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Publication Details

Ajala, I. 2013, 'Muslims and foreign policy in France: A case-study of UOIF and the Palestinian issue', *French Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 259-271.

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Muslims and Foreign Policy in France: a Case-study of UOIF and the Palestinian issue

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Abstract (119 words):

European Muslim communities' views on foreign policy constitute a growing topic of research. This paper presents a case study of the status of the Palestinian issue in France and focuses on one particular actor, namely the UOIF (Union of Islamic Organizations of France). The content analysis of several documents and press releases issued by the UOIF aims at characterizing how the UOIF frames the conflict and mobilizes on the issue. Then, the analysis replaces a range of actors, including the UOIF, in the context of the Israeli operation in Gaza which took place between December 27, 2008 and January 17, 2009. The examination of press archives is meant to characterize different actors' behaviors, narratives and reactions to the crisis.

Keywords: France, Muslims, Jews, Palestine, mobilization,

France is home to the largest Muslim community in Europe. Muslims do not constitute a homogenous group but are characterized by various forms of belonging to Islam, from rigorous religious practice to cultural affiliation (Frégosi 2008), that's why the title of this article refers to Muslim communities. When it comes to foreign policy issues, the symbolic allegiance and feeling of belonging to the Arab world feed sensitivity to the Palestinian question (Cesari 1991). Given these conditions, talks about the 'importation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict' are recurrent in the public sphere. Expressions such as 'intifada des banlieues' and 'importation du conflit israélo-palestinien' evoke the opposition of Muslim and Jewish communities as a result of the conflict and anti-Semitic incidents because of Israel's policy (Hecker 2007).

The French political opportunity structure rejects ethnic group politics. In a centralized framework which is unfavorable to the expression of specific interests, it is even more difficult to mobilize. If foreign policy is not a prior concern for French voters, including Muslim French voters (Laurence & Vaïsse 2006, 218; IFOP 2006), the Palestinian issue seems to constitute an exception, at least for a part of French voters with a Muslim background. Muslims' foreign policy views are generally close to the general population, except precisely on the Palestinian issue (Laurence & Vaïsse 2006) which crystallizes activism.

After a theoretical framing of the relation between ethnic groups and foreign policy and after situating the Palestinian question in the French context, this paper chooses to focus on one particular Muslim organization, namely the UOIF (Union of Islamic Organizations of France), which is notorious for its grassroots activism and where solidarity with the Palestinians is heavily displayed. Empirical evidence is gathered through the content analysis of several documents and press releases issued by the UOIF. The investigation of such data aims at characterizing how the UOIF frames the conflict and its mobilization on the issue. Polls and surveys, which are usually

also reported in the press constituted another source of data to try to understand French Muslims as a group of individuals. In parallel, as we also need to consider the institutional aspect, some documents of the UOIF were consulted on the UOIF website¹. The following categories were browsed on the website in their integrality in November and December 2009: Institution, Principles, Objectives, Authorities, UOIF Letters, Le Bourget Meetings, Recent Events, News in France, Activities, Europe, Press Reviews, UOIF Statements, Other statements².

Then, the analysis replaces a range of actors, including the UOIF, in the context of the Israeli operation in Gaza which took place between December 27, 2008 and January 17, 2009.

The examination of press archives is meant to characterize different actors' behaviors, narratives and reactions to the crisis to ultimately foster at least in part, a better understanding of the "specificity of French passions" (Wieviorka 2005) surrounding the Middle East conflict. A search was conducted in the newspaper *Le Monde* for a timeline going from January 1st, 1988 to November 2009 with the keyword "Musulmans de France" to ensure the maximum of coverage. The media is a useful source to collect the views and feelings of different actors: in the French case, this is all the more a valuable source given the rejection of any official recognition of ethnic groups.

How does UOIF frame the Palestinian issue? How is does it conceive and carry out mobilization? What are UOIF's incentives for such mobilization?

