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Muslims in Marseille's Public Space: Belated Recognition, Ambivalent Visibility

Vincent Geisser

Introduction: The Myth of the "Muslim-Arab Projects" in Provence

In the national imagination, Marseille is often associated with the representation of an "Arab-Muslim" city. This can take on various registers (humor, literature, cinema, media, etc.) and refers to contradictory, often stigmatizing, connotations, such as in the xenophobic rhetoric of the extreme right denouncing a supposed "Islamic graft" in the soil of Provence.¹ Positive representations can also occasionally be found, primarily among defenders of cosmopolitanism.² This identity-centered vision of local social realities can no doubt be explained by the history of the city, long considered the "Gateway to the East" (Porte de l'Orient),³ but also by its urban geography and sociology that are marked by a strong visibility of so-called "Muslim" populations in the heart of the city.⁴ These neo-orientalist images, supporting the cliché of a "Muslim city," have also been reinforced over the past twenty years by the public controversies around the rise of a proselytizing Islam (fundamentalist and salafist), of which Marseille is seen as one of the preaching grounds.⁵

But here, as in other areas (including crime, the myth of integration through soccer, communitarianism, clientelism, etc.), the discourse on "Marseille exceptionalism"⁶ does not entirely withstand the nuances revealed by sociological observation not only of the demographic size of the population with cultural ties to Islam in the city, but also of the influence of communitarian and religious logics in the establishment of local sociabilities, including those in working-class neighborhoods.⁷ In this area, Marseille even seems a "reverse exception" since Muslim modes of operating and mobilizing in public spaces are less developed here than in the other large French agglomerations (Lyon, Lille, the Parisian region, etc). In fact, the dynamics that constitute a "local Muslim milieu" are less extensive in Marseille than in the rest of France, and the assertion of a "young Islam" driven by the new generations who have French nationality is more subdued than in other French cities.⁸ There exists a real discrepancy between the recurrence of speeches and images about the Islamic character of the Phocaean city and the inadequacy of processes of institutionalization of Islam in the heart of the urban configuration.

The issue is not so much to deny the particularities of the history and sociology of the local Muslim field, but to highlight connection of these particularities with economic, political

¹ The conservative and extreme-right press regularly publishes articles and dossiers on Islam and Muslims in Marseille. See, for example Nasri, "A Marseille."

² Lorcerie, "Un cosmopolitisme enraciné," 71-93.

³ Blanchard and Boëtsch, *Marseille, Porte Sud*.

⁴ Peraldi, Dupont and Samson, *Sociologie de Marseille*.

⁵ Leroux, "A Marseille."

⁶ Peraldi and Samson, *Gouverner Marseille*.

⁷ Geisser and Lorcerie, *Muslims in Marseille*.

⁸ Geisser, "Immigration et mobilisations musulmanes à Marseille."

and social dynamics within urban space that largely refutes the belief in a “Marseillais Muslim exception.” From this viewpoint, Marseille would instead be a magnifying mirror and echo chamber of public debates and national challenges, in which Islam is not so much treated as an ordinary religion like Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism, but rather as a social problem.⁹

From the Colonial Worker to the “Marseillais Muslim”: Islam as a Political Construction and Method of Social Control

The first traces of a Muslim population in the Phocaeen city can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, according to historians: “Marseille, by virtue of its status as a port city, has long been marked by the presence of Islam. A ‘cemetery for Turcs,’ assigned to Muslim slaves that served on the galleys, was until 1723 situated at the corner of the rue Sainte and the rue de la Paix, just behind the Vieux Port, and then between the cours Pierre-Puget and the rue Roux-de-Brignoles.¹⁰ Chroniclers even affirm the construction of a Muslim necropolis allegedly destroyed after the 1789 Revolution.¹¹ Today, these “Muslim traces” have completely disappeared from collective memory and from the urban landscape. Not until the middle of the nineteenth century, with the start of the colonial conquest and the birth of the first industries, did “Muslim demographics” become significant in urban space and give rise to a tentative public policy aiming to regulate colonial workers. From that moment on, the management of the Muslim presence in Marseille is closely related to colonialism and to how it extends socially and economically into the region. At this point, the Phocaeen city is not an exception: the regulation policies of indigenous Muslims are similar to those of other large French cities, giving a determining role to security forces (Ministry of the Interior and prefectorats), and to employers.¹²

