

## **CULTURAL CONFLICTS: NORTH AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN FRANCE**

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Napoleon, before launching his attack on Egypt, addressed his troops in these words: "Soldiers you are engaged in a conquest whose consequences will be incalculable."<sup>1</sup> The ensuing events proved beyond all doubt how true his assessment of the historical significance of that invasion was. Napoleon's brief occupation of Syria and Egypt in 1799 inspired Western interests in the region and in a way paved the way for further French incursions into North Africa. In 1830 French troops landed in Algeria.

Since the early days of its conquest, the French showed keen interest in the area's history, language, literature and culture.<sup>2</sup> That historical interest of France (and Europe) in North Africa, still strongly alive today, will help in analyzing the root and cause of present cultural conflicts in many European countries between the North African immigrants and the local population. The rich heritage of European fine arts, which was clearly influenced by the Maghreb (Arnason, 1988), indicates the reaction of the West when it came into direct contact with the North African region. The French introduced their language and social mores and implemented a systematic policy of cultural integration of the local people with France. This process has been the theme of a painting, "Conquest and Civilization," showing the French passing out to the local Arabs the traditions of Western Civilization.<sup>3</sup> The idea of French community and French Union and measures such as the declaration of all Algerians as French in 1864 developed an elite class of Algerians who lived side by side with the French and nationals of other European countries, in the newly constructed quarters in Algiers, Oran, Tangier, Rabat, Casablanca and scores of other cities of the region. The extent of the French cultural impact can be gauged and assessed by taking into account that at some time almost two thirds of the total population of Algiers was European, predominantly French. Similarly, other coastal cities in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco had acquired a French look. This blend of the old and the new, the East and the West, the romantic view of these cities, inspired many poets and artists. One whole century of cross-cultural communication and interaction between people living on both side of the Mediterranean have provided ideal setting for literary masterpieces like *La Peste* of Albert Camus, the French Nobel laureate who was born and brought up in Algeria.

World War I heralded an era of change in the direction of migration between Europe and North Africa. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia sent soldiers to fight alongside the French. Algeria sent 173,000 men, whose bravery and gallantry may be assessed by the fact that 25,000 lost their lives. Tunisia contributed 56,000 soldiers, 12,000 of whom never returned home. Moroccan troops participated in the defense of Paris. Not only did the Maghreb help France with troops but is also provided relief and manpower to replace the French workers who were serving in the

army. About 119,000 Algerian youth went to France to take up jobs in factories in 1919. Similarly, Moroccan workers arrived in Bourdeaux as early as 1916 (Laroui, 1970). In the early decades of the twentieth century, these North African settlers initiated the process of cultural interaction on the French mainland. How much of a change the general complexion and ethnic composition of French cities have undergone can be best judged by looking at Paris. According to the 1980s statistics, about 25% of the total population of inner Paris, and 14% of the metropolitan area, were foreigners, the majority of whom came from Algeria (Colliers Encyclopedia, 1987).

Today there are about three million Muslims living in France, most of them coming from the Maghreb. There are 1,500 regular mosques and informal worship places where congregation prayers are organized. Muslims have become the second largest religious community, after the Roman Catholics. The North African Muslims had been living a peaceful life, completely in harmony with the local French population for quite some time. However, they could not remain immune to political and social developments in and outside France, especially in the Muslim world. The growing religious awareness, the quest to retain their identity, socioeconomic disparities, French government policy regarding the Muslim world, waves of subversive activities, and last but not least, the Gulf War and its aftermath— all these diverse and multivariant factors, joined by the rise of neo-Nazism in Germany, have posed serious challenges to the peace and stability of the Mediterranean region. French cities, especially ports where there is a sizeable immigrant population, are gradually turning into crisis areas in the contemporary European scene, challenging the peace and harmony of the region, as the latest incidents of violence in Nice and other cities in Southern France indicate. Appropriate policies of dialogue and confidence building should be implemented before the situation gets worse.

