

# LIMEN

Journal of the International Network for Immigration Research

9 (2024/1)



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**Frontispiece:** Newly arrived irregular immigrants waiting outside Yuma for Border Patrol agents to take them to the processing center.

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## Immigration and Islam in France: how do they interact?<sup>1</sup>

Nicolas Pouvreau-Monti

### Abstract

France now has the largest Muslim population in Europe. In a few decades, a religion which had virtually no followers in mainland France rose to prominence as the second most important in the country – and may already be the first in terms of concrete religious practice among the youngest people. This dynamic of the establishment and rapid growth of Islam in France deserves to be analyzed in terms of its essential interactions with another phenomenon that has marked French society over the last half-century: immigration, particularly from outside Europe. The said interactions can be understood in terms of three different drivers: the acceleration in current inflows, many of which now come from the Islamic world; the different birth rates of the immigrant populations at stake; and the greater religious transmission within Muslim families. Moreover, through capillary mechanisms inherent in diaspora phenomena, migratory flows import the trends in Islamic observance at work in the countries of origin. They also offer a ground for foreign government interference through religious organizations.

**Keywords:** demographic change, religion, Islam, birthrate, interference

### Introduction

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There are political issues which are so intimately linked that any attempt to consider one without the other seems doomed to superficiality. There is no doubt that the issues of immigration and Islam in France belong to this category of intrinsically intertwined subjects. Demographer Michèle Tribalat sums it up this way: “In France, almost all Muslims are immigrants or the children of immigrants; the development of Islam is therefore linked to foreign immigration”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an updated and expanded version of an article published in September 2024 by Nicolas Pouvreau-Monti in French in *La Revue des Deux Mondes*.

<sup>2</sup> TRIBALAT 2011.

The aim of this paper is therefore to understand the interactions at work between the demographic dynamics, both quantitative and qualitative, of the Muslim religion on French soil, and those of the influx of immigrants to the country – today as well as in recent decades.

The Muslim religion had virtually disappeared from Western Europe for several centuries. Then the onset and acceleration of non-European immigration from the post-war economic boom onwards set in motion a dynamic of Islamic settlement in France, which can be approached demographically by analyzing the proportion of newborn boys bearing an Arab-Muslim first name (which allows for a broad approach to this phenomenon over time): almost equal to 0% in 1950, it would exceed 21% in 2021 according to the analyses conducted by Jérôme Fourquet and Sylvain Manternach.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of religious affiliation in the strictest sense, across all age categories: Muslims represented 10% of the population of mainland France in 2020.<sup>4</sup> According to the latest comparative data made available by the Pew Research Center, in 2016, the share of Muslims in the overall population of France was the highest among all countries of the European Union, apart from Cyprus (due to the historical presence of Muslim Turkish Cypriots on the island).<sup>5</sup>

On the basis of the most recent *Trajectoire & Origines* survey conducted by INSEE and INED (in 2019–2020), 44% of immigrants and 32% of the descendants of immigrants declare themselves to be Muslims in France – compared with just 1% of French people with no migratory background.<sup>6</sup> This percentage obviously varies radically depending on the migratory origins considered, with a very high prevalence of the Muslim religion among the most numerous immigrant populations in France: 89% of immigrants from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia claim to be Muslims – as do 65% of the descendants of immigrants from these countries. The same applies to 84% of immigrants from Sahelian Africa (77% of descendants) and 72% of those from Turkey or the Middle East (67% of descendants).<sup>7</sup> While a small part of others in those immigrant groups may belong to religious minorities from the countries of origin, such as Middle Eastern Christians, the rest are mainly people who say they have no religion.

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<sup>3</sup> FOURQUET – MANTERNACH 2023.

<sup>4</sup> INSEE 2023.

<sup>5</sup> PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2017.

