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## Unveiling French Xenophobia: A Study of Prejudice Against Arabs in France

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**UNVEILING FRENCH XENOPHOBIA:  
A STUDY OF PREJUDICE AGAINST ARABS IN FRANCE**

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**Abstract**

*This paper reports on the socioeconomic status of Arabs and how attitudes toward them vary between France and the United States. It is intended to illuminate the French perspective toward Arabs to an American audience while comparing it to the American perspective. Arabs hold a lower socioeconomic status in France than in America. They are frequently targeted by French policy, which has formerly aimed to repatriate them but now focuses on assimilating them. In America, Arabs face less cultural oppression, but more political exclusion. Because Americans prize independence as opposed to community, Arabs have more freedom to retain their home cultures; however Americans are hostile to perceived opposition to government and fear an Arab link to terrorism. Thus, while the French and Americans both fear Arabs, the French perceive Arabs as symbolic threats to French culture, while Americans perceive Arabs as militant opponents.*

**Introduction**

In international relations today, one of the biggest issues is the troubled relationship between the Arab world and the West. France and the United States, two prominent powers of the West, have each recently had high-profile problems with Arabs both within and outside of their borders. The terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 brought American relations with Arabs to the world's attention. However, France's history with the Arab world has a far more extensive past than that of the U.S, dating to its colonial era; in addition, its internal conflicts have received much more media attention. In the past two decades, France has been the object of international attention due to its debate over Islamic headscarves and the violence in its *banlieue* (low-income, high-crime suburbs where high concentrations of minorities are found).

For some Americans, it can be hard to fully understand the racial and cultural tensions due to differences in French and American cultural perspectives. Americans feel in some ways able to relate to the French perspective because the U.S. also has a past of deeply troubled race relations. In other ways, French actions can baffle Americans. For example, most Americans would have serious reservations about banning the *hijab* (an Islamic garment which covers a woman's hair and neck) in schools or the *niqab* (an Islamic garment which covers the entire body except the eyes) and *burqa* (an Islamic garment which covers the entire body) in public, as the French have done. It is useful to compare the situations of France and the U.S. concerning Arab relations because the two states are similar in many ways, including their foreign policy toward Arab states; however they differ widely regarding Arabs within their borders and how they are viewed (Scott 1-12). To shed light on the French perspective for an American audience, this paper includes a description of French public policy affecting Arabs and the socioeconomic problems facing Arabs in France. It also includes a comparison between U.S. and French policies. The goal of this paper is to elucidate the American and French racial and cultural tensions and

provide suggestions to address these issues.

For this paper, it is important to be clear about the terms used. In everyday usage, “Arab” is not a well-defined or well-understood word. Some people use it to refer to people from the Middle East; others define Arabs as anyone who speaks Arabic; still others consider it synonymous with “Muslim.” For the purposes of this paper, Arab is defined as anyone of Egyptian, Sudanese, Somali, Libyan, Tunisian, Algerian, Moroccan, Mauritanian, Syrian, Jordanian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi, Saudi Arabian, Yemenite, Kuwaiti, Qatari, Omani, Bahraini, or United Arab Emirates ancestry; these countries are all in the Arab League (Nigem 629). This, of course, is not a homogeneous group since people from these states have different dialects, religions, and histories (Salaita 6). However, over time they have come to be grouped together into the loose cultural identity of “Arab.”

In France, most Arabs originate from the Maghreb, which refers to Northwest Africa (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, and Mauritania); in particular, large numbers of Arabs are from Algeria. While not all Arabs are Muslim, Islam is a central element of Arab culture. Since Arabs are the largest non-European immigrant group in France, and the conversion rate of Europeans to Islam is low, most Muslims in France are Arab. There are some Muslim immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, but in much smaller numbers. Therefore, issues of discrimination against Islam and its followers are connected with discrimination against Arabs.

## **Literature Review**

### **2. Socioeconomic status of Arabs in France**

#### *2.1 Unemployment*

The economic status of Arabs in France has consistently been lower than that of non-Arab French citizens. When Arabs first began immigrating to France in large numbers to replenish the labor force, they were generally employed in low-skill, low-paying jobs. The French viewed Arabs as short-term replacements for French workers, and when the need for immigrant labor decreased after the wars, Arabs were then viewed as reserve labor. It was generally understood by French citizens that these reserve labor forces were supposed to continue to supplement labor when needed, and disappear otherwise. The French did not realize that most Arabs were settling permanently in France, which contributed to the animosity between the groups when unemployment rose in the 1970s. Because Arabs were only intended to be reserve labor, the French believed that Arabs were stealing their jobs (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 40-56).

Arabs and other immigrant groups in France have consistently experienced higher unemployment rates than non-immigrant groups. Immigrants from Asia and Africa have much higher unemployment rates than immigrants from other states of the EU (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 40-45). According to Hargreaves, unemployment is highest (20-25%) among people who move to France from countries outside the European Economic Area or individuals who are descendants of these groups. Though data do not specify unemployment rates by country of origin, given other data sources regarding unemployment rates among Arabs, it seems evident that a large portion of France’s non-EEA immigrants is comprised of Arabs. In addition, immigrants and their descendants who relocate from the EEA experience unemployment rates (roughly 9.5%) almost identical to those of non-immigrant French citizens. For immigrants who relocate from outside the EEA, whether or not they have officially become French citizens, the unemployment rates are more than double those of the native French.

More recent data indicate that the highest unemployment rates in 2010 (24.2%) were experienced by the descendants of non-EEA immigrants; in other words, they are comprised of immigrants’ children and grandchildren, all of whom had been born and raised in France

(Bouvier 1-4). This suggests that racism is a factor in their unemployment. The high unemployment rate for this group is a significant cause for the discontent felt by many *beurs*, or second-generation Arabs in France.

