



Constructing Muslims' Identity In France's Public Discourse

Fransa'nın Kamusal Söyleminde Müslüman Kimliğinin İnşası

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ABSTRACT

Identity is a very complex issue in France, and so is nationalism contentious in French politics. There are many people with an immigrant background in France, because this country is one of the most attractive destination countries in Europe for immigrants. This study discusses the issues of immigrant background by the case of Muslims living in France. In this sense, this study explores the issue of identity among French Muslims, and the role of public discourse in recognizing religion or culture vis-à-vis identity. The Republican model of citizenship and political ideas of French secularism portray Muslims as 'unintegrated' and 'unfit'. Because their demand for religious freedom contradicts with what is considered as the civil religion of the French nation, laïcité principle. The French public discourse often questions Muslims with immigrant origin [in particular] in national belonging. Therefore, French state and society do not perceive Muslims as French because they believe that practicing Islam or raising such demand contradicts with the values of the French culture and citizenship model, which is in large exclusive and member-conditioning.

Keywords: French Muslims, laïcité, public discourse, nationalism, national identity.

ÖZET

Kimlik, Fransa'da çok karmaşık bir konudur, bu yüzden milliyetçilik konusu da Fransız siyasetinde tartışmalıdır. Fransa'da göçmen kökenli birçok insan vardır, çünkü bu ülke göçmenler için Avrupa'nın en cazip ülkelerinden birisidir. Bu çalışma, Fransa'da yaşayan Müslümanlar örneğinde göçmen kökenli olma ile ilgili konuları tartışmaktadır. Bu kapsamda, bu çalışma Fransız Müslümanlara yönelik kimlik meselesini, kamusal söylemin din veya kültürü kimlik olgusu ile karşılaştırmalı olarak nasıl tanımladığını üzerinden araştırmaktadır. Cumhuriyetçi vatandaşlık modeli ve Fransız laikliğinin siyasi fikirleri Müslümanları "uyun sağlayamamış" ve "uyumsuz" olarak tanımlamaktadır. Çünkü Müslümanların dini özgürlük talepleri Fransız ulusunun sivil dini olarak da bilinen laiklik ilkesi ile çelişmektedir. Fransız kamusal söylemi, göçmen kökenli Müslümanları özellikle ulusal aidiyetlerine göre sorgulamaktadır. Bu nedenle, Fransız devleti ve toplumu Müslümanları Fransızca olarak algılamaz, çünkü onlara göre İslam'ı uygulamak veya bu gibi taleplerini dile getirmek, Fransız kültürel değerleriyle ve ayrıcalıklı ve üyelik şartı gerektiren vatandaşlık modeliyle çelişmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fransız Müslümanları, laiklik, kamusal söylem, milliyetçilik, ulusal kimlik.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is often contested that French identity in state national discourse is being 'politicized' and 'exploited' by political actors who consider a national rhetoric on Muslims, Islam and identity especially during electoral campaigns. During these times, these political actors recall a rhetoric that implies 'nous' (us) and 'eux' (them) in France's identity discourse. For example, Xavier Lemoine, who is the French mayor of Montfermeil, argued that "It will either be them or us. If they win, we are dead. I am a proud Catholic and Frenchman and I don't have the intention to live like a dhimmi in my own country. We are different from them and they don't represent France" (Caron, 2013: 229). Similarly, an analysis of the elite public discourse, such as that of the National Front which is a dominant extreme-right political party in France, often discusses whether Muslim people are able to be good French citizens or not (Webster, 2007). Additionally, the far-right political discourse claims that immigration from mainly Islamic countries was a threat to French national identity (Lahdili, 2016). In point of fact, the National Front's electoral campaigns demagoguing the issues of

nationalism, immigration, integration, security, and radicalism, and mobilizes its supporters on xenophobic and racist discourse. Considering the elite and closed nature of politics in the country, French citizens with an immigrant background think that it is a challenge to actively join French politics, because they think that politics is mainly carried out by French elites with more opportunities and better education (Webster, 2007: 32).

