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UNREST IN FRANCE, NOVEMBER 2005: IMMIGRATION, ISLAM AND THE CHALLENGE OF INTEGRATION

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1. Background: Muslims in France

- The events of 2005 must be put into context and some enduring myths about social unrest in France dispelled.
- There are approximately 5 million people of Muslim background in France. Estimates of 6 million and more are not reliable. According to the 1999 census and a survey of family history that accompanied it (based on a sample of 380 000 persons), "potential Muslims" were 3.7 million that year.¹ Most French Muslims trace their lineage back to Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, and to a lesser extent, Turkey. Among "potential Muslims," that is French citizens of African or Turkish origin with at least one parent or grandparent born in Africa or Turkey, 66% identify themselves as Muslims and 20% as having no religion at all.²
- Among "potential Muslims" in France, attendance at mosques is not very high. This is particularly noticeable when the figure is compared with church attendance (around 10% attend each week). But religious observance (abstaining from alcohol, fasting during Ramadan and praying) is higher among self-declared Muslims than among self-declared Catholics.
- Although French Muslims of African or Turkish origin are typically younger than the rest of the French population, fertility rates among immigrant women tend to conform with the French norm after their arrival. The gap in fertility rates between

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¹ Michèle Tribalat, "Une estimation des populations d'origine étrangère en France en 1999," *Populations*, no.1 (2004), and "Le nombre de musulmans en France: qu'en sait-on?", *Cités*, (special issue), 2004.

² See Sylvain Brouard and Vincent Tiberj, *Français comme les autres? Enquête sur les citoyens d'origine maghrébine, africaine et turque*, (Paris: Presses de Sciences-Po, 2005).

immigrant women and French women is 0.46. While Europe on the whole is experiencing declining birth rates, there are two demographic exceptions: France and Ireland. In France, the fertility rate is 1.94 children born per woman (2005.) (In comparison, the U.S. fertility rate is 2.08 children born per woman.) Without immigrant women, this figure would drop by 0.05 children born per woman. In other words, one can hardly speak of a "demographic time bomb," "colonization in reverse," or the "Islamicization of France."

- Roughly half of the 5 million Muslims living in France today are not citizens. Many are under 18 years of age or recent immigrants, the latter of which tend not to register to vote. As a result, Muslims are not a political force in France. Even if one assumes that somewhere between 1.2 and 1.5 million Muslims living in France are eligible to vote, they do not constitute a voting bloc as the French electoral system in general is not predisposed to such blocs. Merely speaking of a "Muslim community in France" can be misleading and inaccurate: like every immigrant population, Muslims in France exhibit strong cleavages based on the country of their origin, their social background, political orientation and ideology, and the branch or sect of Islam that they practice (when they do). With the exception of the French Council for the Muslim Religion (CFCM), an institution created by the State for purely religious purposes, there exists no common association or central representation for French Muslims.
- Integration challenges as well as failures and successes must be put in historical perspective: The majority of France's Muslims today arrived during the 1960s-1980s from North Africa. Integration, however, takes time. Some of the biggest challenges have typically occurred after the first generation. Contrary to its European neighbors, France has been a destination for immigrants since the mid-19th century and has a long history of absorbing immigrants. Integration has always occurred gradually, however. (This was true for Italians, Poles, Spaniards, and especially the Portuguese.) This historical pattern however does not imply that everything will be rosy by 2015 or 2020, but it does suggest that there is a normal evolution towards greater achievements in the second and third generation of immigrants.
- Conclusions:
 - (1) The majority of self-declared Muslims in France practice "family Islam", close to the one practiced in Morocco, for example. A more radical and extremist brand of Islam does however exist—and is closely monitored by the State (e.g. the expulsion of radical imams and the headscarf ban).
 - (2) In spite of obstacles and spectacular failures like the riots in November, integration is happening as part of a background evolution. Most examples of success go unreported in the media. There is no standard sociological definition of integration; though it is often measured with a set of indicators, these too can vary. Two such indicators are:

a) Exogamy rates (i.e. marriage between persons of African or Turkish origin with persons not of African or Turkish origin, or between self-declared Muslims and those who are not self-declared Muslims) are high, ranging from 20% to 50% depending on the generation (i.e. immigrants, 1st generation born in France, 2nd generation born in France), country of origin (e.g. higher rates among Algerians than among Moroccans) and gender (e.g. higher rates for males).

b) Declared optimism. This may seem somewhat strange after the striking images of the unrest but poll after poll shows that self-declared Muslims have a higher confidence in France, its institutions and their own future than the rest of the French population. Far from rejecting the French way, they proclaim loudly their desire to be better integrated while also complaining about the discrimination they endure. A 2005 State Department survey concluded: "*French Muslims have a favorable overall opinion of France (95%), and two-thirds express confidence in the national and local government.*"³

2. So what did the unrest reveal? What was its significance?

- Social unrest, which sometimes bordered on rioting, was spectacular and indeed costly—causing one fatality (although relationship with unrest is not clearly established; the events were triggered by the accidental death of two boys who were chased by the police or thought they were), more than 200 million euros in damage, and some 10 000 cars destroyed.
- Certainly, many perpetrators of the violence—as well as many of their victims—were of Muslim background. New immigrants tend to concentrate in poor areas and it was there that much of the nightly unrest unfolded. (It should be noted, however, that many perpetrators were not Muslim.) But that's it for the religious factor. The unrest was not about religion. It was not even really about politics; it was about the social and living conditions of the young and of course, about discrimination. As we put it elsewhere, it was “About Marx, not Bin Laden”.
- The absence of the religious factor was made apparent by the total powerlessness of Muslim organizations (whether fundamentalist ones like the Tabligh or more mainstream ones like UOIF, which issued a *fatwa* on the subject on November 6,) to reestablish calm. While pockets of radical Islam do exist in some of the same areas where the riots unfolded, its adherents were not the ones who were burning

