

Muslim France

by Daniel Pipes

I had the good fortune in late September to spend a week in France, in Paris and at the Riviera. While much of my time was taken up with the more conventional attractions that country has to offer, including some wonderful food and wine, I did concentrate on the Middle Eastern side of things as well, and here's a brief report on that dimension:

Problems. With a population of over three million Muslims, about half of them citizens, France has the largest Islamic presence of any country in Western Europe, both absolute and relative. Of this number, some 90 percent have North African origins (Algeria especially, followed by Morocco and Tunisia). In addition, France suffers in a particularly acute way from several problems.

(1) The Muslims live more concentrated together in what the French call the "suburbs of Islam." In part, this reflects a characteristically French difference from the United States: whereas here the affluent and the middle class have virtually abandoned the city for the suburbs (in order to have more space), in France and some other parts of Europe, the well-off have stayed in the city (wanting to travel less). This has relegated immigrants and other poor to dreary "suburbs" in the periphery of the cities. In the French case especially, Muslims tend to live isolated from others, creating their own subculture and building resentments.

(2) Muslims engage disproportionately in criminal activity, and mostly of a violent nature. Muslim youth gangs, for example, like their counterparts here, smash a stolen car into a luxury store, push aside the bewildered shopkeeper, and run off with the loot. It's gotten to the point that Arabs intimidate the French without specific reason. For example, the household I visited in the Riviera employs three gardeners, named Nabil, Ali, and Mustafa. Although one of the three has proven to be incompetent in the garden, the owners of the house dare not fire him, fearing retribution. When I asked if they knew of violence in other cases of dismissal, they said no, they simply had a bad feeling. Behind the idyllic appearance of the Côte d'Azur, in other words, lurk some quite powerful fears.

(3) Terrorism committed by Muslims takes place more often in France than elsewhere. One spasm of violence took place in 1986; another has occurred over the past three months, and has included attacks on a busy subway station and a Jewish school. The terror has prompted not only a massive manhunt (which led to a shootout and the death of the apparently lead perpetrator) but a host of security measures. Public trash bins throughout Paris have been sealed tight (to prevent their being used as bomb containers) and air travellers must run a gamut of concrete and paper obstacles. The

police set up impromptu road blocks here and there, causing traffic delays. Virtually every person I talked to agrees that the French population, famously ornery when it comes to authority, has accepted these inconveniences without complaint. This, they further agree, points to the widespread conviction that the country needs to protect itself.

Future of the country. Beyond these specific problems, some French believe the very nature of their country to be in play. One prominent journalist (who plans to write on this subject for the *Middle East Quarterly*) told me he thinks that France may change from what it is into an Arab and Muslim country in the course of the next century. How so? He pointed to two main trends, the demographic and the political. The French, like almost all modern peoples, are not sustaining their own population even as the nearby North Africans have one of the highest rates of reproduction in the world. Over time, he holds, the North Africans will ineluctably fill the vacuum in France.

Secondly, there's the matter of will. As a post-Christian country, he sees the French lacking the will to maintain their own against the powerful wishes of the Muslim immigrants. As the latter population gains in numbers and sophistication, he sees a real possibility of French civilization's drying up and the country's changing course in profound ways.

I checked out this astonishing prediction with others and found that while no one else put the case so strongly as did the journalist, no one entirely disagreed with him either. Rather, a wide agreement seems to exist that unless something changes, the historic French population will over the long term not be able to control the immigrant population. This prospect, needless to say, worries more than a few of the French.

Daniel Pipes is director of the Middle East Forum.

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