

8 The reinvented role of imams in French society

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Abstract

Based on the findings of a research project that combined ethnographic and socio-historic approaches, this chapter investigates how imams in France progressively established themselves as one of the main embodiments of Islamic authority under the dual impetus of Muslim communities and state authorities, particularly at the local level. Retracing the socio-historical stages of the reinvention of their role(s), it shows both how French imams have emerged as a distinctive type of ‘organic intellectuals of migration’ in their places of worship, and how they became the objects of public policies in *laïque* (‘secular’) French society.

Keywords: (history of) Imams in France, *laïcité*, immigration, state policy

1 Imams in France

This chapter is based on the findings of a doctoral study I conducted in France (Jouanneau, 2009a),¹ in which I investigated how imams have progressively established themselves as one of the main embodiments of Islamic authority under the dual impetus of Muslim communities and state authorities – particularly at the local level. Imams, who lead the main rites of the daily prayers and the Friday congregational prayers in French mosques, interact with a wide range of actors: the faithful, leaders of Muslim associations, consulates of their countries of origin, local politicians, and agents of the central French authorities.

1 The translation of this chapter into English was made possible by the Excellence Initiative of the University of Strasbourg, and funded by the French government’s Future Investments programme. Mr. Jean-Yves Bart skilfully executed the translation.

In my doctoral research, I explored why imams play a much more central role in France than they do in countries where Islam is both the state and majority religion (Frégosi, 2004, p. 137). This required retracing the socio-historical stages of their changing role(s) to identify the processes that have allowed imams to emerge as a distinct type of 'organic intellectuals of migration' in French places of worship. It also sheds light on the influence of civil servants in redefining the imamate in France. Indeed, civil servants have gradually made imams the objects of public policies, as they saw them as an 'immigrant clergy' that could have some authority over immigrants and their descendants.

I used a range of methods combining ethnographic and socio-historic approaches to conduct this research over a six-year period. In the early years, I carried out fieldwork in several Muslim prayer rooms in Eastern and Southern France to collect accounts of the life stories and practices of around 30 imams. I also spent several months making daily observations in a neighbourhood prayer hall. In the following stage of my research, I looked for traces of imams' historical presence in various archives, particularly those of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Additionally, I interviewed about fifteen senior civil servants who had been assigned to work on Islam in France at some point in their careers.

This chapter briefly presents the main findings of this research. In the first part I retrace the main steps in the institutionalization of the social role of imams in France, as Muslim immigrant workers and their families settled into French society. The focus is on the conditions that made genuine community leadership possible for imams in France. I also describe the most important features of imams' role in contemporary France. The second part shows that from the 1990s onwards imams also became the targets of public policies aimed at influencing Islam's identity in France as oppositional political Islam gained momentum in major countries of Muslim emigration.

2 From imams in the trenches to neighbourhood imams

The first French imams left very few traces and are seldom mentioned in the archives of the French administration. Historians and sociologists of immigration generally did not consider them until the late 1990s. Yet, based on archival material, interviews, and second-hand sources, a short socio-history of their settlement in France can be retraced. These sources allow us to identify the various stages of the formation of the imamate in France, which are to a great extent connected to the phases of Muslim migration to France and of the structuring of French Muslim faith.

2.1 The colonial legacy and the invisibility of the indigenous imam

In the twentieth century, the earliest records that indicate the presence of imams in mainland France date to the beginning of the First World War, when French military commanders decided to 'send imams among the Muslim troops stationed in France in January 1915' (Le Pautremat, 2003, pp. 153-154), and to build mosques in military depots (Laurens, 2004, p. 42). When the war ended some of these imams – soon to be joined by others – continued to meet the needs of immigrant workers coming from the French colonies, whose numbers were rapidly growing. For instance, there is evidence of the existence of a wooden mosque in Toulouse, built on the initiative of a French employer 'wishing to create a good environment in his business' in the 1930s (Clément, 1990, p. 98). In Paris, the chronicles of the Renault car factory recount the death of the Moroccan imam tasked with meeting the religious needs of the company's Muslim colonial workforce in the same period (Garache, 1984). However, employers' practices aimed at ensuring the loyalty of colonial workers are not the only explanation for the presence of these imams. In certain cases, the imams also seem to have been directly mandated by the migrants' community of origin to accompany those who were given the responsibility of migrating to mainland France from rural communities (Sayad, 2004).