The first incident that sent ripples across French national life occurred on 22 October 1989, when thousands of Muslims staged a demonstration in Paris in support of the Muslim girls who were expelled from their school, Gabriel-Havez Secondary School in Criel, for wearing the head scarf. French Education Minister Francois Bayrou had introduced a regulation banning the wearing of "ostentatious religious insignia" in French schools. The demonstrators protested against the decision of the French Ministry of Education. The incident stirred reaction in other cities in France and neighboring European countries. In the last seven years the issue has become a topic of national debate. Madam Mitterrand, the First Lady of France, expressed her strong disapproval of the Ministry's action saying "If today, after two hundred years of the revolution the secular schools cannot welcome all religions in France, that means there has been a set back" (*Frontier Post*, 8 December 1989, Peshawar). On the other hand, Interior Minister Charles Pasqua, speaking in the Parliament in November 1993, commented: "We must also be very vigilant and ensure that the wearing of the Islamic head scarf is not used in a deliberate and organized way to challenge the principles of secularism that govern our schools" (*The News*, 24 November 1993, Karachi). Interestingly, the policy of banning "ostentatious religious insignia" in schools was shared by the Egyptian Education Ministry, which prohibited wearing of the *hijab* in schools.

The head scarf controversy ignited many violent demonstrations, hunger strikes and law suits. In France, the matter appears to be settled, as on 2 May 1996 an Appeals Court in Nancy

ordered the French State to pay \$2,000 compensation to a Muslim girl, Ms. Salwa, who was banned from school for wearing a head scarf. The same tribunal also upheld the appeal of six Arab girls from Colmar, who were banned from attending their classes for the same offense (*Dawn*, 3 May 1996, Karachi). Surprisingly, the Nancy judgement coincided with the ruling of Egypt's Higher Constitutional Court upholding the Education Ministry's decision banning the head scarf from local schools (*The News*, 20 May 1996, Karachi).

Sometime back, Interior Minister Pasqua had said that the French Government would fight the Islamic activists in its schools and would not tolerate attempts to obstruct the integration of Muslim immigrants into French life. However, in the light of the Nancy court decision, the matter seems to be resolved. Obviously the initial harsh punishment, fueled by provocative statements, precipitated a sharp reaction in France and abroad. The Muslim Parliament of United Kingdom, an NGO, has issued a white paper on education, demanding separate schools for the children of the Muslim immigrants. The French Muslims also took up the matter and tried to promote the idea of government-funded Quranic schools with a religious syllabus. The demand was termed as unacceptable by the French Government. The issue is not resolved, however, as due to the gradual increase of the North American population in France and opening of new mosques and Islamic centers throughout the country, an elaborate chain of Islamic schools is developing on a non-governmental basis. Muslim activists claim that since the French government is providing funds for the private Catholic Mission schools, their demand for financial assistance from the state for Islamic schools is justified. According to the available statistics, about 15% of the French children attend private schools, most of which are controlled by the Roman Catholic Church (*Europa Year Book*, 1987, p. 1045).

The French Muslim population is facing strong opposition to the observance of certain of their religious traditions and rituals. Muslim cemeteries are under pressure to open their doors to the dead of other religious groups as well. In some incidents, Muslim cemeteries have been desecrated (*Dawn*, 24 November 1991, Karachi). The Islamic practice of sacrifice that involves animals has come under fire. For example, Brigitte Bardot issued a strong statement in 1993, saying "I am revolted and outraged by this barbaric custom from the Dark Ages" (*The News*, 1 July 1993, Karachi). Now it has become an annual tradition for Ms. Bardot to criticize the tradition of Abraham on the eve of *Eid al-Adha*, the Festival of the Sacrifice, every year. This year she has threatened to leave the country because France has too many Muslim immigrants (*The News*, 27 April 1996, Karachi).

In addition to these socio-religious issues, the Muslim immigrants in France are facing financial hardships, unemployment and economic disparities. The majority of these immigrants are unskilled workers who are engaged in the lowest paid menial jobs. In a way, they are directly responsible for their own plight and dilemma. A growing number of North African immigrants are willing to work for lower wages in comparison with local French laborers. Consequently, labor riots have become rampant in the industrial towns, especially in the port cities on the Mediterranean. According to Reuter's news published in the international press on July 19, 1994, youths set fire to 17 cars in Nice to avenge the death of an Arab colleague, killed in ethnic violence. It was the second outbreak of ethnic clashes in one weekend, following a shootout in the northwestern town of Dreux, in which a man was killed and eight others were

wounded. Racism and ethnic violence is on the increase threatening the stability and integrity of French society. It is a matter of great concern that almost 50% of the immigrants are unemployed. Living in an affluent society, they have become more depressed and disillusioned with their standard of life, and have become vulnerable to antisocial tendencies and psychological complexes that could ultimately lead to far reaching consequences.