In general, European politicians think that citizens with Muslim background form the least integrated minority groups in Europe due to their religiosity (Ayhan and Önder, 2016; Maxwell and Bleich, 2014; Kretz, 2010; Safran, 1991). Accordingly, as French politics is elite-driven, along with the media and intellectuals, elites adopt a public discourse that has social and legal aspects, stigmatizing Muslim immigrants, and describing them as the ‘inassimilable other’, ‘unwilling to integrate’, ‘unwilling to accept/live with the republican values/citizenship’, or ‘threatening French national identity’ (Fredette, 2014; Kastoryano, 2006). Moreover, Muslims’ religiosity is often associated with “segregated lifestyles, susceptibility to violent terrorism, and rejection of European values and identity” (Maxwell and Bleich, 2014: 1). Similarly, Webster (2007: 21) quotes Alain Finkielkraut who argued that “France, faced with a new diversity of ideas and people, is in a process of ‘decivilization’, undoing its way of life, social cohesion, and intellectual, moral, and Judeo-Christian traditions”. Therefore, the debate on ‘Muslims of France’ often brings into discussions the Frenchness of Muslims, the compatibility of Islam with France, and integration of these people into the French society. On this matter, Maxwell and Bleich (2014: 3) argued that “The [supposed] incompatibility between Muslim religious practices and European society is also embedded in national institutions that offer minimal official recognition of Islam”. Hence, identity and nationalism have always been subjects of public debates in France.

This study tries to explore national identity in France, because it is essential to evaluate how French Muslims are being defined in the national discourse, and what factors affect their feelings and attachment to their own nation. In other words, it tries to understand the implications of religious identity on national identity among French Muslims with immigrant origins, and how their ‘Frenchness’ is constructed. Thus, the following question is being argued in this study: Does the situation of French Muslims constitute a ‘Muslim question’ vis-à-vis identity politics? In fact, Muslim people form the second largest religious minority group in France. Depending on the definition of religion by Emile Durkheim (1995) as the deepest and most enduring source of human identity, this study evaluates religion as an independent variable that influences identity of immigrant Muslim population in France. In this sense, this study scrutinizes nationalism and identity politics among these people in French public discourse.

2. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG FRENCH MUSLIMS

The presence of Islam in France was due to two factors; the first factor was a result of colonization of Muslim countries, while the second one emerged due to immigration and decolonization (Lahdili, 2016). Since the 1950s and 60s, waves of immigration began settling in France (Safran, 1991). About a million guest workers arrived during the 1960s (Giry, 2006). Most of these immigrants were recruited from France’s former colonies in Africa (Kretz, 2010). The majority of Muslim immigrants came to France after Second World War, and they were mainly low-skilled guest workers or economic migrants who were seeking jobs that required low skills (Maxwell and Bleich, 2014; Fetzter and Soper, 2005). Thus, the reason for entry was primarily and exclusively economic. The immigration experience engendered identity shift from temporary workers benefiting from the labor migration policies to permanent settlers bringing their families as part of family reunification policies, and so beginning a new life in a new environment.

Immigration waves also transformed the understanding of how these immigrants define(d) their identity. At that point, it is necessary to ask the following question: Contrasting the country’s political history and immigration background, is France a civic or ethnic nation? The civic/ethnic

typology was proposed by Michael Ignatieff (1994) in his book “Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism”. Similarly, Goode and Stroup (2015: 3) claim that civic nations are inherently inclusive, tolerant, and pluralistic, and people define their national identities vis-à-vis state institutions and territory in civic nations, while, ethnic nations are exclusive, intolerant and restrict space for a multicultural identity. Besides, exclusionary ethnic nationalism is conducive to authoritarian regimes (Auer, 1997: 3; Goode and Stroup, 2015: 3). In this sense, Auer (1997: 3) argues that ethnic nationalism considers nation as “a community of fate”, while civic nationalism conceives nation as “a voluntary association”. He contends that French nationalism “has traditionally been regarded as the epitome of civic nationalism... based on the political ideas of revolutionaries, who fought for the ‘sovereignty’ of the people” (Auer, 1997: 2). In other words, civic virtues define national identity rather than ethnicity, or common culture, because territorial boundaries of a country are the only means of exclusion (Auer, 1997: 2). In addition, Sayegh (2011: 33) also argues:

“in the case of civic nationalism, state and society relations are based on the rule of law, and all citizens are equal and share the civic and political values, independently of the color of their ethnic particularities. A color-, creed-, and culture-blind formation, although not gender-blind, is closely related to republican ideas and especially to the notion of *laïcité* (secularism)...The civic type of nationalism is linked to the formation of nation-states based on liberal political principles”.