Unfortunately, very little is known about these early imams in metropolitan France and the practical conditions they faced in exercising their religious duties. These imams, who were both migrants and colonized, left few traces. The few documents that mention them are from the press or archives of administrative, military, and productive institutions (like factories), or of those monitoring immigrant workers (like the Sonacotra *foyers*).² These archives let us look at these migrant clerics only through the words of the non-Muslims who wrote about them (Spivak, 1988). There is another reason for the scarcity of sources. In the 'era of empires' (Hobsbawn, 2009), the Muslim religion was seen as a factor of control in most French colonies (Luizard, 2006), particularly in Algeria where attainment of the role of imam was tightly controlled by the prefectural authorities (Achi, 2004). However, French authorities seem to have had little interest in the religious practices of the natives of the colonies after they migrated to the mainland. This was partly because the authorities thought that this immigration would

2 The term *foyer* refers to social housing units built mostly in the 1950s for the specific purpose of accommodating migrant workers. The social Housing Sonacotra was initially established for Algerian migrant workers.

be temporary (Tripier and Rea, 2003, p. 41), but it also reflected the reality of the migrants' religious practices to some extent: most specialists of Islam in France agree that, until the tail end of the 1950s, there were few religious demands from Muslim immigrants. The majority tended to consider their experience as migrants as 'a space of freedom in which, for a certain time, Islamic precepts did not apply' (Cesari, 1994a, p. 36).

2.2 The makeshift Islam of the factories and foyers of migrant workers in the 1970s

Under the influence of three distinct but highly congruent phenomena, the exposure of Islam and the number of imams both started to gradually increase in 1970s' France. First, the continual extension of the stays of migrants from the former French colonies tended to favour their mobilization to organize Muslim worship during the migration period. Second, starting with the decision to end immigration in 1974, a state discourse developed around the need to 'facilitate [among migrants] the preservation of religious tradition[s]', so as to allow 'foreigners who wish to pursue temporary immigration' to 'preserve their ties to their culture of origin' (Dijoud, 1974). Third, at roughly the same time, as strikes in factories and *foyers* became increasingly frequent, some officials in charge of immigrant workers' affairs were inclined to use imams as 'antidotes to leftism' (Kepel, 2004, p. 299). The imams of the 1970s, who were largely self-taught volunteers, can be split into two distinct groups: the 'isolated imams' and the 'affiliated imams'.

Isolated imams were first and foremost workers or *foyer* residents who were appointed to fulfil the role of imam, partially in response to requests from the migrants and partially to humour the paternalistic goodwill of employers and *foyer* managers. They were generally appointed following a consultation among the 'inner circle' of attendants of the newly-created prayer halls, i.e., those involved in their day-to-day running (such as cleaning, decorating, and making repairs). It is worth noting that the evaluation of these imams' religious competence was always connected to the social, familial, professional, and symbolic prestige they enjoyed among their peer group. Among different candidates with an equivalent amount of religious capital, the one chosen would generally be the man with the best reputation – a reputation based on age, seniority within the group of migrants, and social position within the factory or *foyer*. These imams who did not belong to any organized group were often in vulnerable positions and dependent on the institutions that employed or housed them. Taking a stance that contradicted the interests of their employers or landlords would potentially

be detrimental to their situation as migrants: they risked being fired or expelled from their *foyer*. It could also impede the effective functioning of the prayer hall, which might be closed down, or cause prayer time arrangements to be discontinued. Additionally, they had little legitimacy to serve as imams due to their lack of religious knowledge. Thus, caught between the hammer of potential dismissal and the anvil of losing religious legitimacy in the eyes of the faithful, these 'worker imams' were often assigned a strictly ritual incarnation of the role of imam. Lacking conviction in their Islamic knowledge and wishing to avoid the risk of writing their own sermons, they contented themselves with the Friday 'reading of a pre-prepared sermon, obtained in advance by some Islamic association or taken from a collection' (Kepel, 2004, p. 299). These 'imams of fortune' experienced an insecurity reflecting that of the Muslim immigrants to whom they preached in factories or *foyers*; it is doubtful whether under such conditions they were able to exert any real religious authority over believers.

In contrast to these 'isolated imams', the 'affiliated imams' became imams due to their involvement in the Islamic associations that were active in the early days of the structuring of Muslim worship in France. These included the *Association des étudiants islamiques en France* (AEIF, founded in 1963), which represented a reform movement of Islam in France; *Foi et pratique* (founded in 1972), the French branch of the Tablighi Jamaat pietistic movement; and the *Mouvement islamique des mourides en Europe* (MIME, founded in 1977), founded by West African students who had come to France to complete their studies. In many cases, these affiliated imams were not workers, but students or self-employed professionals. To Muslim immigrant workers, they embodied a model of self-accomplishment. Furthermore, because of their involvement in Islamic movements they generally acquired complementary religious training in addition to their religious education in the family and at school. Although they were self-taught in the handling of 'Islamic salvation goods', their religious discourse displayed a consistency and systematization not usually found in those of the worker imams who acted autonomously. Third, the movements of which they were members had a history of reflecting on what 'being a Muslim' means in a country where Islam is not the majority religion. Thus, beyond fulfilling a purely ritual function, they were also generally predisposed to accompanying migrant workers in the process of rethinking their religious beliefs, which until their arrival in France had been deeply rooted in village customs (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1996). By using the language of Islam to explain how to live in France within Muslim communities, they gave the faithful a sense of belonging in a community of destiny experiencing the same

