

Growing Muslim, North African Population in France

Prior to the 2024 Paris Olympics, Amnesty International released a 32-page report condemning the French ban of Muslim women's and girl's hijabs and other religious head coverings while representing France in the games. The report found this prohibition incompatible with international human rights laws as well as the Olympic Charter.¹ The ban is predicated on France's 1905 Law of Separation of Church and State which established the idea of *laïcité*, roughly translatable to secularism, or freedom from religion, in English.

Article One of the total forty-four articles included in the 1905 Law promises freedom of conscience and exercise of religion but does include restrictions when this expression interferes with "public order."² Article Two declares that the State does not recognize or subsidize any religion with the exception of chaplains working in publicly funded institutions.³ Over the twentieth century, varying interpretations of the law plus expansive legislation has rendered its praxis to affect some religious populations more than others, especially as the demographics of France have shifted since the early twentieth century.

Since the 1960s, the Muslim, North African population in France has generally grown once the former French colonies and protectorates of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco gained independence.⁴ The rationale for many of these migrations was a result of political and economic reasons. North Africans, mainly Algerians, worked as administrators, officers, and soldiers during the wars.⁵ France offered them compensation through the *Rapatriés d'origine nord-africaine* or Repatriates of North Africa (RONA) program.⁶ A 2016 Pew Research study on Europe's Muslim population estimated that 8.8% of the French Population identified as Muslim.⁷

¹ "France: Hijab bans in French sport expose discriminatory double standards ahead of Olympic and Paralympic Games." *Amnesty International*, July 16, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/france-hijab-bans-olympic-and-paralympic/>.

² Davis, Stephen M. "France's 1905 Law of Separation of Church and State." *World History Encyclopedia*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/2094/frances-1905-law-of-separation-of-church-and-state/>.

³ Davis, Stephen M. "France's 1905 Law of Separation of Church and State." *World History Encyclopedia*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/2094/frances-1905-law-of-separation-of-church-and-state/>.

⁴ "French empire." *Oxford Reference*. 2012; Accessed 16 Apr. 2026. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191737596.timeline.0001>.

⁵ Limage, Leslie J., "Education and Muslim Identity: The Case of France." *Comparative Education* 36, no. 1 (2000): 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060027773>.

⁶ Limage, Leslie J., "Education and Muslim Identity: The Case of France." *Comparative Education* 36, no. 1 (2000): 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060027773>.

⁷ "Report: Europe's Growing Muslim Population." *Pew Research Center*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>.

This group included economic/academic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, as well as the first-generation French citizen children of these migrants.

The population shift increased Muslim visibility in the French national context, especially of women and girls who wore some sort of religious veil (ex. Hijab) and even more modest dress (ex. Abaya). A 1989 incident in which three Muslim girls refused to remove their Islamic headscarves in school brought this issue to national and international attention, leading to a slew of legislation targeting Muslim women's dress. In 2004, the first hijab ban passed for students in state schools. In 2007, this ban extended to teachers, and most recently in 2023 abayas are no longer permitted in public schools.⁸ This brings up a philosophical and political question that many scholars have sought to answer: how can Muslim identity co-exist with the secular, French republic?

⁸ Tazamal, Mobashra. "Timeline: France's Targeting of Muslim Women's Dress." *The Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University*, October 20, 2023, <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/timeline-frances-targeting-of-muslim-womens-dress/>.