

Terror in France: implications for Muslim integration

By Claire Adida, David D. Laitin and Marie-Anne Valfort January 14, 2015

The following is a guest post from political scientists [Claire L. Adida](#) (University of California, San Diego), [David D. Laitin](#) (Stanford University) and [Marie-Anne Valfort](#) (Paris School of Economics), the authors of the forthcoming “Why Muslim Integration Fails,” to be published by Harvard University Press.

In the wake of France’s worst terrorist attack since 1961, many are asking what the implications of the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher massacres will be for Muslim integration in France. As the solidarity we have witnessed in the immediate aftermath of the attack quickly gives way to politics as usual, it is worth asking what kind of wake-up call this tragedy will come to represent.

We fear the worst. Over the past six years, relying on interviews, surveys and behavioral game experiments conducted in France, we have demonstrated systematic discrimination against Muslims and then researched why this discrimination exists. Our results, summarized in our book “Why Muslim Integration Fails,” to be published by Harvard University Press this fall, reveal that Muslims and French are stuck in a vicious circle of discrimination: Muslim immigrants to France are culturally distinct from the host society in ways that are threatening to French republican ideals; such distinction feeds anti-Muslim discrimination in France, which itself encourages greater Muslim withdrawal from French society, feeding back into French discrimination. The Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher tragedies will only exacerbate this discriminatory equilibrium.

An overwhelming majority of French society attributes the failure of Muslims to fully integrate to Muslims’ refusal to integrate themselves. While it would be easy to write this off as unfounded prejudice, it is important to examine the roots of these beliefs. Our research suggests that two factors distinguish Muslims from French society in a way that feeds French discrimination: Not only are Muslims in France less secularized than the average French, they also support more conservative views and behaviors toward women. In other words, Muslims in France are culturally distinct in ways that deeply threaten French society today; for they challenge France’s century-long commitment to the separation of church and state (what the French call “laïcité”) and its 50-year struggle for gender equality.

This poses a serious challenge for the integration of Muslims in France, because the characteristics that differentiate Muslim immigrants from rooted French society, and from otherwise-matched Christian immigrants, are – in their grotesquely exaggerated form – precisely those that the French associate with jihadists: the insistence that religious principles should be the foundation of governance and the repression of women. This false equivalency between “Muslim” and “jihadist”, and thus the irrational discrimination that the French harbor against Muslims, will likely only be reinforced by events like the double massacre perpetrated by those claiming to act in the name of Islam, as the dozen attacks against mosques since Wednesday afternoon indicate.

So what is to be done? Although scholars have shown that there is no direct relationship between unemployment due to discrimination and terrorist acts (here and here), the discriminatory equilibrium we describe above, and the resulting alienation of Muslims in France, surely render the viral cults propagated on the Internet and in mosques more attractive. The big question is how to eliminate the attraction of this cult to young French people of Muslim heritage.

Sadly, the only party in France to put forth concrete measures to address this problem is the Front National, France’s extreme right party; and its proposed measures, such as the repeal of the Schengen space permitting the free movement of all residents through much of the EU, or the reinstatement of the death penalty, are in direct contradiction with rights that have defined post-war Europe. Equally important: However much the FN seeks to restore France to its Christian roots, French Muslim citizens remain a significant and growing minority in France. Reinforcing the negative stereotypes of rooted French on one hand, and of those with Muslim immigrant backgrounds on the other, cannot be a solution to either discrimination or the propagation of anti-Western viral cults.

An alternative approach would be to undermine the discriminatory equilibrium. An equilibrium implies that neither side has an incentive to alter its behavior, so such a solution would require changes from both sides, French and Muslim. Research on nudges teaches us that seemingly trivial changes may encourage improved behavior. Broadcasting prejudicial and discriminatory behavior, for example, might help reduce discrimination. When publicists at the French-American Foundation first sought to disseminate our findings demonstrating anti-Muslim discrimination in the French labor market, their pleas fell on deaf ears from France’s elite media outlets. Broadcasting that French society tends to harbor prejudicial behavior toward Muslims even though such behavior is irrational and contrary to French republican ideals may help French citizens resist their prejudicial tendencies. Similarly, on the Muslim side, continued and enhanced mobilization of the Muslim population in France both on the streets and in social media, if not around “I am Charlie,” then at least around “I am neither Kouachi or Coulibaly,” “I am Ahmed” or “I am Bathily,” can only contribute to unraveling this discriminatory equilibrium.

Our research also points to policies and politics beyond the level of individual nudges. We have shown that anti-Muslim discrimination on the French labor market is alive and well. Labor market reforms must encourage French firms to diversify their work force, not only because the type of discrimination we have uncovered is illegal in France, but also because diversifying a firm’s workforce is a smart business decision: Research suggests that socially responsible firms attract socially responsible employees and that diversity in groups improves group productivity. Persuading firms to change their standard business practices does not pose an insurmountable challenge. Indeed, it has been done before. New standards for energy efficiency were set in the 1990s via the Energy Star label, and since the late 1980s, the fair trade label has encouraged fair trade, environmental and labor practices. Similarly, a “diversity compliant” label could shape the decisions of firms and improve work force diversity.

Reforms must occur at the educational level, as well. French schools are failing to achieve what the French call “l'égalité des chances,” or equality of opportunity. According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which evaluates the performance of 15-year old students in literacy, mathematics and science in over 70 countries, the difference between the best- and worst-performing students is higher in France than in many other industrialized countries. And economists have shown that in France, 37 percent of those whose parents were born in Africa have failed to obtain at least a secondary school degree, compared with 17 percent of those whose parents are both French born.

But here, too, there is a role for the Muslim community: Moderate Islam must increase its weight in France. The French Council of the Muslim Religion, an elected body that serves as representative of the Muslim faith to the national government, plays an important moderating role. Last June, for example, it published the French Muslim Civil Convention for Cohabitation, which affirms French Islam's founding principle as the respect for French republican laws. But the CFCM needs to represent all Muslims in France – especially its youth. Currently, the council's delegates hail from official places of worship: With only 90 mosques and over 5 million Muslims in France, the CFCM clearly misses a large swath of the Muslim population. Additionally, the CFCM, or other organizations representing Muslim populations, must play a greater role in diffusing French republican principles. One solution is to increase the number of imams who are trained in France as opposed to countries where republican principles are not a core element of the political culture. Currently, the Ministry of the Interior estimates that under 10 percent of France's 1800 imams are trained in France. Coming up with the financial and institutional support to increase that number might be one way to ensure that moderate Islam predominates in France and that Muslims can be a part of Europe's future.

Our solutions offer no panacea to a multilayered problem. But recognizing the discriminatory equilibrium in which rooted French and the more recently arrived Muslim population are caught, and the role that both parties can play to undermine that equilibrium, would be a more positive approach to Muslim integration into French society than is being offered by any political party in today's France. We cannot promise that these efforts would be sufficient to reduce the terrorist threat in the short term. But it shows more promise than mosque-burning, calls for deportation or the reinstatement of the death penalty.