In France, historical narratives, power articulations, lived experiences, political opportunities and constraints frame national identity understandings of people. Although immigrant Muslim population is very diverse, these citizens share the same social situation of being a feared religious minority in France with an overt secular identity and a deep colonial history (Webster, 2007: 5; Kastoryano, 2006). Besides, civic engagement among French Muslims differs among ‘generations’. The first generation that came to France was less engaged in the public life especially in politics, unlike the second and third generations which were brought up in the country, benefited from national education, spoke fluent French, and were more familiar with public institutions. According to Maxwell and Bleich (2014), the second and third generations are more likely to identify themselves by the surroundings (e.g., French identity, language and culture) in which they were brought up. Having this in mind, the first generation of immigrants re-created ‘local’ and ‘informal’ space in smaller communities, founded on ‘*culture du quotidien*’ or everyday culture, to resemble those of their countries of origins. And this was also a way to reconnect with their roots, cultures and homelands. These imaginary spaces relate to Anderson’s idea in describing the existence of national communities as “imagined”, which is the common characteristic of all national communities (Anderson, 1983).

3. LAÏCITÉ, POLITICS OF RECOGNITION AND STATE ACCOMODATION

France is a country with deep roots in secularism (Kastoryano, 2006: 61-62). In theory, secularism creates a society in which religion is not a condition to belong to society. In liberal democracies, all citizens are equal by law, and the political authority is given by law, not by religion that emanates from God (Waters, 2016: 12-13). Traditionally, secularism in France is exclusive, because it requires French national identity to be dominant among all other identities in the society. Therefore, majority of Muslim people in France are struggling to integrate their religious identity (private) with national identity (public), because these two identities are considered to be conflicting (Kalleberg, 2015). But still, these people demand to be equally treated in terms of being loyal French and equal citizens. However, bringing religion directly into politics, or limiting representation of religious identity only in private sphere, not public sphere makes it hard for them vis-à-vis identification (Webster, 2007: 53). For instance, Saida Kada states that “today a person is French through an act of citizenship, by sharing certain common values and by [supporting] everyone’s right to find happiness...in the end a French person can be a Muslim, [Muslims should enjoy religious liberty]

just as other [French] citizens do” (Fetzer and Soper, 2005: 1). This manifestation also serves to inform elites about peoples’ opinions and perceptions. French Muslims with immigrant origins stand for a politics of recognition. They want to enjoy their religious right without hiding it, and they do not want to isolate their religious identity from their national identity as citizens of France. Webster (2007: 59) argues that these people do not want to apologize for their religious identity, unlike their parents or grandparents. Nevertheless, their Muslim identity is more complex than the previous generations when their identification has transcended narrow references.

Elite discourse in France on Muslims of immigrant background is still framed in terms of ‘failed integration’ which is often viewed as a consequence of the state’s public policies that is ‘rejecting’ Muslims’ identity, and a failure to accommodate ethnic and religious diversities. This discourse of *laïcité* in France is opposed to multiculturalism, unlike the case of Britain, Canada, the United States, etc. Waters (2016) argues that *laïcité* (as stipulated in 1946 and 1958 Constitutions, and the 1905 Law on Separation of the Churches and State and proclaiming that religion is a private affair) is essential to understand French identity. *Laïcité* in France can be considered as the ‘civil religion of the country’, because it has a significant influence on French state and society (Waters, 2016: 9).