Further analysis of the unemployment rates among non-EEA immigrants in France confirms that Arabs suffer much higher jobless rates than most other immigrant groups. From 2007 to 2010, unemployment rates were the highest among immigrants from the Maghreb; higher unemployment rates were experienced only by immigrants from Turkey. In contrast, immigrants from nearby EU countries (e.g. Spain, Portugal, and Italy) experienced unemployment rates similar to the native population, which was roughly half that of the Maghrebi immigrants (Bouvier 1-4). Some attempt to explain this disparity by attributing it to Arabs' poor French language skills. However, this explanation is not wholly valid, since most of France's Arab immigrants come from its former colonies in North Africa, where French is still spoken (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 56).

Even when comparably skilled, an Arab worker is almost three times more likely to be unemployed than a European worker (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 56). When Arabs are able to find jobs in France, they are usually in low-skill, low-paying jobs such as construction; this reflects a similar pattern of employment during the first waves of Arab immigration of the 1950s-1960s (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 40). In addition to low salaries, these jobs are characterized by insecurity, often consisting of short-term projects from which employees are easily fired and replaced. As the second and third generations of Arabs in France enter the work force, they are finding the same types of jobs as their parents, thus remaining in the same low-income economic conditions. In addition to low economic status, Arabs in France also have very low upward mobility due to French racism and Arab disenfranchisement (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 50-56).

## 2.2 Housing

Finding acceptable housing has been a persistent problem for Arabs in France. While this can be linked to their current poor economic status, during the first waves of Arab immigration, it was also tied to poor government preparation. For example, in the years after World War II, France was not prepared for the large influx of immigrants into its country; as a result it suffered a dire housing shortage. Many immigrants were moved into outlying settlements (*bidonvilles*), which in English could be called shantytowns. These settlements often lacked basic amenities including electricity, running water, and sewers. By the 1960s, at least 75,000 people lived in *bidonvilles*, 80% of whom were immigrants. Half of the immigrants living in *bidonvilles* were from the Maghreb (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 68-71). There was at least one slightly better option for housing overflow; in 1956, *Sonacotral* (National Society of Construction of Housing for Algerian Workers) developed hostel accommodations for Algerian workers that offered better basic facilities than the *bidonvilles*; however they also separated Algerians geographically from the rest of the population (Viet 93-95). In 1963, the hostels were expanded to include any foreign workers, and they continued to be used for many years; by 1990, 100,000 foreigners lived in these hostels (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 68-71).

The French government initiated efforts to relieve the housing shortage and eradicate *bidonvilles* in the 1970s. The government began to offer increased subsidized, public housing opportunities, known as *HLMs* (*habitation à loyer modéré*, or moderate-rent housing). *HLMs* tend to be concentrated in the peripheries of large cities (Viet 93-95) and are mostly inhabited by immigrants, particularly Arab immigrants. These areas are often called *banlieues*. A *banlieue* is similar in concept to the American ghetto in that it consists of areas of public housing, largely inhabited by minorities, which often experience high rates of poverty, crime, and violence.

However, *banlieues* are generally smaller than American ghettos and have lower rates of poverty and crime. While American ghettos are located within the inner city, *banlieues* are located on the edges of cities. As in the U.S., there is poor transportation between the inner city and the *banlieue*, furthering the sense of separation between the two areas and serving as a barrier to employment, shopping, and social support opportunities. The *banlieue* has come under increased scrutiny since the 1990s, when violent confrontations between disenfranchised youth and police in the area became frequent. The media have heavily covered such confrontations and often presented it as a problem with the “Arab youth”, further giving the area and the Arabs in it a reputation for lawlessness (Hargreaves, *Immigration* 71-75).

### 3. Public Policy Affecting Arabs

Public policy concerning Arabs has been inconsistent over the years. For example, the French government has at times (a) ignored Arabs, (b) attempted to send them back to their countries of origin, and (c) attempted to integrate them into French society. This inconsistency is due to the alternation of the left and the right political groups holding power in the government and to varying attitudes of the French people, which often correlate with economic conditions.

As previously noted, the French people assumed before the 1970s that Arab immigrants were hired temporarily to supply labor; it was largely assumed that they would return to their countries of origin when they were no longer needed. As a result, Arab immigrants were not the subject of much public debate. However, following the recession of the 1970s and the increasing unemployment rates, Arabs were viewed as competitors for increasingly scarce jobs. Thus, the image of Arabs was now as competitors who had overstayed their welcome (Nielsen 7-8).

Immigration policy is exercised through controls applied to the flow of immigrants, and integration, which is applied to residents of immigrant origin (Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France* 175-179). The French government’s approach to labor immigration can be summarized into three basic periods since 1974. The first period corresponds with Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s presidency (1974-1981). His center-right government attempted an aggressive approach to restrict immigration and to send non-European immigrants to their countries of origin through incentives for leaving and deterrents for settling permanently in France. The second period began in 1981, when Socialist François Mitterrand took the presidency, and lasted until 1997. During this period, the government retained strict controls on immigration but shifted its immigration policy focus from repatriation to integration, with the hope of transforming Arabs into true French citizens. The right renounced mass repatriation as a goal in 1991, perhaps trying to distance itself from the FN and recognizing the failure of mass repatriation policies in the past. However both the left and the right political groups began to show enthusiasm for integrating Arabs, though the right still supported restrictive citizenship laws. The third period began in 1997, when it became clear that the government’s attempts at integrating Arabs were failing, perhaps due to the deteriorating economy; as a result, it was believed that anti-discrimination measures were needed.

