

Macron and Muslims in France: “Vaste Programme, Monsieur”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Many years ago, Charles De Gaulle was addressing a political rally when an enthusiast in the crowd shouted out “*Mort aux cons!*,” a term first used by the French military in addressing the enemy, and which means “Death to the idiots” or “Death to the dopes.” De Gaulle turned slowly to where the shout had come from and famously replied “*Vaste programme, monsieur,*” which means “that, sir, is a very tall order.”

Emanuel Macron, who is now proposing to promote “national cohesion” and crush Islamic “fundamentalism” by restructuring Islam in France, deserves the same response: “Vaste programme, monsieur.”

Macron, who has hitherto exhibited little concern about Islam, or about the growing presence of Muslims in France, now appears to have recognized that there is indeed a problem. He has decided that Islam in France needs to be reformed –

restructured – in order to “fight fundamentalism.” On February 11, in an interview with the *Journal du Dimanche*, Macron said that in order to “lay the groundwork for the entire reorganization of Islam in France,” a new plan, which is being coordinated by the Interior Ministry, will be announced within the next six months: “we are working on the structuring of Islam in France and also on how to explain it,” Macron said. “My goal is to rediscover what lies at the heart of secularism – the possibility of being able to believe as well as not to believe – in order to preserve national cohesion and the possibility of having free religious conscience.” “Preserve national cohesion”? For many observers, that “cohesion” is already gone. He ought more accurately – if also more disturbingly – have spoken of the need to “regain national cohesion.”

He sees three main areas that require the government’s attention.

First, given the plethora of Islamic institutions in France, with 2,500 mosques, thousands of imams representing different sects, different levels of cooperation by Muslims, both clerics and believers, with the French state, and different degrees of integration into French society, **who shall speak for Muslims in France?** Macron has suggested the creation of the position of Grand Imam, based on the model of the Grand Rabbi, who speaks for French Jews. But the problem remains: who will decide who should be chosen as “Grand Imam”? Will it be the French government? Will it be the current heads of existing Muslim organizations, that vary considerably in their ideology as in their size and significance, in solemn conclave assembled? **Vaste programme, monsieur.**

Macron’s plan for now is to keep, but to reform, the French Council of the Muslim Faith (*Conseil français du culte musulman*, CFCM), which was established in 2003 and now serves as the interlocutor between Muslims and the state in the regulation of Islam in France. The CFCM has been criticized

for being ineffective, with a rotating presidency that results in constantly changing policies, and for allowing interference by foreign countries – Algeria, Morocco and Turkey have been especially aggressive – that naturally promote their own interests among French Muslims. These countries encourage Muslims in France to retain close ties with their countries of origin (such as Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey) rather than promoting integration into French society.

Second, who should pay for the mosques, the imams, the madrasas and other Muslim institutions in France? If foreign Muslims are permitted to continue to do so – hundreds of mosques are paid for by countries in the Persian Gulf and North Africa – those they finance will continue to be influenced by the reigning Islamic ideology of the financing countries. The biggest financier is Saudi Arabia, that in France could continue to spread its ferocious Wahhabi brand of Islam, on which it has spent nearly \$100 billion around the world – the classic “fundamentalism” that Macron now deplores. The danger from foreign financing involves more than the promotion of a particular brand of Islam. A foreign Muslim government can maintain unacceptable control over “its” Muslims in France, by financing certain mosques, madrasas, and clerics. It’s not hard to imagine Erdogan, who considers that his government has a right to meddle with Turks everywhere in Europe (as we saw from the electioneering by Erdogan’s men among Turks in Germany and the Netherlands), financing mosques attended by Turkish immigrants in France. Think of what that could mean for their political allegiance, which might well be given not to France, the state they live in, but to the one they, or their parents, came from, that is, Turkey, and that continues to finance “Turkish” mosques in France and thereby to control the most important part of the Turkish immigrants’ identity – the religion of Islam.

