

Charlie and Islam: A History of Insiders and Outsiders

Jocelyne Dakhlia

Translated from the French by Veronica Dean

THE JIHADIST VIOLENCE THAT TOOK PLACE in Paris in January 2015 was followed by a somewhat-unexpected wave of intense emotional responses around the world.¹ How does one begin to understand the ways in which the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks focused the attention and emotion of the world? And at a time when the question of jihad imposes itself as a global issue, concerning first and foremost Islamic societies themselves (a violent attack was committed in Yemen on the same day as the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks), how does one begin to evaluate the situation confronting France? In spite of everything, France is at once a symbol as well as a somewhat specific case. Just as the Danish cartoon affair in its time suddenly drew attention to the relationship that this small country might have to Islam and to its Muslim community, today the world looks on with a much more pronounced intensity, scrutinizing France as it grapples with its own relationship to Islam, Muslims, and the status of religion in general. However, in this respect, understanding French history is difficult, not only for societies whose concept of secularism differs from French *laïcité*, as is the case of Great Britain and Germany, for example, but also for the French themselves, considering that French society's relationship to Islam is characterized by avoidance, distortion, or silence and is only rarely reassessed in public debate.

Jocelyne Dakhlia is a historian and Directrice d'Études at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, and the author or coeditor of numerous books, including *L'oubli de la cité* (1990), *Urbanités arabes: Hommage à Bernard Lepetit* (1998), *Le divan des rois: Le politique et le religieux dans l'Islam* (1998), *Forgetting History* (2003), *Trames des langues* (2004), *L'empire des passions: L'arbitraire politique en Islam* (2005), *Islamicités* (2005), *Lingua franca: Histoire d'une langue métisse en Méditerranée* (2009), *Tunisie: Le pays sans bruit* (2011), and *Les musulmans dans l'histoire e l'Europe*, vols. 1–2 (2011 and 2013).



¹ An earlier version of this essay was published in French in *Zamane*, March 2015, 62–66.

In an attempt to shed some light on this somewhat-incomplete history and a range of underlying factors concerning the traumatic experience of January 2015, two interrelated factors are worth considering. The first is geopolitical and the second relates to an internal debate taking place within French society. The former is probably the more straightforward, yet has been accorded less attention on the French public stage. France has a long tradition of political attacks within its “metropolitan” territory going back to at least the Algerian War of Independence, but until recently such events had no religious resonance. Front de libération nationale (FLN) attacks were neither perceived nor performed with religion in mind. Let us also briefly recall the long series of now almost forgotten Basque and Corsican nationalist attacks, as well as Armenian (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia), Kurdish, and even the various pro-Palestinian attacks in Paris. Only since the Iranian Revolution and the events in Afghanistan in 1979 has the risk of attack been linked to jihad and Islam on a global scale, which corresponds chronologically in the French and European context with a citizens’ assertion of Islam on the political landscape, a claim to society coming from Muslim citizens themselves.

This coincidence of an internal public debate with various Islamist advocacy movements around the world has certainly confused the issue over the past few decades, but above all it has given credence to the idea that the sudden appearance, apparently out of nowhere, of religious claims made by young Muslim French citizens must necessarily have been manipulated from the outside or at the least be “artificial”—after all, their fathers for the most part were not practicing Muslims and their mothers rarely wore head scarves. The consequence has been a burgeoning rejection of Islam, accompanied by widespread fear and opposition by a significant portion of French society to the possibility of a Muslim faith being properly integrated into the public space as legitimately French. Islam thus figures only as a reality that is external and foreign to the national body.

This fear of Islam also feeds on historical reminiscence. Without systematically defining French society in terms of its colonial legacy, the fact nevertheless remains that at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, French colonial history—much like its Italian and British counterparts—was marked by the fear of a transnational Islamic alliance or conspiracy. This was shaped by the Mahdist War in Sudan, the campaigns of the Sanūsīyya Brotherhood, pan-Islamic directives from Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II, and colonial surveillance of various activists for Muslim reformism. The perception of a threatening anti-Western Islam permeated police reports, policy documents, and the news media at the time.² What part then does this memory play in present fears as well as in jihadist engagement today?