#### 3.1 Political Climate of the 1970s-1980s and the Front National

During the 70s, the center-right government sent mixed messages about how it intended to address Arab immigrant policy. The official policy in the later years was to halt new labor immigration, but to integrate immigrants already established in France. While the left and right political groups agreed on these policy goals, they did not agree on how to achieve them (Lochak, *L’immigration* 251). For example, the government began to invest more money for improving the very poor conditions in which most immigrants lived. While the government also prevented families of immigrant workers from immigrating to France, this was found unlawful under the

European Convention on Human Rights of 1950. Due to strained economic conditions, including increasing unemployment rates, the French people were unwilling at that point to accept Arabs as a permanent part of society; as a result, bitterness against Arabs and their real and perceived use of French resources grew. By the end of the 1970s, unemployment was the primary concern of most French people; the French government under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing continually supported the reduction of the immigrant population as a solution to unemployment; data suggest, however that it was not able to carry out that reduction with much success (Guiraudon).

In the early 1980s, political party leaders began to compete with one other to find the best solutions to the problems associated with the Arab population. Many local elections were filled with debates over how to “handle” Arab immigrants (Lochak, *L'immigration* 251-252). In 1983, the *Front National* (FN) first gained national attention. While the FN had existed since 1972, it was only in the flurry of concern over Arab immigrants of the early 1980s that the party gained momentum and popularity. In 1983, the party won 17% of the vote in a local election in Dreux, a small town in northern France; this was a huge leap from its former obscurity. The FN was founded under Jean-Marie Le Pen, who continued to lead the party until his resignation in 2011, when his daughter Marine Le Pen assumed leadership. This far-right political party, whose platform is based on preserving the “purity” of French culture, supports measures to remove non-Europeans from France and exclude foreigners and immigrants from French nationality and its accompanying benefits (Bréchon and Mitra 63-65; “L'Internaute: Histoire”).

Though other political parties view the FN as an unacceptably extreme party, the growing support that the FN received forced other parties to respond to FN's immigration agenda and to address the fears of the public. While other parties felt pressure to support tougher immigration controls, they found this difficult to do while also trying to avoid appearing racist or xenophobic (Lochak, *L'immigration* 251-253). Party leaders on the right struggled with how to address the FN, which was shunned for its extremism, yet was gaining support and stealing voters from the center-right. Leaders fluctuated between making political deals with the FN, stealing ideas from the FN, and opposing the FN. At the national level, where the party was shunned, party leaders refused to make any open deals with the FN; however, at the local level, leaders were more willing to compromise. Throughout the 1980s, many local elections were won by alliances between the FN and center-right parties. When the right regained power in the national government in the 1990s, an increase in immigration legislation was executed in an attempt to lure back FN supporters (Bréchon and Mitra 63-66).

### 3.2 *The Right's Control Policy in the 1970s*

In terms of controlling immigration, the government has exercised two main tools: regulation of admission into France and limits on the duration of residence allowed. Along with limits on duration, on several occasions the government has changed the terms under which repatriation is required. For example, before 1981 the center-right government exercised strict control over immigration by attempting to end labor migration and family reunification. Though the government did not succeed in these efforts, it placed many obstacles for reunification for labor immigrants and their families. The unsuccessful policy of *aide au retour* (aid to return), whereby financial incentives were offered to immigrants who agreed to return to their countries of origin, also qualifies as a control measure. Another attempt to control immigration during the 1970s included executive orders that were created to reduce the number of work permits provided to immigrants and to deport unemployed immigrants (Guiraudon). The *Conseil d'État* (France's highest court) declared this order unlawful; despite this, in 1979 the government tried to achieve the same results by drafting similar legislation titled the Bonnet law of 1980. This

legislation restricted entry and residence rights for immigrants. Significantly, the law made it legal to hold foreigners in custody for a week while deportation orders were pending (Lochak, *The Bounds of Freedom*). The facilitation of holding and deporting foreigners was a sign of the growing French fear of Arabs as threats to French society and, perhaps more importantly, as threats to the French economy.

### 3.3 *The Left's Control Policy Starting in 1981*

When the left took control of the government in 1981 and started a more liberal approach to immigration policy, the use of restrictive controls was greatly reduced. The official government discourse shifted radically and ceased to emphasize the expulsion of immigrants. Instead, the government discontinued administrative expulsions and required court orders for most deportations. Measures were also passed to protect many immigrants from expulsion. For example, young immigrants who had spent the majority of their lives in France were protected from deportation. The government also granted amnesty for immigrants who had entered the country illegally before 1981, as long as they were employed (Lochak, *L'immigration* 251-253). As a result of this new policy, 132,000 immigrants were made legal citizens of France. In 1983, the government passed a law which simplified the renewal of work and residence permits by combining them into automatically renewable ten-year permits and granting them to most of the legal immigrants in France. Before this law, the renewal of permits was a confusing process and a source of anxiety to many immigrants (Martinez 36).

Despite the impressive amount of liberal immigration legislation during this period, the government still maintained strict control in certain aspects of immigration policy. For instance, the government implemented harsher penalties for employers who hired illegal immigrants; deportations of immigrants who were determined a threat to the public order became more frequent in 1983. The government also reintroduced repatriation incentives in the form of *aide à la réinsertion* (aid for reinsertion) in 1984. In addition, the government complicated family reunification by introducing requirements of certain housing conditions, which were difficult for many immigrants to meet (Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France* 177-180). Thus, while the left fostered an overall liberal phase of immigration policy and control, it was influenced by the previous government and the persistent fears of the public concerning immigration.

