

**"The headscarf (1989) and burkini (2016) affairs reflect a particular relationship between the French Republic and Islam". Discuss.**

Undoubtedly the relationship between the French Republic and Islam is one of hostility, intolerance and tension, stemming from a combination and amalgamation of different factors such as the perceived threat of Islam to Republican values, the debate on *laïcité* and the wider context of Islamist extremism; ultimately creating a political discourse that serves to marginalise and discriminate against the French Muslim population. Arguably, these issues culminated in the headscarf (1989) and burkini (2016) affairs whereby "the conjecture of domestic and foreign threats made scarf-wearing into a national "affair"" (Bowen, 2007) bringing the debate over Islam and its place in the Republic into mainstream political discourse.

Roughly translated as secularism and officially recognised by the French government as representing "equality for all before the law" (*Qu'est-ce que la laïcité?*, 2015), the value of *laïcité* plays an important role in the tensions between the French Republic and the French Muslim population in that it is often used as a justification for policies intending to limit religious expression within the public sphere. It seems that the exact definition of *laïcité* remains unclear within public discourse and thus interpretations of this ambiguous term differ significantly. For example, as the critic Tolan notes in the context of the burkini ban of 2016, one interpretation is that *laïcité* should "protect the rights of French citizens to express their religious beliefs in public" while on the other hand "laïcité should oblige Muslim women to avoid dressing in ways that expressed religious affirmation" (Tolan, 2017). It is the conflicting nature of this state-adopted policy of *laïcité*, introduced under the 1905 law which established the separation of church and state, that raises issues within the relationship between the Republic and

Islam. Indeed, the headscarf affair of 1989 undeniably marked a shift in the understanding of laïcité from protecting the right to practice religion freely towards a policy focusing largely on Islam, where it “began to mutate into a frame for an ethnicised debate on the place of Islam in French society” (Almeida, 2018). Thus, laïcité has been commonly used as a justification for targeting Muslims with overtly discriminatory policies (such as the burkini ban) whilst maintaining the appearance of a neutral state under the guise of the Republican value of secularism, ultimately worsening relations.

**Commenté [EM1]:** Good point.

Undeniably, this hostile relationship between Islam and the French Republic is founded on the idea that Islam is inherently incompatible with Republican values, particularly those concerning gender equality which is evident in the debate over laïcité and headscarves. Many critics have recognised the symbolism of the headscarf as the “banner of women’s oppression” (Khemilat, 2019) and thus a threat to the Republican value of égalité, yet choose not to explore the interpretation of the headscarf or burkini “as an instrument of empowerment and inclusion for Muslim women” (Almeida, 2018) as some Muslim women do. In 1989, during the height of the first headscarf affair, it was suggested that in wearing a headscarf to school the girls were threatening Republican value of equality (as “supporting the foulards was interpreted as contrary to French equality of the sexes” (Thomas, 2005)) as well as the value of laïcité (as it was interpreted as an attempt to proselytise other students) thereby justifying their expulsion from school. Ironically, it is policies such as the aforementioned that exclude and “further marginalise Muslim women from participation in French society” (Almeida, 2018) when in fact the supposed objective is to create a sense of equality amongst the citizens of the Republic, consequently reinforcing the divisions between the Republic and Islam.

**Commenté [EM2]:** Yes. But explain further.

Certainly, the wider global context contributed to the strained relationship between the French Republic and Islam. Between the 1980s to the present day, the significant rise in Islamist extremism has incited

fear within the Western world surrounding the Islamic religion and culture leading to the association of headscarves and practicing Muslims in general with acts of violence and terrorism, arguably exacerbated through press coverage which, as Bowen notes, “played up the connections between these scarves and broader dangers” (Bowen, 2007). This fear, alongside existing anxieties concerning the incompatibility of Islamic values with the Republic and the perceived problem of integrating those viewed as “former colonial subjects” (Bowen, 2007), ultimately manifested itself in the headscarf affair where “it was on the heads of three schoolgirls, in September 1989, that collective anxiety focused” (Bowen, 2007). Indeed, the 2016 burkini ban also demonstrates the impact of Islamist extremism on the deterioration of the relationship between Islam and the Republic as well as French society in general. Introduced to guarantee the “preservation of public order” (Almeida, 2018) following the 2016 Nice attack, the ban is evidently a response to the heightened threat of Islamist terrorism, contributing to an increasingly hostile sentiment directed towards French Muslims.

While there are clearly longstanding tensions in the difficult relationship between the French Republic and Islam, there are certainly moments of tolerance and compassion in which the French state has attempted to appear hospitable and receptive to the Islamic faith and its followers, though these have been few and far between. Perhaps the most notable example is the construction of the Paris Mosque in 1926, commemorating the Muslim soldiers of World War One, which suggested to the world that “France was friendly to Islam” while emphasising that “Islam was compatible with French values” (Tolan, 2017). Although this appears relatively on the French Republic’s part, Tolan suggests that there was perhaps an underlying intention to control and limit the power of French Islam, once again conveying this turbulent relationship. Similarly, despite the creation of the Fondation des œuvres de l’islam de France (FOIF) in 2005 signifying progress in building a better rapport between the French Republic and Islam, this action inhibited meaningful change due to a lack of representation of the Muslim voice, a

trend that is repeatedly seen in government policy concerning Islam (for example in the Conseil français du culte musulman).

To conclude, it is evident that the troubled relationship between the French Republic and Islam was reflected in the handling of both the headscarf and burkini affairs. Threatened by the rise of Islam in France following the end of colonialism, as well as the security concern over Islamist terrorism, the French Republic attempted to control the Muslim population by placing restrictions on the wearing of headscarves within public spaces in order to limit the power and influence of Islam. Overall, the perceived 'threat' of Islam to French society and its apparent incompatibility with French Republican values, namely *égalité* and *laïcité*, resulted in the deterioration of relations thus creating a tense and hostile environment for followers of Islam within the French Republic.

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