Ethnic groups and foreign policy

When we talk about 'ethnic groups and foreign policy', it is usually and implicitly inferred that we actually mean 'ethnic groups and foreign policy *in the United States*': there is a wide range of literature dedicated to this question, from general studies about this relationship

(Ahrari 1987; Deconde 1994; Shain 1999; Smith 2000; Ambrosio 2002) to specific case studies (Croucher 1996; Haney & Vanderbush 1999; Walt & Mearsheimer 2006). Some observers have a negative view of ethnic lobbying seen as jeopardizing the national interests (Huntington 1997) while others consider ethnic groups as potential agents for the promotion of democratic values in their countries of origin, which can benefit the United States (Shain 1999).

If there is a rich literature on ethnic groups and foreign policy in the United States, this is not the case in Europe (Aggestam & Hill 2008). The expression itself of “ethnic lobbying” –not necessarily in foreign policy, but in a general sense- is difficult to find in studies dealing with European contexts. European governments do not deal with the same domestic pressures as in the United States (Nielsen 2003). Césari points to the difference between the United States and Europe, and within Europe itself, concerning the creation of pressure groups by recognizing that “the phenomenon exists but is not articulated and elaborated as a lobby activity,” conceding that things may change. Still the phenomenon is less obvious in Europe than in the United States (Césari 2003).

Having established that, the assumption of the absence of ethnic lobbying in the American understanding should not prevent an analysis of Muslim communities’ attitudes on foreign policy in a European context. According to the United States National Intelligence Council, “on-going societal and political tension over integration of Muslims is likely to make European policymakers increasingly sensitive to the potential domestic repercussions of any foreign policies for the Middle East, including aligning with the U.S. on policies seen as pro-Israeli” (USNIC 2008, 25). There is a strong incentive for research on foreign policy opinions of Muslims in the West as multiculturalism is more and more considered an issue of high politics (Aggestam & Hill 2008, 106). Silvestri even talks about “almost an obsession with ‘Muslim attitudes’ to

British and American foreign policy” (Silvestri 2007a, 179). This is because on foreign policy issues, European Muslims tend to share the views of Muslims in Muslim countries (The Pew Global Attitudes Project 2006a, 4). In 2006, European Muslims were less favourable to the United States and the War on Terror than the general European population was (The Pew Global Attitudes Project 2006a, 4). European Muslims are much more likely to side with Palestinians than with Israelis, and in 2006, they had a favorable view of Hamas electoral victory (The Pew Global Attitudes Project 2006a, 4). In 2006, French Muslims were more divided than other Muslims on this issue: 44% said it was good for Palestinians while 46% thought it was bad for them (Allen 2006). This analysis precisely takes the Palestinian issue as a case study in the French context.

The Palestinian question in the French context

Even before the arrival of Muslim immigrants in the seventies, France already had its “Arab policy”. This policy had been relatively stable since 1967 whereas at that time, the Muslim presence in France was very small (Laurence & Vaisse 2006, 216). Until the end of the Algerian war, France was Israel’s ally. After the Accords d’Evian, the 1967 war marked a shift, and France began selling weapons to Arab countries. Since that time, French foreign policy is considered to be pro-Arab, a policy originally conceived as a Gaullist one.

Positive opinions about Israel had been the rule in the sixties except for the Communist Party, which was aligned with the Soviet Communist Party. The first shift came from non-leftist intellectuals at the time of the Lebanon war in 1982 (Wieviorka 2005, 196; Vidal 2005, 176). Then, the Intifada profoundly changed the perception of the conflict. Wieviorka notes that the

sympathy for the Palestinians could only be reinforced as the contestation, which until then had mostly been external and conveyed through terrorism was now coming from abated young people (Wieviorka 2005, 196). The second wave of sympathy came from Muslims who, given their lack of socio-economic integration and the strong discrimination issues, could identify with Palestinians (Wieviorka 2005, 197). The radicalization of these two movements was taking place while the Jewish leadership in France showed more and more support to the Israeli government (Wieviorka 2005, 197).