### 3.4 *The Right's Control Policy from 1986 Onward*

In 1986, conservative Jacques Chirac became Prime Minister, and the right regained power in the government. This led to another period of tightening immigration control. The parties of the right attempted unsuccessfully to revise the nationality code in 1986, under the premise that French nationality should be restricted to those who truly want it—an idea that implies that some people who had obtained French nationality did not appreciate or deserve it. The *exposé des motifs* (the explanation of the bill's purposes) states: "It is agreed that, henceforth, to insure that the acquisition of French nationality corresponds to a genuine will of those concerned ... We must avoid integrating people who do not actually desire it or who are not aware of having become French" (Lochak, *L'immigration* 255).<sup>1</sup>

Interior Minister Charles Pasqua initiated legislation that would restore executive control over deportations based on the threat of immigrants to the public order. The legislation, known as the Pasqua Law, placed more restrictions on obtaining the ten-year residence and work permits, and made more immigrants vulnerable to deportation. It also gave more powers to the police to regulate immigration and deportation. In 1988, Socialist Pierre Joxe assumed the

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from French sources are my own translations.

Interior Minister position and managed to reverse some of Pasqua's measures. However, the reversal was short-lived. In 1993, Pasqua became Interior Minister again and introduced the New Pasqua Laws, which consisted of harsh anti-immigration measures. The laws reinforced his previous legislation and placed strict restrictions on family reunification. The Pasqua laws had such a negative effect on immigrants and on the image of the French government that they were reversed in 1997. Still, the right persisted in tightening control in the 2000s, when Nicolas Sarkozy (Minister of the Interior at that time) initiated policy to encourage the immigration of professionals and to discourage immigration related to family reunification.

Following Sarkozy's presidency in 2007, the Minister of Immigration and Integration, Brice Hortefeux, continued Sarkozy's projects with the Hortefeux Law, which increased restrictions on entrance into France (Edmiston and Duménil 232-237). In early 2012, Sarkozy reiterated his wish to reduce immigration. On the television show, "Des paroles et des actes" ("Words and Acts"), Sarkozy noted that if reelected in May, "During my term, I think that in order to bring integration back into a good condition, we must divide the number of people that we receive in half, that is to say, to go from 180,000 per year to about 100,000". He also proposed ideas such as a mandatory test of French language skills for foreigners immigrating to join family members or marrying a French citizen (Jarry and Le Guernigou). Thus, despite the heightened popularity of anti-racism movements in the 90s, the right has continued to support strict immigration control.

### *3.5 Integration Policy: Ambiguous in the 1970s*

The application of integration measures has fluctuated greatly over the years. In the 1970s, the government sent mixed messages to its people by funding improvements in housing for immigrants but by also encouraging repatriation. No specific agent existed for immigrants until Antoine Postel-Vinay was appointed Minister of State for Immigrant Workers in 1974. Postel-Vinay ended the recruitment of labor immigrants. He attempted to improve conditions for immigrants in France by improving their housing options; however he resigned from his post after his efforts failed. Paul Dijoud assumed the post in 1974 and perpetuated the mixed signals the government sent to immigrants. He strongly encouraged repatriation by encouraging immigrants to retain their original cultures and discouraging their integration into French society. At the same time, he secured funding increases for immigrant housing, which implied that he welcomed the permanent settlement of immigrants, or perhaps simply accepted that they might not leave. To oversee the use of these funds, the *Commission Nationale pour le Logement des Immigrés* (CNLI: The National Commission for the Housing of Immigrants) was created. Some of the money raised in this way was used to construct or refurbish hostels for single immigrant workers; however the majority of funds were used to build public housing. At this time immigrants were relocated from the shantytowns to disadvantaged urban areas that would become the *banlieue*. Unfortunately, immigrant-housing funds were often misdirected and misused. For instance, some of the funding was used to refurbish or construct homes for non-immigrants. As a result, many immigrants frequently ended up living in the least desirable homes and areas of the public housing. Because of the high rate of misuse, the proportion of funds directed to immigrant housing was reduced and then abolished in 1987 (Viet 100-103).

In the late 1970s, the government began to encourage immigrants to keep in touch with their native cultures. While this could be interpreted as a precedent to the multiculturalism movement and a positive statement about the value of foreign cultures. considering the French preoccupation with unified culture and tradition, it is more logical that the true motivation was the hope that immigrants could eventually be repatriated. For successful repatriation, an



immigrant must still feel connected to his native culture, or he will not feel comfortable returning to it (Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France* 182-185).

As part of the promotion of immigrant culture, the new Minister of Immigrant Workers, Lionel Stoléru, created an advisory commission to consider the cultural needs of minority immigrant groups. In 1977, a weekly television show called “*Mosaïque*” (“Mosaic”) was introduced. “*Mosaïque*” was a show designed for children, but specifically targeted at immigrant children. It featured different cultural traditions, with an emphasis on those of the Maghreb. In another effort to keep immigrant children in touch with their native cultures, the French government made agreements about language instruction with some sending states (immigrants’ home countries). The agreements allowed sending states to fund a limited number of classes in their emigrants’ native languages in French public schools (Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France* 180-185).

### 3.6 *Integration in the 1980s: Integration and Multiculturalism*

In the mid-1980s, when it was evident that the Arab population was settling permanently in France, the newly left-ruled government shifted its focus from repatriation to integration. Under François Mitterrand, the government’s powers of expulsion were somewhat reduced. The *beur* identity began to materialize during this time, and numerous famous anti-racism marches took place in the mid-80s. However, integration continued to be a troublesome issue for the French, who wanted to avoid their former colonial image of cultural dominator, but who also placed great value on unity and cultural, racial, and ethnic “purity” (Bleich, *Anti-Racism* 173-174). In other words, if too much emphasis is placed on the distinctness of a culture or ethnicity, the French consider it a threat to their cultural unity and republican values. Ethnic separatism is such an issue that there is even a specific word for it in French: *communautarisme*. *Communautarisme* was also linked to the reform of the nationality code and the emerging dichotomy between “good” and “bad” immigrants. “Good” immigrants were those who were legal, employed, and adapted to French culture. “Bad” immigrants were defined as illegal, likely unemployed, and individuals who prevented other immigrants from integrating well (Lochak, *The Bounds of Freedom* 253-254).