The “Muslim policies” of Employers and Local Elites in Marseille

Without necessarily supporting the hypothesis of a *colonial continuum*, there is a certain permanence in the conceptions and ways of managing the Muslim presence in local space that is striking for historians and sociologists: the recognition by the Marseillais elites of the Muslims’ legitimate right to conserve their religious traditions and practice their worship remains largely overdetermined by security considerations, leading to regulation policies that are relatively disconnected from the expectations and demands of the targeted populations. The recent debates (in the 1990s-2000s) on the project of the “great Mosque of Marseille”¹³ for example seem to reconnect with a political vocabulary and a public construction by local actors of a “Muslim problem;” this project was already present at the beginning of the last century and can be summarized in three words: philanthropy, social control, and surveillance. We can however note some developments in the approach to the Muslim presence that can largely be explained by the transformations affecting the configuration of local power: at the beginning of the last century,

⁹ Hajjat and Mohammed, *Islamophobia*.

¹⁰ Renard, “Aperçu sur l’histoire de l’islam à Marseille,” 270.

¹¹ Bilici, “L’Islam en France,” 17-37.

¹² Sayad, Jordi and Témime, *Migrance : histoire des migrations à Marseille*.

¹³ Ciret, *La grande mosquée de Marseille*.

the “Muslim policies” of the city of Marseille were not so much determined by the political elite but by the local corporations, the main employers of colonial laborers (the oil and soap factories and the Gardanne mines).

Thus, starting during World War I, in 1916-17, Marseille’s employers, through the Chamber of Commerce, developed a regulation policy for Muslim natives that was already based on a religious vocabulary, with the plan to construct a “Kabyle village” around a central mosque (*masjid*) in the *Quartiers Nord* of the city; the village would contain lodging, halal businesses, a meeting place (*djemaa*) and even a *hammam*.¹⁴ Even though this project would never see the light of day, it remains emblematic of both orientalist representations and the paternalist management practices of the Muslim presence by the Marseillais elites, combining philanthropy with social control, charity, and safety.

The plans for mosques that would follow in 1937, 1942, and 1951 follow the same logic of authoritative governance of Islam in the urban space of Marseille: satisfying the religious and cultural demands of the Muslim workers while simultaneously keeping them under the yoke of the employers and the security agencies (police and prefecture), in this way preventing them from succumbing to the temptation to join autonomous religious movements (Association of Algerian Ulemas), nationalist political organizations (L’Étoile nord-africaine) and later, national liberation movements (National Algerian movement and National Liberation Front). While they were not yet recognized as citizens and voters (they were at that point treated as “French subjects” or “protégés of France” but lacked civil rights), Muslims were the object of particular attention from local political elites (French section of the Socialist International and the Parti populaire français) and of representatives of the municipal government who sought to distance them from emerging nationalism and also from the growing influence of the Communist Party and the labor unions. Islam was therefore perceived in an ambivalent way by local elites, as both a means of disciplining the colonial workforce but also as an emancipation risk for native Muslims, in need of surveillance and suppression by all means.

With the process of decolonization and especially after Algeria gained independence in 1962, the Muslim question was temporarily eclipsed from the public debate in Marseille: the priority at that moment was to organize the local reception of repatriates of European origin (the “*Pieds noirs*”), and the Sephardic Jews, and to “contain” the more and more numerous immigrant laborers in the city.¹⁵ During the 1960s and 1970s, there was no real “Islam policy” on the municipal level or in employers’ associations, since the Islam of the formerly colonized was perceived as just one marker of identity among others. North-African immigration received a predominantly racist treatment that pushed the Muslim question to the background.¹⁶

The Defferre Era (1944-1986): Post-Mortem Recognition of the Muslim Presence

¹⁴ Renard, “Aperçu sur l’histoire,” 277.

¹⁵ Sayad, Jordi and Témime, *Migrance*.

¹⁶ Brahim, *La race tue*; Brahim, “Nous exécrons le racisme,” 43-60 ; Gastaut, “Marseille cosmopolite,” 269-285 ; Gastaut, “Marseille, épicerie,” 20–21.