Since secularism is considered an important component of French identity, Muslim people are expected to integrate *laïcité* into their private identity in order to embrace French identity. This argument goes hand in hand with the idea that secularism constitutes ‘France’s civil religion’ which is “a combination of collective rituals that reveal a devotion to the unity of a nation and national mythology made up of a diffusion of beliefs and representations that constitute the dominant mental attitudes of society” (Waters, 2016: 13). On the other hand, *laïcité* causes a taboo in the society, taking into account the sensitivity of discussing ethnic, racial, or religious minorities’ issues in public. The state identity and its foundation are important elements that help people understand why Muslims are challenging the common elite discourse, or what is also referred to as ‘*la pensée unique*’ or the single way of thinking which means that Muslim people have failed to fully integrate themselves into the French society.

The issue of integration is mainly led by two camps. The first one is the rightist and extreme right, which argue that Muslims failed to integrate themselves into the French society, and that religion can be an identity or a political statement. On the other hand, the second camp is the centrist and leftist, which contend that France failed to integrate Muslims into the French society. Waters (2016: 8) argues that French Muslims with immigrant background think that they are trying to integrate themselves into French society, and therefore, the state needs to acknowledge integration processes. However, French government and French people do not want to accommodate or support attempts of these French Muslims. For instance, the 2004 and 2011 Laws on banning wearing religious signs (e.g., Muslim headscarf and Burqa) in public institutions was received by Muslims as a ‘hindrance’ of the French government that prevents them from assimilating themselves into French society. Similarly, Waters (2016: 16) also argues that French government does not only uses *laïcité* as a mere political tool, but also as a concept representing French experience and history, since it protects French national identity from the presence of Islam. The idea of people’s religious and cultural identity as a source of conflict is further elaborated by Samuel Huntington’s thesis on Clash of Civilizations. Likewise, the integration of culturally diverse populations has been elaborated by Francis Fukuyama in his work related to immigration and integration, being an internal challenge faced by liberal democracies. Consequently, the state public laws on banning religious signs in state public institutions are argued to ‘defend’ French culture, identity, and values against the Islamic signs and values which are thought to be barriers for Muslim people to integrate themselves to French society (Waters, 2016: 18). Therefore, French government sharpened the line between French national identity and Muslim identity by new policies. On the other hand, there are French Muslims who are engaged in ‘neutrality politics’, and are closer to the rightist camp. They criticize

their fellow Muslims who fail to integrate into French society, and consider religion as identity, or a political statement (Fredette, 2014; Kastoryano, 2006).

4. IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE DEBATE ON NATIONAL IDENTITY

Home to the largest Muslim population in Western Europe, France faces a complex challenge to live up to its republicanism model, and to integrate its Muslim populations into national public life (Lahdili, 2016; Giry, 2006). Waters (2016) argues that French identity is an abstract and multi-dimensional concept, so it does not have a unique shape. However, its influence on the French state and society is undeniable. With this in mind, one might ask how do French citizens define themselves vis-à-vis their national identity? Caron (2013) assumes that the meanings of being French define our understanding and interpretation of French national identity. Therefore, French identity can be diverse for people with distinct understandings and interpretations. For instance, there is no single or monolithic 'French Muslim identity', but still national elites commonly frame this type of identity as one model among all Muslims, and they consider this model as a constructed identity, and see it as a threat to the French nation (Webster, 2007: 5). This type of political behavior is one aspect of elite power that can include, exclude or define who is part of the French nation (Webster, 2007). This is also referred to as 'public identity'. Hancock (2004: 14-15) also states that "public identity as a political psychological construct reflects the influence of political culture upon the dialogical interaction between actor and spectator... Public identities are constituted of stereotypes and moral judgments of multiple group identities (e.g., race, class, gender) ascribed to groups that are the subject of legislative policy". Thus, she believes that public identities are 'goal-oriented' and serve a policy purpose among political elites. This elite-constructed identity often creates judgments about the 'others', and this attitude towards French Muslims creates marginalization and exclusion in the public sphere as long as they [French Muslims] do not accept the French national identity. As a reaction, Muslims have started to create their 'own narratives' to define their identity both as French and Muslim. Finally, Webster (2007: 27) argues that elite discourse challenges the position of Muslims as French citizens, because "when citizenship was reinterpreted by liberals and republicans to mean equal membership on the basis of the most inclusive characteristic possible -humanity- new methods of boundary drawing and exclusion were developed". This argument is similar to Shane Phelan's idea on the democratic project of 'inclusion through the process of exclusion', which means that "discourse about the commonality of citizens, meant (genuinely or not) to strengthen equal rights for an equal people, provides a way to define who is 'unfit for membership'" (Webster, 2007: 27-28).