<sup>6</sup> INSEE 2023a.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The migratory factor therefore plays a decisive role in the rapid growth of Islam's presence in France, and it would be euphemistic to describe it as 'central', since it explains almost all of it. Its impact is being driven in three different ways:

1. The acceleration in incoming flows from outside the European Union, most of which now come from the Islamic world;
2. The different birth rates in the immigrant populations in question;
3. The greater religious transmission within Muslim immigrant families.

## Current immigration flows and their impact on Muslim demography in France

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The annual number of first residence permits granted in France to immigrants from non-EU countries rose by 172% between 1997 and 2023 – a record year with more than 320,000 first permits granted.<sup>8</sup> Since 2017, 2 million first residence permits have been granted. The main reasons for granting these residence permits have been family reunification<sup>9</sup> and studying. Last year, work-related permits accounted for only 17% of the whole annual number of first permits.<sup>10</sup>

An analysis of their distribution by nationality reveals that the Islamic world is heavily represented among the recipients: of the twenty most numerous nationality groups in 2021, citizens of Muslim-majority countries accounted for 72% of the recipients of a first residence permit.<sup>11</sup> Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have consistently topped the list in recent years. There are also large numbers from Muslim-majority Sub-Saharan countries (Guinea, Senegal, Mali, etc.). Over a quarter of a century – between 1997 and 2021 – there was a very strong statistical parallel between the rise in the annual number of first residence permits and the rise in the proportion of newborn boys bearing a Muslim first name: a correlation coefficient of 0.95 can be calculated between these two sets of data, attesting to a very high degree of concordance between their trajectories.<sup>12</sup>

Another, even more dynamic area of immigration is that opened up by the current asylum system. The annual number of first-time asylum applications registered in France rose by 245% between 2009 and 2023, reaching a historic high of

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<sup>8</sup> FRENCH MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Over the period of 2005–2020, France received the most family-based permanent immigration in all of Western Europe. See: OECD 2023.

<sup>10</sup> FRENCH MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR 2024.

<sup>11</sup> See OID data analysis in WAINTRAUB 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

145,000 last year. Since 2017, France has received 825,000 first-time asylum applications – the demographic equivalent of a city like Marseille.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the spectacular rise in the number of applications, the rate of asylum actually granted has also risen, reaching 44.7% in 2023,<sup>14</sup> while public policy is inefficient in the return of rejected asylum seekers, turning the right to asylum into a veritable factory for illegal residents. An analysis of this flow by nationality leads to the same conclusion as for first-time residence permits: in 2022, nationals of Muslim-majority countries accounted for 61% of first-time asylum seekers in France.<sup>15</sup> The top three countries of origin were also three Muslim countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Turkey.

### **Different birth rates among immigrant populations**

The second driving force at work is the fertility rates specific to certain immigrant populations of Muslim culture. According to a study published by INED in 2019<sup>16</sup>, based on birth data for 2014: Algerian immigrant women in France had an average of 3.69 children per woman. This was not only double of the figures for non-immigrant women, but also significantly more than for Algerian women in Algeria where the fertility rate was just 3 children per woman. The same differential applied to Tunisian, Moroccan and Turkish immigrant women, whose fertility rate was between 3.12 and 3.5 children per woman, while the fertility rate in their countries of origin was between 2.1 and 2.4 children.

Such country-based immigrant birthdate data have been lacking publicly over the last few years. However, other birthrate figures are available: the particular structure of immigration in France is reflected in the different fertility rates on French soil, which reflect the habits at work in the countries of origin. In 2019, women born outside the European Union and living in France had an average of 3.27 children in their lifetime: this was the highest fertility rate in Western Europe, and twice as high as that of women born in France (1.66).<sup>17</sup>

The public INSEE data available also show that the peak in births to immigrant women in France occurs in the first year after they settle in France – then they remain at a particularly high level for the next five years, before gradually

<sup>13</sup> EUROSTAT 2024.

<sup>14</sup> FRENCH MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR 2024.

<sup>15</sup> WAINTRAUB 2024.

<sup>16</sup> INED 2019.