### 3.7 *Integration from the 1990s Onward*

At the beginning of the 1990s, the left still held power in the government. This political party was enthusiastic about integration, though the leaders in the right still spoke of the need to control the immigrant “invasions” (Lochak, *L’immigration* 257). Prime Minister Edith Cresson strategically chose Kofi Yamgnane to be the Minister of State for Integration. Yamgnane was born in Togo and had become a successful politician in France. He was also Catholic and not particularly friendly toward Islam. He was thus a clear symbol of successful integration since Yamgnane was able to remain connected to his native culture while adapting to key aspects of French culture. Moreover, he became an important part of French society through politics; as such, this made him a prime candidate to facilitate integration for other immigrants (“L’Ouest en mémoire”).

After the Pasqua laws of 1993, the Arab community became increasingly frustrated with its political, economic and cultural situation in France. Tensions rose in the *banlieue* between Arab youth and police, and riots occurred. The people of France were shocked by the grim situation, and the public spotlight turned to the problem of racism in the country. Before the 1990s, the French were fairly oblivious to their racism. With public attention turning to Arabs, however, the level of discrimination they faced became apparent. The public began to see how discrimination and racism against Arabs provoked anger and resentment, subsequently creating the threat to the

public order France was currently facing. That threat to the public order came to be called *insécurité* (insecurity), a concept that encompassed fears for personal safety and the safety of society as a whole. *Insécurité* grew in the 1990s as violent confrontations occurred between Arab youth and police; petty and violent crimes were committed by socially and economically disadvantaged youth, and French-Arab youths participated in Islamic terrorist bombings. The government tried to combat these problems by reinforcing police forces in the *banlieue*; however most politicians realized that discrimination was the root problem. Integration could not move forward as long as severe discrimination remained (Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France 186-190*).

At the same time, public sympathy for illegal immigrants grew as awareness of racism rose and Arabs gained more of a public voice through media such as the popular movie *La Haine* (*Hate*), which depicted the struggles of minorities in the *banlieue*. Both the left and right attempted to be viewed as more moderate on immigration issues. In 1997, Interior Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement said in an interview with *Le Monde*: “I am convinced that there is room for an immigration policy that is generous but firm, in keeping with the national interest, upon which a vast majority of our fellow-citizens can be united in consent” (Lochak, *L’immigration* 259). Also in 1997, the government called upon political scientist Patrick Weil to develop new regulations for the entrance and residence of foreigners in France. The regulations were to be simple, realistic, and humane. It was in this process of reforming the immigration and nationality laws that the government repealed the Pasqua Laws (Lochak, *L’immigration* 259-260). Thus, the mixed government of the late 1990s demonstrated growing sympathy for the immigrants of France.

### 3.8 Ethnic Monitoring

The increasing focus on immigration policy reveals a French struggle that is linked to the situation of Arabs and other minorities. In France, official recognition of different ethnic groups had historically been considered taboo. In the past, France had scoffed at the American and British approaches to ethnicity and race relations. To the French, American and British policies encouraged *communautarisme* and demonstrated opposition to the French goal of unified integration. Recognizing ethnicity was and continues to be considered contrary to the French values of equality and *laïcité* (the key French value of secularism), which the French interpret as an official blindness to differences such as religion and ethnicity. While Americans idealize the celebration of diversity, the French avoid even acknowledging differences. Furthermore, ethnic recognition is associated with painful memories of the Holocaust and the Vichy regime (when the French government kept official records on Jews and minorities and used them to cooperate with Hitler). Thus, any form of ethnic monitoring or recognition of ethnicity has traditionally been forbidden (Bleich, *Social Research* 66).

Considering the French aversion to British-style racial and ethnic recognition, it was considered shocking to the French people when the *Haut Conseil à l’Intégration* (HCI) reported in 1998 that Britain’s Commission for Racial Equality might be a good model for addressing discrimination and inequality. While the HCI was interested in creating a similar independent body to address race relations, it did not develop one at the time (Garbaye); instead, a free hotline was created through which people could report discrimination to authorities. Unfortunately, the authorities were not at all prepared to handle the volume of complaints received. The hotline instead referred callers to regional citizenship commissions, who in turn referred callers to immigration or racism-based Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). This inadequate response only led to further disillusionment among Arabs about the state’s desire and its ability to improve race relations (Lépinard and Simon 12).

In 2005, Prime Minister de Villepin appointed Azouz Begag as Minister for Equal Opportunities. Like Kofi Yamgnane, Begag was a strategic politician. Born in Lyon to Algerian parents, Begag became a successful researcher, writer, and politician; he wrote several books about multiculturalism and ethnicity in France. As such, Begag was considered the perfect candidate to represent successful Arab integration into French society (Gazsi). Begag has favored ethnic monitoring and other proactive measures as a way to enforce equality laws, though many other members of the government still resist these ideas. In his book *Ethnicity & Equality*, Begag describes how France could benefit from systems that encourage “social mixing” and provide more opportunities to ethnic youth, with the help of ethnic monitoring (Begag).

President Nicolas Sarkozy has been unclear about his position on ethnic monitoring. In 2003, when he was Minister of the Interior, he expressed support not just for ethnic monitoring, but also for positive discrimination (policies that privilege historically disadvantaged groups; i.e., affirmative action). While he initially noted that France needed more Muslims in senior professional and public positions, he recanted two years later, suggesting that positive discrimination should be territorially-based, not ethnically- or religiously-based (Bleich, *Social Research* 67).