living conditions. Therefore, they were able to play the role of ‘organic intellectuals’ in their communities better than the ‘isolated imams’ were. By prescribing certain self-representations and behaviours for ‘Muslims’ living on French soil, they gave them an existence as a social group (Gramsci, 1978, p. 309). Finally, given the frequently conservative leanings of the Islamic associations of which they were members, they were also more often able to get in the good graces of the factory bosses and *foyer* managers than the worker imams were.

2.3 The emergence of neighbourhood imams in the 1980s and 1990s

A number of processes involved in the rooting of immigrants in French society – longer stays, more frequent family reunifications, increasingly restrictive immigration policies – also played a part in reshaping the institutional framework of imams’ practices in France.³ This was especially the case after 1981, as the right of association was expanded to include foreigners (Wihtol de Wenden and Leveau, 2001). Between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, places of Islamic worship opened at a faster rate, and factories and *foyers* ceased to be the main locations of these prayer halls. As of 1981–2, the majority of imams in France practised in working-class neighbourhoods that had large proportions of Muslim immigrants. This trend continued into the 1990s. By 2004, only 18 per cent of the Muslim prayer halls registered with the French Council of Muslim Worship (CFCM) were still located in *foyers* for migrant workers (Godard and Taussig, 2009, p. 116).

New prayer halls opened outside of factories and *foyers* were granted institutional representation in the form of officially registered associations (Kepel, 1987, pp. 229–234). These new prayer halls facilitated the embedding of Muslim worship in the municipal space. They also enabled the development of relationships with local politicians (as they were progressively included in local associative life). To the Muslims that frequented them, these prayer halls were a source of collective pride: they were no longer symbols of the generosity of some factory or *foyer* manager, but objective evidence of the group’s existence and of its capacity for collective mobilization (Bourdieu, 1980).

In addition to giving imams more local recognition and exposure, these associations also transformed the practical conditions of their religious leadership. Indeed, with the creation of these Islamic associations came a gradual separation of the roles of ‘imam’ and ‘president of the association’.

3 The Ministerial Circular issued by Schumann on 29 July 1968, the Ministerial Circular issued by Marcellin-Fontanet on 24 January 1972, and the Council of Ministers Circular of 3 July 1974.

This prompted discussions within mosques about the imam's role in France. The imam's legitimate authority progressively came to be defined as that of a cleric, who was in charge of handling the goods of Islamic salvation. The president of the association was chiefly a notable member of the community commissioned to represent the group's administrative, symbolic, and political interests.

Another development that transformed imams' practices in the 1980s and 1990s was the bureaucratization of the Islamic associations managing prayer halls for the purpose of rationalizing their functioning and increasing their financial resources. In many mosques, this professionalization process inspired the idea that it was necessary to pay imams. In 2004, according to a Ministry of Internal Affairs survey, only 45 per cent of imams practicing on French soil were regularly paid.⁴ Yet, since the early 1990s, paying the imams had become an ideal for most Islamic associations, much as they dreamed of one day owning their own mosque. While costly, placing imams in an employer-employee relationship had the immediate advantage of allowing association leaders to have control, if not a monopoly, over the appointment of the imam and the definition of his scope of action. Also, this mercantile relationship placed imams under the direct authority of board members, whereas previously different forms of authority were able to coexist without a clear hierarchy.

With the introduction of this mercantile relationship and the continuously increasing number of Islamic prayer halls in France, the backgrounds of French imams became more and more varied. When imams were still unpaid, those aspiring to be imams in neighbourhood mosques had similar backgrounds to those practicing in factories and *foyers* during the previous decade. These individuals were self-taught in the handling of Islamic salvation goods. Whether they were affiliated with national or international Islamic movements or not, for them being a voluntary imam was never a reason to emigrate or a professional activity: they always did it alongside paid employment in another sector or in addition to pursuing secular studies.

Conversely, the paid imam positions that began to develop in the 1980s attracted several categories of individuals who saw religion as a potential profession. First, there were students with a degree in Islamic studies and/or experiences of activism in (political or trade union) organizations with ties to oppositional political Islam. Having arrived in France with the goal of completing advanced graduate studies, they had high amounts of educational

4 These figures come from the statistics reported by the technical adviser in charge of the 'Islam file' at the *Bureau central des cultes* between 2000 and 2010 (interview, July 2005).

capital and were well versed in Islamic culture. These new positions were in some cases the means for them to pay for their studies in France. For those with ties to organizations such as the *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF) – itself close to the Muslim Brotherhood movement –, the positions were direct extensions of their political engagement in favour of political Islam, as well as an opportunity to disseminate their political and religious ideology to others.