In the context of France, the debate on 'deserving citizens' is a form of exclusion of immigrant Muslim populations. This was caused by the prejudice of treating them as 'second-class citizens' or 'undeserving citizens'. In the light of French national debate on identity, elite constructions of the 'deserving citizen', based on the values of the French republican model promoting liberty, equality and fraternity, are determined in opposition to Muslim people, and subsequently questioning their loyalty to the state. Such categorization troubles social cohesion and burdens the state (Webster, 2007: 30-46). Arguably, these debates make French Muslims vulnerable to social, political and cultural marginalization (Kalleberg, 2015).

5. THE 'GREAT DEBATE ON NATIONAL IDENTITY' AND TYPOLOGIES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

A century ago, Muslims of immigrant descendants were referred to as "colonials". During the 1960s, they were known as "immigrants". Today, they are "citizens" (Lahdili, 2016). In 2009 and 2010, Eric Besson, Minister of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Mutually-Supportive Development, opened the "Great Debate on National Identity" in an attempt to define what does it mean to be French? and what are the French values? (Webster, 2007: 30). Discussions were mainly on national symbols such as French flag, national anthem, France's glorious history, generosity,

open-mindedness, and its great men (Waters, 2016: 28). Considering discussions on French identity, on the results of the French identity debates, Jean-Francois Caron (2013) identified four aspects of national identity definitions vis-à-vis the participants' answers and profiles in his article, namely "Understanding and interpreting France's national identity: The meanings of being French". These are:

1. The ethno-symbolic sense of attachment.
2. The ethnic conception of nationhood.
3. The constitutional patriotism paradigm.
4. The ideal that citizenship defined by universal values and civic contributions and sacrifices.

First, the ethno-symbolic sense of attachment: According to Caron's observations: "a civic community is not just supported by citizenship, but rather a shared cultural and historical heritage...the formation of modern states has been associated with a nation-building process whose objective is to unite the unknown members around the same collective psyche" (Waters, 2016: 29). The ethno-symbolic approach to nationalism argues that nations create common shared history, culture, symbols, or values in order to unite people, and raise sense of belonging and patriotism. However, in the context of French Muslims of immigrant origin, this aspect is a challenging one since they hold cultural and religious backgrounds that are different from the common one.

Second, the ethnic conception of nationhood: Ethnicity is another way to identify French identity. According to this aspect: "a Frenchman is white, of Judeo-Christian tradition and of Western culture... being French implies three conditions: first of all, be a direct descendant of the Gauls, the Romans and the Franks; secondly, claim a belonging to the Western world; thirdly, to be inspired by our Catholic roots" (Waters, 2016: 31). In the context of French Muslims, the ethnic conception of national identity and nationhood excludes French Muslims because they do not fit the ethnic definition of 'being French', and fails to integrate the collective psyche. Besides, there exists an incompatibility between Muslim values and Western/European ones, or what the former Interior Minister Claude Gueant referenced as a difference of 'ontological value' (Caron, 2013). It is important to state that even if French Muslims fulfill all requirements of integration, they would not be considered French because of their ethnic background.

Third, the constitutional patriotism paradigm: This aspect argues that citizens develop a common political identity through channels of political ideals rather than cultural or ethnic ones. Nevertheless, patriotism paradigm still exists in parallel with the common/national culture to sustain the sense of attachment. The republican model, national values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and assimilation policy towards migrants affect the patriotism paradigm, and therefore people should be loyal to these values as French (Waters, 2016: 33). This form of French identity seems to make no reference to religion, ethnicity or culture, so it accommodates French Muslims. However, the way these values (e.g., liberty, equality and fraternity) are interpreted and lived poses a dilemma to Muslims who chose to express their religious and cultural identity in the public sphere.