When one takes into account the transnational and historical dimension of this fear of Islam (whatever the basis of such fear may be), the fact that France’s recent military activities in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, in addition to operations in Mali and the Central African Republic and the numerous alliances it has formed with other powers, including the United States, sparked virtually no debate of any real substance either in Parliament or in civil society may seem all the more surprising. This stands in marked contrast to France’s involvement in Iraq, which brought to the fore deep political divisions on the issue. Jihad, in its recent manifestations, seems to have bolstered the universalism of France’s history and the France of the age of Enlightenment and served to legitimize the return of French neocolonial practices in Africa (known as *Françafrique*)

² Jean-Louis Triaud, *La légende noire de la Sanūsīyya: Une confrérie musulmane saharienne sous le regard français (1840–1930)* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1995).

along with a quasi-colonial military investment on that continent. Likewise, it has restored, as illustrated by the overwhelming support shown to the French nation after January 2015, the symbolic idea of France as the torchbearer of liberty and human rights to the world. There is certainly no harm in France being reminded that it was once home to Voltaire, someone who had made the case for Muslim tolerance in the face of French intolerance. But how does one even begin to understand the roots of this almost-mythic vision of France at a time when, for all intents and purposes, characterizations of Islam as incompatible with French ideals, values, and traditions persist, and when a choice has to be made between yielding to these or leaving?

The crimes committed in the name of Islam in Paris in January 2015 have compelled France, in a highly problematic and painful way, to look at itself in the mirror and reckon with the reality of Islam as a component of French society. The present moment is a turning point for France when it must decide whether or not to accept this image of itself. Current controversies surrounding the radicalization of young French people are certainly not unique. In fact, all Islamic countries are experiencing the departure of young people for jihad, as are other European nations, such as Belgium and Denmark. One should not forget that the international conflicts or even the major political causes of the twentieth century, such as communism, always inspired these kinds of sudden engagements, in spontaneous ways as well as through recruitment networks. The same was certainly true when it came to those self-exiled young people who broke their ties with society and journeyed to Kathmandu following the events of May 1968 or who gravitated toward sectarianism. That generation, whether or not its engagements would be deemed legitimate today, shares similarities with the population under the spotlight today in terms of its disaffiliation and rejection of the “system.” Parallels have already been drawn with the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, and these have been heavily criticized, but let us not forget that both post-1948 Palestine and the Lebanese Civil War gave rise across the Arab world to forms of engagement that are analogous or at least comparable to those of today.

However, in terms of the French situation, the shock and disbelief originate in the realization that these jihadist engagements—more acutely even than during the Bosnian War—have forced France to think of itself as both a land of Islam and one from which Muslims have fled, while also endeavoring to comprehend how young citizens educated in the republican educational system and raised with the values of *laïcité* can today challenge the very foundations of the republican pact. This has been especially daunting for France in comparison with other European nations, because of its Enlightenment legacy and commitment to privileging a model of integration rather than of diversity and because it persists in thinking of itself in terms of a secular integrationist stance. This has entailed, on the one hand, conceiving of Islam as existing in a liminal position, to be indefinitely excluded and kept at the threshold, and, on the other hand, declaring that France is prepared to welcome Islam if it accepts the kind public invisibility adopted by Jewish institutions in France. In short, integration is to remain perpetually conditional and ultimately revocable, even though the affected populations are increasingly born in France and as such are French in their hearts and minds.

Why then does this schema of Islam’s exteriority remain so prevalent? Through an absolute and remarkable vicious cycle, jihad itself reinforces and justifies the global and often-unconscious rejection of Islam as a whole. In the present state of French debate, the two responses schematically provided to the burning question of jihadist terrorism imply a heteronomy. The first, all the more striking because of its lack of originality, especially when one considers other

cases, such as the Tunisian debate on the question, explains the situation in terms of contagion. In this framework, jihad is perceived as an international pathology; because it must necessarily originate elsewhere, outside local society, it spreads by contamination and contagion. The challenge therefore consists in identifying the contaminants. The second interpretation, brandished today with unprecedented fervor and conviction, draws on a range of social factors, accentuating the marginalization of young Muslims in French society. The appeal in this instance comes from the manner in which cultural issues and religious essentialism find themselves amalgamated as a way of getting to the heart of social problems. But this argument is insufficient because young jihadists do not all come from disadvantaged neighborhoods (housing projects in the *banlieues*, or suburbs), and social marginalization cannot alone explain the motivation for engagement. The identification of these young people with political and moral causes, such as Palestine or Syria, no matter their relevance or legitimacy, is brushed aside in this interpretation. Most importantly, this take on things produces and thereby reinforces the paradoxical effect of banishing Islam while concomitantly sustaining Islam's alleged desire for secession (contained in the idea of the lost territories of the Republic),³ since by conjuring a social gap, it has the effect of decoupling those who are seen to contribute to France's grandeur and embrace its spirit from those who adhere to an external and potentially errant Islam.