In the wake of these conflicts, the influx of North African refugees and illegal immigrants has contributed toward worsening the situation. In July 1986, the Chirac government adopted a resolution from the right wing coalition's proposal to frame tougher laws for immigration (*Europa Year Book*, 1987, p. 1041). It authorized the local administration to expel illegal immigrants, it reserved the right of granting automatic citizenship to the children of foreign parents, and it gave more power to the frontier police to refuse entry. In 1986, 1700 illegal immigrants were expelled from the country. However, these stringent measures couldn't effectively contain the problem. After the Gulf War the employment opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa decreased considerably. EC Commissioner for North-South Relations, Mr. Abel Matutes, proposed that member countries give more economic aid and encourage private investment in the southern Mediterranean, so that the young Tunisians and Algerians could stay home. He had warned that if the EC doesn't help to revive the economies of North African countries, "it could find itself playing reluctant host to thousands of unemployed North Africans." He observed that if appropriate measures are not taken, then these people will be driven into the grip of extreme political movements. The depression and the bewilderment that these immigrants share in almost all the port cities can be assessed by looking at the numerous news articles in the daily press about the constant increase in crime (Sage, 1995). A *National Geographic* correspondent was manhandled and virtually abused in a slum in Milan by North African refugees who took him to be an immigration officer (McCarry, 1992).

In addition to these socioeconomic factors, France's foreign policy, especially its relation with the North African States, is heightening the tension. The Islamic Salvation Front of Algeria (FIS) is accusing France of supporting the military-led regime in Algiers. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) has carried out a number of attacks on French nationals and its installations in Algeria. The gravity of the problem can be gauged by simply taking into account the statistics published in the international press. According to *TIME* (6 March 1995, p. 21), the guerrilla activities in Algeria have cost some 30,000 lives, 600 schools have been burnt down and more than 80% of the foreign nationals (about 75,000) have left Algeria in 1994-95. In the latest incident of violence, seven French monks were kidnapped and killed by the GIA on May 24, 1996, according to a CNN Bulletin. Unfortunately, the wave of terrorism has hit Paris. The bomb explosions of 25 July and October 1995 in Paris took a heavy toll of human lives and property (*TIME*, 28 August 1995, p. 29 and 30 October 1995, p. 32). The psychological impact of these activities has been far reaching. The French government responded by banning five Islamic periodicals and withdrawing financial assistance to the Paris Mosque (*The Nation*, 19 February 1996, Lahore). These steps were followed by operations against suspect Muslim activists. Dalil Boubakeur, the Imam of the Paris Mosque has expressed concern over the recent developments. In an interview with *Le Monde* he said "What we fear is that France comes to see every Muslim as a potential terrorist." Following the threat of the Muslim activists to carry



out more attacks on French interests, Dalil, in an interview with LCI Television, urged them to withdraw their threat: "I feel the Algerian attacks could trigger reaction and counter reaction, triggering for instance a kind of witch hunt. I am appealing to reason, vigilance and common sense."

A country that has always upheld the values of freedom and human dignity, a true champion of peace and understanding, is now faced with ethnic violence and religious intolerance. Historically, France has provided refuge and protection to radical leaders who have staged revolutions in the East and the West. Jamal al-Din Afghani, the pioneer leader of the Pan-Islamic Movement, lived in Paris during the nineteenth century and published from there his famous Islamic journal, *Al-Urwath a-Wusqa*. Lenin stayed in Paris from 1908 to 1911, and founded a school for the revolutionaries near Paris. Earlier, the Father of Communism, Karl Marx, enjoyed the liberal French hospitality, publishing the renown *Paris Manuscript*, in which he espoused communism. Ho Chi Minh took full advantage of French freedom of expression and civil liberties as he resided in Paris and presented the case in Versailles negotiations of 1919. Imam Khomeini led the Iranian revolution of 1979 from Paris. The leader of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, worked in Paris as the correspondent of *New Free Press* in 1991. The city of Nice played host to the family of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the ex-Prime Minister of Pakistan hanged in 1979. Historically, France has been quite impartial in extending its hospitality to all radical groups and personalities. The complexities and crosscurrents of the current wave of ethnic, religious and cultural hostilities, not only in the Mediterranean but in many regions, make that impartiality more difficult to apply today.