The second category of paid imams that appeared in the 1980s comprised individuals who came to France at their own expense, often illegally. Out of the paid imams who applied for a residence permit as ‘ministers of religion’ between 1990 and 1997, only 29.5 per cent had entered French territory with the 90-day-visa required to subsequently be granted ‘visitor’ status for one year (Jouanneau, 2009b). They hoped to be recognized for their religious competences by word of mouth and paid by Islamic associations. These competences could come in the form of an Islamic degree, or of experience as imam or muezzin in their home country. They had generally come to France for financial reasons, and chose to be imams out of a sense of ‘pragmatism’. As conditions of residence became gradually more strict between 1980 and the end of the 1990s, the perspective of a salary (however low) and of a residence permit (however temporary) was an enticing prospect for individuals with no hope of obtaining a regular work permit, but with the ability to monetize a religious capital that was still rare on French soil. These early migrants aspiring to the title of imam were often considered excellent candidates by the presidents of associations who were able to pay imams a regular salary for two reasons. First, they often possessed enough religious experience and competence to make them credible in the eyes of the faithful. Second, they were generally doubly dependent on the association in which they practised: they relied on it for both their salary and the certificate required to obtain a residence permit.

Finally, from the 1990s on, civil servant imams sent to France by some Muslim countries of emigration – such as Algeria, Turkey, and, to a lesser extent, Morocco – made up a third category of paid imams. Islamic associations were often formed on the basis of shared national origins and languages. Those in charge of such associations often managed to secure funding to have ‘professional’ imams come to France through the consular representatives of their country of origin. As these imams’ salaries were paid by their home countries, they came at little cost to the associations; as their status as imam was officially recognized by the consulates, they were generally perceived as highly legitimate by immigrant workers (Akgonul, 2005, p. 123). However, compared to the other categories fewer civil servant imams spoke French and were familiar with French society, and they sometimes

struggled to fulfil the religious needs of Muslims born or socialized in France – whether converts or the children of migrants.

2.4 How imams became local community leaders

During the First World War, France already had imams who were able to perform the main Muslim group rites. Yet, until the late 1970s their authority was largely reduced by the weight of the institutions in which they officiated: the army, the factories, and the *foyers*. In contrast, the structuring of Muslim worship that began in the 1980s transformed the material conditions of imams' practice in ways that directly contributed to increasing their influence over the faithful. It gave them a more central role in the process of the social construction of a Muslim community with a newly established, local anchoring.

They might often have been just as cramped and worn down as the older ones, but the prayer halls that opened in working-class neighbourhoods were a source of collective and individual pride for those frequenting them. They were no longer the symbol of the generosity of a factory or *foyer* boss, but objective evidence of the group's existence and capacity of collective mobilization. By offering a new visibility to Muslim worship and more space for the faithful to gather, these prayer halls favoured a form of appropriation of communal space and by extension the '(re)constitution of community life on the scale of a residential unit' (Cesari, 1994b, pp. 112–113). By actively participating in the creation of this religion-inflected community life, the imams themselves progressively found the opportunity to experiment with a certain form of leadership over their faithful.

As keepers – and in a more prosaic sense 'janitors' – of the mosques where they officiated, neighbourhood imams first found themselves occupying a crucial place in the creation of community networks of mutual assistance. In the process they contributed to transforming their prayer groups into genuine 'communities of shared purpose'. In addition to their community-building role, the imams of the 1980s and 1990s also helped define the specificity of the Muslim community within French society at the neighbourhood level. Indeed, while the presidents of Islamic associations worked towards the recognition of the existence of a 'Muslim community' with specific needs among 'non-Muslims', particularly municipal authorities, imams offered their flock 'procedures for dichotomization between us (Muslims) and them (non-Muslims)' (Streiff-Fenart, 1996, p. 39). They did this by focusing on the supposed bans and recommendations of Islam. These procedures had considerable symbolic power, especially because they drew on religious terminology that conferred a degree of sanctity.

Finally, as it became clear that families of Muslim workers had durably settled in France, neighbourhood imams – clerics ‘mandated to assure the production, reproduction, conservation and diffusion of religious goods’ (Bourdieu, 1971, p. 305) – promoted an increasingly practical and detailed discourse about the everyday behaviour required from a ‘good Muslim’ in France. As they agreed to reply to the faithful’s questions on the ‘right way’ to live an Islamic life in France, most imams found themselves in a position to propose to their religious communities what one might call ‘Islamically desirable forms of acculturation’ to French society, in a more or less conscious and intellectualized manner depending on the cases (Jouanneau, 2013).