Gaston Defferre, who reigned over the Mayoral Office and the city for more than thirty years (from the Liberation in 1944 until 1945, and then from 1953 until 1986), has often been credited with the invention of “municipal communitarianism,” blending electoral clientelism with cosmopolitan symbolism. This representation of Marseille’s political context, however, stems mostly from a cliché.¹⁷ In his methods of local government as well as in his public discourse, Defferre’s frame of reference was rarely communitarian or multicultural, but rather marked by the Jacobin and Republican ideology of his time. He was first and foremost a politician, heir of the Fourth Republic – he was notably under-secretary of State and secretary of Overseas Territories in 1946-1947 and 1956-1957-, who firmly believed in the assimilation of Muslim colonial natives and in the necessity of maintaining the practice of Islam in the private sphere. For him, Islam constituted more a cultural heritage that did not necessarily need to be politicized and publicized. This mayoral relationship with Islam likely explains why he did not develop any “Muslim policies” at the municipal level and why he treated the populations coming from the Maghreb, the Comoro Islands and from sub-saharan Africa as “immigrant workers” destined to return to their country of origin. It is true that, until the beginning of the 1980s, the vast majority of the “Muslims” residing in Marseille were still of foreign nationality and did not constitute a “captive clientele” for political and partisan organizations, except maybe for the Communist party and the labor union associated with it (the General Workers Confederation, or CGT), which attempted to organize immigrant laborers politically and through the union.¹⁸ Having become Secretary of the Interior after François Mitterrand’s victory in the presidential election of May 1981 (a function he combined with his tenure as mayor), Defferre developed a rather paternalistic and security-oriented vision of Islam, denouncing the rise of political Islam and the dangers it represented for social cohesion at the national level but also in the local context. He associated the rise of Muslim demands in Marseille, especially those associated with the creation of new places of prayer and Islamic associations, with the harmful influence of “Muslim fundamentalism.”¹⁹ In sum, Defferre remained nostalgic for a “parochial islam,” anchored in the life of the neighborhoods and village cores, carried on by the “old Maghrebi immigrants” (*chibanis*), in good harmony with the representatives of municipal power and security forces. Incidentally, during his thirty-three years as mayor, he did not maintain any public relationship with Muslim representatives in Marseille (imams, leaders of Muslim associations, leaders in the community, etc.) It was only on the day of his official funeral, on May 12, 1986, celebrated in the Cathédrale de la Major and orchestrated in a very oecumenical setting, that one of the city’s imams was called at the last minute to participate in the ceremony with other religious dignitaries from the city.²⁰ Some will say that municipal Defferism accomplished a *post-mortem* recognition of the Muslim presence in local space.

The Municipal Invention of a “Muslim Community”: Elected Officials, Voters and Clients

When Robert Vigouroux succeeded Gaston Defferre at the head of the municipality, first as interim mayor (1986-1987), then as winner of the mayoral general election (1989-1995), nothing would predict a priori that he would be the initiator of a “Muslim policy” that would leave a

¹⁷ Mattina, “L’invention politique,” 223-290 ; Peraldi and Samson, “Des communautés,” 263-278.

¹⁸ Césari, *Être musulman*, 27-44.

¹⁹ Interview de Gaston Defferre, *Les Temps modernes*, n° 452-453-454, 1984, 1573-1574.

²⁰ Césari, *Être musulman en France*, 95-110.

durable mark on the city through the 2020s. During his term, Vigouroux introduced, at a symbolic level, a type of “Marseillais multiculturalism,” integrating Muslims into the configuration of local authority for the first time. This evolution was however not specific to the Phocaean city and refutes once again the myth of the “Marseillais exception.” It was also part of a national process, encouraged by the French government, to put the “Muslim question” on the official agenda in order to encourage the emergence of “Muslim representation” on the religious scene.²¹ It was in this national context of Islam’s institutionalization that the Vigouroux administration laid the basis of a “Muslim policy,” from 1989 on, that would be partially continued by his successor as mayor, Jean-Claude Gaudin (1995-2020). This policy rested on three main pillars.