A poll taken just before the sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of Israel reveals balanced expectations regarding French policy on the Palestinian issue (IFOP 2008). 72% of the sample believes that French and Israeli relations are good though the share is higher on the Right (81% of the UMP partisans) than on the Left (66% of the Socialist party partisans) (IFOP 2008, 4). Preoccupation with and attention to the conflict have decreased: 63% think that the situation in the Middle East represents no or very little threat of world war. 85% consider that the French interest resides in relations with Arab countries as much as in relations with Israel (IFOP 2008, 4). 64% claim their sympathy goes to neither of the parties. Until the seventies, Israel attracted more sympathy than Arab countries whereas now, 14% of the interviewees give their sympathy only to Israel and 19% only to Palestine (IFOP 2008, 5). The most widespread reaction to the Middle East conflict is indifference (Hecker 2007, 17).

The picture is different concerning Muslims. Muslims' sympathy goes in majority to Palestine (78%) (Allen 2006). Only 8% say their sympathy goes to both parties while 7% says their sympathy goes to none (Allen 2006). 6% say their sympathy goes to Israel (Allen 2006). However, Brouard and Tiberj highlight the relative character of the opposition to Israel: if 30% of the French people with an immigrant background reckon that Israel bears the greatest

responsibility in the conflict (13% of the French overall population), 65% consider both parties are equally responsible for it, which is close to the 75% of the French overall population also condemning both parties (Brouard & Tiberj 2006a, 105).

As a conclusion, even though the Palestinian question is the only issue which can be considered as an issue of interest to French Muslims, some evidence seems to indicate that the indifference or the neutrality characterizing French public opinion might be extended to at least a part of French Muslims. However, if foreign policy is a relatively minor issue for French voters, including French Muslims, it can still play a role in electoral choices for the most politicized, especially for students and youth, a core component of UOIF (Vaïsse 2007b).

Mobilization on Palestine: the case of UOIF

The Union of Islamic Organisations in France (UOIF) is a strong grassroots force which was founded in 1983 and gained visibility in 1989 with the Salman Rushdie affair and first cases related to the headscarf. It comprises 250 civil associations, controls 13.5 % of prayer spaces (Laurence & Vaïsse 2006, 105) and is theologically situated in the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood. The organisation is mostly financed by foreign donors. Its relative success comes from efficient networking at the grassroots level on the one hand and its efficient insertion in transnational networks on the other hand (Zehgal 2005, 5): it is also the French branch of the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe. It is known for its annual gathering in Le Bourget. UOIF strongly involves younger generations and has relations with different youth organisations such as JMF (Young Muslims in France) and EMF (Muslim Students in France). It was also one of the three big federations (along with the Great Mosque of Paris and the National Federation of

Muslims in France) which signed an agreement in 2002 on the composition of the French Council of the Muslim Cult created in 2003 (Zehgal 2005, 9).

If the general influence of Islamic political organizations over Muslim populations is limited (Laurence & Vaisse 2006), UOIF still mobilizes though its influence is restricted to 'communitarian' events. However, it is also affected by a crisis of militancy which can be explained by a social division: there are tensions between institutionalization and militants' aspirations, as proven by the UOIF leadership refusal to show public opposition to the 2004 law ban of headscarves in school. In this context, the Palestinian issue acts as a consensual and cementing issue perpetrating UOIF's influence in the struggle for representation. Consequently, this mobilization also contributes in reducing divisions related to domestic religious issues with regard to the visibility of Islam in France.

There is indeed intense activism around this issue. All of the UOIF statements concern the Palestinian issue whether it is for the commemoration of past events (UOIF 2009w) or for reporting the evolution of the conflict (UOIF 2009L). In a press release, the UOIF called for all "Muslims in France to participate in demonstrations and campaigns in favor of the Palestinians, to pray for Palestinians and for *Imams* to devote their sermons to the issue" (UOIF 2008g). The organization asked the French authorities, the EU and the international community to take sanctions against Israel and stop the Gaza blockade (UOIF 2008g). Demonstrations are regularly reported, especially against the blockade in January 2008 (UOIF 2008a), and at the time of the Israeli operations in the Gaza strip in January 2009 (UOIF 2009p). The Palestinian issue was indeed at the core of the Annual General Assembly at Le Bourget in 2009. The organization called for a continuation of mobilization "to better inform opinion about the dramatic situation of the Palestinian people" (UOIF 2008d). The UOIF has explicitly labeled Israeli operations in the

Gaza strip in January 2009 as ‘genocide’ (UOIF 2009o), ‘Shoah’ (UOIF 2008e), and ‘crime against humanity’ (UOIF 2008h) and has often condemned violence (UOIF 2008c). Arguments made in favor of Palestinians also often invoke international law (UOIF undated 1; UOIF undated2).

