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Urban riots in France : It's Marx, not Bin Laden

In recent weeks, some American observers have hastily – and mistakenly – slapped a religious template over the urban riots outside major French cities. They misinterpret these riots as “the first instance of a semi-organized Muslim insurgency in Europe,” in the words of *New York Sun* columnist Daniel Pipes.

This fits into a pattern among conservatives who have warned that Europe was on the verge of being "Islamicized," and that it would soon morph into "Eurabia" - a continent siding with Muslims in a hypothetical war of civilizations. With the urban riots unfolding in France this month, many feel vindicated and now see the beginning of a "French Jihad" which will soon sweep across the old continent.

The problem with this interpretation is that the "Muslim" ingredient in the current riots is simply non-existent. For sure, many of the perpetrators do come from Muslim backgrounds - as do many of the victims. But they have no religious agenda and, even more telling, no political agenda: most are teenagers, often deprived of hopes for a good future and a good job, who won't listen to anyone. Not their parents, not social workers, not even the soccer star Zinedine Zidane, and least of all any religious authorities.

Both radical Muslim groups such as the Tabligh - an international proselytizing group active in France - and more institutional ones such as the UOIF, a large federation of French Muslim prayer spaces, who issued a fatwa condemning the riots as un-Islamic on November 7 - have revealed their powerlessness and lack of impact on the situation.

The sad truth is that these young people are having an exhilarating time playing hide and seek with the cops and burning the symbols of a society and state which have failed them – they are not going to stop just because an imam or an Islamist recruiter who wants them to live a rigidly pious life tells them to. The only current Islamist danger would be to send them to prison where they could encounter religious radicalism.

In spite of enduring problems, such as discrimination and racism, the 5 million Muslims living in France - whether they are citizens or not - are actually very positive about France. According to a survey by Claude Dargent in 2003, 74% of them are optimistic about the future of France, while only 61% of Catholics and 62% of Protestants share their optimism. 69% think that democracy is functioning well in France, versus only 58% of Catholics. Another study done released this year by Sylvain Brouard and Vincent Tiberj shows that 57% of Muslims do not

think Muslims encounter difficulties in practicing their religion, and the very concept of "*laïcité*" - the French brand of separating Church and State - is extremely popular among them, with 81% supporting it.

If you're still unconvinced, consider the result of one final study, this one by the American government. According to the Office of Research of the State Department, "large majorities of Muslims in France voice confidence in the country's government, feel at least partly French and support integrating into French society." According to this 2005 survey, 95% of Muslims have a favorable overall opinion of France, 89% of them express confidence in public schools, and 65% in the national government. Moreover, 54% also express confidence in the police, which is only slightly less sanguine than the 56% who express confidence in Ulama and Imams.

So much for the French Jihad.

The current riots are not about Islam: they're about the poor social and economic conditions in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods – and young "native" Frenchmen are involved in the disturbances, too. "Urban policy", pursued by governments of right and left since the 1980's, has failed to eliminate these bleak pockets of poverty, located on the outskirts of large cities, where recent immigrants flock to and where unemployment remains high. Undoubtedly, official French reluctance to attack ethnic discrimination head-on has contributed to these young people's sense of vulnerability. An 18-25 year old born in these "*cités*" is twice as likely to be unemployed than other young Frenchmen.

Political decisions made by the current conservative government since 2002, such as cutting subsidies to community associations, social workers and "neighborhood policing", have not helped, nor has the tough language adopted by Nicolas Sarkozy, the Interior minister. The irony is that if Sarkozy can boast some real successes in religious policy (he created the French Council for the Muslim Faith in late 2002, after more than a decade of unsuccessful attempts), his social policy and that of the government to which he belongs have clearly failed. He has put forward new ideas to promote greater equality of opportunity through proposals for limited "positive discrimination" and although these have remained shelved, the current pressures have led the Villepin government to wisely propose reinforcing anti-discrimination measures and educational subsidies for poor neighborhoods to try to repair a tattered social fabric while attempting to restore order.

The sad conclusion is that French Muslims, who have nothing to do as a group with the current riots, may end up paying a disproportionate part of the bill in the form of heightened suspicion from their compatriots and the international community in general.

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