First of all, it aimed to promote on a symbolic level dialogue between communities, with the goal of preventing conflicts that could potentially arise between the different ethnoreligious components of Marseille’s population. With this in mind, a new agency called Marseille-Espérance was created in 1990, which brought together the city’s principal religious dignitaries and community leaders with the mayor. It was a rather elite body, completely disconnected from the aspirations of social groups and from the reality on the ground, but it contributed nonetheless to the durable anchoring of a communitarian symbolism in local governance.²²

The second pillar was to integrate “Muslim intermediaries” at the heart of municipal agencies themselves, which signified an opening up of Marseille’s political society to a community that the local elites had for a long time ignored and even disdained. In March 1989, for the first time in Marseille’s political history, several members of the city council and the *arrondissement* council with Maghrebi roots were elected on the lists of the new mayor. These “Muslim elected officials” generally did not have any power in a municipal context where power is strongly personalized and concentrated around the mayor (predominance of mayoral authority), but their symbolic presence nourished the political and partisan strategies to capture and control the votes of the “community”: from then on, Muslims became voters and potential clients of municipal politics.²³

Finally, the last pillar of this municipal multiculturalism was the project to construct a Grand Mosque. This initiative was not specific to Marseille (the mayor of Lyon supported a plan for a Grand Mosque in his city), nor innovative, since, as we have seen earlier, an alliance of local political elites and employers’ organizations had already developed several plans for “municipal mosques”, including one as early as 1916. Beginning in 1989, the new mayor Robert Vigouroux launched the idea of constructing a Muslim place of worship, inspired by “cathedral mosques.” At this level, we find the same types of municipal action as in the past, stemming simultaneously from a policy of recognition of the Muslim minority and the wish for security control of a population whose cultural and religious alterity continued to be perceived as problematic. The modest change when compared to the preceding decades is that the theme of the “Grand Mosque,” starting in the 1990s, tended to overdetermine the municipal approach to post-colonial migratory populations: no longer perceived as “foreigners” or “immigrants” destined to go back to their homeland, they were now captive citizens and voters, definitively

²¹ Frégosi, “Les mosques,” 153-174.

²² Geisser and Zemouri, *Marianne et Allah*.

²³ Geisser and Kelfaoui, “La communauté,” 55-77.

settled on Marseillais soil. The municipality intended to promote “good Islam,” symbol of peaceful integration of Muslims in the Phocaeen city, and simultaneously combat “bad Islam,” that of autonomous religious movements perceived as “separatist.”

The Marseillais Right’s Conversion to Municipal Multiculturalism: Electioneering and Exaggerating Security Concerns

Until the early 1990s, the Right in Marseille and its most important supporters in local civil society considered the “Muslim question” a political and electoral tool for stoking fear. Its longtime leader, Jean-Claude Gaudin, declared for example to the newspaper *Le Monde*: “[In Marseille] there are more and more men with religious beards (*barbus*) and women wearing veils. The promoters of fundamentalism are here and those who, in Algeria, refuse their law will be arriving here *en masse*.”²⁴ Beyond this vocabulary of stigmatization and xenophobia, a real refusal of recognition manifests itself, with the conservative and nationalist circles in the city still considering “Muslims” as “immigrants” and “foreigners” and wishing for their definitive return to their homelands. In this sense, the Marseillais Right has for a long time maintained a relationship with Islam that can be described as simultaneously paternalist, racist, and security-concerned, and it has treated Muslims as “illegitimate citizens.”

Finally, only when confronted with the challenge of governing (Jean-Claude Gaudin became mayor of Marseille in 1995), the local Right progressively modified its view of the Muslim question, and, more generally, of populations with post-colonial migratory backgrounds. Faced with the realities of municipal government, Marseille’s Right progressively realized that it could no longer govern the city while denying recognition to a significant part of its population that was no longer simply “immigrant” or “foreign” but also comprised of French citizens and most importantly, voters. At this point, conservative groups made a pragmatic shift and opted for a Muslim *realpolitik* that consequently factored in demographic and sociological changes affecting urban space. The local Right subsequently discovered the political and economic assets of a “municipal multiculturalism” and a “communitarian symbolism” that allowed for the promotion of a cosmopolitan and tolerant city, enriched by the contributions of different diasporas and migrations.²⁵