³ Office of Research (State Department), "French Muslims Favor Integration into French Society - Two-Thirds Report Racist Experiences" (May 2005); See also polls in Claude Dargent, "Les musulmans déclarés en France: affirmation religieuse, subordination sociale et progressisme politique", *Cahier du CEVIPOF*, no. 34 (February 2003); Brouard and Tiberj, *Français comme les autres?*, 2005.

cars. (Radical Islamists are more interested in fighting Americans in Fallujah than in battling the French police in Clichy-sous-Bois.)

- The young individuals who rampaged through the Parisian suburbs did not have a religious agenda. Churches and synagogues were not deliberate targets; or at least no more than schools and other public buildings. Nor did the youth appear to have a political agenda. Nothing was said about Palestine or Iraq and no one was seen wearing the *keffieh*. And there was no central organization behind the unrest.
- The bulk of the Muslim population in France, not just the Arab “bourgeoisie” (called *beurgeoisie*), did not participate in the unrest. In fact, many disapproved of it. Even at public universities, where many young Arabs or Muslims study in less than optimal conditions and which are typically centers for political action, things were quiet. Nothing took place on these campuses because Arab and Muslim students believed it was not their fight.
- So if it wasn’t about Islam, what was it about? A comparative study of urban riots in the West since the 1960s—from Los Angeles to La Courneuve, Brighton to Birmingham, and elsewhere—suggests a common phenomenon of “double exclusion” based on both ethnic and economic factors is to blame. In particular, there appear to have been 6 key factors that contributed to the riots:

i.) **Discrimination:** From housing to entry into nightclubs (a grievance often voiced by many of the youth who participated in the riots,) discrimination is common in France. Unemployment rates run as high as 40% in some of the affected neighborhoods. High unemployment is of course not just a result of discrimination: the French job market in general is bad. But the situation is worse for young people of African or Turkish ancestry.

ii.) **Police violence and racial profiling:** Social unrest in the housing projects over the last 15 years always begins with the death of a youth in an encounter with the police. The youth of African origin resent being profiled by the police and asked to present their identification wherever they go. The result is an often tense situation between the youth and the police in the housing projects.

iii.) **Territory and ghetto phenomenon:** The poorest as well as the more recent immigrants tend to concentrate in the bleak housing projects located on the outskirts of French cities. Those who do well and are able to do so, move, leaving the “social losers” behind. These areas exhibit higher than normal concentrations of social ills (such as unemployment, poverty, drug trafficking and crime,) which in turn creates a ghetto culture based on machismo and honor and lays particular importance on defending one’s territory. Caught in this trap, youth don’t venture out. During the unrest, they set fires in their own locales, never in the city centers. (The caption

“Paris is burning” was absurd; no cars were set on fire in the city, with two small exceptions.) Typically, however, the immigrant youth protect their home territory from strangers and intruders.

iv.) **The “Game Boy effect” and copycat violence:** Idleness and boredom were also a factor, as was the group effect (although by no means comparable to the “gangs” that roamed the streets during the Los Angeles riots). The media also played a part, with its never-ending reporting. For some, this made it seem like a contest: how many cars can we burn tonight? Others had a great time playing hide-and-seek with the police. (Many of those arrested were very young, often only 12 or 13 years old.)

v.) **Delinquency:** The more dangerous characters emerged during the second half of the unrest, during the nights of November 8-15. These were delinquents already known to the police. However, they did not constitute the majority as the initial agitation was spontaneous and expressed genuine discontent and a sense of having had enough.

vi.) **Bad policy:** Decisions made after 2002 may actually have made the situation worse. Subsidies to local associations and social workers were cut, weakening the social fabric. Neighborhood policing (*police de proximité*) put in place in the late 1990s—although certainly not a panacea—had helped in the past by somewhat softening the relationship between the people in the housing project and the police. But the cancellation of this program in 2002 meant that for many their only encounter with police came during identification checks. Not surprisingly, these encounters did little to foster confidence building or understanding between the two parties.

3. Conclusion

- **New Measures announced by the government:** Subsidies to local associations have been reinstated and the fight against discrimination has been intensified. The HALDE agency (*Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations et pour l'Égalité*) has been given more “teeth” and Chirac is requesting more integration of youths from disaffected areas in the country’s universities. Changes are also underway on the economic front, with new free zones in the poor neighborhoods and more flexible employment contracts. There is also a significant effort underway to renovate housing projects. But all of this will take time and it is too early to tell what the impact will be.
- **Role of Religion:** Although Islam, and radical Islam in particular, was not one of the ingredients in the unrest, it could enter the picture at a later stage. The potential for this seems most likely among the prison population. Radical Islam is known to sprout up in prisons and there are a number of terrorists, including Jose Padilla, Richard Reid and Khaled Kelkal, who got their start in prison.

- **What the future holds:** The biggest unknown—apart from issues of unemployment which is a crucial part of the equation—is how the conflict between a possible white backlash (support for extreme right-wing parties has gone up) and increased awareness of the problem of discrimination in French society will be resolved. Much more so than in the past, the media is focusing on these issues as are members of civil society and the business community and many new initiatives are getting off the ground. But when it comes to the future of integration in France, the real question is which trend will prove stronger.