The organization also seeks a Europeanization of the issue. The situation in Gaza for example brought about an extraordinary session of the UOIF Administration Council where it noted the participation of the UOIF President, Lhaj Thami Breze to a European delegation led by the FIOE President, Chakib Makhoul to Rafah. The delegation included the European Council for Fatwa and Research as well as the European Gathering of Imams and was meant to give European Muslims’ moral support to the Gazaouis and to sustain a humanitarian mission (UOIF 2009r).

A statement released by the FIOE, published on the UOIF website, condemned Israeli operations seen as “a war crime”. The statement was calling for the EU to mobilize to stop the blockade and was asking for the Muslim and Arab world to adopt “a dignified position”. It was also asking for Muslims in Europe to support the Palestinian people through prayers, to organize “popular and media mobilizations associating Muslims and non-Muslims” and to initiate humanitarian mobilization (UOIF 2008f). Other institutions’ statements condemning the offensive on Gaza and calling for various forms of mobilization were also included: a statement of different regional councils of the CFCM and Muslim associations (CRCM of La Réunion and la Saint-Denis, the Calvados Cultural and Islamic Association, Le Havre Muslims association, EMF (Muslims Students of France), France-Comté Islamic Cultural Center) (UOIF 2009k). The UOIF also invited imams to raise awareness about the issue (Le Bars 2009a).

Though solidarity with the Palestinians is heavily displayed, it does not necessarily translate into strong political action. Indeed, it is felt through “militantisme distancié” (distanciated activism), for example through charities (Godard & Taussig 2007, 72). There is politicization through identification and the subsequent positioning on a particular policy or event, but political mobilization as such does not necessarily follow as it implies the need for organization and resources (Bennani-Chraïbi 2007, 152). Indeed, the UIOF admits no political ambition on this front. Its president, Lhaji Brèze said in an interview: “Concerning the situation in Palestine, the UIOF has neither the mandate nor the power to enter into political complexities. And so we have decided to act on the humanitarian front” (Ternisien 2005). In fact institutionalization via the CFCM has also entailed, for UIOF leaders, the refusal to “import” or deal with foreign conflicts as proven by its leaders’ declaration in May 2004 that the Palestinian conflict will not be resolved by French Muslim or Jewish citizens’ actions³ (Godard & Taussig 2007, 52).

Identity complexities and Muslims being defined by French society as the “other” (Ayhan 2006, 2) bring about a selective identification with “all things Muslim- including, for example the Palestinian cause” (Laurence & Vaïsse 2006, 93). With the end of the myth of return, the only return which is possible is that “in an imaginary homeland”, that of Islam, according to Benjamin Stora (Bernard and Herzberg 1995). UIOF plays on this mythical community when emphasizing solidarity with the Palestinians to reinforce the unity of its constituencies and the transnational attachment to the ummah induced by Muslim identity. The symbolic related to the Palestinian issue is powerful and it is in the interest of UIOF to catalyze this symbolic to reinforce itself as an organization.

The Israeli offensive in Gaza: debating or importing the issue? Actors' positions and reactions

As relations between the Muslim and Jewish communities became strained after the Israeli offensive in Gaza between 27 December 2008 and 17 January 2009, the Palestinian issue was at the core of the message of the Vice President of the UOIF Fouad Alaoui during the Annual Congress at Le Bourget in April 2009 (UOIF 2009z). The information was also reported in *Le Monde* (Le Bars 2009d). In his intervention, Fouad Alaoui argued that the UOIF's support to the Palestinian cause was not communitarian but "a support to a universal just cause" and regretted the absence of consensus on this issue in France, especially with French Jews, calling them to join this cause. He was in fact alluding to the CRIF (the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France) demonstrations in January in favor of Israel, a support which was viewed negatively by French Muslims (Le Bars 2009d). In a statement entitled « Qui donc importe le conflit Israélo-palestinien en France? » (Who does import the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in France?), the UOIF had attacked the traditional CRIF dinner organized on 2 March 2009 for its call in favor of «Zionism » and its approbation of Israeli policies (UOIF 2009y).