All of these developments spurred the conservative majority (1995-2020) to reappropriate the heritage of “municipal multiculturalism” left by its predecessor at the mayoral office, Robert Vigouroux. First of all, the municipal association “Marseille Espérance,” once on the brink of disappearing, was in the end maintained and even consolidated by Jean-Claude Gaudin, who transformed it into a major instrument of his political communication and presented it as a pillar of social cohesion and a symbol of “Marseille’s social cohesion (*vivre ensemble*).” Furthermore, the conservative mayoral office seems to consent to partially rewriting “Marseille’s story” by subsequently integrating a certain social, territorial and cultural diversity and organizing several symbolic events such as the intercultural celebrations, “La Massialia” in 1999 and “La Marscéleste” in 2000.²⁶ Finally, at the beginning of his second term (2001-2007), Gaudin

²⁴ “La droite tétanisée.”

²⁵ Maisetti, *Marseille, Ville du Monde*.

²⁶ Mattina, “L’invention politique,” 223-290.

relaunched the plan to construct a “Grand Mosque” even though he had fiercely opposed it when he was the principal leader of the municipal opposition.

Nevertheless, Marseille’s conservative groups’ belated conversion to communitarian symbolism is not free of paternalistic and security-concerned undertones. Their treatment of the Muslim question is less a form of full political recognition than a process to assign them the status of “subordinate minority,” one that requires control and regulation. This very directive Muslim policy led in large part to failure. In October 2016, the mayor’s office officially withdrew its support of the Grand Mosque project.²⁷

It is true that in Marseille, as in numerous French agglomerations, the “Muslim community” is largely a political construction, the subject of an essentialization process whose goals are social control and local governance. However, even if this community only exists in the political and social imagination, this does not mean that we should deny the existence of Muslim dynamics that are historically anchored in the urban space and are vectors of very real cultural and religious sociabilities.

Historic Centers of Influence and Social Dynamics of Marseillais Islam: A Muslim Mosaic?

In 2020, according to unofficial numbers, Marseille counts approximately 80 Islamic centers of worship, a single mosque with a minaret, and just as many Muslim-oriented associations, for an estimated so-called “Muslim” population between 200,000 and 250,000 individuals with different migration backgrounds: Algerian (100,000), Comorian (70,000), Tunisian (25,000), Moroccan (10,000), West African (10,000), Middle Eastern (10,000) and a few hundred French converts to Islam.²⁸ These numbers should however be used with considerable caution, since they are projections based on the national origin of residents that do not necessarily reflect either their beliefs or their religious practices. As such, the statistical data tend to show that Marseille is not a more “Muslim city” than other French agglomerations, where the proportion of individuals assumed to belong to the Muslim religion is substantially higher (towns in the suburbs of Lyon, cities in the Seine-Saint-Denis department and especially municipalities like Roubaix, Tourcoing or Villeneuve d’Ascq in the Greater Lille region).

Nevertheless, this “Muslim visibility” in Marseillais public space is not entirely fictive, projected by a xenophobic imagination or, on the contrary, by local proponents of multiculturalism. It is also the product of a local history, where the degree of identification with Islam (*islamité*) of individuals and social groups resulted in collective mobilizations and sociabilities that have contributed to forging the city’s lasting identity.

A Marseillais Islam “Molded” by the History of Migration

In Marseille, more still than in other French cities, local Muslim dynamics remain heavily marked by the influence of the country of origin and patterns of migration. The actions and

²⁷ Cîret, *La grande mosquée de Marseille*, 67.

²⁸ Cîret, *La grande mosquée de Marseille*, 26-27.

