

EXTREMISM, SECURITY, AND SECULARISM: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ORGANISATIONAL BANS IN FRANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, France has expanded counter-terrorism powers, codifying them into ordinary law through the 2017 SILT legislation. While justified as protecting republican values, these measures disproportionately target Muslim organisations while treating far-right groups more cautiously. This study examines the dissolutions of Génération Identitaire (GI), BarakaCity, and the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) to reveal structural double standards in anti-terror enforcement. The decrees relied on divergent evidentiary standards: Islamist organisations were dissolved on the basis of speech, associations, and alleged “collusions,” whereas GI was banned for visible stunts, leaving much of its network intact. Parliamentary and public debates reinforced this asymmetry, framing Islamism as a civilisational threat and far-right extremism as a matter of pluralism or free speech. By situating these cases within the genealogy of laïcité, this research argues that counter-terror law functions as an ideological tool of institutional Islamophobia, embedding suspicion of Muslims into the security apparatus.

AIMS

This study aims to examine how French organisational bans function as tools of counter-terror governance and to highlight disparities in their application. Focusing on the dissolutions of GI, BarakaCity, and CCIF, it evaluates the legal decrees, parliamentary debates, and public discourse surrounding each case. The project seeks to demonstrate how laïcité underpins a security logic that polices Muslim visibility more harshly than far-right extremism, ultimately showing that counter-terror legislation sustains institutional Islamophobia while eroding civil liberties.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative case study approach, examining the dissolutions of Génération Identitaire, BarakaCity, and CCIF between October 2020 and March 2021. Primary sources include government decrees under Article L.212-1 of the Code de la sécurité intérieure, parliamentary and senate debates, and media coverage. These are analysed through discourse analysis to trace how laïcité and security rationales are mobilised. Secondary literature on secularism, Islamophobia, and counter-terrorism provides theoretical grounding, situating case findings within broader debates about institutional discrimination.

BACKGROUND

Institutional Islamophobia in France

Institutional Islamophobia in France stems from laïcité functioning as an ideological tool of exclusion. Islam is formally protected but only under a “cold tolerance” that pressures Muslims to assimilate (Geisser, 2010, pp. 1, 5). This produces material costs: Muslims face higher barriers to economic integration than non-Muslims with otherwise identical profiles (Adida et al., 2010, p. 22390). Legal frameworks compound this through restrictions on headscarves, burkinis, and religious practices, often enforced by mayoral decrees, relegating Muslims to “second-class citizens” (Akhtar, 2024, pp. 201, 212). Scholars argue laïcité allows the state to define which religious signs are acceptable, regulating visibility and framing Muslim practices as potential threats (Asad, 2006; Jansen, 2010).

SILT Laws and the State of Emergency

After the 2015 Paris attacks, France entered a state of emergency extended five times until its measures became permanent under SILT in 2017 (Kilpatrick, 2020, p. 4). These powers weakened judicial safeguards, permitting raids, seizures, and house arrests on minimal evidence, disproportionately targeting Muslims (Kilpatrick, 2020, pp. 8–10). Attacks on mosques rose sharply, reinforcing the securitisation of Islam (p. 4). SILT preserved closures of religious sites, identity checks, and ministerial authority, normalising extraordinary powers (p. 15). Critics, including the Défenseur des Droits, warned of disproportionate targeting, while Paris Bar head Frédéric Sicard cautioned that France could “turn into a dictatorship within a week” (Louati, 2022). This framework contextualises later bans under Article L.212-1, where organisations were dissolved less for violence than for alleged incompatibility with republican values.

Connection to the Far-Right and Generation Identitaire

The Rassemblement National under Marine Le Pen mainstreamed Islamophobic rhetoric, promoting laws that disproportionately target Muslims (Benveniste & Pingaud, 2016, pp. 61–64). This aligns with far-right “organicism,” valorising the “we” against an alien “other” (Camus et al., 2017, p. 21). Génération Identitaire (GI) operationalised this narrative through stunts—patrolling Alpine borders, occupying mosque sites, unfurling anti-immigration banners—paired with paramilitary-style training (Jacquet-Vaillant, 2021; Beirich & Via, 2020). By casting migration and “Islamisation” as existential threats, GI echoed the same civilisational logic underpinning SILT. Yet in parliamentary debates, Muslim groups like BarakaCity and CCIF were labelled direct security threats, while GI was more often discussed in terms of proportionality and freedoms, reflecting a double standard.