3 Imams as a public problem: The paradoxes of laïcité

As I noted above, in the postcolonial period of the 1970s the French authorities started addressing Islam and Muslim worship. Initially managed by the little-known *Secrétariat d’Etat aux travailleurs immigrés* (State Secretariat for Immigrant Workers), this gradually became a more significant policy area during the 1980s as the government tackled the necessary ‘integration of immigrants’ more broadly (Escafré-Dublet, 2008, p. 337). In the case of Islam, this translated into a discourse on the need to ‘upgrade Muslim worship’ to bring it up to the standards of other religions with a longer history on French soil (Commission Culture et Immigration, 1979).

However, as long as the government approached the question of Islam only in terms of how to remedy its material and symbolic ‘indigence’, like the lack of cultural centres, absence of representation in chaplaincies, and absence of religious broadcasts on public channels, the imamate received little exposure. The situation began to change radically in the early 1990s, when ‘Islam and Muslim worship’ became marked as a ‘sensitive issue’ by French government agencies because officials at the Ministry of Internal Affairs were increasingly concerned that the civil conflict in Algeria and the rise of oppositional political Islam in North Africa could have a fallout in France (Frégosi, 2008, p. 256; Jouanneau, 2013, pp. 245–250).

3.1 Development of the surveillance of imams’ sermons

French authorities thus began to be concerned by the development of oppositional political Islam in the late 1980s. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was worried about the potentially harmful consequences of the rise to power of ‘Islamists’ for France’s diplomatic relations with its former colonies. For

their part, officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs grew concerned about the influence such movements might have over immigrants of North African origin and their children. As a result, the French authorities started adopting a security-centred approach to the question of Islam and Muslim worship (Frégosi, 2008, p. 256), which is abundantly documented in the Ministry of Internal Affairs archives from the 1990s and 2000s that I was able to consult.⁵

Starting in Pierre Joxe's second term as Minister of Internal Affairs (1988-1991), these archives mentioned a 'fundamentalist threat' to France. In response to this 'threat', the minister's advisor wrote that the government should, on the one hand, encourage a 'moderate, tolerant Islam, well-integrated into French society' and, on the other, fight 'the unregulated development of mosques whose imams preach fundamentalism, intolerance and violence'.⁶

This preoccupation became more visible during the term of Charles Pasqua (1993-1995), who was the first to order the surveillance of sites of Muslim worship. This surveillance was ramped up during Jean-Louis Debré's term (1995-1998), after the wave of attacks in 1995 orchestrated by the Algerian *Groupe islamique armée* (GIA; Armed Islamic Group) that culminated in the bombing of a train in Paris. Due to the involvement in these attacks of Khaled Kelkal, an Algerian-born youth who grew up in the *banlieues* of Lyon and who was radicalized in prison, the Ministry of Internal Affairs' agents became increasingly suspicious of immigrant clerics in France.

As the surveillance of imams' sermons widened, the Ministry of Internal Affairs entrusted intelligence agents with the tasks of identifying any attempt by imams to import the political conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East into France, and reporting cases of support for certain forms of religious radicalism among disenfranchised youth.⁷ In other words, in the 1990s, as the new focus on public security and efforts to monitor the fallout of faraway geopolitical conflicts combined with older discourses on the 'integration' of foreigners, imams became an object of governmental attention more than ever.

5 This refers to the archives of the cabinets of the Ministers of Internal Affairs Pierre Joxe, Jean-Louis Debré, and Jean-Pierre Chevènement. Charles Pasqua, Philippe Marchand, and Paul Quilès refused to grant access to their archives.

6 Contemporary Archives Center (CAC), v. 19920417, art. 2, 'Questions de fond soulevées par la disparition du recteur de la Mosquée de Paris', May 1989. Administrative memorandum of 'Islam' technical Adviser to the Minister of Internal Affairs Pierre Joxe.

7 CAC, v. 19970347, art. 4, l. 1. For example, the administrative memorandums written by the Central administration of the Renseignements généraux, *Les échos des prêches et de la communauté musulmane*, on 19 August 1996 and on 2 September 1996.

3.2 A double-edged government discourse: Imams as problems and as solutions

Until the late 1980s, French authorities generally accepted the fact that Muslim worship was essentially structured at the local level through the creation of a multitude of Islamic associations largely independent of each other. In the subsequent decade, the fear of Islamism spreading to French soil brought Ministers of Internal Affairs to turn the organization of Muslim worship in France into a 'public problem' requiring state intervention. This concern for rationalizing the structure of France's 'second religion' was publicly justified by left- and right-wing politicians alike on the grounds of the necessary emergence of an *Islam à la française*, a phrase that amalgamated two distinct projects. The first, openly acknowledged, consisted of ensuring religious equality in the country by improving the conditions of Muslim worship in France, and thus meeting the legal definition of *laïcité* ('secularity') set forth in the 9 December 1905 law on the separation of church and state. The second, which was less covered and more overt as it did not strictly fall within the legal bounds of *laïcité*, was to introduce government monitoring of a religion that worried the authorities in several respects.