mobilizations of the new generations of Muslims born in France and growing up in French society are not very visible yet in urban space, compared with the influence of the “Islam of the *blédards*”:²⁹ the latter continue to control the vast majority of Muslim institutions in the city (associations, representative bodies, prayer halls and mosques). This influence of countries of origin on Marseillais Islam manifests itself on several levels. First of all, the language used in the sermons in prayer halls and mosques remains, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in large majority Arabic, despite initiatives to promote translation or bilingualism (French/Arabic), so that young Muslims born in Marseille, who often do not understand Arabic, can understand the contents of the imams’ *khutba*.³⁰ Furthermore, the majority of directors of Muslim associations and of religious staff have foreign nationality (Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian, Comorian, etc.). Even if some of them have obtained French nationality during the past several years and have double citizenship today, most of them have been brought up and received their religious education in their country of origin. In Marseille, young clergy with French nationality still lack influence, compared to the dynamic “next-generation Islam” of the Greater Lyon, Paris and Lille areas. Finally, this influence of the countries of origin manifests itself in the predominance of consulate-based Islam, through which the countries of origin express the will to control their “expatriate communities” on a religious level. It is no secret to anyone that in Marseille, the Algerian state practices interventionist politics in religious affairs and makes use of the Muslim question in order to maintain the national allegiance of its expatriates as well as those with French and Algerian citizenship. The Algerian consulate, and to a lesser degree the Moroccan and Tunisian consulates, remain central actors of Islam in Marseille. In fact, the city of Marseille is considered a strategic site by the Algerian authorities due to historical relationships related to the colonial past, to economic and commercial relationships, and to the demographic importance of the Algerian community and of French-Algerians in the local population. Some have even nicknamed Marseille “the forty-ninth Algerian *wilaya*.”³¹

A Well-Established Islam: Collective Sociabilities and Muslim Networks in the City

This importance of countries of origin and of migratory trajectories in the Muslim dynamics does not exclude a process of sedentarization of Marseillais Islam, which can be seen in the formation of local Muslim sociabilities, creating a lasting effect on urban space. In this sense, we should reconsider the image of an “imported Islam” that would simply represent a “foreign graft” in the city’s sociology. Much to the contrary, these different, more or less structured “Muslim centers of influence” (*pôles*) are the expression of a “well-established Islam.”

The first center of influence for Islam in Marseille can be seen regarding official Algerian Islam, linked by virtue of the past to organizations sponsored by the FLN-led Algerian State³² in France; these organizations were tasked with cultivating national and religious allegiances of the “emigrants” and “ex-patriates.” In the context of Marseille, because of the size of the population with an Algerian background and the long history of its implantation on local soil (starting by the

²⁹ In the slang used by the French of Maghrebi origin, the term *blédards* designates people born in the country of origin (*bled*).

³⁰ This word means sermon or preaching in Arabic.

³¹ Farhani, “Marseille, la 49^e wilaya.”

³² The National Liberation Front (Front de libération nationale (FLN)), a mouvement inherited from the struggle against French colonization, transformed itself upon the Liberation into a single party. For a long time, it engaged with immigrants in France in numerous ways, notably through the *Amicale des Algériens en Europe*, which disappeared in the mid-1990s.

end of the nineteenth century), this official center of influence still has significant power, including with regard to the new dual-citizen generations who were born in France. It is mainly structured around the En Nasr mosque, created in 1985 in the La Capelette neighborhood (in the tenth *arrondissement* in the East of the city) and the Sociocultural and Educational Association, founded in 1992, which has the mission to provide Islamic education and Arabic courses. Despite the political crisis that affected the Algerian State and its representative institutions in France, this movement of “FLN-Islam” still remains very much alive in the Muslim landscape of Marseille, combining, in a symbolic way, identification with Islam and Algerianness, or veneration of the Algerian nation with Muslim worship. This official Algerian Islam also draws its influence from its recognition by local authorities, and especially the municipality of Marseille (from Defferre to Guadin), which has always perceived it as the incarnation of the “good Islam,” moderate and tolerant, as opposed to the “Islamist threat.”

This desire for control by the Algerian state over Islam in Marseille has not prevented the development of autonomous and competing religious sociabilities, including among Algerian migrants who moved to the Phocaeen city a long time ago. Until the beginning of the 2000s, the Al Taqwa mosque close to the Porte d’Aix and the marché du Soleil in the 1st *arrondissement* embodied the religious resistance against FLN-Islam. Hosted by the Alili family and closely related to Maghrebian Islam linked to Sufi groups (the Raḥmâniyya order having an important presence in Kabylia), this place of worship was supported by the merchants and artisans of Algerian origin from the avenue Camille Pelletan and the Marché du Soleil, and frequented by a large number of faithful Muslims because of its central location. Since the mid-2000s, the Mayor’s office gained control over this mosque, which therefore lost its autonomy and influence. It nevertheless remains a significant place of worship, frequented by Muslims of all national origins. The “autonomous” Algerian Islam is also represented by the Islah (meaning reform in Arabic) mosque, also called the “Mosque of the Marché aux Puces” in the fifteenth *arrondissement*. Founded in 1988, this mosque is one of the most important places of worship in the city, based both on the size of its prayer hall (accommodating up to 1500 faithful with a dedicated space for women with 200 seats) and also on its vibrant congregational life. During the 2000s, the Islah mosque attempted to bring a dynamic of unity to Marseillais Islam, working together with the most important prayer halls, mosques, religious personalities, and associations, in particular through the Council of Imams in Marseille and its surrounding area (CIME). Of a rather conservative bent, Islah brings together Muslims of the older generation and international students along with practicing Muslims born and raised in Marseille.