LEGISLATION

French law (Article L.212-1) authorises dissolving organisations that act as militias or incite hatred, yet its application differs sharply between Islamist and far-right groups. Génération Identitaire (GI) was dissolved in March 2021 for portraying immigration and Islam as threats and staging paramilitary-style stunts, but its parent body Les Identitaires and affiliated “identity houses” continued to operate, enabling rebranding and claims of persecution (Camus, 2021). In contrast, BarakaCity and the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) were dissolved in 2020 under terrorism-related provisions, largely on the basis of leaders’ statements, unmoderated online comments, and framing of state policy as Islamophobic. This expansive logic collapsed discourse and networks into security risks, applying a harsher and more preventive standard to Muslim groups than to GI.

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY & SENATE

French parliamentary debates on organisational bans expose tensions between security, republican values, and liberties. Darmanin defended dissolutions of BarakaCity and CCIF, citing “collusions” and relying on SILT powers, while critics like Charles de Courson warned against dissolving groups for leaders’ statements alone. GI’s ban was justified as curbing xenophobia, yet figures such as Nicolas Bay decried “leniency” toward UNEF, and Odoul called it “disproportionate.” Proposals to toughen penalties for far-right groups were rejected as excessive. Exchanges revealed selective framing: Stéphane Ravier boasted of “stigmatizing Islamists,” while Didier Marie noted the same logic could dissolve GI. Civil society groups cautioned that executive-led bans erode rights, while far-right politicians alleged bias against their movements.

PUBLIC

Media and political discourse amplified these asymmetries. Islamist NGOs were framed as existential threats, legitimising Macron’s claims of “parallel societies” and Darmanin’s use of ensauvagement, a colonial-coded term signalling Islamisation as civilisational decline. Conversely, GI was cast more as a political nuisance; its “Defend Europe” stunts justified dissolution, but debates stressed free expression and proportionality. Muslim civil society condemned bans as intimidation, with IHRC denouncing CCIF’s case as “empty accusations.” Meanwhile, RN leaders, including Le Pen, opposed GI’s dissolution as censorship, reframing anti-immigration rhetoric as legitimate policy debate. Analysts noted bans drive groups underground, fuelling online activism, as with GI’s migration to Telegram and ties to Zemmour’s campaign. The term “Islamophobia” itself divided the left: Mélenchon shifted from rejecting it in 2015 to marching with CCIF in 2019, while Danièle Obono argued the left systematically ignores Muslim marginalisation. These disputes reinforced the perception that Islamist groups face harsher securitisation, while far-right actors prompt civil liberties debates—echoing Meier’s warning that counterterrorism cloaks imperial domination by casting Muslims as existential dangers.

CONCLUSION AND SIGNIFICANCE

French bans on extremist organisations expose a marked asymmetry in how counter-terror law is applied. Islamist groups such as BarakaCity and CCIF were dissolved on expansive, speech-based grounds, while the dissolution of Génération Identitaire (GI) relied on narrower justifications and proved largely symbolic, as its networks persisted through ties to the Rassemblement National. Parliamentary debates reinforced this disparity: Islamist organisations were cast as existential threats, whereas far-right actors were more often framed in terms of pluralism or civil liberties. This imbalance reflects the specificity of French laïcité, which functions less as a neutral principle than as an ideological tool for regulating Muslim visibility. Secularism in practice recasts Islamic spaces and practices as security risks, legitimising their repression under counter-terror frameworks. By contrast, GI was sanctioned for visible stunts but without invoking terrorism provisions or dismantling identitarian structures.

The significance of these findings lies in revealing how counter-terrorism legislation sustains institutional Islamophobia under the guise of republican neutrality. By embedding suspicion of Muslims into ordinary law, the French state enforces a model of citizenship tied to whiteness and conformity to majority norms. Without safeguards, bans risk deepening structural discrimination and further fragmenting social cohesion.