<sup>17</sup> OECD 2023.



declining.<sup>18</sup> Several hypotheses can be put forward to explain these facts: we can assume that some immigrant women postpone giving birth until they arrive in France, migration being a structuring life project; it also seems likely that the system of social care for families (whatever their nationality) encourages them to continue on this fertility trajectory.

Demographic studies indicate that the fertility rates of immigrants tend to fall in the next generation and gradually converge towards the average for native-born people. However, this convergence is slow, and its effects are greatly mitigated by the continuation and acceleration of new inflows.

### **A greater religious transmission within Muslim families**

The third way in which immigration affects France's religious landscape is through the transmission of religious practice within the family, which is stronger in Muslim families – whatever their geographical origin – than in Christian households. The latest INSEE-INED survey on this subject<sup>19</sup> shows that 91% of people brought up in Muslim families continue to claim their parents' religion, with peaks of 97% in families from Turkey, the Middle East or Sahelian Africa (89% for families from the Maghreb). However, only 67% of people brought up by Catholic parents actually inherit their religion. This is largely due to the strength of religious socialization in the home: 43% of Muslims say they were brought up in a family where religion was 'very important', 3 times more than Catholics (14%). Descendants of Muslim immigrants who grew up in such families are 70% more likely to say that religion plays a very important role in their lives.

Generally speaking, INSEE observes that twice as many immigrants are affiliated to a religion as people with no migratory ancestry, although there are significant differences depending on the religion concerned: immigrants from countries with a Muslim tradition are the most religiously affiliated, while those from predominantly Christian European countries or Asia declare an affiliation less often. In addition, people of immigrant origin appear to be much less affected by the secularization trend than French people of no immigrant background. The proportion of people who say they have no religion rose by 12 points among the latter between 2009 and 2020, compared to just 3 points among immigrants who arrived in France as adults; even more strikingly, it did not change among the descendants of immigrants over the same period. Furthermore, five times as many

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<sup>18</sup> INSEE 2023b.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Muslims as Catholics cite religion as a constitutive dimension of their identity (30% versus 6%). 58% of people who say they are Muslim pray at least once a week – 4 times more than Catholics (15%).

The reasons for Islam being more resilient to secularization in France than Catholicism are various. Christianity's political and social influence has been declining in Europe over the last two centuries at least, with a notable acceleration since the 1960s linked to structural changes in geographics (urbanization and rural depopulation), economics and values. Islam has not been following the same path: in its native-based homelands, its social and political role appears to have regained importance over the last few decades, after an historical interlude opened by European colonization and closed with the weakening of non-religious nationalist regimes established after independence. Muslim populations of immigrant origin in France seem to be part of this global dynamic that supports and consolidates Islam, through the cultures and habits acquired in their countries of origin.

### **Beyond numbers alone: the *qualitative* impacts of immigration on Islam in France**

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In addition to its quantitative impact on Muslim demographics in France, the multidimensional impact of migratory flows has qualitative consequences for the types of Islam claimed in our country and the nature of the religious practices associated with them. According to INSEE<sup>20</sup>, the proportion of Muslim women wearing the Islamic veil has risen by half in the space of a decade (2009–2020). This increase concerns all migratory origins, for immigrants themselves – people born abroad – as well as for the descendants of immigrants. However, the extent of the increase varies greatly according to origin: for example, the percentage of Sub-Saharan immigrant women of Muslim faith who wear the headscarf more than doubled over the period. The interaction between this observation and that of the rapid Islamization of Sahelian societies is obvious: through the capillary mechanisms inherent in diaspora phenomena, migratory flows import the Islamic trends at work in the countries of origin onto French soil. The Muslim women who most often wear the Islamic veil in France today are immigrants from Turkey and the Middle East.<sup>21</sup>

Alongside this tangible but informal indicator, the current acceleration in immigration maintains and consolidates the concrete political control exercised by

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

the governments of the countries of origin over the Muslim faith in France, with its imams and its so-called ‘representative’ bodies. The Grand Mosque of Paris is still seen as a relay for the Algerian regime in France, and the *Rassemblement des musulmans de France* as a tool in the hands of the Kingdom of Morocco. These countries see them as important levers of influence in Paris, as well as instruments for controlling the diasporas, with the aim of maintaining a bond of allegiance with the country of origin.

