Extremism, Security, And Secularism:

A Sociological Analysis of Organisational Bans in France

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Introduction

This research examines the justification and effects of organisational bans as a form of counter-terror legislation in France, with particular focus on the contrasting cases of Génération Identitaire (GI), BarakaCity, and the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF). These disparities cannot be understood without recognising the role of institutional Islamophobia, where *laïcité* and *ordre public* have historically operated as instruments of exclusion. The paper first outlines the development of French counter-terror laws, often centred on Islamist threats and producing discriminatory measures. It then compares the legal reasoning used to dissolve GI, BarakaCity, and CCIF, exposing the more lenient framing applied to the far right. Finally, it examines parliamentary and media discourse, showing how counter-terror legislation both reflects and reinforces structural biases. Overall, the research argues that French bans operate unevenly, sustaining Islamophobia under the justification of security and the model of republican equality.

Background

Institutional Islamophobia in France

Institutional Islamophobia in France is rooted in a logic of *laïcité* (secularism) that transforms secularism into an ideological tool of exclusion. Geisser (2010) states that Islam is formally protected but only under a “cold tolerance” that pressures Muslims to abandon “community attitudes” and assimilate(pp. 1, 5). Adida et al. (2010) show that this dynamic carries material costs: Muslims face higher barriers to economic integration even when identical in all respects but religion (p. 22390). Akhtar (2024) demonstrates how *laïcité* and *ordre public* (public order) restrict headscarves, burkinis, and other religious practices, with mayors empowered to nullify freedoms via executive decrees (pp. 201, 209). Such measures enforce conformity to majoritarian norms, relegating Muslims to “second-class citizens” through cultural denigration (Akhtar, 2024, p. 212).

Asad (2006) highlights how laïcité enables the state to define “religion,” with schools producing “secular subject-citizens” (pp. 104–105) Secularism thus acts less as a neutral safeguard than a state apparatus regulating visibility, deciding which practices are assimilable and which are threats (Asad, 2006, p. 105). Jansen (2010) similarly argues that French secularism rests on the “interiorization of religion,” confining faith to private belief (p. 69). Yet this interpretation politicises religion, as seen in the headscarf ban, where fear of “what lay behind the scarf” framed religious practice as a security problem (Jansen, 2010, pp. 69–70). By severing religious practices from their meanings, *laïcité* creates continuous insecurity: Muslims may outwardly comply but remain suspect as potential dissidents (Jansen, 2010, pp. 78, 83).

Summarily, Islamic spaces are generally cast as inherently threatening to republican order. This ideological framing underpins the 2015 state of emergency and subsequent SILT laws, embedding suspicion of Muslims into counter-terror governance and legitimising harsher application of security powers against them than against far-right groups.

SILT laws and the state of emergency

Following the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, France declared a nationwide state of emergency (Kilpatrick, 2020, p. 4). Intended as temporary, it was extended five times until November 2017, when powers were codified into ordinary law via the *Loi renforçant la sécurité intérieure et la lutte contre le terrorisme* (SILT) (Kilpatrick, 2020, p. 4). These measures weakened judicial safeguards, permitting administrative searches, seizures, and house arrests on minimal evidence (Kilpatrick, 2020, pp. 8–10). Crucially, they were disproportionately used against Muslims, reflecting the laïcité concept that casts Islamic visibility as a security problem. By late 2015, physical attacks on Muslims had risen 150% and mosque vandalism 140% (Kilpatrick, 2020, p. 4). Subsequent extensions expanded identity checks and vehicle inspections (Kilpatrick, 2020, p. 10). Despite little proof of enhanced safety, SILT embedded these powers into ordinary law, institutionalising suspicion of Muslim communities (Kilpatrick, 2020, p. 4).

