

Muslims in France: A Ticking Time Bomb?

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

The following are excerpts of remarks by Washington Institute senior fellow Soner Cagaptay at a FrontPageMagazine.com symposium moderated by Jamie Glazov.

Percentagewise, as well as in cumulative terms, France has the largest Muslim community in the EU. There are no official figures, since France does not collect numbers on religious affiliation, but according to official estimates, there are 6 million Muslims in France; that is, 10 percent of the population. Unofficial estimates point at an even higher figure, suggesting as many as 8–9 million Muslims. What is more, given the low birth rate in the general French society, and the continuing immigration of Muslims from North Africa, this number is bound to increase.

The issue I would like to raise in this context is not that we should be concerned that there are so many Muslims in France; rather it is that the Muslims in France see themselves at the margins of the society and resent that fact. Muslims in France are the worst integrated Muslim community in any EU country. Mass Muslim immigration to France is a post–World War II development. Many came from North Africa, especially Algeria, to look for jobs. However, France has done a terrible job in integrating them. The benign founding myth of the French state, that there are no differences between citizens, has worked against the integration of Muslims. On the one hand, from the very beginning, Muslims in France, already from a background of conservative-rural Islam, had few avenues toward assimilation into the metropolitan French society, and on the other, the society has acted as if these barriers do not exist.

The end result is that vast segments of the Muslim population in France have little to do with the rest of society. There are, for instance, no Muslims in the French parliament. And when is the last time anyone met a Muslim diplomat representing France? The banlieus of Paris, Marseilles, and other major French cities today are full of poor, disgruntled North African Muslims who feel discriminated against in the school system, in the public sector, and in access to government services. The bottom line is that elite institutions, means of upward mobility, and quality government services are inaccessible to most Muslims in France. What is more, with the rise of radicalism in the 1990s, these neighborhoods are now under the effective control of fundamentalist Muslims. If I were French, I would be very worried. . . .

Europe is not a continent with religious tolerance. Look at 1492, the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain and then Portugal, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of French Protestants in 1572, the Thirty Years War, incessant

pogroms against Jews in Eastern Europe from the seventeenth century until the twentieth, the Holocaust, and last but not least, the expulsion and annihilation of European Muslims in Central Europe, the Balkans, and Russia ever since the seventeenth century.

Why am I making this point? Even under the veneer of post 1968-multiculturalism . . . there persists a Europe that is intolerant toward religions other than Christianity. What is interesting is that in this day and age, when a majority of Europeans are either nonbelievers or lapsed Christians, and Europe is arguably the most secular, Europeans view Muslims through their religious identity and their European credentials—or their lack thereof. Given this dynamic and the historically combustive mix of religious hatred on the Continent, here is my prediction for a worst-case scenario, which I should add I would never want to see: imagine for a minute that there were September 11–style attacks in France. What would the French response be?

We have a small-scale test case to answer this question. Remember what happened after the murder of van Gogh in the Netherlands. This was a gruesome and appalling murder. Yet, the response to it—acts of violence against Muslims and mosques collectively in the old, but apparently still alive, European fashion—showed that even in the very liberal Dutch society, the old European mindset still persists. Hence, to go back to my worst-case scenario, if there were a September 11–type of attack in France, I shudder to think in which ways the majority French people will take on the Muslims in the country.

[Read a PDF version \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/cagaptay070405.pdf\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/cagaptay070405.pdf) of the entire symposium.

[Read \(http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=18631\)](http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=18631) the symposium transcript at FrontPageMagazine.com.

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