Fourth, national attachment, civic contributions and sacrifices: This is another aspect of identifying as French based on a sense of nationhood and collectivity. This is a value-based, even a subjective aspect that is linked to the perception of an imagined community where people are not defined by national, historical, religious, ethnic, or cultural premises, rather by how they contribute to their community. Thus, "being French is when he/she is working or actively looking for work and paying taxes in order to allow our institutions to work correctly" (Waters, 2016: 34). It appears that this way of identification is more liberal compared to the three previous ones, since contribution defines how much a person is French. Interestingly, when there is a success story of a French Muslim citizen (an asset from people's perception) in politics, arts, or sports, the public and the media draw clear merit to his 'French' belongingness, a perception that might be chauvinistic. On

the other hand, when a French Muslim citizen (a burden from people's perception), who comes from *les banlieues de Paris*, gets involved in a terrorist act, then the media make reference to him as an extremist of 'Moroccan' or 'Algerian' or 'Arab' origin.

Levasseur (2009: 269) states that "for many years, the '*banlieue immigrée*' and its common image of '*violences urbaines*' and Islamist terrorism has certainly exemplified a resounding 'moral panic' haunting the French public imaginary". However, these classifications tend to ignore real debates about the socio-economic marginalization these 'second-class' citizens face, or to address the causes behind religious fundamentalism or criminality among the second and third generations that grew up in the Parisian suburbs (Lahdili, 2016). In fact, such debates shed light on the ongoing realities endured by these citizens who feel excluded, marginalized and segregated from the mainstream society. Often, jihadism appeals to these 'rootless' members who identify with a feeling of 'otherness' (Tarifa and Di Monte, 2016; Lahdili, 2016). It is argued that the lack of 'sense of belongingness' draws an interesting argument on how these ghettos can become fertile ground for radicalization, and this was pointed out by the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, when he criticized the failure of multiculturalism in creating a sense of shared identity and that "the search for something to belong to and believe in can lead them to extremist ideology" (Tarifa and Di Monte, 2016: 8). Likewise, the former French President Nicolas Sarkozy admitted the failure of state immigration and integration policies to create an identical French identity and that the focus was being centered on the identity of individuals (Tarifa and Di Monte, 2016). Sarkozy's rhetoric of "France, love it or leave it!" led to stigmatization and tensions among French people in terms of national identification. Waters (2016: 25) argues that "participation in the civic policies seeks to yield overall improvements in immigrant integration, but at their core, they are requirements without which status cannot be obtained". There are differences between citizenship policy and integration policy. The former one refers to a member-conditioning in which immigrants have to meet demands of the state. The latter one implies to member-enabling in which the state's role is limited to accommodating, promoting and respecting life of immigrants. In France, member-conditioning model is more obvious than member-enabling.

6. DISCUSSION

French debate over the politics of identity causes an ambiguity on whether the nation is a civic or ethnic/cultural community. The hostility and stigmatization around French Muslims, as far as the elites' public discourse goes, condemns Muslims as 'unfit citizens', and questions their national belonging. The French state and society can hardly perceive Muslims who demand to practise their religious freedom in public as French, because they believe that practising Islamic rules and values - openly- conflicts with the French identity and values. The situation of French Muslim population reveals that the state, through its public policies and laws, pursues an integrationist version of *laïcité* which limits the religious freedom of this population in public sphere, for which laicism becomes an exclusionary force (Giry, 2006). Waters (2016) argues that the way by which Republican values are applied in France often results in Muslims perceiving French citizenship as a discriminatory force. On the other hand, Maxwell and Bleich (2014) found that religiosity is not the main factor that influences Muslims' attitudes, or it is not a tool to understand national identity among French Muslims. On the contrary, French Muslims feel strongly attached to their French identity and their national identification can only moderately relate to religiosity. Likewise, Brouard and Tiberj (2011: 104-105) also argue that overall "transnational religious and minority identifications are not alternatives to identification with France...The religious dimension in particular is completely independent from that of identification with France".