The longer-term effect has been the combination of secularism and security. By framing religious expression, e.g., mosques, clothing, associations, as potential threats to *ordre public*, the state reinterprets *laïcité* as a counter-terror rationale. SILT preserved closures of places of worship, restrictions on movement, and ministerial authority over associations, normalising extraordinary measures (Kilpatrick, 2020, p. 15). Civil society groups, such as the Défenseur des Droits, cautioned against disproportionate targeting (Kilpatrick, 2020, p. 8). Furthermore, Paris Bar head Frédéric Sicard warned in 2016 that “France can turn into a dictatorship within a week” if safeguards erode (Sicard, 2016, cited in Louati, 2022). This contextualises later dissolutions under Article L.212-1, where Islamic organisations were banned less for violent activity than for perceived incompatibility with republican values.

Connection to the Far-Right and Generation Identity

The Front National, rebranded as Rassemblement National (RN), remains France’s most electorally successful far-right party (Benveniste & Pingaud, 2016, p. 60). Under Marine Le Pen, RN has weaponised Islam, and especially “Islamism”, as a populist rallying point, embedding Islamophobic rhetoric into mainstream politics and promoting counterterror laws that disproportionately target Muslims(Benveniste & Pingaud, 2016, pp. 61–64). This reflects a broader far-right logic of “organicism,” or “autophilia (the valorisation of the ‘we’) and alterophobia”, which gained traction through the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory (Camus et al., 2017, p. 21).

Génération Identitaire (GI), a youth-oriented branch of the identitarian movement, advanced this narrative using “ethnodifferentialist” language (Jacquet-Vaillant, 2021, p. 9). It staged highly mediatised stunts, such as occupying a mosque site, patrolling Alpine borders with drones, and unfurling anti-immigration banners. These were designed for viral circulation (Jacquet-Vaillant, 2021, pp. 9–10). Alongside these spectacles, GI trained members through martial arts clubs and paramilitary-style camps (Beirich & Via, 2020, p. 11).

By casting migration and “Islamisation” as existential threats, GI reinforced the same civilisational framing invoked by state officials to justify SILT and subsequent organisational bans (Richards, 2022, p. 37). In parliamentary debates, this produced asymmetry: Muslim

civil society groups such as BarakaCity and CCIF were portrayed as direct security risks, while GI's actions were more often discussed in terms of proportionality and civil liberties.

Legislation

Bans on Extremist Groups: GI Compared to BarakaCity and CCIF

French law allows dissolution of organisations acting as private militias or inciting hatred or violence, applied to both far-right and Muslim groups, though evidentiary standards differ (*Code de la sécurité intérieure*, Article L212-1, 2021).

Generation Identity

GI was dissolved by Interior Ministry decree on 3 March 2021 for promoting "an ideology inciting hatred, violence, or discrimination," portraying immigration and Islam as threats, and acting as a private militia, evidenced by structured training and symbolic occupations (*Décret du 3 mars 2021 portant dissolution d'une association*, 2021). The decree cited links to ultra-right groups and a donation from Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant (*Décret du 3 mars 2021 portant dissolution d'une association*, 2021). GI's parent organisation, Les Identitaires, and "identity houses" in Lyon, Nice, and Rouen, as well as its Lyon martial arts club, remained active, allowing GI's network to rebrand and claim political persecution (Camus, 2021).

BarakaCity

BarakaCity, a Muslim humanitarian NGO, was dissolved in October 2020 (*Décret du 28 octobre 2020 portant dissolution d'une association*, 2020). Authorities alleged it propagated radical Islamist ideas, citing the president's statements and unmoderated antisemitic comments online(*Décret du 28 octobre 2020 portant dissolution d'une association*, 2020). No paramilitary activity was mentioned; the focus was ideological, in the context of a crackdown after Samuel Paty's murder. Post-dissolution, it retains inactive UK connections via BarakaCity Limited (Stott, 2021).

Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF)

CCIF, an NGO aiding victims of anti-Muslim discrimination, was dissolved in December 2020 for allegedly legitimising extremist narratives by portraying counterterror policies as Islamophobic (*Décret du 2 décembre 2020 portant dissolution d'un groupement de fait*, 2020). The decree cited unmoderated comments and its platforms for controversial preachers (*Décret du 2 décembre 2020 portant dissolution d'un groupement de fait*, 2020). CCIF reconstituted in Belgium as the Collective against Islamophobia in Europe (CCIE), transferring most assets and intellectual property to the new organisation (Jenkins, 2021).