In Marseille, conservative Islam is also represented by the Union of Islamic organizations in France (UOIF, since 2017 the association *Musulmans de France* [“Muslims of France”]), which managed to take root on local soil despite Marseillais Muslims’ suspicion of national initiatives coming from “above.” Despite this local resistance, the UOIF has taken root in Marseille’s Muslim landscape, to the point of being considered one of the most dynamic Muslim organizations. Its pragmatic strategy has consisted of hiding its conservative connections (it is close to the Muslim Brotherhood), and maintaining good relationships with the local authorities and especially with the mayor, Jean-Claude Gaudin, and with the prefectural authorities. Avoiding polemical subjects, the association has primarily focused on educational projects. In 2009, the local representative of the UOIF, Mohsen N’Gazou, was the creator of the first Muslim middle school in the history of Marseille: called “Ibn Khaldoun” after the great Muslim thinker

of the fourteenth century and located on the boulevard Viala in the fifteenth *arrondissement*, the school has been under contract with the state since 2015 (its educational programs follow those of the Ministry of National Education) and enrolls approximately 250 students spread over different levels.

Less covered in the media and less studied by sociologists are Comorian Muslim sociabilities, which are nevertheless among the best structured in urban space. Currently they represent one of the most influential Muslim centers of influence of the city. Organized around village associations connected to the country of origin, traditional Koran schools called *shioni*, prayer halls and independent mosques that are financed by the faithful themselves, “Comorian Islam” possesses a distinctive identity in the Muslim landscape in Marseille.³³ It is, at the same time, also well-integrated in common dynamics: imams and preachers of Comorian origin generally speak Arabic, are well-educated in religious matters and function as theological authorities for other Muslims in Marseille. In this area, there have been major evolutions in the past ten years: in the first place, so-called “Comorian” mosques no longer function as self-sufficient entities but welcome more and more Muslims of all national origins; secondly, the new generations of Franco-Comorian scholars and imams enjoy a religious reputation that extends well beyond the local Comorian community. Incidentally, Marseillais elites of Comorian origin, for a long time forgotten by the “Muslim policy” of the local authorities, are more and more visible in political life, as municipal elected officials, deputy mayors and even representatives.

“Subsaharian Islam” is also embodied in Marseille by associations and prayer halls led by personalities and imams from West Africa (Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, etc.). As sociologist Sophie Bava’s publications show, African Islam is mainly structured locally around Sufi religious groups, representing the main West African *tariqa*:³⁴ Mourides, Tijanis and members of the Qadariyya.³⁵ The presence of this African Sufi Islam in Marseille is primarily related to former Black soldiers in the French army, seafarers, and to the commercial networks moving between the two continents.³⁶ With family reunification, African Islam largely settled down in the Phocaeen city and partially distanced itself from its original brotherhood affiliations. Nonetheless, like Comorian Islam, it remains endowed with a distinctive identity, without being closed on itself. This is how in 2009, the Bilal mosque was formed, in homage to the Prophet Muhammed’s black muezzin. Close to the Saint-Charles station and the premises of Aix-Marseille University, the mosque attracts in majority though not exclusively Marseillais Muslims originally from West Africa.

Since the 2010s, there have been profound transformations in Marseille’s Muslim landscape that have challenged, in part, the hegemony of socio-historical centers of influence of local Islam. In the first place, there has been the crisis of Muslim institutions connected to states of origin (consular Islam), whose democratic and religious legitimacy has been contested more and more by the new generations of believers and devout Muslims who grew up in France. The

³³ Barbey, “Institutions et acteurs,” 17-39 ; Dirèche and Le Houérou, *Les Comoriens* ; Dirèche and Le Houérou, “L’islam comorien,” 50-56.