Though Sarkozy did not introduce any new principles in ethnic monitoring, he did oversee increasing equality measures, which indirectly benefited Arabs. One area of improvement involved the *grandes écoles*, the most prestigious universities in France. The vast majority of students in the *grandes écoles* are from wealthy families who spend thousands of dollars on preparatory courses; entry into the schools is highly competitive and graduates of the *grandes écoles* are historically guaranteed good jobs. To address the inequality of access to the *grandes écoles*, the *Institut d'Études Politiques* (the *grande école* of political science) created an additional method of entry for high school students from *Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires* (ZEPs) whereby they write and defend two papers instead of taking an entrance exam, the content of which is suggested to be biased against immigrants. While this new method did not explicitly target Arabs, it did primarily benefit Arabs and other minorities, since they are the main residents of ZEPs. Since its implementation, at least two-thirds of students admitted through this method are comprised of minorities; several other schools later enacted similar practices (Bleich, *Social Research* 67-68).

Sarkozy also supported positive discrimination and other policies that benefit low-income youth, specifically through preparatory courses for entry into civil service employment. His suggestion follows the pattern of indirectly trying to reverse racism by targeting disadvantaged areas. This supports the taboo of directly addressing race and ethnicity by basing measures on territory (Bleich *Social Research* 67-68).

With the May 2012 election of Socialist President François Hollande, it is unclear how policy affecting Arabs will change. Hollande has avoided making explicit statements about his stance on immigration, but it appears he holds views similar to his predecessor. Although he has criticized Sarkozy and conservatives for moving too closely to the extreme right, he has also said he will uphold enforcement of the burqa ban and limits on economic immigration (Sage). However, as a member of the Socialist Party, he may face increased pressure from his party to liberalize his policies.

### 3.9 ZEPs

*Zones d'Éducation Prioritaires* (Priority Education Zones) are defined as disadvantaged zones whereby public schools receive extra state resources. The zones were created in 1982 in response to high rates of academic failure among disadvantaged students in urban areas; ZEPs

were designed to improve education. Interestingly, the criteria for being recognized as a ZEP contain an ethnic factor; the guidelines for selection as a ZEP are loosely based (among other factors) on rates of unemployment, blue-collar jobs held, and notably, the number of families with non-European members. To combat the problems of high dropout rates and poor exam scores, ZEP schools receive extra teachers, funding, and other benefits (Bénabou, Kramarz, and Prost 3-4). The ZEP program attests to the value the French place in their education system, for the French view the public school as the place where republican values are instilled in children. Thus, when faced with the difficulty of integrating large numbers of Arabs into French society, they turn to the school to help prepare foreign children to be successful French citizens.

### 3.10 Halal Controversy

Recently, *halal* food has gained national attention—a development Americans might find puzzling, since the preparation methods of food are not of great concern to most in the U.S. In Arabic, “*halal*” means “permissible” according to Islamic law. The Quran gives certain dietary guidelines for *halal* food. According to the Quran, Muslims cannot eat pork, and any animal that a Muslim eats must be slaughtered in a certain way. In addition, the animal’s meat must not come into contact with any non-*halal* food. In 2010, the French burger chain Quick began serving *halal* hamburgers in 8 out of its 366 restaurants; they also stopped serving bacon burgers and started using *halal* meat. The decision increased its number of Muslim customers, but it also caused controversy among non-Muslims. Some politicians claimed the *halal* menu was a threat to France’s Christian culture and to *laïcité*; they also believed that the new menus were exclusive to non-Muslims.

In response to public outrage, FN staged a protest and FN leader Marine Le Pen suggested that a tax should be collected from Islamic certification organizations. Authorities in one northern city opened a criminal investigation on Quick. The chain offered a compromise in which customers could also order non-*halal* burgers, and the mayor withdrew his complaint. Other politicians attempted to force the chain to serve both *halal* and non-*halal* meat. This was despite the fact that there is no significant taste or texture difference between the two types of meat, and it is not economically efficient to store and prepare the two types of meat separately (Seelow). In response, a Muslim consumer website suggested that the negative reaction was due entirely to anti-Islamic sentiments. Since there are many other restaurants that cater to niche markets and exclude others, such as Mexican, Chinese, or “green” restaurants, the writer questioned the claim that *communautarisme* is the problem (“Al-Kantz”).

*Halal* food has also been a point of contention in public schools. There are currently no public schools that offer *halal* options in their cafeterias. In August 2011, a statement from the Minister of the Interior reported, “The school cafeteria is an optional public service ... providing menus accommodating religious practices constitutes neither a right for the users nor an obligation for the community” (“Aufait Maroc”). In early 2012, Marine Le Pen provoked a debate among politicians by announcing that she wants to ban *halal* in school cafeterias (“Aufait Maroc”). Her statement spurred some other politicians to show that they, too, oppose *halal*. In March, Prime Minister Fillon criticized the observance of *halal* and kosher regulations by saying that they are ancestral traditions with no relevance in modern society. His criticism drew outrage from Jewish and Muslim organizations. President Sarkozy expressed his opposition to *halal* in cafeterias and has supported clearer labeling of *halal* meat so that non-Muslims will not accidentally purchase it (Foulkes).