In this respect, the case of Turkish Islam is a paradigmatic example. The Turkish state has long supervised its official imams who report to the ‘Presidency of Religious Affairs’ (Diyanet), the equivalent of a Ministry of Worship operating in Europe under the banner of the Turkish Islamic Union of Religious Affairs (DITIB). Its equivalent in France is the Coordination Committee of Turkish Muslims in France (CCMTF), set up in 2001 to manage a network of around 280 mosques staffed by 150 imams and officials seconded directly by Ankara. As Jérôme Fourquet points out, the Turkish communities scattered across France almost systematically have their own mosques, thereby actively contributing to the maintenance of a ‘Turkish isolate’ within the ‘French archipelago’.<sup>22</sup>

In light of all these factors, the question of how the links between immigration and Islam in France will evolve in the years to come obviously arises. This question is all the more pressing if we look at the breakdown of births in France. Between 2000 and 2022, the annual number of children born in France to two parents who were themselves born in France fell by 22%; but at the same time, births to at least one parent born outside the EU rose by 40%, and those to two parents born outside the EU rose by 72%. Almost a third (29%) of children born in France in 2022 will have at least one parent born outside the European Union.<sup>23</sup> The data quoted above demonstrate the major presence of the Muslim religion among immigrants from countries outside the European area who are granted residence permits, and the higher birth rate associated with migratory origins in the Muslim world.

In 2017, the Pew Research Center published a major study on the evolution of the Muslim population in Europe between now and 2050 according to different scenarios. It concluded that Muslims would certainly represent a growing proportion of the European population, and that by the middle of the century, this proportion could be at least or even higher than double what it is today. In the scenario corresponding to the realities observed to date, assuming the continuation of high levels of regular immigration and the influx of asylum seekers (whose

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<sup>22</sup> FOURQUET 2019.

<sup>23</sup> INSEE 2023c.

annual number received in the EU multiplied by 3 between 2013 and 2023), Pew Research estimated that France would have 13.2 million Muslims in 2050, or 18% of its population (compared with 10% in 2020 according to INSEE), with an age distribution that is necessarily younger than the overall average - a sign of further increases to come. At the European level, the combined Muslim population of the EU/UK/Switzerland/Norway would be an estimated 75 million.<sup>24</sup>

Pew Research estimated that even if immigration were to be reduced to zero until 2050, the share of the Muslim population in Europe would nonetheless increase by half by that date, as a result of its differential fertility (Muslims being 13 years younger on average and having one more child per woman than the other inhabitants of Europe), with around 10 million additional people declaring an affiliation with Islam. France's population would then include 8.6 million Muslims, or 12.7% of the total - a share one-third lower than that projected on the basis of the continuity scenario mentioned above.<sup>25</sup>

This scenario-based analysis, with the imponderable element inherent in every forward-looking exercise, has the merit of objectifying the decisive impact that today's political decisions can have on the religious landscape of a country tomorrow and, more generally, on its capacity for social and cultural cohesion. Political control of migratory flows and a determined drive to boost the French birth rate appear to be the two legs on which public policy can walk in this direction, in order to guarantee civil peace and enable a sense of community.

## Conclusions

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When it comes to Islam in France, traditional political concerns about French-style secularism and the rejection of "cultural separatism" are obviously legitimate. To avoid becoming bogged down in impotence, however, they must not ignore the concrete demographic realities that are the fundamental issue – first and foremost: immigration and its various consequences. If this question were to be dealt with politically, it would probably have to be done in two stages: firstly, by reducing France's specific attractiveness for certain types of immigration, within a constant legal framework at a European and international level; then by working to modulate this framework, which largely constrains the political treatment of large-scale immigration – in particular family immigration and asylum.

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<sup>24</sup> PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

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