Comparison

All three decrees invoke Article L.212-1 of the *Code de la sécurité intérieure*, but with different paragraphs and evidentiary logics. GI relied on 2 (private militia/“groupes de combat”) and 6 (incitement to hatred/discrimination). BarakaCity and CCIF invoked 6 and 7 (acts “with a view to provoking” terrorism), signalling a harsher frame for Islamist groups.

Procedural Posture

Each decree included a notice-and-reply phase. GI’s president had 10 days to submit observations. BarakaCity’s president provided written (23 Oct.) and oral (26 Oct.) observations. CCIF had an 8-day window (19 Nov.) and, after attempting self-liquidation, a 3-day window once reclassified as a groupement de fait (27–30 Nov.). Procedurally, Islamist organisations had similar opportunities to respond. The key difference lies in the broad interpretation of evidence and organisational responsibility.

Grounds and Evidentiary Standards

GI’s dissolution focused on concrete acts such as border patrols, occupations, and demonstrations. These fulfilled militia and incitement provisions. Authorities did not invoke terrorism provocation (L.212-1(7)). BarakaCity and CCIF relied primarily on speech, networks, and associations, using L.212-1(7) to frame online activity, discourse, and unmoderated comments as threats. Liability extended to narrative framing, associational ties, and facilitation of extremist discourse, reflecting broader preventative logic.

Comparative Proportionality

GI’s ban targeted visible conduct and hate incitement, leaving allied structures intact. BarakaCity and CCIF faced expansive measures: third-party speech, legitimisation of resistance to state policy, and preventive dissolution of successors. Discourse and networks alone were sufficient grounds for banning, even without paramilitary activity.

In sum, French authorities apply Article L.212-1 more expansively against Islamist civil society than far-right groups. Islamist decrees collapse speech, networks, and intent into terrorism prevention, while GI focuses on overt acts and allows continuity of affiliated structures, highlighting a double standard that has sparked parliamentary and public debate.

Parliamentary Debate on Bans

The French debate over banning extremist groups reflects persistent tensions between national security, republican values, and civil liberties. Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin repeatedly defended dissolutions of Islamist organisations such as BarakaCity and the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF), citing “collusions that you can only condemn” and arguing closures were proportionate under powers rooted in the 2017 SILT law (Assemblé Nationale Deb., 2021, p. 1081). Critics questioned whether an association could be dissolved because “one of its former leaders makes anti-republican… statements”

(Charles de Courson), warning sanctions on members could go “too far,” as the Défenseur des Droits also cautioned (Assemblé Nationale Deb., 2021, p. 1081).

Concerns over Islamist bans intersected with debates about far-right groups. The government framed the 2021 dissolution of Génération Identitaire (GI) as ending “the armed wing of extremism and xenophobia” (Attal, 2021 cited in Mallet, 2023). Gabriel Attal cited GI’s “Defend Europe” anti-migrant patrols as incitement to discrimination, insisting the state acts consistently: “We won’t let any group, whatever it is, undermine our laws or our values” (Attal, 2021 cited in Mallet, 2023). Yet critics across the spectrum charged overreach and double standards. Nicolas Bay complained of “incredible leniency” toward student group UNEF compared with GI (Bay, 2021), and Julien Odoul labelled the decision “totally disproportionate” (Bay, 2021 & Odoul, 2021, cited in Tanguy, 2021).

Some MPs argued for harsher penalties against reconstituting banned far-right groups, such as raising prison terms or fines (Belkhir Belhaddad, (Assemblé Nationale Deb., 2021, p. 1088), but Éric Poulliat resisted, calling existing sanctions “proportionate” (Assemblé Nationale Deb., 2021, p. 1087). This highlighted a broader disagreement over whether dissolution acts as an effective deterrent or is easily bypassed.