On the other hand, some politicians, including conservatives, have taken the opportunity to show their openness to Islam. Salima Saa, member of the Union for a Popular Movement

(UMP) and daughter of a *harki* (Muslim Algerians who supported France during the Algerian War and subsequently fled to France), stated that she was “saddened to see the spread of negative and devaluing judgments of the Muslims of France” (Foulkes). Still others have distanced themselves from the debate or attempted to minimize its importance. For example, Minister of Foreign Affairs Alain Juppé stated, “I think that the problem of *halal* meat is in reality a false problem, that there are other true questions that must be raised” (Foulkes). The various responses reflect the still unsettled French approach to Islam.

#### 4. Arabs in the U.S.A.

##### 4.1 History of Arab Migration into America

The situation of Arab Americans is quite different than that of Arabs in France.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. began as a country of immigrants and has based much of its identity on that concept, though new immigrant groups have always faced discrimination after arrival. This suggests a different attitude toward immigrants than in France, which for much of its history was a fairly homogenous nation, both culturally and racially. In addition to America’s distinct identity as an immigrant nation, the conditions of Arab immigration into the U.S. have been different from those in France; this influences how relations between Arab Americans and the U.S. develop.

The earliest wave of Arab immigrants came to America in the late 1800s-1920s. Unlike France, there was no great labor demand drawing Arabs to the country. Most early immigrants were Christians from villages in Greater Syria, as opposed to France’s largely Muslim Algerian immigrants. Like France’s Arab immigrants, they were comprised of generally poor, semi- or unskilled workers who obtained low-paying jobs. However, most of the immigrants’ loyalties were to their home villages rather than their native country or Arab culture in general, so they did not form a unified community like other immigrant groups in America, such as the Italians or the Irish. Because they did not form a conspicuous community, and because they were mostly Christian, Arab immigrants provoked fewer xenophobic reactions in America than Arabs in France (Samhan 11-27).

Moreover, the U.S. had had minimal relations with the Arab world in the early 1900s, so it lacked the tense backdrop of colonialism that France shared with North Africa. However, this time period (1880s-1920s) coincided with a rise in American nativism, which resulted in increased xenophobia toward all immigrant groups. The rise in nativism was due to the decreased demand for labor and the increased number of immigrants from poorly understood cultures, such as Southern and Eastern Europe. Many Americans began to blame immigrants for the social problems of their day, including ghettos, crime, poverty, corruption, labor unrest, and radical ideologies. Of the immigrant groups, the Chinese were considered the “most foreign,” and Syrians were the second “most foreign” due to differences in their culture and physical appearance.

In the early 1900s, several laws were passed to restrict immigration, especially from Asia. One law was titled the Johnson Reed Act of 1924, which specified annual immigration quotas of only one percent of the existing immigrant community of 1920. At the same time, many Americans were confused about exactly who or what Arabs were in terms of culture, race, and ethnicity. For example, during these years, disputes arose regarding whether Syrians should be awarded citizenship because it was unclear whether they were Asian (non-white) or white. Arabs were also frequently mistaken for other ethnicities such as Italian, Spaniard, Portuguese, Turk, or

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<sup>2</sup> The terminology is perhaps even more complicated when it comes to describing Arabs in America. It might be more fitting to frame this section in terms of America’s conflicts with the Islamic World rather than the Arab World, but I have chosen to keep my focus on Arabs for the sake of consistency.

Jew, as evidenced by the fact that ethnic slurs for those groups were often used for Arabs as well. Nevertheless, the first generation of Arab immigrants continued to integrate successfully, and by the 1920s, the second generation had been born in America and was being raised in assimilation with other American children. Thus, Arab integration into America progressed relatively successfully (Samhan 11-27).

The Arab situation in the U.S. changed with the second wave of immigration in the 1950s and 1960s. These immigrants consisted primarily of individuals fleeing economic and political crises in the Middle East. They were very different from earlier Arab immigrants in that they identified as Muslim, consisted of middle-and upper income households, and were more attached to their native cultural identities. Unlike the early, disorganized immigrant groups, they formed groups based on regional loyalty and identity. The issue of Israel was and remains a critical element in the Arab American identity.

After the Arab-Israeli Wars in 1967 and 1973, a stereotype arose in America of Arabs as fanatic terrorists. Many Arabs found themselves in disagreement with the American support of the Israeli state's creation, which helped to unify Arab Americans as a group. The increased organization and visibility of Arab American groups led to increased general American awareness of their existence, which led to more pronounced stereotypes. In addition, the media began to portray Arabs as "villainous, greedy, blood-thirsty, or dangerous" (Samhan 11-18).

#### *4.2 Political Exclusion*

Samhan argues that Arab opposition to the creation of Israel was in fact the cause of a particular kind of discrimination Arab Americans face, which she calls political exclusion. Arab Americans who voiced their support for Palestine or their disagreement with the American government were regarded as highly suspicious. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) monitored many Arab American groups, including the Association of Arab-American University Graduates and individual political activists. Arabs seeking visas to the U.S. were carefully screened and questioned in regard to their political opinions. These measures were meant to prevent Arab terrorism, which was increasing in the Middle East. At the same time, Americans generally ignored Israeli acts against Palestinians that could qualify as terroristic, while focusing on Arab terrorist acts against Israelis reflecting a bias in favor of Israelis over Arabs and a refusal to recognize Israeli fault. This time period produced an ongoing legacy of associating Arabs with terrorism and the acceptability of viewing any politically active Arab as a security threat (Samhan 11-27).

#### *4.3 Socioeconomic Status of American Arabs*

This type of exclusionary or political racism in the U.S. is very different from the type of political racism Arabs in France experience. It is important to distinguish this from the "pervasive, societal discrimination" that other minorities, such as African Americans, have faced in America (Samhan 27). Primary evidence of the difference between the types of racism is the socioeconomic status of Arab Americans and the fact that Arab Americans were not originally brought to this country as slaves. In contrast to Arabs in France who are generally poor, uneducated, and who hold low-paying, blue-collar jobs, Arab Americans often are of higher economic status than the average non-Arab American. In the early 1980s, over half of Arab Americans had some higher education, as opposed to only a third of Americans in general. In addition, 61% of Arab Americans held white-collar jobs, compared with only 49% of Americans (Nigem 638-639). Even now, after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, these statistics are almost the same. According to recent American Community Survey results, the median income for an Arab

American household is \$59,012 and \$52,029 for all American households (“Arab American Institute”).