Nevertheless, the Muslims who have acquired French nationality are now bonafide French subjects and are entitled to equal rights and privileges. Instead, the Harakis, those Algerians who supported and fought for France against their own countrymen during the Algerian war of independence, are now being targeted as Muslim activists. These Harakis, after the fall of French colonial power in Algeria, fled to France where they were given citizenship. Now their numbers have risen to about 450,000, the majority of whom have been born and brought up in France. But they are now being pressured by radical French nationalist movements to return to Algeria. The Harakis today are disenchanted and disillusioned by the hopeless situation they face. Almost 80% of these people are unemployed, a fact that has made them quite vulnerable to crime and subversive activities (*Star*, 14 September 1991, Karachi).

Unfortunately, despite having such a close historical relationship, the Muslim community in France too has fallen a victim to the fear of Islamic fundamentalism that is haunting the West. Regretfully, Islamic "activists" and "terrorists" are looked upon today as the same. The acts of a small group should not reflect upon the character of a nation. There has been a considerable number of terrorist operations carried out by several underground organizations in Italy, Spain, Germany, Japan and the United States. Many European and Latin American cities have witnessed extremely brutal incidents of violence committed by their own people but they were not declared terrorist states or nations. The irony of the situation seems to be more striking when we see PLO Chairman, Yaser Arafat, shaking hands in the US with the Israeli Premier as a legitimate leader of the Palestinian people and a respected freedom fighter, whereas in the recent past he was denied entry into the US on the grounds of being a terrorist and supporting terrorism

all over the world. There is a pressing need for more thoughtful analyses of the character and strategies of the many social action groups at work on the world scene today. Certainly "muslim" must not be equated with terrorism.

The latest developments in France must be analyzed in the global historical perspective. Besides this general attitude of the West toward Islam, the swift changes in the demographic statistics of the Mediterranean region is also causing alarm in France and other countries of the northern Mediterranean, such as Italy, Greece and Spain. According to the UN Mediterranean Blue Plan, published in Athens in 1987, in 1950 two-thirds of the Mediterranean population were Europeans, belonging to the countries stretching from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Bosphorus. But it is projected that by the year 2025, the population will be exactly reversed. Ten years from now, the Mediterranean will be an Islamic, if not an Arab, sea. The swift rise in the Muslim population has raised alarm among the European countries of the region, a concern that EC members have expressed repeatedly in their meetings. Robert Fox, in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* (London), "The human time-bomb in the Mediterranean," has gone as far as making a forecast of armed confrontation in the region within 20 years due to the shift in the population balance (Aziz, 1988).

To defuse the tension and start the process of confidence building the author suggests the following measures:

1. French government officials should apply restraint in issuing provocative statements and desist from levelling general charges against the Muslim community. Only those culprits should be condemned who are involved in subversive and terrorist activities. The whole Muslim community in France, more than three million people, cannot be held responsible for the acts of terrorism committed by a small group of people. In 1994, ministers like Pasqua and Alden Juppe were waging a war of words against their own Muslim citizens. However, after the last elections the controversy seems to have cooled off and the situation has definitely improved.
2. A code of conduct for the press, at least in France, should be implemented, so that the conventional and electronic media could play a positive role and contribute towards bringing the two communities, the North African Muslim (which includes French nationals) and the native French nationals, together. The international press is publishing news items and stories that present a very grim picture of the North African immigrants. When the prestigious weekly, *TIME*, published a report from Roubaix, France, that a 19 year old girl died in the hands of Islamic Exorcists, the incident has been termed as a "serious blow to Islam and the Muslim community in France and a setback to the process of integration of the Muslims into French society." Such incidents, unfortunately, occur in almost all parts of the world. When Hollywood actress Sharon Tate and her friends were brutally murdered by a satanic cult in the US, nobody framed the account in those terms. How delicate and fragile is the process of social integration that it may be reversed either by a few girls wearing a head scarf or by the crime of an exorcist?