Rhetorical battles over naming and targeting also surfaced. Stéphane Ravier asserted, “when we talk about Islamism, we only stigmatise Islamists… I’m proud to stigmatise the Islamists” (Sénat Deb., 2021, p. 2314). Didier Marie challenged such selective framing, pointing to atrocities by other regimes and suggesting similar logic could justify “the dissolution of Génération Identitaire” (Sénat Deb., 2021, p. 2315). These exchanges reflected disputes over whether a bounded definition for a group is necessary for security or risks politicising bans and alienating communities.

Civil society critics warned bans erode fundamental freedoms. The National Bar Council compared some anti-terror powers to “house arrest and searches controlled by the administration,” circumventing defence rights with “very serious consequences” (Éliane Assassi, Sénat Deb., 2020, p. 7461). Far-right figures argued “hateful far-left groups… are never targeted” (Odoul, 2021 cited in Tanguy, 2021), while human rights advocates viewed the crackdown on Muslim organisations as part of a wider campaign against dissent under “separatism” (Louati, 2022).

Ultimately, debates reveal no consensus on banning criteria. Supporters emphasise security and defending the Republic; opponents stress proportionality and the danger of bans as political tools.

Public Debate on Bans

Across mainstream and movement media, Islamist groups were persistently cast as an existential threat to the Republic, while GI was framed more as a public-order nuisance or political controversy. Advocacy outlet IHRC argued Macron’s 2020 agenda portrayed France as facing “a coordinated campaign by ‘radical Muslims’… to create a ‘parallel society’,” justifying “brutal repression of organised Muslims” and “exceptional measures” against “second class citizens” (Macron, 2020 cited in Louati, 2022). In parallel, the term *ensauvagement*, with colonial overtones implying loss of civility due to immigration, was

mainstreamed by senior officials (Louati, 2022). The NYT noted ministers used it to warn France was turning “savage,” signalling a harder line on immigration and crime (Onishi & Méheut, 2020). Gérald Darmanin said, “I use the word *ensauvagement* and I repeat it” (Darmanin, 2020 cited in Onishi & Méheut, 2020). This far-right dog whistle contributed to a climate where dissolutions of Muslim-led NGOs could be presented as protecting republican order rather than restricting civil society.

When GI was targeted, official framing emphasised equality of enforcement (Mallet, 2023). Before the dissolution, France 24 reported Darmanin had “triggered procedures to close down Generation Identity” for “incitement to discriminate,” pointing to its “Defend Europe” stunts at the border with drones and uniforms, evidence used to depict GI as a quasi-militia, on X (formerly Twitter) (Trouillard, 2021).

Critics from Muslim civil society contended that dissolutions of CCIF and BarakaCity punished advocacy and chilled community organising. IHRC accused authorities of “destroy(ing) or intimidat(ing) any organization that dares” normal Muslim civic participation and called the cases against CCIF “empty accusations” motivated by disagreement over its anti-Islamophobia work (Louati, 2022).

On the right, prominent figures cast GI’s ban as overreach. France 24 recorded Marine Le Pen’s statement that “the rule of law doesn’t work like that,” showing support for GI despite RN broadly positioning itself apart from GI’s ideology (Le Pen, 2021 cited in Trouillard, 2021). The Irish Times likewise quoted RN protesting threats to “freedom of conscience, expression and association,” posing the rhetorical question: “Should one say that it’s no longer possible to make the connection between massive immigration and crime?” (RN, 2023, cited in (Mallet, 2023). This reframed GI’s messaging as legitimate policy debate rather than hate speech. On social media, RN figures emphasised the ban as “censorship” when Facebook demoted GI-support content (Tanguy, 2021). Facebook stated GI “has been banned from our platforms since 2018” for promoting hate, countering the perceived censoring asymmetries the right portrays as bias (Facebook, 2021, cited in Tanguy, 2021).

Government-friendly commentary highlights that France also bans far-right groups (e.g., Blood & Honour Hexagone; Bastion Social) and that courts upheld the GI dissolution, countering the “only Muslims” narrative and claims of bias (Policy Exchange, 2021). However two themes may sustain the double-standards argument in media discourse.

