An uncomfortable time to be Muslim in France

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(The Christian Science Monitor) The #JeSuisCharlie hashtag has gone global since the terrorist attack at France's satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo*.

But there is a lesser known, yet just as historically and politically significant one as well: #JeSuisAhmed.

It's an homage to Ahmed Merabet, one of the police officers killed in the attack on Wednesday, at the hands of two brothers believed to be radicalized Muslims who targeted the weekly because of its caricatures of Islam. The fallen policeman is believed also to be Muslim, of two parents from Northern Africa, just like the shooters.

France's large and diverse Muslim population is increasingly assimilated in French society—despite radicalization at the margins. But it must still navigate cultural echoes of France's colonial past as well as its fierce embrace of secularism.

Q: What's the recent history of Muslims in France?

The vast majority of Muslims in France hail from former colonies in Africa. Of all of the relationships, the one with Algeria is the most fraught. When the Algerian war broke out in 1954, a violent power struggle forever marred relations. French were ousted from Algeria, and Algerians were denied entry into France after the country gained independence in 1962. It set a pattern of prejudice and suspicion that persisted when North African immigrants, mostly from Algeria and Morocco, fled into France to find menial jobs during the postwar boom years, particularly in the 1960s and '70s. Many ended up in the outskirts of Paris and other large cities in banlieues, or suburbs.

"In France, the way . . . people from North Africa were welcomed . . . was done in catastrophic conditions," said Mounira Chatti, a Paris-based professor of Arabic and

Francophone literature who researches sociohistorical phenomena and integration. “They were placed in housing and work situations that were supposed to be provisional but ended up being permanent.”

Many French consider their country's tactics in the Algerian independence struggle a stain on their history, similar to the shame surrounding the Vichy regime during World War II. But despite tensions, many migrants from North Africa continue to arrive in France for a better life and fully embrace the values of French secular society.

Q: What’s the general perception of Muslims in France?

According to a 2010 poll by the Pew Research Center, 72 percent of French respondents have a favorable view toward Muslims, the highest number among European nations polled. And migrants from North Africa continue to arrive in France in droves, seeking a better life and fully embracing the values of French secular society.

Q: What is unique about the Muslim experience in France?

Because of secularism, Muslim life in France is vastly different from that in other European nations. The Muslim population in France is estimated to be about 5 to 10 percent (about 5 million), the largest community in Europe. But since 1905 the separation of church and state has been codified as law and forms the basis of some of the more controversial decisions in recent history in France: A 2004 law bans veils, yarmulkes, and crosses in schools, and a 2011 law bans full-face coverings, including wearing the niqab, in public. Many Muslims say they view the law of secularism as anti-Muslim, and some Muslim women in France will wear a veil even if they are not particularly religious to promote their cultural identity.

“France’s situation is very singular. Its colonial past weighs extremely heavily on the nation’s collective memory,” said Mansouria Mohkefi, a special advisor for the Middle East and North Africa at the French Institute for International Relations in Paris. “Any type of communitarianism or show of public religiousness is forbidden.”

Q: How marginalized is the Muslim community?

Less so than before, but political barriers remain and the lack of job opportunities for Muslims in banlieues continues to stoke feelings of frustration and marginalization as evidenced by the 2005 riots outside Paris. Chatti said the root of the problem can be traced to integration. “French institutions have enormous difficulty in completely integrating multilingualism and multiculturalism,” she said.

Muslims often say that no matter how much they disagree with U.S. foreign policy, they feel they’d be better off living as Muslims in the United States than Europe. At the same time, third- and fourth-generation French Muslims are full citizens and able to attend public schools, and have become doctors, lawyers, and police officers—such as Merabet.

Politically Muslims have had a harder time gaining a foothold, which many Muslims blame on political divisions within the community, primarily between Moroccans and Algerians. And although the media disproportionately cover the negative news of riots or jihadis, most of their discontent with ruling society has played out in the courts, observers have noted, not through violence.

Q: Is there a new Islamophobia?

Yes. A couple developments have come together to make this a particularly crucial moment for Muslims in Europe, and in France specifically. Political unrest in the Middle East has played out on European soil, inflaming passions but also directly drawing French and other European citizens to jihadi warfare in Syria and more recently Iraq. Within Europe, more jihadis have left from France than any other nation.

When a French citizen who had fought in Syria shot into a Jewish museum in Brussels this past May, the worst fears of many European citizens were realized. Later the nation was equally shocked when a French hiker was beheaded in the mountains of Algeria, after the Islamic State urged its members to kill Westerners, including the “filthy French.” That is believed to be retaliation for France joining the U.S. bombing campaign against Islamic State in the Middle East. The attack at *Charlie Hebdo* offices that killed 12, and was claimed to have been orchestrated by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, has further solidified fears of an Islamic threat.

Muslims have been the first to condemn these attackers as terrorists who manipulate the message of Islam. But at the same time that radicalization is on the

rise, so are populists who have generally taken an anti-immigrant tone. This attack could buoy Marine Le Pen’s National Front, as voters fear radical Islam and often conflate that with Muslims overall.

And it’s not just politicians doing the scare-mongering. This month Michel Houellebecq, a controversial French novelist, published his newest book, *Submission* , which imagines a future France as an Islamic country of polygamy and women in full veil.

A teenager in Marseille may have summarized it best when he said, “I have the feeling that I was born in a bad era for Muslims.”