb sacrifices. Though it is possible that Islamophobic discourse is an exclusively of right-wing parties, in France many intellectuals like Alain Finkiel Krauf, Bernard Henry Levy and Michel Hollubecq have uttered negative speeches against the Muslim population.

Besides, in an unfortunate maneuver, French government established a new official interlocutor to discuss religious issues, *La Fondation pour l'Islam du France* in 2016, with Jean-Pierre Chevenement as leader. In 2016, this politician suggested that Muslim

"must adopt discretion in the visibility of their religion". Chevenement added that "rather than reclaiming *halal meals*, better declare being "vegan."

Grosfoguel (2013) has denounced that the old ideology which justified the inferiority of "the others" based on race arguments as politically incorrect. But discrimination of Muslims has become something "natural". In 2015, *The Atlantic Times* denounced that Islamophobia in European countries was a neo-populism, given that manifesting against Muslims was no taboo topic. Because "although anti-religious hate speech is illegal(…) Anti-Muslim hate speech is by contrast not explicitly prohibited in Europe even though it can be prosecuted as incitement to group hatred" (Taras, 2012: 125).

The acts or discourses against Muslims tend to increase in some contexts. That is why accusations against the visibility of Islam are an essential element to reinforce the government´s reliability in order to improve the public image of parties and politicians around the world. In this regard, many right-wing parties and politicians have an explicit anti-Muslim discourse, such as: the Republican Party in United States, the Freedom Party in Austria and the Alternative for Germany, among others. Less educated people and working class are among the main supporters of these parties which have an anti-immigrant, xenophobic, isolationist and populist position. However, other parties consider Muslims as an important factor to increase their credibility as well. "In the U.S., presidential campaign in 2008 underscored the ways in which Arabs and Muslims continue to be othered as suspect citizens, as was apparent in the removal of Muslim women in hijab from Barack Obama's campaign rally" (Esposito and Kalin, 2011: 122).

When Sarkozy ran his reelection in 2012, the French government took very strict measures against the Muslim community in France because of the attacks in Toulouse and Monteauban. El shenawi 2012 in this sense, there were official actions against "radical Islamism," which consists on increasing imams and Mosque control. This was a strategy that favored the image of Sarkozy, who appeared like a strong leader, capable of challenge any enemy of the French republic.

In this manner, the fights between Sarkozy and Marine Le Pen had abundant mentions against the Muslim community. Le Pen´s comments and criticism compared the Friday praying with the Nazi occupation, contributing to the prohibition of acts of worship in streets (El-Shenawi, 2012) and opening the debate to ban *halal* meets due to the risk that implied that French were consuming them without their agreement.

The *Positive Laïcité* of Sarkozy, is a contradiction of the same principle, given that *laïcité* was established to respond to the issue of Catholic Church in France and the Pope´s interventionism in the French government and education. On the other hand, the principle of *laïcité* was a way of preventing discrimination towards other religions in a context in which French thought was an exemplary role model for other European nations (Taras, 2012: 59). In this regard, Jean-Paul Willaime, expressed that is necessary having a "secularism more secular." In other words he affirms that "the dominant secularist ideology has too many dogmatic aspects; it has almost become a worldly religion" (cited on Kuru, 2008:9). This "combative secularism" (Ahmet Kuru) may

contribute to the segregation of immigrant communities living in France,that is the case of the Muslim women.

Belgium, Netherlands, Spain, some regions of Germany, France and recently Bulgaria banned burqa (a loose garment covering the entire body including eyes)in public spaces. In this regard, Muslim women who use hijab or headscarf have been a main target of Islamophobic attacks in the world because they convey a visible Islam, easy to identify and therefore they represent a vulnerable sector. *El Collective Contre l'Islamophobie* in France in 2004 denounced that 81% of Islamophobia cases were directed against women with veils. On the other hand, some authors (Jasmin Zine, Angeles Ramirez) have studied the representation of Islam as an agent of sexism and violence against women which have become the backbone of many Islamophobic discourses, and that is particularly true in the case of France.

In France, exclusion of Muslim women has been legalized by two laws: the law that prohibits the use of fancy religious symbols in schools issued in 2004, and the law that prohibits veils covering the face in public spaces like institutions, transport, courts and hospitals, which was approved in 2010. The prohibition of 2004 was proclaimed when some students attended school using their veils and refused to take it off. In response, the government organized an investigation comity led by Bernard Stasi in 2003, who informed that the use of veil, kippa and other religious symbols was an attack against the principle of *laïcité*. The government concluded that the veil itself was one of the main obstacles to attain equity among men and women. This prohibition was legitimated by the European Court of Human Rights and in this manner the ostracizing process against the French Muslims began. (Alain Gresh, 2015) Sarkozy argued that "such legislation would constitute a law of liberation, not a ban because it involved securing woman's freedom and dignity and it was not about freedom of religion" (Taras, 2012: 59).

The context in which the law of 2004 was approved reveals the reasons why China government made such a controversial determination official. Only one year after the US invaded Iraq, Europe was shocked once again by the Atocha attacks, where 191 people died. At the same time, Chechen rebels kidnapped many people in a school in Beslan; the death toll was 340 victims. On the other hand, France performed military operations in Ivory Coast in response to the bombing of a French mission called Bouake. The law against fancy religious symbols, although justified upon the defense of the *laïcité principle* and the public order, in fact represented the first maneuver against what was considered an "Islamist boom" in France.