In this study, the case of national identity among French Muslims suggests the possibility to conceptualize identity and national belongingness from a liberal nationalist lens, or what resembles an inclusive and accommodating nationalism. In the case of France, it appears that the Republican model of citizenship, and the assimilative policies of integration set barriers towards this quest. On

the other hand, Tamir (1993: 90) argues that liberal nationalism is polycentric by definition. In other words, liberal nationalism respects differences and considers them as enriching a common civilization, while ethnocentric ethno-centric nationalism considers a common nationality that is superior to other ethnicities and nationalities, and dominates them. Therefore, the conception of polycentric is more suitable for modern liberal democracies (Auer, 1997: 4-5). Furthermore, Stuart Hampshire proposed the idea of ‘sane nationalism’. In Auer’s words: “it [sane nationalism] is to be justified by a utilitarian argument -that most men and women are happy only when their way of life prolongs customs and habits which are familiar to them” (Auer, 1997: 4).

France’s national discourse on identity is an attempt to understand Muslims’ allegiances with loyalty to the secular values of the Republic, and this is debatable in the public space, taking into account the previous discussions. Moreover, many French Muslims are certain about their French identity. However, it is argued [from the stand of the rightist camp and French Muslims who adhere to the politics of neutrality] that people who identify themselves in the public space through their religion or culture are considered to be ‘failing to be French’, or even a danger to national unity and social cohesion. It is set clear that the demand of French Muslims is not recognition for obtaining rights; their demand is recognition for obtaining social equality which is going to enable them to feel that their image and self-perception is accepted as other French citizens (Webster, 2007). It is concluded from the previous discussions that the indivisible universalist neutrality is invoked to challenge multicultural demands. On the contrary, in the French citizenship model, French citizens should be united in their common beliefs and values -by search for the common good- before any other affiliation, including religious ones, so to make them “French” first and “Muslim” second (Waters 2016). Arguably, the French republicanism egalitarianism model which promotes for values of equality, liberty and fraternity can serve to set up a pluralistic model though the integration of Muslim population in the national public sphere, however, this model when interpreted becomes a ‘pretext’ for inflexibility (Giry, 2006). The pretext of inflexibility is what renders public discourse worth scrutinizing in order to draw on the strengths and weaknesses of states’ public policies towards Muslims. Gemie (2011) argues that Muslim integration will not come about until the Republic ceases to fear diversity and embraces toleration.

7. CONCLUSION

France is a secular state with deep roots to republican values. It is commonly argued that being French means embracing French values as a common way of life. The state expects Muslims to integrate themselves to French citizenship model and internalize these values, as a sign of belongingness, assimilation, and patriotism. The debate on French identity generated ample discussions on what it means to be French, and yet, did not provide a consent definition, but a few paradigms on how French national identity is perceived among French citizens, where a number of factors such as public discourse, intellectual debates, media images and portrays, public opinions, prejudices and lived experiences interact. In addition, while the French people consider *laïcité* as an equalizing force that guarantees religious freedom, many French Muslims perceive it as a ‘form of preconceived discrimination’ that violates their right to freely practise Islam in the public sphere. On that note, Muslim identity is complex, and cannot be described as a religious identity alone. Interestingly, the integrationist form of secularism and assertive assimilation has caused some French Muslims to construct a defensive identity.

This study tried to explore national identity in France, in order to understand how French Muslims are being defined in the national discourse. Caron proposed four typologies of the French national identity following the ‘Great Debate on National Identity’, as well as attempted to understand the implications of religious identity on national identity among French Muslims of immigrant origins, and how their ‘Frenchness’ is constructed. Nationalism is a ‘feeling of attachment’ to a land that empowers people and raises their sense of belongingness. In the French context, we found that the situation of French Muslims is complex, and to some, it constitutes a ‘Muslim question’. Although,

the country falls under civic nationalism model, the situation of French citizens of Muslim faith and immigrant background is complex and problematic especially in the national public institutions. French nationalism is regarded as an exclusionary force that defines French Muslim citizens on the aspect of religion/ culture, and that the Republican model of citizenship and political ideas of French secularism portray Muslims as ‘unfit’ and ‘undeserving’ [de facto inequality], as long as their demand for religious/cultural freedom contradicts with what is considered as the civil religion of the nation i.e. *laïcité*.

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