Firstly, rhetorical intensity. Islamist threats are cast in civilizational terms (the “parallel society,” “savage” drift), while far-right actors often trigger debates about civil liberties and pluralism (Louati, 2022; Onishi & Méheut, 2020). This asymmetry shapes how audiences perceive necessity and proportionality.

Second, practical operation post-ban. Removing extremists from mainstream platforms can limit their reach but also pushes them into unregulated echo chambers, which may not reduce violence and can harden views (Jackson, 2019, p. 6). *Le Monde* reported ongoing “porosity” between RN and radical far-right groups (Mestre, 2024), while the Institute for Strategic Dialogue observed a surge of identitarian activism online in 2021–22 linked to Éric Zemmour, with Instagram funnelling users to less-moderated Telegram (institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2022). Historical studies of 1990s German bans show groups adapting through

informal “comradeships,” suggesting proscription without follow-up risks symbolic rather than structural impact (Botsch et al., 2013, p. 268).

Alongside this, the term Islamophobia has also proved contentious, particularly on the left. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of La France Insoumise (LFI), has stood out in condemning what he terms “Islamophobia disguised as secularism,” accusing mainstream politicians of using *laïcité* as “disguised hatred” against Muslims (Melenchon, 2020, cited in Hamann, 2020). His position evolved from 2015, when he claimed “we [have] the right not to like Islam, just as we have the right not to like Catholicism,” to marching in 2019 alongside the CCIF and adopting the term Islamophobia (Mélenchon, 2015, cited in Cassini, 2025). Within LFI, Danièle Obono adopted a stronger critique, arguing that the left systematically refuses to confront Islamophobia (Cassini, 2025). These internal divisions mirrored broader debates: Islamist groups cast as civilisational threats justifying exceptional laws, while far-right actors like GI sparked disputes over pluralism and the limits of state authority.

Debates around France’s bans reveal uneven securitisation. Dissolutions of CCIF and BarakaCity relied on broad claims of “collusion,” prompting warnings about overreach and interference in Muslim civic life. GI’s ban was framed as proof of neutrality, yet rhetoric and media portrayals differ: Islamist groups are cast as civilisational threats, while far-right actors prompt civil liberties debates. As Meier (2025) argues, counterterrorism often reproduces “imperial domination… cloaked in language” marking the non-white Other as a perpetual danger (p. 465). Gabriel Serville’s warning against “an authoritarian France of fear” underscores the risk that, without safeguards, bans entrench structural biases rather than neutrally protecting security (Assemblé Nationale Deb., 2020, p. 10528).

Conclusion

In conclusion, French bans on extremist organisations reveal a clear disparity: Islamist groups such as BarakaCity and CCIF were dissolved on the basis of expansive and speech-based justifications, while the dissolution of Génération Identitaire (GI) was framed more cautiously and proved largely symbolic, as its networks persisted through ties to the Rassemblement National. Parliamentary debates reinforced this imbalance, stressing Islamist terrorism as an existential threat while treating far-right extremism primarily as an issue of pluralism or free speech. These dynamics reflect the specificity of French laïcité, which functions less as a neutral principle than as an ideological tool for policing Muslim visibility. Secularism in practice recasts Islamic spaces and practices as signs of insecurity, justifying their regulation or erasure. The bans on BarakaCity and CCIF illustrate this, being dissolved not for paramilitary organisation but for speech, networks, or framings deemed incompatible with republican values. By contrast, GI was sanctioned for overt actions but without invoking terrorism provisions or dismantling broader identitarian structures. The implication is that counter-terrorism legislation in France sustains Islamophobia under the guise of neutrality. By embedding suspicion of Muslims into law, the state legitimises authoritarian measures and enforces a model of citizenship aligned with whiteness and conformity to majority norms. The model of French republican equality and secularism is therefore prone to exclusion and discrimination, particularly due to its security agenda. Without stronger safeguards, bans risk deepening structural discrimination and social fragmentation.

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