This assumed exteriority of Islam warrants further consideration, especially because it is a constructed reality that ends up being accepted as real. In this reality, the unique nature and special characteristics of the Muslim presence explain the "problem" of Islam and the corresponding problems of "integration." A society armed with all its values is now confronted with a new reality, and recently arrived Muslims find themselves colliding with the shifting and uncompromising circumstances of *laïcité* and, to a greater extent, of French republican values.

Recent historical research has argued for a reconsideration of the preconceived idea that the clash between France (or other European nations) and the Muslim presence on its soil is recent.⁴ Research shows that throughout the centuries preceding nineteenth-century colonization and the migration of colonial workers, the presence of Muslims from the Mediterranean basin in Western Europe was uninterrupted, characterized by a continuous stream of people. What has always been contested though has been the public nature of Muslim worship. Even in settings regulated by reciprocal diplomatic agreements or in the authorized religious practice of Muslim prisoners taken during corsair raids in the Mediterranean, the French authorities were, for instance, reluctant to establish mosques. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French society tolerated Muslims living in its midst, with obvious nuances and indecision of course, but it did so precisely because the question of the official recognition of their faith did not arise. The expression "Islam des caves" (underground places of religious worship) took on significance well before the twentieth century. For reasons that are as much theological (resurging today around the mocked figure of the Prophet) as they are geopolitical (owing in particular to the power of the Ottoman Empire historically), Islam was ascribed to a structurally exterior space beyond France's borders, as opposed to Judaism, which represented instead a form of internal alterity.

³ See, e.g., Emmanuel Brenner, ed., *Les territoires perdus de la République: Anti-sémitisme, racisme et sexisme en milieu scolaire* (Paris: Éditions Mille et une nuit, 2003).

⁴ Jocelyne Dakhliya and Bernard Vincent, eds., *Les Musulmans dans l'histoire de l'Europe: Une intégration invisible* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011); and Jocelyne Dakhliya and Bernard Vincent, eds., *Les Musulmans dans l'histoire de l'Europe: Passages et contacts en Méditerranée* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2013).

The question of Islam as such did not emerge as a problem nor did it arise as a historical concern, even at the height of debates on *laïcité* at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, because Islam was not considered part of society. Muslims were of course present at this time, albeit in a subaltern position, but the “question” of Islam was seen as exterior and reserved for colonial contexts. Jean Baubérot, most notably, steadfastly argued that today’s interpretations of the 1905 legal definition of *laïcité*, which mandates the exclusion of religion in public spaces, are in actuality distortions of the definition of *laïcité* put forth in the 1905 law, which pertains to the separation of church and state and in no way prohibits visible signs of faith in public spaces.⁵ Yet it should be noted that the present and overwhelming desire to exclude all visible signs of religion in public spaces finds itself applied in fact principally and selectively to Islam and Muslims, despite claims that all religions are treated equally, as *Charlie Hebdo*’s secular credo affirms. *Laïcité* is called upon to uphold a desire to maintain the invisibility of Islam. This is where the French specificity is to be found: namely, in the overwhelming attachment to the national charter of *laïcité* that purports to deny Islam an accepted and lawful presence in society. On this legitimate and globally celebrated model of separation of church and state (or one that at least aims at this ideal), one finds superimposed an imprecise theological-historical model in which the only conceivable form of Islam emerges, one that is invisible and unspoken.

Summoning *laïcité* in this way therefore reinforces Islam’s exteriority, not because of its oft-cited belated arrival, but instead because of its systematic nonaffiliation or weak affiliation in the public sphere. The consequence is to further delay the concrete aspiration of Muslims to find a rightful place in French society, thereby renouncing the fictional “return” and codified exteriority of Islam. When then, did Islam become a full-blown “crisis”? This process started in 1990 when young schoolgirls (considered at this time to be the very antithesis of agency in Islam) declared from the very heart of the Republic: “We are French *and* Muslim.” This moment, in 1990, launched the crisis of Islam in France by forcing French society to begin seeing itself also as a Muslim society. Indeed, if French society is still able to refuse and reject, or at least to put off, acceptance by brandishing an Islam of the veil and of the beard as not corresponding to “real Islam,” then French jihad today is forcing French society to adopt measures that will render the relinquishing of the structural exteriority of Islam in France inevitable. A

⁵ Jean Baubérot, *La laïcité falsifiée* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2012).