Examination of the archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs confirms that attempts to push the creation of a central representative body for Muslim worship almost always came with the institutionalization of a public state discourse on imams. This happened on numerous occasions, from the creation of the *Conseil de réflexion sur l'islam en France* (CoRIF, Council for Reflection on Islam in France, 1990-1993) under the impetus of Pierre Joxe, to the assisted birth of the *Conseil français du culte musulman* (CFCM, French Council for the Muslim Faith, since 2003) by Nicolas Sarkozy, the *Conseil consultatif des musulmans de France* (CCMF, Consultative Council of French Muslims in 1995) by Charles Pasqua, and the *Istishara* association (Consultation, in 1999) initiated by Jean-Pierre Chevènement.

For Ministry higher-ups, these ambivalent developments gradually came to embody either the problems allegedly posed by the Muslim religion in France – such as the dependence on foreign countries, the threat of fundamentalism, and the dispersion of religious authority due to the lack of institutional structures – or opportunities for the diffusion of a more 'liberal Islam' that was 'modern' and 'adapted' to French society. In their briefs, Ministry technical advisors presented 'foreign imams' at best as having an 'outdated theological training' and, at worst, as having 'marked Islamist

tendencies' (Debré, 1997, p. 102-103).⁸ At any rate, they were 'incapable of speaking French' and of 'understanding the problems of young French people living in the *banlieues*'. As a response to this, the belief progressively emerged that the 'creation of imams should be undertaken'⁹ to promote a model of 'French imam' or, failing that, of a Francophone imam trained in France.

In other words, from the 1990s onward imams increasingly came to play a crucial role in the symbolic apparatus through which French government agents defined and planned to address the alleged issues pertaining to the Muslim religion in France. In the official discourse, 'the foreign imam' became one of the root causes for the supposed 'inadequacy of Islam' to meet the 'values of the French Republic'. In contrast, the 'French imam' – 'integrated', 'well trained', and 'moderate' – was held as the possible 'solution' to this 'inadequacy'.¹⁰

This belief did not only become widespread among officials working in the Ministries of Internal and Foreign Affairs and the presidential advisors. The Ministers of Internal Affairs and their representatives – ministerial advisers, heads of the *Bureau central des cultes*, and police officers – publicized it in the media; in the second half of the 1990s, it became a staple of French mainstream media discourse.

However, before further describing the forms of government intervention into the structuring of the imamate in France it is worth noting that in this policy area the authorities had to act indirectly due to the objective constraints of the legal and constitutional framework of *laïcité*. The following section provides more clarity on this subject.

3.3 The particulars of state action toward imams in the context of *laïcité*

The so-called law on the 'Separation of Churches and State', adopted on 9 December 1905, heralded a turning point in the French authorities' management of religions. Since then, the French Republic has ostensibly been a *laïc* ('secular') regime, refusing all forms of religious identity or affiliation. It neither recognizes, nor subsidizes, nor provides salaries for any religion (Article 2), but ensures freedom of conscience and the free

8 CAC, v. 19970347, art. 4, l. 1, ref: no. 38 / AN MO – CHM, 'L'islam et la poussée islamiste en France', 1997. Administrative memorandum written by the technical adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the attention of the cabinet of the Minister of Internal Affairs Jean-Louis Debré.

9 CAC, v. 19970347, art. 4, l. 1, 9 July 1997. Administrative memorandum written by the technical adviser for religious affairs of the Minister of Internal Affairs Jean-Louis Debré.