Whatever racism against Arab Americans exists in the U.S., it does not prevent them from succeeding financially. As Samhan argues, Arab Americans are able to succeed because the racism directed against them is mostly limited to the political realm. Arab Americans who have become involved in politics are usually Christians; most have also been born and raised in the U.S. and do not emphasize their heritage. While in general, this remains true today, some changes are taking place. In January 2007, Keith Ellison became the first Muslim to be elected to Congress. Ellison is not of Arab descent, but the election of a Muslim to such a high office bodes well for Muslim Arab Americans. He quickly provoked controversy when he chose to be sworn into office with a Quran, rather than a Bible. Not to be dissuaded, he was sworn in using a Quran once owned by Thomas Jefferson. In his 2009 speech at Cairo, President Obama cited Ellison’s ceremony with Jefferson’s Quran as an example of the positive relationship between Islam and America (Obama). Ellison’s experience shows that America is making progress in reducing xenophobia toward Arabs and Muslims; however Arab Americans and Muslims who become involved in politics still risk drawing negative attention and racist or xenophobic criticism.

#### *4.4 “Othering” of Arabs in America*

Unfortunately, the suspicions, fears, and misunderstandings that some Americans felt toward Arabs, even Arab Americans, were aggravated by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Salaita argues that the attacks made American attitudes more extreme, no matter how they viewed Arab Americans prior to the attacks. For instance, Americans who already tended to be racist or xenophobic found justification in the attacks and encouragement to be more aggressive; those who already supported multiculturalism used a backlash against the former group’s outbursts to further campaign against exclusion and inequality. On the one hand, there were outpourings of sympathy toward Arab Americans in the time after the attacks; on the other, an insidious “us/them” vocabulary quickly developed. For example, Congressman Howard Coble discussed the possibility of internment of Arab Americans on a radio call-in show. He reasoned, “some of these Arab Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us” (Salaita 158). It is significant that even though he acknowledges the group’s status as Americans, he sets them against the “us” of Americans in general, implying they are not truly part of the American group. This vocabulary permeated even the discourse of Americans who tried to encourage acceptance and sympathy toward Arab Americans. Often, such encouragements would contain the ideas that “Arab Americans are just like us,” and “They love this country just as much as we do.” While positive on the surface, these statements perpetuate the “us/them” divide. Instead of acknowledging them as true members of the American group, such statements maintain the idea that Arab Americans are a group separate from other Americans (Salaita 146-161).

At the same time, the U.S. government has taken advantage of popular fears in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> to justify much interference with the privacy of its citizens, especially Arab Americans. Salaita claims that the government not only took advantage of such fears, but also purposely induced them so that it could then engage in practices such as ethnic profiling, surveillance, citizen spying, and detention (Salaita 159).

### **5. Conclusion**

The idea of Arab threat is where American attitudes are most similar to the French, though the fear is projected differently. Both nations view their culture as exceptional and in need of protection. Both nations perceive Arabs as threats to those cultures, and justify intrusive laws and practices. To the French, conspicuous visual markers of loyalty to another culture, and

especially to a culture in which religion plays a major role, are seen as a threat to French culture. The French focus on the *hijab* in public and now *halal* as well. To Americans, the primary concern is dissent from the government, particularly in matters of security or the Middle East. Thus, they are suspicious of Arabs who oppose America's support of Israel or question security measures. France and the U.S. have troubled relations with Arabs despite their efforts to be positive players in the Arab world because they have not overcome their xenophobic suspicions and fears about Arabs, which stem from their recent colonial and political histories, respectively.

Despite the similarities, the problems faced by Arabs in France and America are quite different. Until the past few decades, Americans had little experience with Arabs. When more Arabs began to immigrate to the U.S, they were politically, not economically motivated. As a result, they did not provoke resentment for "stealing" jobs, and they were not associated with low socioeconomic status. This contrasts with the poor Arabs who migrated to France in large numbers and who vied for low-paying jobs. These conditions set the background for the current issues involving Arabs in both countries. In America, Arabs face less everyday discrimination than in France. There are no proposed laws banning the *hijab*, and *halal* is almost nonexistent on the public debate radar. In areas sensitive to security issues (e.g., airports), Arabs may be seen as a threat due to the ignorant perception that all Arabs are potential terrorists, but this is not a problem of everyday life for Arabs. The opposite is true in France. Arabs are not recognized as physical threats in the form of terrorists, but as figurative threats to French culture. During the colonial era, the French began to see Islam as fundamentally opposed to *laïcité*, and *hijab* dress emerged as a focal point of French fear and suspicion. The French felt threatened by *hijab* in Algeria because they could not control it. *Hijab* in that context also incited French unease because of its symbolic defiance against the West and its support of Algerian nationalism. That unease continues today, the same symbolic struggle transplanted into mainland France.

Once Americans understand the complicated history of Franco-Arab relations, they can understand how the *hijab* has assumed such importance as a symbol of Franco-Arab conflict, to the point of sparking a national controversy lasting almost two decades. Americans should observe and learn from French policies and their results. Issues such as illegal immigration are of growing concern in America, and it would be wise to take note of which actions have succeeded and which have failed in France, particularly if a situation as divisive as the *hijab* controversy is to be avoided.



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