Regarding debates about communitarian tensions in France, Alaoui added that Muslims did not confuse Israeli policies with Jewish citizens, that this was not a war of religions, and that there was no question of importing the conflict (UOIF 2009z). The same argument had been included in a UOIF statement wishing the CRIF had disapproved of the Israeli operations in the Gaza strip and arguing that there was no confusion being made between Israeli policies and Jewish citizens (UOIF 2009x). In January 2009, the organization had issued the following statement:

« Tout en soutenant le peuple palestinien terrorisé, l’UOIF refuse toute importation du conflit entre citoyens français et condamne avec vigueur tous les actes islamophobes, antisémitismes et racistes. L’UOIF déplore également l’utilisation de certains faits isolés condamnables et l’amalgame pour tenter de faire taire les manifestations de solidarité avec la population de Gaza et détourner l’attention des crimes contre l’humanité⁵ » (UOIF 2009t).

On the contrary, Dalil Boubakeur, head of the GMP, in an interview for an Israeli magazine (SVP Israel) seemed to support Israeli actions against Hamas, an interview which brought about a lot of criticism from the Muslim community and made him issue a statement declaring that these were not his remarks (Le Bars 2009d). The presence of the CFCM and of the head of the GMP Dalil Boubakeur at the Annual Dinner of the CRIF also stirred controversy within the Muslim community (Le Bars 2009d). The article concluded by noting that:

“La dimension politique et conflictuelle de la question palestinienne en France a fait ressurgir, ces dernières semaines, l'idée d'un “CRIF musulman” une structure laïque susceptible de se substituer au seul Conseil français du culte musulman, instance religieuse, inadaptée pour s'exprimer sur de tels sujets. Cette idée, qui ne fait pas l'unanimité chez les musulmans, s'inscrit dans un contexte d'antagonismes entre communautés algérienne et marocaine. Porté par des personnalités algériennes, ce projet reste pour l'heure dans le flou⁶” (Le Bars 2009d).

Gilles Bernheim, France's Great Rabbi, noted that Jewish institutions insisted that the Gaza crisis was a conflict between Hamas and Israel, not against a people or a religion, and as such, not to be imported in France (Le Bars 2009c). This is an opinion shared by the President of the CRCM of the Rhône-Alpes region, Azzedine Gaci, for whom this was not a religious conflict but a "political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians" (Le Bars 2009b). This did not entail silence or the impossibility of expressing one's opinion for Gilles Bernheim. However, he also recalled that at the time of the second Intifada, the Jewish community felt insecure (Le Bars 2009c).

An editorial recognizing that the biggest Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe were in France, noted that it was "natural" for Muslims of France to feel solidarity with Palestinians and that was equally true for French Jews with Israel (Delberghe, Garin and Zappi 2009). This feeling of solidarity probably explained "the importance of the Muslim community's mobilization and the demonstrations (...) and also the importance of the reactions of the Jewish community organizations" who were afraid of an increase of anti-Semitism like at the time of the second Intifada (Le Bars 2009b). Three dangers were identified in the editorial: the importation of the conflict, the choice of terminology (the abusive use of the term 'genocide' to describe the events) and the increase of anti-Semitic actions (Le Bars 2009b).

The press also noted the relief of local authorities as the Gaza crisis implications stayed within the realm of political and public expression (Delberghe, Garin and Zappi 2009). Most mayors, who often organized discrete meetings with Jewish and Muslim leaders, claimed that the situation was calm and in no way comparable to what took place at the beginning of 2000, though

there was some anxiety (Delberghe, Garin and Zappi 2009). This episode seemed indeed to justify different apprehensions from public authorities. Mosques as well as various local initiatives also served to “canalize anger”, mobilize, call for prayer for Palestinians, and promote cohesion between the communities in France, but also prevent any violence (Le Monde 2009). In Lyon and in Alsace, religious leaders called for peace and dialogue while condemning attempts aimed at importing the conflict (Le Bars 2009a).