3. Appropriate measures should be taken to improve the living standard of the poverty stricken Muslim population. More job opportunities should be created and technical training should be provided to the unskilled immigrant workers so that they may also qualify for higher paid jobs.

4. Regular meetings should be convened between the leaders of the North African and Muslim French community and the rest of the local French population. Cultural societies can play a very important role. NGOs may be encouraged to work in this direction. The experience of Christian-Muslim Dialogue or the Euro-Arab Talks can prove helpful. In such meetings arranged in localities of mixed ethnic groups, themes and topics regarding history, culture and literature of France and the Maghreb may be discussed through lectures, panel discussions, exhibitions and film.<sup>4</sup>

5. More time should be allowed for programs on the Maghreb on the French Television Network. In many countries in the West, special TV programs are broadcast regularly for minority populations. BBC, VOA and the Canadian Television are doing a marvelous job in integrating immigrant populations into their respective social fabrics through these transmissions. In view of the higher ratio of immigrant population in France, a separate TV channel might be started. The problem can only be solved through strengthening human relations that will ultimately endure and prevail over the political differences.

6. School curriculum should be revised and lessons about Islam, and the history, languages, and literature of the Maghreb should be included in school text books. This will help the younger generation to know and understand better its neighbors living just on the other side of the Mediterranean. Revision of the school curriculum does not mean that the recommendations of the Islamic activists are necessarily incorporated. As the issue has been raised by the French Muslims, it deserves a thoughtful response.

7. It is not the sole responsibility of the French government to defuse the tension and normalize the situation. The Muslim community should cooperate and initiate actions that could improve present conditions. Bringing home political disputes from across the Mediterranean is not at all in the interest of the Muslim citizens, especially for those who hail from North Africa. The Muslim community in France should honor and respect the Constitution and laws of the country that in no way interfere in their religious matters. They should not be disappointed by irresponsible statements of a few government officials or public figures. If they feel that their civil liberties and human rights have been violated, they should approach local courts for justice. The recent decision of the Appeals Tribunal at Nancy in favor of the head scarf has proved the viability of the French legal system. An appropriate course of action should be adopted instead of resorting to a head-on collision with state authorities.

Things are improving steadily since the new government has taken over after the recent French elections. The French move to include the Algerian issue on the agenda of the G7 Conference has had interesting consequences. By transforming the Algerian situation into an international issue, France may set an example to its Muslim subjects to approach relevant international institutes and organizations to redress grievances. The European Court of Human Rights has an important role to play in setting standards not only for France but for all European countries.

### Notes

1. See Hermassi (1987). Also quoted in my paper "Socio-Cultural Interaction between France and North Africa during the Twentieth Century, *Journal of European Studies*, Area Study Centre for Europe, University of Karachi, July 1991, p. 4. Some aspects of relations between France and the Muslim World, especially North Africa, have been discussed in my earlier paper, "Impact of the French Revolution on the Muslim World," *Journal of European Studies*, Area Study Centre for Europe, University of Karachi, January 1990, pp. 43-50.

2. France's passion for the Orient is exemplified in Delacroix's paintings, including the famous "Women of Algiers," "The Jewish Wedding," and "The Lion Hunt." Similarly, Rossini also could not resist the charismatic appeal of Algiers as he composed his famous opera, *Italian Girl in Algiers*.

3. See Lewis (1980). "Conquest and Civilization" is actually a lithograph from Berbugget's *Algerie Historique*, published in Paris in 1843.

4. Such meetings would provide an opportunity for the general French public to understand that the head scarf is a mode of covering women's hair from the Arab World, and not a weapon to be afraid of. In different parts of the world, Muslim women cover their hair in various fashions. For instance, the head scarf in Pakistan is totally different from that of the Maghreb. The idea should be promoted that following religious instructions by no means conveys the sense of hostility and terrorism.

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