There are several interpretations about the meaning of the veil symbol and the visibility of Islam in Europe. From a conservative perspective, the use of veil represents not only non-acceptance of the European way of life but a political statement and other Islamic tendencies. From a progressive point of view, veil is an identity affirmation. From a Purple washing approach, the veil depicts women submission and their denial as individuals; and that is the reason why the restriction of veils among Muslims is a definite step to attain equity. However, beyond these interpretations, the opposition of ideas around the use of veil has more to do with the conflict between individual choice and the State. In this sense, the government uses the body of women as instrumental

device in order to secure a homogenic, static national identity, which they consider superior.

Since the Charlie Hebdo and the November attacks in Paris, the European Council and many media have reported an increase of Islamophobic incidents. The Observatory against Islamophobia (2015) recorded 128 attacks between November and January. Considering that 128 attacks were recorded only in 2014, the raise of violence against Muslims is evident.

In the meantime, French politicians continue adapting themselves to the circumstances. In January of 2015, president Hollande spoke in The Arab World Institute saying that "Islam was compatible with democracy" (Alemagna, 2015). Nevertheless, since the November attacks, he has dramatically changed his mind speaking out against "radical Islam" (cited by Jhonson, 2016) In a declaration, Hollande explained that "the world leaders were coming to France not just because of the conference of climate, the world leaders were also coming to express their support to freedom, to the fight against extremism, that radical Islam, which is becoming dangerous." Between November and January, three Mosques were closed because of alleged radicalization and the French government brought out a project to remove the French nationality to those who were charged with crimes related with terrorism.

Back in the early 2016, once more Islamophobia and the arguments in favor of women rights took place in France. In the context of Nice and Saint-Etiebbe-du-Rouvray incidents, president Hollande acknowledged that France was dealing a battle against ISIL. In addition, there was an intensification of police raids due to the state of emergency; some coast cities banned the use of "burkini," (full body swimsuit). This polemic measure instantly raised a wave of protests and some NGOs like Human Rights Watch uttered their concern about the exclusion of Muslim women from recreational spaces. In response to those accusations, president Hollande declared that "Life in France supposes that everyone sticks to the roles and that there is neither provocation nor stigmatization."

Prime Minister Emmanuel Valls, recycled the premise used in order to prohibit hijab in previous administrations, he explained that "burkini was a political sign of religious proselytizing." At the same time, the other presidential aspirant, Nicolas Sarkozy (Chrisafis, 2016), added up that if he won the elections in 2017, he would ban burkini once more. Both statements are truly worrying because on the 26 of August the French State Council already sentenced that the prohibition of burkini was illegal.

The efforts of the French government against the visibility of Islam have focused on women as their ultimate target. According to Professor Angeles Ramirez and Aheda Zanneti (2016), the purpose of these measures is to "discipline all the people identified by the dominant discourse as different from the national community."

Frequently, the electoral French context is dominated by Islamophobic discourse and measures directed towards the regulation of Muslim clothing. In this sense, the most important topics of former electoral campaigns have been focusing on national security issues and terrorism, ignoring economic or social matters. In the last December

elections, National Front Candidates like Gerad Brazon, Enric Pinzelli, Françoise Helie y Chantal Clamer made Islamophobic statements and called to action using their twitter accounts. They never faced any legal charge for that. In spite the fact that National Front did not attain the same results in the two-round election on December 13, it is evident that the party has thoroughly increased its amount of sympathizers and the National Front posture is becoming more radical.

Many candidates are eligible for next 2017 elections. Meanwhile Hollande prepares his reelection, the current minister Emmanuel Valls, Emmanuel Macron, Sarkozy and Le Pen are also willing to contest for the presidency. As in other electoral processes, Islamophobic discourses are abundant; beginning with Sarkozy, who has proposed the creation of arrest centers for radical Islamic suspects. Emmanuel Macron, former Minister of Economy, has a conciliatory program which promotes the "En Marche" movement. Macron has conveyed that measures against Islam only contribute to the isolation of the Muslim community and that the principle of *laïcité* does not represent a confrontation with Islam.

CONCLUSION

In February of 2011 Sarkozy claimed that: "If you come to France, you have to melt in a single community, which is the national community. If you don´t accept this, you cannot be welcomed in France." This sentence explains itself: from a conservative perspective, the principle of laïcité may be interpreted as a claim of assimilation and it is clearly against the visibility of Islam around public spaces.

This "claim of assimilation" comes from an implicit assumption that regards French society as homogenic and thus, any religious worship or ethnic group should pretend to be French in order to successfully adapt themselves to the Republic. In this sense, in general, the issues around Muslim integration are perceived in terms their religious worship. However, following Grosfoguel (2004) the great failure of the French integration models are related to racial discrimination, given that they part from their cultural superiority and their European values.

In the French society, the traditional vision of Islam still prevails. In this vision, the Muslim is identified with "the other," an irrational barbarian. For this reason, even though the conviction of many politicians is openly racist and Islamophobic, their statements have no legal consequence and they are not facing any sort of censorship. In fact, the debate about a real integration process in France has been deviated by means of a neo-populist rhetoric which focuses on trifling topics like the use of niqab (Islamic face covering), burkini and the consumption of *halal* meals.

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