10 Idem.

exercise of religion in the entire country (Article 1). *Laïcité*, as it is defined in the 44 articles of the 1905 law, breaks the ties that formerly bound the State and religious institutions together under the Concordat regime (Chantin, 2010). While the State's religious neutrality might have been asserted, this did not mean that its representatives would necessarily or systematically ignore the existence of the religious sphere, or even give up on regulating it entirely. Indeed, *laïcité* is not only the legal translation of the socio-historical process through which government agents have progressively managed to impose the principle of a distinction between order in religious activities and order in political activities (Lalouette, 2005); it is also – and perhaps more importantly – the idea that the latter prevails over the former, considering the fact that struggles over the control and legitimization of these spaces of differentiated activities cannot be separated from struggles over their hierarchy (Lagroye, 2003, pp. 361-362). From this perspective, *laïcité* is not only aimed at ensuring the freedom of religion and the state's religious neutrality, but is also a possible tool for politically de-legitimizing the religious contestations of the 'national order' that political representatives and civil servants are supposed to guarantee (Bourdieu, 1971; Noiriel, 1991). Yet it is also a means of regulating religions that translates into legal and/or administrative norms. These norms define the nature of the relationships that state agents are legally authorized to have with the actors of institutions that are defined or that define themselves as 'religious'. They also establish the practical scope of the intervention of administrations into the religious sphere for the purpose of managing or regulating such activities within the social space (Boyer, 2005, p. 2). Since 1911, there has been a bureau within the Ministry of Internal Affairs that is in charge of the compliance of religious organizations with public rules. The members of that bureau, the *Bureau central des cultes*, can force religious institutions to conform to the general organizational rules stipulated in the 1905 law. It is also worth recalling that the 1905 law lays the groundwork for the surveillance of places of worship and their ministers by public authorities. Under Article 34, 'Any ministers of religion who, in those places where religion is exercised, has publicly [...] insulted or defamed a citizen charged with public service, will face a fine of € 3,750 and a one-year prison sentence, or one of these two penalties'; under Article 35,

If a speech given or a piece of writing posted or publicly distributed in places where religion is exercised contains a direct incitement to resist the implementation of laws or legal acts of the public authorities, or if it tends to cause an uprising or to arm one group of citizens against others, the

minister of the religion who has made himself culpable will be punished by a prison sentence of three months to two years, without prejudice in a case where the incitement is followed by a riot, revolt or civil war.

Yet, since the implementation of the 1905 law the French Republic is no longer authorized to interfere in the selection and appointment of 'ministers of religion': this domain has been legally defined as the sole responsibility of religious communities. This means that French government officials have no legal right (in theory) to express an opinion on whether a given individual is fit to play that role. To maintain the appearance of compliance with the legal framework set by *laïcité*, civil servants and political representatives largely have to act through back channels, in policy areas where the legal and political basis of state intervention cannot be legally questioned.

The second characteristic of the public policies targeting imams is the involvement of multiple institutions. Because of the principle of *laïcité*, there is no administrative department in France that deals officially and practically with all aspects of Muslim worship. Depending on the case at hand, imams may be managed by the *Direction de la surveillance du territoire* (DST, Directorate of Territorial Surveillance), or *Direction centrale des renseignements généraux* (DCRG, Central Directorate of General Intelligence), or by their local branches when surveillance is required; the *Bureau central des cultes* on questions linked to the training and status of imams in particular; the *Direction des libertés publiques et des affaires juridiques* (DLPAJ, Directorate of Public Liberties and Legal Affairs) and the prefectures' departments for non-nationals on questions about the regularization or expulsion of foreign imams; or the *Conseiller pour les affaires religieuses* (CAR, Counsellor for Religious Affairs) and *Direction de l'Afrique du Nord et du Moyen-Orient* (Directorate for North Africa and the Middle East) for the diplomatic component of negotiation with countries of Muslim emigration. Of course, the number of institutions that are involved has consequences for how each issue is handled. Each of these administrations not only has its own imperatives, but also has a distinct 'administrative culture' that endows its agents with a distinct ethos that does not necessarily coincide with those of other agencies (Jouanneau, 2009b).

Finally, aware of the fact that they were playing with the legal limits of *laïcité*, the successive Ministers of Internal Affairs have generally tried to remain discreet about the internal attempts by some of their advisers and top officials to restructure Islamic worship in France. This constraint manifests in the often-unofficial status of technical advisors working on the question of Islam in France within the Ministry's offices. These advisors,

whose ranks do not include graduates of the *Ecole nationale d'administration* (ENA, National School of Administration), are often civil servants recruited informally on the basis of their pre-existing ties with the Ministers to 'coordinate' a public policy with a limited scope of action (Jouanneau, 2013, pp. 266-270).

3.4 Three forms of the state monitoring of imams

The legal rules of *laïcité* preclude Ministers of Internal Affairs from directly reforming the recruitment of imams to officiate in France. However, in the 1990s, they developed at least three measures aimed at indirectly altering the profiles of Muslim 'ministers of religion', with varying outcomes.

Based on the premise that 'from a Muslim point of view, France is a mission country, i.e. a country that receives foreign missionaries',¹¹ the first policy option for monitoring French imams consisted of approaching the selection of imams as a specific component of diplomatic relations with the countries of so-called 'Muslim emigration'. The intention was to introduce a 'bureaucratic rationalization' of the monitoring of foreign imams through enrolling the consular networks of their countries of origin. If imams were going to be foreign nationals anyway, they were at least going to try to promote those whose status as an imam was officially guaranteed by the governments in their countries of origin (Jouanneau, 2014). This measure rested on the assumption that the selected candidates would preach an Islam that is in conformity with the interests of the governments in place in those states and – the flipside of the same coin – that would not promote Islamism in France. Furthermore, supporting consular procedures for monitoring the emigration of imams allowed Ministry officials to rely on trusted diplomatic partners who were capable of keeping the concerned imams in check, or even of revoking their residence permits in case of problems. Not only do 'consular imams' depend on the diplomatic authorities of their countries of origin for their pay and status, but during their stay in France they also find themselves embedded in hierarchical structures which, both in everyday life and in the case of problems, makes them potential mouthpieces and channels for French government officials.