The French government had also demanded that the CRIF and the CFCM pacify the situation (Le Bars 2009b). The Minister of the Interior, Michèle Alliot-Marie, who called for a meeting with Muslim and Jewish institutions, insisted that the priority was to maintain stability and not to import the conflict, an objective agreed upon by the CRIF President (Richard Prasquier) and the CFCM President, Mohammed Moussaoui (Le Bars 2009a). The article itself was entitled “Les autorités françaises redoutent des tensions entre communautés juive et musulmane⁷” (Le Bars 2009a). If tensions were perceptible between the two institutions, this was because the UOIF was calling the Israeli offensive a genocide, which only aimed at importing the conflict in France for the CRIF President” (Le Bars 2009a). In January 2009, public authorities had, on various occasions, declared the need for “national cohesion” and had called for not importing the conflict in the context of increasing anti-Semitic actions: an inter-ministerial committee even took place on January 16 regarding the fight against racism and anti-Semitism (Le Bars 2009b). However, different organizations, as well as religious leaders themselves, feared these calls could in the end prove counter-productive: secular organizations had signed a text criticizing the role given by public authorities to religious instances to prevent violence, and another text was signed by local associations, SOS-racisme, and l' Union des étudiants juifs de

France (the Jewish Students Union of France) emphasizing the “political and non ethnic or religious” aspect of the conflict (Le Bars 2009b).

Conclusion

As a conclusion, the Palestinian issue certainly holds an exceptional status in the French political debate on international politics. It affects the French public sphere in that it forces the governmental authorities to engage in different initiatives with Muslim and Jewish communities. The UOIF stands out as strongly mobilized on this issue. This mobilizing strategy on an external issue has unifying purposes in the context of heavy tensions related to domestic religious issues. By emphasizing solidarity with the Palestinians and the humanitarian aspect, UOIF also seeks to favor bridge-building between the different components of its constituencies and transcend the divisions related to the visibility of Islam in the French secular context.

NOTES

1. UOIF has since renovated its website: <http://www.uoif-online.com/v2/>
2. These categories were labelled as follows in French; Institution, Principes, Objectifs, Instances, Lettres de l'UOIF, Rencontres du Bourget, Actualités à la Une, Actualités France, Actualités, Europe, Actualités revue de presse, Communiqués de l'UOIF, Autres communiqués.
3. In May 2004, Lhaj Thami Breze stated that : « Le problème des Palestiniens trouvera sa solution en Palestine avec l'aide des Nations unies et des grandes puissances, mais certainement pas par l'action des citoyens de confession juive ou musulmane de France... Notre responsabilité de citoyens est de savoir contrôler nos propres pulsions au profit d'un intérêt commun juif et musulman » (Godard & Taussig 2007, 52).
4. In July 2004, the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, encouraged French Jews to emigrate to Israel because of anti-Semitism which gave way to some diplomatic tensions. He reiterated his invitation the following year, without however linking it to anti-Semitism (*Le Figaro*, 29 July 2005).
5. The remarks can be translated as follows: « While supporting the terrorized Palestinian people, UOIF refuses any importation of the conflict among French citizens and vigorously condemns all islamophobic, anti-Semitic and racist actions. UOIF equally deplores the use of reprehensible isolated facts and the confusion in order to silence the expressions of solidarity with the people of Gaza and divert attention from the crimes against humanity”
6. The remarks can be translated as follows: “The political and conflict dimension of the Palestinian question in France unravelled these last weeks the idea of a “Muslim Crif”, a secular

structure likely to substitute the French Council of the Muslim Faith, a religious authority ill-adapted for expression on such issues. This idea, which is not unanimously approved by Muslims, has to be seen in the context of antagonisms between the Algerian and Moroccan communities. Put forward by Algerian personalities, this project is still vague.”

7. The title can be translated as follows “French authorities fear tensions between Muslim and Jewish communities”.

WORD COUNT: 4147

DATE OF REVISED MANUSCRIPT: 15 April 2013

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