³⁴ In standard Arabic, this term designates “the path” and by extension the “brotherhood,” meaning the Muslim believers who follow the same path.

³⁵ Bava, “Reconversions et nouveaux mondes,” 46-55.

³⁶ Bertoncetto and Bredeloup, “Marseille, carrefour d’Afrique,” 1-81.

Tunisian revolution of 2011 and the *hirak* movement in Algeria³⁷ have contributed to increasing fragilization of these Muslim institutions connected to states of origin. Furthermore, we can note a veritable generational schism between the “Islam of the fathers,” marked by a traditional conception of religious practice, and the Islam of the migrants, who have French nationality, have enjoyed social mobility through schools and universities, and have developed an increasingly individualistic and intellectualized vision of the faith. Finally, this hegemony of the historic centers of Marseillais Islam has also been contested “from the inside” by the rise of new religious movements that are increasingly aggressive and proselytizing. Without lapsing into a catastrophic vision about the existence of an “Islamic separatism” in Marseille, one cannot deny the inroads associations, prayer halls and preachers of salafist conviction have made over the past ten years. Virtually invisible at the beginning of the 2000s, salafist Islam is now present in urban territory, especially in the working-class neighborhoods and is structured around approximately twenty small prayer halls in the North of the city along with more important mosques (the “Al Sunna,” mosque,³⁸ the “Ben Baz” mosque in the third *arrondissement*, and the “Mosquées des Bleuets” in the thirteenth *arrondissement*). These approaches are reaching in particular new generations of Muslims, descendants of postcolonial immigration as well as converts, and especially girls. Even though, contrary to the clichés in the media, Marseille is not a stronghold of French salafism, this movement has gained numerous followers in the Phocaeen city, contributing to the crisis of Muslim institutions related to consulate-based Islam but also to that of more conservative Islamic organizations (UOIF, Union of Muslims in France, Islah Mosque, etc), which sometimes find themselves overtaken by adherents of a proselytizing Islam linked to Persian Gulf states.

Conclusion: Muslims, Legitimate Actors in the Marseillais Mosaic?

At the end of this sociohistorical analysis of the Muslim question in Marseille, it is possible to show continuities but also discontinuities. It is true that, even though the Muslim question has continuously been a major preoccupation of local public authorities, and, more generally, of the Marseillais elites, it also reflects the social representations, political controversies, and power balances of the moment. Because of this, it would be simplistic to speak of a *colonial continuum*, as if Marseillais Muslims of the 2020s were perceived and treated by the local public agencies as “indigenous,” “colonial workers” or “North-African immigrants.” At this point, it is clear that the symbolic status and the social position of Muslim have evolved significantly in the Marseille mosaic. At the start of the twenty-first century, they are no longer considered simply as subjects, “extras” on the scene of local politics or “second-class” residents of Marseille; they are also perceived equally as citizen-voters, stakeholders in the economic and political challenges of the city, agents of social mobilization and objects of the full attention of local authorities, especially of municipal political figures. However, this political and symbolic recognition of “Muslims” is founded on a profound ambivalence. On the one hand, because it tends to assign and confine them in terms of identity to an ethnoreligious category that has culturalist and essentialist, or even racialist overtones. On the other hand, because this ticket to enter local public space is based on a form of implicit hierarchization that tends to transform Marseille’s “mosaic” into a type of ethno-racial “pyramid,” with Muslims occupying the base, in other words a subordinate

³⁷ In Arabic, the term *hirak* means “the movement” in the sens of “mobilization.”

³⁸ Suspected of fueling radical jihadism, the Al Sunna Mosque was closed in 2018, following a prefectural order.

place. The political recognition of Muslim presence in the Phocaeen city has thus happened at the price of a double process of “racialization” and “hierarchization,”³⁹ namely a philanthropism driven by both identity and security issues, in which Islam is simultaneously treated as an “enrichment” for local cosmopolitanism and a “danger” to the social cohesion of the city.

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³⁹ Brahim, *La race tue*.

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