A second measure dating to November 1990 consisted of introducing a confidential procedure for monitoring the visa applications of Muslim

11 CAC, v. 19970347, art. 4, l. 1, 10 January 1996. 'Situation actuelle de l'islam de France'. Administrative memorandum written by the technical adviser for religious affairs of Minister of Internal Affairs Jean-Louis Debré.

'ministers of religion'.¹² Indeed, as the overwhelming majority of Muslim clerics are not French nationals,¹³ the Ministry of Internal Affairs systematically used the right of residence as a roundabout way of recruiting 'good candidates' and turning down 'bad' ones (Jouanneau, 2009b). This method was directly in line with a long-attested French tradition of '*à la carte* treatment of foreigners' through the frequent use of ad hoc circulars (Spire, 2005, p. 13). This measure, which only affected professional imams – volunteer imams generally do not apply for visas in their capacity as ministers of religion, instead using their main occupation – had only a marginal impact on the profiles of imams in France, but it was symbolically useful for the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Whether the imams who applied for residence were expelled or granted more or less short-term residence permits, each of the stages in the administrative investigation served as a reminder of 'what any foreigner who fails to comply with the rules of good conduct exposes himself to'. Here these rules were the obligation 'of being respectful of the existing order [and of] its system of values' (Sayad, 1999, p. 9). The policy also contributed to facilitating the bureaucratic identification of foreign imams, chiefly by centralizing 'the body of information at the disposal of the different administrations' on the same imam and therefore 'recording, and eventually (should the need arise) punishing all deviant behaviour, or behaviour suspected to be deviant' (Spire, 2005, p. 58).

The third measure devised by officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs received more coverage. It consisted of unofficially encouraging and supervising projects intended to ensure the training of imams *à la française*, in a bid to influence the profile of imams officiating in French mosques in the long or short term. The intention of this measure was to set up training programmes in which individuals would learn how to conduct the profession of imam, and in the process create places where Islamic religious rationality was adjusted to French State rationality by defining the 'good practices' and 'legitimate beliefs' of future imams to better reflect the 'values' of French society. For government agents, promoting and steering the creation of training institutions for the role or 'profession' of imam also stemmed from a desire to establish a more formal definition of the pre-requisites for becoming an imam. To make an educational institution the main means of

12 CAC 200030069, art. 28. Confidential telegram issued by the Sub-Directorate for Aliens and Cross-border Travel (SDECT), dated 21 November 1990.

13 In 2005, B. Godard (special adviser to the Central Bureau for Religious Worship) stated that 'less than 20 per cent of the imams in France had French nationality' and that 'they were less than a handful a decade ago'.

obtaining the status of imam was also to progressively reduce the credit of other forms of legitimization that might have been employed by individuals striving to become the imam in a given mosque (Jouanneau, 2013, pp. 333-357). However, most of the training projects launched or supported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs struggled to take off, and subsequently to function effectively. In addition to financial difficulties, these programmes also had problems recruiting students because of the current state of the structuring of Muslim worship in France; training appeared to be an expensive investment for such a poorly paid 'occupation' (Frégosi, 1998).

4 Conclusion

In their efforts to introduce formal standards and certificates for imams, the monitoring policies devised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (often with the help of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) all encountered the issue of the legitimacy of the imams they attempted to select or endorse. As both the archives and my ethnographic research indicate, these measures failed to address the conditions of the emergence of a religious authority which in practice rests not so much on official titles and degrees as on the elective affinities that develop between an imam and those who over time became 'his' faithful. Indeed, in the absence of a single ecclesiastical institution or a bureaucratization of the imamate (resembling the system in place in certain countries of origin), in France an imam's 'audience' remains the main yardstick to gauge the religious legitimacy of a Muslim cleric (Jouanneau, 2012). Try as it might, the government will never be able to fully 'rationalize' the ability of the imams it selects to meet the expectations of a wide array of faithful. No title, no foreign state can ensure the success of this co-optation, which forms vary depending on the place of worship, and which is necessary for an imam to 'establish' himself or 'emerge' within a mosque. This is undoubtedly a thorn in the side of the French government actors who contend that imams have the power to facilitate or hinder the 'cultural integration' of French Muslims and seek to indirectly control their profiles. But in fact, this limitation of state power is in keeping with the legal spirit of *laïcité*.

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