The “Law on the Separation of the Churches and State” of 1905 established state secularism in France, and among other

provisions, banned government funding of religious groups in France. Is Macron prepared to try to repeal that venerable law? Is he prepared to abandon *laïcité*, which is a core concept in the French constitution, Article 1 of which formally states that France is a secular republic (**“La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale”**)? How does he think French non-Muslim taxpayers would react to the news that they are to be funding one religion with their taxes, that is, Islam and only Islam? Why should Muslims in France not pay their own way, and fund without either foreign or French government help, their mosques and madrasas, and pay their clerics themselves, just as happens with Christians and Jews and every other religious group (Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs) in France?

Macron is said to be considering a **“Halal Tax,”** that is, a sales tax on halal products, which would help fund the 2,500 mosques in France and their imams. It’s an excellent idea, narrowly tailored, to tax only observant Muslims to support Islam. It remains to be seen if he has the political will to ensure its passage. It’s already been denounced by Muslims in France, who apparently think it unfair to make them pay for their mosques, madrasas, imams, although exactly why it is unfair has not been made clear.

Third, Macron believes the French need to exercise more oversight over the training of imams. At the moment, there is no effective oversight. Several hundred imams in France are civil servants whose salaries are paid by foreign governments. Interior Minister Gérard Collomb has said the French government “should intervene” in the training of imams so that they are “imams of the French Republic,” not “imams of foreign countries.” What in practice does this mean? Will the French government end the payment of imams’ salaries by foreign governments, and insist that Muslims pay their own imams?

What kind of training would the French government require of imams in France? Would they be told they should be emphasizing

certain verses, such as 2:256 ('There is no compulsion in religion') and 5:32 (the abridged, misleading version) or reinterpreting other, more disturbing verses, that is, to treat the many commands to wage Jihad as descriptive, applicable to an enemy at a particular time and place rather than prescriptive, which would mean that the command to wage Jihad would apply everywhere, for all time? Will French officials decide what Qur'an verses should be omitted entirely from the education of imams, such as, for example, that which commands them "not to take Jews and Christians as friends" (5:51) or that which describes non-Muslims as "the most vile of creatures" (98:6)? Who will decide what hadith stories are to be discussed, and which omitted or treated as of doubtful authenticity? Will those imams who are now working, and who are deemed worrisome, but not dangerous enough to be banned, or to have their mosques shut down, be subject to re-education by the French state? How exactly would all this work? Who will educate the imams, and how will the French state monitor both the classes now made mandatory for aspiring Muslim clerics, and also monitor the sermons nationwide during Friday prayers? Will those sermons be filmed for review by French officials in the Ministry of the Interior, as the best way to ensure that the imams do not, in their *khutbas*, cross a line into "extremism"? *Vaste programme, monsieur.*

Even though Macron spoke in general terms during his February 11 interview, it was enough to infuriate Muslims in France:

"Everyone must stick to their role," Ahmet Ogres, a Frenchman of Turkish descent and the current president of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), told Reuters.

"The Muslim faith is a religion and, as such, takes care of its own household affairs. The last thing you want is the state to act as guardian," said Ogras.

What gives Ahmet Ogras the right to tell the French state to

butt out? Or to “rebuke” Macron? On what grounds does Ahmet Ogras presume to have such a right? Being admitted to live in France, to become a French citizen, to enjoy its advanced civilization, is not a right, but a privilege. It has constantly to be earned, especially by the adherents of a faith that has been at war with the West for 1400 years.

And here’s a very partial list for Ahmet Ogras, of what gives President Macron the right to interfere with Islam, and Muslims, in France:

Charlie-Hebdo offices, Paris

Hyper-Cacher grocery, Paris

Bataclan nightclub, Paris

Le Petit Cambodge, Paris

Ozar Hatorah School, Toulouse

Air Products factory, Grenoble

Church of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray.

Promenade des Anglais, Nice

Montauban, Magnanville, Nantes, Dijon, Joue-les-Tours, and many more.

That’s enough. That’s more than enough.

As De Gaulle said: *“Vaste programme, monsieur.”*

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